

Spain Revealed

Granada's

Alhambra



Introduction

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Travel guidebooks for the ultra curious, Approach Guides reveal a destination's essence by exploring a compelling aspect of its cultural heritage: art, architecture, history, food, or wine.

The Alhambra — a magnificent 14th century palace-city built by the Nasrids in the city of Granada — stands as one of the greatest monuments of Islamic Spain, or Al-Andalus. Using elaborate mosaic decoration that creates the impression of infinity, inscriptions that tell of the greatness of God, and walled gardens that symbolize Quranic paradise, the Nasrids realized a divine vision on earth. It is yours to discover.

What's in this guidebook

- **Comprehensive look at the Alhambra's art and architecture.** We examine the defining characteristics of the Nasrid style, isolating key features and concepts that you will see again and again as you make your way through the Alhambra; we tell you what makes them unique and what they symbolize. To make things come alive, we have packed our descriptions with high-resolution images.
- **A tour that goes deeper on the most important sites.** Following our tradition of being the most valuable resource for culture-focused travelers, we provide a unique, detailed tour of the Alhambra's premier sites, with a special focus on the Nasrid palaces. For each site, we provide information on its history, a detailed plan that highlights its most important architectural and artistic features, high-resolution images, and a discussion that ties it all together.
- **Advice for getting the best cultural experience.** To help you plan your visit, this guidebook offers logistical advice and provides links to online resources. Plus, we provide our personal tips for getting the most from your experience while on location.
- **Information the way you like it.** As with all of our guides, this book is optimized for intuitive, quick navigation; information is organized into bullet points to make absorption easy; and images are mocked up with text that explains important features.

Contact us anytime

Our readers are our greatest inspiration. Email us at founders@approachguides.com to let us know about your experience with Approach Guides — many of our recent updates have been inspired by customers like you. We personally respond to every email.

We hope that this cultural guidebook offers you fresh insights into Spain's Islamic art and architecture and sets you on a path to making your own discoveries.

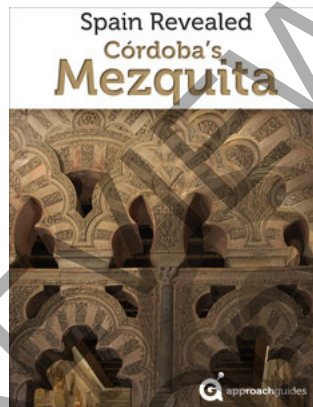
Have a great trip!



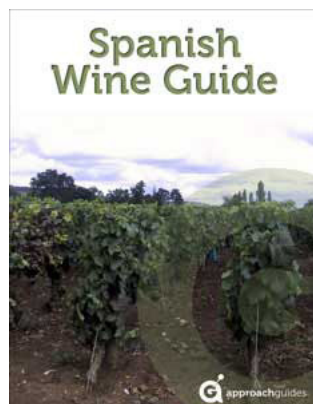
David and Jennifer Raezer
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Discover Spain with Approach Guides

Córdoba, the city where Islam got its start in Spain, is home to one of Spain's greatest Islamic sites: la Mezquita, or the Great Mosque of Cordoba. [Download our guide to Córdoba's Mezquita](#) to explore its stunning architecture.



One of our favorite things about Spain is discovering its wines. Each region has unique grape varieties, terroir, and traditions that impact the flavors and styles of its wines. [Download our Spanish wine guide](#) and enjoy tasting your way through Spain.



Spain Revealed: Granada's Alhambra

Version 1.0

by [David Raezer](#) and [Jennifer Raezer](#)

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**“The dome is so beautiful that the palace
competes in beauty with the heavens ...
How many arches rise upward to the vault at the summit,
supported by columns that are adorned by the light!
They appear as heavenly spheres that turn,
outshining even the glowing pillar of dawn!”**

—

Ibn Zamrak (1333-1393),
poet-vizier of Granada's Nasrid dynasty ruler Muhammad V,
from an inscription on the walls of the
Alhambra's Sala de Dos Hermanas,
the longest in the Alhambra.

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BACKGROUND ON THE ALHAMBRA

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Meet the Builders: The Nasrids

The art and architecture of the Alhambra is the legacy of the Nasrids, Spain's last great Islamic dynasty; it represents the culmination of a style begun 700 years prior with the initial Islamic conquest of the Iberian Peninsula. It is important to understand a bit of the background on the Nasrids — especially, who they were and the geopolitical conditions under which they ruled — since it had a profound impact on their aesthetic expression.

