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Traveller

INDIAN EDITION

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7TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

THE BEST OF THE WORLD

EXCEPTIONAL TRIPS FROM EVERY CONTINENT

FROM MACHU PICCHU TO ANTARCTICA

MOHAMMED HANIF MANU JOSEPH **DEVDUTT PATTANAIK**

THE DALAI LAMA & OTHER **HIMALAYAN HEROES**

CONTRIBUTORS

WE ASKED OUR CONTRIBUTORS:

WHAT IS THE BEST PLACE ON EARTH AND WHY?

ANDREW ROWAT

Who: Photographer; *A pilgrimage to oneself*, p222 **A:** "For me it isn't a specific location, but a state of mind—a place where, when you arrive, you smile immediately, heave a contented sigh and relax into the familiarity of a place, even if you have never been there before." @andrewrowat

ROBERT LITTLEFORD

Who: Illustrator; *Hike the Balkans*, p274 **A:** "Loon Lake, Muskoka, Canada. It's a pristine freshwater lake set amid a wilderness of forests, cabins and bears. One can go canoeing, swim in the lake, hiking or just swing in the hammock watching the stars." @robertlittleford

SARAH KHAN

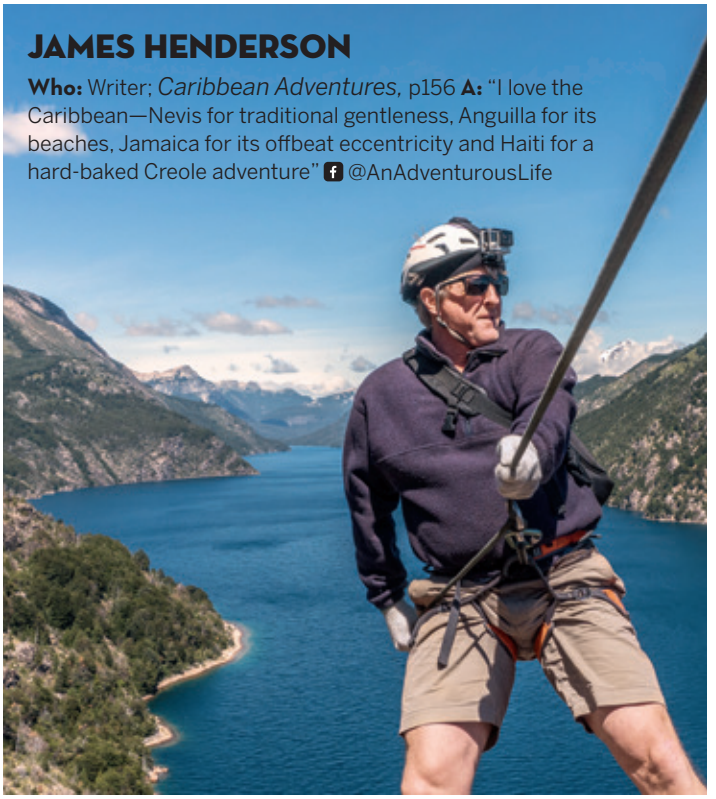
Who: Writer; *Spain by train*, p262 **A:** "The best place on Earth is an airport lounge just before a trip. There's nothing like that feeling of excitement and anticipation as you're heading off on a new adventure. Second would be my parents' couch in suburban Massachusetts—when you're always on the road, sometimes the most familiar, comforting places are the most special." @BySarahKhan

F.T. KOLA

Who: Writer; *Summer time and living is easy in Austin*, p164 **A:** "Cape Town, the landscape of my early childhood. It's where sea and mountain meet most majestically, and is a city of great soul."

JAMES HENDERSON

Who: Writer; *Caribbean Adventures*, p156 **A:** "I love the Caribbean—Nevis for traditional gentleness, Anguilla for its beaches, Jamaica for its offbeat eccentricity and Haiti for a hard-baked Creole adventure" @AnAdventurousLife



MOHAMMED HANIF

Who: Writer; *Magic tracks*, p190 **A:** "Karachi, because of its sea breeze." @mohammedhanif

PHOTOGRAPHS: SAMANTHA REINDERS; ESENCIA; ALAMY

SPAIN BY TRAIN

PHOTOGRAPH: SAMANTHA REINDERS

Journeying from Extremadura to Madrid on board the Al Andalus, **Sarah Khan** finds the region's history might just hold the key to world peace

Now this—this is why I travel!" My friend Sam and I emerged from a nondescript building in Cáceres as she made that breathless declaration. Cáceres had been a revelation, a beguiling city best known for a historic quarter that's refreshingly devoid of modern intrusions. If you think its labyrinthine streets would make a great movie set, you might have a future as a location scout: in the latest season of *Game of Thrones*, these immaculately preserved alleys feature prominently as King's Landing.

