



Three Days at Alhambra

In the south of Spain there endures the memory of a people who were vanquished and forced from the Peninsula more than 500 years ago. A hundred years ago visitors would claim to see the remnants of the Moslem Moors in the character of the contemporary Spaniard and even attributed the *backwardness* of Spain to this influence. No one continues to make this claim for although undoubtedly there are remnants from the North Africans, as well as the French, English and Italians and perhaps even the Romans, the Spaniard is now unapologetically Spanish. Yet the memory remains and draws to the Mezquita Mosque of Cordoba, the Giralda of Seville, the Alhambra of Granada and other sites scattered about the country, tens of thousands of tourists a year.

It was the early eighth century when Arabs and North Africans, under the banner of the up and coming Islam, crossed the narrows of the Mediterranean and set foot in Spain. Conquest was quick and easy, coupled with the fervor of the new religion the Visigoths offered an easy and divided prey and between 711 and by 713 the Moslems had conquered most of the Peninsula. Once the Moslems settled into Spain they were



ruled by the distant Fatimid Caliphate of Damascus however with its demise in the tenth century the Moors fractured into petty competing Kingdoms each looking to whatever allies they could find to maintain their advantage, many turned to the neighbouring Christian kingdoms. Despite the perception of the indomitable foes of Christianity and Islam in constant struggle

there were times of peace, and times of cooperation, Moslems more than once sided with Christian Spaniards against others of the crescent in wars of advantage, not of faith. The Christians made better use of these alliances and by the early thirteenth century the *Reconquista* was well under way, although not as swift as the two year long conquest by the Moslems, the Christians had started their inevitable but slow, reclaiming of the peninsula.

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Cordoba and Seville fell by the mid thirteenth century leaving a rump Kingdom of Granada to linger on until Ferdinand and Isabella, the patrons of Columbus, determined to expel Moorish rule from the Peninsula. By the 1480s their efforts were in full force, Ronda fell in 1485, Malaga in 1487 and finally Granada, which held out by a hope and a prayer until 1492, the year Columbus set sail for the Americas. Popular history may recall that all Muslims and Jews were herded to the Straits of Gibraltar and sailed off to Africa. But they were allowed to remain under treaty until some years later, the treaties broken, they rose in rebellion and were finally forced into conversion or departure.

The fractures that were the features of the earlier Visigoths and later Spanish were major factors in the fall of Granada and the Moors of Spain could not overcome their differences to save the Nasrid dynasty. The ruler of Granada, when it fell, was Mahomet Abdalla, better known as Boabdil and also El Chico. He was also known as *El Zogoybi* or *the unfortunate* and the name was appropriate for upon his birth the astrologers declared that he would be the last Moslem ruler



of Granada. In an attempt to circumvent fate, Boabdil's father, Muley Aben Hussan, tried to sideline and even kill his son, fortunately Boabdil's mother had loftier expectations for the boy. Ayxa, more familiarly known as *the chaste* or *La Horra*, was not the image of motherly warmth. 'A throne or a grave' Washington Irving was able to quote her some 350 years later 'for a king there is no honourable medium' and failed to present alternative career opportunities to the boy. For obvious reasons he chose the throne but perhaps Boabdil was not suited to rule lacking the decisiveness and ruthlessness of his father. His overbearing mother did save him from his father's attempt to kill him and she advised him when his uncle opposed him for the crown of the Kingdom. When his fortunes were down, the Spanish harboured him while his uncle ruled and when he was able to take the crown it was with their support, his son

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surrendered as hostage. In the end he was betrayed by his overlords and forced from the stump of his kingdom in 1492.

There is a famous image that takes places at a pass still known as the *Moor's Last Sigh* when Boabdil turned and lamented his last glance of Granada, 'You do well to weep like a woman, for what you failed to defend like a man.' I can see his eyes roll as these were the words of his dear old mom and I know that the sigh was not for Granada, but that during the negotiations with the Spaniards for surrender, they insisted that she leave with him, perhaps as a final insult. Boabdil lingered on an estate in Spain until 1496 when he left for Morocco, it is suggested he died in battle when fighting for the King of Fez.

