

Usually, I'm a happy camper and a happy traveler, but I had a hard time with Spain. At this point, some years later, I don't believe that my difficulties were entirely with Spain, although the unmarked streets of medieval Sevilla didn't make navigation in the city any easier. I think Spain was the right place at the wrong time, and I was certainly the wrong person at that time. I attended a conference in Sevilla and went on from there for almost two weeks, mid-way through a so-called graduate program that was so terrible that Amnesty International should have an ongoing investigation of it. I have many lovely memories of Spain, not including the unmarked streets of Sevilla, and many not-so-lovely memories that I suspect I took more personally thanks to the other nonsense that was happening at the time and that had nothing to do with Spain. Despite unmarked streets, I found my way to the Plaza de España, a huge open space with a wide spread of official buildings that is now primarily a tourist destination. It's hard to take pictures of it and convey the scale, so here's a small tidbit and not a viewpoint that's already available all over the Internet.



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The conference kept me on a schedule, which was difficult with unmarked streets, but I left early on the conference days and wandered all over Sevilla, more and less intentionally, and usually relying on a compass. Sevilla is a place to see when one does not have a schedule and wandering is the goal. I saw one of the still-active bull-fighting arenas (I did not stop to watch a bull be tortured to death). I visited the cathedral. I asked directions from all kinds of bystanders, most of whom don't know how to get anywhere outside of their immediate neighborhood. One theory I've read about several times for the navigational difficulties presented by medieval cities was that the cities were made to be deliberately confusing so that invaders wouldn't be able to find their way through the cities and would leave many opportunities for confusion and for the locals to provide ad hoc defenses of the cities. The locals not knowing how to navigate beyond their immediate neighborhoods is good reason to be skeptical of the theory. No one can figure out how to get around, and it would be difficult to figure out who the invaders were: maybe the people wandering around are just people from the next neighborhood over who took a wrong turn and don't know how to get home.





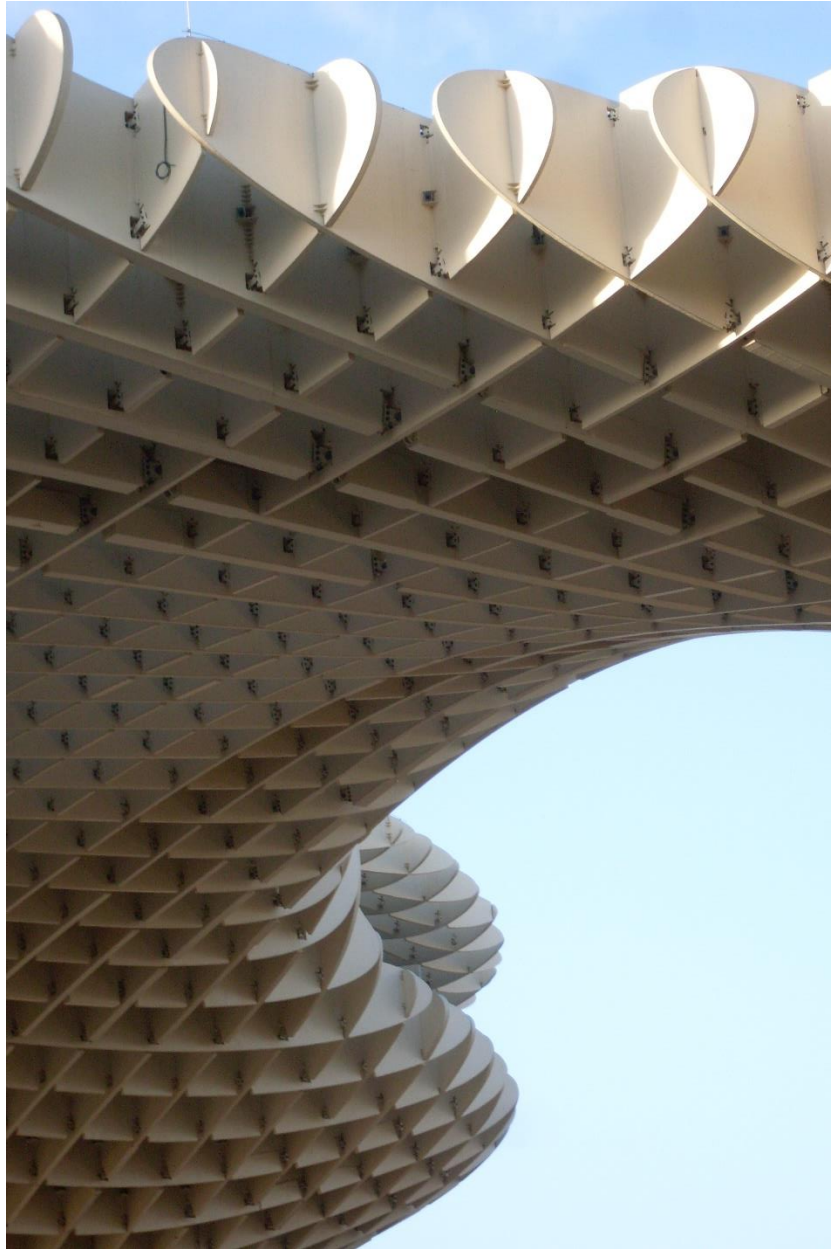
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I connected the verbal dots: from this immediate neighborhood along some compass direction to the next immediate neighborhood, and so on. I visited the dodecagonal Torre del Oro, the tower of gold (because of the reflected sun, not the building materials). It was built in 1220 so that the Almohad caliphate could defend Sevilla from Reconquista attacks by river, and it was one of two towers that anchored chains that blocked further access to the river. The defense was breached in 1248, and eventually, the caliphs were forced off the Iberian Peninsula, thus making room for the Spanish Inquisition. The tower was used as a prison during the middle ages, and it was damaged in the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, 401 km away (249.17 miles).



