

# Spain - Germany Vacation Diary 2009

## Part 1 of 2

### Friday, April 24 – Flight to Malaga

Our 2009 odyssey began when we departed San Diego for LAX via American Eagle Jet at 12:40pm. We arrived LAX and spent nearly 4 hours making ourselves comfortable in Admiral's Club. Our 767 jet flew non-stop to London, and we whiled away the 11-hour transit time watching Valkyrie and several other movies. Got stuck in the middle seats, but had a spare between us in a 2-5-2 seating configuration, so not bad.

Arrived London after noon and passed through security at Heathrow, only to learn that the \$25 bottle of Jack Daniels we had purchased duty free on the flight would not be allowed to continue with as carry-on baggage, but would have to be checked at a counter in God knows where part of the airport. We waved goodbye to our friend Jack and headed for the Admirals Club, where we were compensated for our loss by consuming the all-you-can-drink alcoholic beverages.

We boarded the Iberia flight via an old-fashioned stairway since the ramp extension failed to operate properly, delaying our flight by over an hour. A helpful Spanish flight attendant reassured us that we would still have enough time to make our connection to Malaga in Madrid. After arriving in Madrid and passing through passport control, we headed for the gate which was located within our same terminal. When we arrived at the gate, we once again found ourselves in hurry up and wait mode. Unlike our earlier flights, this one to Malaga was packed with vacation-goers.

We arrived Malaga airport close to 10:00pm on Saturday evening. We passed into the airport with no sign of Craig and Amy, We waited for our baggage at the designated conveyor belt for over 15 minutes. In the meantime, Karen went to the car rental area in search of Craig and Amy. When our luggage failed to appear, I happened to notice a second conveyor belt in a nearby glassed-in area which was circulating baggage. I was relieved to find out two suitcases among the missing. Karen returned and together we went to the car rental area downstairs.

The female agent at the Avis car rental counter was efficient, and turned over the keys to a black Volkswagen Passat after I presented her with our confirmation sheet from Auto Europe. After surveying the area one last time, we proceeded to the garage and located our car. As explained by the agent, the "key" was a rectangular device that one inserts into a slot in the steering column. The car starts only when the driver depresses the clutch pedal while simultaneously depressing the "key".

We plugged in the GPS, and watched anxiously as it searched for a satellite signal. Already in motion towards the A-7 highway, we cheered when the gray-blue screen came alive with color, indicating that it had successfully triangulated our position. As we sped through the dark Spanish night, we wondered what must have happened to Craig and Amy. We finally concluded that they had given up and gone to a hotel for the night when our plane was late. Or possibly they had taken a taxi to the resort?

After more almost 45 minutes on the A-7, we came to our first traffic light in the small town of San Pedro de Alcantara. We continued in light traffic toward the resort, very near to us now. With Karen corroborating the GPS instructions with written driving directions from the resort, we exited the A-7 after a sign that indicated "Cambio de Sentido". The exit ramp took us back under the highway and looped back so that we were now traveling in the opposite direction. Following a frontage road, we nearly passed the "Villacana Resort" sign, but without the GPS we would have been lost due to the lack of street signs. Our GPS has become a trusted friend, so we decide to name her "Bella".



*Our faithful GPS led us to the Villacana Resort near Estepona*

We were welcomed at the front desk by Diego, who came to Spain by way of London. He managed to scare up a welcome package for us containing "survival food". By this time we were pretty hungry. The package included eggs, bacon, cereal, milk, coffee, and other essentials. Funny thing, but the eggs and milk are unrefrigerated. Once we checked into our apartment, we fixed ourselves a great breakfast at 11pm.

### **Sunday, April 26 – Villacana Resort**

The apartment faces a tiled patio with a fountain and purple bougainvillea growing on the white, sun-splashed walls. In the center of the patio is an ornamental fountain, making a peaceful gurgling sound. The apartment is spacious, consisting of a downstairs living area and kitchen, a patio with table and chairs and chaise lounges. The master bedroom is on the 2nd floor, and two smaller bedrooms containing twin beds and a separate bathroom are on the 3rd floor. Our footfalls on the marble staircase echo from top to bottom. The furniture is simple and the rooms are quite spacious.

The phone rings and it's Amy. She and Craig waited outside the airport, rather than inside, which explains why we missed them. They spent the night at a hotel in Malaga, and have decided to take the bus to Estepona, the nearest town about 10 minutes drive west from our resort.

I attend the resort visitors orientation in the tented area adjacent to the pool bar, while Karen stays behind to build our new nest. It is a chilly morning, and most visitors are bundled up in jackets and scarves while sipping complementary Sangria. I'm wearing shorts, flip-flops, a sweatshirt, and my Chargers hat. A young Spaniard speaking in heavily accented English provides an orientation to the resort. Kris, a tour group leader from Scotland, describes the excursions. They all sound interesting, but two in particular stand out: the trips to Tangiers and Granada. After the presentation, I meet with



Kris to book these two tours for the four of us. A friendly middle-aged Canadian named Don from Ottawa also books the tour to Tangiers. I learn that he works as a customer trouble-shooter for IBM.



