

# IT'S ALWAYS SUNNY IN SEVILLE

FIESTA IS OPTIONAL HERE BUT SIESTA IS A NECESSITY

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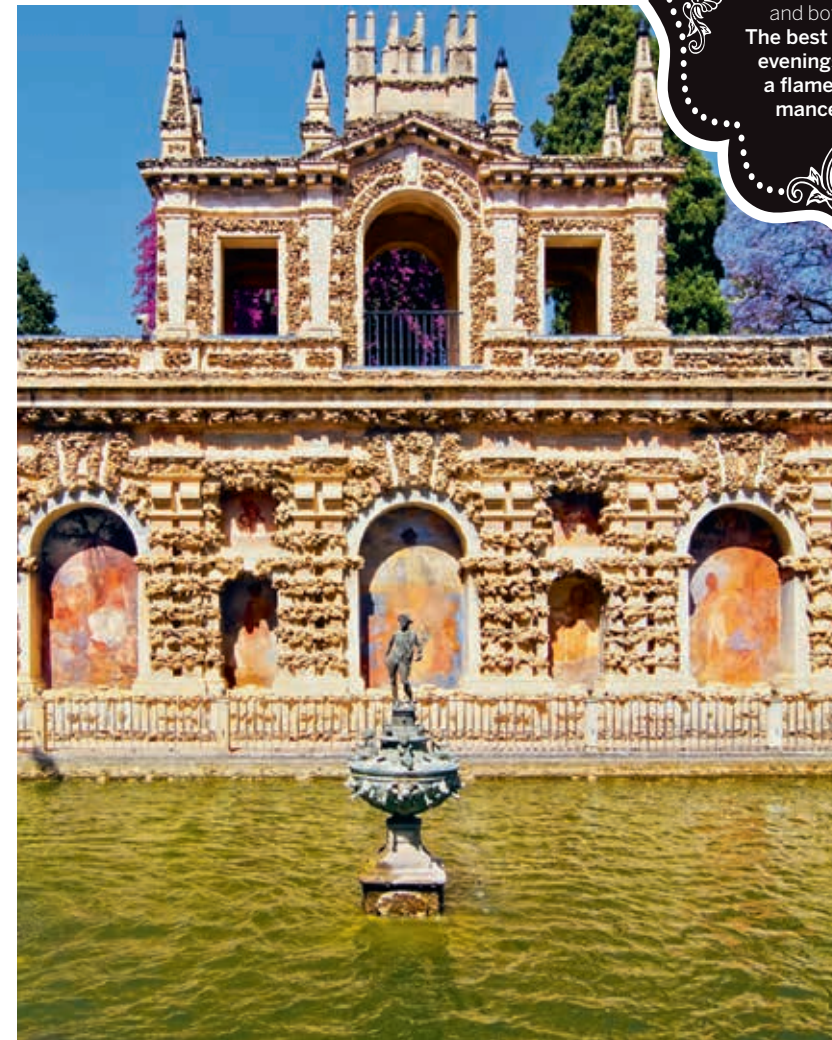


Even Triana, a lively and bohemian part of Seville, wears an empty look in summer.

PHOTO COURTESY: INSTITUTO DE TURISMO DE ESPAÑA (SPREAD)



Seville's main sights include the palace of Alcázar (bottom left) and the Barrio Santa Cruz (top right and bottom right). The best way to spend evenings is to catch a flamenco performance (top left).







the fading light of a balmy Sunday in August, the San Pablo airport resembles an abandoned hangar from a Bond movie. We've just arrived by the last flight coming into Seville. We are the last passengers to exit, we've missed the last bus, and all the taxis have been taken by passengers not travelling with a flamenco guitar in a hard case with a 'Fragile' sticker on it.

Twenty minutes later, a taxi finally careens into the empty driveway. As it nears, the Bond movie analogy is complete—we will be driven to our rental apartment by Javier Bardem's doppelgänger. The word for “menacing smile” is beyond my fledgling Spanish vocabulary. I brace myself for a ride with Raoul Silva, with only my husband's well-filed flamenco-playing nails as protection.

