

## SPAIN

# Enchanted by southern Spain

## Weeklong bicycle tour provides charming view of Andalusia

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By Becca Hensley - Special to the American-Statesman

If it weren't for the cantor, I would still be in Spain. Possibly at the bottom of a hill.

On a VBT Bicycling and Walking Vacation tour, "Spain Under the Andalusian Sky," I join a coterie of fellow recreational cyclists on a weeklong biking vacation through sun-dappled southern Spain. A stirring landscape marked by boundless olive and orange groves, centuries-old castles, vineyards and fields of golden, anthropomorphic sunflowers, Andalusia casts a spell. In this dusty region, snow-white, solar-baked villages cascade like spilled popcorn down red-hued hills. Roman bridges, defiantly intact, link riverbanks. And proud, robust horses stand in rolling pastures, sentries to the age-old artifacts that lie still in the earth below them.



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Biking through Andalusia means lunchtime in evocative places. This one near Andalusia's Subbetica Natural Park looks over an organic olive farm.

Andalusia embodies the nation's exotic, complex spirit. The lugubrious guitar riffs, clicking castanets and graceful dance steps of flamenco hail from here. As does the tapas culture, which lures people out at dusk to parade from bodega to bodega, sampling small plates and Lilliputian beverages at each in a ritual that can last all night. Here, matadors, elegant celebrities, wave their red capes in the corridas of Seville and Cordoba. Side-by-side, imposing Catholic cathedrals, Jewish neighborhoods and Arab castles stand as equal elements of the architectural fabric. Amid vineyards in Jerez and Montilla, sherry-makers handcraft flavorful wine in small, sumptuous batches. Rising along one horizon, the Sierra Nevada range soars to make a mottled sky. Majestically, the mighty Guadalquivir River, once the Roman's trading highway, blesses the region with watery abundance. At Andalusia's southernmost point, Africa awaits just 9 miles across the sea. Such proximity enabled long-ago civilizations, from the Romans to the Phoenicians, to settle, conquer, utilize, labor in the land — and then leave behind their rich and lasting legacy.

A tapestry, this prodigious terrain takes time to digest. That's why I've elected to pedal through it with VBT, a U.S.-based outfitter offering trekking and cycling trips from Tuscany to South Africa. Known for having a black book of connections in each location, expert guides who inspire and stellar equipment, VBT triumphs with its ability to lead active travelers along the world's backroads. On my trip, 15 of the 20 participants are repeat VBT travelers, a testimonial to the way the company successfully executes its itineraries. Using four- to five-star hotels characteristic of the destination (on this trip we stay in a restored monastery, a refurbished convent, a one-time olive oil hacienda and a hotel composed of a bevy of Medieval buildings amid a Jewish Quarter) and utilizing family-owned restaurants known for their local cuisine, VBT further conjures magic. The typical seven- to 10-day adventures include such extras as cooking classes and wine tastings, lectures and city tours. Optional pre- and post-trips, facilitated by the outfitter, bookend the journey. With routes planned for riders (or walkers) of most levels, each day offers both easier and harder options, as well as morning and afternoon jaunts.

That's where the cantor comes in. On a moderate spin, which nevertheless involves seemingly endless inclines in record Spanish summer heat, somewhere near

Cordoba, I find myself flagging. Then I hear him. Sonorous and mellifluous he croons; the Hebrew indecipherable to me, but beautiful and haunting nonetheless. At intervals, his partner pipes in, her soprano-style harmony reminiscent of morning birdsong. Together, they absolutely propel me up the mountain as if I have wings. Their melodies are as motivating as the “Rocky” soundtrack, though far more dulcet and resounding. Somehow, this ancient music, created for the synagogue, belongs amid the rows of olive orchards and the twisting lanes of the rural, hilltop pueblos. It’s as natural an occurrence as the warm, caressing Andalusian wind. But much more uplifting.

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One day, the author decides to trade her bicycle for a trot on an Andalusian, Spain’s storied breed.

I begin my stay in Spain in Seville, a few days before the bike portion of the trip. Having once lived in this former “Kingdom of Castile,” even dating a matador here, I know its myriad nooks and crannies, rambling passageways and riverside

taverns. Wistfully, I return to old haunts, such as Bar Plata in the Macarena District, the ever jaw-dropping Alcazar Palace and Bodeguita Casablanca near the Cathedral, which always brims with locals. One can shop here for colorful tiles in Triana, wander the gold-intoned city's parks, perfumed by orange blossoms, or be enthralled by a flamenco performance in the 12th-century Barrio Santa Cruz. I do it all, as well as discover new things, such as Hotel Alfonso XIII's contemporary tapas restaurant, Ena, helmed by one of Catalunya's top celebrity chefs, Carles Abellan.

But then it's time to bike. I meet my fellow cyclists, including the cantor and his girlfriend, and our two peerless guides, Nico and Juan Carlos, in a tiny town about an hour from Seville. There, staying in Monasterio de San Francisco, a restored 15th-century monastery, with ample spots to park our bikes, we prepare for five days of invigorating and varied cycling. While some riders opt for road bikes, I choose a sturdy but lightweight hybrid, ideal for the gravel-strewn roads, earth-encrusted highways and the unexpectedly omnipresent inclines to come. The first day, we do a short circuit to test our mettle. The loop through the expansive Guadalquivir River plain allows us to bond with fellow riders, a clan that includes doctors, teachers, students and business professionals. What everyone shares is curiosity, and a love for cruising on two wheels.

As we ply the roads of Andalusia, reaching Cordoba before crossing the finishing line in Granada, we discover a varied landscape. Each day's course vaunts a title that promises sights and adventures we can't resist. The Old Road to Cordoba takes us along 64 kilometers of gentle uphill, through varied farmland and alongside Castle Almodovar, a fortress built in the 8th century by the Arabs and later conquered by the Christian kings. A 55 kilometer day, called the Wine Road, plunges us into the vineyard region of Andalusia, the Montilla-Moriles hills. In the olive-covered, undeveloped expanses near Cabra, we follow a bike path, the Via Verde, formed from a now-disused railway line. As we spin, we embrace Andalusia with all five senses. We taste wine, try tapas, learn how to make olive oil and attend lectures on history and culture. Spanish lessons, cultural pointers and some yoga classes add to the allure. Splendidly, our trip coincides with Noche Blanca, a famous all-night flamenco festival in Cordoba. Naturally, we stay up late, enlivened by the scene, welcomed by the throngs, awakened by the thrill of belonging — if just for an evening.

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Bar Plata, in Seville's Macarena, has been serving up tapas for more than a century.

Though we carry clearly marked route maps, I know from experience my propensity for getting lost. So, for most of the cycling days, I dash with the pack, always following somebody and always listening for the sweet sounds of the cantor's voice. But, on the last day, I find myself on a long trek completely alone. "Continue straight" says my map — and I do for many tranquil kilometers. Along the way, I begin to hum my version of the cantor's song. It gets me to the end of the route — where cold beer, bowls of olives and a party awaits.

That song, like the images of Andalusia, is still in my head — it is the cantor's unexpected gift to me, the joy of travel, the reward of connection.



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The famous white villages of Andalusia are sun-dappled and mysterious. Zuheros, with its warren of winding streets, boasts an ancient castle.

### IF YOU GO

**Fly:** British Airways makes it easy to get to Spain. Go nonstop to London from Austin, then continue to Andalusia.

**Bike:** Sign up with [vbt.com](http://vbt.com).

**Seville:** [starwoodhotels.com/luxury/property/ove](http://starwoodhotels.com/luxury/property/ove)