

Sevilla is wonderful. It took time to reach its old centre as it is Spain's 4th largest city but once there it is very walkable, much like Paris.

For my day out I focused on visiting Sevilla's Cathedral, its connected bell tower called the Giralda and the Alcazar as all are UNESCO world heritage sites.

The cathedral is truly monumental. It is the largest gothic cathedral ever built. When consecrated in the early 16th century it surpassed the Hagia Sophia as the largest cathedral in the world, a record which it had held for nearly a millennium.

Walking around it before I prayed everything was on a huge scale from the organs to the choir, stained glass and altar.

Even the burial monument to Christopher Columbus in the church is monumental.

The Giralda, originally an Islamic minaret connected to the cathedral, was easy to ascend with a wide walkway up its 37 levels. On reaching the top the view over the city was amazing.

The Alcazar, a short walk from the cathedral, is the oldest palace in Europe dating back almost 1,000 years. It is still used as an official royal residence. Originally constructed when the Moors ruled southern Spain or Al Andalus, its architecture is predominantly Islamic but this was later fused with more European elements. Interestingly, it was the place where trade with the colonies of Spain in its golden period were managed.

Leaving Sevilla again as a large city took a couple of hours. North of Santiponce the camino finally became rural. The path for 8-9km was totally straight and marked by wheat and fields of sunflowers.

North of Guilliana to Castelblanco the camino went through olive tree groves which covered the landscape like a dark green blanket for kilometres until they came to an end and the land became uncultivated countryside. For much of this day's walk the sky was mercifully overcast.

The next two days to Monisterio were long and mostly uphill.

To travel in the cool part of the day I left before daylight for Almaden. Here the path led into low undulating countryside where there were many trees stripped of their bark which I took to be cork trees.

This led to a massive park within the Sierra Norte. Whilst long, the path was straight forward and only became challenging just before Almaden leading to a wonderful viewpoint which required a steep climb of around 200m in less than an half a km. This gave a magnificent unobstructed view of the countryside through which I had just passed before turning around to go down an equally steep hill to reach Almaden.

Next day I was up early at 5am for the 33km walk into Monisterio. I left before it was light, around 6am. with my head light on as it was still dark. Within a few minutes I was startled by what I initially took to be a 100 to 150 lb wild boar cross my path about 10 feet in front of me! On second glance I realised it was not wild and the pig was just as frightened of me as I was of it! Interesting start to the day!

The walk was initially through a national park characterised by holm oak trees dotting a golden carpet of burnt grass.

This led to Jara, a small town dominated by an old Moorish fort. Here I had breakfast before moving on through open fields leading to Monisterio and the end of a long day.

Monisterio is a centre for production of a cured ham famed in Spain called 'jamón ibérico'. Reflecting this there is a ham museum in the town and it was humorously referred to as 'Jamonisterio' in my guide app!

The road out of Monisterio to Fuente de Cantos was reminiscent of small country lanes in England marked by aged, moss-covered stone walls and wonderful morning twilight shining through trees.

This, in turn, folded into wide open plains full of wheat fields reaching to the horizon under a deep blue sky and the dry heat of the sun.

Zafra, what a great name for a town.

In Zafra I stayed in a former monastery which was sadly rundown but still evidenced its former elegance.

Amusingly, as I left this town at 6.15 in the morning, the sound of a rock concert could be heard clearly in the distance. This is Spain where people do not sleep!

Similarly, reflective of leaving a remote country town like this, is that the first thing you see is a person on a tractor early in the morning. What a mixture!

The landscape from here until Merida flowed first through fields of wheat to the horizon yielding to unending vineyards through Villafranca and Torremeija.

Through this the sense of space was wonderful. Jet blue sky and light which even in the morning was bright and harsh causing one to squint.

This is the wonderful thing about Spain. It is harsh but offers unending beauty and surprises as was discovered in Merida, - a stunning site of Roman ruins to be passed on in the next update!