

Córdoba Province



Once the proud queen of Al-Andalus, with its splendid court and cultured caliphs, Córdoba's opulent and enchanting Islamic heritage resonates with faded glory. Although the city's romanticism and imagination-fuelling history still fascinates travellers, Córdoba today has the added ingredients of modernity and commerce, which give it a contemporary, fun feel. So, some of the epithets used to describe it in its more recent past, such as 'museum city' or 'quiet backwater', are starting to lose their aptness. Córdoba's charm is that one can be intoxicated by architectural and historic beauty during the day, and drop into a happening bar and be intoxicated by various sherry wines and cocktails in the evening.

The Mezquita, Córdoba's greatest monument and the sight that everyone flocks to see, is World Heritage listed and one of the world's architectural wonders. But don't forget that Córdoba, despite all its Islamic elements, is quintessentially Andalusian: it has spawned some of the region's most important bullfighters, it's the home of *salmorejo* (a thick gazpacho) and has some of the best places to eat in the region.

Outside of Córdoba, a vast landscape of olive trees encircles the city like miles of braided hair, and there's a fascinating patchwork of small towns, ranging from introverted Islamic mazes to extravagant baroque showpieces. Then there are magnetic pulls such as the award-winning, velvety olive oil of Baena, and treacly Montilla wine, whose wrinkly vines grow south of Córdoba city. The province also produces some of the tastiest cheese and pork products in Andalucía.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Visit the **Mezquita** (p301) in the early morning for breathtaking architecture in peace
- Explore the labyrinthine alleys of Córdoba's **Judería** (p307) and celebrate the city's secret patios at the festival of **Cruces de Mayo** (p310)
- Sweat buckets at the renovated **Hammam Baños Árabes** (p310), followed by a hookah and tea
- Imagine the short-lived splendour of the **Medina Azahara** (p306) at the ruins of the palace-city
- Enjoy the extravagant baroque architecture of **Priego de Córdoba** (p320)
- Get a great view from the beautiful mountains of **Parque Natural Sierras Subbéticas** (p318) or the wooded hills of **Parque Natural Sierra de Hornachuelos** (p317)



■ POPULATION: 1.14 MILLION

■ CÓRDOBA AV DAILY HIGH:
JAN/AUG 11°C/27°C

■ ALTITUDE RANGE:
55M–1570M



CÓRDOBA

pop 319,000 / elevation 110m

Córdoba is ideal for those who like to eat well, explore towns on foot, dive into old bodegas (traditional wine bars) and relish architectural wonders. The city's heart needs no introduction, for it's the most famous in the region: the magnificent Mezquita, a symbol of a worldly and sophisticated Islamic culture lords it over the town centre, and pulls thousands of tourists into its arched womb every day. The tiny streets of the Judería (Jewish quarter) stretch out from the Mezquita like capillaries, and while some are peaceful and bare, many are clogged by kitsch tourist shops. The compact town centre has some excellent bars and restaurants that have become sights in themselves, while the Islamic ruins of Medina Azahara, outside Córdoba, make the imagination tingle with the site's past glory and grandeur.

Córdoba has found its own niche with gastronomic delights, affordable accommodation, a relaxed feeling and pretty patios alongside the Mezquita. The city is quiet and withdrawn during the winter months, but it bursts into life from mid-April to mid-June. At this time of year the skies are blue, the heat is tolerable, the city's many trees and patios drip with foliage and blooms, and Córdoba stages most of its major fiestas.

HISTORY

From its early years Córdoba was the star of the show. The Roman colony of Corduba, founded in 152 BC, became the capital of Baetica province, covering most of today's Andalucía and bringing the writers Seneca and Lucan to the world.

Córdoba fell to Islamic invaders in AD 711 and soon took the role as Islamic capital on the Iberian Peninsula. It was here in 756 that Abd ar-Rahman I set himself up as the independent emir of the Al-Andalus region, founding the Omayyad dynasty, but the town's and region's heyday came under Abd ar-Rahman III (AD 912–61). He named himself caliph (the title of the Muslim successors of Mohammed) in 929, sealing Al-Andalus' long-standing de facto independence from Baghdad.

Córdoba was by now the biggest city in Western Europe, with a flourishing economy based on agriculture and skilled artisan products, and a population somewhere between 100,000 and 500,000. The city shone with hundreds of dazzling mosques, public baths, patios, gardens and fountains. Abd ar-Rahman III's court was frequented by Jewish, Arab and Christian scholars, and Córdoba's university, library and observatories made it a centre of learning whose influence was still being felt in Christian Europe many centuries later. Abulcasis (936–1013), the author of a 30-volume medical encyclopedia and considered the father of surgery, was the area's most remarkable scholar during this age. Córdoba also became a place of pilgrimage for Muslims who could not get to Mecca or Jerusalem.

Towards the end of the 10th century, Al-Mansur (Almanzor), a ruthless general whose northward raids terrified Christian Spain, took the reins of power from the caliphs. But after the death of Al-Mansur's son Abd al-Malik in 1008, the caliphate descended into anarchy. Rival claimants to the title, Berber troops and Christian armies from Castile and Catalonia all fought over the spoils. The Berbers terrorised and looted the city and, in 1031, Omayyad rule ended. Córdoba became a minor part of the Seville *taifa* (small kingdom) in 1069, and has been overshadowed by Seville ever since.

But the city's intellectual traditions lived on. It was home to two important 11th-century philosopher-poets, Ibn Hazm (who wrote in Arabic) and Judah Ha-Levi (who wrote in Hebrew). Twelfth-century Córdoba produced the two most celebrated scholars of Al-Andalus – the Muslim philosopher Averroës (1126–98; p46) and the Jewish philosopher Moses ben Maimon (known as Maimónides; 1135–1204). Their philosophical efforts to harmonise religion with Aristotelian reason were met with ignorance and intolerance: the Almohads put Averroës in high office, and persecuted Maimónides until he fled to Egypt.

When Córdoba was taken by Castile's Fernando III in 1236, much of its population fled. Córdoba became a provincial city and its decline was only reversed by the arrival of industry in the late 19th century. But something of old Córdoba remained –

one of the greatest Spanish poets, Luis de Góngora (1561–1627) was from the city.

ORIENTATION

The medieval city is immediately north of the Río Guadalquivir. It's a warren of narrow streets surrounding the Mezquita, which is just a block from the river. Within the medieval city, the area northwest of the Mezquita was the Judería, the Muslim quarter was north and east of the Mezquita, and the Mozarabic (Christian) quarter was further to the northeast.

The main square of Córdoba is Plaza de las Tendillas, 500m north of the Mezquita, with the main shopping streets to the plaza's north and west. The train and bus stations are 1km northwest of Plaza de las Tendillas.

INFORMATION

Bookshops

Luque Libros (☎ 957 47 30 34; Calle José Cruz Conde 19) City and Michelin maps half the price of those from the tourist shops near the Mezquita. There are also CNIG and SGE maps, and Editorial Alpina maps.

Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 957 21 79 03, 957 29 55 70)
Policía Nacional (☎ 95 747 75 00; Avenida Doctor Fleming 2) The main police station.

Internet Access

Ch@t (Calle Claudio Marcelo 15; per hr €2; ☎ 10am–1pm & 5–9.30pm Mon–Fri, 10am–2pm Sat) A large internet room in the modern part of town.

Mundo Digital (Calle del Osario 9; ☎ 10am–2pm & 5–10pm Mon–Fri, 11am–2pm & 5–10pm Sat & Sun) Has similar prices to those of Ch@t.

Internet Resources

Info Cordoba (www.infocordoba.com) A useful site with general information on Córdoba.

Left Luggage

Bus station (Plaza de las Tres Culturas; per day €3; ☎ 8am–8pm Mon–Fri) Has a baggage deposit facility in the form of lockers.

Train station (Avenida de América; 8am–8pm Mon–Fri) Also has lockers, which operate similar hours to those at the bus station.

Medical Services

Hospital Cruz Roja (Red Cross Hospital; ☎ 957 29 34 11; Avenida Doctor Fleming s/n) The most central hospital.

Hospital Reina Sofia (☎ 957 21 70 00; Avenida Menéndez Pidal s/n) Nearly 2km southwest of the Mezquita.

Money

Most banks and ATMs are in the newer part of the centre, around Plaza de las Tendillas and Avenida del Gran Capitán. The bus and train stations also have ATMs.

Post

Post office (Calle José Cruz Conde 15)

Tourist Information

Information booth (☎ 10am–2pm & 4.30–8pm Mon–Fri) A kiosk at the train station.

Municipal tourist office (☎ 957 20 05 22; Plaza de Judá Levi; ☎ 8.30am–2.30pm Mon–Fri) A block west of the regional tourist office, with information and maps of Córdoba city.

Regional tourist office (☎ 957 47 12 35; Calle de Torrijos 10; ☎ 9.30am–8pm Mon–Sat, 10am–2pm Sun Apr–Jul, 9.30am–7pm Mon–Sat, 10am–2pm Sun Aug–Mar) In a 16th-century chapel facing the western side of the Mezquita. A good source of information about Córdoba province.

SIGHTS

All of Córdoba's sights can be found in a compact area on the north side of the Río Guadalquivir, with the main tourist activity concentrated around the Mezquita and the adjacent Judería.

Most people take a good half-day to enjoy the Mezquita, and another day or two to explore the city's museums and palaces, which are all a short walk to the northeast. A not-to-be-missed day trip is to the ruins of the palace-city, Medina Azahara, located 8km west of Córdoba.

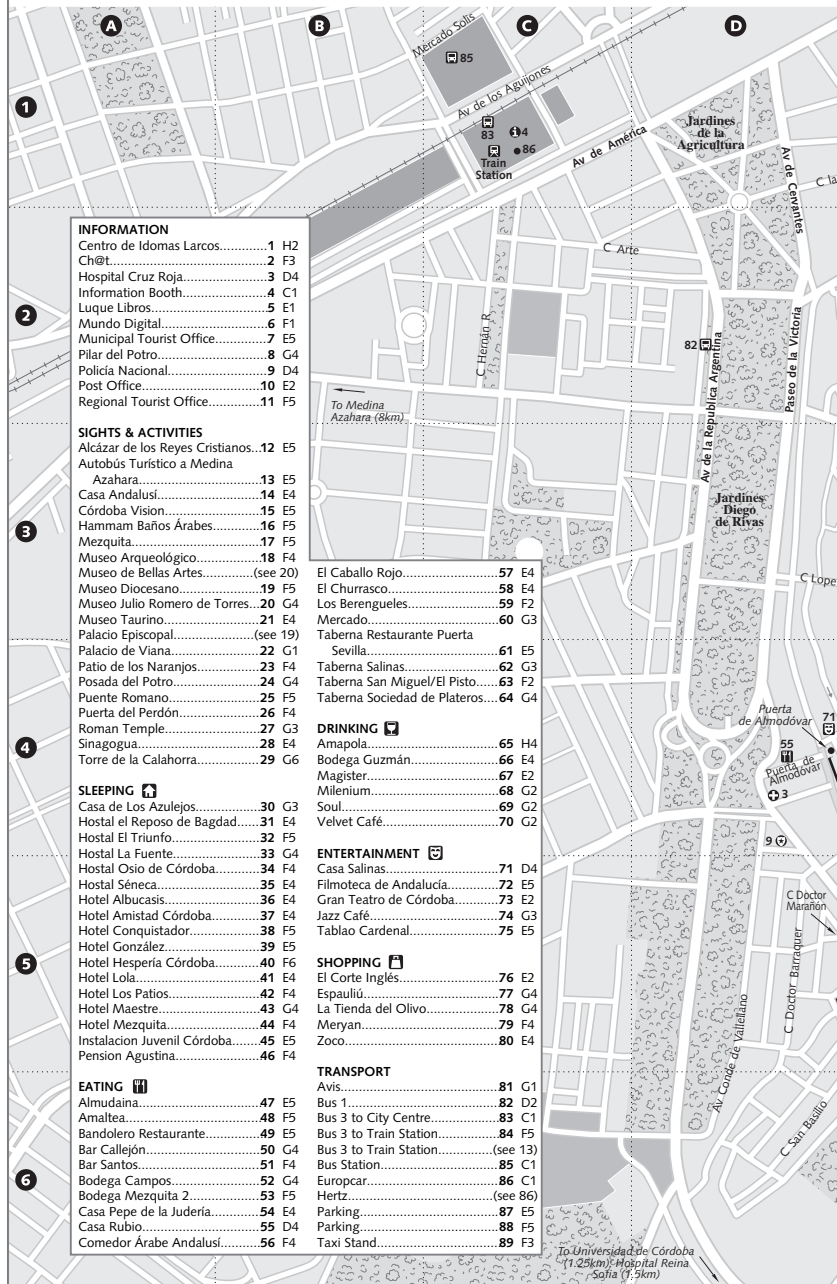
Mezquita

It's impossible to overestimate the beauty of Córdoba's **Mezquita** (Mosque; ☎ 957 47 05 12; adult/child €8/4; ☎ 10am–7pm Mon–Sat Apr–Oct, 10am–6pm

OPENING HOURS

Opening hours for Córdoba's sights change frequently, so check with the tourist offices for updated times. Most places except the Mezquita close on Monday. Closing times are generally an hour or two earlier in winter than summer.