The last years of Moslem rule was from Granada or more specifically from the Alhambra, the complex of gardens, forts and palaces above Granada. The Alhambra was started as early as the eleventh century however it was after the Spaniards started to tighten the noose in the thirteenth century that the complex started to take on the form that we are now familiar with. When the Nasrid capital of Cordoba fell in 1236, the seat of government was moved to Granada and Mohammed I began construction and expansion. Since that time, the Alhambra has been, and continues to be, a work in



progress as successive rulers made their own alterations and the Christians continued to do so. Charles V added a palace smack in the middle of the complex, and French soldiers destroyed some of the towers when they occupied the complex early in the nineteenth century. According to Robert Irwin the Alhambra has been used, at various turns, 'as an extra-judicial asylum for

debtors. At other times the buildings housed galley slaves, invalid soldiers, prisoners, convicts and gypsies and were also thought to be the ideal place for storing gunpowder.' It has also been used to pen animals and as 'a kind of agricultural village.'

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The Alhambra has become the iconic symbol of the Moslem presence in Europe. There is nothing comparable, as far as I am aware, in the Balkans, Sicily, or the south of Italy, other places in Europe where Islam established a foothold. Seville has left us almost nothing and Cordoba has left us the Mezquita Mosque. But Granada has left us the Alhambra, which has been the destination of travelers, artists and writers for centuries and it is where I too had the opportunity to visit.

The mystique of Alhambra has been largely created by the American writer and diplomat, Washington Irving, who *discovered* the Alhambra in the early 1800s. Already an established writer Irving departed from Seville on horseback in May 1829 and upon arrival in Granada was granted permission to stay in the rooms of the Alhambra. He lived there for three months amongst those who settled into the palace and during this time he had access to the Jesuit library at the University in Granada. From his sources he produced, over the next few years, three volumes, one on the history of Columbus, one on the Spanish re-conquest of Granada and another on the myths and fables of the Alhambra. It is the later two which concern us here.

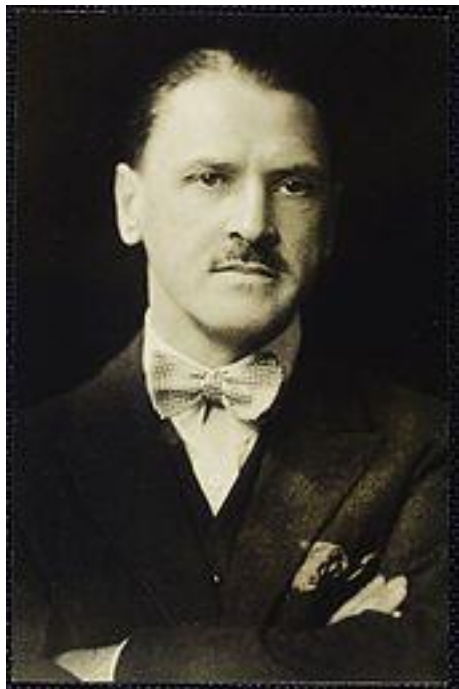


Irving's writings have been referred to as *romantic history* or *historical fiction*. Perhaps we could drop the history and call it *romantic fiction*, we need to take caution with his *history*. His *conquest* of Granada is an historical account and the *facts* that it contains may hold a balance of veracity but some of his construction is simply outlandish, the conversations and sentiments he records happened more than 300 years prior and cannot be taken seriously. The tales of the Alhambra are nothing more than that, stories that Irving has concocted, from local legends, during his three month stay there. There are tales of buried treasures, magic spells, sorcerers and black magic, secret passages and the love of three Moslem princesses for three captured Christians. There is also the tale of The Pilgrim of Love, an epitaph by which all males, ancient or modern, hope to be remembered. These are the images that have drawn

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people to Alhambra. Irving himself indicated that the conquest of Granada is 'a tract of history but too much overgrown with the weeds of fable,' he did nothing to improve this. He was the Disney of the 19th century, taking an event and making it his own leaving little or nothing of the actual event. I do not condemn this, he was an entertainer, not an historian. Regardless of his literary worth it was Irving who has left us the mystique.