It was there, amid the cobbled streets and stone palaces draped in ivy and bougainvillea, that Sam and I found ourselves in a traditional villa seemingly plucked from a volume of *Arabian Nights*. Tucked away on the fringes of the walled city, **Casa Museo Arabe** (www.turismoextremadura.com) is a snug jewel box awash in shades of turquoise and emerald. I meandered through the warren of narrow archways, intricately carved plasterwork, tiled walls and lush gardens, while Sam followed in my wake, capturing every detail on her camera. By the time we left, our eyes were glassy and our faces were flush with that particular brand of contentment (or is it smugness?) that is familiar to every savvy traveller who's stumbled off the trodden path onto that holiday holy grail.

Casa Museo Arabe might seem out of place in Cáceres, but actually, the rest of the town grew around it half a millennium ago: this 12th-century house is a colourful vestige of Spain's Moorish heyday. After the Reconquista, or reconquest, during which the Catholic monarchy all but wiped out all traces of 800 years of Arab rule, the villa's sinuous eaves and delicate arabesque details had been slathered with cement and mired under layers of paint and plaster. In fact, the house's history was forgotten for centuries before the present owners unearthed its Muslim pedigree during a routine renovation. They went on to recreate it in its original Islamic splendour, forging a small Arab oasis in the heart of Spain.

Serendipity guided most of my experiences in Cáceres: first, when I found myself amid a procession marking Corpus Christi, lost in a spectacular display of finery and formality—priests in opulent robes and little girls marking their First Communion in flowing white gowns. Then, when I sought refuge from the midday sun in **Baluarte de los Pozos** (www.ayto-caceres.es), a museum in the Old Jewish Quarter. The guide tasked with conducting English-language tours was Madiha, a sweet Pakistani-Spanish girl in a purple salwar-kameez and hijab, who gamely indulged my half-serious request to conduct my tour in Urdu. →

Clockwise from top left: **at Plaza de España in Seville; salsa at Pancho's, Mérida; a table set for breakfast in the restaurant carriage of the Al Andalus train; patterned tiles at Seville's Real Alcázar; the staff of the Al Andalus treat passengers to a grand farewell; Torre de Bujaco in the city of Cáceres.** Previous pages: **the train winds its way through the countryside from Seville to Madrid**

PHOTOGRAPHS: SAMANTHA REINDERS; ALISON ENGSTROM; JULIEN CARMEIL

A view over the terracotta roofs of Cáceres from the belfry of the Church of San Francisco Javier

In the new season of *Game of Thrones*, these alleys feature prominently as King's Landing

PHOTOGRAPH BY SAMANTHA REINDERS

It was Madiha who tipped me off to Casa Museo Arabe, whose existence I might otherwise have left Spain without ever knowing about. The house had a personal reason for piquing my interest: five generations of my own ancestors had lived in Moorish Spain before a centuries-long migration led them through the Middle East to Central Asia and, eventually, to Hyderabad in India. Could this be how they had lived? I wondered. Sam, on the other hand, was simply enamoured with its beauty.

It's not what one might typically expect to find in Spain, that bastion of Catholicism and Gaudí and jamón. But on my third visit to the country, I knew better than to arrive with preconceived notions in tow.

My lifelong fascination with Spain could be traced to a trip my parents took there without me. Family lore has it that, as a five-year-old left behind at my grandparents' house, I announced to anyone who'd listen that my parents had gone abroad to bring me "chamak-chamak ke kapde"—sparkly-sparkly clothes. While I'll now concede they had other expectations for their holiday, they did bring back a voluminous polka-dotted flamenco dress that I might have worn more frequently than my pyjamas. Since then, I've never missed an opportunity to see a live flamenco performance. In Seville, I caught two: a raw, boisterous show at **La Carboneria** (www.andalucia.org), a sticky tavern where locals go for their flamenco fix, and a more refined production at the **Museo del Baile Flamenco** (www.museoflamenco.com), a four-storey temple to the history of the dance form.

