The Almoravids and Almohads in Granada

Routes of The Legacy of al-Andalus

Major Cultural Route of the Council of Europe
his is a long and beautiful trip, which enables one to journey through the common history of two neighbouring continents; Africa and Europe and, more precisely, through two countries, Morocco and Spain, which for several centuries shared the same destiny, culture, triumphs and vicissitudes.

“All countries, in their diversity, are one and all men are neighbours and brothers”. Az-Zubaidi, 10th Century.

The Almoravids, or Al-morabitun, were a dynasty which arose in the 11th Century out of the depths of the Maghreb desert and which arrived in the Peninsula at the desperate call of the poet-king of Seville, al-Mutamid, who was overwhelmed by the increasing Christian pressure which was taking grip in al-Andalus. The Almoravids, led by the “blue” warrior Yusuf ibn Tashfin (the Almoravids, belonged to the Lantuna tribe, who were accustomed to protect their head and face with an indigo blue ‘litam’), didn’t have to think twice and obligingly arrived. Their luck ran out in the middle of the 12th c., when another group of Berbers, the Almohads, took over the reins of power themselves, professing arguments of spiritual cleansing, which didn’t gain much response.

Along this Route, the traveller will savour the weight of History, a history laden with brilliant characters, from the Neanderthal “Man of Zafarraya”, passing along Phoenicians, Romans and Moors down to our present day. A history and tradition which all of these have left in our people, reflecting their great capacity for hospitality and demonstrating their influences, especially the deep Andalusi tradition, full of charm and local colour.


The Zafarraya corridor was used for incursions by the first Muslims in al-Andalus, in the middle of the 8th century. This pass was conserved and re-used continually as a means of communication with and recuperation of different enclaves and numerous remains of towers are still to be seen. Beyond the narrow pass, an immense valley can be seen together with the Sierra Gorda and Sierra de Alhama. In 1883, human remains dating back some 30,000 years, were found in a cave in this narrow opening. Phoenician influences and Palaeo-christian remains can be found in this spectacular landscape, thanks to the saltworks (a complex system of irrigation and salt mining), the baths and the irrigation. These elements provide a wide range of products which are produced simply but with great care and can be savoured in the large inns, or in the shade of the numerous poplar groves, which actually have nothing to do with the natural forests that existed on the riverbanks of yesteryear.

Thanks to its proximity to Granada, this area is an ideal place to get to know the local townships and enjoy the numerous fiestas celebrated throughout the year, or to pass the summer months, to enjoy the freshness and fertility of its cultivated fields and above all the pleasantness of the cool climate in summer, the proximity of the beach and the affable behaviour of the local populace.

The following description has changed little with the passage of time:

A crown of hamlets, farms and ‘carmenes’ (villas) encircled Granada. The hamlets were small peasant nuclei. In the Vega, there were more than three hundred, fifty of which had their own mosque. The farms were large country houses. Less definable the ‘carmenes’ (from qarm, vineyard), which were homesteads, either within or without the city, with patios and gardens, where the inhabitants of Granada withdrew to spend the ‘alacer’ or autumnal festival, at the time of the grape harves, and to enjoy parties or celebrate Moorish festivals, or fiestas related to preparing and fertilizing the land.

By taking long walks through Granada, the traveller can contemplate and almost live the legacy of a people who occupied this city and kingdom for more than eight centuries. The first will show us the Albaicín (from San Cristóbal to the Alcázar Genil), moving through squares, churches, lookout points, palaces and incomparable monuments and terminating at the Corral del Carbón. A trip to the Sierra Nevada revealing the black slate hills to the south from the Veleta, or frozen lakes at the foot of the Mulhacén like the Caldera, will be the interim walk. The second and last, from the Puerta Elvira to the Alhambra, offers us the grandeur of al-Andalus, in the Nasrid royal residence, the Alcazaba (fortress), the Comares Palace and on to the Generalife.