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If this structure were in an English-speaking country, it would be the Overhead Waffle. Officially, it is the Metropol Parasol and a good candidate for the world's largest wooden structure. In Sevilla, people call it Las Setas de la Encarnación (Incarnation's Mushrooms). It was designed by a German architect, Jürgen Mayer. I don't know what they call it in Germany.



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Here's a fountain head, somewhere in Sevilla. Everything in Sevilla is somewhere in Sevilla, and don't ask me where, and asking anyone else where is pretty hit or miss.





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Eventually, I found my way out of Sevilla. Then on to Córdoba, which one of my former students had recommended to me, and a first stop at the Mezquita de Córdoba, the Córdoba Mosque.



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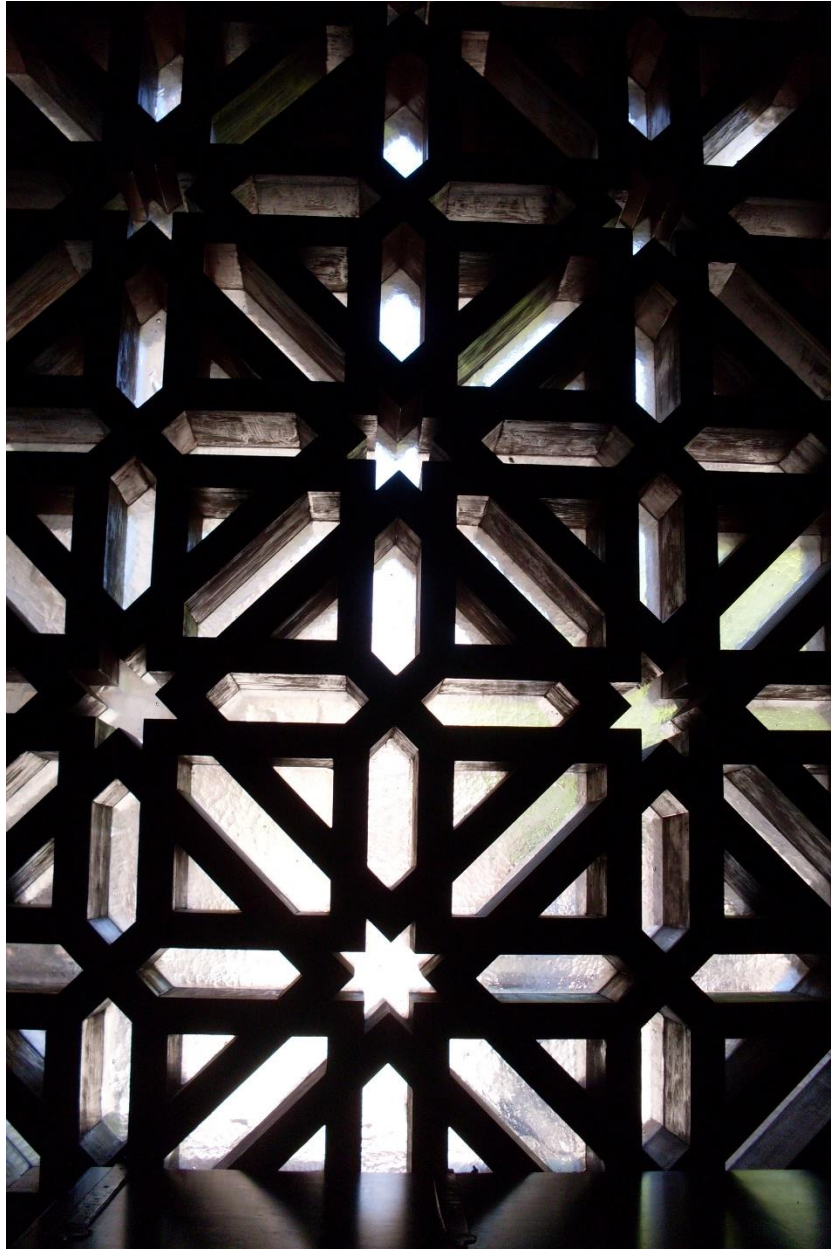
The bell tower of the court of oranges at the Córdoba Mosque. The tower is Catholic, not Muslim, and the Roman Catholic Church now claims the whole building and complex, despite its original design as a mosque. There's a Catholic nave inside the mosque at this point, and Muslims are not allowed to pray inside the building.





