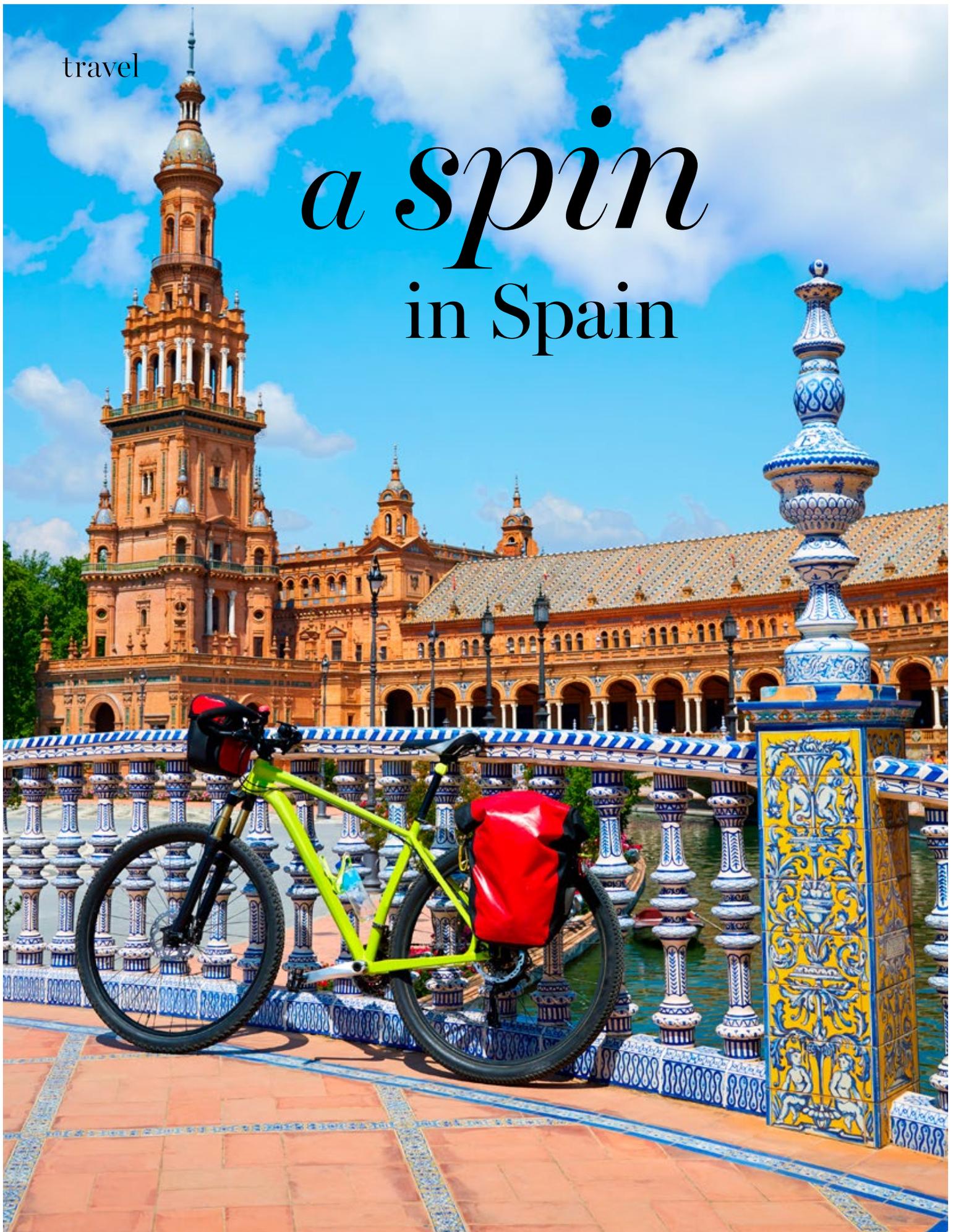


travel

a spin in Spain



A two-wheeled adventure

WORDS + PHOTOGRAPHY SUZANNE MORPHET

“**Y**

our entourage is ready,” jokes Steve, a fit, middle-aged man from Denver who’s on my bicycle tour in Spain.

We’re ready to cycle out of Seville on a sunny October morning and I’m a little concerned that I might get lost, so I’ve asked Steve and his wife, Christina, if I can ride with them until we’re out of the city.

I needn’t have worried. One of our three guides left earlier and sprayed arrows in chalk to mark our route. (Who needs apps, maps and GPS when chalk works like a charm?!)