The Alhambra was defined in a manifesto, by a group of 24 Spanish architects, in 1952:

“The relationship between this 14th c. building and the most advanced architecture of to-day, in some ways, is astonishing; they coincide in their acceptance of the human model, in the asymmetric way of arranging the floors, in the purity and sincerity of the resultant spaces, in the form of incorporating the landscape and the garden into the building, in the economic and strict use of materials, without plastic adiposities, and in so many other ways that it would take a long time to list.”
“The gates of Zafarraya are just cuts, or narrow passes, at the top of the pass, or branch of the Sierra de Tejeda. One enters here in order to cross a large area of oaks, holm oaks and abundant pastures. The land is extremely high in relation to the cities of Vélez and Alhama...”

Antonio Ponz

The narrow opening of Zafarraya, known as the Boquete de Zafarraya, is the pass which defines the transition from the Axarquia to the lands of Alhama; it is the fissure which cuts and separates the rocky walls of the sierras of Alhama and Tejeda. The Plains of Zafarraya appear beyond the Boquete and Ventas de Zafarraya, where the town bearing this name is to be found on a fertile and beautiful plateau. They form a geological corridor extending some ten kilometres, corresponding to a polje or Carstic depression. Man has settled this area from ancient times. The remains known as the “Man of Zafarraya” (dating back 30,000 years) attest to this. Their discovery was invaluable evidence of the human link to Neanderthal. The Argar culture arrived in this area some two thousand years before Christ, establishing settlements in easily defendible sites. There is an Argaric site to the south of the Plain. Phoenicians and Romans also established their encampments here, as demonstrated in objects and remains found along the ancient roadways. Nevertheless, it was with the arrival of the Muslims that this area became known for its wealth in livestock. Thus its name stems from the Arabic, Fahs al-raiyya or “field of shepherds”, although there are those who think it stems from Saiarraya, which
means limit of territory. Towards the middle of the 8th c., the Zafarraya corridor witnessed the passing of the Ummayad prince, Abd al-Rahman, on his way to be proclaimed Emir of al-Andalus. This same pass was used on many occasions by the Muslims, such as for the reconquest of Vélez or during the Christian conquest of Alhama and Loja. The ruins of numerous communication towers remain, which connected the coast with the interior of the peninsula. The area made up part of the Nasrid royal road, along which so many Arab travellers passed, among them being Ibn Batuta in the year 1349. Following the Christian conquest, the plateau became dependent on Vélez-Málaga, which initiated a centuries’ long dispute between the latter and Alhama. This was interrupted by the 1884 earthquake, which damaged 80% of the buildings and made intensive reconstruction imperative. In 1913, Zafarraya became an independent town and shortly afterwards, a municipality.

This town is a tidy urban unit, with long and straight roads, which reflect its reconstruction following the violent earthquake. The parish church, the Nuestro Señor de las Tres Marías hermitage and the Pilar Viejo (old fountain) are the landmarks which punctuate its streets, while the arches of the ruined old church remain as evidence of its history.

Zafarraya is a ideal place to pass the summer months, given its cool climate, its proximity to the beach (20 km. to Torre del Mar) and the freshness and fertility of its cultivated fields. From el Llano (the plateau) one can reach Loja, Salar or Alhama, on mountainous roads, passing through picturesque spots like Las Parideras, El Carrascal, El Refugio or Fuente del Espino. It is also possible to reach the coast along pathways through the pinewood on the Sierra Umbría.

Going up the Bernagal road, one can experience the spectacular panoramic view right over the Llano with the Pass in the distance.
Before our eyes the plateau appears, cleft by the narrow pass of the River Cacín which precedes La Malahá and the villages of the Vega. A white popular hamlet, whose name means the saltflat, due to the one just by the village, fed by the Salado stream.

