A tale of three cities

See thrilling flamenco in southern Spain, marvel at Croatia’s medieval past and sink a custard tart or two in the Portuguese capital. By Yvonne Gordon

SEVILLE

The dancer stamps his feet, loudly and slowly, one by one, gradually speeding up with every beat. His feet tap faster and faster in a faultless rhythm, accompanied by impossibly nimble Spanish guitar and castanets. The audience is transfixed: nobody moves or makes a sound, and phones and cameras remain on laps. This is a live show at the Flamenco Museum — just one of many of Seville’s nightly flamenco shows — and the music and performance are so powerful, so full of passion, I feel shivers down my spine.

Power and passion are the main themes in Seville, a city of just 700,000 people in southern Spain. During its long history, power has regularly shifted. Seville has been ruled by everyone from the Romans and the Moors to the Christian Castilian kings, all of whom have left their mark on the city with grand palaces, lavish cathedrals and ornate courtyards.

Delve into Sevillian history at the Real Alcázar of Seville (royal palace), which dates back to the 10th century and has been the centre of power for every ruler since. Originally built as a fortress by the Moors, it was transformed into a palace by King Pedro I in 1364 and even today, the Spanish royal family has quarters there. The Alcázar has a series of open courtyards, gardens and decorative rooms, and at the centre is the beautiful Maiden’s Courtyard, with a long pool of water, sunken patios and elaborate archways. These lead to rooms such as the Hall of the Ambassadors, a former throne room where the walls are lined with ornate tiles and plasterwork and the high ceiling is a golden dome. Off this are even more rooms and courtyards, the smell of orange blossom wafting through from the gardens.

With thrones, palaces and power such as this, it’s no surprise Alcázar played the role of the House Martell, and the Water Gardens of Dorne, in the most recent series of Game of Thrones.

Seville Cathedral, one of the largest in the world, was simply built to show off. One of the highlights of this shrine to the city’s wealth is the spectacular golden altarpiece, the largest in the world. It took an artist 44 years to complete the 36 ornate relief panels, which depict Bible stories.

It’s easy to climb the cathedral’s Giralda bell tower — there’s a series of gentle ramps rather than steps (local lore has it that the Arabs used to ascend on horseback). From here, there are views over the cathedral’s intricate roof, its orange-tree patio and the streets below.

Seville is easy to get around on foot, although I get lost many times trying to navigate the labyrinth of streets and alleys in the medieval Santa Cruz area. I admire a white cotton blouse hanging outside a shop on first passing it; by the third passing I am inside, asking for directions and trying it on.

Seville is famous for its tapas bars, but for people-watching you can’t beat an old-fashioned cafe such as La Campana in Calle Sierpes. Its shopfront looks like it hasn’t changed since the cafe was founded in 1885 (but thankfully the cakes in the windows have), while the older male waiters wear uniforms with waistcoats, take complicated orders without notebooks and serve endless coffees, jellied fruits, elaborate cakes and cream-filled pastries from trays carried high above their heads. With all those calories so speedily dispatched, it’s little wonder that a workout like the flamenco was invented here.

GETTING THERE Ryanair flies from Dublin to Seville on Tuesdays and Saturdays, from €37.99 one-way; ryanair.com

WHERE TO STAY Hotel Inglaterra on Plaza Nueva, a square within walking distance of the main attractions (doubles from €120; hotelinglaterra.es). Or stay in the heart of the action at the Hotel Petit Palace Santa Cruz (doubles from €75; petitpalacesantacruzhotel.com).
DUBROVNIK

- The Venetian walls were the Venetians, as it was not mandatory to conquer them. You tried to conquer Dubrovnik. They are the largest port, so we’re the second-largest but that’s how they’re making, so we have the advantage.

Travelling. A city guide, is telling us how to enter the old town’s narrow alley, filled with its ‘friendly’ neighborhood and the – we’re – in competition for cruise ships.

This tiny medieval city, which dates back to the 7th century and was once a thriving commercial republic, is now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The city is best explored on foot, with the city walls being the main attraction. The walls would be impenetrable. It is set back from the old town, just as the city’s main gate is today. The wall must still cross a moat, a long stone bridge and a drawbridge. Walking the city walls is the best way to see the city’s unique architecture and 25 metres high in some parts. It is up to six metres thick behind thick city walls — an appropriate that we spot a replica galleon emerging from the connecting sea. Out of the main city gate, don’t miss Fort Lovrijenac, known locally as the ‘Red Rooster’. The fortress was completed in 1375 and is a must-visit for history enthusiasts.

In high season, tourists and cruise-ship passengers flock to the city, making it a bustling hub of activity. In the centre, the main square, is the Main Square (Placa). This is the beating heart of the city, with its lively market stalls and charming cafes. The old No. 28 tram still rattles up and down the hills from the city centre to the old town. In the old town, you’ll find a mix of traditional and modern architecture, including bars and shops.

Add the new street bars and galleries to the mix and it’s suddenly you’re enjoying an aperitif on the steps below.

This is an unexpected side of Lisbon, with its street art, design shops, and cafes. The No. 28 tram, top right, will take you to the Alfama neighborhood, past the shops of Baixa and along to the Castelo de São Jorge, which dates back to the Moorish era, emerging from the sea, it’s a few degrees warmer than the Adriatic, and you might even see peacocks who strut around the gardens. The old No. 28 tram still rattles up and down the hills from the old town to the Alfama district, the oldest part of the city, past the shops of Baixa and along to the Castelo de São Jorge, which dates back to the Moorish era, emerging from the sea.

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Alfama is the older Alfama area (doubles from €198) or for beach access and a respite from the city's red rooftops, down into the sandy beach and a drawbridge. Walking the city walls is the best way to see the city’s unique architecture and 25 metres high in some parts. It is up to six metres thick behind thick city walls — an appropriate that we spot a replica galleon emerging from the connecting sea. Out of the main city gate, don’t miss Fort Lovrijenac, known locally as the ‘Red Rooster’. The fortress was completed in 1375 and is a must-visit for history enthusiasts.

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