The Lead Up to the Nasrids

- **Al-Andalus before the Nasrids.** Islamic forces — chiefly North African Berbers with Arab commanders — began their conquest of Spain in 711. In the period of the *taifa*, or petty states (1031-1088), the lands around Granada were controlled by the **Zirids**, a Berber tribe, until they fell to the **Almoravids**, a more powerful Berber tribe that crossed over into Spain from Morocco in 1088 and absorbed Granada in 1090. In 1146, the Almoravids were supplanted by yet another Berber tribe, the **Almohads**. For more detail on pre-Nasrid history, see the section at the end of this guidebook entitled “Al-Andalus: The History of Islamic Spain.”
- **Almohads depart, creating Islamic power vacuum.** The Almohads withdrew from the Iberian Peninsula in 1232, as they were experiencing troubles on the home front with rival Berber clans.
- **Reconquista gains momentum.** With the exit of the Almohads, the Reconquista — the Christian reconquest of Spanish territories controlled by Islamic forces — gained significant momentum: Córdoba and Seville fell to the Christians in 1236 and 1248, respectively.

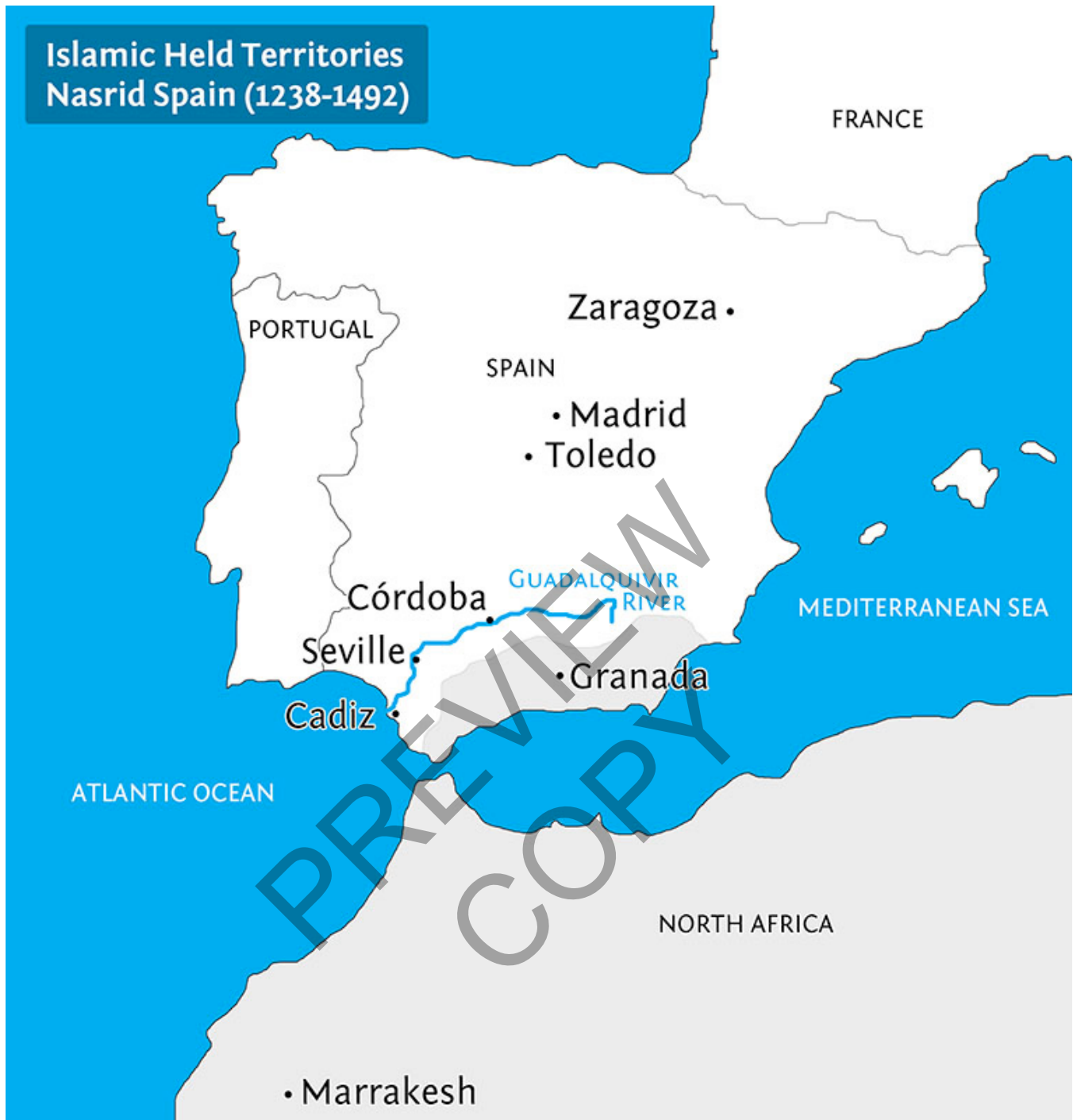


Fig. 1. Islamic held territories under the Nasrids.

The Rise of the Nasrids

- **Nasrids emerge with departure of Almohads.** Capitalizing on the power vacuum that ensued following the Almohads' departure, the Nasrids won control of Granada in 1238.
- **Arab dynasty.** The Nasrids were an Arab (Arabic-speaking from the Arabian Peninsula), rather than a Berber (Berber-speaking from North Africa) dynasty, as the Almoravid and Almohad dynasties had been. They claimed a distinguished lineage: direct male-line descent

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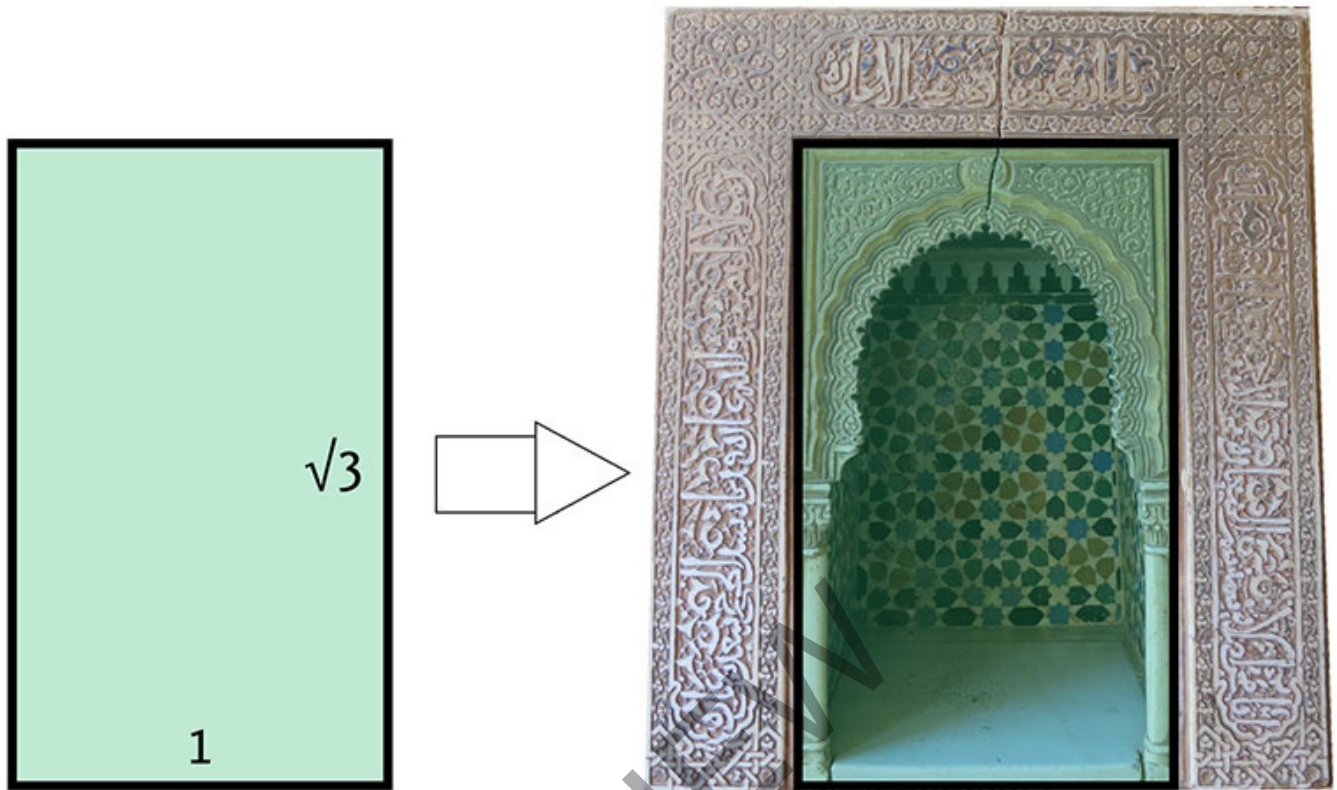