William Somerset Maugham travelled through Andalusia as a young man 70 years later and he must have certainly read Irving's *Tales of the Alhambra* for he expressed that half of his experiences were with the remnants of the Moors from 500



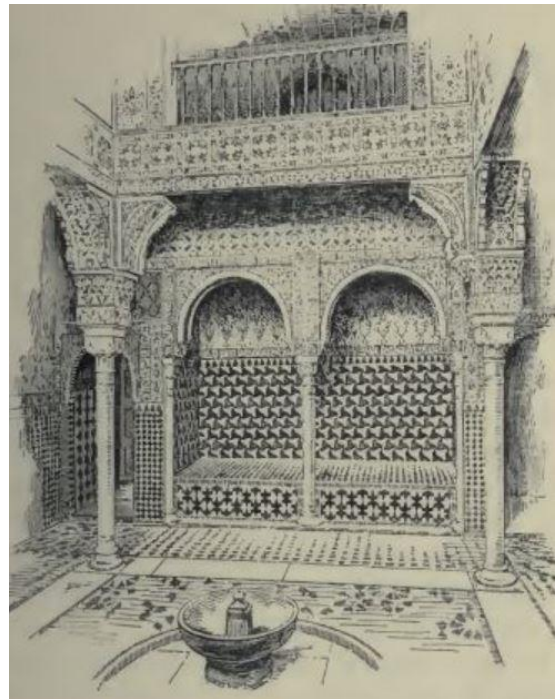
years previous, 'to this day the peasant at his plough sings the same quavering lament that sang the Moor' and of Cordoba 'absolutely a Moorish city... you are astonished to meet people in European dress rather than Arabs in shuffling yellow slippers.' The man gushes things of Moordom and I could quote at length his praises of the long gone culture and how Spain has only suffered from their departure. He found nothing of Granada that appealed to him except the Alhambra which he call a 'magical place' which brings to his mind the Arabian Nights, Sinbad the Sailor and Hasan of Bassorah. On another instance he recalls Scherehadze. He stretched, whether in his own mind or only for the benefit of his readers, to find these

connections for Sinbad and Hasan sailed the Indian Ocean and Scheherezade was Persian, not Arabic. His connections are at best tenuous or fabricated. Somerset Maugham takes notice of other aspects during his travels in Spain. He was 'touched' by the poverty he encountered, and the locals seemed to be quite accommodating in presenting this to him and bearing it all quite stoically. He talks of the bullfights and of flamenco and the Spanish desire to dance which he attributes to the influence of the Moors and he once, very briefly, mentions the Gypsies. But these are essentially footnotes to all thing Moorish. (In later years upon reflection of these writings Somerset Maugham was 'bitterly conscious of its defects'.)

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I too thought I could travel to the south of Spain in search of this Moorish mystique. As part of my research, in addition to Washington Irving, I picked up a copy of a travel guide from the 1850s. Its author, Richard Ford, felt that for Spain 'a whole year would scarcely suffice to make the grand and complete tour.' Fortunately we were only doing Lisbon and Andalusia, so the ten days available to us would suffice, we had a few advantages to make up the time. The flight from Toronto to Lisbon was only eight hours, to travel from the English port of Southampton to Gibraltar the voyage was six days however provided the opportunity to stretch one's legs and a few more options for food. If given the choice I would sail and take the year for 'the grand and complete tour.'

Irving spent three months living at the Alhambra as well as time in Seville and Madrid. Richard Ford was able to stay two summers in the Alhambra, and he was, it seems a long time resident in Spain. Somerset Maugham, at the end of the nineteenth century had time to meander through the south, as did Irving Brown in his search for the Gypsy twenty years later. After his two summers in the Alhambra, Richard Ford indicated that 'The artist should live up in the Alhambra where he will always find a lodging'. How did these guys manage this? I have three weeks vacation and two children that I'd like to spend this time with. Ford includes hints for the *Idler and Man of Pleasure*, which appeals to me, however my limited time denies me the opportunity to idle. Books such as his were written for a certain class, people who through fortune or family enabled them to idle more than I.



