

A small guide for lovers of Andalusia.

You have decided to spend some time in one of the richest European region in terms of History, Architecture, Archaeology and Folklore. Here, for a few short centuries, the three religions of The Book lived side by side in an atmosphere of relative tolerance, a rare thing at the time. Al Andalus left its mark in the monuments you will visit: the Alhambra Palace of Granada, the great Mosque of Cordoba, the Giralda in Seville etc. All these places are must sees and the number of visitors shows their importance. But there are also less known places, very interesting and charming, as well as peaceful areas where one can breathe more freely. Ecija itself is one of those destinations, and in the surrounding small towns and villages you will be able to discover a more discreet, perhaps more authentic face of Andalusia.

The house you will stay in was built in the 18th century on the remains of an Arab villa from the Almohade period (11th century) and uses the old city wall as a base on the north side. If you open the wooden trap-door in the living room and go down the small staircase (take a candle and mind your head!), you will discover an antique cellar where the marks left by amphorae are still visible on the earthen walls. The floor has been renovated and the whole place as been consolidated, but the vault is still a thousand years old! Of course, the trap-door must stay closed otherwise, and children should not be allowed to lock each other down there (it is apparently a very tempting game for 10-15 year olds...). You can see the rest of the city wall in the garden, and further, the octagonal watch tower dating back to the same period.

Ecija is famous for its eleven baroque church and bell towers, all of them richly adorned with blue ceramic tiles. Its archaeological Museum is worth a visit too. Housed in a lovely 18th century palacio, it contains some of the finest Roman mosaics found in Spain, dating from the 1st and 2nd century AD. It also holds the superb « Wounded Amazon », discovered in a roman temple pool when digging the Plaza de España to make a car park. It is a roman copy of a Greek masterpiece of the classic period and there are only 4 of them in the world. This one was found in a remarkable state of preservation: there are still traces of colour on its tunic.

Ecija's charm lies too in its narrow whitewashed streets, letting visitors discover its wonders as they meander: baroque facades of palaces, covered with faded frescoes, delicately sculpted brick gates, ornate patios with fountains, vast churches with treasures of gold and silver...

More down to earth, you will also find a wealth of good restaurants and tapas bars. El Gallego, near the palacio de Penaflor, has a great fish menu. On the plaza de puerta Cerrada, Manolo's bar will serve simple and fresh food al fresco until late, as will "el Bar de la Casa" in front of the Museum (open on Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays only). More chic, "La casa Machin", also near the museum, serves good traditional seasonal food in a nicely restored old house.

Around Ecija, you will find many places to visit less well known than Seville, Cordoba or Granada.

Estepa, a white village 40km south, on the Seville- Granada road, clings to a steep hill and from its top you will discover the huge surrounding sea of olive trees. Its history is marked by a collective suicide in the 2nd century BC, when the whole population, of Carthaginian origin, decided to die jumping from the city walls rather than surrender to the Roman invaders.

It is now the peaceful centre for manufacturing “mantecados” and “polvorones”, exquisite and melt in the mouth biscuits which are eaten in huge quantities around Christmas.

You can buy them from the cloistered nuns in Santa Clara monastery, at the very top of the town. Thanks to an ingenious system (a rotating cupboard in the wall) the “Clarissa” nun will be able to do business with you without being seen. There is also one in the convent of the “Florentinas”, about 100m from the house in Ecija.

For a nice al fresco lunch with a great view, go to the restaurant “El Balcon” at the very end of the promontory.

For another great view and more history, go to Carmona, between Ecija and Seville. From the Roman necropolis (200 tombs) to the monumental Arabic gates, this small town holds many interesting places to visit. Enter via the wonderful “Puerta de Sevilla” and leave through the superb “Puerta de Cordoba” (or the other way round) and lose yourself a little in between...

Do not leave Carmona before having a drink, or more, in the Parador at the top of the city. It is a splendid place, situated in an 11th century fortress, with a lovely patio and a terrace overlooking the plain to the East. The restaurant room is impressive, and the cuisine is typically Andalusian, although not cheap.