CÓRDOBA



INFORMATION

- Centro de Idomas Larcos.....1 H2
- Ch@t.....2 F3
- Hospital Cruz Roja.....3 D4
- Information Booth.....4 C1
- Luque Libros.....5 E1
- Mundo Digital.....6 F1
- Municipal Tourist Office.....7 E5
- Pilar del Potro.....8 G4
- Policía Nacional.....9 D4
- Post Office.....10 E2
- Regional Tourist Office.....11 F5

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

- Alcázar de los Reyes Cristianos.....12 E5
- Autobús Turístico a Medina
 - Azahara.....13 E5
 - Casa Andalusi.....14 E4
 - Córdoba Vision.....15 E5
 - Hammam Baños Árabes.....16 F5
 - Mezquita.....17 F5
 - Museo Arqueológico.....18 F4
 - Museo de Bellas Artes.....(see 20)
 - Museo Diocesano.....19 F5
 - Museo Julio Romero de Torres.....20 G4
 - Museo Taurino.....21 E4
 - Palacio Episcopal.....(see 19)
 - Palacio de Viana.....22 G1
 - Patio de los Naranjos.....23 F4
 - Posada del Potro.....24 G4
 - Puente Romano.....25 F5
 - Puerta del Perdón.....26 F4
 - Roman Temple.....27 G3
 - Sinagoga.....28 E4
 - Torre de la Calahorra.....29 G6
- El Caballo Rojo.....57 E4
- El Churrasco.....58 E4
- Los Berengüeles.....59 F2
- Mercado.....60 G3
- Taberna Restaurante Puerta
 - Sevilla.....61 E5
- Taberna Salinas.....62 G3
- Taberna San Miguel/El Pisto.....63 F2
- Taberna Sociedad de Plateros.....64 G4

DRINKING ☑

- Amapola.....65 H4
- Bodega Guzmán.....66 E4
- Magister.....67 E2
- Milenium.....68 G2
- Soul.....69 G2
- Velvet Café.....70 G2

ENTERTAINMENT 🎭

- Casa Salinas.....71 D4
- Filмотeca de Andalucía.....72 E5
- Gran Teatro de Córdoba.....73 E2
- Jazz Café.....74 G3
- Tablao Cardenal.....75 E5

SHOPPING 🛍

- El Corte Inglés.....76 E2
- Españuli.....77 G4
- La Tienda del Olivo.....78 G4
- Meryan.....79 F4
- Zoco.....80 E4

TRANSPORT 🚗

- Avis.....81 G1
- Bus 1.....82 D2
- Bus 1 to City Centre.....83 C1
- Bus 3 to Train Station.....84 F5
- Bus 3 to Train Station.....(see 13)
- Bus Station.....85 C1
- Europcar.....86 C1
- Hertz.....(see 86)
- Casa Pepe de la Judería.....87 E5
- Parking.....88 F5
- Parking.....89 F3
- Taxi Stand.....89 F3

SLEEPING 🛏

- Casa de Los Azulejos.....30 G3
- Hostal el Reposo de Bagdad.....31 E4
- Hostal El Triunfo.....32 F5
- Hostal La Fuente.....33 G4
- Hostal Osio de Córdoba.....34 F4
- Hostal Séneca.....35 E4
- Hotel Albucahis.....36 E4
- Hotel Amistad Córdoba.....37 E4
- Hotel Conquistador.....38 F5
- Hotel González.....39 E5
- Hotel Hesperia Córdoba.....40 F6
- Hotel Lola.....41 E4
- Hotel Los Patios.....42 F4
- Hotel Maestro.....43 G4
- Hotel Mezquita.....44 F4
- Instalacion Juvenil Córdoba.....45 E5
- Pension Agustina.....46 F4

EATING 🍴

- Almudaina.....47 E5
- Amaltea.....48 F5
- Bandolero Restaurante.....49 E5
- Bar Callejón.....50 G4
- Bar Santos.....51 F4
- Bodega Campos.....52 G4
- Bodega Mezquita 2.....53 F5
- Casa Pepe de la Judería.....54 E4
- Casa Rubio.....55 D4
- Comedor Árabe Andalusi.....56 F4

TO MEDINA AZAHARA (8km)

TO SEVILLE (138km); GRANADA (166km); MÁLAGA (187km)

TO UNIVERSIDAD DE CÓRDOBA (1.25km); HOSPITAL REINA SOfía (1.9km)



TO PARADOR NACIONAL ARRUFZA (2km)

TO SURTER ROSA (650m); A4 (1.35km); JAÉN (104km)

TO SEVILLE (138km); GRANADA (166km); MÁLAGA (187km)

Scale: 0 to 300 m / 0.2 miles

Mon-Sat Nov-Mar, 9-10.45am & 1.30-6.30pm Sun year-round), a building that overwhelms with its peaceful, spacious interior. The Mezquita hints, with all its lustrous decoration, at a lavish and refined age when Muslims, Jews and Christians lived side by side and enriched their city and surroundings with a heady interaction of diverse and vibrant cultures. However, it's likely that a less glamorous reality prevailed – medieval Córdoba was probably a hotbed of racial and class-based tension. That said, the Mezquita is still captivating, despite the hordes of tourists that threaten to drown the romance.

HISTORY

The Church of St Vincent was the original building located on the site of the Mezquita, and Arab chronicles recount how Abd ar-Rahman I purchased half of the church for the use of the Muslim community's Friday prayers. However, the rapid growth of that community soon rendered the space too small and in AD 784 he bought the other half of the church in order to erect a new mosque. Material from Roman and Visigothic ruins was incorporated into the structure and it is often speculated that Abd ar-Rahman I designed the mosque himself with the help of Syrian architects. In 785 the mosque was opened for prayer, although it was subsequently extended southwards by both Abd ar-Rahman II (821–852) and Al-Hakim II in the 960s, in order to cater for Córdoba's expanding population. Al-Hakim II also added the existing mihrab (prayer niche) and, for extra light, built a number of domes with skylights over the area in front of it. Under Al-Mansur, eastward extensions were made and the mihrab lost its central position in the south wall.

What you see today is the building's final form with one major alteration – a 16th-century cathedral right in the middle (hence the often-used description of 'Mezquita-Cathedral'). Extensions made to the Mezquita under Abd ar-Rahman II and Al-Mansur were partly dismantled to make way for the cathedral, which took nearly 250 years to complete (1523–1766). The cathedral thus exhibits a range of changing architectural styles and tastes, from plateresque and late Renaissance to extravagant Spanish baroque.

For more information on the Mezquita's architectural qualities and importance, see p53.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The main entrance to the Mezquita is the Puerta del Perdón, a 14th-century Mudejar gateway on Calle Cardenal Herrero. There's a ticket office immediately inside on the pretty Patio de los Naranjos (Courtyard of the Orange Trees), from where a door leads inside the building itself. A leaflet given free to visitors contains a map clearly outlining the stages of the building's construction.

Entrance to the Mezquita is free from 8.30am to 10am Monday to Saturday and groups are not admitted during this time, so weekday morning visits are perfect for appreciating the Mezquita in peace and quiet. Mass is held at 11am, noon and 1pm on weekdays. Entrance is also free on Sunday from 9am to 11am, when Mass is celebrated in the central cathedral. Note that on weekends you cannot enter the cathedral unless you are attending the Mass in its entirety, and the rest of the Mezquita is unlit during this time. It is also worth taking a turn around the exterior walls at night when the lights throw the highly ornate doorways into relief.

THE MOSQUE-CATHEDRAL

The Mezquita's architectural uniqueness and importance lies in the fact that, structurally speaking, it was for its time, a revolutionary building. It defied precedents. The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the Great Mosque in Damascus both had vertical, nave-like designs, but the Mezquita's aim was to form an infinitely spacious, democratically horizontal and simple space, where the spirit could be free to roam and communicate easily with God. The original Islamic prayer space (usually the open yard of a desert home) was transformed into a 14,400-sq-metre metaphor for the desert itself. Men prayed side by side on the *argamasa*, a floor made of compact, reddish slaked lime and sand. A flat roof, decorated with gold and multicoloured motifs, shaded them from the sun. The orange patio, where the ablution fountains gurgled with water, was the oasis. The terracotta and white-striped arches suggested a hallucinogenic forest of date palms, and supported the roof

with 1293 columns (of which only 856 remain). This was truly a mosque – 'a place to prostrate oneself'.

Abd ar-Rahman I's initial mosque was a square split into two rectangular halves – a covered prayer hall and an open ablutions courtyard. The prayer hall was divided into 11 'naves' by lines of two-tier arches striped in red brick and white stone. The columns used for the Mezquita were a mishmash collected from the Visigothic cathedral that had previously occupied the site, Córdoba's Roman buildings and places as far away as Constantinople. This, predictably, presented problems in keeping the ceiling height consistent and making it high enough to create a sense of openness. Inventive builders came up with the idea of using the tall columns as a base and planting the shorter ones on top in order to create the ceiling arches. Later enlargements of the mosque extended these lines of arches to cover an area nearly 120 sq metres and create one of the biggest mosques in the world. The arcades are one of the much loved Islamic architectural motifs. Their simplicity and number give a sense of endlessness to the Mezquita, and imagining this vast space filled with kneeling men, praying in unison, is quite mesmerising.

Originally there were 19 doors, filling the interior of the mosque with light. Nowadays, only one door sheds its light into the dim interior, dampening the vibrant effect of the red-and-white vousoirs of the double arches. Christian additions to the building, such as the solid mass of the cathedral in the centre and the 50 or so chapels around the fringes, further enclose and impose on the airy space.

At the furthest point from the entrance door, on the southern wall of the mosque, the aisles draw you towards qibla (the direction of Mecca) and the mosque's greatest treasure, the mihrab built by Al-Hakim II.

Mihrab & Maksura

Like Abd ar-Rahman II a century earlier, Al-Hakim lengthened the naves of the prayer hall, creating a new mihrab at the south end of the central nave. The bay immediately in front of the mihrab and the bays to each side form the *maksura*, the area where the caliphs and their retinues would have prayed (now enclosed by rail-

ings). Inside the mihrab a single block of white marble was sculpted into the shape of a scallop shell, a symbol of the Quran. This formed the dome that amplified the voice of the imam throughout the mosque. The art of the Cordoban caliphate can be seen to have reached maturity here, and many of the intricate decorative effects were carried over into Abd ar-Rahman III's extravagant palace at Medina Azahara (see p306).

The arches within and around the *maksura* are the mosque's most intricate and sophisticated, forming a forest of interwoven horseshoe and bow shapes. Despite their orgy of decoration, these ingenious curves are subtly interwoven to form the strongest elements of the structure. But they were not only physically functional: their purpose was to seduce the eye of the worshipper with their lavish decorations, leading it up to the mihrab – to the focus of prayer and the symbolic doorway to heaven. Equally attractive are the sky-lit domes over the *maksura*, decorated with star-patterned stone vaulting, reminding worshippers of heaven and its promises of beauty. Each dome was held up by four interlocking pairs of parallel ribs, a highly advanced technique in 10th-century Europe.

The greatest glory of Al-Hakim II's extension was the portal of the mihrab itself – a crescent arch with a rectangular surround known as an *alfiz*, surmounted by a blind arcade. For the decoration of the portal, Al-Hakim asked the emperor of Byzantium, Nicephoras II Phocas, to send him a mosaicist capable of imitating the superb mosaics of the Great Mosque of Damascus, one of the great 8th-century Syrian Omayyad buildings. The Christian emperor sent the Muslim caliph not only a mosaicist but also a gift of 1600kg of gold mosaic cubes. These shimmering cubes, shaped into flower motifs and inscriptions from the Quran, decorated the whole *maksura*, giving the Córdoba mihrab area something of the mysterious character of a Byzantine church.