Fig. 2. Irrational ratio rectangular *alfiz* frames water niche, Alhambra.

Author Tip: The visual preference for rectangles with undefinable ratios is not unique to the Islamic world: the $\sqrt{2}$ ratio appears in International “A” paper sizes – A4, the most commonly used, is 210 mm x 297 mm.

Opposites Unified

Consistent with their Sufi mystical Islam beliefs, architects embraced pairs of opposites that unite to infuse the space with an otherworldly, immaterial quality.

- **Interplay of light and dark.** Dim passages lead into bright courtyards; and water reflects light into dark interior spaces.
- **Interpenetration of inside and outside.** Outdoor features, such as water channels, penetrate interior spaces.
- **Appearance of reflected and solid forms.** Reflections on the surface of pools of water were used to powerful effect: reflections make solid architectural forms shimmer and vibrate, while the water itself is given a more structured form.
- **Multipurpose rooms.** Many rooms appear not to have had a single, fixed purpose, but rather were repurposed as needed, regularly transformed to fit changing requirements. For example, a single room might serve as a bedroom, a reception hall, or a waiting room, depending upon the situation.

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Geometric and Arabesque Designs

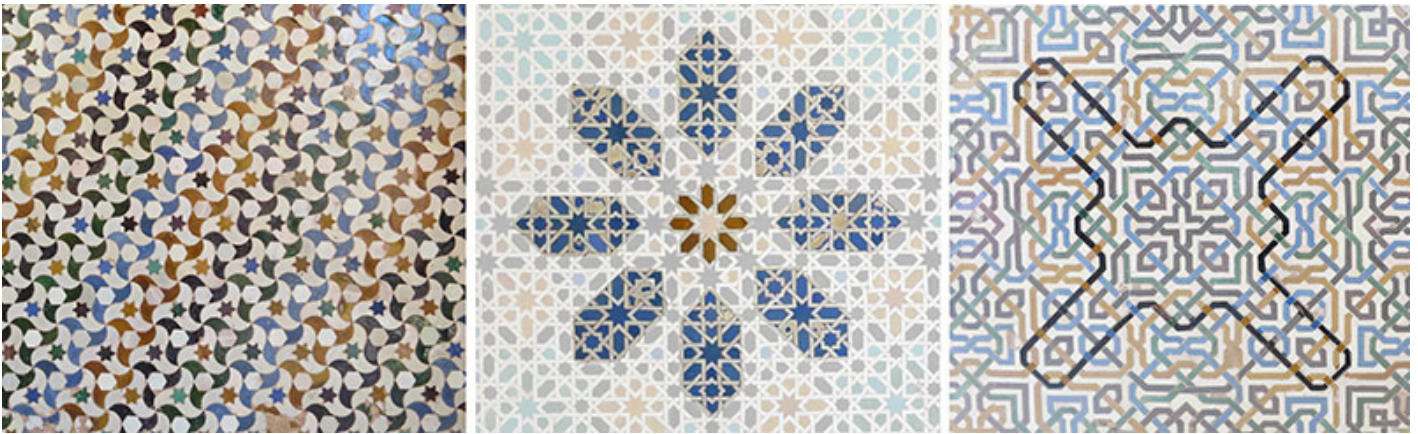


Fig. 6. Geometric designs: repetitive, self-similar, and higher dimension. Highlights added.

Geometric Designs

Geometric designs are the most common decoration at the Alhambra.