Seville is where my ancestors lived in the 10th and 11th centuries, and it's where I got my first glimpse of the Islamic influence that had once prevailed across the Iberian peninsula. As Catholic monarchs regained control of Andalusian cities, they were, understandably, taken by the grandeur of Islamic architecture, and hired Muslim artisans to build new palaces. This Mudéjar architecture is marked by a fusion of colourful Moorish tiles and geometric patterns with very European busts of human figures and animals. Seville's **Palacio de las Dueñas** (www.lasduenas.es), **Casa de Pilatos** (www.andalucia.org), and even the **Real Alcázar** (www.alcazarsevilla.org), a palace still in use by the royal family, all marry Gothic, Renaissance and Islamic aesthetics, toeing the line between mosque and manor.

After a few days exploring Seville, we boarded the Al Andalus, a luxury train, to travel through Extremadura, one of Spain's lesser-trammelled provinces, slowly winding our way to Madrid. The journey takes two and a half hours by high-speed rail; on the old-world Al Andalus, time travels at its own pace. We made our leisurely way to the capital over the course of six days, with stops in aforementioned Cáceres, other cities and remote villages that hark back to different periods in Spain's complex history. →

Clockwise from top left: **bacalao con tomate (cod with tomato sauce) at El Rinconcillo, Seville; the Sabatini Gardens at the Royal Palace of Madrid; flamenco is part of the after-dinner entertainment aboard the Al Andalus; jamón Ibérico hanging in Madrid's Mercado San Miguel; a passenger on the Al Andalus at Seville's Hotel Alfonso XIII; the vast subterranean cellars of Bodega Real Cortijo de Carlos III, a winery in Aranjuez**

PHOTOGRAPHS: SAMANTHA REINDERS; COLIN DUTTON/SIME; ALISON WRIGHT/AUSTROM

Could the key to world peace lie in 12th-century Spain?

It's a question I pondered in Toledo, which entranced me

PHOTOGRAPH: **SAMANTHA REINDERS**

Two actors await rehearsals for a Corpus Christi play at the Museo Nacional de Arte Romano in Mérida

"It's like a cruise ship without the water," Sam remarked after our first night on board. She had a point, what with the daily cycle of lavish four-course meals, meticulously planned excursions and entertainment. We left behind Seville's bustling Santa Justa train station and entered a Belle Époque time capsule evoking the glamour days of rail travel in all its sepia-tinted glory: wood panelling, brass fittings, plush chintz upholstery and elegantly appointed cars designated for different pursuits: dining, drinking, lounging or sleeping.

When we weren't out exploring, we would be relentlessly plied with shrimp-and-octopus ceviche, partridge salad with eggplant confit, truffle lasagna or duck mille feuille with goat cheese and apple. One afternoon, we gathered in the bar car for an Iberian ham-carving lesson; the next evening, we were treated to an opera performance better suited for the stage at La Scala than a train station in Plasencia.

Life on the train was mostly idyllic. I hadn't, however, anticipated how difficult certain simple activities might seem: after a few days, wearing contacts, applying eyeliner and even putting on pants began to feel like accomplishments. And with so much time spent in close proximity, cliques were quickly established: Sam and I mingled most with Kate and Philippe from New York and Christine and Greg from Brisbane. Our English-speaking crew immediately bonded over our fascination with a sultry Brazilian on the arm of a much older husband.

"Is she his caretaker?" Kate speculated innocently.

"That's not how you kiss your caretaker," Sam retorted.