Patio de los Naranjos & Minaret

Outside the mosque, the leafy, walled courtyard and its fountain were the site of ritual ablutions before prayer, while the arcaded walls would have seen much of the ancient city's hustle and bustle. The

crowning glory of the whole complex was the minaret, which at its peak towered 48m (only 22m of the minaret still survives) and allowed the call to prayer to echo over the city. Now encased in its 16th-century shell, the original minaret would have looked something like the Giralda in Seville, which was practically a copy. In fact, Córdoba's minaret influenced all the minarets built thereafter throughout the western Islamic world.

The Cathedral

For three centuries following the Reconquista (Christian reconquest) in 1236, the Mezquita remained largely unaltered

save for minor modifications such as the Mudejar tiling added in the 1370s to the Mozarabic and Almohad **Capilla Real** (located nine bays north and one east of the mihrab, and now part of the cathedral). In the 16th century King Carlos I gave permission (against the wishes of Córdoba's city council) for the centre of the Mezquita to be ripped out to allow construction of the **Capilla Mayor** (the altar area in the cathedral) and *coro* (choir). However, the king was not enamoured with the results and famously regretted: 'You have built what you or others might have built anywhere, but you have destroyed something that was unique in the world.'

PLEASURE DOME & POWERHOUSE

Legend has it that Abd ar-Rahman III built his palace-city, the **Medina Azahara** (Madinat al-Zahra; ☎ 957 32 91 30; Carretera Palma del Río; non-EU/EU citizen €1.50/free; 🕒 10am-8.30pm Tue-Sat May-mid-Sep, 10am-6.30pm Tue-Sat mid-Sep-Apr, 10am-2pm Sun year-round), for his favourite wife, Az-Zahra. Dismayed by her homesickness and yearning for the snowy mountains of Syria, ar-Rahman tuned into his poetic side; he surrounded his new city with almond and cherry trees, replacing snowflakes with fluffy white blossoms.

More realistically, it was probably the case that Abd ar-Rahman's rivalry with the Abbasid dynasty in Baghdad drove him to build an opulent royal complex outside Córdoba. Building started in AD 936 and chroniclers record some staggering construction statistics: 10,000 labourers set 6000 stone blocks a day, with outer walls extending to 1518m west to east and 745m north to south.

It is almost inconceivable to think that such a city, built over 40 years, was only to last a mere 30 years before the usurper Al-Mansur transferred the seat of government to a new palace complex of his own in 981. Then, between 1010 and 1013, the Azahara was wrecked by Berber soldiers. During succeeding centuries its ruins were plundered repeatedly for building materials. Less than one-tenth of the site has been excavated to date.

Located at the foot of the Sierra Morena, the complex spills down over three terraces with the caliph's palace on the highest terrace overlooking what would have been the court and town. The visitors' route takes you down through the city's original northern gate to the **Dar al-Wuzara** (House of the Viziers) and then to the centrepiece of the site, the **Salón de Abd ar-Rahman III**. Inside, the royal reception hall has been much restored, and the exquisitely carved stuccowork, a riot of vegetal designs, has been painstakingly repaired to cover most of the wall's surface. It gives just a glimpse of the lavishness of the court, which was said to be decorated with gold and silver tiles, and arches of ivory and ebony that contrasted with walls of multicoloured marble. For special effect, a bowl at the centre of the hall was filled with mercury so that when it was rocked the reflected light flashed and bounced off the gleaming decoration.

To reach the site with your own vehicle, follow the signs down Avenida de Medina Azahara, which leads west out of Córdoba onto the A431. The Medina Azahara is signposted 8km from the city centre and there is free parking at the site, although this gets very full. Try to visit before 11am to avoid the buses.

A taxi costs €24 for the return trip, including one hour to view the site, or you can take a bus tour (see p310). The nearest you can get by public transport is the Cruce de Medina Azahara, the turn-off from the A431, from which it's a uninspiring 3km walk, slightly uphill, to the site. City bus 1 will drop you at the Cruce de Medina Azahara – the bus departs from the northern end of Avenida de la República Argentina.

Subsequent additions included a rich 17th-century jasper and red-marble retablo (ornamental screenlike structure behind the altar) in the Capilla Mayor, and fine mahogany stalls in the choir, which were carved in the 18th century by Pedro Duque Cornejo.

If you think of the whole building as a cathedral, the forest of arches and pillars provide a superb setting for the central structures. If you see it as a mosque, however, the Christian additions wreck its whole design.

Around the Mezquita

Opposite the Mezquita and next door to the regional tourist office is the **Palacio Episcopal** (Bishops' Palace; Calle de Torrijos), now a conference centre but originally the old Hospital of San Sebastián. A lovely Isabelline-style villa with an internal patio, the palace stages exhibitions, often of regional pottery, to which admission is free if you have a Mezquita ticket. The palace also houses the **Museo Diocesano** (Diocesan Museum; ☎ 957 49 60 85; Calle de Torrijos; admission €1.20; 🕒 9.30am-3pm), which has a collection of religious art. The best of this art is some outstanding medieval woodcarving, including the 13th-century *Virgen de las Huertas*.

Continuing southwest from the Mezquita, down Calle Amador de los Ríos, will bring you to the massive fortified **Alcázar de los Reyes Cristianos** (Castle of the Christian Kings; ☎ 957 42 01 51; Campo Santo de los Mártires s/n; adult/child €4/2, Fri free; 🕒 10am-2pm & 4.30-6.30pm Tue-Sat mid-Oct-Apr, 10am-2pm & 5.30-7.30pm Tue-Sat May, Jun & Sep-mid-Oct, 8.30am-2.30pm Tue-Sat Jul & Aug, 9.30am-2.30pm Sun & public holidays year-round). Built by Alfonso X in the 13th century on the remains of Roman and Arab predecessors, the castle began life as a palace, hosting both Fernando and Isabel. From 1490 to 1821 it became a home for the Inquisition, later being converted into a prison that only closed in 1951. Its large terraced gardens, full of fish ponds, fountains, orange trees, flowers and topiary, were added in the 15th century and are among the most beautiful in Andalucía. They're dotted with fine archaeological remains, including mosaics, marble sarcophagi and Roman statuary. The building itself, much altered, also houses an old royal bathhouse, the Baños Califales.

Situated on the banks of the Río Guadalquivir, the castle overlooks a much restored Roman bridge, the **Puente Romano**. The bridge formed part of the old medieval walls that are reputed to have been some 22km in length. These days, traffic is heavy across the bridge and the pedestrian walkways are narrow. On the other side of the river, the dour-looking **Torre de la Calahorra** (☎ 957 29 39 29; Puente Romano s/n; adult/child €4/2.50; 🕒 10am-2pm & 4.30-8.30pm May-Sep, 10am-6pm Oct-Apr) is the oldest defence tower in the city. Used as a jail for the Cordoban nobility in the 18th century and as a school for women in the 19th century, it now lays extravagant claim to being the 'Living Museum of Al-Andalus' and offers a rather over-the-top multimedia tour (in Spanish), complete with headphones, models and films.

Judería

Córdoba's Judería is a charming maze of narrow streets and small squares, white-washed buildings with flowers dripping from window boxes, and wrought-iron doorways that give glimpses of plant-filled patios (see Córdoba's Hidden Heart, p308). The Judería is one of Córdoba's main tourist attractions and many of its streets are stuffed with shops selling vast amounts of tacky souvenirs. But there are still quiet residential streets here that offer a glimpse into how the neighbourhood might have been hundreds of years ago.

Spain had one of Europe's biggest Jewish communities, recorded from as early as the 2nd century AD. Persecuted by the Visigoths, they allied themselves with the Muslims following the Arab conquests. By the 10th century they were established as some of the most dynamic members of society, holding posts as administrators, doctors, jurists, philosophers, poets and functionaries. The importance of the community is illustrated by the proximity of the Judería to the Mezquita and the city's centres of power. In fact, one of the greatest Jewish theologians, Maimónides, was from Córdoba. He summarised his teachings of Judaism and completed his magnum opus, the *Mishne Torah*, which systemises all of Jewish law, before fleeing persecution to Fez. He later moved to Egypt, where he became physician to the sultan, Saladin.

CÓRDOBA'S HIDDEN HEART

As you're squeezing yourself down the mini-streets of the Judería, the green, airy patios, partly concealed behind heavy wooden doors and wrought-iron gates, will be stealing your attention at every point. The famed patios of Córdoba have provided shade during the searing heat of summer for centuries. They are a haven of peace and quiet, and a place to talk and entertain.

The origin of these patios probably lies in the Ancient Greek megaron and the Roman atrium, but the tradition, with the addition of a central water fountain, was continued by the Arabs. The internal courtyard was an area for women to go about family life and household chores, and was decorated with potted plants – an idea conceived by desert nomads who carried pots of plants with them on their migrations. The grapevine offered good shade.

In the first half of May you'll notice 'patio' signs in the streets and alleyways, which means that you're invited to enter and view what are for the rest of the year closed to the outside world. At this time of year the patios are at their prettiest, and many are entered in an annual competition, the **Concurso de Patios Cordobeses** (Competition of Cordoban Patios). A map of patios open for viewing is available from the tourist office. Some of the best patios are on and around Calle San Basilio, about 400m southwest of the Mezquita. During the competition, the patios are generally open from 5pm to midnight Monday to Friday, and noon to midnight Saturday and Sunday. Admission is usually free but sometimes there's a container for donations.

Although much diminished, what remains of the old Jewish quarter extends west and northwest from the Mezquita, almost to the beginning of Avenida del Gran Capitán. The most famous street in the area is known as **Calleja de las Flores** (Flower Alley) and gives a picture-postcard view of the Mezquita bell tower framed between the narrow alley walls.

The medieval **Sinagoga** (Synagogue; Calle de los Judíos 20; non-EU/EU citizen €0.30/free; ☎ 9.30am-2pm & 3.30-5.30pm Tue-Sat, 9.30am-1.30pm Sun & public holidays), built in 1315, is a beautiful little building, decorated with some extravagant stucco work that includes Hebrew inscriptions and intricate Mudejar star and plant patterns. There's a solitary menorah, probably where the ark (the cabinet where the Torah is held) used to be. It has a women's gallery upstairs.

The **Casa Andalusi** (Calle de los Judíos 12; admission €2.50; ☎ 10am-7pm) is a 12th-century house with a bit of an exaggerated, slightly tacky idea of Al-Andalus. It has a tinkling fountain in the patio and a variety of exhibits, mainly relating to Córdoba's medieval Muslim culture, as well as a Roman mosaic in the cellar, and a shop selling North African items.

Nearby is the **Museo Taurino** (Bullfighting Museum; ☎ 957 20 10 56; Plaza de Maimónides; admission €3, Fri free; ☎ 10am-2pm & 4.30-6.30pm Tue-Sat Oct-Apr, 10am-2pm & 5.30-7.30pm Tue-Sat May, Jun & Sep, 8.30am-2.30pm Tue-Sat Jul & Aug, 9.30am-2.30pm Sun & public

holidays year-round), housed in a 16th-century Renaissance mansion. It celebrates, with grim theatricality, Córdoba's legendary matadors, with rooms dedicated to El Corobés and Manolete. Exhibits include the rather forlorn, pegged-out hide of Islero, the bull that killed the revered Manolete at Linares in 1947. It was closed for refurbishment during research.

Plaza del Potro, Plaza de la Corredera & Around

Córdoba's famous Plaza del Potro (Square of the Colt) has in its centre a lovely 16th-century stone fountain topped by a rearing *potro* that gave the plaza its name. The plaza is home to an attractive old charity hospital that houses two of the city's most visited museums, the Museo Julio Romero de Torres and the Museo de Bellas Artes. The square's heyday was in the 16th and 17th centuries, when it was the preferred gathering ground for traders, vagabonds and adventurers. On the plaza's western side is the legendary 1435 inn, **Posada del Potro** (☎ 957 48 50 18; Plaza del Potro 10; admission free; ☎ 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Mon-Fri Aug-May), described in *Don Quijote* as a 'den of thieves'. Cervantes once lived here for a short period, and was no doubt robbed and cheated several times by the rough lot hanging out on the square. The picturesque *posada* (inn), charmingly arranged around a small animal yard, regularly hosts inter-

esting temporary exhibits of art, artefacts and photography.

