

# Spain and Morocco

A Client Travel Report by David Forrester  
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To be met at Barcelona airport and whisked to our city centre hotel was most reassuring after a long flight. Three nights of magic in this fantastic city awaited us. After settling in we went on a long walk to shake out the cobwebs and absorb the local area. Wide avenues, a beautiful park and narrow alleyways crowded with people eating or just watching the world go by were a delight. Back at the hotel we received a phone call from our guide, Miro, to arrange a meeting of the 'not too young and not too old' group that evening. There were 24 of us in all – a mixture of singles and couples. We were asked if we would like have a meal in a restaurant he knew. What a meal, it was buffet style full of exotic tastes and eat as much as you like for 8 Euros!

The following day we began our tour of the city including the Cathedral, Gothic Quarter and the Plaza San Jaume. What a city. Then it was on to Montjuic and a view of the city from on high. We also visited the Olympic Stadium. The afternoon was free so we took a leisurely stroll from the Monument of Christopher Columbus up through the busy thoroughfare of Las Ramblas, which is a must. It's a lively, colourful street full of restaurants and tourist attractions. Buskers abound, ready to entertain and delight. We had lunch at a Tapas Bar, which was delicious. The beer was also excellent. The Metro was our next adventure, a cheap and easy to use transport system, which took us back to our hotel.

Barcelona is famous for the works of architect Anton Gaudi. The following day we were taken to the Parc Guell, where Gaudi was commissioned to design a sustainable garden city but it failed. However it is preserved as a tourist attraction, here there are beautiful mosaics and naturalistic decorations. In the afternoon we took the railway back to the top of Montjuic to visit the Miro Art Gallery. Another amazing day.

The program for most of our holiday was the morning for sightseeing and the afternoon for exploring, our guides giving us good information about what to see and where to shop.

Valencia was the next stop, a city of old and modern architecture. The buildings of the Opera House, the Exhibition Centre and the new bridge are all elegant in design. In the afternoon we visited the old Moorish and Jewish Quarters. The Silk Market with its gold inlaid ceiling and the cathedral were the highlights. A traditional Seafood Paella was organized for the group in the evening.

Grenada has a rich Moorish history, surrounded by the Sierra Nevada Mountains often covered in snow. We stayed in a new luxury 5 star hotel - very swish. A visit to the Alhambra Palace situated on a tree covered hill

overlooking the city and a stroll through the tranquil 14th Century Generalife were a definite highlight. Being on tour with experienced local guides enabled us to avoid the long queues and visit places we could have easily missed.

Day 8 saw us heading south towards the coast. We passed through beautiful countryside planted with rows of olive trees. We stopped for lunch at Ronda, a village set precariously on the cliff face. Buildings appear to hang over the steep valley while narrow streets wind their way around this ancient town. It was a most exhilarating visit.

The high speed ferry ride across the Straights of Gibraltar and the arrival in Morocco was chaotic. Filling out immigration forms, showing passports and going through security checks were all part of the experience. A quick tour of Tangiers and arrival at our hotel were most welcome.

The next day we were off to Fez, the ancient capital. A lunch stop saw us sitting at a roof top restaurant, eating a wonderful chicken tagine and drinking mint tea. The tagine is a shallow dish with a conical cover in which the meal is cooked. From here we strolled through the Roman ruins of Volubilis, exhibiting mosaics, columns and archways. The sun setting over the ruins gave them a golden glow. We continued on to Meknes and viewed the magnificent Bab el Mansour gate. The city was swarming with people. Ramadan was about to commence and people were beginning to prepare for their evening meal when the sun finally set.

Day 10 was dedicated to the medieval city of Fes el Bali with its magnificent gates and the colourful and vibrant Medina. The narrow alleyways gave us an interesting snapshot of local life. Women taking their trays of dough to the bakers, the butcher shops (no refrigeration here), spices, decorative arrays of fruit, clothing, the leather dying works and the ceramic and mosaic factory - everything that one could imagine. A buyer's paradise! We started at the top of the hill and worked our way through the narrow lanes, sidestepping bicycles, donkeys and handcarts. A young boy, Yusef, was engaged to keep his eye on us. To make certain no one got lost. If I mentioned a "Blue Heeler" you can imagine how good he was.

The following day we travelled up through the partly wooded Middle Atlas Mountains. We passed through a village reminiscent of Switzerland. Layers of scenic mountains clothed in fir trees, bathed in the mist. This is snow country and the buildings have the steep roofs one would expect.