Types

- **Repetitive designs.** In this, the most basic type of geometric design, a core set of shapes is continuously repeated (left design in Fig. 6). Colors are often employed to add complexity, such as the diagonal stripes in Fig. 6.
- **Self-similar designs.** With self-similar designs, the same forms appear at different scales. In the design at the center of Fig. 6, the brown eight-pointed star pattern at the center repeats in larger scale in the blue star surrounding it.
- **Higher dimension designs.** In higher dimension designs, small shapes subtly combine to form larger arrangements. On the right side of Fig. 6, higher level forms — such as the pattern in black — appear from a collection of smaller forms.

The eight-pointed star

The eight-pointed star is, far and away, the most frequently encountered geometric pattern at the Alhambra.

- **Quranic reference.** The Quran's chapter 24, verse 35 equates the light emanating from a star with God's calling to the faithful:

“Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth.
The example of His light is like a niche within which is a lamp,

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Muquarnas Designs



Fig. 10. The elaborate *muqarnas* dome of the Sala de los Abencerrajes, Palacio de Leones.

Background

Muqarnas — known as *mocárabe* in Spain — is a decorative feature formed by intricate corbelling of multi-faceted prismatic surfaces (Fig. 10).

- **Organic appearance.** *Muqarnas* decoration yields an organic appearance, typically re-

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VISITING THE ALHAMBRA

Location

The city of Granada sits at the center of a vast fertile plain, called **La Vega**, that is surrounded on all sides by mountain ranges (Fig. 13).

At the center of the city, the Alhambra spreads out over the top of **Sabika hill** (700 meters long and 200 meters wide), a spur of the Sierra Nevada, Spain's highest mountain range, which rises to sharp snowcapped peaks of nearly 3,500 meters in elevation southeast of the city. Immediately to the north of the Alhambra lies the **Darro river**, and just beyond it, the hills of Albaicín and Sacromonte.



Fig. 13. Map of the city of Granada, with Alhambra highlighted. See [Google Maps](#).

- Tickets often sell out in advance, so **we strongly recommend buying tickets online before your arrival in Granada**, rather than trying to buy them on location. You can make a reservation on the [official ticketing website](#).
- If you purchase tickets online, you will need to **pick up the paper tickets on location**. You can do so from the main ticket center located east of the Alhambra ([Fig. 14](#)). However, if you are staying in the area around **Plaza Nueva**, it is easiest to pick up your tickets at the kiosk inside the [Tienda Librería de la Alhambra](#) (located on Calle Reyes Católicos, 40) and enter through the **Puerta de la Justicia** (Justice Gate); this shortcut will save you a lot of time ([Fig. 14](#)).

Author Tip: Due to large numbers of visitors, the Alhambra can feel congested, particularly in the palaces' smaller rooms. Accordingly, we recommend making a reservation for the very end of the day (2-3 hours before closing); approximately one hour before closing, most people make their way to the exit, creating a much more peaceful ambiance. The earliest appointments are also good options, but you have to move quickly to stay ahead of the rush.

