The Nasrids in Granada
had it not been for the Kingdom of Granada, a resplendent epilogue of the history of Islam in the Iberian Peninsula, the panorama of the Spanish-Muslim civilization would have remained irremediably deformed, incomplete and unintelligible. This Route is dedicated precisely to the protagonists of that important chapter, to the Nasrid Dynasty, which created and headed the last state of al-Andalus, and whose trajectory encompassed, uncountable events of a political or bellicose order apart, artistic and cultural accomplishments as magnificent as the Alhambra itself.

“Oh peoples of Al Andalus, what a pleasure is Yours! You have water, shade, rivers and trees; eternal Paradise is but in your very homes and if I had to choose, I would keep this”.

Ibn Jafaya

This journey directly links Jaén and Granada, and inaugurates the final third of the Route, which moves across the southern face of the Sierra Mágina and ends in the Cambil and Huelma highlands. From that point, the itinerary changes province and moves into the region of the Eastern Mountains of Granada via Guadahortuna, along the banks of its river, which flows eastward. The high plateau continues from Guadahortuna towards Piñar and Iznalloz, where it appears to be cloven by the River Cubillas valley and the mountainous range of the Sierra Arana, with its characteristic chasms and caves, which rises to over 2,000 m. and is a prelude to the massive reliefs of the Sierra Nevada. Towards the end of the journey, the path joins the course of the River Cubillas and slips down into the Vega, with its poplar groves and irrigation channels and reaches the final stops along the Route: Albolote, Maracena and Granada. Behind, like a backdrop, rises the imposing mass of the Sierra Nevada, the highest in the Peninsula and crowned by the 3,482 m. Mulhacén peak.

This is an itinerary that speaks of the vicissitudes of two peoples in a constant confrontation of ideas, beliefs and customs, but also of epic and humane interchanges and the birth of something that has come to be called the frontier culture. In spite of everything, one mustn't consider this frontier as something irremovable or static; on the contrary, more like a pliable fabric, which gave, according to how much one pulled on it.

There are few routes, such as this one, that show such a numerous amount of castles, fortresses, towers, strongholds and watchtowers the whole length of its path, as much in the towns, as scattered about the sierras and countryside. It isn't really surprising, if one thinks that the territories of the Holy Kingdom of J aén and the northern fringe of the province of Granada were, from Antiquity, a natural frontier and crossroads between the North and the South, the East and the West of the Peninsula. These defensive works, which to-day might seem isolated, or confused with the large houses in the villages, or the cortijos, in their majority, date from the Middle Ages and in particular from between the 12th and the 15th centuries, when the division between the Christian and the Muslim kings oscilated throughout these lands. The abundance of rural forts is, above all, a symptom of the rise in importance of the landlords in this frontier zone, which was always open to danger, due the Crown ceding vast possessions to the Nobles and the Military Orders, in order that they would maintain their defense.

Lovers of popular arts can make most of the traditions, fiestas, different crafts, food and a long list of the welcoming aspects of these lands, which reflect a marked tradition of al-Andalus. The May crosses, the pilgrimages, the festivals of Moors and Christians, Corpus Christi make this a truly memorable trip, coupled with visits to the workshops producing ironwork, wickerwork, ceramics and bookbinding. Also for the opportunity to taste different dishes, following traditional local recipes and made from the first class natural produce of the area and its excellent water. The welcoming bars, taverns, 'mesones', inns and restaurants which line the path, offer all the knowledge, variety and originality of local specialities, which can be tasted in the form of a small portion, or a "tapa", or by sitting down to table.

The raw materials correspond to the basis of the Mediterranean diet: cereals, pulses, vegetables, greens and fruits, and olive oil; an essential ingredient in these lands. Also wines, with the essential support of meats; pork, lamb, fowl and game, complemented by salted meats and fish. To conclude, desserts and sweets. These are the aspects of the cuisine along this Route, that most clearly reflect the survival of al-Andalus tradition, patent in its use of spices and dried fruits, in the pastry used in the confectionery, in the frying and the baking and in the sweetness of the honey, with which they are coated.

The route includes a great many protected areas, particularly in the sierras, covering open spaces, natural and national parks, many of which are among the largest and most attractive in the Peninsula. The path leads to the Sierra Mágina Natural Park and ends in Granada, in the lap of the Sierra Nevada National Park.