The River Cacín, whose course flows through impressive rocky passes, marks the limit of the Temple region, a transit zone and an area of small villages set between dry land and olive groves, which forms the southern edge of the Vega and is closely connected to Granada. Various places dot the road and notably La Malahá; a small white village situated on a shelf at the base of the Digudía hill. This area received a significant number of Arab settlers, shortly after the arrival of the Muslims in the Peninsula. Its old name, Queemple, comes from the Arab Qaysi tribe, who arrived with the Syrian troops under General Baly in 740. A district dependent on the Granada province of Ilbira was formed here and about ten hamlets were parcelled out, one of the most important of which was La Malahá. There are interesting prehistoric sites round here and evidence that this place was inhabited at the time of the Roman Empire, a period when its saltflats were already being exploited. The Greeks named it Malka and the Romans Misaña, mild valley or relief of pains and established a spa.
here. Later, the Goths named it Mizarza in allusion to the benefits of its thermal waters. A very well preserved cistern from Roman times still exists, apart from baths and a necropolis. Nevertheless, its name stems from the Arabic, Almalaha, the saltflats, and they created a complex irrigation system and exploited the salt. At the time the town was very important, growing to 3,000 inhabitants, who also cultivated silk. La Malahá developed its quiet existence of saltmining, agriculture and forestry until the commencement of the upheavals prior to the conquest of Granada. The Catholic Monarchs ceded the exploitation of the saltmines to El Zagal, when the latter surrendered the cities of Guadix and Almería in 1489. A considerable population of Moors and Moriscos must have remained, who, on account of the uprisings, diminished and was substituted by Christian settlers from other regions. It experienced an extraordinary prosperity during the 19th c., thanks to its spa, whose fame spread throughout Europe.

La Malahá’s simple town centre spreads out, in the midst of a gently undulating terrain, with fields of cereals, olive groves and irrigation ditches. It is based on ordered blocks, which converge on the older and more compact sector of the town, where the Parish Church of the Purísima Concepción stands; a building consisting of a single nave, covered by an excellent 16th c. Mudejar ceiling. Its streets exude the quiet atmosphere of a country town and nearby are to be found the ponds and labyrinths of the old saltmines, which are some of the most remarkable in the interior of Andalusia. To the North and very close by, is the attractive area of the Baths, the source of curative arsenical sodium chloride waters, which flow very slowly into a circular stone pool, a vestige from the Romans and the Moors, with an extensive view before one that stretches into the Vega of Granada.
La Gabias is 8 kilometres from Granada, in the Vega and situated opposite the splendid Sierra Nevada mountain chain. It is a residential area for many Granadans, in search of a short break, or an exceptional view.

Situated to the southeast of the city, between the fertile region of the Vega and the Secano, Las Gabias is the anteroom to the Temple region. The River Dílar runs through the township in a north-south direction, creating important irrigated zones and the Arroyo del Salado stream, in the westerly part, allows for the growth of olive groves. The countryside around Las Gabias, offering both natural and cultural alternatives, is much appreciated. The dry hills contrast with the plains of the valley and the mountainous spurs with the depression of Granada.

Its history dates back thousands of years, as is confirmed by the archaeological remains found on the Cuesta de los Chinos, a promontory in the zone between the Vega and the drylands. Under Roman domination the population moved to an area nearby, where an important settlement has revealed the ruins of an oil mill and several houses. However, the most interesting thing about this is the 3rd c. Roman Baptistry, which was declared a National Monument in 1931 and is the only one preserved in Spain. It consists of a corridor with a subterranean chamber covered by a cupola which appears on the surface.

In the times of al-Andalus, it had as many as 1500 inhabitants and a large fortress was built in the centre of the town. Centuries later, during the Morisco rebellion, Hurtado de Mendoza drew up a census and claimed that there were 1418 people spread between Las Gabias and other places in the...
Vega. It would seem that its name stems from Hisn Caviar, which means military tower. There are two versions concerning the construction of this tower; one that it belongs to the period of the Caliphate and the other, that it is one of the five lookout towers built by Muhammad III. What is certainly clear is that it played an important role during the period that the Christian troops were laying on the pressure prior to the Conquest, when it served both to keep watch over the Vega and to house the troops. In 1490 it was taken by the Christians under the command of the Gran Capitán. The same year, King Ferdinand the Catholic ordered its destruction but that never came to pass.

The modern history of Las Gabias begins with the Christian conquest and the repopulation undertaken by Philip II, when settlers arrived from different parts of the peninsula. It belonged to the Counts of Gabia until the 19th c. and in the 20th c. it became one of the most prosperous and important villages in the province, due to expansion in the tile industry and the cultivation of flax, hemp and beetroot. The official establishment of the municipality of Las Gabias occurred in 1973, with the fusion of the old towns of Gabia Grande and Gabia Chica. The Torreón, a fortress with buildings and walls around, is of great interest owing to its structure and its interior decoration (horseshoe arches, ovolo archivolts, plaster columns with capitals etc, etc). It was part of a fortification used as a refuge by the hamlets in case of danger, or military attacks. The whole valley can be seen from the terrace, which is what gives this tower its strategic importance in the defense of the area. It was declared a National Monument in 1922.