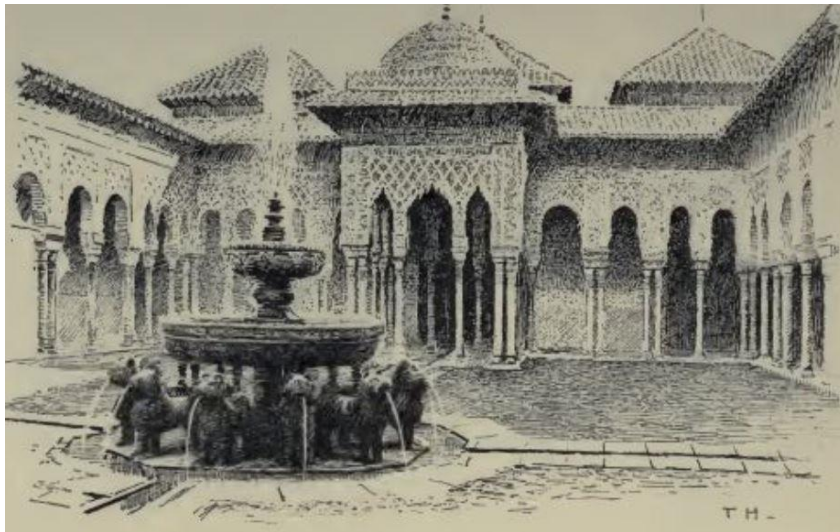
Irving was from a large family and his brothers were willing to support him in his writing. They ran a trade business which, when times were hard, Washington was called into service while overseas. One of his brothers acquired for him a desk job with the United States navy, but he turned it down to focus on his writing. His stay at the

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Alhambra was cut short as he had to take up a consular position in Madrid, although his duties were not too taxing as he still had the opportunity to research and write, regardless, life in the civil service must have been a nuisance.

Somerset Maugham received less encouragement from his family so he wrote in spite of them, perhaps in secret. Regardless he was of sufficient talent to support himself with his writing and although he studied medicine he was never forced to use this knowledge. His schedule was his own and he was able to travel throughout Europe, Asia and to America. Of Irving Brown I can find little information, he seems to have been an academic and had funding that allowed him to live for months among the Gypsies pretending to be one of them. Robert Ford I suspect had business interests in Spain that allowed him to stay long term in a foreign land and research and write about the land in which he resided.

This is the situation that I'd like to be in, but in my 50 years I haven't quite figured out how to do it. My brother is a hell of a guy but I don't think he'd be willing to support



me while I established my writing career and traipsed about the globe, but I've never asked. My government hasn't seen a sufficient measure of talent to send me around the world in their employ. It seems that I've been waiting for the

opportunities to present themselves but either these opportunities have not arisen or I've not been paying attention. So I'm left with my three weeks a year to see bits and pieces of the world, I'm not ungrateful, although jealous of others who travel more, and I'll keep trying to make my travels and those of my family, a larger part of my life.

It was fortunate that these visitors had time available for they had no choice but to travel by horse. Ibn Battuta, when he visited in the mid fourteenth century, travelled from Gibraltar to Ronda and Granada after crossing from Africa, he also had to put up

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with marauding Christians. There really were no options available to him and this did not change much for Washington Irving when he took six days to ride from Seville to Granada in the 1820s. Although he may have occasionally stayed in an inn or home he often slept in the open, relying upon his guides for hunting or procuring food along the way.

Shortly after Irving's journey the trains became a more familiar site in southern Spain and Richard Ford at mid-century indicated that 'it is no longer necessary, or even expedient, to perform any considerable portion of the journey on horseback, though that mode of travelling still has a charm in certain seasons of the year, and for adventurous travelers having unlimited time and money at command.' But he did recommend that one travel the trains well provisioned with 'a flask of good brandy', a metal teapot as well as a luncheon basket with a bottle of wine for 'the supply of food is not always abundant.'

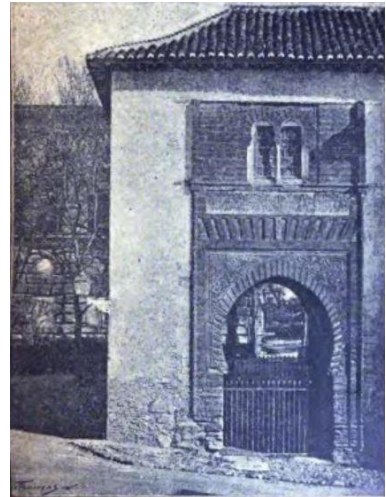
Somerset Maugham apparently had the 'time and money at command' and despite the presence of train routes he rode by horse from Seville circuitously to Ecija, he even carried a loaded pistol to add a bit of 'adventure' to the journey. Even the locals he encountered wondered why he did not take the train. He hoped to see the heart of Andalusia where its 'antique character' had been preserved. It took him, it seems, three or four days to make the journey, riding into towns and looking for accommodation, at times staying at inns or *posadas* that were little more than stables. He didn't mention travelling with a guide, but he may have omitted this in his writing to add adventure. He didn't follow Ford's advice and take a packed meal and had to eat where and when he could, finding the food barely palatable. In the 1920s Robert Irwin did not even consider riding a horse and took the trains.