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Tour Itinerary

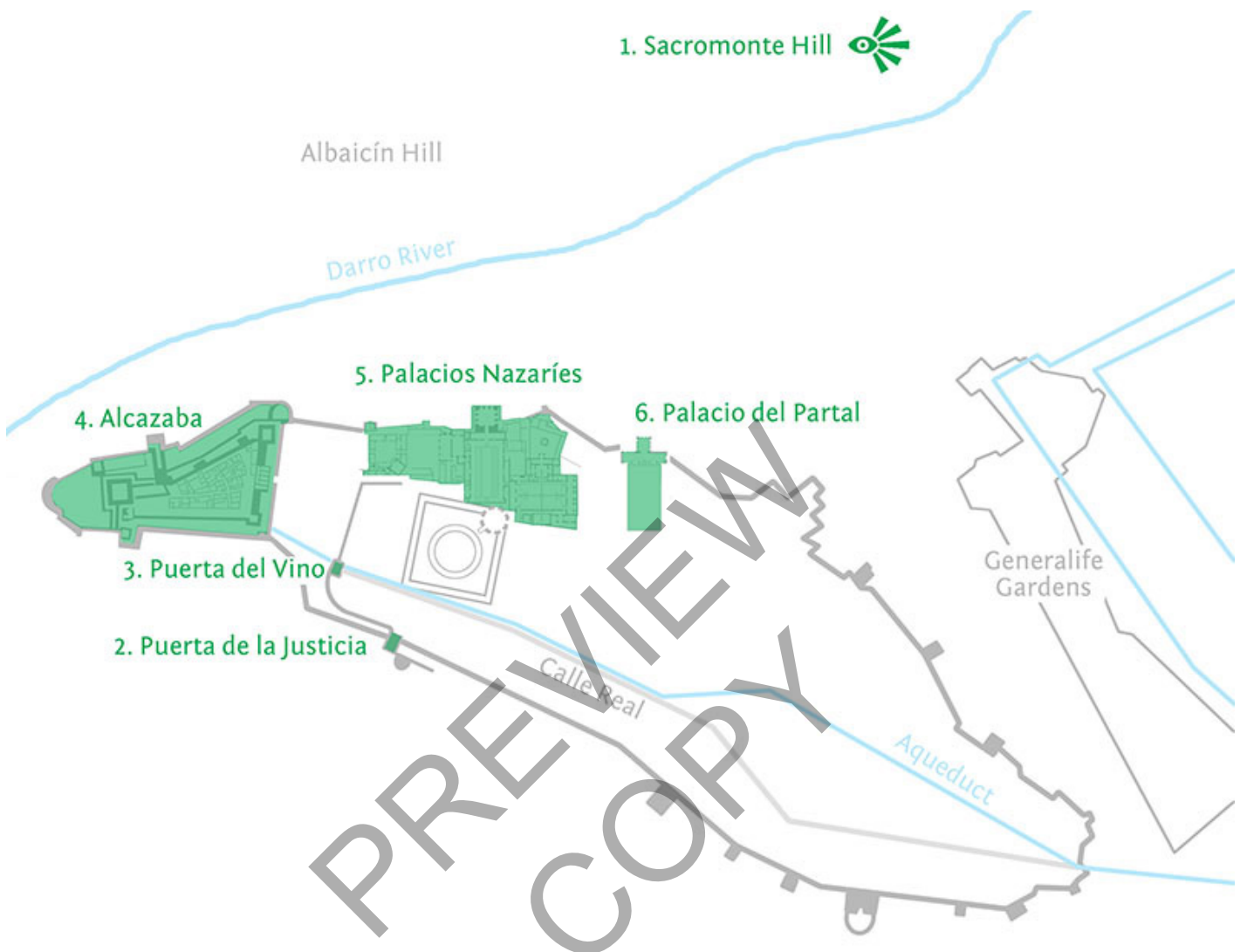


Fig. 16. Tour itinerary, Alhambra.

Six Stops on Our Tour

Our tour consists of the Alhambra's six premier sites (green highlights in Fig. 16), with a focus on the Nasrid palaces.

1. Sacromonte hill viewpoint.
2. Puerta de la Justicia (Justice Gate).
3. Puerta del Vino (Wine Gate).
4. Alcazaba (Fort).
5. Palacios Nazaríes (Nasrid Palaces).
6. Palacio del Partal (Partal Palace).

