

ANDALUSIA



The view from Almodovar Castle, which has been in the same family since 1629.

The joy of cycling solo with a group

SUZANNE MORPHET takes a freewheeling trip in Spain

We don't do group riding," Dan tells our small group as we meet one another for the first time in a hotel in Seville. "We mark all the route, and then you guys are free to follow the arrows at your own pace."

It's such a simple idea you wouldn't think it could work. Every morning, Dan or one of the other two guides with Experience Plus! will leave the hotel early and cycle the day's route, pausing to spray arrows in chalk at every intersection so we don't get lost.

Given that we'll ride 386km in total from Seville to Cordoba, it seems like a lot of arrows. Or perhaps there won't be enough?

I'm not taking any chances, so I ask two couples if they'll ride with me until we're out of Seville.

"Your entourage is ready," jokes Steve the next morning, as he and wife Christina, from Colorado, take the lead while Dave and Cindy, from New York, follow.

I needn't have worried. The chalk arrows are easily visible, and within minutes of leaving the

cobbled streets, we're on a paved bike lane that leads under leafy plane trees and along the Guadalquivir River. It's the same waterway Ferdinand Magellan sailed on from Seville in 1519 on the first round-the-world voyage.

This is my first guided cycling tour, and while it's nothing like sailing into the unknown world, it will prove culturally enriching (our guides are all Spanish), and a perfect balance of solo cycling and group socialising.

Even before we leave Seville, I'm relieved I won't be forced to keep up with the group when Anita asks me "who do you ride with?"

We're lounging by the rooftop swimming pool at our hotel and discover we both live in the same city — Victoria, Canada.

"I don't belong to a riding club," I tell her. I don't even ride regularly.

Still, I love cycling and when I learnt Experience Plus! has an ingenious method of letting everyone ride solo, I wanted to try it.

Word of mouth is also what brought Jeff and Sylvia here from Salt Lake City, US, for their first trip with Experience Plus!

"The arrows on the road are a game changer for us," Jeff says.

Most of the 16 participants are long-time fans of the company. For Chas and Linda of Toronto, it's their 20th tour and second time cycling in Andalusia.

"This is probably our favourite," says Linda. "We did it with Experience Plus! years ago and enjoyed all the culture."

Another retired Canadian couple, Lora and Mathias, once cycled a whopping 4000km from St Petersburg to Istanbul with Experience Plus! "The organisational skill set of you guys was exceptional," Lora says.

I'm probably the last to arrive in the hilltop city of Carmona, a Roman stronghold under Julius Caesar and our destination for the second night, but I've not kept anyone waiting. I'm hot and tired but I've cycled 64km — the most I've ever done in a single day!

That night some of us gather at a courtyard restaurant and



Suzanne on the last leg of her journey from Seville to Cordoba. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet



Above, an appetiser starring fresh figs at Hotel Los Pozos de La Nieve. Right, cyclists prepare to leave the hotel.



A picture and arrow in chalk leads participants with Experience Plus! to a recommended coffee shop.

exchange cycling stories.

Steve once went head over heels on a tight turn in the Dolomites. Dave (who met Cindy while cycling the Canadian Rockies) lost a shoe on a rutted trail in Nepal. And Sylvia cracked a couple of ribs when she fell going over a kerb. "She was crying!" says Jeff, when they hit bumpy cobblestone later.

Sometimes, our guides arrange dinner for everyone, like on one night at our hotel in Constantina, where Napoleon and his soldiers slept.

"They killed quite a lot of people in the village," the owner of Los Pozos de la Nieve tells us, as if it happened just yesterday.

Typically, we see our guides a few times a day when the support van stops and offers water refills and snacks. They also brief us on what's ahead. Before cycling through the foothills of the Sierra Morena mountains, for instance,

Montse tells us to watch for Iberian pigs grazing on acorns and wild bulls resting in the shade of oak trees.

"And if you need a toilet tree along the way, don't jump over any fences," she warns. "Because those bulls, they look very nice but you don't want to get in there."