“Granada is the Damascus of al-Andalus, a feast for the eyes, rapture for the soul. It has an impregnable citadel, with high walls and splendid buildings. It is distinctive for the peculiarity of its river, which flows through the houses, baths, squares, exterior and interior mills and gardens”.

al-Saqqândî, 14th century.
On the edge of the province of Jaén and 65 kilometres from the capital of Granada, on the banks of the river which bears the same name, and on the road which leads us to the Sierra Mágina Natural Park, we come across this particularly beautiful town and a vast horizon of farmland.

This town is situated on the banks of the River Guadahortuna, a name which stems from the Arabic *ued*, river, and the Latin *hortus*, being ‘huerta’ or ‘huerto’ (orchard) in Spanish. It dates from Neolithic times and during the Nasrid period, it suffered harassment from the Castilian cavalry, stationed in Cazorla, during its attacks on the Moorish territory around Guadix. Following the conquest of the area by Don Fadrique de Toledo, in 1486, Queen Isabella arranged for its repopulation by Christians, in order to guarantee the security of the roads and the supply of bread and provisions to Granada. The town soon prospered and became, together with Iznalloz, the principal town in the area of the Eastern Mountains.

The parish church of Santa María la Mayor stands in the town’s unique centre. The earliest references to its construction date from 1506, commenced by the master builder, Domingo de Yguía, and later joined by Diego de Siloé. The monumental façade in the form of a triumphal arch is a highlight, which is reminiscent of the Puerta del Perdón of the cathedral in Granada. The belfry tower, crowned by a series of diminishing sections, stands beside it. The interior consists of three naves separated by pointed arches and covered by a rich Mudejar wooden ceiling. The main chapel, designed by Diego de Siloé, has a fine altarpiece.

On the way out of the town one can see the Hermitage of the Virgin of Loreto, patron saint of the town. Following along the road to Alamedilla one comes across the Hacho Bridge, a product of 19th c. industrial engineering, which spans a 623 metre ravine.
Lying in the Sierra de Arana, Píñar is a white village with a strategically placed castle of Moorish origin, visible from a distance. Olive and almond trees add colour to its surroundings. In turn, it serves as a window to the underground landscape of its caves. It is one of the earliest inhabited villages in the entire peninsula and dates from the Mid-palaeolithic. The remains found in the Cueva de la Carigüela and the neighbouring Ventanas cave are spectacular. The Neanderthal remains (bones and stone tools) are famous and the Neolithic ones, with their splendidly decorated ceramics can be seen in the Archaeological Museum in Granada. The history of Píñar is made up of Iberians, Romans and Moors. During the Muslim domination, this was one of the principal towns of the area. Following the establishment of the Nasrid frontier, it became a fortified town, against the advances of the Christians from their bases in Jaén. Following the conquest at the end of the war of Granada, Píñar's importance declined in favour of other towns repopulated by Christians. The town stretches out from the foot of the castle and is presided over by the Church of Santa Mónica, which is Mudéjar in origin and is of a single aisle with a wooden ceiling. Going up the hill, one comes to the main precinct of the castle, which consists of tracts of wall with rectangular towers and two semi-circular ones. A cistern made up of two sections can also be seen. The Carigüela and Ventanas caves are also on this same rise and are well worth a visit, as they offer the visitor a world of natural beauty, which will take him on a journey through time.
This town, which is the capital of the area of the Montes Orientales, is very near to Granada and sits on the edge of the Tajo (gorge) de la Hoz. It was a town of a clearly military nature, since the Romans used it as a strategic enclave to defend the road which linked Tarraco with the coastal areas of Eastern Andalusia.

There are many prehistoric remains to be seen in the town and above all in the numerous caves. However, its Roman past is very well documented. The town of Acatucci, cited in the itineraries of the Empire, was built by the Romans, as was the bridge in the lower town (Artistic-Historic monument), which links the roads that communicate the Upper Guadalquivir with the valley and the coast of Granada. Only a little while ago a 3rd c. Roman sculpture, known as the “Togado (togaed) de Periate” was found at the side of a road in the municipal limits of Piñar.

It was during the Nasrid period that the town adopted its definitive name, Hisn al-Lawza, or what is the same thing, the Castillo de los Almendros. Unfortunately, all that remain to-day are the ruins. The town formed part of the defensive line between the Christian and Moorish kingdoms. In the 14th c. and 15th c., Iznalloz became involved in the border skirmishes, until its fall in 1486, in the wake of the loss of Cambil. It became an important commercial, agricultural and livestock centre after the conquest of Granada.