*Amy, Craig and Karen in the courtyard in front of our apartment.*

Upon returning to the apartment, I find that Karen has made an executive decision to move our belongings to the 3rd floor and give Craig and Amy the more accessible master bedroom on the 2nd floor. We head to the pool bar area around 1pm to take advantage of their special invitation to a Paella lunch. The steaming spiced rice and seafood taste especially good with Sangria.

I visit the front desk to get directions to the nearest store and to send an email message home advising everyone that we made it to Spain safe and sound. After exiting the resort, I take the onramp to the A-7 heading east. After a mile or so, I take the exit marked "Cambio de Sentido" expecting to change sides. However, there is no sign of an underpass as I meander through a neighborhood searching in vain.

I get back on the A-7 and after 100 yards see another Cambio de Sentido sign, which leads to an underpass, through a roundabout, and back onto the A-7 heading west. I now realize that the first sign, in blue letters, merely announces the upcoming side change exit ramp (there is no mention of distance on the sign). The sign in black letters is the actual exit. I locate the market and fill up on all the essentials, including regular and mineral water, eggs, bacon, vegetables, cheeses, salami, bread, and beer.

I return to the apartment to find that Amy & Craig have arrived safely, the troubles of the previous day beginning to fade in the celebration of our reunion. They are glad to have the 2nd floor. I inform them of our excursion plans, and they are gung-ho.



As the evening approaches, we contact reception for restaurant recommendations. Juan tells us that most places don't open for dinner until at least 8pm, but suggests La Palma Tapas Bar and Restaurant which is open earlier.

Our trusty GPS guides us into Estepona, and then directs us up a narrow side street where we find La Palma. I drop off Karen, Craig, and Amy in front of the restaurant, and Amy offers her international Disabled Parking Permit. I find a disabled parking spot near the restaurant, but it's too short. I set off in search of another spot. Cars are parked very close together, and there is not much room to maneuver. It is then that I realize that our Volkswagen Passat is a "Gulliver" in a land of Lilliputians - way too big for the average parking space. As luck would have it, I find a disabled parking space in front of a church on a corner. I use the GPS to navigate while walking, and soon realize that after all the twists and turns, I am only two blocks from the restaurant!



*Enjoying tapas in the La Palma tavern in Estepona.*

We get a table near the window and order tapas. Craig orders the scampi in a sauce. I order garlic scampi. Karen orders pork in a red sauce, and Amy orders a seafood dish. Most of the other patrons are avidly watching a soccer match between Seville and Madrid. Most cheer Madrid, suggesting that Seville must be a bitter rival of the local team, maybe Malaga.

Suddenly, our waiter dashes out a side door and into the street. We notice he is not slowing down, he's accelerating. I step outside to see what's going on, and others have stopped to watch our waiter running up the street. Minutes later, he returns carrying a purse, appearing as joyful as a lab retriever. Apparently, our quick-witted waiter has just foiled a purse snatching attempt! Everyone applauds and cheers our new hero.

## Monday, April 27 – Villacana Resort

Today is an R & R day.

We sunbathe around the pool at the resort, feast on burgers and beers at lunch, walk down to the beach. The wind is blowing strong enough to make the beach untenable. A lone sunbather searches for a spot away from blowing sand.

We stroll Estepona's beach promenade and walking streets in the shopping district, then have dinner in a nearby restaurant. The poached fish is excellent, and I make a point of telling our hospitable waiter, "La cena fue muy deliciosa". He graciously acknowledges the compliment; by his expression, I can tell he takes it very seriously.



*Amy, Karen, and Craig walking the Promenade in Estepona*

## Tuesday, April 28 – Villacana Resort, Visit to Tangiers

We are up at 6:00 to prepare for our trip to Tangiers, Morocco. After a quick breakfast of cereal and a rapid infusion of coffee, we make the 10-minute walk to the bus stop on the opposite side of the A-7. While waiting, we meet a middle-aged couple from Temecula who are also staying at our resort. He notices Craig's Chargers jacket and we start talking football. He's an expatriate Rams fan.

The bus arrives on time, a large comfortable coach with plush seats. We settle in for the 45 minute ride to Tarifa where we will catch the high-speed ferry to Tangiers. Our guide is silent until all



passengers have been picked up. As the sun begins to rise, he starts our tour by describing the boarding procedure in heavily accented English.

He continues to describe what our tour will consist of, and what we can expect when we arrive in Tangiers. We will board a tour bus and embark on a 2-hour tour of the city and its environs, visit a seaside cave, have lunch in an Arabian style tent, tour the marketplace, and return to the ferry by late afternoon. He saved the best for last, telling us that we can expect to be followed and badgered by incredibly persistent street merchants not unlike the mob in "Life of Brian". I laugh out loud at the thought of poor Brian being pursued by idolaters, then realize I'm the only one on the bus who got the joke.

We pass through beautiful rolling green hills dotted here and there with herds of sheep and goats. On the hillside above Tarifa are giant white windmills that produce energy via turbines. A blend of the new and the old.