The Church of Gabia Chica in the town centre is important, built of a single nave with a “V” roof, coffered in wood and with a belfry attached to the Sanctuary. There is a magnificent 16th c. altarpiece inside and a statue of the patroness, the Virgen del Rosario. The pulpit is of carved wood. Since 1990 the parish church has been the Church of the Encarnación, conceived as a Neo-gothic temple, its most characteristic feature is the tower. The interior houses sculptures, paintings and alterpieces from the 16th and 17th centuries. The Cristo de la Expiración and the San Juan stand out and are attributed to the School of Pablo de Rojas. The hermitage of Nuestra Señora de las Nieves dates from the 16th or early 17th c.: Baroque in its cupolas and vault, Renaissance in its frieze and walls and Rococo in the alcove of the Virgin.

Las Gabias boasts two of the very few 18 holes golf courses in the province of Granada, and perhaps the most beautiful of them due to the unbeatable countryside that can be appreciated while playing, with the Sierra Nevada as a backdrop. The excellent setting of this town and its system of communications means that one can combine sport with tourism and play golf, or enjoy winter or aquatic sports, all within an hour’s drive.
Discovering Granada is all an adventure, perhaps due to the mysterious Moorish legacy that envelops it, perhaps due to the narrowness of its streets or for the treasures which it conceals. To contemplate Granada has always been considered a privilege, as the popular saying shows: “Give him alms woman, for there is no greater sorrow than to be blind in Granada”.

The finishing touch to this journey is the city which was the last stronghold of Spanish-Muslim civilization. It is the symbol of its refinement and the memory of the profound influence it left behind. It is a rich and varied itinerary which has introduced us to the nature, the art, the history, the countryside and the villages of Andalusia. Granada has a unique charm and an unforgettable setting, at the end of the Genil valley and at the foot of the Sierra Nevada. Given its situation, it attracted settlers from very early on. The first human settlement was the nucleus of lliberis, an Iberian hamlet on the Albaicín hill. Around 27 BC this became a Roman town and, in the 4th c. it was the seat of the first Spanish Council. In 714, it was taken by the Muslims under Tariq. Converted into the capital of one of the provinces, in the mid 8th c., the centre of the population moved to the neighbouring Elvira, in the plain, which went into decline in the 11th c., owing to internal conflicts. Now called Garanta, it picked up again in the 11th c. under...
Zirid rule, a dynasty which headed one of the most powerful of the Taifa kingdoms. In 1090, the king of Granada, Abd Allah was deposed, shortly after the Almoravids established the headquarters of their peninsular domains in Granada. Things remained so until 1156, when it passed into the hands of their rivals, the Almohads. Both North African dynasties had a special relationship with this city, to the extent that it was often governed by people of royal blood.

In the 13th c. the Christian advance caused changes in Granada, which was destined to become the last focus of Spanish Islam. From the moment Ibn al-Ahmar made it his capital in 1238, the Court of theish Islam. From the moment Ibn al-Ahmar destined to become the last focus of Span-

The cupola at the entrance to the Patio de los Leones

The heart of the Alhambra is made up of alcazares and royal palaces, a labyrinth of halls, patios and gardens, where the splendour of Nasrid Art is displayed. The first section corresponds to the Mexuar, the place of audiences and councils, with an oratory and marvellous Golden Room. The Palace of Comares, with a spectacular façade in plasterwork, surrounds the Patio de los Arrayanes, or de la Alberca, in which the Comares tower is reflected. Its interior houses the Hall of Ambassadors, with its marvellous and refined decoration and its wooden cupola. The visit continues through the Palacio de los Leones, which was the royal family's private residential area and was built by Muhammad V at the end of the 14th c. It stands around a central patio with a fountain supported by twelve lions. The gallery is supported by stylized columns which communicate with the hall of the Abencerrages, that of the Kings and of the Dos Hermanas (two sisters). The Royal Baths are nearby and a bit further on, the Partal, with the Ladiess' Tower and splendid gardens and other towers (of the Captive, of the Princesses) with palatial rooms. All these wonders lead up to the Generalife, a heavenly environment of vegetation and water on a hillside, which the princes of Granada used as an area of retreat. The name of this palace probably comes from alarife, or master architect. The Patio de la Acequia, in its interior, is exceptional; a long space intersected in the centre by the canalization of the Royal Acequia (irrigation channel). The Sala Regia with its decorative plasterwork in the northern section is splendid and from this room one accedes to the Patio del Ciprés de la Sultana and the Upper Gardens.