A walk through Iznalloz reflects the diversity of cultures to which it has been subject. On entering the town there is a Roman bridge dating from the 1st century, which spans the course of the River.
Cubillas. It is of a single span with stone pilasters. The scanty remains of the Castillo de los Almendros are further up the hill. They are of Nasrid construction, built upon an earlier one, possibly of Almohad origin and consist of a mud and rubblework tower and two others, at different levels with stone blocks in the corners. At the foot of the castle stands the Parish Church of Nuestra Señora de los Ángeles, the focus of the old town. It is of enormous proportions and construction began in the mid-16th c., along designs by Diego de Siloé. It is Renaissance in style, on a rectangular plan, with three naves divided by cruciform columns with Corinthian capitals. Lateral chapels are set in niches. The presbytery is covered by a coffered vault, decorated with heraldry and the Imperial coat of arms. The coats of arms of Archbishop Guerrero, and the sculptor, Alonso Hernández, can be seen on the side walls. Its construction was interrupted by the Morisco rebellion in 1568, and from then on it was only worked on in stages. Attempts to complete the work in the 18th c. were unfruitful and it remains an unfinished building.

The modest building of the Old Hospital, the construction of which was ordered by the Catholic Monarchs, is very nearby. It came to be used as the communal granary, which the Church used to store the tithes. To-day one can pay a visit, to admire its magnificent coffered ceiling.

Near the road toward Deifontes, one comes across the Hermitage of Nuestra Señora de los Remedios, patron saint of Iznalloz. It is a simple edifice, with a single nave and a traditional Mudéjar timberwork ceiling and construction began in the 16th century. It was rebuilt in 1960, when two towers were added to the façade.

The new part of the town is around the Plaza de la Constitución, where one can see the town hall and an old fountain with a coat of arms. The whole township is dedicated principally to farming, above all to cultivating the Olive and some of the best olive oil in all of Spain comes from here, although it also produces quality wool and beef. Iznalloz also participates in the ‘Moors and Christians’ festivals, which are so rooted in the villages which once belonged to the old Nasrid kingdom.

Sierra Arana

The spectacular calcareous massif of the Sierra Arana rises to the south of Iznalloz, crowned by the Peña de la Cruz, at an altitude of 2,029 m. Hundred year old pines and masses of Mediterranean forest grow on its slopes. It has a lot of interesting fauna, such as the mountain goat, boar, fox, badger, mountain cat, genet and a great quantity of birds. The Museo Micológico is situated at a spot called the “Casa del Forestal”, in the area of El Sotillo, a place which is dedicated to the study and investigation of different wild mushrooms. This is an area which is open to relaxation, excursions and various sporting activities. Another of the attractions of the Sierra Arana are the caves. Perhaps the most beautiful of these is the Cueva del Agua, which is deep and spectacular and has springs and a lake in its interior.
Deifontes is the last stop in the Eastern Mountains and one is already aware of the descent towards the capital. Behind stand the foothills of the Sierra Arana and below it, the carefully cultivated plain.

According to the tools dating from the Palaeolithic and Neolithic period that have been found within the town limits, it is assumed that the area has been inhabited since prehistoric times. The Roman presence is demonstrated at Venta del Nacimiento, where a temple dedicated to the Water gods may have existed. Some historians think the name may come from deus and fontes, the springs of God; others, perhaps more correctly, from dar and al-font, the home, or place of the spring.

Deifontes preserves the aspect of an agricultural village, with its simple whitewashed houses. In the highest part of the village stands the Parish Church of San Martín, a Mudejar building with a single nave and a timberwork ceiling, with tie beams and an interlaced design.

The population consolidated itself under the Moors and the hamlet became dependent on Iznalloz. Being on the frontier, it became involved in border skirmishes. There are many references to those events but in particular, those of the High Constable D. Miguel Lucas de Iranzo. Following the conquest it became dependent on the Abbey of Sacromonte, later passing into the hands of the local nobility and finally becoming divided into plots and shared out between farmers.

The place known as the Nacimiento (source) and the Hermitage of San Isidro are on the outskirts. Downhill, one comes to las Erillas, a place where remains have been found, dating from the Neolithic to the Roman and Moorish periods.
Life under the Nasrids in Albolote was just like that in all the other agricultural villages of the area; normally prosperous and peaceful but not exempt from the fear of surprise attacks by the Christians.

There are vestiges of Paleolithic settlement in the area of the Cubillas dam and also archaeological remains of a Roman town dating from the 3rd c. AD. Nonetheless, the establishment of Albolote as a village dates from the Nasrid period and is related to the abundance of holm oaks in its surrounding area. It’s name, al-Bulut, in fact, means holm oak, or forest of holm oaks. An Arab chronicler talks of a human settlement in the area, which he considers to be a hamlet belonging to the district of Elvira.