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In Córdoba, I began to understand that all of the best design ideas in Andalusia were North African in origin, and I put North Africa on the list. My trip to Tunisia in 2018 confirmed the hypothesis about where the best designs were coming from, but I now think that the North African designs were from farther east, probably Persia. If Iran ever becomes doable, I'll have to check.





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This was part of the arcade and part of the courtyard at the hostel where I stayed in the old city of Córdoba. The tile work on the floor and part of the way up the walls is stereotypically Turkish.



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Entirely without intending to, I showed up in Córdoba during the major annual porch-flower festival. I was temporally lost, not only geographically lost. Most of the porches and decks were hanging gardens.





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Córdoba also had a breeding facility for Andalusian horses, and this was the palace for the horses where the royal mares and stallions lived and worked: the Caballerizas Reales. This is not the palace for the people who worked with the horses. This is the palace for the horses. I don't know where the people lived, but given that their facility isn't on any maps of points of interest, they probably weren't living in a palace.





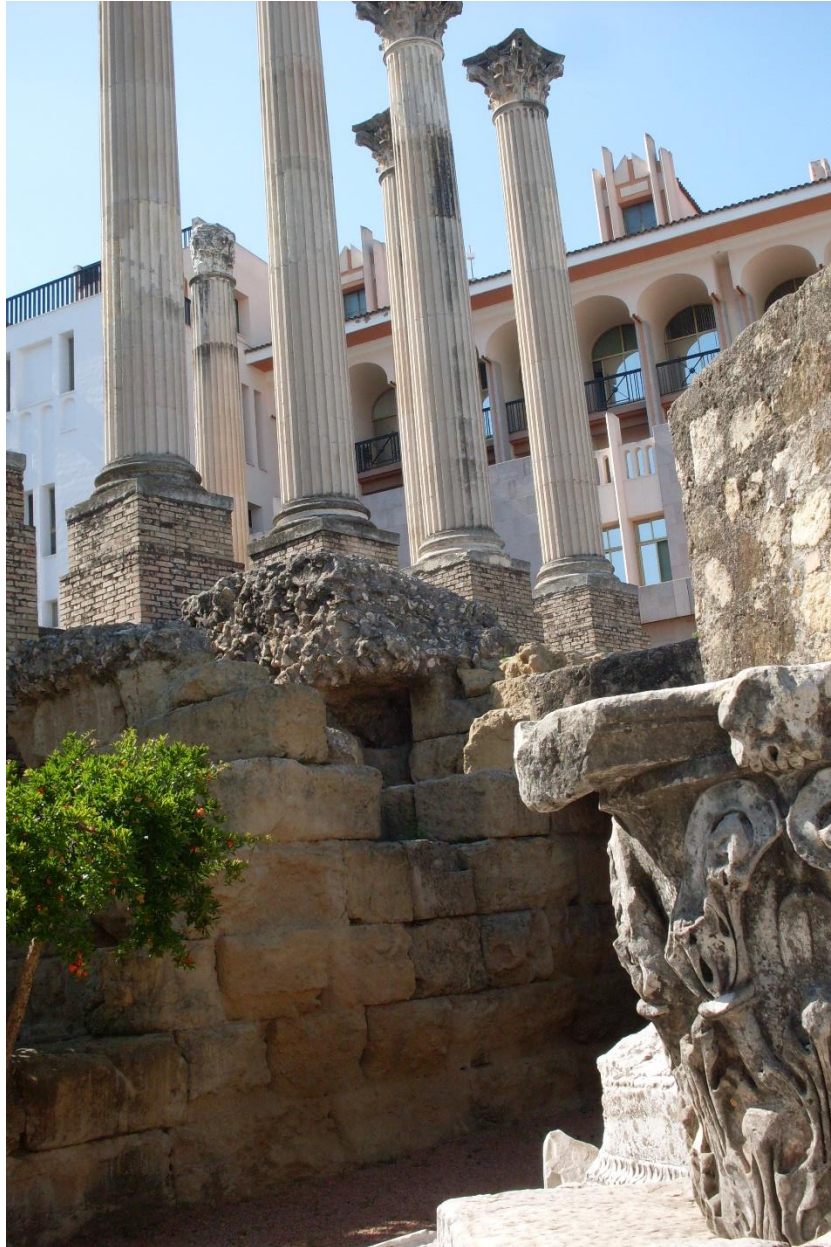
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In Córdoba, it is worthwhile to look in all directions, as many as possible simultaneously. I wished to be a chameleon in Córdoba to have that visual system. Looking at the ceiling doesn't help with navigating on the ground, but what's a person to do? Miss the ceiling? Miss the hanging gardens? Miss Córdoba? Heaven forbid. Become a chameleon. There's a good option.