The **Museo de Bellas Artes** (Plaza del Potro 1; non-EU/EU citizen €1.50/free; ☎ 3-8pm Tue, 9am-8pm Wed-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun & public holidays) has a collection of mainly Cordoban artists.

The excellent archaeological museum, **Museo Arqueológico** (☎ 957 47 40 11; Plaza de Jerónimo Páez 7; non-EU/EU citizen €1.50/free; ☎ 3-8pm Tue, 9am-8pm Wed-Sat, 9am-3pm Sun & public holidays), is housed in a Renaissance mansion that was once the site of an original Roman villa. The museum has a wonderful collection of Iberian, Roman and Muslim artefacts, and provides real insight into pre-Islamic Córdoba. A reclining stone lion takes pride of place in the Iberian section, and there is a huge collection of Roman artefacts – from large mosaics and gladiatorial tombstones to elegant ceramics and tinted glass bowls. The upstairs is devoted to medieval Córdoba, and includes a bronze stag, a gift to Abd ar-Rahman III from the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII, that used to grace one of the fountains at Medina Azahara.

North of Plaza del Potro is the grand 17th-century Plaza de la Corredera, a square with an elaborate history of public entertainment and gory showbiz. This was the site of Córdoba's Roman amphitheatre (where, no doubt, gladiator blood was spilled), and the location for horse races, violent bullfights and horrific Inquisition burnings. Thankfully, all of that is in the past, and nowadays the extensively restored square hosts tame rock concerts and other events (ask at the tourist office for details). A daily

fruit market is held here and on Saturday there's a lively flea market selling stuff like secondhand clothes, household items and bric-a-brac.

Some 500m north of Plaza de la Corredera is the stunning Renaissance **Palacio de Viana** (☎ 957 49 67 41; Plaza de Don Gome 2; whole house/patios only €6/3; ☎ 9am-2pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat Jun-Sep, 10am-1pm & 4-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat Oct-May), which has 12 beautiful patios and a formal garden that are a real pleasure to visit in the spring. The palace was occupied by the Marqueses de Viana until a couple of decades ago. The charge covers a one-hour guided tour of the rooms (packed with art and antiques) and access to the patios and garden. It takes about half an hour to stroll around the garden and patios.

Plaza de las Tendillas & Around

Córdoba's busy main square, Plaza de las Tendillas, features a clock with flamenco chimes, exuberant fountains and an equestrian statue of local lad Gonzalo Fernández de Córdoba, who rose to become Isabel and Fernando's military right-hand man and earned the name El Gran Capitán. You may notice his head is small and white, while the rest of the statue is grey – the town legend goes that someone stole his head and the authorities replaced it with a smaller, colour-clashing version. The mystery gets deflated when you spot his real head (which must have fallen off and broken) in the Museo de Bellas Artes.

The streets running off from here are the main shopping zones. Calle Conde de Gondomar leads west into the broad and

ANDALUCÍA'S ARTIST OR CÓRDOBA'S CLICHÉ?

Córdoba's most visited museum, the **Museo Julio Romero de Torres** (☎ 957 49 19 09; Plaza del Potro 1; admission €3, Fri free; ☎ 10am-2pm & 4.30-6.30pm Tue-Sat mid-Oct-Apr, 10am-2pm & 5.30-7.30pm Tue-Sat May, Jun & Sep–mid Oct, 8.30am-2.30pm Jul & Aug, 9.30am-2.30pm Sun & public holidays year-round), is devoted to the city's beloved painter of the same name and housed in his former studio. Born and bred in Córdoba, Señor Torres (1880–1930) received international recognition and acclaim during his lifetime, but after his death his work lost respect everywhere but in his home town. It won't be long before you notice poster reproductions of his paintings in local shops, bars and restaurants. Romero's art was entirely dedicated to all things passionate, despondent and Andalusian, portraying broken-hearted beauties, jealous bullfighters and proud prostitutes. He was deeply connected to the flamenco world, and is still respected by flamenco musicians – the famous guitarist Paco Peña, a fellow Córdoba, dedicated an entire show to Romero's work and themes. Some have described his work as voyeuristic eroticism and chocolate-box trash, and others as the quintessence of all things Andalusian. Take a look and make up your own mind.

lengthy Avenida del Gran Capitán. The *avenida* is undistinguished architecturally, but is the scene of Córdoba's evening *paseo* (stroll) and is lively enough. To the east of Plaza de las Tendillas, a ruined **Roman temple** on Calle Claudio Marcelo has been partly restored, with 11 columns that remain standing.

ACTIVITIES

When you've had enough of being active, try utter laziness at the newly renovated Arab baths, **Hammam Baños Árabes** (☎ 957 48 47 46; www.hammamspain.com/cordoba in Spanish; Calle Corregidor Luis de la Cerda; bath/bath & massage €12/16; ♿ 2hr sessions at 10am, noon, 2pm, 4pm, 6pm, 8pm & 10pm). In its glory days Córdoba had 60 of these wonderful baths where you hop from hot pools to tepid and cold pools, sipping mint tea after being pleasantly pummelled and squeezed by the aromatherapy masseuse or masseur. You must wear a swimming costume here, but don't worry if you forget yours, as they rent them on the spot and take hygienic precautions. They also give you a towel, so there's no need to bring one. There's a lovely, cushion-strewn *tetería* (tearoom) upstairs where you can smoke a hookah, drink tea and eat Arabic sweets. Reservations for the baths and massages are required at least a day in advance.

COURSES

Centro de Idiomas Larcos (☎ 957 47 11 03; www.larcos.net; Calle Manchado 9) A private language school offering a range of Spanish courses lasting one or two weeks and longer, plus different accommodation options. A typical two-week course costs €260, and two weeks in a shared apartment costs about an extra €160.

Universidad de Córdoba (☎ 957 21 81 33; www.uco.es/webuco/ceucosa/lenguas in Spanish; 5th flr, Building EU Enfermería, Avenida de Menéndez Pidal, Córdoba) For information on monthly language courses (held every month except August) contact the Servicio de Lenguas Modernas y Traducción Técnica at the university. Course fees are €365 and monthly accommodation can be arranged in shared apartments (€180), university residences (€480) and lodgings with local families (€480).

TOURS

You can book an organised tour to Medina Azahara through many of the hotels, or contact the following places:

Córdoba Vision (☎ 957 23 17 34; Calle Doctor Marañón 1; tour €10; ♿ tours 4pm Tue-Sat Oct-May, 6pm Tue-Sat Jun-Sep, 10.30am Sat & Sun year-round) Offers a three-hour guided tour to Medina Azahara, conducted in Spanish, French and English. The bus departs from Avenida del Alcázar from in front of the Alcázar de los Reyes Cristianos. It also does a combined tour of the city and Medina for €30.

Autobús Turístico a Medina Azahara (☎ 902 20 17 74; Campo Santo de los Mártires; tour €5; ♿ tours 11am Tue-Fri, 10am & 11am Sat & Sun) Another good way to get to the Medina. Tickets include a three-hour guided tour and an illustrated book of the site.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Spring and early summer are the chief festival times in Córdoba.

Semana Santa (Holy Week) Every evening during the week before Easter Sunday, up to 12 *pasos* (the decorated platforms on which statues are carried in a religious procession) and their processions file through the city, passing along the *carrera oficial* (official trail) – Calle Claudio Marcelo, Plaza de las Tendillas, Calle José Cruz Conde – between about 8pm and midnight. The climax is the *madrugá* (dawn) of Good Friday, when six *pasos* pass between 4am and 6am.

Cruces de Mayo (Crosses of May) During the first few days of May, flower crosses decorate squares and patios, which become a focus for wine and tapas stalls, music and merrymaking. For more information about the patios, see Córdoba's Hidden Heart, p308.

Concurso de Patios Cordobeses (Competition of Córdoba Patios) Held at the same time as the patio festival (see Córdoba's Hidden Heart, p308), this festival has a busy cultural programme that every three years (next in 2007) includes the Concurso Nacional de Arte Flamenco, an important flamenco competition.

Feria de Mayo (May Fair) Held in the last week of May and the first days of June, this is a massive town party with concerts, a big fairground in the El Arenal area southeast of the city centre, and the main bullfighting season in Los Califas ring on Gran Via Parque.

Festival Internacional de la Guitarra (International Guitar Festival) A two-week celebration of the guitar, with live performances of classical, flamenco, rock, blues and more; top names play in the Jardines del Alcázar at night. It's held in late June or early July.

SLEEPING

This is budget traveller's heaven. There are more *hostales* (budget hotels) and *pensiones* (guesthouses) around the Mezquita area than you can shake a pillow at, and those mentioned here are just a selection. The cheapest are towards the east and many of

them are built around the charming patios for which the city is famous. There are also some charming midrange and top-end options, some with simple, elegant style and spacious rooms, others laden with antiques and history.

Booking ahead during the main festivals is essential. Córdoba draws increasing numbers of visitors throughout the year, so single rooms at a decent price are in short supply. Prices are generally reduced from November to mid-March; some places also cut their rates in the hot months of July and August. Where stated, hotels do offer parking facilities but these have to be paid for at a rate of around €10 to €12 per day.

Budget

Nearly all of the following places also offer rooms without bathrooms at a cheaper rate.

Instalación Juvenil Córdoba (☎ 957 29 01 66, reservations 902 51 00 00; www.inturjuven.com; Plaza de Judá Levi s/n; dm under 26yr/over 26yr incl breakfast €14/19; ♿ ♿) Fantastically cheap and perfectly positioned in the Judería, Córdoba's youth hostel accommodates 167 people in double, triple, quadruple and quintuple rooms, all with private bathroom, but beware the screaming school kids who come here on group trips. It can be hellish. One wing is in a converted 16th-century convent.

Pension Agustina (☎ 957 47 08 72; Calle Zapateria Vieja 5; s/d €17/30) A simple, old-fashioned and friendly family-run *hostal* with a plant-filled patio. There are nine simple but pristine rooms.

Hostal el Reposo de Bagdad (☎ 957 20 28 54; www.hostalbagdad.eresmas.com; Calle Fernández Ruano 11; s/d €22/38) Hidden away in a tiny street in the Judería, this place is excellent for anyone wanting an interesting and beautiful place to stay, at bargain prices. The house is over 200 years old, and the en-suite rooms are simple with crisp, white linen. The (dark) ground-floor rooms have lovely Andalusian tiling. There's a guest-only Arabic *tetería* on the ground floor, off a gorgeous leafy patio.

Hostal Osio de Córdoba (☎ /fax 957 48 51 65; Calle Osio 6; d €40; ♿) This refurbished mansion with two patios has great facilities at a very reasonable price, and has been recommended by Lonely Planet readers. The proprietor speaks English.

Hostal La Fuente (☎ /fax 957 48 78 27; Calle de San Fernando 51; d €45; ♿ ♿) La Fuente is a 19th-century town house with spacious courtyards, roof terrace and lift. Newly refurbished in 2005, the *hostal* has 40 compact, pleasant rooms painted in custard yellow, all with TV, heating, and sweet, tiny-tiled bathrooms. Some character and 'class' is added by wrought-iron mirrors and chairs.

Hostal Séneca (☎ /fax 957 47 32 34; Calle Conde y Luque 7; s/d incl breakfast €44/46) A charming and friendly villa with a marvellous pebbled patio filled with greenery. The rambling house has 12 rooms of different sizes and configurations.

Hostal Maestre (☎ 957 47 24 10; www.hotelmaestre.com; Calle Romero Barros 4; s/d €35/49, apt €58; ♿ ♿) This place has comfortably furnished rooms equipped with all the mod cons, and the helpful reception staff speak English. The same proprietors run an equally good *hostal* a few doors down (No 16) and have a number of attractively furnished apartments that sleep up to four people.

Hostal El Triunfo (☎ 957 49 84 84; reservas@htriunfo.com; Calle Corregidor Luis de la Cerda 79; s/d €29/55; ♿ ♿) Facing the southern side of the Mezquita, El Triunfo has 70 boxy rooms with yellow walls and blue beds. The biggest thing in the rooms is the spacious wardrobe, so you could spend your time there. Some rooms have views of the Mezquita, but can be noisy. There's also a friendly bar and restaurant.

Hostal Los Patios (☎ 957 47 83 40; www.lospatios.net; Calle Cardenal Herrero 14; s/d €34/59; ♿) Super friendly but a bit soulless, Los Patios has clean, small rooms with bare walls. You enter through the busy restaurant, so try not to wander to the reception in your pyjamas.