The Battle of Higueruela took place in the municipal district of Albolote, in 1431, Juan II of Castile and his favourite, Don Álvaro de Luna, at the head of the Castilian troops, came down the side of the Parapanda, camped in the area of Maracena and proceeded to devastate the Vega. The Emir Muhammad IX came out with all his forces and the ensuing battle resulted in a defeat at the gates of Granada.

A circular lookout or watchtower of the Nasrid period remains on a hill near to the town. Its function was the surveillance of the Cubillas corridor.

The centre of the town is the Plaza de España, where the Ayuntamiento and the Parish Church of the Encarnación are to be found. Declared a National Artistic Monument, it was built in the 16th c. along designs by Ambrosio de Vico. It is rectangular with three naves and a series of semicircular arches on pillars and a Mudejar coffered ceiling. The 1610 altarpiece is remarkable and is the work of the mastercraftsmen Pablo de Rojas, Bernabé de Gaviria and Marín de Aranda.

Outside the town, the shores of the Cubillas dam offer us the possibility of enjoying peaceful and lovely surroundings.
“According to the infinite praise given to it in the accounts of travellers and conversations at parties, its extensive valley is similar to the cultivated plains of Damascus. God spread it out like a carpet on a plain furrowed by streams and rivers, where farmsteads and gardens abound, in the most delightful situation and with the greatest abundance of sown fields and cultivated lands.”

al-Saqundi

Our journey enters its last stage before reaching the legendary capital of the Nasrids, making a stop in one of the most prosperous towns in the Vega. The origins of Maracena are lost in time but it is possible that one needs to look at the Roman era, as reflected in its name at the time, Maratiena, the place or the property of Maratius. The fact that it was an important centre is demonstrated in that an oilmill stone dating from the 2nd c. AD was found in the present day Caseria de los Titos. Under Muslim domination, Marasana, experienced unequalled prosperity, only broken from time to time by Christian incursions, such as that by Alfonso I the Fighter, in his search for Mozarabs in Granada in 1126. Following the conquest of Granada and the crisis of the Morisco population, Maracena had to be repopulated again. In the ensuing centuries it was involved in agriculture, in particular with the grapevine. In the 20th century tobacco was introduced and there was a rapid expansion in industrial and residential areas.

In the centre of the original sector of Maracena, we come to the Encarnación Church consecrated for the Catholic Monarchs. It is Mudejar in style with a timberwork ceiling and was reformed in the 18th century, when a slim tower was added. This town is surrounded by beautiful countryside.

The writer Emilio Carmona, an authentic 20th c. humanist, has close connections to this village.
“...Abenalahmar made his way towards Granada with great pomp and ceremony and set up camp on the outskirts of the city, in order to enter the following day. He then changed his mind and entered at sunset on the day of his arrival, with his sword already girded. He then went out to Badis ben Habux's castle. Torches burned between the gates and he entered with his eunuchs, like a man just married”.

Under the Nasrids, Granada came to form part of the select group of cities whose history is as strong as their very reality. The dawn of Granada goes back to the 7th c. BC, to the Iberian town of Iliberis, situated on the highest point of the present day Albaicín quarter.

In the year 45 BC, it acquired the rank of a Roman municipality. In the first decades of the 8th century, the Muslims decided to transfer the capital of the district to the foot of the Sierra Elvira. The revival of Granada came in the 11th c., at the hand of the Berber dynasty, the Zirids. Its period of splendour was between the 13th and 15th centuries, when it became the capital of the Nasrid sultanate, founded by Ibn al-Ahmar. The new dynasty inaugurated its reign with a transcendental gesture: the creation of the palatine citadel of the Alhambra.

The ancient Nasrid capital allows for an infinity of itineraries. In this case a representative selection for the last Muslim city are put forward. The most renown jewel of al-Andalus Art is the Alhambra, whose name, al-Hamra, means 'The Red (place)'. Although it was preceded by a Muslim fortress, perhaps of Roman origin, its appearance began to take shape, thanks to the Nasrids, who created an aristocratic
city in Oriental style. The first sultan, Muhammad ben Nasr, al-Ahmar, is the one who commenced its construction in 1238.
The ascent starts from the Plaza Nueva and first of all passes through the Renaissance gate, the Puerta de las Granadas (Gate of the Pomegranates), within the ramparts which connect the Alhambra to the Torres Bermejas fortress, constructed by the Nasrids. The road up levels off at the Pilar de Carlos V, a fountain in Classic style, designed by Pedro Machuca. The Gate of Justice, constructed by Yusuf I in 1348, towers up beside it. The Alcazaba, which is the oldest section of the Alhambra, juts out on the western cliff. The keep, the Torre del Homenaje, was rebuilt over a previous one by al-Ahmar. The Torre de la Vela (vigil) and the Puerta de las Armas are at the forefront of the Alcazaba.