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Spain also had its experiences with the Roman Empire. The Templo Romano in Córdoba was rediscovered when city hall was being expanded. The columns are replacements, but the foundation is Roman.





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I don't remember which cathedral this was, but I like the picture.





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Next stop, Granada. Mostly, I wanted to get out of the cities and hike up a hill. Granada has the Sierra Nevada mountain range, the highest range in Spain and one of the southernmost possibilities for skiing in continental Europe. I didn't ski.



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I spent several days in Granada, one of them on the mountain Mulhacén. If that doesn't look Spanish, that's good paying attention. The name of the mountain is from Arabic, Mulay Hassan, who was the next-to-the-last Muslim king of Granada. Supposedly, he was buried at the peak of the mountain, which is the highest in Spain, and the highest on the Iberian Peninsula, at 11,413 feet (3478.6 meters). It's walkable, under some conditions, but the week that I was there, there was more and more snow the farther I went up, and the snow was unstable and weird because of the sun and season and the way the snow had fallen and drifted, and eventually, I turned around and did not reach the summit. A few days earlier, someone else did not make the same decision and disappeared into a crevasse that had been covered with what looked like a solid sheet of snow.





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I frequently take pictures of lichen, and this one is my favorite. I don't know what the lichens are called. The naming (and categorizing) of lichens is tricky, because they are symbiotic organisms that combine algae and fungi. So should they be named for the algae that's involved, or the fungi, or the specific relationship, or something else? This is an open discussion among people who discuss such things. I met some of those people at one point, and although, as a linguist, I could contribute productively to the discussion, I don't think I convinced the botanists or mycologists or lichenologists or whatever they're calling themselves, to hire a linguist. In any case, I wasn't hired.





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Alpine zones come with different soils and different plants, all working through the weather. I was unable to identify these. Meanwhile, one of my very secondary (probably tertiary, maybe even quaternary) hobbies is to visit alpine zones when I can to have a look at the rocks and soils and plants. Sometimes it's worth handling things, too. These were stiffly rubbery.



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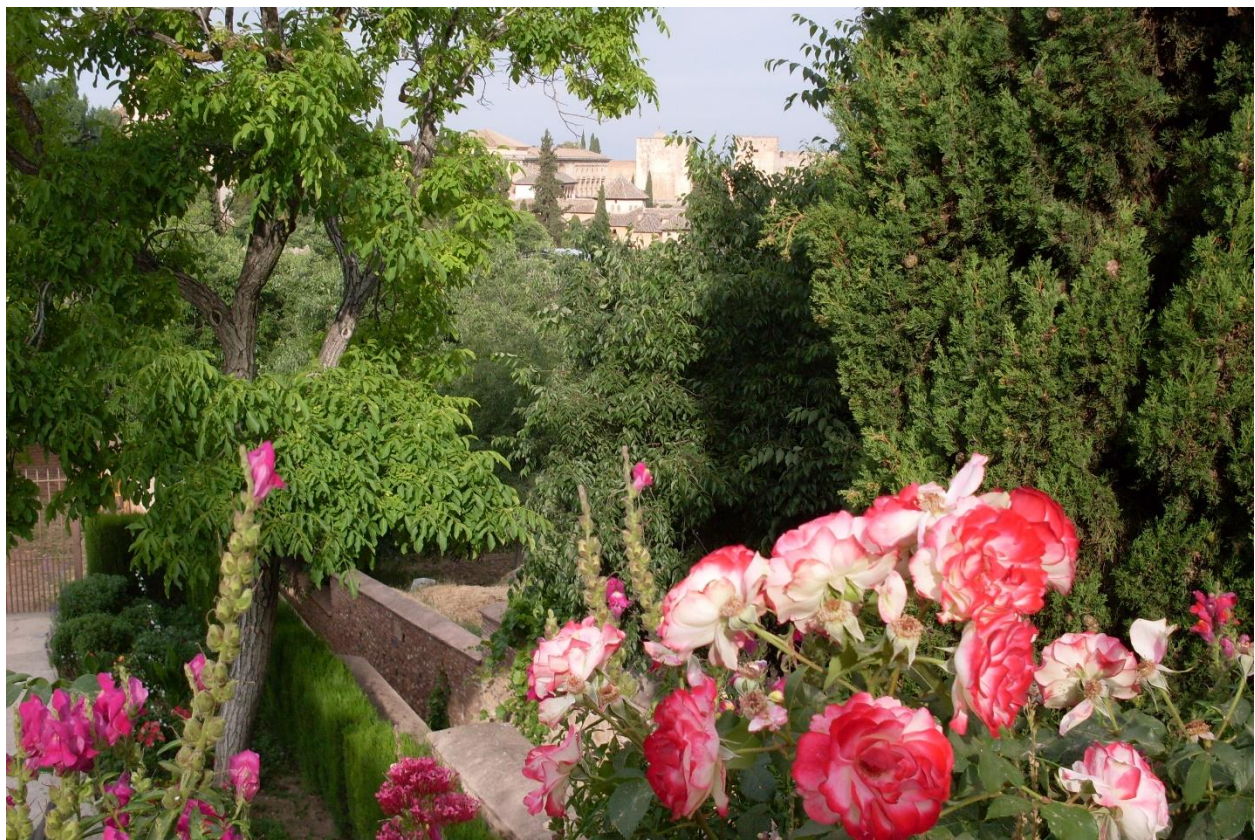
Granada is also where the Alhambra is located. The 'the' and 'al' are redundant, the 'al' being an article in Arabic. The same redundancy arises in Spanish, where the Alhambra is "El Alhambra." I would like to make it The El Alhambra, but maybe that's beyond redundant and moving toward excess. But is trilingualism ever excessive? And we couldn't have a set of pictures without an insect. This is a bee on a flower in the Alhambra gardens, but that's getting ahead of the excursion.