My husband, not prone to flights of wild imagination involving Bond villains, attempts a question in Spanish. The taxi driver's face first softens and then rearranges itself around a sweet smile of the kind that his *abuela* would have doted on. His delighted response skids over the familiar cadence, skips a few syllables, and slaps on a rasher of the Andalusian lisp. We barely grasp what he says, but outside the taxi window, night has fallen and with the flip of a switch, stone and brick, cement and glass, and cobbles and concrete, all acquire eloquence.

Perhaps some of the allure is also because the streets appear desolate. It's a little past 10 in the night. Traffic is sparse and the trams seem to be running nearly empty. Shops, bars and restaurants are shut. In the Seville we know and love, one would find people sauntering out of a bullfight in the wee hours to stop for a nightcap with friends at a neighbourhood bar.

Where were the *sevillanos*?

### SOUNDS OF SILENCE

There are no door numbers. We've stayed at this apartment on a previous trip, and only remember a restaurant next door. Raoul lets us off at the end of the street and, as we wait for the executive from the rental agency to arrive with the keys, we look for a place to eat.

The restaurant across the street is open, but has only potato wafers on offer. There's another restaurant down the other end of the street, that has a device spraying a mist of cool water on passers-by. We go on to discover that this is a common feature here in summer. But even as we make our way over, the faucet is abruptly turned off, and the lights go out one by one. We ask if we can dine there—even *tostada* with a chunk of cheese is good enough. “*Lo siento*”, they say regretfully, and with a firm hand, the owner pulls the shutter down.

The young woman from the agency arrives and leads us to a nondescript door. Among traditional Sevillian houses, even apartments, it is common to have a courtyard or a patio garden. Some buildings have even managed to carve out an elevator shaft in what looks like an ancient structure. Our building has

neither courtyard nor elevator, and we trudge up the tile-lined stairway for a late dinner of instant noodles from the emergency food stash that we had hoped to take back home untouched.

It turns out that we've arrived during the collective summer vacation in July, August and well into September, when people in the city move en masse to cooler parts of the country. A bartender in Jerez de la Frontera would later call it the *vacaciones colectivas* although no sevillano I know has been known to use the phrase. This vacation, in addition to the numerous festival holidays in Spain, perplexes productivity fiends but local folks are known to unapologetically pack laid-back and feisty in the same breathy sentence.

Late the next morning, we walk over to a bar across the street that was closed the previous night, but now incongruously serves breakfast. Three *bomberos*, firefighters, still in their dark blue uniforms, saunter in and noisily greet the owner of the bar. While our day has just begun, with strong *café con leche* and crusty *tostada*, their workday just ended with beer and *fritas*.

The day is not yet as intensely hot as predicted and strolling along pedestrian streets, we find few of the retail outlets in Calle Sierpes open. When the heat rises off the flagstone paving, the dark, cool confines of the Santa Maria de la Sede, the largest Gothic cathedral in the world, are particularly inviting.

The structure was once a mosque built by the Moorish royal dynasty, the Almohads, in the 12th century. The cathedral was constructed after Ferdinand III of Castile conquered Seville in 1248. Inside, Arturo Melida's tomb for Christopher Columbus is held aloft by four coffin bearers representing the kingdoms during Columbus's times: Castile, Leon, Aragon and Navara.

The Giralda is the cathedral's minaret-turned-bell tower; its spiralling ramp was designed to be ascended by the muezzin on horseback. From atop the tower, there is a breathtaking view of the city. Looking down into the cathedral, there is a simplicity in the symmetry of the Patio de los Naranjos, a courtyard with orange trees irrigated by water from a nearby fountain.