The Palatine section is to the east of the Plaza de los Aljibes. In the foreground stands the Palace of Charles V, an unrivalled example of Spanish Renaissance architecture, designed by Pedro Machuca in 1527. The Reales Alcázares stretch out from this point, a nucleus of palaces, with gardens juxtaposed the full length of them. The first and oldest sector is the Mexuar, a place for audiences and the meetings of the councils, the Oratory and the Golden Room, in front of a patio with a fabulous façade, which gives access to the Comares sector, the most important of the buildings. A corridor leads to the Patio de los Arrayanes, in whose pool the magnificent Comares Tower is reflected, the seat of the Hall of Ambassadors, a complex built by Yusuf I and Muhammad V. Along one reaches the Palacio de los Leones, the focus of the private apartments of the Royal family. This is set around a patio in whose centre stands a fountain supported by twelve lions. The Sala de los Abencerrajes is situated beside this. The Hall of the Two Sisters and the Mirador of Lindaraja are on the northern side. The Palacio del Partal, the oldest palace and built at the beginning of the 14th c., is beyond these, with the Torre de las Damas (Ladies) and the Oratory. On the way to the Generalife there are two more towers, converted into small palaces: The Torre de la Cautiva (Captive), from 1340, and the Torre de las Infantas (Princesses), from the mid-15th century. Above the Alhambra, resting on a hillside called the Cerro del Sol, is the Generalife, the largest recreational building to which the emirs retired. Called, djennat alarif, the “Garden of the Architect”, it is a heavenly setting, where plants and water reign, and where a mirador-pavilion, dating from the beginning of the 14th century, stands before the pleasant Patio de la Acequia.

Opposite the regal edifices of the Alhambra, the Albaicín portrays the urban essence of Granada. From the Plaza Nueva, adorned by the Chancery and the Church of Santa Ana, the Carrera del Darro runs round the lower part of the district. The Bañuelo, the Nogal Moorish baths, a Zirid construction of the 12th century, the Convent of Santa Catalina, the Casa de Zafra, and the Casa de Castril, home of the Archaeological Museum, the Church of San Pedro y San Pablo and the Monastery of the Descalzas Reales, are at the heart of the Albaicín.

A few steps on stands the Salvador Church, built on the site of the main mosque of the Albaicín. The walk continues across the nucleus of the Alhambra Qadima (fortress) and comes out at the Plaza Larga and the las Pesas Arches. From this point and for the length of the Cuesta Alhacaba, there is a stretch of the 12th c. ramparts which terminate at another of the entrances of the old fortress, the Monaita Gate. The Convent of Santa Isabel la Real is to be found nearby, whose buildings overlap into the Dar al-Horra Palace. The slopes of the Albaicín run down to the Puerta de Elvira, with its imposing horseshoe arch, which was built in the 12th c. and reformed in the 14th c. by the Nasrids. In front of the arch there is an area of the city which was urbanized by the Christians, with buildings like the Royal Hospital and the 16th c. Monastery of St. Jerome, the Church and Hospital of San Juan de Dios, built on Baroque lines, the Church of Saints Justo and Pastor and the University. The Gran Vía de Colón brings the itinerary back to the heart of the Muslim ‘medina’, around the mosque, which was replaced by the Sanctuary and the Cathedral. Commenced along Gothic lines, Diego de Siloé transformed it into a Renaissance building, and it was finished off in the 17th c. with a Baroque façade, designed by Alonso Cano. The Royal Chapel, which is attached to the Cathedral, is the Mausoleum of the Catholic Monarchs. It is Flemish Gothic in style and was built by Enric Egas between 1505 and 1521. Opposite, is the Madraza, a centre of studies established by Yusuf I. The Alcaicería, formerly a 14th c. silk market, is very nearby, as is the el Zacatín, the trading centre of the ‘medina’ and the Plaza de Bib-Rambla. The Corral de Carbón, one of the old corn exchanges, is on the other side of the calle Reyes Católicos. The outskirts of Granada comprise many attractive places, such as the Cartuja Monastery, in a lovely setting of orchards, which was much praised by the Nasrid chroniclers. The Vega itself is a complete evocation of the Nasrid world. A consubstantial element of the city is the Sierra Nevada, which silhouettes the horizon of Granada and is crowned by the Mulhacén peak, whose very name is also an evocation of the Nasrid past.