

TEAR-OFF-AND-GO GUIDE | SULTRY CORDOBA



instant escapes

Sultry Córdoba

Submit to the sunny, sexy rhythms of this Spanish beauty

It's hard to believe, but this southern Spanish muddle of tapering lanes and fragrant squares was once Europe's largest city – the opulent epicentre of the western world, home to Muslims, Christians and Jews. Fortunately, round every corner, in ruined palaces, candlelit hammams and soothing fountains, echoes of the glory days remain. **By James Blick**



SEE & DO

● Contemplate Córdoba's complex past in the Mosque-Cathedral (Calle Cardenal Herrero 1; catedraldecordoba.es; £7; ① on map), a compelling 8th-century *mezquita* (mosque), built using Roman temple remains and rejigged as a church by Christian conquerors. **Countless pillars and arches evoke a lush date-palm oasis.** Córdoba's writer Antonio Gala called it 'the heart of Córdoba, when Córdoba was the heart of the world'. It still lives up to the hype.

● Mix piety with prurience – ogle portraits of Andalusian sirens by local master Romero de Torres in the Museo Julio Romero de Torres (Plaza del Potro 1; museojulioromero.cordoba.es; £4; ②). Like Córdoba, Romero de Torres's 19th- and 20th-century work is a juicy jumble of sex, flamenco and Catholicism.

● Escape the tourist-crammed *Judería* (Jewish Quarter) and instead make for the tumbledown northeastern *barrios*, chancing on lonely orange-blossom squares and lazy bars. Suck spicy snails at El Tercio Viejo (Calle Enrique Redel 19; tapas about £2.50; ③) and swing by Cristo de los Faroles (Plaza de Capuchinos; ④), a spooky 18th-century crucifix lit by the candles of penitent Córdobaes.

● On the dusty outskirts, explore the ruined 10th-century palace-city of Medina Azahara (www.turismodecordoba.org; EU residents free; ⑤). You

TAKE HOME WITH YOU...
Not a piece of mosque but beautiful jewellery inspired by mosque motifs at Platería Califal, a workshop run by silversmith brothers Manuel and Angel (Calle Buen Pastor 19)

PATIO PEEKING
Proud locals leave front gates open so passers-by can admire their flowery patios. Don't be shy – poke your head in!

Moor the merrier: the mighty Mosque-Cathedral; below, from left, Plaza de la Corredera, where Inquisitions once took place; the winding, bloom-decked streets of the city

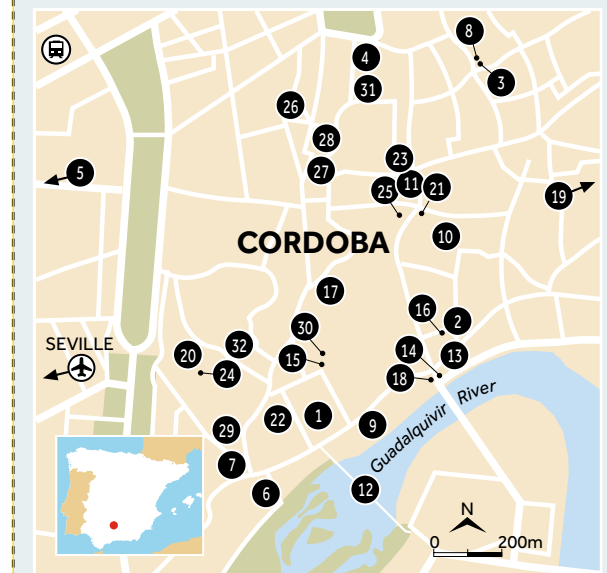
can go solo by bus (www.reservas.turismodecordoba.org; tickets £7.50), or let a guide bring the once-lost citadel alive: Córdoba Vision lays on weekend tours (www.cordobavision.com; £17, bus included). Legend has it a **besotted caliph built the shining city to placate his petulant concubine.**

● Relax amid the tinkling fountains and shimmering pools of the Alcázar de los Reyes Cristianos gardens (Calle de las Caballerías Reales; www.turismodecordoba.org; free 8.30am-9.30am, then £4; ⑥). Afterwards, **take a horse-drawn carriage outside the Alcázar** (cochesdecabaloscordoba.com; £38 for 45 mins; ⑦) and head to the 14th-century Palacio de Viana, where you'll roam patios bursting with bergamot and bougainvillea (Plaza de Don Gome 2; palaciodeviana.com; £4; £7 including the palace; ⑧).

● Recline like a caliph in Europe's largest Arab baths. Hammam Al Andalus (Calle del Corregidor Luis de la Cerda 51; cordoba.hammamandalus.com; bath and massage from £30; ⑨) has been painstakingly built to ancient specs, with sinuous relief work, vibrant tiles and muscular pillars. **Bathers pad from pool to misty pool, before an essential-oil rub-down** under a canopy of celestial skylights.