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The Alhambra is one of the most popular and most visited destinations in Spain, and usually, reservations should be made well ahead of one's intended visit. But I didn't make reservations ahead of time because I didn't know much about my itinerary ahead of time, or about my schedule. So I showed up the day after the mountain to find thousands of people in line. There was a shorter line off to the side, but I didn't want to lose my place in the long line to see what was happening in the shorter line. If only I had a travel buddy to check on the line while I held the place, or vice versa. The woman in front of me was thinking the same thing, and in the same situation. We had a quick chat. She held the place in the long line, and I went to check the shorter line. The shorter line was a line for some computers where one could go online and buy tickets that printed off from machines below the printers. I bought two tickets, went back and found my temporary travel companion, and we were allowed into the Alhambra, ahead of thousands of people, many of whom would not be allowed into the site that day.





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I have pictures of the crowds, but the Alhambra is best seen around the edges of the crowds. It wasn't designed for thousands of people. It was designed as a royal residence for a few people at the top of the social pyramid and as a fortress from within which their hired thugs could defend them.



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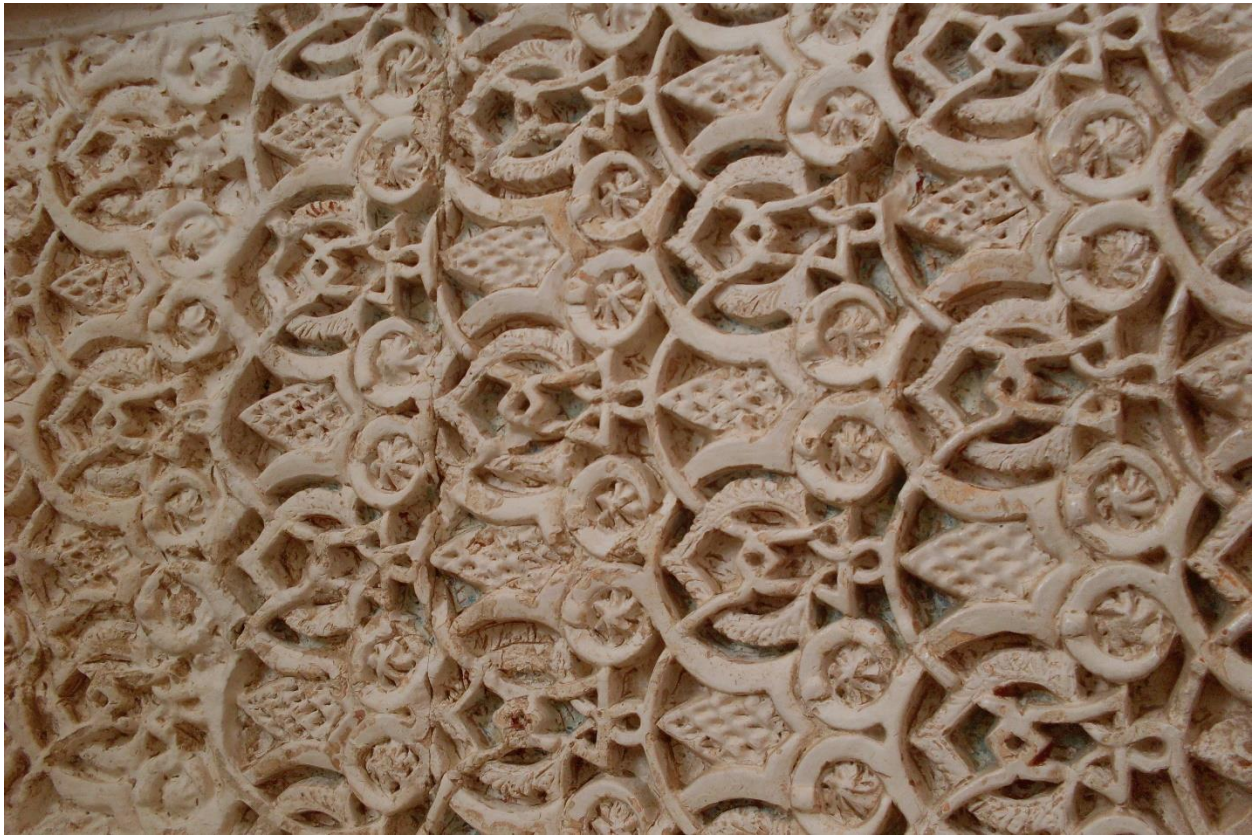
All of the head-swiveling practice from Córdoba was useful again in The El Alhambra. In the El Alhambra, the stone carvings are delicate, detailed, and everywhere. This is a ceiling.