Our ferry is a large, modern, comfortable catamaran capable of 20 knots or more. It will make the sixteen mile crossing to Tangiers in about 40 minutes. We pass through passport control and board the ferry. The spacious seating area on the second deck offers great views through large Plexiglas windows. I buy some croissants and coffee from the well-stocked cafeteria. Craig, Amy, Karen and I make ourselves comfortable at small tables with bench style seating.

Upon arrival, we exit through the car deck and pass immediately through passport control. Our guide leads us through the passenger facility directly to our waiting bus. We are the first to arrive and are able to leave the parking lot quickly. It is slightly cloudy, with a hint of the rain to come.



*View of the Rock of Gibraltar from our bus en route to the port of Tarifa.*

We pass through very quarters of old Tangiers. We have a new tour guide who speaks perfect English and appears to have been educated in the USA. Our bus heads into the hills above Tangiers, into an exclusive area where sheiks and high-ranking government officials have residences. One of them commanding a panoramic view of the city is guarded by sentries. As we crest the hill, the road dips down into a heavily forested area. Our guide is talking about how corrupt government officials allowed development to proceed virtually unimpeded until reformers were voted in and recently put a stop to it. He explains that the area we are passing through is a nature preserve, accessible to all citizens.



*Oh my! We're definitely not in Kansas anymore, Toto!*

As our bus turns south along a coastal road, we are afforded great views of the Atlantic ocean. There are fisherman in small boats at work not far from shore. We pass by a group of camels resting by the side of the road, their owners close by. Soon we pull off the road into a parking lot for our first rest stop. As we make our way to the cave entrance, vendors begin waving merchandise in our faces. They offer knitted caps, geodes, handicrafts, and other knick-knacks. The stairs down to the cave are steep, but Craig and Amy bravely negotiate them and we are soon inside. The cave is amply lit, and a vendor with a vast display is situated in one corner. We make our way to the ocean where our tour guide points out how the cave walls form an outline of the African continent as we look out to sea. It is rather amazing. After describing the history of the cave, our guide leads us topside where Amy makes the mistake of showing just the slightest interest in a sweater. That is all the encouragement the vendor needs to hound Amy all the way back to the bus. She is saying "No" repeatedly and in more ways than she thought possible.

As we continue our bus tour through the countryside, it begins to rain. Our guide points out a huge apartment complex that didn't exist just a few months ago way out here in the suburbs. He explains

that land is getting more expensive as development continues at a heated pace. It can take two to three years to take possession of an apartment after a buyer puts down the deposit, and prices climb as demand grows. Yet new developments sell out quickly, even far from the city.



*Ships of the Desert near a rest stop on the coastal road.*

We are soon back in the city of Tangiers. We round a corner, and the bus pulls up in front of a walled compound with a large gate. The gate is flanked by two sentries wearing pink tunics and a black fez. A mounted Berber rifleman is off to one side. We enter the compound and into an open courtyard flanked by two huge tents. In the back is a long open field. Three mounted riflemen make their way to the top of the hill and suddenly charge towards us, spinning their rifles over their heads and shouting. When they are nearly upon us, they give a final war cry and fire shots into the air. The horses remain calm. We applaud, and are then ushered into the tent.

Our host welcomes us as we sit on heavy metal chairs in groups of ten around dining tables. The first course is a vegetable soup mixed with curry, served with a delicious hot tea and bread. The soup is very good, and several guests help themselves to a second serving. We are serenaded by three musicians with lutes and drums. A belly dancer appears as the main dish is served, chicken with cabbage and cous cous. It is also quite tasty. A pair of male dancers take the stage with the belly dancer, as our dessert of cookies and oranges arrives.

As we leave the tent, the rain has let up somewhat. Several guests are taking camel rides from a vendor in the middle of the courtyard. They are hamming it up for cameras and having a great time. I ask one guest what it costs, and she says "He wanted 2 Euros but I offered him 1 and he accepted it." Karen resists at first, but I persuade her to take advantage of this once-in-a-lifetime photo opportunity and climb aboard. As she does so, I press a Euro into her hand and tell her to pay the



vendor up front, otherwise he can demand whatever he wants afterwards. Karen suddenly rises one story into the air and is taken for a quick trip in a circle, but not before she is able to give her best "Rose Parade" wave to the crowd. The vendor demands an additional Euro, which we ignore.



*Karen's best Rose Parade wave!*

As we board the bus, the rain begins to fall steadily again. By the time we reach the central marketplace in downtown Tangiers near the harbor, the rain has quit and the sun has reappeared. We gather in a plaza to listen to our guide explain the colorful history of the marketplace. As we enter the building, our guide reminds us to watch out for pickpockets. The narrow passageways wind past stalls offering all kinds of fresh fruits, vegetables, meats, and merchandise. There are many shops lining the walls, and space is at a premium. One vendor's wares are overflowing his shelves and spilling onto the floor of his tiny shop, leaving little room to walk. Whole chickens hang from hooks and there is a noticeable absence of flies. Later, we would be told by a member of our group from England who visited 20 years ago that it wasn't always this tidy. The chickens used to appear black due to a solid coating of flies. Yuck! The shopping area today is clean and attractive.

