

HUELVA
LA LUZ
Andalucía

Columbian Sites



La Rábida

The time was the morning of the third August 1492 and the place the confluence of the Tinto and Odiel Rivers, where, from the beginning of time, their waters have flowed together before emptying into the vast Atlantic Ocean; the event, three vessels setting sail toward an uncertain destination, and equally uncertain destiny. The expert seamanship of a handful of men, the blessings of the monks at La Rábida Monastery and a commission from the Catholic Monarchs guided Admiral Christopher Columbus in his grand feat – the crossing of the ocean to a new continent. This exceptional spot in southern Spain, meeting point for Tartessians, Phoenicians, Romans and Arabs, has stood by its Colombian ambition and tradition ever since.

La Rábida Franciscan monastery was a silent witness to Columbus' heroic achievement. Its monks provided the Admiral with lodging and support and were so enthralled by his venturesome quest that they interceded for him in Queen Isabella's court. The modest appearance of this Christian monastery belies its historic importance, for its interiors hold the living memory of the region's Americanist tradition.



Before the monastery was founded over 500 years ago, the hill on which it perches had successively been the site of a Phoenician sacrificial altar, a Roman temple to the goddess Proserpina and even a Muslim mosque fortress or “rápita”, from which its present name derives. A national monument since 1856, the building that has reached us has undergone substantial rehabilitation over the centuries, particularly after the Lisbon earthquake in 1755.

The Mudéjar (Muslim under Christian rule) style church, which boasts a splendid coffered ceiling and several original frescoes from the era, houses a tiny chapel with an alabaster statue of Our Lady of Miracles, to whom the sailors from Palos de la Frontera prayed before embarking on their oceanic venture. In the eighteenth century, a second storey was added to the original Mudéjar style cloister to protect the monastery and its inhabitants from pirates. A stroll through the chapter house, the refectory or the library, whose impressive historic archives include a world map charted by Juan de la Cosa, inevitably evokes scenes of an unknown and visionary Christopher Columbus discussing his theories of navigation and his nautical projects with the monks. A few grains of soil and the flags of all the countries in America are zealously custodied within these whitewashed walls, which also encompass a small but delightful courtyard brimming with potted plants and decorated with murals of Columbian scenes painted by Daniel Vázquez Díaz, an artist from nearby Huelva.



La Rábida has been home, since 1892, to the monolithic Column of the Discoverers and hosts the International University of Andalusia's La Rábida Ibero-American Headquarters. Year after year, this institution's ambitious training programmes strengthen bonds with students and researchers from the other side of the Atlantic.

The Ibero-American Forum is an auditorium seating 4,000 that also houses exhibition, conference and screening rooms, making it one of Andalusia's major convention centres.

Blending perfectly with its surroundings, and despite its modern eclectic design, building finished in 1991 is heir to Greek and Roman theatres. The complex consists in a large outdoor square – or forum – that leads up to an open air auditorium with comfortable seating whose interiors accommodate a convention hall and exhibition centre. Its summer programme, a continuation of the La Rábida Ibero-American Music Festival, features a wide variety of different musical styles, interpreted by leading performers. The José Celestino Mutis Botanical Gardens located on the west slope of the hill is an inviting place to stroll while viewing the most characteristic local and American flora.



The compound is known for the exuberance of the contrasting colours and shapes of the many plants growing there, and for the refreshing sensation generated by its lakes and brooks. In its greenhouse, temperature and humidity are kept constant to simulate the tropical rain forest environment appropriate for its exotic plants.

Across from the botanical garden, replicas of Columbus' three vessels are docked on the banks of the Tinto River: the two caravels Pinta and Niña and the larger Santa María. The vessels are moored on a semi-circular dock known as Muelle de las Carabelas (Caravel Wharf), in a setting typical of Colombian times. This building also houses a standing exhibition on the fifteenth century showing Columbus' correspondence with the Catholic Monarchs and navigational charts, and highlighting the instruments that made the oceanic crossing possible.

Finally, a 20-minute audiovisual show carries viewers back to 1492 and embarks them on a virtual voyage with Columbus, conveying the hopes, worries and uncertainties that haunted the admiral and his courageous crew. Nearby are the Muelle de la Reina (Queen's Wharf), named in honour of Regent María Cristina who presided its opening during the festivities commemorating the fourth centenary of the Discovery of America, and the monument to a milestone in the history of aviation: the 1926 Spanish Plus Ultra hydroplane crossing from Palos de la Frontera to Buenos Aires.