1. Sacromonte Hill Viewpoint

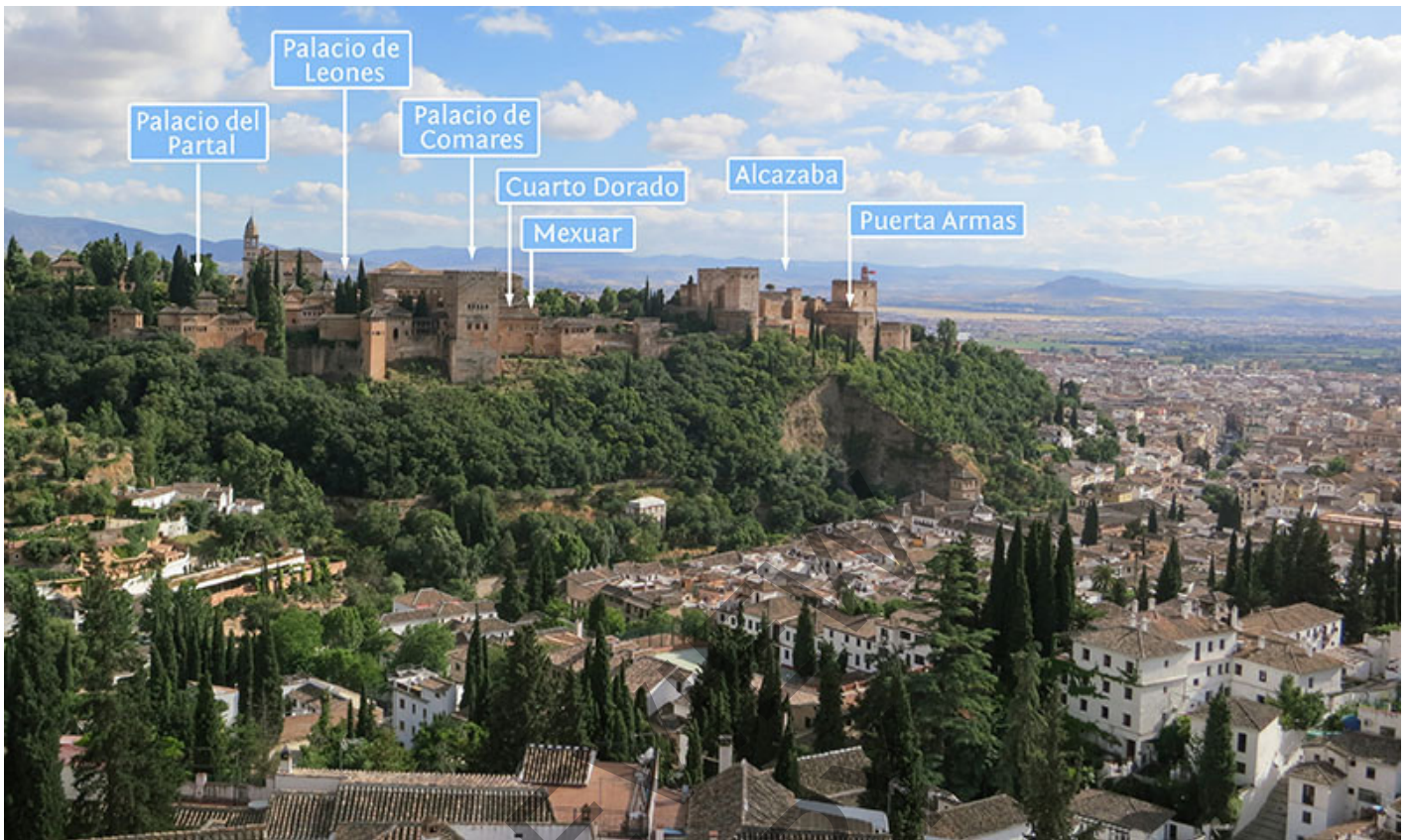


Fig. 17. Alhambra rising over the city of Granada, view from Sacromonte. Highlights added.

Unrivaed Panorama

For a panoramic view of the Alhambra (Fig. 17), we recommend walking to the top of Sacromonte hill, located immediately northeast of the Sabika hill. The views are magnificent and clearly convey how the Alhambra towers over the city below.

Walking Directions to the Lookout Point

It is easy to reach the Sacromonte viewpoint from Plaza Nueva.

- Take the main road that runs along the Darro river (Calle Accero de Darro) to the end.
- Then follow Cuesta del Chapiz northward to Placeta Albaida.
- Go right on Placeta Albaida, beginning your ascent up Sacromonte.
- Go left on Callejon de los Pinchos.
- Go right on Calle Cuevas Coloradas. From here, a number of lookout spots are visible.

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Other Highlights

- **Military residences.** The center of the Alcazaba is filled with a warren of walls that were the former residences of the Nasrid military (location marked with yellow highlights in Fig. 21; interior view in Fig. 22). The zone includes living quarters, latrines, kitchens, baths, and cisterns.
- **Dungeons.** There are three dungeons in which captive Christian soldiers were held (location marked with red highlights in Fig. 21).



Fig. 22. Internal view from Torre de la Vela, looking west to east, Alcazaba. Photo by: Diego Delso.

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Fig. 32. South facade inscriptions, Cuarto Dorado.

Inscriptions

The facade is covered with inscriptions.

Poem

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Although it is quite difficult to make out from the floor of the court, the wooden eave holds a famous poem by **Ibn Zamrak** (light blue highlights in [Fig. 32](#)).