● From Inquisition executions to alfresco dining, Plaza de la Corredera ⑩ has come a long way. Grab a sunny spot at El Sótano (No. 1 in the plaza; tapas about £2.50) and **cool off with a 'fifty-fifty' (half Pedro Ximénez sherry, half fino sherry)**, before grazing on local classics: *flamenquín* (pork loin in jamón), *salmorejo* (garlicky tomato soup) and honey-drizzled aubergine. Then slam G&Ts at El Despachito (Calle Capitulares 2; ⑪), as the sun melts behind the Roman ruins opposite.

● When darkness falls, cross the Guadalquivir river over the Roman Bridge ⑫ and gaze back on Córdoba glowing in the half-light. Then go back to **barhop the north bank, nibbling grilled squid and Iberian pork sushi** at La Taberna del Río (Calle Enrique Romero de Torres 7; latabernadelrio.es; mains about £8; ⑬), and swilling mixed-berry Mojitos (about £7.50) at Sojo Ribera (Paseo de la Ribera 1; cafesjo.es; ⑭). ➤



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EAT

● **The snack stop**

BARSANTOS (Tapas about £2.50)
Because: The famed four-kilo potato omelettes – heralded for their girth – are Córdoba's heartiest snack (£1.65 a slice). **Travel's tip:** Avoid the crowded bar by getting your food to go and eating in the Mosque's merciful shade. Calle Magistral González Francés 3; ⑨.

● **The local haunt**

EL POTRILLO ESPAÑOL (Tapas about £3)
Because: You'll rub elbows with Córdoba's regulars gobbling garlicky grilled mushrooms and charcuterie, while one-man-band Argimiro pours the drinks and cooks to order on the tiny bar-side grill. **Travel's tip:** Order plump Huelva shrimp – the Andalusian delicacy is especially cheap here. Calle Lucano 19; ⑩.

● **The must-try dish**

SALMOREJERIA UMAMI (Mains about £8.50)
Because: Local staple *salmorejo* (cold tomato soup) takes an inspired turn here, with palate-tickling twists – anything from green tea to white chocolate with strawberries. **Travel's tip:** Eat on a Tuesday and you'll receive a gift of handmade pottery from nearby village La Rambla. Calle Blanco Belmonte 6; *salmorejeriaumami.com*; ⑪.

● **The hottest ticket**

REGADERA (Mains about £11)
Because: It's luminous, laid-back and down by the river and chef Adrián Caballero serves a heavenly fusion of local classics and exotic flavours. The suckling pork is a show-stopper. **Travel's tip:** The dining room is tiny, so if it's warm, call ahead to secure an outdoor table. Plaza Cruz del Rastro 2; 00 34 957 101400, *regadera.es*; ⑫.

● **The Michelin-starred joint**

CHOCO (Tasting menu about £44)
Because: With dishes such as 'the little red tuna that thought it was pork' and 'Morena mountain cream', this is low-cost Michelin with an Andalusian bent. **Travel's tip:** Grab a preprandial beer in the bar alongside, set up by Choco chef Kisco García's dad. Calle Compositor Serrano Lucena 14; 00 34 957 264863, *restaurantchoco.com*; ⑬.

LUNCH TIP
 Save the tapas crawl for the evening and by day take advantage of bars' reasonably priced menus del día (three-course fixed-price lunches; about £8.50)

GOURMET TAKE-AWAY
 Love the food? Stuff the suitcase (or pack for a picnic) with local delights (jamón, goat's cheese, mountain honey) at deli Bodegas Mezquita (Calle Cardenal Herrero 8)

DRINKS & SHOWS

● **The old-timers' tavern**

BODEGA GUZMAN
Because: You can sup Córdoba's own Montilla-Moriles wine (about £1), poured straight from the barrel, paired with cured meats. A delicious combo. **Travel's tip:** Love the vino? No problem. They keep bottles for sale behind the counter (about £7). Calle de los Judíos 7; ⑭.

● **The noisy nightcap**

JAZZ CAFE
Because: In this low-lit jazz cave, boho musos knock out syncopated beats to a hip crowd slugging spirits (about £5). **Travel's tip:** There's free live music Tuesday and Thursday nights. Calle Rodríguez Marín; ⑮.

● **The flamenco show**

TABLAO EL CARDENAL
Because: It's the city's most celebrated flamenco venue, with shows on a leafy 16th-century patio. **Travel's tip:** Nab a second-row seat: close enough to see the footwork, far enough to experience the whole spectacle. Calle de Torrijos 10; *tablaocardenal.es*; 10.30pm, except Sundays; £19 with a drink; ⑯.