Our guides prove to have a knack for handling everything that comes their way. One morning Sylvia is locked in the women's bathroom and Montse borrows the hotel's toolbox to get her out. One evening, someone is almost in tears after turning on the TV in her room and seeing a



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Clockwise from above, flamenco performers in Cordoba; courtyard at Monasterio De San Francisco, Palma del Rio; Experience Plus! guide Montse Bosch Olives reaches for an orange to demonstrate how a move in flamenco dance mimics picking the fruit that grows widely in Andalusia. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

fact file

- Experience Plus! offers guided cycling tours throughout Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean. Their tours of Andalusia are in May and October and start at about \$6724. This includes bikes, accommodation, some meals, guides, van support and luggage transfers.
- experienceplus.com/bike-tours/spain/andalucia/

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bullfight. "The bull went after the guy on the horse who was stabbing him," she tells guide Nico. "And then the poor horse fell down and the bull kept attacking the horse!" "I am not a big fan of that," Nico says in consolation, adding that in Catalonia, bullfighting is banned.

Humour also goes a long way in drawing us closer. One day the word "picnic" has been chalked on the pavement next to an arrow directing us where to turn off. Overlooking a lake, our guides have set out a selection of meat, cheese, bread and chocolate. Holding up a thin piece of meat, Anita innocently asks, "Is this prosciutto?"

Guides Dan and Nico look at her

as if she's just said something obscene. "It's jamon!" says Dan in mock horror. Yes, he'll eat prosciutto in Italy, but Spanish ham is much better!

When we reach Cordoba, my butt is sore and my fingers tingle (I learn I've been wearing Montse's borrowed gloves on the wrong hands!) Yet, I couldn't be happier to have discovered it's possible to cycle solo with a group — and have so much fun doing it.

Suzanne Morphet was a guest of Experience Plus! They have not influenced this story, or read it before publication.



CRUISE NEWS

Hydrogen on the horizon



In a world first, Viking has announced plans for a zero-emissions ship, writes MICHAEL FERRANTE

By late next year, luxury cruise line Viking has pledged to deliver a world first — a hydrogen-powered cruise ship capable of sailing with zero emissions.

The Viking Libra is under construction at Fincantieri's Ancona shipyard in Italy and is scheduled for delivery in late 2026.

Libra's hybrid propulsion system will be capable of producing up to 6MW of power using a combination of liquefied hydrogen and fuel cells, allowing zero-emission operations.

Libra is the first of two hydrogen-fuelled ships planned for Viking's expanding fleet. The

other is Viking Astrea, which is scheduled to touch water in 2027.

This is a big development for the industry as cruise lines across the world grapple with alternative fuel solutions to make their fleets cleaner, but at a cost and scale that will be viable.

For Norwegian line Viking, it allows these ships "to access even the most environmentally sensitive areas", including the World Heritage fjords of Norway in which it sails, that will have zero-emissions requirements by January 1, 2032.



A Viking ship in Geiranger Fjord, Norway.

Viking says its advanced fuel cell technology was enabled by Isotta Fraschini Motori, a subsidiary of Italian shipbuilder Fincantieri. Fincantieri boss Pierroberto Folgiero tells us its commitment extends beyond sustainable cruising.

"With the Viking Libra, we are not only delivering the world's first cruise ship powered by hydrogen stored on board, but we are also reinforcing our commitment to shaping the future of sustainable maritime transportation," he says.

"This new order is a testament to our shared vision for a more sustainable cruise industry, as together we continue to set new standards for innovation and responsible shipbuilding."

Viking chairman and CEO Torstein Hagen says: "From the outset, we have designed our river and ocean ships thoughtfully to reduce their fuel consumption, and we are very proud the Viking Libra and the Viking Astrea will be even more environmentally friendly. Viking made the principled decision to invest in hydrogen, which offers a true zero-emission solution."

The company has committed to a fleet expansion plan that aims for 23 ocean and expedition ships by 2031.