Our guide escorts us through the labyrinthine streets until we arrive at one of Tangiers' finest rug dealers. The store is huge - three stories with fine Moroccan rugs of all shapes, colors, sizes displayed on the walls. We are shown to seats along two walls, and the proprietor begins to speak about the history and quality of Moroccan rugs. He speaks excellent English. He asks where we are from. When Karen answers "San Diego", he mentions that he knows our fair city and once sold a rug to Joan Kroc. He explains there are three quality levels and price points for rugs. The finest are woven so tightly that no air gets through, and they do not burn. To demonstrate, a sales associate waves the flame from a cigarette lighter back and forth over the rug, with no sign of a burn.



*A local woman strolls the labyrinthine network of market streets of Tangiers*

When the demonstration is complete, an army of sales associates swoops in to ask each of us which rug we want to buy. Although the idea is attractive, we decide to pass. The rugs are truly beautiful - and expensive. We learn that prices range from about \$1,000 to over \$4,000 depending upon size and quality level. We leave Craig and Amy on the 3rd floor, haggling with a salesman over a rug they decide to buy as a housewarming gift for son Chris.

Our group presses on to an herb store, where the proprietor describes the benefits of his many products. He offers everything from cumen to skin cream. A sign says "Good Massage - 1 Euro". A young man appears and begins massaging guests in their seats. A massage lasts least 5 minutes and appears to be worth every cent. We buy a "stash" of cumen (it comes in a baggie) and 3 jars of skin cream (buy 2, get 1 free).

As we leave the pharmacy and proceed down the street, the street merchants suddenly appear out of nowhere and begin thrusting merchandise in our faces. As we flee, I'm reminded of what our tour guide said on the bus a la the "Life of Brian". Our situation is also reminiscent of Albert Hitchcock's "The Birds" as the schoolchildren run screaming in terror from a flock of ravens. Okay, it's not THAT bad, but we soon begin running out of ways to say NO to hand drums, geodes, knit caps, and other useless stuff. When I tip one of our guide's assistants a couple of Euros, the hand drum vendor sees it and starts begging for a hand out. Karen is charmed by a flock of boys and smiles at them but courageously presses on. Suddenly, our bus appears and we hurry on board. It drives us the short distance to the embarking area for the ferry, where our Tangiers guide bids us farewell.

We arrive back at the resort in the late afternoon around 4:00pm in time for a quick visit to the sauna and steam room. Craig, Amy, and Karen hang out at the apartment. As I recline on the lounge reading my book, The Ice Limit, a small lead ball begins to form in my stomach.





*The rug merchants make their pitch*

By the time I return to the apartment close to 7:30, my body is telling me to prepare for an assault. I advise Karen and the Andersons that I'll not be going to dinner. It isn't long before I'm worshipping at the porcelain fixture. By midnight, I've gone three rounds while wondering how there is anything left to throw up. I mercifully drift off to sleep, thinking it's a crying shame that I will have to miss the trip to Granada and the famous Alhambra Palace tomorrow.

### **Wednesday, April 29 – Villacana Resort, Visit to Granada**

I awake just before 6am, and find to my amazement that the lead ball in my stomach is gone. With Karen offering words of encouragement, I slowly proceed through my morning routine "as if" I will be going on the trip. With each passing minute, a sense of normalcy begins to return. I am able to drink water and find that 30 minutes later I can still keep it down.

At 6:50am, we leave the apartment and proceed toward the bus stop through the early dawn light. I'm feeling almost normal, but don't yet trust my stomach to hold solid food. Once on the bus, Karen offers me a Power Bar and I nibble at it tentatively. By the time we reach Malaga, after several stops to pick up additional passengers, I'm feeling confident enough to eat the whole thing.

Our guide Kris is originally from Scotland and has been living in Spain for over 15 years. Her love of her adopted country is apparent, even while she offers anecdotes about government blunders. She points to the points to the example of the opening of an IKEA store on the outskirts of Malaga.



*Am I hallucinating or is that a giant bull on the hillside? No, just another advertisement for a famous brandy.*

The store opened despite the fact that the supporting roads, traffic lights, and other infrastructure had not been completed. She laughed as she recalled that the resulting traffic jam was beyond imagining!

As we pass above Torremolinos on the A-7, Kris recalls the glory days of the town which was once a major party destination for vacationers and jet-setters back in the '60s and '70s. The town was notorious for all-night parties, described in Spanish as "the town that never sleeps".

As we head north out of Malaga, the terrain begins to change into a valley carved out over the ages by the Guadalmedina River. The water level is very low, reducing the river to a docile stream. Our guide tells us a story of how the citizens of Malaga turned out to rescue the crew of the German sailing ship [Gneisenau](#) in a violent storm off the coast in 1900. Apparently, the grateful Germans never forgot the kindness of the Malaguenos. Some years later when the city suffered a major flood, the Germans responded with financial aid and emergency services.