Midrange

Hotel Mezquita (☎ 957 47 55 85; hotelmezquita@wanadoo.es; Plaza Santa Catalina 1; s/d €36/69; ♿) One of the best value-for-money places in town, the Hotel Mezquita is right opposite the Mezquita itself. The 16th-century mansion has large, elegant rooms, marble floors, tall doors and small balconies; some rooms have views of the great mosque.

Hotel Albucahis (☎ /fax 957 47 86 25; Calle Buen Pastor 11; s/d €47/75; ♿ ♿) This is a quiet hotel tucked away in the Judería far from the tourist

circus and decorated in stern medieval style – though it has to be said that the small driveway promises more than it delivers. The rooms are clean and plain, decorated in melancholy khaki and white.

Hotel González (☎ 957 47 98 19; hotelgonzalez@wanadoo.es; Calle Manriquez 3; d €66; 🏠) Located in a building that was once home to the son of Córdoba's favourite artist, Julio Romero de Torres, this hotel has rich baroque décor with golden everything and numerous paintings. There are 16 large, lavishly decorated rooms and the hotel's restaurant serves meals on the pretty flower-filled patio. The friendly proprietors speak fluent English.

Parador Nacional Arruzafa (☎ 957 27 59 00; cordoba@parador.es; Avenida de la Arruzafa s/n; d €113; 🏠 🚗 🚲 🚰 🚰) Something of a hike if you're not driving, this parador (state-owned luxury hotel) is 3km north of the city centre. But it's fabulously situated on the site of Abd ar-Rahman I's summer palace and is a modern affair set amid lush green gardens where Europe's first palm trees were planted.

Hotel Lola (☎ 957 20 03 05; www.hotelconencanitolola.com; Calle Romero 3; d incl breakfast €114; 🏠 🚗) Individualism and quirky style are the prime ingredients here. Each room is named after an Arab princess, and is decorated with large antique beds and other covetable items that you just wish you could stuff into your pockets and take home. What's more, you can eat your breakfast on the roof terrace overlooking the Mezquita bell tower.

Top End

Many of Córdoba's top-end hotels find it difficult to compete in character and location with the cheaper *hostales* and small hotels. However, if you don't want to get embroiled in traffic or are just stopping for a day or two they may be a good option.

Hotel Amistad Córdoba (☎ 957 42 03 35; www.nh-hotels.com; Plaza de Maimónides 3; s/d €106/130; 🏠 🚗 🚲) This bright, spacious hotel spread across two 18th-century mansions has original Mudejar patios and elegant rooms. It is part of the modern NH chain and therefore has all the requisite facilities, including baby sitting and internet access.

Hotel Hesperia Córdoba (☎ 957 42 10 42; www.hesperia.com; Avenida Fray Albino 1; d €115-135;

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Casa de los Azulejos (☎ 957 47 00 00; www.casadelosazulejos.com/marco.htm; Calle Fernando Colón 5; d incl breakfast €130; 🏠 🚗) Mexican and Andalusian styles meet in this gorgeously stylish hotel, where the patio is all banana trees, fluffy ferns and tall palm plants, bathed in sunlight. The colonial-style rooms have tall antique doors, massive beds, walls in lilac and sky blues, and wi-fi connections. The floors are covered in the beautiful old *azulejos* (tiles) that give the place its name. There's a good Mexican restaurant, La Guadalupe Cantina, downstairs. Top choice.

🏠 🚗 🚲 🚰) This place is situated across the river with good views of the Mezquita and the Puente Romano from its rooftop bar. Although the hotel is looking a little tired, it offers a huge range of facilities.

Hotel Conquistador (☎ 957 48 11 02; Calle Magistral González Francés 15; d €118-141; 🏠 🚗) An elegant 102-room hotel facing the eastern side of the Mezquita. It is the best-located top-end hotel and offers a good range of facilities and tastefully decorated rooms.

EATING

Food is among Córdoba's greatest draws – it is the best place to eat in the whole of Andalucía. Córdoba's culinary legacy is *salmorejo*, a delicious chilled soup of blended tomatoes, garlic, bread, lemon, vinegar and olive oil, sprinkled with crumbled hard-boiled egg and strips of *jamón* (ham). *Rabo de toro* (oxtail stew) is another juicy favourite. More upmarket restaurants experiment with recipes from Al-Andalus, such as garlic soup with raisins, honeyed lamb, fried aubergine and meat stuffed with dates and pine nuts. People go loco for the wine from nearby Montilla and Moriles. Although similar to sherry, it prides itself on being naturally alcoholic. Like sherry, it comes in *fino*, *amontillado* or *oloroso* (see p83), and there's also the sweet Pedro Ximénez variety made from raisins.

Budget

Córdoba prides itself on its *tabernas* (taverns) – busy bars where you can usually

also sit down to eat. A long walk east or north of the Mezquita will produce better options for the budget-conscious or inquisitive gourmand.

Bodega Mezquita (Calle Corregidor Luis de la Cerda 73) This sumptuous place is one of a number of excellent delicatessens in town. It sells a huge selection of olive oils, *jamónes* and wines.

Mercado (market; Plaza de la Corredera) For fresh food and a pleasant wander, this a wonderful food hall with all manner of stalls.

Taberna San Miguel/El Pisto (☎ 957 47 01 66; Plaza San Miguel 1; tapas €1.50, media-rationes €3-6; 🏠 closed Sun & August) Full of local characters and open since 1880, El Pisto (the barrel) is one of Córdoba's best *tabernas*, both in terms of atmosphere and food. Traditional tapas and *media-rationes* (half-serves of meal-sized tapas dishes) are done perfectly, and inexpensive Moriles wine is ready in jugs on the bar.

Bar Santos (Calle Magistral González Francés 3; tortilla €2.50) The legendary Santos serves the best *tortilla de patata* (potato omelette) in town – and don't the *cordobeses* (Córdoba locals) know it. They rush here for a tapa of tortilla, and eat it with plastic forks on paper plates while gazing at the Mezquita. Don't miss it.

Taberna Sociedad de Plateros (☎ 957 47 00 42; Calle de San Francisco 6; tapas €2, raciones €8; 🏠 closed Sun) Run by the silversmiths' guild, this well-loved restaurant in a converted convent serves a selection of generous *raciones* (meal-sized servings of tapas) in its light, glass-roofed patio.

Taberna Salinas (☎ 957 48 01 35; Calle Tundidores 3; tapas/raciones €2/8; 🏠 closed Sun & Aug) A historic *taberna* that dates back to 1879, with a reputation so good the tables are always busy. Try the delicious aubergines with honey, potatoes with garlic, *flamenquin* (rolled pork and *jamón*), and *rabo de toro*.

Comedor Árabe Andalusi (☎ 957 47 51 62; Calle Alfayatas 6; mains €8-11) A stylish Arabic-style eatery with low seating and dim lighting, you can eat *kofte*, falafel, tagines or bowls of fluffy couscous with chicken, lamb, greens and herbs. A great place for indulging in North African tastes.

Bar Callejón (Calle Enrique Romero de Torres; platos combinados €3-6, menú €7.50) On a pedestrian street with tables outside, looking up to

Plaza del Potro, Bar Callejón does tasty omelettes (€4.50) and a range of fish dishes. There's also a *menú* (set meal).

Midrange

Amaltea (☎ 957 49 19 68; Ronda de Isasa 10; mains €6-10; 🏠) This place specialises in organic food and wine, serving up excellent meat dishes and a great range of vegetarian fare such as a delicious green salad with avocado and walnuts, and Lebanese-style tabbouleh. A haven in a vegetarian desert.

Los Berengueles (☎ 957 47 28 28; Calle Conde de Torres Cabrera 7; mains €7-14) A fantastic, attractively decorated *azulejos*-lined fish restaurant. Choose your own fresh fish or monster prawns from the cold counter.

Casa Rubio (☎ 957 42 08 53; Puerta de Almodóvar 5; mains €7-15) Dedicating itself to Mezquita arch-imitation, this busy place serves up all the usual tapas and has a *comedor* (dining room) upstairs. Start with *salmorejo* and *cordero a la miel* (lamb in honey).

Taberna Restaurante Puerta Sevilla (☎ 957 29 73 80; Calle Postera 51; mains €8.50-15; 🏠) This is a restaurant made for intimate lunches and inventive food. It has divided, private salons and a pretty plant-hung patio framed by ancient crenellations. Artistic presentation is important here, as is playfulness; specialities include *bacalao* (cod) tacos and duck in caramel cream.

Bandolero Restaurante (☎ 957 47 64 91; Calle de Torrijos 6; raciones €2.50-8, mains €9-14) This is an attractive *azulejo*-lined bar, facing the western side of the Mezquita. It serves up good traditional dishes (including *media-rationes*) and you can sit in the bar or the restaurant patio at the back.

Casa Pepe de la Judería (☎ 957 20 07 44; Calle Romero 1; mains €9-15) This place has a great rooftop terrace with views of the Mezquita, and a labyrinth of dining rooms that are always packed. Start off with a complimentary glass of Montilla on the patio before choosing any of the delicious house specials, such as *rabo de toro* or venison fillets.

Almudaina (☎ 957 47 43 42; Plaza Campo Santo de los Mártires 1; mains €10-14) An elegant, atmospheric restaurant in a 16th-century mansion, with dark wood and damask tablecloths. Almudaina serves up excellent traditional food in individual dining rooms, including on an ivy-clad patio.

THE AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Bodega Campos (☎ 957 49 75 00; Calle Lineros 32; tapas €5, mains €13-19; 📺 closed Sun evening) One of Córdoba's most atmospheric and famous bodegas, walking in here is like getting lost in a different world. There are dozens of different rooms and patios, and each room is lined with oak barrels that have been signed by local and international celebrities (such as the Spanish queen Sofia and UK prime minister Tony Blair). This bodega produces its own house Montilla, and the restaurant, frequented by swankily dressed *cordobeses*, serves up a delicious array of meals. For a cheaper but no less enjoyable evening, try the huge plates of tapas in the bar.

El Churrasco (☎ 957 29 08 19; Calle Romero 16; mains €12; 📺 closed Aug) One of Córdoba's top-notch restaurants. The food is rich, the portions generous and the service attentive. Meaty dishes include *churrasco* (grilled meat in a tangy sauce) – in this case, barbecued fillet of pork with Arabian sauce.

Top End

El Caballo Rojo (☎ 957 47 53 75; Calle Cardenal Herrero 28; mains €10-18) Busy, big and with a reputation for Mozarabic specialities, El Caballo Rojo serves up heart-warming dishes such as white-bean stew. The upstairs terrace overlooks the Mezquita.

DRINKING

Córdoba's liveliest bars are mostly scattered around the newer parts of town and come alive at about 11pm or midnight on weekends. You'll be lucky to find any action early in the week. Most bars in the medieval centre close around midnight.

Amapola (☎ 957 47 37 40; Paseo de la Ribera 9; 📺 noon-3am) Possibly Córdoba's hippest hang-out, the Amapola is where the young and beautiful lounge and get intoxicated on a selection of elaborate cocktails. Walls are covered with blue tiles on which graphics are projected, a DJ looks busy and inspired in his booth, and people hang out on green leather chairs and sofas. Party in style till late at night.

Soul (☎ 957 49 15 80; Calle de Alfonso XIII 3; 📺 9am-3am Mon-Fri & 10am-3am Sat & Sun) This DJ bar gets

hot and busy on weekends, and attracts a hip and arty crowd. The music is good and the place is friendly, but perhaps the best thing in this place is the breakfasts (€3 to €4), with bread baked in a wood-fired oven, and fresh orange juice.

Bodega Guzmán (Calle de los Judíos 7) Close to the Sinagoga, this atmospheric local favourite oozes alcohol from every nook. Check out the bullfighting museum and don't leave without trying some *amargoso* Montilla from the barrel.

Magister (Avenida del Gran Capitán 2) This place caters to the more mature drinker, playing soporific background music and brewing beer on the spot to assure patrons the alcohol won't run out. The beer comes in five tasty varieties: blonde *rubia* and *tostada*, the dark *caramelizada* and *morenita*, and the *especial*, which varies from season to season.

Up near the university there are a number of small bar-cafés such as the '60s-style **Velvet Café** (Calle Alfaro 29) or the popular gay haunt **Milenium** (Calle Alfaro 33), which plays a good range of ambient house tunes.

