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World Heritage in Seville: Cathedral, Alcázar and Archivo de Indias

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The city of Seville, on the banks of the Guadalquivir in south-western Spain, has 136 protected sites and the province of Andalusia has 497. The cathedral, the Alcázar and the Archivo de Indias (Archive of the Indies), a cluster of buildings in the heart of the city, are an integral part of the largest historical urban centre in Europe.

Seville Cathedral.

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The distinctive bell tower of the cathedral, the Giralda, is just under 100 m high.

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Andalusia prides itself in five sites currently inscribed on the World Heritage List: the cities of Cordoba, Granada and Seville, Doñana National Park (1994, 2005), and the Renaissance Monumental Ensembles of Úbeda and Baeza (2003). Prior to the inscription of these sites, the Board of Andalusia had been pursuing a policy of protection of Andalusian historical heritage since the 1980s, when it was entrusted with this responsibility.

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The Cathedral Church of Santa María has been protected since 1928 as a Property of Cultural Interest (Bien de Interés Cultural, BIC), while the Alcázar has enjoyed BIC

protection since 1931. The Archivo de Indias building has been covered by the same declaration since 1983.

UNESCO inscription has linked together these three diversely owned and managed buildings. On the one hand, the cathedral, one of the largest Roman Catholic edifices in the world, belongs to the Church, which has reached an agreement for its conservation with the Commission of Culture of the Board of Andalusia. Those who built this ambitious structure hoped that posterity would view it as *'una obra de locos'* (a work of madmen) – a wish, as it turns out, that was less implausible than it sounds. On the other hand, the Royal Alcázars are managed in their entirety by the Council of Seville, while the Archivo de Indias is owned by the Department of Culture.

Seville's cathedral and Giralda minaret, the Alcázar and the Archivo de Indias form an impressive and coherent whole and illustrate the principal milestones in the history of the city. Together they form a monumental ensemble that unifies and integrates the cityscape. This in turn endows

them with a universal and exceptional value from the historical, aesthetic and artistic points of view, justifying their inscription on the World Heritage List.

The cathedral

In the cathedral, as in all the city's historic buildings, several cultures may be seen to overlap. The interior displays various typologies of Visigoth capitals, while the surviving parts of the original Almohad mosque and the Giralda, the great bell tower that rises to almost 100 metres, delight visitors. A Christian bell tower of Renaissance style, typical of the architect Hernán Ruiz II, was added to the Almohad body of brick trellis-work in the 16th century and culminates in the airy statue known as *El Giraldillo*. More Almohad architecture can still be found to the north of the cathedral, in the ancient courtyard of ablutions. This has become an interior garden, named the *Patio de los Naranjos* (Courtyard of the Orange Trees) which can be reached through the *Puerta del Perdón* (Door of Pardon).



Aerial view of Seville cathedral, Alcázar and Archivo de Indias.

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Public entry to the cathedral is via three great doorways that pierce the principal façade, the portals of Birth, Baptism and Ascension, but also through doorways

traditionally known as the *Portada del Lagarto* (Lizard Door), *Palos* (Sticks), *Campanillas* (Little Bells) and finally, facing the Alcázar, the Doorway of the Prince.

Once inside the cathedral, the visitor is struck by the impression of tinted light diffused by 138 stained-glass windows that illustrate the different stages of the construction of the building. They also provide a splendid introduction to the history of stained glass in the Iberian Peninsula from the 15th to the 20th centuries. Another outstanding feature is the main altarpiece, one of the most significant works of Gothic sculpture and the most important commissioned in Andalusia in the latter part of the 15th century. Its unique appearance can be ascribed to the Flemish artist Pieter Dancart, who initiated the work. It was completed by Jorge and Alejo Fernández Alemán, although it was later

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enlarged by two side panels thus providing work for several Renaissance artists, including Juan Bautista Vázquez. The iconography and organization of the altarpiece retraces the History of Salvation in forty-four reliefs and numerous sculptures set on the intervening columns. It culminates in a Gothic Calvary dating from the late 13th century.

It is impossible to enumerate all the outstanding treasures preserved in the cathedral. Suffice to mention that they include dozens of sumptuous chapels, carvings and sculptures of great value, together with an imposing collection of over 800 paintings, all of them first rate. There is also a fine collection of textiles and liturgical books (both Gregorian and polyphonic chant), and a heritage of 3,000 pieces of gold work that attests to the cathedral's wealth of gems and ecclesiastical finery.