I am a crown on the front of my door
and my door is a parting of the ways:
in me is the west [door, which leads to the servants' quarters],
envious of the east [door, which leads to the ruler's palace].
Al-Gani billah [Muhammad V] orders me
to quickly give way to the victory,
as soon as it calls.
I am always waiting to see the visage of the ruler,
as one waits for the sun to appear
at dawn above the [east] horizon.
May God make his works as beautiful
as his predisposition and his appearance.

The poem reveals many characteristic features of Nasrid poetry.

- **First person voice.** The poem is crafted in first person voice, as if the facade wall were a woman speaking to the visitor, describing its function and praising the ruler.
- **Non-duality.** The doors referenced in the poem allude to Sufism's belief in non-dualism, which posits that every person possesses both evil and goodness, and that they are one. The resolution of this seeming conundrum brings one to unity with God, symbolized in the passage through the east doorway, the symbolic gateway to the divine afterlife. Viewed from this perspective, Muhammad V is subtly equated with God, as the Palacio de Comares, his royal palace, lies just beyond.

Quranic verse

The upper portion of the central window (yellow highlights in [Fig. 32](#)), under which the ruler likely sat, is closely framed by an inscription from the [Quran's chapter 2, verse 255](#), popularly known as the "Throne Verse": "His Kursi [throne] extends over the heavens and the earth, and their preservation tires Him not. And He is the Most High, the Most Great." The placement of this inscription above the ruler's throne purposefully creates **ambiguity between God and ruler** and certainly speaks to the ruler's growing power.

Nasrid motto

The Nasrid motto — "There is no conqueror but God" — cycles repeatedly around the windows and door frames (white highlights in [Fig. 32](#)). You will see this inscription again and again as we make our way through the rest of the palaces' structures.

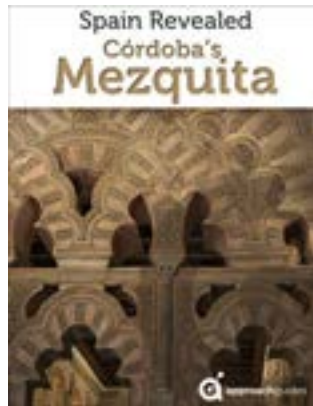
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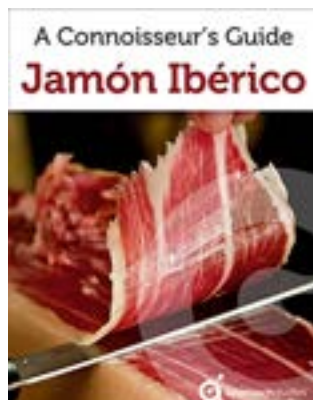
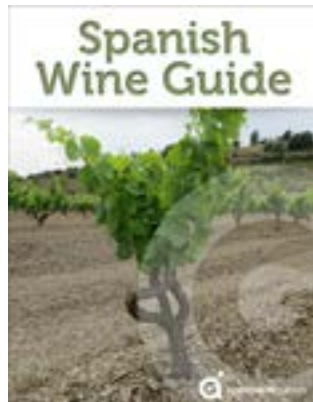
Going to Córdoba?

If you are visiting Córdoba to see where Islam got its start in Spain, consider [downloading our guidebook](#) to its greatest Islamic site, the Umayyad mosque, called the Mezquita.

The Mezquita is one of the greatest surviving structures from the 700 years during which Islamic forces controlled the Iberian peninsula. A massive mosque constructed in five stages from 785-988 by the Umayyads who had been displaced from their former capital in Damascus, it reveals a unrivaled collection of art and architecture.



One of our favorite things about Spain is indulging its food and wine. Download our [Spanish wine guide](#) and guide to in [jamón ibérico](#) and enjoy tasting your way through Spain.



Packing List

PACKING LIST *for global voyagers*

We're constantly on the road and as you can imagine, have a pretty defined list of things that we never leave home without. Here's a peek at [what's in our luggage](#), from our favorite camera to portable wine glasses. It's the ultimate list for a seasoned traveler!

[View our packing list >](#)

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Travel + Leisure

What started as one couple's travel notes aimed at filling in the gaps in guidebooks has become Approach Guides — a menu of downloadable travel guides that cover cultural and historical topics of interest to thoughtful travelers. What's hot: Bite-sized travel guides that specialize in topics ranging from the foods of Italy to one that helps you explore the historical and architectural significance of Angkor's famous temple structures in Cambodia.

Los Angeles Times



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