At the foot of the Alhambra we encounter an animated city full of monuments. The course of the River Darro is an important feature and an emblematic artery from the Plaza Nueva (with the Chancery and the Mudejar church of Santa Ana) to the Paseo de los Tristes, bordered by the Bañuelo (the 12th c. Nogal baths), the Plateresque Casa del Castril and a whole row of monumental edifices. The Albaicín stands opposite the Alhambra, full of narrow little streets and bastion of the Moorish town. It was the focal point of the city in the Zirid and Nasrid period, as is demonstrated by the numerous references that remain. The Cuesta del Chapiz goes up from the Darro to the centre and worth a mention is the church of San Juan de los Reyes, whose tower is the minaret of a 13th c. mosque and, at the highest point, the church and Mirador of San Nicolás, with splendid views of the Alhambra, together with the Salvador church, built over the former main mosque and which preserves its 13th c. porticoed patio. A feeling of al-Andalus prevails upon crossing the
Plaza Larga and the Arco de las Pesas, the gate of the Cuesta Alhacaba and especially the Monaita Gate. Another of the important buildings in this quarter is the Santa Isabel la Real convent, which adjoins the Dar al-Horra palace, the “Casa de la Reina”, where Boabdil's, the last king of Granada, mother lived. By going along the streets called Calderería Nueva and Vieja, one descends to the street called Elvira, where a gate connected the Albaicin with the medina (market).

Important buildings constructed after the Christian conquest proliferate around the Elvira Gate and the Campo del Triunfo, such as the Hospital Real and the San Jerónimo monastery, both of which are Renaissance, or the Baroque Hospital de San Juan de Dios.

The Gran Vía de Colón marks the modern axis of what was the medina and the city in the Middle Ages, situated round the Great Mosque, which would be replaced by the Christian cathedral. Construction began in 1523 along Gothic lines. Its plans were modified by Diego de Siloé, who created a magnificent Classic construction, which was finished it the 17th c., to include a sensationalist Baroque façade designed by Alonso Cano. The Royal Chapel stands alongside and was built by Enrique Egas between 1505 and 1521 and came to serve as the Mausoleum of the Catholic Monarchs. It houses a rich collection of works of art.

The Madrassa, created by Yusuf I as a centre of studies, is to be found very nearby and also the Alcaicería, the old Nasrid market for luxury goods, together with the Zacatín and the Corral del Carbón, being examples of the corn exchanges and merchants’ inns, dating from the first half of 14th century. There are still a multitude of places to visit, to end up falling in love with this incomparable city.

Walks which take one along the calle Reyes Católicos, the Plaza del Carmen and the Puerta Real, in the town centre, or through el Mauror, the old J udería, the Antequeruela, with its terraced 'carmenes' and the popular Campo del Príncipe. Or alternatively, along Realejo, San Matías and so many other interesting nooks, to end up on the Carrera del Genil and the riverbank walkways, with the old Moorish oratory, now converted into the San Sebastián hermitage, and the palace of Alcázar Genil, the most authentic evidence of the Almohad presence in Granada.

On the outskirts, important buildings include the Cartuja with its Sanctuary and Sacristy, which are among the most brilliant works of 18th c. Andalusian Baroque. Federico García Lorca’s memory is evoked in the Huerta de San Vicente, where he spent periods of respite in the house where he was born at Fuente Vaqueros. An ascent of the Sierra Nevada seems obligatory: A steep climb which takes one up the highest mountains in the Peninsula to the peaks of Mulhacén, at 3,482 m., and Veleta. Named Solair, or Snowy Mountain, in the times of al-Andalus, it has been declared a National Park, because of its vigorous Alpine nature and it has the most southerly ski station in Europe, equipped with very modern installations.