The Metropolitan Council and its Maestro Mayor support various ongoing strategies of restoration and recovery, thanks to funds collected from cultural visits and contributions made by the Department of Culture, the Commission of Culture, the Council of Seville and private bodies. The conservation of the cathedral requires that constant attention be paid not only to the building (restoration of surfaces and pillars and renovation of façades) but also to the interior. Among the latter, the restoration of the altarpieces of the Chapel of the Evangelists and the Chapel of the Marshall by the Andalusian Institute of Historical Heritage (IAPH) deserve special emphasis. The IAPH also devoted seven years to the bronze sculpture *El Giralddillo*. A new structure was created which, while similar to the existing one, stabilized the mechanical behaviour of the sculpture, taking into account the expansion of the materials under the effect of heat and the need to resist corrosion. When this was done, an exhibition was mounted to inform citizens about the restoration of *El Giralddillo*.



Interior of Seville's Alcázar.

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(70,000 visits), and shortly afterwards the statue was lifted back into its original position on the Giralda.

Alcázar

The Alcázar of Seville, an ancient palace that was built by order of Abd Rahman III in the 10th century, has been a royal residence from the time of Alfonso X the Wise to the present day. But the decision to build what is known as the Mudejar Palace was taken in the 14th century, under Pedro I the Cruel, The building, the most complete example of Mudejar architecture, survives to this day and is still admired for its luxury and beauty.

Public access to the Alcázar is through two imposing royal gates, followed by a series of interior courtyards including the *Patio de la Montería* (Courtyard of the Hunt), with its Muslim wall, built by Pedro I who summoned the best carpenters and master builders of Granada and Toledo for the purpose. Next comes the *Patio del Yeso* (Plaster), *Patio de las Doncellas* (Courtyard of the Maidens), *Patio de las Muñecas* (Courtyard of the Dolls), chapels, reception rooms and look-out points, all of which are decorated with rich tapestries, carpets, paintings, tiles and panelled ceilings with ornate Mudejar plasterwork. These open onto gardens which, from the starting point of the original Almohad transept garden,

were developed in the Renaissance around the Pond of Mercury and the Gallery of the Grottesque.

The Alcázar is the most complete example of Mudejar architecture.

The Arbour of the Bedroom or Carlos V Pavilion, a summer house displaying both Mudejar and Renaissance elements, is yet another outstanding element of this group of gardens. In these extensive recreational areas, the natural setting with its ponds, fountains, arbours and grottoes forms a unique complex that makes it one of the most beautiful royal palaces in Spain.

The Board of the Royal Alcázar has constantly supported a line of conservation and restoration that is best exemplified by work done in the Courtyard of the Maidens. The archaeological investigations undertaken by the Board to restore the original landscaping of Pedro I's palace made significant advances in the knowledge of preceding Moorish palaces and solved a number of mysteries touching upon their architectural evolution. Contributions of great interest from a heritage point of view include a better understanding of the



The cupola above the *Salón de los Embajadores* in the Alcázar.



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morphology, functioning and successive transformations of the original Mudejar courtyard.

Archivo de Indias

For centuries Seville was the administrative capital of Spanish America. In view of this and to ensure the management of different mercantile activities, King Philip II built the so-called *Casa de Contratación* (House of Trade), which by the end of the 16th century was known as the Market of Seville. The building was conceived by the distinguished architect and Inspector of Crown Monuments Juan de Herrera, who raised the stone and brick edifice on its square foundation. This design was repeated inside, the building being arranged around a central courtyard which stresses the purity of the stone structure in typical Herreriano style.

The function of the archive changed in 1790, when it became the great library of Hispanic America, the General Archives of the Indies. It preserves all the documents relating to Spanish-American history and still held by Spain, 43,000 files of incalculable value. Hence the importance of the work currently carried out by the archive, which is converting all this material into digital format.

The Department of Culture has undertaken the refurbishing of the building to modernize the facilities, improve the storage of documents and adapt the outer galleries of the upper floor for temporary exhibitions, thus defining an itinerary for visits that covers the entire building. The space for research and the management of the General Archive, in the building known as La '*Cilla*' (The '*Granary*'), has been remodelled to ensure that administrative functions and research are compatible with visits and exhibitions organized within the building.