In Zafra, we enjoyed an al fresco cheeseboard in a quintessentially Spanish plaza dappled in the late afternoon sun before repairing for dinner to the **Parador de Zafra** (www.parador.es), a 15th-century fortress that looks like it could have been the model for every castle found in my childhood fairy tales. Sleepy Mérida lays claim to the best-preserved Roman ruins in Spain—relics so prolific that even the roundabouts in the middle of the city are strewn with stray pillars, and the **Museo Nacional de Arte Romano** (www.mecd.gob.es), built by Pritzker Prize-winning architect Rafael Moneo, houses a staggering collection of Roman art and antiquities. We stopped in Montánchez to visit a pig farm; even though I abstain from swine, I couldn't help marvel at the passion of our guide, Pepe Alba, who presides over a ham-tourism operation called **Turismo del Jamón** (www.turismodeljamon.com). We visited the **Royal Palace** (www.patrimonionacional.es), the Spanish answer to Versailles, in Aranjuez; in **Monfragüe National Park** (www.turismoextremadura.com), we rested on the ruins of an Arab castle from the Middle Ages.

During our morning tours, Sam and I took mental notes of offbeat museums or photogenic alleys to return to on our own time, and we spent delightful afternoons trying to retrace our steps through winding medieval mazes. It's during these daily constitutionals that I finally began to appreciate the wisdom of the siesta. Whoever invented the Spanish concept of the afternoon nap, when most shops and restaurants shutter their doors and the streets seem to be on mute, was not, as I may have been guilty of conjecturing, the world's most persuasive kaamchor. By 2pm each day, the normally lively streets were ghost towns and the Instagram posts that my meanderings yielded were pristine and people-free—but as the temperature inched toward 40ºC, the oppressive heat clung to me like an unwanted companion. As I'm not one for napping, I did as the Spanish ladies do: bought a fan and fluttered it prettily to keep sweat at bay.

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Could the key to world peace lie in 12th-century Spain? It's a question I pondered as I marvelled at the **Sinagoga de Santa Maria La Blanca** (www.toledomonumental.com) in Toledo, the erstwhile Spanish capital often referred to as the City of Three Cultures. Gazing at the distinctive architecture of the 800-year-old sanctuary, it was easy to see why this might be a popular musing during these tempestuous times: the striking design is the unique result of Muslim artisans constructing a Jewish synagogue in a Christian city.

Toledo, a place I'd returned to after 15 years, entranced and enchanted me like few places have. The imperial city was under Islamic rule for 400 years and then the capital of the Catholic state for another 500. It was in the interim, under King Alfonso VI, that Toledo earned its reputation as a cradle of tolerance. "Long ago, Toledo was so peaceful," said our guide, Luis. "It's important for people to understand today that three religions and three cultures can mix."

This concept of 'convivencia,' or coexistence, was emblematic of Moorish Spain. "My heart can take on any form," the Andalusian Sufi poet Ibn Arabi once wrote. "A meadow for gazelles, a cloister for monks, sacred ground for the idols, the Kaaba for the circling pilgrim, the tables of the *Torah*, the scrolls of the *Quran*." I saw glimpses of this symbiosis in the rich architecture of Seville and Córdoba in the days before I boarded the train, but it was in Toledo that this synergy soared to new heights. I gawked at the intricate carvings of the synagogue, masterful details that, to my untrained gaze, seemed more suited to a Muslim mosque in Morocco than a Jewish temple in Spain. Such is the wonder of Toledo.

As the Al Andalus pulled into Madrid's Chamartin train station the next day, the world seemed to shed its black-and-white filter and resume its Technicolor brilliance. The frenetic pace of Madrid was at odds with the genteel scene we'd just emerged from. I'd boarded the train expecting to step back in time; somewhere along the way, I saw a glimpse of what the future could look like.

Now this—isn't this why we travel?

The Al Andalus offers a six-day itinerary through Extremadura, between Seville and Madrid. The train passes through Zafra, Mérida, Cáceres, Monfragüe, Toledo and Aranjuez. The trip can be booked via a travel agent or directly with Trenes Turisticos Reservation Centre (www.renfe.com; from €2,980 or ₹2,21,360 per head, including a private cabin, all meals, ground transportation and tours).

GETTING THERE: Fly to Seville with Air India via Madrid from Delhi, or with Lufthansa via Frankfurt from Mumbai or Delhi. Indian passport-holders can apply for a Schengen visa online with BLS International Services (www.india.blsspainvisa.com). Visas cost from ₹4,300 and take at least 15 working days to be processed.

PHOTOGRAPH: **SAMANTHA REINDERS**

The narrow, cobbled streets of Cáceres