We stop at a roadside cafeteria for a brief rest. My stomach has recovered to the point where I can comfortably down a serving of yogurt and juice. We pass through the streets of modern Granada and our guide provides final instructions before the bus drops us off. We have about 90 minutes of free time to take a self-guided tour of the heart of the city and having lunch before re-boarding the bus for the Alhambra. Our guide leads us to the restaurant before turning us loose. As a group, we pass over the Darro River bridge, and then past a fountain with a sculpture containing pomegranates, the symbol of this proud city. A long, tree-shaded boulevard named Carrera del Genil stretches before us. The restaurant is on the left side; Kris tells us to meet here for lunch at 12:30. Craig and Amy decide to take it easy and hang out near the restaurant. Karen and I head off towards old town.



It is a beautiful, warm sunny day. People are out walking and sitting on park benches catching some sun or chatting with friends. We pass by another fountain as Carrera del Genil meets Acera del Darro. We turn a corner onto Calle Reyes Catolicos and proceed down the street in search of the old Cathedral. We pass a monument honoring King Ferdinand & Queen Isabella with Christopher Columbus. The monarchs have been local heroes in these parts ever since they engineered the overthrow of the last Moorish Emir in 1492, when Columbus discovered America. Quite an eventful year! They are buried in the nearby Cathedral. We wander past the turnoff and realize a block later that we have gone too far.



*A tree-lined boulevard in old Granada*

We retrace our steps and follow the crowds to the Cathedral entrance a block from the monument and just off the [Calle Gran Via de Colon](#). As time is growing short, we decide to pass on seeing the inside of the Cathedral. Instead, we visit a nearby shop and purchase the obligatory souvenir shot glasses imprinted with designs proclaiming "Granada". We wander through the back streets and come to a large plaza in the old Moorish section of town, known as the Albacin District. Its buildings feature a mixture of Christian and Moorish architecture. A group of children are playing loudly in the middle of the plaza. They form a ring around a boy in the center, who twirls a ball on a string around the circle. The children shriek with delight as they jump and the ball passes under their feet. A statue surrounded by a fenced rose garden brightens the center of the plaza, which is ringed by shops and cafes.

We walk leisurely back toward the restaurant, stopping en route to sit on a park bench and watch the world go by, if only for a few minutes. We arrive at the restaurant to find many of our group already seated. A waiter escorts us to our table, where we meet Winston and Barbara who are from

a town near the northern English city of York. They are a very personable couple in their early 60's who enjoy traveling as much as we do. They talk pretty much non-stop, and we enjoy listening to them as we dine on fish and rice. He is in the computer paper supply business. And although he doesn't claim to be an expert on computers, we share a mutual interest in technology innovations and businesses that have come and gone over the years like DEC, or adapted and remade themselves like IOMEGA, a storage peripherals company headquartered in San Diego.



*View of the Guadalquivir River in Granada*

We board the bus and take the 15 minute drive up into the hills above Granada to begin our tour of the Alhambra. When we arrive, some of the environs are familiar to me from my last visit more than 20 years ago. In particular, the view of the surrounding valley where the Gypsies still reside in their caves is as I remember it. Our tour guide Kris explains that due to the large daily volume of tourists, buses are allowed only 10 minutes to drop off and pick up, and are subject to fines if they are late. This requires that we all be on time when we return for pickup or risk having a very unhappy driver.

Our guide, Lucia, is very knowledgeable and engaging. She seems truly passionate about the history of the [Alhambra Palace](#). Her eyes grow wide as she relates stories about the residents and events as if she experienced them herself.

The Alhambra was a palace, a citadel, a fortress and home of the Nasrid Sultans, high government officials, servants of the court and elite soldiers of the Nasrid Dynasty (1238-1492), the last Islamic sultanate in the Iberian Peninsula. Together with the Mezquita (Great Mosque) of Cordoba, the Alhambra is one of the most widely known of all Islamic works of art.





*Outside the entrance to the Alhambra Palace in Granada*

The Nasrid Sultans chose as the site for their court the Sabika hill, one of the foothills of Sierra Nevada on the plain of Granada, which constituted an excellent site from which to keep watch over the capital of their kingdom and the surrounding area. From the beginning of the 13th century, the small older buildings, mainly watchtowers, some of which dated back to before the 11th century, gradually grew into a huge walled site intended to be both palace and court.

Within this gradual change, different stages of development, grandeur and decadence can clearly be seen through the various works of art and buildings erected over the years. The Alhambra was not a single static construction, built at a specific date, but rather the result of an evolution, successive reforms and extensions.

During the reign of the Nasrid Dynasty, the Alhambra was transformed into a palatine city complete with an irrigation system composed of acequias for the gardens of the Generalife located outside the fortress. Previously, the old Alhambra structure had been dependent upon rainwater collected from a cistern and from what could be brought up from the Albaicín. The creation of the Sultan's Canal solidified the identity of the Alhambra as a palace-city rather than a defensive and ascetic structure.

The Muslim rulers lost Granada and Alhambra in 1492 without the fortress itself being attacked when King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella of Castile took the surrounding region with an overwhelming force of numbers.