ENTERTAINMENT

The magazines *Qué Hacer en Córdoba?* and *Welcome & Olé!*, issued free by tourist offices, have some what's-on information, as does the daily newspaper *Córdoba*.

Live Music

Fliers for live bands are posted outside music bars and at the Instalación Juvenil Córdoba. Bands usually start around 10pm and there's rarely a cover charge.

Surfer Rosa (☎ 957 75 22 72; Feria El Arenal 4; 📺 11pm-late Thu-Sat) A riverbank warehouse in the El Arenal (the location of the Feria de Mayo). Live bands play frequently and the recorded music is infectious.

Jazz Café (☎ 957 47 19 28; Calle Espartería s/n; 📺 8am-late) Black-and-white tiled floors, a dark bar with glittering optics and pictures of jazz legends such as Roberta Flack, Miles Davis and King Curtis set the tone for this fabulous laid-back bar. It's a haven for late-morning coffee away from the tourist hordes and regularly puts on live jazz and jam sessions.

Sala Level (Calle Antonio Maura 58; 📺 8pm-late) West of the city centre in the Ciudad Jardín suburb is this busy live-band venue. Prices vary depending on the talent.

Flamenco

Tablao Cardenal (☎ 957 48 33 20; www.tablaocardenal.com; Calle de Torrijos 10; show €17; 📺 10.30pm-late) This place vibrates with the intoxicating sound of tapping heels when its flamenco shows get going. Performances, which vary in quality, can be enjoyed on the open-air patio. Guitar players and singers also add to the vibe.

Casa Salinas (Calle Fernández Ruano) A cosy bar serving up tapas and Montillas, Casa Salinas quite often also stages flamenco shows. Ask at the tourist office for schedules.

Theatre

Gran Teatro de Córdoba (☎ 957 48 02 37, tickets 901 24 62 46; www.teatrocordoba.com in Spanish; Avenida del Gran Capitán 3) This theatre puts on a busy programme of events ranging from concerts and theatre to dance and film festivals.

Cinemas

Filmoteca de Andalucía (☎ 957 47 20 18; www.cica.es/filmo in Spanish; Calle Medina y Corella 5; tickets €0.90; 📺 closed Sat & Sun morning & Jul & Aug) An art-house cinema with regular screenings of subtitled foreign films.

SHOPPING

Córdoba is known for its *cuero repujado* (embossed leather) products and silver jewellery (particularly filigree). Shops selling these crafts concentrate around the Mezquita and go for the tourist with mean prices, so shop around for the best deal.

Calle José Cruz Conde is the smartest central shopping street.

Zoco (Calle de los Judíos) In the Judería, Zoco is a group of workshop-showrooms selling good but pricey crafts.

Meryan (☎ 95 747 59 02; Calleja de las Flores) Try this place for embossed leather; you should be able to find a wallet or a pair of slippers for €9 to €12.

Espauliú (Calle Cardenal González 3) A tasteful silver shop that sells modern jewellery.

Museo Regina (Plaza Luis de Venegas 1; admission €3; 📺 10am-3pm & 5-8pm) You can buy wonderfully crafted silver pieces from this new place, which has dedicated exhibitions of silver jewellery.

La Tienda del Olivo (☎ 95 747 44 95; Calle de San Fernando 124B) 'The Shop of the Olive Tree' sells fancy soaps made from olive oil, plus oodles of extra virgin olive oil.

El Corte Inglés (Avenida del Gran Capitán) This ubiquitous shop helps to fulfil those shopping whims.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Bus

The **bus station** (☎ 957 40 40 40; Plaza de las Tres Culturas) is behind the train station. Each bus company has its own terminal. The biggest operator, **Alsina Graells** (www.alsinagraells.es), runs services to Seville (€9.50, 1¼ hours, six daily), Granada (€10.50, three hours, nine daily) and Málaga (€10.50, 2½ hours, five daily). It also serves Carmona (€7.50, two hours, one daily), Antequera (€8.50, 1½ hours, two daily) and Almería (€21.50, five hours, one daily). Bacoma runs to Baeza (€8.50) and Úbeda (€9). Transportes Ureña serves Jaén (€7, 1½ hours, seven daily), while **Secorbus** (www.socibus.es) operates buses to Madrid (€14, 4½ hours, six daily).

Empresa Carrera heads south, with several daily buses to Priego de Córdoba (€6, 1¼ hours) and Cabra (€4.50), and a couple to Zuheros (€4.50, one hour, at least two daily), Rute and Iznájar.

Car

Rental firms include **Avis** (☎ 957 47 68 62; Plaza de Colón 32), **Europcar** (☎ 957 40 34 80) and **Hertz** (☎ 957 40 20 60), with the latter two located at the train station.

Train

Córdoba's modern **train station** (☎ 957 40 02 02; www.renfe.com; Avenida de América) is 1km northwest of Plaza de las Tendillas.

For Seville, there are dozens of Andalucía Exprés regional trains (€7.50, 1½ hours), Alta Velocidad trains (€13.50, 45 minutes) and AVEs (€22, 45 minutes). To Madrid, options include several daily AVEs (€47 to €52, 1¼ hours) and a night-time *Estrecho* (the slower, cheaper train; seat €28, 6¼ hours).

Several trains head to Málaga (€16 to €21, 2½ hours) and Barcelona (€52 to €85, 10½ hours, four daily), and there is a service to Jaén (€8, 1½ hours, one daily). For Granada (€16, four hours) you need to change at Bobadilla.

GETTING AROUND

Bus

City buses cost around €1. Bus 3, from the street between the train and bus stations,

runs to Plaza de las Tendillas and down Calle de San Fernando, 300m east of the Mezquita. For the return trip, pick it up on Ronda de Isasa, just south of the Mezquita, or on Avenida Doctor Fleming.

Car & Motorcycle

Córdoba's one-way system is nightmarish, and parking in the old city can be difficult. Metered street parking around the Mezquita and along the riverside is demarcated by blue lines. Charges are €0.30 for 30 minutes or €1.30 for two hours, from 9am to 9pm. Overnight parking outside these hours is free. There is parking across the river, but it is not necessarily secure overnight. A tempting option (metered) is the walled space just below the Mezquita,

abreast of the Puerta del Puente. This is fine by day, but not advised overnight. There is secure parking just off Avenida Doctor Fleming costing €1/6/12/45 for one hour/overnight/12 hours/24 hours. There is an underground car park on Avenida de América that has similar prices.

The routes to many hotels and *hostales* are fairly well signposted, and the signs display a 'P' if the establishment has parking. Charges for hotel parking are about €10 to €12.

Taxi

In the city centre, taxis congregate at the northeastern corner of Plaza de las Tendillas. The fare from the train or bus station to the Mezquita is around €5.

DETOUR: CÓRDOBA'S MYSTERIOUS NORTH

The area north of Córdoba has wild landscapes, dark-green hills and tiny, hard-working pueblos (villages) untouched by the tourist mania of the south. The Sierra Morena rises sharply just north of Córdoba city then rolls back gently over most of the north of the province. The N432 runs northwest into Extremadura, but after 50km, detour onto the lengthy N502, which will take you to the far north along some incredible landscapes in the area of **Los Pedroches**. This sparsely populated area is full of scattered granite-built settlements, occasional rocky outcrops and expanses of *dehesa* (woodland pasture). The area is known for being covered with holm oak, and during the era of Al-Andalus it was called 'the Land of Acorns'. Thanks to the acorns, this area, along with Jabugo in Huelva, is another source of quality *jamón ibérico de bellota* which comes from small black pigs who feast on the October harvest of acorns. The acorns give the meat its slightly sweet, nutty flavour. Salted and cured over a period of six to 12 months, the resulting dark-pink ham is usually served wafer thin with bread and Montilla. And, luckily for you, it can be sampled in almost every village in this area.

If you enjoy off-the-beaten-track destinations, head to the castles at **Belalcázar** and **Santa Eufemia**. The 15th-century **Castillo de los Sotomayor** looms over remote Belalcázar, and is one of the spookiest fortifications in Andalucía. The castle is in private hands so you can't go inside, but it still provides a dramatic focus amid the low-lying hills. The only place to stay in Belalcázar is the simple **Hostal La Bolera** (☎ 957 14 63 00; Calle Padre Torrero 17; s/d €14/28), which also has a restaurant, although there are also a number of café-bars clustering around the Plaza de la Constitución.

Santa Eufemia, 26km east of Belalcázar across empty countryside, is Andalucía's northernmost village. The originally Islamic **Castillo de Miramontes**, on a crag to the north above the village, is a tumbled ruin, but the 360-degree views are stupendous. To reach the castle turn west off the N502 at Hostal La Paloma in the village, and after 1km turn right at the 'Camino Servicio RTVE' sign, from which it's a 1.5km drive uphill to the castle. The **tourist office** (☎ 957 15 82 29; Plaza Mayor 1; ☎ 9am-2:30pm Mon-Fri) in the *ayuntamiento* (town hall) also has a leaflet (in Spanish) detailing two walks, one up to the castle and the other to the nearby *ermita* (chapel). For comfortable accommodation, book into the village's **Hostal La Paloma** (☎ 957 15 82 42; Calle Calvario 6; s/d €12/24). The *hostal* does a good-value *menú* (set meal) for €8.

The eastern end of Los Pedroches is occupied by the **Parque Natural Sierra de Cardeña y Montoro**, a hilly, wooded area that is one of the last Andalusian refuges of the wolf and lynx.

Buses reach most of Los Pedroches' villages from Córdoba, but to tour freely you will need a vehicle.

WEST OF CÓRDOBA

ALMODÓVAR DEL RÍO

pop 7420 / elevation 123m

Sleepy Almodóvar del Río is best known for its impressive castle. Situated 22km down the Guadalquivir Valley from Córdoba, the town is attractive enough for half a day's visit, best timed after seeing the Medina Azahara. There is a **tourist office** (☎ 957 63 50 14; Calle Vicente Aleixandre 3; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun Apr-Oct, 9am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun Nov-Mar) just around the corner from the pretty central square, Plaza de la Constitución.

Almodóvar's monumental and sinister-looking, eight-towered **castle** (☎ 957 63 51 16; admission €3, EU citizen free Wed afternoon; ☎ 11am-2:30pm & 4-8pm, closes 7pm Oct-Mar) dominates the view from miles around. It was built in AD 740 but owes most of its present appearance to post-Reconquista rebuilding. Pedro I ('the Cruel') used it as a treasure store because the castle had never been taken by force. Its sense of impregnability is still potent within the massive walls. The castle has now been over-restored by its owner, the Marqués de la Motilla, and is full of some rather silly exhibits including limp, manacled mannequins. The towers – with names such as 'the Bells', 'the School' and 'the Tribute' – have various stories attached to them and there are information placards in Spanish and English.

If you are driving, the best way to reach the castle (avoiding the crowded town centre) is to ignore the signs ahead for Centro Urbano at the junction as you enter town. Instead, go right and follow the A431 ring road, signed to Posadas and Palma del Río. There is ample parking below the castle, but you can also drive up the stony approach track (there is no official parking space there but you can park). You can easily walk down into the old town centre from the castle.

If you decide to stay in this area, **Hostal San Luis** (☎ 957 63 54 21; Carretera Palma del Río; s/d €24/40) is a decent option alongside the main A431 by the turn-off for Almodóvar coming from Córdoba. It has basic rooms in a separate building attached to its busy restaurant. You can get plentiful *platos combinados* ('combined plates' of seafood,

omelette or meat, with trimmings) for around €7. For accommodation at the opposite end of the spectrum, **Hospedería de San Francisco** (☎ 957 71 01 83; www.casaspalacios.com; Avenida Pio XII 35; d €104; ☎ ☎) in Palma del Río, 30km southwest, offers luxurious accommodation in a converted 15th-century monastery set around a superb Renaissance patio.

Almodóvar's best and poshest restaurant is **La Taberna** (☎ 957 71 36 84; Calle Antonio Machado 24; mains €9-18; ☎ closed Mon Sep-Jun, Sun Jul & all Aug), which has tasty home-cooked fish and meat dishes.

Autocares Pérez Cubero (☎ 957 68 40 23) runs buses to/from Córdoba (€1.50, 30 minutes, at least five daily).