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This is a wall. These people did with stone what most people do with wallpaper.



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The ventilation system is decorative, and these little stars allow for natural light in a small room during most of the day, thanks to differently angled openings.





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A wall that looks like fabric. But it's carved in stone.



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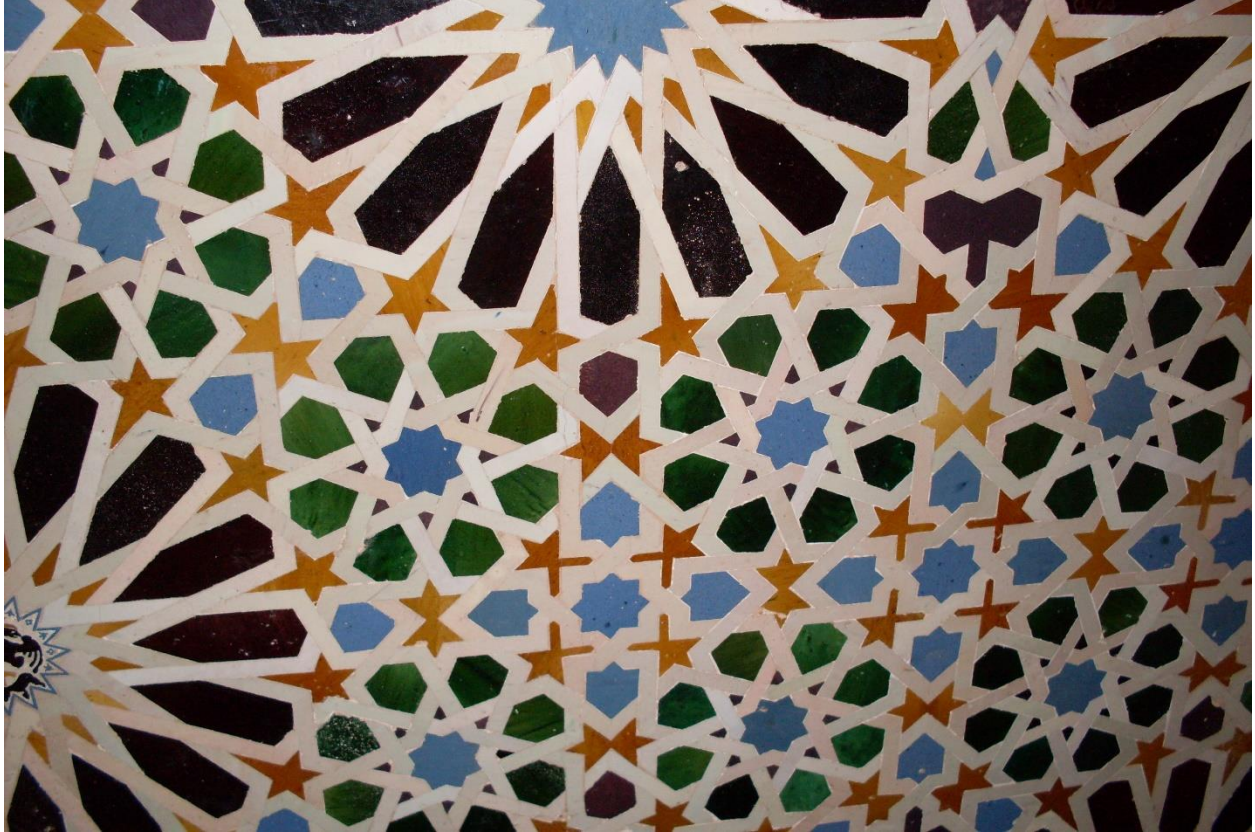
If one becomes tired of looking at the stone walls and ceilings, there is always the tile work. The varying colors made an almost three-dimensional appearance when the entire wall was considered.





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Even more interesting are complex tessellations. These were based on multiples of four, but notice that fives and sixes were also worked into the design. In some parts of the world, tessellations are based on multiples of thirteen, so that the designs don't really repeat in the area being tiled.



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One can tile with curves. M. C. Escher used pencil on paper. The El Alhambra tessellators used stone and mortar.





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A wall that looks like lace. But it's carved in stone.



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Columns and arches that might as well be lace. These are not laser cut. These are hand carved in stone. In this courtyard, the carvings were done to penetrate through the depth of the walls, rather than as design that is shallower than the depth of the stone. The design on the floor, which would be impressive anywhere else, is on the level of cheap linoleum here. The carver probably did the floors as a vacation activity.