After their conquest of the city, Fernando and Isabel lived for a while in the Alhambra. They restored some rooms and converted the mosque but left the palace structure unaltered. As at Córdoba and



*The Alhambra Palace interior*

Sevilla, it was Emperor Carlos V, their grandson, who wreaked the most insensitive destruction, demolishing a whole wing of rooms in order to build a Renaissance palace.

This and the Alhambra itself were simply ignored by his successors and by the eighteenth century the Palacios Nazaríes was in use as a prison. In 1812 it was taken and occupied by Napoleon's forces, who looted and damaged whole sections of the palace, and on their retreat from the city tried to blow up the entire complex. Their attempt was thwarted only by the action of a crippled soldier who remained behind and removed the fuses.

Two decades later the Alhambra's "rediscovery" began, given impetus by the American writer Washington Irving, who set up his study in the empty palace rooms and began to write his marvellously romantic *Tales of the Alhambra* (on sale all over Granada – and good reading amid the gardens and courts). Shortly after its publication, the Spaniards made the Alhambra a national monument and set aside funds for its restoration. This continues to the present day and is now a highly sophisticated project, scientifically removing the accretions of later ages in order to expose and meticulously restore the Moorish creations.

The literal translation of Alhambra "red fortress" derives from the color of the red clay of the surroundings of which the fort is made. The buildings of the Alhambra were originally whitewashed; however, the buildings now seen today are reddish.





*The ornate ceilings and archways are a common feature of the Alhambra Palace*

We spend close to three hours touring the palace and the grounds. Lucia describes the colorful history of the palace and its owners. One of the younger princes had a harem of 200 concubines, and apparently wasn't satisfied and wanted more. As Lucia described how the prince expanded the palace to accommodate the new members of his harem, a fellow American tourist turned to me and said in admiration, "...my new hero!" Boabdil, the last Moorish Sultan of Granada, occupied the Alhambra from 1483 until its surrender to the Christians in 1492. Lucia points to a room near the [Court of the Lions](#) and relates how Boabdil arranged for 40 prominent citizens of Granada to be murdered while attending dinner at the Alhambra as his guests because he suspected one of them to be having an affair with the woman he loved. He later died on the battlefield (couldn't have happened to a nicer guy).

Our tour of the palace ends at the beautiful and exquisitely manicured Gardens of Daraxa. Karen spots a gray, white, and brown tabby resting in the shade of the garden wall. He stands still long enough for her to pet him and get her "kitty fix" for the day.

Higher up on the hill and overlooking the main palace complex stands the Generalife. This was the summer palace of the sultans, constructed in the 13th century. Here, among the shaded avenues and terraced water gardens, the king and his court could escape from the oppressive heat and catch the best of the light summer breezes. Small cascades, pools, and fountains greet the visitor at every turn and almost everywhere there's the constant murmur of running water.

As we enter the Generalife, we notice a small open-air auditorium. We are told it is the setting for the annual Music and Dance Festival in July, where some of Spain's top performers entertain an audience of perhaps 400 people. The final area is the Alcazaba, or Fortress. This was the center of



the palace defenses and its central keep offers magnificent views over the city below. We find a long rectangular pool in the inner courtyard. Jets of water form an archway the length of the pool, and the sound is relaxing. Our tour guide, Kris, appears on the walkway above and tells Lucia that she is starting to get concerned that we won't make the bus in time. Lucia replies that we still have plenty of time and she will return us to the bus stop soon.

The open windows of the Alcazaba look out upon the valley. From this vantage point, we can enjoy spectacular views of the city of Granada below. From the Alcazaba, it is a short walk back to the main entrance and the bus stop. We tip Lucia and thank her for the great tour. Her eyes grow wide once more and she seems pleasantly surprised and grateful.

More information on the Alhambra is available at its official [Web Site](#).



*Gypsy caves dot the hillsides opposite the Alhambra. Some offer belly dancers and full-course meals*

We finally board the bus for the long ride home. Stop at the cafe on the way home, order drinks. All exhausted when we finally get home. it's nearly 4 hrs with all the stops. By unanimous vote, we decide fast food is the right call for this evening. Karen and I drive to Estepona and stop at the MacDonal'd's restaurant just off the highway. The girl behind the counter speaks English and takes our order of burgers and fries with a smile. We see another American in line to get his burger fix. After ordering, we back off to allow a growing line of customers to approach the counter. A woman with a toddler places her on the counter as she orders and we watch warily to make sure she doesn't fall off.

Back at the apartment, we all dig in greedily and enjoy the taste of American "home cooking".



## Thursday, April 30 – Villacana Resort, Marbella

It's a warm, sunny day perfect for baking by the pool. The difference between the weather today compared to our first day is considerable, from cold and blustery to warm and sunny.

We find lounges and relax. I continue reading my novel, "The Ice Limit" and Karen reads her magazines. Craig joins us and takes a nap on a chaise lounge. After awhile we start to become concerned that he may be getting too much sun. At that point he wakes up and goes off to find Amy.