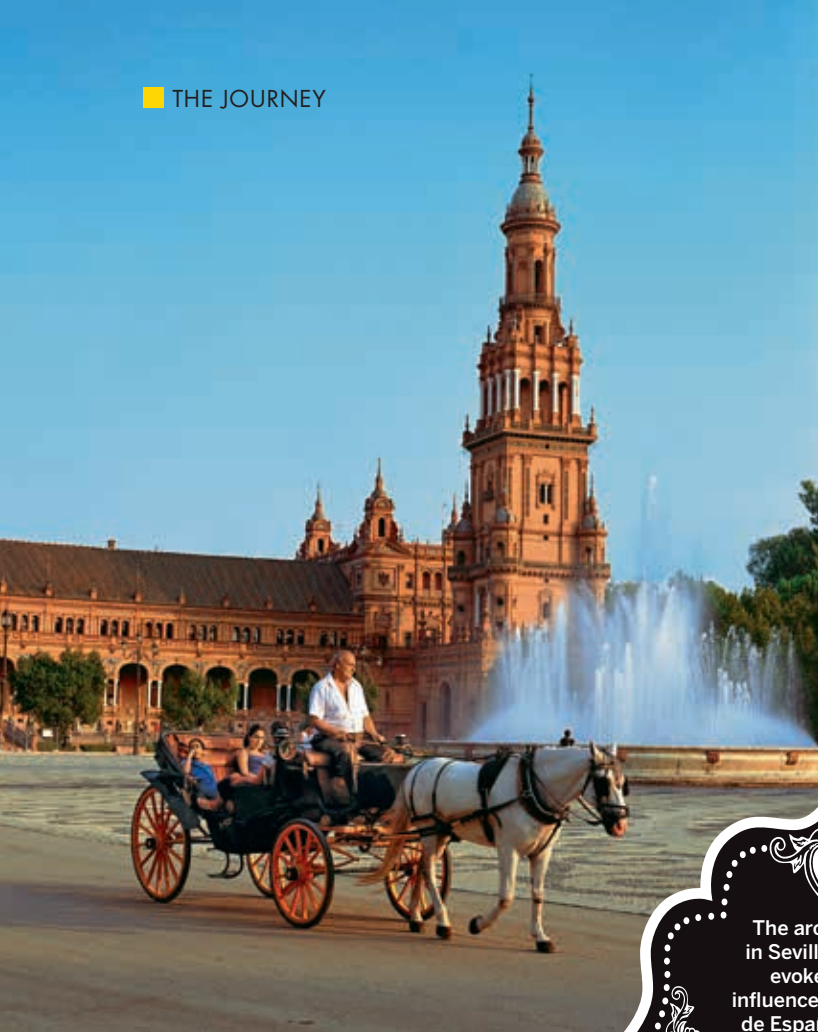
In the late afternoon, our apartment echoes with the *bulerias* (flamenco tunes) that my husband practices on his guitar. We discover that we are the only residents in the building in this off season. How else does one explain the inexpensiveness of the rental space and the agency's nonchalance about a flamenco guitar being played all afternoon in a country where siesta is religion?

As darkness falls, we make our way back to the now



Barrio Santa Cruz, a maze of historic and narrow streets, is the old Jewish quarter of the city.





The architecture in Seville (bottom) evokes many influences. The Plaza de España (top left) has Renaissance stylistic touches while the Alcázar (top right) is a nod to Moorish heritage.

magnificently illuminated cathedral where we gaze at the drama of light and shade on the numerous statues of saints. The cathedral is the hub for tourists like us, and understandably, also the cluster where horse-drawn carriages, kitschy souvenir stores, restaurants, bars and buskers wait patiently for customers. At one of the restaurants, a young waiter tries to woo us to an al fresco table by speaking in English. We ask him to help us practise our Spanish, and also feast on modest spread of fat olives and grilled peppers served in earthenware tapas plates.

### HERITAGE HAUNTS

The next day, we visit the Real Alcázar palace complex, first built in the 12th century, and later evolving into a profusion of medieval styles including Moorish, Gothic, Mudejar and Renaissance. It is a harmonious blend of horseshoe arches, patios, indoor fountains, balconies and exquisitely crafted domed ceilings, especially in the Ambassadors' Hall. We gape awestruck, not for the first time, at the exquisite calligraphic stucco and hand painted *azulejo* tiles on the walls—stylistic details that the Alcázar has in common with the Alhambra fortress in Granada.

Serving as a liminal space between the opulence of the palace and the stark simplicity of the garden, the Galeria del Grutesco has niches with dreamy frescoes in the Italian Mannerist style of the 16th century. The garden is an example of Islamic horticulture, with a grid of paved paths, each square with trimmed hedges and trees, usually orange or palm. In the shaded intersection of the paths, there are water fountains, harking back to Moor's origins in Arabia, where water was considered luxury, and having a fountain, even a small one, was a statement of affluence.