If you feel like mixing more history and gastronomy, go to La Hospederia de San Francisco (957 710 183), an ancient convent in Palma del Rio, 30km north of Ecija. It was founded in 1492, and from here monks left to establish missions on the Pacific coast, such as San Diego, el Pueblo de la Reina de los Angeles, or San Francisco. You’ll see a parchment map in the hall with the route they took. It is now a boutique hotel and restaurant, and it has kept its well organized vegetable garden and orchard, so most of the produce in the menu come from 20m away.

The architecture has been perfectly respected, with many graceful patios, a monumental staircase and the huge refectory room, turned into a welcoming salon. They serve an excellent Irish coffee, and in summer you can use their big swimming pool.

If you are travelling with children, they might be getting fed up with all things “cultural”. So you could take a short trip to the Almodovar del Rio fortress (40km north of Ecija, via Fuente Palmera and Posadas). Overlooking the Guadalquivir plain since the 12th century, this typical fort was restored by its owner at the turn of the 20th century, and he did not skimp on the pedagogical and historical aspects. Armour, weaponry, skeletons in the dungeons, swords in the rock (!), as well as many explanatory texts with inadvertently amusing translations, all that in a truly impressive site: enough to keep the kids occupied for a while.

The small village of Almodovar, nestled at the castle’s feet, hides a delicious secret: the restaurant “la Taberna”, whose refined cuisine attracts local foodies (975 713 684)

Nature lovers and hikers should not leave Andalusia without a visit to the Natural Park of Hornachuelos, near the artificial lake of the Retortillo (embalse del Retortillo). Shortly before reaching the dam, you pass over a small bridge on a big brook: you can park there, go through the rusty and twisted iron gate and take the lane to the right. After a 10mn walk, you will reach a natural pool, edged with oleanders, where you can swim and have a picnic. Avoid week-ends, it gets rather busy. The track goes up towards Hornachuelos, and you will see a lot of birds such as eagles and golden vultures. Do not fear the toros bravos (semi wild bulls raised for bullfights): their exorbitant price means they are kept in well guarded enclosures. There are lots of anglers on the Retortillo lake, and the peaceful atmosphere is very siesta inducing. But swimming is forbidden, and the water is a bit murky anyway. You can go back to Ecija following the lake towards the villages of La Puebla de los Infantes and Penaflores. Under the cork-oaks you will certainly see many of the pigs that are doomed to become the famous “jamón ibérico de bellota” (acorn fed ham).

In winter months, bird watchers flock to the national park of Doñana, near the village El Rocio, in the Guadalquivir delta. The entrance of the visitor's centre is located a few hundred metres after the village, towards Matalascañas. It is a perfect place to see bronze ibis, spatulas, storks and other water fowl, and there are special watching areas and wooden paths to protect the flora. There is a picnic area and fountains as well. El Rocio is also a unique pilgrimage destination: every May, thousands of travellers come here from all over Andalusia on foot, horseback or ox-drawn cart, singing and dancing, to celebrate the “Virgin of the Rocio”. The village itself looks like something out of a Western, with its unpaved, sandy streets, its small low whitewashed houses, complete with hitching posts, and its huge church decorated with blue azulejos. Most shops sell typical Andalusian costumes: it is the dress code for pilgrims!

Do you miss the sea? Leaving El Rocio, keep going towards the endless beaches of Mazagón. Petrified sand dunes, covered with a thick forest of umbrella pines, welcome you, and the ocean is warm enough to swim until late October. Maybe later for teenagers or braver folks...

There are good picnic and barbecue areas, but the local Parador (very modern, with a superb view) make a great paella.

If you feel adventurous, you could go and spend a day in Portugal: 2h drive from Ecija, and you will be in a different culture, with a different time zone, language, and cuisine.

The small villages of Tavira and Vila Nova de Cacela have kept their specific style, and the blueness of the houses is there to remind you of Portugal's great maritime past. On Tavira's harbour, you will find many small restaurants serving delicious fish and seafood (mariscos).

Special For Children:

In Seville, Isla Mágica is a huge and recent theme park, opened in 1997 on the 1992 Expo site. It has lots of rides, jungle, pirate boats and lots of other attractions, a bit like an Ibero-American Disneyworld. Open between March and October, tel 902 16 17 16, www.islamagica.es