It's after lunchtime, and the staff is getting ready to take the afternoon siesta. We have just enough time to order a burger and fries and a large cerveza. The waiter seems reluctant at first to take my order, but acquiesces to my request. Amy asks about the ordering process, and I suggest she give him the order and don't take "no" for an answer. She returns to the table with a smile and says the food will be coming right up. When it arrives, the food and cold beer are delicious.



*A Paella dinner at the La Pesquera Restaurant in Marbella - at 11:00pm!*

After lunch, Karen and I head off to the beach in search of the Mediterranean sea. We don't have to look far. Unlike my first visit, the wind is absent and the horizon is clear enough to see Gibraltar and the coast of Morocco less than 30 miles away. We wade into the ocean, just to be able to say we "swam" in the Med. We then wander west along the shore, as Karen stops frequently to collect seashells. She points out that they are different in shape and color from those she finds at Torrey Pines State Beach. Despite the favorable weather, we encounter very few tourists along our path; most are beachcombing like us rather than lounging in the sand.

We take pictures of what appears to be an abandoned resort right on the beach. Its condition is puzzling. While the Olympic sized pool has apparently been empty a long time, the grass and plants are well maintained. Around the front, we peer into the interior and can see furniture in place, but some in storage. The balcony railings on the 20-story unit in back are all rusted out, yet there are still curtains in the windows. The building appears to be in hibernation, just waiting for summer to arrive again.

Back at the apartment, we regroup with the Andersons and decide to dine in Marbella tonight. Amy wants to pick up some energy bars for the trip home and I am still hoping to find fuses for our new wimpy voltage regulator that blew out when Karen plugged in the hair dryer. Amy and I set out in the car for the Carrefour department store in Estepona. We find it just down the street from MacDonald's. We quickly find a good parking spot and head into the store. With the help of a saleswoman, I am able to locate the voltage regulators but find no fuses. The way they organize products on shelves is different from home. After searching the aisles for awhile, we finally locate the energy bars. With renewed hope, we decide to resume the search for fuses. We decide to try the electronics department on the 2nd floor. No luck. I ask a salesman and he suggests trying the automotive section on the 1st floor. We find fuses, but none are the right size. Declaring a partial victory, we leave the store and head for home.

### **Dinner in Marbella: La Pesquera**

As we enter the town of Marbella, the GPS loses power, so we must navigate the old fashioned way, by map. The map proves challenging, as it is difficult to locate street signs. We inadvertently leave town, get on the highway, exit the highway, and return. Finally we locate a sign for a street we recognize that is known for its concentration of restaurants and bars.

We park in an underground garage, and Amy offers her disabled parking pass which I hang on the rear view mirror. A garage employee challenges us, declaring that we need a "special permit". In English, I tell him that this is an international permit. I'm not sure that he understands, but the wheelchair emblem appears to have convinced him so he relents. We take the elevator to the 2nd floor and walk to the street corner.

The Restaurant La Pesquera is right in front of us. The large crowd, warm tavern-like appearance, and festive lights in the dining pavilion win us over. We decide on Paella Valenciana and order a pitcher of Sangria with bread and mineral water. A large group of French girls is seated at the next table. They appear to be students on a field trip, and are talking non-stop and very animated. Another large group of Englishmen are seated in the corner. They are laughing and joking and talking at a very high volume. Judging by the number of wine bottles collected on the table, they have been here quite a long time. Amy comments on the fact that children are out with their parents eating dinner after 11pm.

At the end of the fine meal, I ask the waiter, "Por favor, puede usted ponerlo en una caja para llevar? (can you please put our leftovers in a box for takeout?)" He hesitates a moment, smiles and says "Por supuesto, señor". He seems both surprised and pleased to hear an extranjero (foreigner) speak la lengua.

After dinner we wander off in the general direction of the flamenco bar recommended by our guidebook. Following the map, the bar appears to be only a short walk away. The narrow streets are lined with shops, bistros, and restaurants. Although it is nearly midnight on a Thursday, it is the night before a holiday and everyone is out taking advantage of it knowing they can sleep in.

We pass an alley with a red-tiled walkway lined with planters and narrow balconies with wrought iron railings. The streetlights cast a golden glow making the scene appear like something out of a fairy tale. We come to a large plaza next to a church. There is a small group of people milling about outside the entrance to the flamenco bar (name???) Although it is after midnight, the music hasn't





*A late evening stroll through the back streets of Marbella*

started yet and we grab a flyer off the top of a wooden cask. Apparently things don't really get rolling until after 1 or 2am. Considering tomorrow's early excursion to Ronda, we decide reluctantly to call it a night. We take our time wandering back down the streets and past La Pesquera. We come to a small park, where a large banner proclaims the May Day festivities beginning tomorrow.

We return to the garage and ponder the steep driveway, blind exit, and narrow turn radius onto the street. Karen stands guard at the top of the driveway, as I rev the car and gun it up the steep hill. As I see her waving her arms to stop oncoming traffic, the narrow street permits me to make only a partial turn. As I back up and let her in, everyone congratulates Karen on saving us from a certain crash.