Natural Surround

La Rábida is located amidst naturescapes of great ecological value, most of which have remained unaltered since Columbus and his seamen set sail from here in their New World venture. The Odiel Marshes, the Domingo Rubio Estuary and the Palos and Las Madres Lagoons are all listed as protected properties and each constitutes an excellent excuse to visit the region; the entire area falls, of course, under the influence of Doñana, one of Spain's natural gems and a World Heritage Site.

The Odiel Marshes stretch eastward from the colossal Monument to Discoverer Faith, a work authored by sculptress Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in 1929 that towers 37 metres over the water at a spot known as Punta del Sebo. These 7,000 hectares of estuary, channels, lagoons and beaches comprise one of Europe's most prominent wetlands. The "La Calatilla" Visitors' Centre on Bacata Island furnishes all manner of information on the marsh and arranges guided tours by boat or SUV around the protected area. In any event, the access road to the Juan Carlos I Breakwater, which cuts across the entire marsh from east to west, affords visitors a view of its serene beauty as well as of some of its most distinguished inhabitants: spoonbills, flamingos, ospreys and countless other swamp and sea fowl.



The lower part of these wetlands constitute a typical marshy ecosystem influenced by the tides and providing a habitat for salt water species. The upper portion is a fresh water wetland flanked by reeds, rush, nut sedge and bulrush and topped off by a pine and cork tree grove. Its well conserved remains of a Mediterranean thicket are a favourite hunting grounds for the pardel or Spanish lynx. Bird observatories are strewn all along the estuary and a signed footpath running between the roads that connect Palos de la Frontera and Moguer to Mazagón provides an enticing opportunity to absorb all the beauty and calm that these lands have to offer.

Travellers going from La Rábida to Mazagón will see, off to the left, a chain of lagoons of enormous ecological value, in particular for the fauna that finds shelter and rest there in its constant to and fro between the Odiel and Doñana Marshes. Their waters teem with ducks, herons and the shy and evasive otter. La Primera de Palos, La Jara, Las Madres and La Mujer are among the lagoons comprising this fragile ecosystem that co-exists in equilibrium with intensive strawberry farming, the area's "red gold".



Palos de la Frontera

The city that lent its men, its money and its ships for the American venture has proudly proclaimed its Columbian mission every since. In the month of May 1492 a village meeting was called to read a Royal Order asking for weapons and sailors to accompany Christopher Columbus in his pursuit of a commercial route to the "West Indies". Gothic-Mudéjar style St George the Martyr Church, outside whose doors the meeting was held, looks much the same today as it did to the astonished fifteenth century villagers who, in their prayers on that day and those that followed, implored their patron saint to bless the crossing.

The building's simple and austere architecture is relieved by the socalled Puerta de los novios (wedding gate) and its distinctly Mudéjar brick ogee arch. Among its treasures inside are an alabaster thirteenth century statue of Saint Ann and an indisputably Tuscan style, seventeenth century ceramic altarpiece. It also has Renaissance frescoes with scenes depicting St George, the crowning of the Virgin and St James the Apostle.



On the road that connects the church to Moguer there is a fountain known as La Fontanilla, a charming little thirteen century brick pavilion where ships would fill their water tanks before setting sail. Not far from here is the Casa de la Misericordia (House of Mercy), known at the time as the Blood Hospital, which provided care and shelter for locals and sailors when they fell ill.

The Renaissance style Casa de los Pinzón (Pinzón family homestead) has a standing exhibition and a research centre specializing in the relationship between Palos de la Frontera and the Discovery of America. This family of local sailors lent Columbus decisive support, not only staking their vessels and large sums of money on the venture, but personally enlisting in the journey. The statue of Martín Alonso Pinzón in the main square is the city's tribute to its most illustrious citizen.

The part of the city overlooking the Tinto River leads to the recently restored Muelle de la Calzadilla (Pathway Wharf), originally built on the occasion of the fourth centenary of the Discovery of America. This is the spot where the Plus Ultra took off in 1926 in its historic first-time flight between Europe and America.



