

# Spain's route of White Hill Towns charms



**Rick Steves**

When my travel dreams drift off to Spain, they often include visions of Andalucía, the southern part of the country that feels so quintessentially Spanish. With a string of whitewashed hill towns, sunny skies, vibrant festivals and tempting tapas, Andalucía is the soul of Spain — almost stereotypically so.

Most tourists hit Andalucía's three great cities — Granada, Córdoba, and Sevilla — or the Costa del Sol. But for something more authentic, I like exploring the region's interior along the Route of the White Hill Towns (Ruta de los Pueblos Blancos). This is a charm bracelet of cute villages that are more accessible and friendlier than the big cities, but still pack a wallop of traditional Spanish culture. Whether crouching in a ravine or perched atop a hill, each town — painted white to stay cool in scorching summers — has a personality and a story of its own.

Exploring these hill towns is best by car, as only two are easily accessible by public transportation: Arcos de la Frontera (by bus) and Ronda (by train).

Arcos de la Frontera is a photographer's feast. It smothers its hilltop, tumbling down its back like the train of a wedding dress. The fairy-tale old center is a labyrinthine wonderland, where you can viewpoint-hop all the way through town and feel the wind funnel through the narrow streets as cars inch around tight corners. Around town, I like to peek discreetly into private patios. These wonderful, cool-tiled courtyards — filled with plants, pools and happy family activities — are typical of the region. Arcos' name — de la



Ronda's breathtaking perch above a deep gorge is visually dramatic today but was practical and vital when it was built. **DOMINIC ARIZONA BONUCELLI**

Frontera means "on the frontier" — and main church are reminders of the Reconquista, the centuries-long fight to take Spain back from the Muslim Moors. After Christian forces retook Arcos, the mosque was demolished, and a church was built on its ruins. Today, these hill towns — no longer strategic — are just passing time peacefully.

From Arcos, a short drive takes you to Ronda. With nearly 35,000 people, it's the most substantial and entertaining home base on the route.

Ronda's main attractions are its gorge-spanning bridges, an intriguing old town, and one of the oldest bullrings in Spain. Built in 1785, the bullring's columns

corral the action, creating a kind of Neoclassical theater. But the real joy here lies in exploring Ronda's back streets and taking in its beautiful balconies, wispy gardens, and panoramic views. Walking the streets, you feel a strong local pride and a community where everyone seems to know everyone. During the day, the town gets crowded with tourists from the nearby Costa del Sol. But in the evening, locals reclaim their streets and squares, and a thriving tapas scene takes over.

Ronda's breathtaking perch above a deep gorge, while visually dramatic today, was practical and vital when it was built. For the Moors, it provided a tough bastion, one of the

last to be conquered by the Spaniards in 1485. The ravine divides Ronda into its old Moorish town and the relatively modern new town, which was built after the Reconquista. The two towns were connected by a bridge in the late 1700s.

The dramatic road linking Arcos and Ronda cuts through the Sierra de Grazalema Natural Park, famed throughout Spain for its lush and rugged mountain scenery. Within the park lie the towns of Zahara de la Sierra and Grazalema.

Of the two, Grazalema is the better overnight stop. It's another postcard-pretty town, offering a royal balcony for a memorable picnic, a square where you can watch old-timers playing cards, and plenty of

quiet, whitewashed streets to explore. Shops sell the town's beautiful handmade wool blankets and good-quality leather items from nearby Ubrique. While the Sierra de Grazalema Natural Park is known as the rainiest place in Spain, the clouds seem to wring themselves out before they reach the town — I've only ever had blue skies here.

Tiny Zahara is a delight for those who want to hear only the sounds of the wind, birds and elderly footsteps on ancient cobbles. Perched in a tingly setting under a Moorish castle, it has a spectacular view over a turquoise reservoir. The town had long been a strategic stronghold for the Moors, and Spanish Reconquista forces considered

it the gateway to Granada. Today, the castle is little more than an evocative ruin with a commanding view.

In any of these towns, evening is prime time. The promenade begins as everyone gravitates to the central square. The spotless streets are polished nightly by the feet of families licking ice cream. The whole town strolls — it's like "cruising" without cars. Buy an ice cream, join the parade, and soak up the essence of Spanish life.

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## CELEBRITY TRAVEL

### Ferri calls Calabria untapped location

By **Jae-Ha Kim**  
TRIBUNE CONTENT AGENCY

Claudia Ferri portrays Raquel Kimberley-Marco on the Apple TV series "Palm Royale." She describes her character as one of the Palm Beach elite.

"She, like other women socialites of this exclusive club, will stop at nothing to maintain their status," Ferri said. "Their whole raison-d'être depends on it. This role is so much fun! Physical comedy at its best."

Based out of Los Angeles, Ferri added, "We shot mainly around Los Angeles — first Paramount, then Warner Brothers, Camarillo (California) and in some of the great historical buildings of old Hollywood, like The Biltmore, where the Oscars were once held."

This interview with Ferri has been edited for clarity and length.

**Q: What other locations have you filmed in for other projects?**

**A:** So far I've shot in Turino, Northern Italy, Israel, Colombia, the United States and across Canada. I would love to have an opportunity to shoot in Newfoundland in the winter. I'm curious to see how people live in that kind of cold!