World Heritage values in Seville

Among the many aspects of this World Heritage inscription, the most unique artistic achievement may well be the former minaret, known as La Giralda because it is crowned by a figure

representing Faith Triumphant, *El Giraldillo* (1172–98). Now a Christian bell tower, the Giralda is a masterpiece of Almohad architecture. The five-naved cathedral, the largest Gothic building in Europe, stands on the site of the Almohad mosque. It has magnificent stained-glass windows, altarpieces, and decorative grilles and chairs. In the 17th century the cathedral was offered a considerable number of sculptures and paintings by the great Baroque masters (Murillo, Valdés Leal, Zurbarán, etc.). Inside, the elliptical space of the Sala Capitular, conceived by Hernán Ruiz, is one of the most interesting architectural spaces of the Renaissance with its elliptical floor plan and magnificent domed vault.

Cultural influences

This enclosure, which embraces both the cathedral and the Giralda, is of exceptional heritage value, as it stands as a symbol and an actual conjunction of different cultures in a unique sacred space. Seville Cathedral possesses a series of typical features that distinguish it from other Gothic cathedrals, due to the superposition of Christian structures, principally in the Gothic and Renaissance styles, raised on Moorish vestiges dating from the Almohad era. These additions, completed by elements dating from the Renaissance, the Baroque and successive periods up to the 20th century, are not only architectural but also concern other artistic disciplines. This makes the cathedral an authentic museum with works of art of the first order. Seville was the avowed model for the cathedrals of Salamanca and Mexico and traces of its influence appear in most cathedrals of the 16th century. The Giralda, the 'Christianized' Almohad tower, also influenced the construction of numerous towers in Spain and the Americas. Undoubtedly this influence on the development of a certain architecture extended over a particularly broad territory, examples of which can be found in such cities as Écija, in the province of Seville and in Puebla, Mexico. Its architecture is interesting because it perpetuates the Mudejar world, but also for its ornamental motifs, which persisted through the centuries (in more or less evolving forms) in numerous buildings and in Mudejar bell towers in Aragon, Castile and Andalusia.



Archivo de Indias.

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The influence of Islam

Seville Cathedral and Alcázar stand as exceptional testimony to Almohad culture and to Christian Andalusia which, from 1248 to the 16th century, remained deeply imbued with Moorish influences. The presence of Islam had been firmly established in the peninsula for eight centuries and this led to a deep interpenetration of the Christian and Islamic ways of life and culture. Its best known symbol is the Mudejar style, an extraordinary synthesis of Moorish and Christian architecture. Both buildings display an intricate blend of various styles and periods. The complex of the Royal Alcázars principally represents Almohad art of Muslim origin, sober, powerful and geometrical, but it also attests to the cultural coexistence of West and East. This is also reflected in Mudejar art, a singular phenomenon found only in Spain, which lasted from the 12th to the 16th centuries and combined the Christian (Romanesque, Gothic and Renaissance) and Muslim artistic trends of the time. This style also travelled to the New World with the introduction of Mudejarism and the coexistence of peoples, religions and civilizations.

Architectural work representative of a historical period

The cathedral, the Alcázar and the Archivo de Indias are associated in a direct and tangible way with an event of universal significance: the discovery of the New World by Christopher Columbus in 1492. Visitors are reminded of this by the tomb of Columbus in the cathedral and by an outbuilding in the Royal Alcázar, known as the 'Admiral's Quarters', where many of his expeditions were planned. The bequest preserved in the Archivo de Indias is also of great importance, as it includes documents of critical importance touching upon the history of the Americas and Asia, making the archives the prime centre for research into the history of the American continent.

Management of public use

Seville's cathedral, Alcázar and Archivo de Indias are places of current interest for travellers and are thus visited by large numbers of tourists. Statistics show that the cathedral and the Alcázar are the attractions most frequented by visitors to

the city. In general, the three World Heritage sites in Seville have developed parallel but independent public visiting systems.

Care has been taken to harmonize public and internal uses of the respective institutions, and the activities of information dissemination and tourist visits with those of conservation, research and administration.

The Archivo de Indias, accessible to the public since 1844, combines this duality, directing its flow of visitors to one of the buildings, while the Alcázar has found a balance between public visits and the preservation of the building by setting a maximum reception capacity of 750 visitors at a time. Due to its great size, the cathedral, which shares the same philosophy of sustainability, does not need to limit capacity.

In conclusion, Seville's World Heritage demonstrates that the city's historical and artistic heritage is far from being on the decline. Here cultural heritage proves to be a dynamic factor that drives social and tourist development. This depends, in turn, on the many symbolic and emblematic aspects revived daily by both citizens and visitors. 🌀