Late in the afternoon we arrived in Murzouga and we were transferred to 4-wheel drives for an exciting drive across the gibber plains, heading for the Sahara. Our accommodation loomed out of the eerie sunset - a kasbah called "Timbucktoo." Quite exotic amongst the palm trees, camels, Bedouin tents and a swimming pool. What a set up, only a couple of hundred metres from the desert. A beer and a wonderful buffet meal completed the day. The room was beautifully appointed. Large comfortable beds, very quiet and if one looked up to the stars before retiring, positively romantic.

The next morning we took a camel ride over the dunes of the Sahara. An exhilarating experience, to sit on the top of the knife-edge of a dune in the silence, waiting for the sun to rise.

Day 12 was to explore Ouarzazate. A village where the Kasbahs are often used for film sets. We drove to Ait Benhaddou, one of the most spectacular of the Atlas villages with its Kasbah being one of the most elaborately decorated. We had to wade across a stream and there was an abundance of local children, some with donkeys, willing to lend a helping hand for a few coins. An afternoon relaxing by the pool was most welcome

The drive over the high Atlas Mountains via the Tiz'n-Tichka Pass, provided us with spectacular views. We traversed many hairpin bends, passing through fertile valleys planted with corn, nuts, fruit and wheat. Many of the buildings here were made of local rock due to the high rainfall. This contrasted with the mud brick dwellings of the lower regions.

We arrived in Marrakesh, 'The Pearl of the South', and were immediately enticed to the Medina. It was a blaze of colour, movement and smells, here we saw a menagerie of snake charmers, fortune tellers, spices and sellers of every imaginable item. Every aspect of local life lay before us, water sellers, hawkers of jewellery, ceramics, leather goods and clothing.

The next day we visited the King's Chamber with its beautiful mosaic tiles, splendid cedar ceilings and enchanting courtyards. Then we returned to the Medina to delve once more into the exciting and vibrant world of the Moroccans.

Day 16 saw us travel through Casablanca, here there are many beautiful residences dripping with bougainvillea and hibiscus. At lunch time we had the opportunity to walk through a small market place which was alive with fresh flowers, fish, meat and poultry. The smell of spices and the abundance of vegetables was mind blowing. We then visited the third largest Mosque in the world, erected between 1986 and 1991. It was built right on the waters edge, most magnificent.

The next day we left Morocco in the midst of a flurry of luggage, queues and a deal of hanging about. The boarding of the boat was once again chaotic. Filling in yet more forms, passports, people pushing and struggling through security checks. The Spanish guide had a saying - "tranquillo" - relax, it will all happen and be good, a very good saying. Seville was our destination.

Today we visited the Seville Pavillion, built for the 1992 Exhibition. It is a huge semicircular building with a fountain in the centre. Each Province of Spain is represented created in colourful tiled plaques. We were then led through narrow streets and alleyways, a most interesting day. We visited the third largest Catholic Cathedral in the world where it is believed that parts of Christopher Columbus are buried. We climbed the bell tower, which was once a minaret above the Mosque before the Muslims were defeated. The story is that the Imam would ride a horse up the many levels before calling the faithful

to prayer. Today there is a carillon of bells which are extremely loud if you are standing beneath them when they ring.

The following day we arrived in Cordoba where we visited the Alcazar, a cathedral which was also a Mosque. Beautiful pink and white archways disappeared into the distance. Our delightful local guide, Lola, gave a most informative talk on the building. The afternoon we travelled to Madrid by super fast train. Five hundred kilometres in approximately two hours, by the end of the day we ready for a rest!

Day 20 commenced with a tour of Madrid. We visited the bull ring and toured the more modern areas just to obtain an idea of the buildings which have been constructed. We also toured the Plaza Mayor with its glamorous shops and restaurants and stopped at the monument of the Man of la Manche and the palace. We spent a wonderful afternoon at the Prad Museum viewing El Greco's, Van Dyke's, Mewling, Gaye's, Velasquez and the likes, just amazing.

Our last full day in Spain involved a trip to the beautiful old capital city of Toledo. We walked down lanes and alleyways lined with magnificent eating places and shops. We rested in the afternoon readying ourselves for the long trip home.

This was an amazing trip, with many photos and memories. The experience of the places visited with knowledgeable guides helped us understand a little of these amazing cultures.



*Gaudi's creation at Parc Guelle*



*The Roman ruins at Volubilis*



*The Sahara desert dunes*



*We stayed at the Kasbah called 'Timbuktoo'*



*The mosque in Casablanca*