**Q: Do you have a preference as to working on location versus on a set?**

**A:** I love working on location for the pleasure of discovering new places, but the set, whether local or away, is always where I feel at home. I love the gathering of creative forces coming together to produce a story that will touch the audience.



"Palm Royale" actor Claudia Ferri said she prefers not to travel with a strict itinerary. **TYLER PONG HAM**

**Q: If you could pick a location to film a project, where would it be and why?**

**A:** In normal circumstances, I'd say Southeast Asia, like Bali or Vietnam, where we have friends and family. But currently, I'd say Berlin, Germany, so I could visit with one of my daughters who's been living there for a few years now. I'd love to spend any free time between shooting days with her.

**Q: Do you have any upcoming trips planned?**

**A:** I'm never too far away from flying to my fatherland in Italy. I love it there and I love to visit my family and friends there. Some are in Rome, others in the very south by the Ionian Sea.

**Q: Do you work while you're on vacation?**

**A:** It's more of a vacation while I work. Travel has always come easily for me. My parents never shied away from the eight-hour drive south to Philadelphia to visit our family, nor the three-day drive to Naples, where my father built a home. Looking back, I have to give it to them packing four kids in a car. One of my favorite memories was to be the lucky one to have my turn at sitting in the front seat between my parents. Night drive, my mother at the wheel, and me resting on my father's lap and gazing at the stars from the passenger side.

**Q: What untapped**

**destination should people know about?**

**A:** Southern Italy, for sure! Calabria was given a bad rap and people avoided it. But now when people see what they've been missing, they are sure to come back. I would love to go back to Morocco to visit my dearest friend, whom I call my brother. Maybe I'll take a flight from Lamezia Terme next time I'm in southern Italy.

**Q: What was a trip you took as a child that stands out?**

**A:** That time when my mother decided on the spur of the moment to pack our bags and drive that red station wagon straight through to Florida. She took us to Disney World, and it was memorable. I loved the Epcot Center, which was all about technology. There was a talking dog and speaking mannequins. The very beginning of AI, I guess. But it was full of wonders and wonderful.

**Q: What's the most important thing you've learned from your travels?**

**A:** Travel light. Languages are doors to the world. Learn basic polite words and use them. A little effort goes a long way!

**Q: What are your five favorite cities?**

**A:** Rome, Paris, Los Angeles, New York and Montreal.

For more from the reporter, visit [www.jaehakim.com](http://www.jaehakim.com).

## TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER

### Orbitz promises free checked bag, then makes passenger pay

By **Christopher Elliott** | KING FEATURES SYNDICATE

I booked a Condor Airlines flight from Portland, Oregon, to Frankfurt, Germany, through Orbitz for my family. Orbitz's website explicitly listed the fare as economy classic, which included one free 70-pound checked bag for both legs of the trip. The confirmation itinerary confirmed this.

But Condor's email showed something different. Our return flight was booked as economy zero with no checked bags included. Worse, the outbound flight's baggage allowance was listed at 50 pounds — not the 70 pounds that Orbitz stated.

I contacted Orbitz repeatedly via chat. After days of delays, it directed me to Condor, which confirmed that nothing had changed post-booking. The fault lays with Orbitz's inaccurate listing.

Orbitz blamed Travelfusion, its booking platform, and stonewalled me with cookie-cutter replies to "contact the airline." When I threatened to report it for fraud, Orbitz doubled down on its deflection. I paid \$540 for three return-flight bags that I was told would be free. Orbitz must honor its advertised fare and reimburse me. Can you help?

— *Patrick Bruce, Troutdale, Oregon*

**A:** Orbitz should have stood by its advertised fare. There are no excuses for this.

When an online travel agency displays specific amenities like baggage allowances, it's legally obligated to honor them under Department of Transportation regulations, which prohibit "deceptive or misleading" fare descriptions.

Orbitz's own itinerary listed economy classic with a free checked bag. Orbitz and its parent company Expedia can't pass the buck to Condor or Travelfusion.

You handled this by the book. You checked airline policies before booking, preserved your correspondence and escalated the situation calmly.

Still, I have two recom-

mendations.

First, when you make a booking, always take screenshots in case the confirmation doesn't match up with the booking screen. Also, as a sidenote, there's no such thing as a "free" bag. Whether it's included in your fare, or it's a benefit of your credit card, you are still paying for it.

You could have also escalated this to Orbitz's executive contacts. I list them on my consumer advocacy site, [Elliott.org](http://Elliott.org). My advocacy team contacted Expedia Group on your behalf.

A spokesperson admitted, "The baggage information provided by the airline may have been unclear." Expedia says that it's working with Condor to "clarify" the baggage details.

Orbitz says that your flight did not include a checked bag but agreed to reimburse your \$540 as a courtesy. Online agencies like Orbitz profit by aggregating airfares. But when they misrepresent these airfares, they should own the fallout.

As I've noted before, cases like yours rarely end well. When airlines and online agencies finger-point at each other, consumers often have to pay the price. But not this time!

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