HORNACHUELOS & PARQUE NATURAL SIERRA DE HORNACHUELOS

The pleasant village of Hornachuelos is the ideal base for spending a couple of days enjoying the quiet charms of Parque Natural Sierra de Hornachuelos. The park is a 672-sq-km area of rolling hills in the Sierra Morena, northwest of Almodóvar del Río. The park is densely wooded with a mix of holm oak, cork oak and ash, and is pierced by a number of river valleys that are thick with willow trees. It is renowned for its eagles and other raptors, and harbours the second-largest colony of black vultures in Andalucía.

Hornachuelos stands above a small reservoir and on its banks is a delightful little picnic area. The **tourist office** (☎ 957 64 07 86; Carretera San Calixto; ☎ 8am-3pm Thu-Tue, 8am-3pm & 4-6pm Wed) is located in the sports complex on Carretera de San Calixto, the main road to the west of the centre. From Plaza de la Constitución, a lane called La Palmera, with a charming palm-tree pebble mosaic underfoot, leads up to the **Iglesia de Santa Maride de las Flores** and a **mirador** (lookout) on Paseo Blas Infante.

Heading 1.5km northwest from Hornachuelos on the road to San Calixto will take you to the **Centro de Visitantes Huerta del Rey** (☎ 957 64 11 40; ☎ 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat). This visitors centre features interesting displays on the area and its creatures, has information on visiting the Parque Natural Sierra de Hornachuelos and also sells local produce, including honey. You can get information on any of the numerous

walking trails that fan out from the centre and you can book a **guided walk** (☎ 957 33 82 33), hire bikes or arrange horse-riding sessions here. There is a bar-restaurant situated just by the centre car park that serves mains from €5 to €9.

On the main road just west of the centre, **Hostal El Álamo** (☎ 957 64 04 76; Carretera Comarcal 141, aka Carretera de San Calixto; s/d €30/50; P) has clean, pleasant rooms. There is also a busy bar and restaurant located in a separate unit. The restaurant does a *menú* for €6.90. Through the *hostal* it is possible to arrange a number of activities such as walking, biking and horse riding.

In the heart of Hornachuelos village, **Casa Rural El Melojo** (☎ 957 64 06 29; Plaza de la Constitución 15; d €50) is a traditionally furnished house with comfortable rooms. There are substantial reductions for groups.

Just south of the road that leads into the village you'll find **Bar Casa Alejandro** (Avenida Guadalquivir 4; raciones €3.60). This bar is very popular with locals and the walls are heavy with hunting trophies; an alarmingly life-like stuffed horse's head protrudes from a bar-side pillar.

Autocares Pérez Cubero (☎ 957 68 40 23) runs buses to/from Córdoba (€3.20, 50 minutes, four times daily Monday to Friday, one to two times daily Saturday and Sunday).

SOUTH OF CÓRDOBA

The south of Córdoba province straddled the Islamic-Christian frontier from the 13th to the 15th centuries, so many towns and villages cluster around huge, fortified castles. The beautiful, mountainous southeast is known as **La Subbética** after the Sistema Subbético range that crosses this corner of the province. The mountains, canyons and wooded valleys of the 316-sq-km **Parque Natural Sierras Subbéticas** (www.subbetica.org in Spanish) offer some enjoyable walks. The CNIG 1:50,000 map *Parque Natural Sierras Subbéticas* is useful; it's best to get a copy before arriving in the area (see p435). The park's **Centro de Visitantes Santa Rita** (☎ 957 33 40 34; A340) is located, not very conveniently, 10km east of Cabra.

The southern boundary of the region is demarcated by the **Embalse de Iznájar**, a long, wiggling reservoir overlooked by the vil-

lage of Iznájar (see the boxed text, p321). There are some good walks that can be done around the reservoir. The northern section of the park has a number of attractive settlements of which Zuheros and Priego de Córdoba are among the most appealing.

BAENA

pop 18,000

The name 'Baena' is synonymous with fine olive oil. This small market town, surrounded by endless serried ranks of olive trees, produces olive oil of such superb quality, it has been accredited with its own Denominación de Origen (DO; a designation that indicates the product's unique geographical origins, production processes and quality) label. The periphery of the town is dotted with huge storage tanks and it is possible to visit the best oil-producing mill in the province for a guided tour.

The small **tourist office** (☎ 957 67 19 46; Calle Domingo de Henares s/n; ☎ 9am-2pm & 5-8pm Tue-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun) has limited information but tries to be as helpful as possible. It stocks a range of leaflets on the town, and a useful map.

The best reason for coming to Baena is to visit the **Museum of Olive Oil** (☎ 957 69 16 41; www.museoaceite.com; Calle Cañada 7; admission €1.50; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat), which is devoted to the history and production of Baena's oil. Audiovisual presentations (in Spanish) explain production methods and uses and it is possible to taste and purchase the famous oil from the museum shop.

To experience the best working olive-oil mill in Córdoba, visit **Núñez de Prado** (☎ 957 67 01 41; Avenida de Cervantes s/n; admission free; ☎ 9am-2pm & 4-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat), where Paco Núñez de Prado himself will give you a tour of the facilities. Overall, the family owns something like 90,000 olive trees and their organic methods of farming result in a very high quality product. Unlike some other producers, there are no hi-tech gimmicks here; rather, olives are still painstakingly hand-picked to prevent bruising and high acidity and are then crushed in the ancient stone mills. The mill is famous for *flor de aceite*, the oil that seeps naturally from the ground-up olives. It takes approximately 11kg of olives to yield just 1L of oil. The mill shop sells the oil at bargain prices.

Baena also has a number of quaint 16th- and 17th-century churches and a small **archaeological museum** (☎ 957 66 50 10; Casa de la Tercia, Calle Beato Domingo de Henares 5; admission €1; ☎ 10am-1pm & 6-8pm Tue-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat), which exhibits findings from the Baena area from the beginnings of human settlement here.

There are a number of good *hostales* and hotels in town. The best budget option is **Albergue Ruta del Califato** (☎ 957 69 23 59; www.baenarural.com; Calle Coro 7; per person half-/full-board €29/36), located near the Iglesia de Santa Maria. It has good dorm rooms, a bar-restaurant and some fantastic views. For something more upmarket, try the plush **Casa Grande** (☎ 957 67 19 05; www.lacasagrande.es/hotelbaena/hotelbaena.htm in Spanish; Avenida Cervantes 35; s/d €45/78; ☎), a converted mansion with refurbished accommodation.

ZUHEROS & AROUND

pop 850 / elevation 625m

Rising above the low-lying *campiña* (countryside) south of the C0241, Zuheros is in a dramatic location, crouching in the lee of a craggy mountain. It's approached up a steep road through a series of hairpin bends and provides a beautiful base for exploring the south of the province.

Information

Tourist information is available from **Turismo Zuheros** (☎ 957 69 47 75; Carretera Zuheros-Baena s/n; ☎ 9am-2pm & 5-8pm), a small office at the entrance to the village on the Baena road.

DETOUR: ZUHEROS WALK

Behind Zuheros village lies a dramatic rocky gorge, the **Cañon de Bailón**, through which there is a pleasant circular walk of just over 4km (taking about three to four hours).

To pick up the trail find the **Mirador de Bailón**, just below Zuheros on the village's southwestern side, where the approach road C0241 from the A316 Doña Mencía junction bends sharply. There is a small car park here and the gorge is right in front of the *mirador* (lookout). From the car park's entrance – with your back to the gorge – take the broad stony track heading up to the left. Follow the track as it winds uphill and then curves left along the slopes above the gorge. In about 500m the path descends and the valley of the Bailón opens out between rocky walls. The path crosses the stony riverbed to its opposite bank and, in about 1km, a wired-down stone causeway that recrosses the river appears ahead. A few metres before you reach this crossing, bear up left on what is at first a very faint path. It becomes much clearer as it zigzags past a big tree and a twisted rock pinnacle up on the right.

Climb steadily, then, where the path levels off, keep left through trees to reach a superb **viewpoint**. Continue on an obvious path that passes a couple of Parque Natural notice boards and takes you to the road leading up to the Cueva de los Murciélagos. Turn left and follow the road back down to Zuheros.

The Turismo has plenty of leaflets and information on walking and bike hire. The staff can also put you in contact with an English-speaking walking guide, Clive Jarman (☎ 957 69 47 96), who lives in Zuheros. There is a **park information point** (☎ 957 33 52 55), open occasionally in summer, a few hundred metres up the road towards the Cueva de los Murciélagos. There is a good car park at the heart of the village below the castle.

Sights & Activities

Zuheros has a delightfully relaxed atmosphere. All around the western escarpment on which it perches are *miradores* with exhilarating views of the dramatic limestone crags that tower over the village and create such a powerful backdrop for Zuheros' **castle**. The ruined Islamic castle juts out on a pinnacle and has a satisfying patina of age and decay in its rough stonework. Near the castle is the **Iglesia de los Remedios**, originally a mosque, and opposite the castle is the **archaeological museum** (☎ 957 69 45 45; Mirador, Zuheros; castle & museum €1.80; ☎ 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Apr-Sep, 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Oct-Mar), which houses some interesting finds from the Cueva de los Murciélagos. Guided tours take place on the hour.

Zuheros is also renowned for its local cheeses and there is a wonderful organic-cheese factory, *Fabrica de Queso Biológico*, on the road entering the village. Here you can buy delicious varieties of local cheese – some cured with pepper or wood ash – complete hams, wines, olive oil and honey.

Some 4km above the village is the **Cueva de los Murciélagos** (Cave of the Bats; ☎ 957 69 45 45; admission €4; 🗺️ guided tours noon & 5.30pm Mon-Fri Apr-Sep, 12.30pm & 4.30pm Mon-Fri Oct-Mar, 11am, 12.30pm, 2pm & 5.30pm Sat & Sun year-round, extra tours Sat & Sun summer/winter 6.30pm/4pm), which was inhabited by Neanderthals more than 35,000 years ago. It is worth visiting for its Neolithic rock paintings that date back to 6000–3000 BC. Opening times in winter can be unreliable. The drive up to the cave is fantastic, as the road twists and turns through the looming mountains with spectacular views from a number of *miradores*. From one of these you actually get a weird vertiginous, aerial view of the town.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Zuhayra (☎ 957 69 46 93; www.zercahotels.com; Calle Mirador 10; s/d €46/59; 🗺️ 🚰 🚿) This hotel is an excellent base for exploring the area. The friendly proprietor, Juan Ábalos (who speaks English), can also provide a great deal of information on walking routes and guided walks. Guests get free use of the village pool and can take part in cheese-making and painting workshops. The hotel's restaurant serves good mains from €4 to €9.

Another good option, recommended by Lonely Planet readers, is the new **Apartamentos de Turismo Rural** (☎ 957 69 45 27; Calle Mirador 2; 4-person apt €60; 🗺️ 🚰 🚿) just opposite the castle. The apartments are great value and have extremely helpful owners, who arrange excursions. On the same square is the friendly **Mesón Los Palancos** (☎ 95 769 45 38; Calle Llana 43; raciones €3).

Getting There & Away

Empresa Carrera (☎ 957 40 44 14) runs buses to/from Córdoba (€4.50, one hour, at least two daily).

PRIEGO DE CÓRDOBA

pop 23,150 / elevation 650m

Priego de Córdoba is a sophisticated market town full of 18th-century mansions, extravagant baroque churches and fine civic buildings that will turn your head. Perched on an outcrop over the valley, the town looks like a big vanilla cake. It was one of the towns in the 18th century that was famous for its silk production and, like many of the small neighbouring towns, it grew rich on the proceeds. The excruciatingly

narrow lanes of the Barrio de La Villa (the old Arab quarter) all converge on the handsome Balcón de Aldarve with its elevated promenade and magnificent views over the Río Salado. Two of the province's highest peaks, 1570m **La Tiñosa** and 1476m **Bermejo**, rise to the southwest.

Orientation & Information

Priego's main square is the busy Plaza de la Constitución, which merges with the smaller traffic junction of Plaza Andalucía. The helpful **tourist office** (☎ 957 70 06 25; Calle del Río 33; 🗺️ 10am-1.30pm & 5-7.30pm Tue-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) is a short walk south of the central Plaza de la Constitución. The office's indefatigable chief, José Mateo Aguilera, is an enthusiastic fount of information and the office is in a historic building that you can look around.

Sights & Activities

The town's catalogue of elegant architecture has earned it a reputation as the capital of Cordoban baroque. Golden-hued stonework and whitewashed walls characterise the buildings, and it is easy to lose yourself in the cobbled streets as you move from one sumptuous baroque church to the next.