Riding a horse through Andalusia sounds quite appealing, meandering through the countryside my *jamon*, bread, olives and flask of brandy in my saddle-bag, and finding open ground under the star filled Mediterranean skies in which to sleep. There were factors that worked against this. Horses and I don't communicate well, I've been thrown from a horse in Mexico City and have received severe saddle sores in Cappadocia and while I stood under open sky below Ronda in forty degrees I realized that this whimsical fantasy be best left unfulfilled. Regardless we had ten days to make

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our trip, we were on a schedule and there were no options to break it, our rooms were booked months ahead and had been paid for. None of this wandering into town hoping that a spot might be available, our GPS told us exactly where we were going, from the Lisbon airport we hit the motorway, jetlagged and deprived of sleep, something that Washington Irving and other travelers never had to deal with. At 130 kilometers an hour we were passed by others doing 150 and more, no doubt they had never read Irving, Somerset Maugham or Richard Ford.

The eighteenth century traveler did not have to show up in Spain unprepared and begin his planning upon arrival, there was an abundance of information available to read prior to departure, or better, en route. Today we have readily available, Lonely Planet, Fodors and others, in the eighteenth century they had the Baedeker which had editions dealing with much of Europe and the Americas. Thomas Roscoe produced the *The Tourist in Spain* in 1836 and there was also the previously mentioned *A Handbook For Travellers in Spain* by Richard Ford. These old guidebooks dealt with topics that interest us today, accommodations, food, customs, sites and events. Most appealing for me was the previously mentioned section in Richard Ford's guide for the *Idler and Man of Pleasure*. There are hints for invalids, how Spain is good for those with certain conditions but not for those who do not wish to rough it. There are hints for women 'Ladies will find it advantageous and agreeable to confine themselves to a black dress' which would be considered odd today. Although some of the hassles have changed they are considered in both editions from 200 years ago and their modern versions. Absent from these old books are hints for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgendered traveller.



They talk of travel times, 8 days from Southampton to Gibraltar, as opposed to 8 hours from Toronto to Lisbon. The poorly maintained Royal Roads that spread out from Madrid. These guide books are richly detailed beyond any of the guidebooks we have today, but they were meant for a more limited client, those who had resources to travel and the time while enroute to sit and read. From Richard Ford, 'But the pleasure of the

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remembrance, and the benefits derived by travel, are commonly in inverse ratio to the ease and rapidity with which the journey is performed.'

In these travel books and amongst the nineteenth century traveler, the Spaniard of the day did not fair well. The American Washington Irving, if he had any negative



thoughts about the Spaniard, he kept these to himself, the English were much less circumspect. Richard Ford couldn't decide whether to blame the Moors for their character or the Spaniards themselves. Somerset Maugham found them vain and lazy and could find no foreigners who had a good word to say, although he did find them to be well mannered. Irving Brown, in his search for the Gypsy had little to say about the contemporary Spaniard except that they received their colour from the Moor and the Gypsy. It would be more than another 100 years for political correctness to set in and

your modern Fodors or Lonely Planet would not consider such derogatory claims and most modern travellers would not tolerate this. I did read that those of Granada would be rather rude and I encountered one such episode, but there is little that now pastes a people in a wholly negative character. Perhaps I did not look hard enough.

I kept my eyes open for the Moorish Spaniard but sightings eluded me, whatever the Spaniard or Andalusian or Granadan may have been 150 years ago they are now thoroughly Spanish. Their dress is modern, there is no black dress as recommended by Richard Ford, manners are universal and their outlook engaging. I did see women with the Muslim hijab but like me they were tourists, not moors exactly, but likely Moroccans or Tunisians, and to guide them the road signs near Granada were in Arabic as well as Spanish and English. At the base of the Ablacin, the hills opposite the Alhambra, the narrow and ancient streets are lined with shops run by Moroccans and other north Africans selling tin good, linens, hookahs and other tourist bri-a-brac that are found

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throughout Spain. Tourists fill the tea shops that have a north African decor drinking tea lattes and slushies with flavours from Africa, India and China.

