

La Alhambra de Granada

In the last issue of the Messenger in Spain we saw which monuments the Spanish had chosen as the 'Seven Wonders of Spain'. The first one was the Alhambra in Granada, and we are pleased to take you on a visit to this marvellous and unique monument, which recently was included in the World Heritage List.



At the beginning of the 8th century the Moors landed on the Spanish coast, and this was the beginning of centuries of occupation of the Iberian peninsula. The Moors conquered the whole peninsula in a few years, but were stopped when they reached the Pyrenees in 732. Their occupation of Spain and Portugal had big religious consequences, and although there were not many of them they were certainly efficient. Historians estimate that that some 5.6 out of seven million inhabitants converted to Islam. In 1212 the Moors were finally beaten by a Christian alliance and driven from the peninsula. However, the alliance was unable to touch the last bastion in Granada in southern Spain, and the Moors were to stay put there for the next three centuries.

The ruler Muhammed ibn Yusuf Nasdr and his successors erected the Alhambra in Granada between 1248 and 1354. It started as a bastion with the object of keeping the Christians away from Granada, so that a Muslim state could be established. The construction of Alhambra is a bit of an enigma for historians as there is no written information to cast light on the creation of the complex. However, it is considered certain that the Alhambra during the 14th century changed from being a bastion to being a glorious palace for the local ruler.

Alhambra means the red castle in Arabic and is due to the colour of the stones that it was built from. Its situation is strategic and is closely connected with its original purpose as a bastion. The complex sits on a hill near a river bank and it is surrounded by mountains and woods. An ideal situation to defend. It consists of two main parts, the fortress, Alcazaba which consists of a barracks, and the castle, Medina, which is court quarters. This lay-out was the norm in the contemporary Christian complexes.

Most of the complex's buildings are square and open out into a yard. The exterior of the buildings is nothing special, as opposed to the interiors of the castle which contain an abundance of detail. The ceilings and pillars are adorned to such an extent that the number one artist within geometry, M.C. Escher, found inspiration for his art at the Alhambra.

The Alhambra palace has survived much over the centuries. Napoleon wanted to raze it to the ground, but the soldier that he asked to do the job did not have the heart. He disarmed the explosives and saved the castle. In 1821 it was damaged by an earth quake and it was not finally restored until the middle of the 19th century.

The Moors stayed in Granada for 300 years, but in January of 1492 their stay came to an end. A united Spain had grown strong and the Moors had to capitulate to the superior force.

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When the last Moorish king of Granada, Boabdil, tearfully retreated from his beloved kingdom, his mother is claimed to have said, 'Go ahead, cry like a woman for what you couldn't defend like a man'.

The most well-known features of Alhambra include the Palacio de los Leones, where the harem lived, Sala de los Reyes, where banquets were celebrated and El Generalife, the magnificent gardens abundant with flowers and water features.