



Al-Andalus Expreso

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Spain's restored luxury train, Al-Andalus Expreso, provides a truly first-class trip across the Spanish countryside. But it doesn't live up to its five-star reputation, and you can blame it on the sleeping cabins. They are a metallic eyesore, cramped for space and out of place on a luxury train that caters to the well-to-do.

Completely aware of this major problem, RENFE, the Spanish rail company that owns the train, has spent thousands of dollars toward the purchase of five restored sleeping cars built in France in 1929. Pedro Fernandez, director of the Al-Andalus, promises these cars will sleep a maximum of 80 people, have better suspension than the present ones and offer that touch of class the current sleeping cars are missing.

The new LX-20 cars have been renovated in "belle epoque" style and preserve much of the original 1920s design. They are well lit, clean and spacious, with large closets and enough room for a nightcap for two. The car I saw (which nobody slept in) had eight double cabins and two deluxe suites with private toilet and shower. The pull-out sofa beds of blue-grey fabric are comfortable and can be used as a sitting area during the day. The woodwork throughout the cars is a gorgeous, hand-tooled, lacquered mahogany from Cuba.

The train traditionally remains in the station at night, so your sleep should be comfortable. Unfortunately, those on incentive trips must board in Madrid and endure a shaky and sleepless night ride to Seville.

The Al-Andalus carries two shower cars with 20 private shower compartments that include a dressing area and hygienic wooden floors. A monogrammed bathrobe and a bath towel is supplied daily to each person. Three shower units have sockets for hairdryers, as do all the sleeping cabins and suites.

The two dining cars, *Alhambra* and *Gibralfaro*, are restored coaches from the 1920s. They each seat 48 diners in sofa armchairs at tables for two and four. A continental breakfast is served on board between 7 and 9 a.m. while the train is en route

to the next destination. Dinner, served between 9 and 10 p.m., consists of the best Andalusian fish dishes, soups and desserts. Spirits and wines are not included in the cost of the trip.

The lounge and bar cars are very spacious, accommodating a dance floor and live entertainment. The Al-Andalus also has a 1930s club car that can be used for reading, watching TV or videos or playing cards.

Only one sleeping car is currently in use, but Fernandez expects the remainder to be delivered by April 1990. Then and only then will it be worth it to dish out anywhere from \$700 to \$900 for a two-day, three-city train ride through southern or northern Spain.

During the winter months, the Al-Andalus Madrid-Seville-Cordoba four-day route is solely for incentive/charter travel groups, with only three special consumer charters on New Year's Eve, Easter and for the April Fair. Otherwise, consumer travel is limited to the May-October season.

The Al-Andalus is being marketed as *the* train experience of the 1990s and the stylish way to get to Expo 92 and the Summer Olympics in Barcelona. In summer, the train will run twice-weekly departures from Seville with an additional day in Seville during the Expo months. In fact Al-Andalus might be the answer for travellers wanting to visit Seville's Expo site. They can come for the day and not worry about finding hotel accommodation and reasonably priced restaurants or having to line up at train and bus stations.

For summer 1990, Al-Andalus has several itineraries available for southern Spain. One takes you from Seville to Cordoba (visit the famous 1,000-year-old Mosque), Granada and Malaga. The Al-Andalus also leaves from Malaga and reverses the trip to Seville. For less than \$200, a day trip that includes breakfast and lunch on board is available from Seville to Jerez and back.

The Al-Andalus also has two day trips in northern Spain: From Pamplona (famous for its July 6 bull races) the train heads to Burros-Ponferrada-Santiago de Compostela.