## Friday, May 1 – Villacana Resort, Ronda

After a great breakfast, we consider our plans for the day. Craig and Amy decide to relax at the apartment and the pool while Karen and I head off for a road trip to Ronda. The windy drive through the mountains north of San Pedro de Alcantara offers spectacular views of the coastline, all the way to Gibraltar. As we have found while navigating mountain roads both at home and abroad, motorcyclists here love to drive fast around the hairpin turns. There are plentiful warning signs along the road showing a cyclist coming to a screeching halt behind a slow-moving car. We arrive in Ronda about two hours after leaving the apartment. After taking the turnoff to the city, we soon find ourselves climbing a steep, windy road into the old part of town. As we progress slowly along the narrow street lined with shops and apartments, the number of pedestrians continues to grow. Suddenly, we are crossing the famous Puente Nuevo bridge in the direction of the P signs in hopes of finding a parking spot. As luck would have it, we are among the last to find a free space in a crowded, tight multistory underground garage. It takes several turns to back into our spot, but we make it without a scratch. We climb the stairs into the cool sunshine and try to get our bearings.



*The lovely and ancient hilltop town of Ronda*





*The Puente Nuevo Bridge in the center of Ronda. The ravine is 300 feet deep!*

Despite being Andalucía's fastest-growing town, [Ronda](#) retains much of its historic charm, particularly its old town. It is famous worldwide for its dramatic escarpments and views, and for the deep El Tajo gorge that carries the rio Guadalevín through its center. Visitors make a beeline for the 18th century Puente Nuevo 'new' bridge, which straddles the 300 ft chasm below, for its unparalleled views out over the Serranía de Ronda Mountains.

Ronda is also famous as the birthplace of modern bullfighting, glimpsed once a year at the spectacular Feria Goyesca. Held at the beginning of September, here fighters and some of the audience dress in the manner of Goya's sketches of life in the region. Today the bullring, Plaza de Toros, is a museum, and visitors can stroll out into the arena.

As we stroll along the bridge, the nearby MacDonald's seems oddly out of place. Across the bridge, where an elegant cloistered 16th century convent is now an art museum, old Ronda, La Ciudad, sidewinds off into cobbled streets hemmed by handsome town mansions, some still occupied by Ronda's titled families. The Casa de Don Bosco is one such, its interior patio long ago roofed in glass against Ronda's harsh winters. Its small, almost folly-like gardens lose out, however, to the true star, a few minutes' walk to the furthest end of the Ciudad, the Palacio Mondragón. Clumsily modernised in parts during the 1960s, this still has working vestiges of the exquisite miniature water gardens dating from its time as a Moorish palace during Ronda's brief reign as a minor Caliphate under Córdoba in the 12th century.

The cobbled alley to the Mondragón leads naturally on to Ronda's loveliest public space, the leafy Plaza Duquesa de Parcent, which boasts a convent, two churches, including the toytown belltower

of the iglesia Santa Maria de Mayor, and the handsome arched ayuntamiento (council) building. Nearby calle Armiñan leads down to the spacious plaza of the traditional workers' barrio, San Francisco, with excellent bars and restaurants.

The Minaret of San Sebastian borders a side street that meanders down a steep cobblestone road. A sign describes the history of the minaret, stating that it “belonged to a small mosque or oratory, possibly of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. After the Christian conquest it was converted into a church named San Sebastian, of which today remain only ruins with the exception of the old minaret converted into a bell-tower. The minaret, which has similarities to some still remaining in the north of Africa, is divided into three sections. The first two are of Muslim origin, whilst the highest was adapted by the Christians to house the belfry. The lowest section is made of stone blocks with an ornate, Moorish horseshoe-shaped doorway on its western side with a segmented lintel. The second is of brick with two small, horseshoe arched windows on both sides, above which there used to be geometric designs in brick, of which now remain only traces in the upper part.”

We follow the steep cobblestoned side street to its base, where we find the Palace of the Marquis of Salvatierra.



*The Minaret of San Sebastian.*

A sign describes the history of the palace: “During the division of Ronda, undertaken by the Catholic Monarchs after the conquest of the city in 1485, this house was granted to Don Vasco Martin de Salvatierra. The house underwent extensive reforms at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, giving it its present-day shape. The main façade, made of regular stone masonry, boasts a very baroque doorway, overloaded with colonial symbolism by the paired figures of pre-Columbus style framing the upper balcony. The entrance is lintelled, with floral decorations of stems and circular motifs. A fronton tops off the group, whose tympanum is embellished with the nobleman’s coat of arms. The cross that adorns the square was originally situated in the outskirts of Ronda, next to the now-disappeared convent of the Mercedarios de San Jorge. The outstanding feature of the building’s interior is its patio, with a collanade of segmented Tuscan arches and an upper gallery with rectangular openings and small balconies.”

Back from the Palace of the Marquis of Salvatierra, the Plaza del Campillo overlooks steps that zigzag down to a dramatic eye-level through the Puente Nuevo. The town's pedestrianised 'high street', calle Espinel, opposite the bullring, is nicknamed 'La Bola' and is where Rondeños go for virtually everything.