



TRAIN | SPAIN

Red-carpet ride

There has been a murder on the Al Andalus. Dressed for cocktail hour, passengers gather in the restored 1920s saloon car, eager to discover the culprit. Suspects catch each other's reflection in the vintage etched glass, the crystal scones send shadows across the wood-panelled walls, and bow-tied waiters serve stiff drinks as high heels tap nervously on the parquet.

The detectives (who insist they are neither magicians nor comedians) hand each of us a sealed envelope, revealing our role in the mystery. I open mine discreetly: *You are the murderer*, reads the small slip of paper. It's a bloody business; though I have no recollection of the wealthy industrialist's death, and the magician-comedian-detectives' methods of deduction leave much to be desired (card tricks and straitjackets), I'm eventually exonerated on account of the wine we are all enjoying. It might be just a parlour game, but it's hard to resist the charm of a grand night of mystery riding the rails.

Train travel is experiencing a revival in Europe; demand is high, overnight sleeper trains are returning, and travellers are rediscovering the advantages of slowing down. I've always found myself enamoured with rail travel, yet until recently, Spain's Al Andalus train had slipped under my radar. It's a shame, as having travelled on better-known luxury railways around the world, I can say with absolute confidence that the Al Andalus exceeded all my previous railway adventures.

THE SA1 0018



Riding this luxurious train isn't just a journey through Andalucia: it's a passage back in time, writes Shaney Hudson.

At 450 metres long, the Al Andalus is the longest train in Spain, and a huge attraction for trainspotters whenever it glides into a station. There are two locomotives to move the 15 cars, of which seven are sleeping cars and four are saloon coaches: consisting of two dining cars, a piano bar salon and a reception car, used by British royalty in the 1920s to travel on the Continent.

Painstakingly restored, it is the pride of Renfe's fleet. However, the sheer logistics of moving such a serpentine train (and finding a place to park it overnight) means the Al Andalus offers just a few journeys each year.

Our group meets the train in Granada, where a red carpet is rolled out, and staff in gold-trimmed blue jackets greet us with champagne. Stepping aboard, the interiors fulfil the rich fantasy of the golden age of rail travel; jewel-toned upholstery sets a regal tone, velvet curtains are tied back from picture windows, brass finishes dominate the fixtures, and the soft amber light glowing from the crystal lamps on every table creates a golden hue.

I am staying in a deluxe compartment, located in Car One. Inside, there's a small

fixed desk and chair beside a large couchette in thick velvet, which transforms into a double bed at night. At the other end, one door opens to a bathroom with a shower; another to a small wardrobe with a fridge that fits my suitcase and clothes. The lacquered wood walls feature inlaid motifs and are hung with art, a row of windows are shaded against the afternoon sun by ornate blinds, and a series of clever compartments, shelves and nooks organise my books and personal items.

Far more spacious and elegant than I expected, it's a serene retreat; the kind of place where, were it not for the air-conditioning and full bath, you could imagine travelling a century ago.

The staff offer incredible service, the company on board is excellent, and the conversation in the dining car engaging, but I can't help but notice when the train is moving, how quiet it becomes. Whether travelling as a couple, family or alone, all the passengers aboard grow silent, absorbed completely in the journey, the sensation of being aboard the train, and the landscape outside.

Which means the food has to be fairly spectacular to compete with the view. Luckily, it is. In every sense, this journey could be marketed as an epicurean experience, celebrating the incredible flavours that have made Spain a top culinary destination worldwide.

At breakfast, platters of Iberian ham, fresh tortilla española and slices of tomato are accompanied by overflowing baskets of apricots, pomegranate and fruit; a dozen bottles of specialty olive oil from the region accompany the freshly baked bread and a hefty selection of sweet pastries, as well as famous specialty biscuits fetched from local bakeries along the route.

Lunch and dinner alternate between on-board service and private dining rooms in award-winning restaurants. We dine on tender grouper sautéed with sherry in a classic seaside taverna at the mouth of the Guadalquivir River one day; the next evening, we devour homemade cuttlefish croquettes on the edge of the El Tajo gorge in Ronda. After dinner, Spanish guitarists, magician-detectives, parlour games and parties provide entertainment.

A luxury air-conditioned bus accompanies our journey, whisking us from the station to each site: a private flamenco performance in a centuries-old house in Seville, an olive mill in the agrarian heart of Baeza, and a sherry bodega just a few blocks from the ocean in Sanlúcar.

The itinerary blends must-see attractions like the Alhambra in Granada and the Real Alcázar palace in Seville with smaller,



From far left: one of the dining cars, set for dinner with Andalusia out the window; the train – all 450 metres of it; and the food on board – it needs to be spectacular to compete with the views

JOURNEYS MONTH



THE DETAILS

TRAIN

The Al Andalus offers six-night, seven-day luxury train journeys throughout Andalusia at selected dates visiting destinations including Cordoba, Granada, Seville and Cadiz. In 2026, the train will depart Madrid for the journey south. Deluxe compartments with ensuite, all meals, wine with lunch and dinner and guided tours included, from €10,080 (\$16,360). See eltrenandalus.com

unspoiled places I'd most likely have skipped if I'd travelled solo. Our morning spent strolling around the UNESCO World-Heritage-listed town of Ubeda is an unexpected delight, and a fitting reminder that one of the benefits of taking a tour is that you often visit places you'd otherwise overlook.

Yet even with a tightly managed schedule, there's still room for the unexpected. In Cordoba, we pause for a procession of horse-drawn carriages carrying locals in traditional dress, the men in straight-brimmed hats and short jackets, the women in vivid gowns with flowers in their hair, fanning themselves with silk *abanicos*. Another day in Jerez, the roads are closed for Corpus Christi, where locals construct flower-filled arches, the floral scent accompanying us through the streets.

Andalusia itself seems imbued with magic: ancient fortresses hum with energy, a man-made forest produces liquid gold, white horses dance, and the unrelenting summer heat seems to slow every footstep, while bending the horizon to its will.

For over 800 years, southern Spain was under Moorish rule, and its architectural legacy remains. Whitewashed villages flash past along the rail lines, while in the larger cities, structures like Cordoba's mosque (instead, building a rather incongruous baroque cathedral inside)

Even the stations where we pause for the night, like Jerez de la Frontera, leave us transfixed. While those aboard Al Andalus snap photos of the tiled arches from inside the dining carriage, outside, commuters

photograph the train. As we travel west, the landscape shapeshifts: from thousand-year-old olive groves backed by the snowy mountains of the Sierra Nevada to neat lines of green vineyards and tightly clustered fields of yellow sunflowers closer to the coast.

On the marshlands, there is the occasional dash of riotous pink marking the waterways: migratory flamingos spending the summer on the Iberian Peninsula.

The rocking motion of the train tracks almost feels like a meditation. While the reception cars are filled with happy chatter on my last morning aboard, I'm content in my private compartment, curled on the couchette by the window, the Al Andalus simultaneously propelling us forward to our destination, yet transporting us back to a different, more romantic age of travel. **1**

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