So my search, in the short time I had, came down to the Alhambra. Despite its greatly altered state the Alhambra does provide an image of Islam, although there are sites in North Africa, the middle-east and central Asia that would probably offer a better display of living Islamic culture and its history, The Aya Sophia in Istanbul, Umayyad Mosque in Damascus or the Imam Square of Esfahan in Iran come to mind. Those who occupied it over the centuries cared little for the history of the place, slaves, convicts and animal keepers probably dwelt little upon the past and its Moslem heritage. French occupiers blew up part of the complex, earthquakes have also taken their toll. So the connection with the past is tenuous, the stones, brick, and timber is the dead reminder that remains, but there is something more that takes us there and it is this mystique. The Alhambra is a vast structure, or series of structures that occupies one of the two hills that overlook the city of Granada. The other hill, the Albaizin, served as the neighbourhood of the Alhambra where labourers, trades people and merchants lived and worked. There are three parts to the Alhambra, the Generalife are large gardens



with the smell of oranges in the air, a spot presumably for the rulers to relax. There is the Alcazaba which was the military part of the complex with towers, at least what remains of them, that overlook Granada and the plains beyond. Then there is the Nasrid palace a jumble of residences, official halls, meeting rooms, religious centers and smaller gardens in which many of the room's uses are currently only guessed at. It is the Nasrid palace that is the focus of any tour to the complex.

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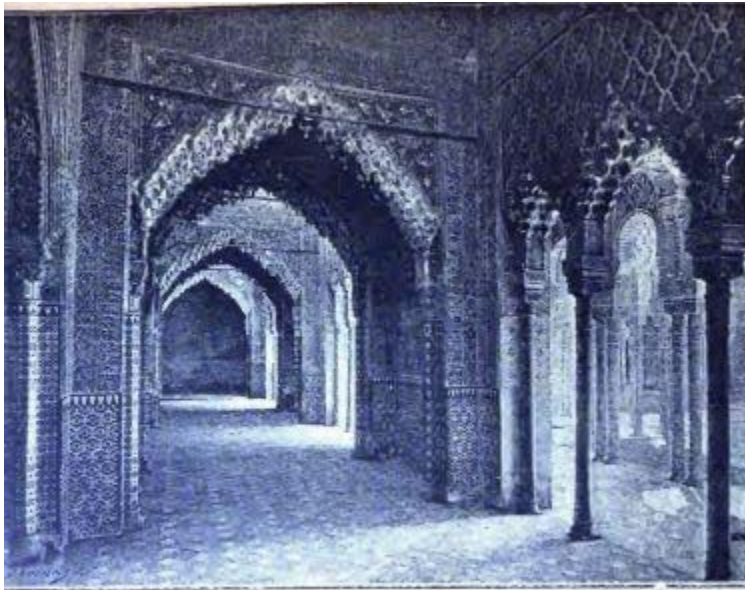
There is, as Robert Irwin points out, no overall design to the palaces, they have been added to, altered and removed as those who occupied them saw fit. Although such little of the Nasrid palace survives as it was first built it is perhaps a surprise that so much of it actually remains considering all that it has gone through. The Alhambra has, until the last century or so, been a living community with changes taking place as best suited the inhabitants. The Alhambra was treated as one's own for each of the successive occupiers, and each felt the liberty to add and reduce as they saw fit. Changes were made by each of the Nasrid rulers, the Christian monarchs, the French who occupied the grounds in addition to the earthquakes and scourge of history. How many of us have declined to renovate our home because we thought that someone someday may find an historical interest in how we lived, not to mention our neighbours trying to blow up our watchtowers. So the Alhambra has been saved and turned into a soulless shell of an Islamic palace and town.