Moguer

Moguer, a prosperous maritime village in the late fifteenth century, participated actively in the Discovery of America. The Niña was launched in its shipyards and many of the sailors who embarked with Columbus were from this town. Today it is an enterprising city with stately Baroque mansions characterized by whitewashed walls, cool ancestral courtyards and large windows with wrought iron trellises.

It conserves many handsome vestiges of the past. One, St Claire Convent, was founded in the early fourteenth century and has been a national monument since 1931. The church and other buildings in the compound contain countless treasures: Mudéjar style coffered ceilings, unique fourteenth century Nasrid choir stalls, the huge Las Madres (the nuns) cloister, the high altar reredos, the Circumcision altarpiece by Martínez Montañés and the suite of carved alabaster with the graves of the Portocarrero family, lords of the city. A stroll around Moguer is bound to invoke the soul and verses of its most illustrious ambassador, Nobel prize literature Juan Ramón Jiménez. Fragments of his Platero and I can be seen on tiles all across the town, reflecting the poet's affectionate and personal vision of his village. The poet wrote, with respect to lovely Our Lady of Granada Church, visited by Pope John Paul II during the commemoration of the fifth centenary of the Discovery of America, that "up close, Moguer tower looks like the Giralda (impressive bell tower on Seville Cathedral) from afar".



For a glimpse of his and his wife Zenobia's lives, the home where he was born, the museum-home and the Fuentepiña estate where Platero is said to be buried are all recommended visits.

The Town Hall was built after the devastation wreaked by the Lisbon earthquake in the second half of the eighteenth century. Of particular interest are the façade, an illustration of the transition from Baroque to Neoclassical style, and the arcades in the main courtyard. St Francis Convent, many of whose friars set off to evangelize America, has a handsome steeple and houses a huge fifteen-metre reredos on the high altar. The remains of the former Almohad castle, including several towers and stretches of wall as well as an original Arab water tank, today house the Tourist Bureau.

Corpus Christi Hospital Chapel, adjacent to the town's modern theatre and once a hospital for the poor, shelters an image of Bleeding Christ. Before leaving Moguer, visitors are well advised to take the time to sit in one of its squares or balconies and treat themselves to a sampling of the town's famous home-made pastries. Sweet and sour Moguerian orange wine is closely akin to the region's wine-producing tradition, whose quality is officially certified under the Condado de Huelva appellation of origin label. A distinctive 500-year-old shrine to the town's patron saint, our Lady of Montemayor, stands on the edge of the city, surrounded by pine groves and strawberry fields.



Mazagón

Palos de la Frontera and Moguer overlook the Atlantic across Mazagón, a coastal village nestled between green pine groves and golden sand dunes.

Mazagón stretches along five and a half kilometres (three and a half miles) of very fine grain sandy beaches and still water, in a place where the sun shines all year round. Eastward the shoreline runs smoothly toward Matalascañas and Doñana amidst strikingly beautiful scenery: pine groves that grow to the very edge of the beach, alternating stony cliffs and dunes and any number of fresh water brooks that flow to the shore.

A typical example of this landscape is to be found in Cuesta de Maneli, a huge sand dune whose kilometre-long footbridge takes the visitor to an altitude of 112 metres, the highest point in the county. This privileged lookout affords an excellent view over the sea and the stretch of coast known as Médano del Asperillo, a natural monument. Sunsets here, an unforgettable experience, make it easy to understand why this is known as the Costa de la Luz (Coast of Light).



The nearby Parador de Mazagón (national inn), which also overlooks the ocean, features choice lodgings on the beach. Alongside the hotel, a picnic area very popular with the locals is fitted with tables and barbeques – all that is needed to enjoy a delightful day in the country and on the beach.

This is also home to the Centenary Pine Tree, a botanical gem protected by the Regional Government of Andalusia. All manner of water sports can be practiced in the vicinity, as well as biking on signed routes. In the summertime, Mazagón's modern, 500-berth recreational port is the perfect place for socializing in its many busy "tapas" bars and sidewalk cafes.

The restaurants sprinkled across the entire city offer fresh fish and seafood caught daily by coastal fleets based at Huelva, Punta Umbría and Palos. Visitors shouldn't miss the opportunity to delight in the different varieties of steamed clams, along with cuttlefish, plaice, sole, prawns and Huelva's famous shrimp.



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HUELVA

LA LUZ

Andalucía

Huelva *eleva* tus sentidos.



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