ASK THE LOCAL
 Córdoba born and bred, José Carlos Luque is an economist and sommelier with the Spanish Wine Tasting School

“When I'm out with friends, we avoid the *Judería* as the bars are so expensive. Instead we head to Delorean (Calle Alfonso XIII 2; drinks about £1.50; ⑰), where they serve massive free tapas with each drink. Two glasses and you're stuffed! When you do want to wander the Jewish Quarter, go early, before the crowds – it's like stepping back in time. Also, I love the recitals of ancient Sephardic music on the beautiful patio of Casa de Sefarad (Calle de los Judíos 17; *casadesefarad.es*; ⑱). Wine-lovers should try El Astronauta (Calle Diario de Córdoba 18; mains about £9; ⑲): it serves excellent wine, including Piedra Luenga, my favourite local tittle.”



STAY

● **The happening hostel**

BED AND BE (Doubles from £25, B&B)
Because: Host José lives on-site, cooks breakfast and attends to every detail in these two exquisitely remodelled apartments-cum-18-bed hostel. **Travel's tip:** José also leads free tours. Calle de José Cruz Conde 22; 00 34 661420733, *bedandbe.com*; ⑲.

● **The bargain bolthole**

HOTEL SAN MIGUEL (Doubles from £32, room only)
Because: Smart rooms and a central location make this a no-brainer. There's also a bounty of bright blooms and dangling ferns. **Travel's tip:** There's no breakfast, so hit La Tortuga (Plaza Mármol de Bañuelos 1B; ⑳) for pastries. Calle San Zoilo 4; 00 34 957 475861, *hotelsanmiguelcordoba.com*; ㉑.

● **The sightseeing base**

LAS CASAS DE LA JUDERIA (Doubles from £82, room only)
Because: Right in the Jewish Quarter, you'll fall out of bed and into the

Mosque, Alcázar and other must-visits. Once it was a prison and Inquisition HQ; nowadays guests do time by the pool. **Travel's tip:** Wi-fi isn't officially on offer, but some rooms can get it, so if you need it, specify in advance. Calle Tomás Conde 10; 00 34 957 202095, *casasypalacios.com*; ㉒.

● **The lovers' lair**

BALCON DE CORDOBA (Doubles from £125, B&B)
Because: Intimacy is assured in this 10-room haven, and sundowners on the roof will set the hardest hearts aflutter. **Travel's tip:** The Ruzbahan room has a bed on the balcony for sleeping beneath the stars. Calle Encarnación 8; 00 34 957 498478, *balcondecordoba.com*; ㉓.

● **The Andalusian palace**

HOSPES PALACIO DEL BAILLO (Doubles from £128, room only)
Because: Sumptuous design, subterranean Roman pools and 18th-century art help make this 400-year-old palace special. **Travel's tip:** Celebrated guitarist Alberto Lucena



Cool it: clockwise from top left, escape the heat in Hospedería de El Churrasco's courtyard; summer flamenco shows; Hospes Palacio del Baillo provides oasis-like calm; pork sirloin Córdoba-style; cured hams

serenades restaurant diners (tasting menu £38) most Saturday nights. Calle Ramírez de las Casas Deza 10; 00 34 957 498993, *hospes.com*; ㉔.

● **The royal retreat**

HOSPEDERIA DE EL CHURRASCO (Doubles from £130, B&B)
Because: The dramatic arabesque/Belle Epoque suites were good enough for Spain's King Juan Carlos when he overnights in 2006. Embrace hi-chintz in the nine suites, all different – from rich golds and reds in 291 to royal blue in 251 – but all fit for a king. **Travel's tip:** Hotel parking is expensive, but there's free street parking just outside the Old Town. Calle del Romero 38; 00 34 957 294808, *www.elchurrasco.com*; ㉕.

GET ME THERE

GO INDEPENDENT
 Seville is the closest airport to Córdoba (40 minutes by train; £40 return; *renfe.com*), served by EasyJet (*easyjet.com*) from Gatwick (return flights from £76) and Ryanair (*ryanair.com*) from Gatwick and Stansted (from £60 one way).

Málaga (55 minutes by train; £53 return; *renfe.com*) has more flights: EasyJet flies from Bristol, Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Luton and Stansted (from £61 return); Ryanair flies from Birmingham, Leeds, Stansted, East Midlands, Manchester, Bournemouth, Glasgow, Liverpool and Bristol (from £60 one way); and BA (*ba.com*) flies from London City, Gatwick and Heathrow (from £78 return).

GO PACKAGED

Kirker Holidays (020 7593 2283, *kirkerholidays.com*) can sort three nights at Hospes Palacio del Baillo, from £729pp, B&B, including flights from Gatwick to Seville and train to Córdoba. **Expedia** (020 3564 3904, *expedia.co.uk*) has three nights at Las Casas de la Judería from £160pp, room only, with flights to Seville (train not included).

FURTHER INFORMATION

Córdoba Cards (£23.50 to £36) include entry to various sites, and are sold at the tourist office (Calle Rey Heredia 22). See www.turismodecordoba.org.