

Grandeur of Granada

a Royal Itinerary

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By Karen Lustgarten



The Alhambra castle-citadel, built atop the highest hill in the city of Granada by the Moors, starting in the 7th century, is a must-see.

If you want to feel like royalty, go to Granada. This dazzling province in southern Spain will intoxicate you with majestic beauty — dramatic, snow-capped mountains dotted with gleaming white villages carved out of cliffs; sparkling beaches along the Costa Tropical, sprinkled with hillside villas and resorts; acres of fruited plains covered with olive, almond, and chirimoya trees; and everywhere the fascinating juxtaposition of ancient, exotic Moorish influences with contemporary style.

Granada's beauty is breathtaking, its cuisine is gourmet and its hospitality unparalleled. This place has it all and welcomes tourists with the same gracious warmth as visiting dignitaries. If you follow this "royal itinerary," prepared by the Granada Chamber of Commerce for our group, you're guaranteed the vacation of a lifetime.

We embarked from Miami to Madrid on Iberia Airlines, the fourth largest in



In the tropical coast village of Motril, a waiter at the Club Nautico debones baked pargo, a delicious whitefish.

Europe and Spain's reliable flagship airline for 75 years. The high quality of the meals (a bottle of wine was included) and service by all-Spanish attendants put you in the right mood.

The city, located in the middle of the province of the same name, is a 45-minute flight from Madrid on Iberia. In the air, you see miles of olive trees cultivated neatly in rows along hills

and valleys. Olive oil is the major export — 80% of the world's olive oil comes from this region. It's a staple in Spanish cooking, which accounts in part for the superior flavor of the cuisine.

Granada has several four-star hotels run by Hotels Santos. I checked into the Hotel Saray, where the king and queen of Spain often stay. Like everything in the province, it combines modern comforts and conveniences with ancient Moorish beauty: colorful tiles, geometric fountains, intricate archways.

This is a walking town, so pack comfortable shoes and enjoy the gorgeous weather (high 60s and sunny in mid-March). Strolling and eating are main forms of socializing: streets, plazas, courtyards, parks, cafés, and shops are filled with friendly residents, many English-speaking. Feel the pulse of the city as you explore its many monuments and narrow streets steeped in history.

Cuisine

To know the cuisine is to know Spanish culture. Meals are sacred and dining is an art form. Lunch and dinner each consist of several courses of exquisitely prepared regional dishes, from an abundant variety of fresh, locally grown foods cooked slowly over a very low fire.

Dinner at Los Manueles was five courses. This charming spot, a favorite of King Juan Carlos I and Queen Sofia, is famous for the finest hams. Throughout this province, order local serrano ham as an appetizer. It is painstakingly cured and sliced paper thin. It's served with goat

cheese, olives, and bread dipped in, of course, olive oil. Nirvana!

Sites

Atop the city's tallest hill sits the "seventh wonder of the world," The Alhambra. The Spanish crown has proclaimed it a national treasure and UNESCO designated it a World Heritage Site. Take a guided tour of this magnificent citadel-castle begun by the Moors in the 7th century — a symbol of the grandeur of the Islamic culture that flourished until 1492. The Alhambra instills awe and appreciation for the remarkable history of Granada (while the rest of Europe was in the Dark Ages). It is a blend of Arab-Christian heritage, reflected in numerous architectural marvels, gardens, and gastronomic delights.

Down the hill, stop at Laguna Taracea, where you can buy fine handmade objects of wood that duplicate the intricate geometric patterns found in the Alhambra.

The gorgeous Alhambra Parador is a palace-hotel adjacent to the great monument and of the same style. You can check in or enjoy a meal on the patio, with its breathtaking view of the countryside. Then explore the gypsy caves and bodegas (wine cellars) in the Sacromonte



Wind up steep, centuries-old cobblestone streets in the village of Pampaneira, high in the Sierra Nevada Mountains.