Despite the claims of those who could feel the *Moorishness* of the Alhambra I was not able to conjure up this sense despite the ornate stucco and the tiles often associated with Islam. The one thing that is missing is the Moor himself, the empty shell of the buildings are lost without the living breathing Moor. The *Patronato de la Alhambra y Generalife*, the body that oversees the Alhambra, could hire north Africans to dress in Moorish garb and circulate for photos and to answer questions, but this would be a sham. At best some furnishings might add to the scenario, during actual use by the Moslems, carpets, hangings and pillows would have been present, but these are tucked away in a museum. Perhaps the Court of Lions could have offered some atmosphere but the Lions had been removed and the court was in disarray when I visited (perhaps I could write about the places I have visited which have been under restoration). Robert Irwin referred to it as the most beautiful building in the world.

The real problem with the Alhambra, as in so many places, are the tourists. I have read that 6000 tourists can be accommodated in the palaces on any day. Based on my simple math of those in line and of the entrance times I believe this to be reasonably accurate. The flow of people are simply too voluminous and rooms too crowded to give one the solitude and frame of mind simply to take it all in, let alone to check their notes on the details that they had hoped to consider. My visit was in early

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August, high season in Europe, everyone has descended on a spot in the south, should I return it will be when the traffic is less. But what is the *Patronato* to do? The ticket revenue, I hope, goes into restoration, maintenance and researches of the complex and to reduce the volume would limit these resources. There should, I believe, be a simple entrance exam for those who wish to enter the palace although nothing too taxing, perhaps: 1. What was the religion of those who built the palaces, 2. Who expelled the Moors, 3. Who was the last Moorish king, 4. Which Moslem King was allied to Pedro the Cruel and what did they enjoy for breakfast when they met (Three out of four would suffice). This would deter the disinterested, those who drop by because it is in the guidebook, or those groups who follow the little yellow flag and come and go on



SALA DE LOS REYES.

chartered buses. I would gladly have paid two or three times the entrance fee if the crowds were diminished in like proportions. This is a reluctant suggestion for similar questions would have denied me entrance to the Vatican

There are means for the common tourist to escape the crowds, one is to come off season, another is to take the

night tour of the palaces. This is when the rooms seem to display themselves best, with the simple lighting and the greatly reduced traffic, one can take a bit more time and solace to appreciate the atmosphere. The court of Myrtles at night left me with the greatest impression, with the moon above the Comares palace in the clear Granada sky. Of the *Mirador of the Lindaraxa* overlooking the garden, it would have been ideal for solitude. I can't determine if the Alhambra at night brought me closer to the elusive Moor or I was simply impressed by my surroundings, either way I can hesitantly say that I was enchanted, a feeling that I do not easily encounter. I was able to experience this for a couple of hours with diminished crowds, Washington Irving, Richard Ford and William Somerset-Maugham could experience this for days, or even weeks, essentially

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in solitude, this is an injustice that shall never be rectified. In the 1920s Irving Brown found that Granada was not overrun by tourists, and that each time he visited the Generalife he was the 'sole admirer'.

My search for the Moor was not complete. I had nine days in Spain and Portugal, three days in Granada, and a few hours at the Alhambra, I am sure that I missed a few of the traces that remain. On the motorways I could see castles and watchtowers that I could not visit, cities and towns that had to be bypassed, Anteguera, Malaga, Ecija and Coin where indices of the valiant Moors and Christians who fought and died for the whims and vanities of their masters and where their presence may be encountered. But I could not linger.



I sat in a cafe in Lisbon, my flight home less than 48 hours away and my two children, well cared for in our absence, happy, but I think eager to see me, I was absolutely eager to see them and a bit impatient to return. It used to be that I was always reluctant to return, always planning my next trip before my plane would land. Our next voyage, to Chile is already in the works, this time with friends and children, but now, for the first time, I will be happy to go home. And on Monday I return to the routine of my employment, that activity that gets me by until I travel again.

I did not chance to become familiar with any of the Spaniards, we chatted with waiters and asked directions but did not make a connection, we cannot recall any names. Our best conversations were with Italians, Germans and a few

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English. Washington Irving, William Somerset-Maugham, Irving Brown and Richard Ford all had time to know people of the Alhambra, Granada and Andalusia. They were in the homes of Spaniards, ate with them and enjoyed their amusements conversing in the native tongue. These are the advantages of time which I did not have.

Andy Hodgins Jan 27, 2012