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The exterior walls, for defensive purposes, were not so compulsively constructed.



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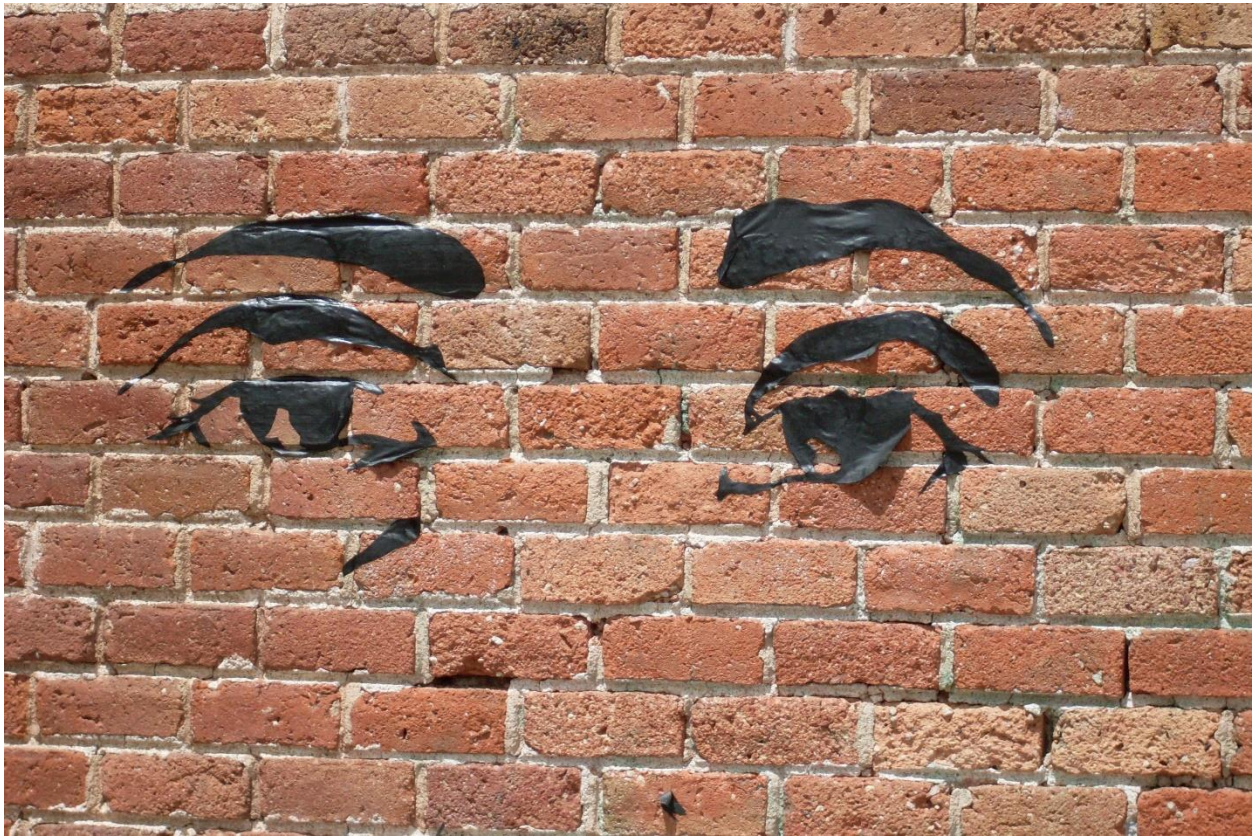
It's worth a walk around the place, too. I'm surprised any movies have been filmed anywhere else. I could imagine this setting working for dystopian sci-fi, rom-com, war dramas, etc.





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I don't have many picture of Madrid, but here's adhesive graffiti. I was in Madrid during a major soccer match between Real Madrid and somebody, not a home game. The pub on the ground floor of the hostel was filled beyond capacity with more people loitering on the stairs and looking in the windows, and I finally understand why people like soccer. It's not the game. It's the drinking. Most people didn't even see when somebody scored. Among the hundreds of people watching, somebody would have been glancing at the TV screen when a goal was made, and that person would cheer, and everyone else would join in cheering on the replays. I didn't get much sleep. I went to many museums, and I wasn't allowed to take pictures, on my camera or off the walls (not to worry: I have fridge magnets!). I went to the Prado, the 28<sup>th</sup> largest art museum in the world. It seemed bigger. The walls were covered in art, but the pieces were not well arranged or lit to enhance viewing. There was a particularly enjoyable Spanish television show that made it to Netflix, *El Ministerio del Tiempo*. In a show about time travel, it's a running theme that everything anyone needs to know about art at any time in history can be learned at the Prado. Probably so.