As we cycle over the cobblestone streets of old Seville, under leafy plane trees and along the banks of the Guadalquivir River, I relax my grip on the handlebars and settle into my saddle.

Passing the Torre del Oro (Tower of Gold), I smile to think that I’m cycling along the same river that Ferdinand Magellan sailed in 1519 on the very first round-the-world voyage.

This is my very first guided cycling tour, and while it’s nothing like sailing into the unknown world, it’s my introduction to the wonderful world of group cycling tours. Even if you come alone—as I have—you enjoy the camaraderie of like-minded people and the support of local guides with a vehicle, should things go awry.

“Get on a bike, follow the arrows and leave your cares behind,” is what Experience Plus likes to say. The other 15 people in my group must believe it, because many are on their third, fourth, even 20th tour with the company. They’re middle-aged to older Americans for the most part, but I’m not the only Canadian. There’s a newly retired lawyer from Victoria, two retired doctors from the Okanagan, and a couple in their 70s from Toronto.

Even though it’s a guided tour, we won’t ride as a group. Instead, we’ll go at our own pace, stopping when and where we want to have lunch or chat with locals over a cappuccino. In the evenings, we socialize—or not—as we like.



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It's this freedom to ride solo that drew me to Experience Plus, a company that began in Italy with one itinerary more than 50 years ago. Today, the two sisters who've taken over the business from their parents offer guided and self-guided cycling tours in 22 countries in Europe, the Caribbean and South America.

I've chosen to join the first half of their Andalusian itinerary, cycling from Seville to Córdoba, two of the most culturally significant cities in Spain. You could drive between them in under two hours, but we'll take a leisurely seven days, pedalling past row upon row of orange and olive trees, climbing into the foothills of the Sierra Morena mountains, and whizzing down roads with tight, hairpin turns and not a vehicle in sight.

One day, I get off my bike several times to observe black Iberian pigs foraging for acorns under oak trees. Starting in December, the fattened pigs will be slaughtered and their meat turned into Spain's famous jamón ibérico. The oak trees are used too, being periodically stripped of their cork bark, which is made into stoppers for wine, fabrics for footwear and countless other products.

Andalusía is also one of the regions where young bulls are raised for fighting. We see them too, standing in the shade of oak trees and swatting flies with their tails. They appear harmless but Montse, one of our guides, warns us at our day's briefing to keep our distance.

"If you need a toilet tree along the way, don't jump over any fences because those bulls, they look very nice, but you don't want to get in there."

Bullfighting is still popular with Spaniards and fights are broadcast on television, as one of the Canadians in our group discovers by accident one evening when she turns on the TV in her room.

"The bull went after the guy on the horse who was stabbing him,"



Photo courtesy ExperiencePlus! Bicycle Tours.



Photo by Roy Finkleman, courtesy ExperiencePlus! Bicycle Tours.



Photo courtesy ExperiencePlus! Bicycle Tours.

she recounts later, nearly in tears, “and then the poor horse fell down and the bull kept attacking the horse!”

“I am not a big fan of that,” says our guide Nico.

But when it comes to other Spanish traditions, we’re all eager to watch. One night in Palma del Río, we join locals at a restaurant with a flamenco guitarist and black-and-white photos of famous flamenco performers covering the walls. When the guitarist begins to play a fast 4/8-count cante, Nico and Montse jump up to dance, their bodies moving sensuously to the beat.

The next morning, in the courtyard of our hotel (a former convent where Christopher Columbus stayed), Montse shows us a simple way to learn one of the dance moves. Standing under an orange tree laden with ripe fruit, she reaches one hand up, picks an orange, pretends to take a bite, then gracefully tosses it away. Ah, if only it were that easy.

We are quick learners when it comes to regional cuisine, enthusiastically devouring salmorejo, tomato soup with bread; paella, a rice dish made with chicken or seafood; and shaved jamón, which is everywhere, of course.

One day, after climbing to the top of the tower in the Castillo de Almodóvar del Río (featured in the seventh season of *Game of Thrones*), I am more hot than hungry, and a juicy tomato salad topped with fresh mozzarella is the perfect lunch. To refuel between meals, I sometimes buy a slice of cold tortilla de patatas, or potato omelette.

Months later, the landscapes and flavours of Andalusía still linger, but it was the cycling and the shared experiences that turned the trip into an adventure I’ll never forget.

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