The most notable church is the **Parroquia de la Asunción** (Calle Plaza de Abad Palomino) with its fantastic **Sagrario chapel** (sacristy) where a whirl of frothy white stucco work surges upwards to a beautiful cupola. The sacristy (off the left-hand aisle) and the ornate *retablo* (retable) represent a high point in Andalusian baroque and are now considered national monuments. Similarly ornate are the **Iglesia de San Francisco** (Calle Buen Suceso) and **Iglesia de la Aurora** (Carrera de Álvarez), whose brotherhood takes to the streets of the town in a procession each Saturday at midnight. They play guitars and sing hymns in honour of La Aurora (Our Lady of the Dawn). All the churches normally open from 11am to 1pm.

The main area of monuments in Priego lies 200m northeast of Plaza de la Constitución and is reached by following Calle Solana on through Plaza San Pedro. At a junction with Calle Doctor Pedrajas you can turn left to visit the well-preserved 16th-century slaughterhouse, the **Carnicerías Reales** (admission free; 🗺️ 10am-1pm & 5-7pm). It has an enclosed patio and a wonderful stone staircase; exhibitions of paintings are often held here. Turning right along Calle Doctor Pedrajas

takes you to Plaza de Abad Palomino, where you can visit the Parroquia de la Asunción. On the square's northern side is Priego's **castillo**, an Islamic fortress built on original Roman foundations in the 9th century and later rebuilt in the 16th century. Privately owned, and closed to the public, the castle has been the subject of much archaeological investigation, which among other things has turned up dozens of stone cannonballs.

Beyond the castle lie the winding streets of the **Barrio de La Villa**, where cascades of potted geraniums transform the white-washed walls, especially in Calle Real and Plaza de San Antonio. Other pretty alleyways lead down from the heart of the barrio to the Paseo de Adarve, where there are fine views across the rolling countryside and mountains. On the southern edge of the barrio and ending in a superb **mirador** is the Paseo de Colombia, with fountains, flowerbeds and an elegant pergola.

At the opposite end of town, you will find Priego's extraordinary 19th-century fountain, **Fuente del Rey** (Fountain of the King; Calle del Río), with its large three-tiered basins continually filled with splashing water from 180 spouts. The fountain writhes with classical sculptures of Neptune and Amphitrite and when the level of the water rises to cover Neptune's modesty, the townsfolk know that it will be a good harvest. The fountain is more Versailles than provincial Andalucía and the peaceful leafy square in which it is situated is a popu-

lar place to while away an afternoon. Behind the Fuente del Rey is the late-16th-century **Fuente de la Virgen de la Salud**, less flamboyant, but further enhancing the square's delightful tranquillity. If you take the stairs to the left of the Fuente de la Virgen de la Salud you can walk to the **Ermita del Calvario** (Calvary Chapel) from where there are scenic views.

Also worth a visit is the **Museo Histórico Municipal** (☎ 957 54 09 47; Carrera de las Monjas 16; admission free; 🗺️ 10am-2pm Tue-Fri, 11am-2pm Sat & Sun), just west of Plaza de la Constitución. Here, imaginative displays exhibit artefacts dating from the Palaeolithic to medieval periods. The museum also organises archaeological tours in the area.

Sleeping

There is only a small selection of accommodation in Priego but places are seldom full.

Hostal Rafi (☎ 957 54 70 27; www.hostalrafi.net; Calle Isabel La Católica 4; s/d €26/40; 🗺️ 🚰 🚿) Just east of Plaza de la Constitución, Rafi has pleasant rooms above a busy, popular restaurant (mains €6 to €9).

Posada Real (☎ 957 54 19 10; www.laposadareal.com; Calle Real 14; d incl breakfast €42; 🗺️ 🚰 🚿) Juan López Calvo and his family have lovingly restored this wonderful old house, and decorated the four rooms (each with a balcony) and one apartment with wrought-iron beds and antiques. In the summer, breakfast is served on the quaint patio.

GETTING AWAY FROM IT ALL

South of Priego de Córdoba, stranded on a dramatic promontory above a huge reservoir, is the isolated pueblo of **Iznájar**, which is dominated by its Islamic castle. Despite the poverty of the region, it is a place of outstanding natural beauty and tranquillity, where you can enjoy the beautiful scenery and indulge in a host of outdoor activities.

On the reservoir's **Valdearenas beach** is the province's most scenic camping ground, **Camping La Isla** (☎ 957 53 30 73; www.camping-laisla.com in Spanish; adult/tent/car €4/3.60/3.60; 🗺️ 🚰 🚿). **Club Nautico** (☎ 957 53 43 04) is close by and hires out dinghies and canoes and runs a variety of courses from its yacht club.

There are also two wonderful rural hotels offering charming accommodation to match the setting. **Cortijo La Haza** (☎ 957 33 40 51; www.cortijolahaza.com; Adelantado 119; s/d €65/75), outside the village, is a 250-year-old Andalusian farmhouse, furnished in typical fashion with wrought-iron beds and rustic furniture, with lovely views from its terraces. Check the website for comprehensive directions (and a map) giving details of how to reach it.

Given the rural beauty and seclusion of this little corner of Andalucía, it is hardly surprising to find one of Spain's most exclusive hotels here – **La Finca Bobadilla** (☎ 958 32 18 61; www.barcelolabobadilla.com; Loja, Granada; s/d €313/332; 🗺️ 🚰 🚿), which is located 20km south of Iznájar in Granada province. Cheaper deals are available for stays of more than two nights.

Río Piscina (☎ 957 70 01 86; www.hotelriopiscina.com; Carretera Monturque-Alcalá La Real Km 44; d €53; 📍 🚗 🚶) A '70s hotel with comfortable rooms and some good facilities, including tennis courts, but without much aesthetic appeal.

Villa Turística de Priego (☎ 957 70 35 03; www.villadepriego.com; Aldea de Zagrilla s/n; 2-person apt/chalet €77/89; 📍 🚗 🚶) A modern Islamic-style complex 7km north of Priego on the road to Zagrilla. The 52 self-catering chalets are arranged around a patio and gardens. Guided walks, horse riding and mountain biking can be arranged through the complex.

Eating

Priego has some good restaurants including the one at Hostal Rafi (see p321).

El Aljibe (☎ 957 70 18 56; Calle de Abad Palomino; raciones €4-9, menú €7) Next to the Castillo, El Aljibe has a nice terrace, and part of the downstairs area has a glass floor through which you can view some old Islamic baths.

Bar Cafetería Río (Calle Río; raciones €6-11) This busy central option has *revueltos* (scrambled eggs), fish and meat dishes. The same people run **Pizzeria-Baguetería Varini** (Calle Torrejón 7) just around the corner, where there's a huge range of pizzas (from €8), pasta dishes (from €4) and baguettes.

Balcón del Adarve (☎ 957 54 70 75; Paseo de Colombia 36; mains €8-12) In a wonderful location overlooking the valley, this place is both a good tapas bar and an excellent restaurant. Specialties include *somolillo de ciervo al vino tinto con Grosella* (venison in gooseberry and red-wine sauce), and *salmón en supremas a la naranja* (salmon in orange sauce).

Getting There & Around

The centre of Priego can become very busy. There is parking just by the football and basketball pitches on Calle Cava north of Plaza de la Constitución. There is a small car park in Plaza Palenque along Carrera de las Monjas, the street that runs east from Plaza de la Constitución.

Priego's bus station is about 1km west of Plaza de la Constitución on Calle Nuestra Señora de los Remedios. Bus 1 from Plaza Andalucía takes you there. **Empresa Carrera** (☎ 957 40 44 14) runs buses from the station to Córdoba (€6, 1¼ hours, 12 daily Monday to Friday, five daily Saturday and Sunday), Granada, Caba and elsewhere.

MONTILLA

If you fancy getting closer to wine-making country and tasting some of that sweet wine (see the boxed text, below), Montilla is the

place for you. The town itself is not hugely appealing, but it's good enough for a stroll. The **tourist information office** (☎ 957 65 24 62; www.turismomontilla.com; Calle Capitán Alonso de Vergas 3; 🕒 10am-2pm Mon-Fri, 11am-2pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug, 10am-2pm & 5-7pm Mon-Fri, 11am-2pm Sat & Sun Jun-Sep) has details of wines and bodegas.

There is an interesting and unusual museum, the **Casa Museo del Inca Garcilaso** (☎ 957 65 24 62; Calle Capitán Alonso de Varga 3; admission free; 🕒 10am-2pm Mon-Fri, 11am-2pm Sat & Sun Jul & Aug, 10am-2pm & 5-7pm Mon-Fri, 11am-2pm Sat & Sun Jun-Sep), dedicated to the 16th-century chronicler of Inca civilisation, the Hispano-Inca son of a conquistador.

If you want to stay the night in Montilla, your best choice is out of town in the charming **Finca Buytrón** (☎ 957 65 10 52; www.fincabuytron.com; d from €48; 📍 🚗 🚶), a farmhouse with a welcome swimming pool. Advance booking is highly advisable, as sometimes the house gets rented out completely. For food, Montilla's excellent **Las Camachas** (☎ 957 65 00 04; Avenida de Europa 3; mains €8-11) has won prizes for its delicious local specialties, served in the expansive, comfortable restaurant.

AGUILAR

In Aguilar, 10km south of Montilla, life goes along at a slow pace and tourists are

pretty uncommon, so don't be unnerved by some of the stares. The town has an unusual octagonal central square, **Plaza de San José**, inspired by a similar square in Archidona which was built by the Salamanca architect Vicente Gutiérrez in 1806. It is rather unfortunate that it's now used as a car park, but despite this, it's possible to appreciate its beauty. Stroll up to the nearby **Torre Civil de Reloj** (Clock Tower), which looks like a missing part of some grandiose castle or church. Thanks to Aguilar's position on top of a hill, there are marvellous views from the site of its old castle, the **Peñon de Moro**. The church of **Santa María del Soterraño** close to the Peñon, was originally built in the Middle Ages, but was entirely replaced in 1530 by the Gothic-Mudéjar building you see today.

Sleeping choices in Aguilar are poor, and the best place, although by no means great, is **Hotel Queen** (☎ 957 66 02 22; Calle Pescaderías 6; s/d €25/40), off Plaza de San José. It has 15 basic rooms decorated with small paintings of Mexicans, fake flowers and a Virgin Mary, plus there is a restaurant on the ground floor, where silent types shoot pool, but the owners are friendly. **Restaurante Guillermo** (☎ 957 66 00 48; Calle Moralejo 47; ración around €6) is a good place to try Andalusian food with a twist of modernity.

TOUGH TREAACLE

Pedro Ximénez wine is a treat after dinner and its taste will linger on your tongue for hours. For miles and miles across the rolling *campiña* (countryside) its vines grow in soggy, rain-drenched soil under a glaring sun. Such conditions would destroy other vines, but not Pedro Ximénez (sometimes called Pe Equis in Spanish for PX). This is a toughy, a Rambo of vines: it loves hardship and thrives on extreme weather. In fact it is exactly these conditions that give it the unusual flavours, ranging from very thin, dry almost olive tastes through to a sweet, dark treacle.

Originally thought to be a type of Riesling, legend has it that the Ximénez grape was imported to the region in the 16th century by a German called Peter Seimens (the Spanish adapted it to Pedro Ximénez). Its intensely sweet wine is endlessly compared to sherry, much to the irritation of the vintners. The fundamental difference between the Jerez sherries and Montilla is the alcoholic potency – alcohol is added to Jerez wine, while Montilla grapes achieve their own high levels of alcohol (15% proof) and sweetness from the intense summer temperatures experienced by the grapes when they are laid out to dry. Left to darken in the sun, the grapes produce a thick, golden must when crushed. What results from this was traditionally racked off into huge terracotta *tinajas*, now steel vats, for ageing. Wine that is clean and well formed goes on to become the pale, strawlike *fino*; darker amber wines with nutty flavours create the *amontillado*; and full-bodied wines become the *oloroso*. The wines are then aged using a *solera* system, where younger vintages are added to older ones in order to 'educate' the young wine.

You can visit **Bodegas Alvear** (☎ 957 66 40 14; Avenida María Auxiliadora 1; guided tour & tasting weekday/weekend €3.95/2.95; 🕒 shop 10am-2pm Mon-Sat) in Montilla but you should call first to book. Tours take place at 12.30pm Monday to Saturday.

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