One evening, we navigate the maze of streets that is the Barrio Santa Cruz, a predominantly pedestrian neighbourhood with flagstone paving, whitewashed houses and a profusion of flowering plants and orange trees. It's a labyrinth that neither the mapmakers of yore, nor the app makers of today are able to capture accurately. A friend is performing this evening, and we find the venue after a few wrong turns: an inner courtyard with arches, surrounded on three sides by folding chairs. A wall of trailing creepers forms the backdrop to the performance, in which a male flamenco dancer uses a walking stick as a prop to complement his deft footwork to the resolute tone that only a flamenco guitar can produce.

Another evening, we cross Puente de Isabel II over the river Guadalquivir that links into the Triana locality. Here, the absence of *sevillanos* is even more conspicuous. The famed ceramic shops of Triana, which manufacture tiles, dados, panels and finials are firmly shut, as though reminding us that work isn't everything in life. The exquisitely painted cherubs on their signboards smirk at us for the timing of our visit. A bar is open, but reluctant to serve us.

We visit the church of Santa Ana, where we learn about an amusing legend: seven shoe taps by a woman seeking a husband, to the head of Basque saint, Inigo Lopez's, ceramic-clad *lauda* or tombstone, assured marriage. Going by the state of the tile portrait, the shoe taps appear to be a popular practice.

### THROUGH THE HEAT WAVE

Our days follow a familiar pattern. The warmer hours of the day are spent indoors, either ensconced in the air-

conditioned apartment or in a heritage structure with naturally cool interiors. The evenings are spent outdoors, walking through a locality that we have not visited, taking in concerts and dance performances, or simply sitting by the river—but always, always ensuring that the evening's entertainment doesn't come in the way of dinner plans at restaurants that close early in this season.

We nod at the regulars we meet and collect vignettes of the mundane in a different land. The vendor at the vegetable store next door, who waits patiently for me to flip through my Spanish-English dictionary to find the word for "basil". The homeless woman with the handwritten cardboard sign that reads in Spanish, "I am hungry". The band of students who perform at the Plaza Nueva. The bespectacled elderly man at the neighbourhood bar who sits ramrod straight on a bar-stool with his morning glass of wine.

Most of all, we remember our conversation with the owner of a modest bar with none of the mounted bull heads and framed flamenco posters that have come to characterise the Andalusian *cerveceria*. He lamented staying behind in Seville while his family vacationed in their hometown up north, in A Coruña. He poured us *tinto de veranos* and together, as we cribbed about the restaurant menus in *Inglés*, and the Chinese grocery stores that stay defiantly open through siesta. ❄️

## ESSENTIALS

**Orientation** Seville, on the banks of the river Guadalquivir, is the largest city in the Andalusia region in the south of Spain. It is 530 km/5 hr from the capital Madrid.

**Getting There** There are no direct flights from India to Seville's San Pablo airport. All connections require at least one stop at a European gateway. Budget airlines such as Ryanair, Vueling and easyJet do not feature on most Indian flight booking websites but often have good connections from places like London.

The fastest and most comfortable way to get from the capital, Madrid to Seville is on the high-speed AVE train which gets you there in 2.5 hours and can be between €30-60/₹2,264-4,528 each way. Tickets can be booked up to 60 days in advance and combined with other journeys with the Spain Pass.

**Visa** Indians travelling to Spain need a Schengen visa. A 90-day multiple entry tourist visa costs ₹4,300. Applicants must have a return ticket and a confirmed itinerary. For application forms and documentation details, visit [india.blsspainvisa.com](http://india.blsspainvisa.com). It is best to apply for a visa at least 15 days before departure.

**See** A leisurely visit to the the Real Alcázar along with the Jardines del Real Alcázar takes half a day. Better still, look for a night visit option or a dramatised visit. A summer concert series—Noches en los Jardines del Real Alcázar—is held at the Alcázar between June and September every year. Be sure to also visit Catedral de Seville or Santa Maria de la Sede, the world's largest Gothic church.