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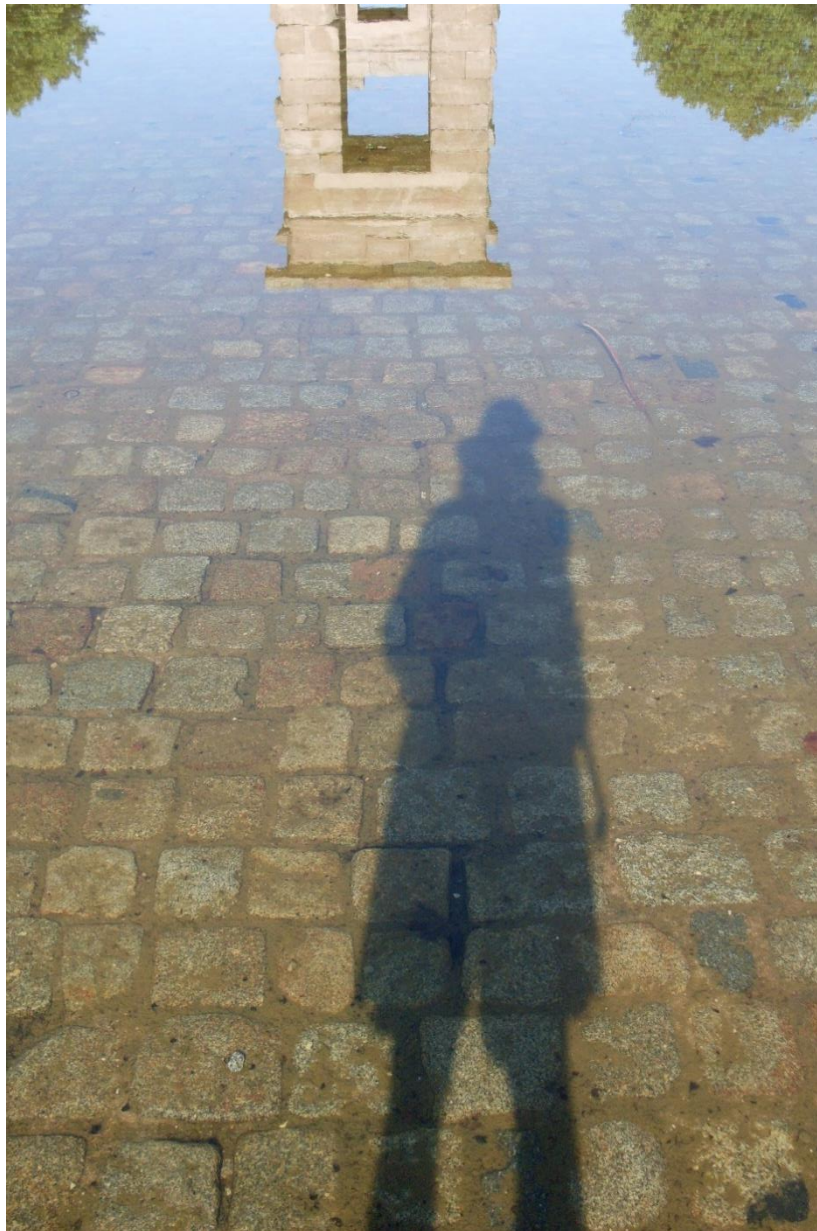
I went to the Espacio Miró, a smaller collection of the works of Joan Miró. It looks like Joan, but it's Joan. That's funny if read in English and Spanish, respectively. I went to the Museo Reina Sofia, where Pablo Picasso's Guernica lives, unlike the people and animals portrayed in that painting. I had no idea. Reading the dimensions of paintings in books is not the same as seeing a painting larger than the area of any apartment I've ever had. That was the last stop of the day. I nearly passed out at the Guernica, maybe because of the Guernica and maybe because of the long day and maybe both.





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This picture and the previous one are at the Temple of Debod, an actual Egyptian temple that was dismantled in Egypt, shipped to Madrid, and reassembled. It is a temple for Isis. She was not moved to Spain. So far as I know, she retired in Egypt and has kept public appearances to a minimum, no doubt spending more time with her family. The Aswan Dam put quite a few antiquities in danger, and Spain was instrumental in helping to preserve and conserve those antiquities. The Temple of Debod was a thank-you gift for the assistance.



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I took a long bus ride to Barcelona. I napped and watched the scenery go by when I was awake. That sort of in-between consciousness was perfect for zipping across most of the country. I was lost temporally, geographically, and consciously.





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A not-so-famous lizard fountain in Barcelona. Hafta love a place with more than one lizard fountain. The more famous one is by Gaudí, a Catalan sculptor. I haven't decided what I think about the Gaudí sculptures, but I didn't like my pictures of anything Gaudí. I was personally miffed that his cathedral remains unfinished. But what is there to do? The guy died before he finished his church. It does seem like there ought to be somebody who can do that kind of work.



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Barcelona has terrific public art. It's an interesting place to walk around, and most of the roads are marked. I didn't have much time in Barcelona, though, because I was moving on to Andorra for some days hiking in the mountains, where I could inspect the ground and plants of another alpine zone. I need to do a better job with Barcelona. Maybe someday.

