

Disorientated – that’s how you could describe my state on this January afternoon. The surroundings are rather typical: a half-hour queue to get in, hot in the sun and icy in the shade, the centre of Seville full of britzkas and Madonnas weeping diamond tears. Tapas, churros, oranges. And then this.

The inscription is surprisingly modern, geometric. White and blue tiles, straight lines. Although after my two years of learning Arabic I still remember the alphabet, I wouldn’t be able to decipher the Kufi script, reduced to its abstract essence. But I do know – because I just read it – that the geometric writing says: there is no victor but Allah. It’s the motto of the Nasrids, the last Muslim dynasty in Spain, also written hundreds of times on the walls of Granada’s Alhambra.

I know, too, that when I step through the gate and onto the patio, there will be more Arabic inscriptions, including one that praises “our beloved sultan Badr”. There will also be a verse from the Qur’an on one of the capitals, and all this among Latin inscriptions and symbols of Castile and León. After all, I’m standing in front of a palace built by the Castilian king, Pedro I the Cruel, also known as the Just or the Executor of Justice, the great-great-grandson of Alfonso X the Wise.

‘The most Catholic,’ said the anthropologist José Antonio González Alcantud, about Seville, when I asked him about the former capitals of Al-Andalus. There’s the Seville of indie rock, feminist mobilisation and rebellious neighbourhoods adopting their own currency during the economic crisis. But there’s also another one, not always distinct from the first: a shop selling devotionals, and on display a small wooden figurine of the Virgin Mary that you can dress up in different robes. It encapsulates an entire religious culture that can be described with a plethora of adjectives: ludic, baroque, corporeal, ubiquitous, exaggerated. Catholic. And very Sevillian. Perhaps that’s why I’m surprised to find out that the Alcázar (from the Arabic ‘al-kasr’, castle) – “the longest functioning royal residence in Europe”, as the sign in the courtyard reads – is still the home of the royal couple when they visit Andalusia. In other words, every time Felipe VI and Letizia spend a night in Seville, they walk under an inscription praising Allah, placed there by their distant grandfather – albeit their symbolic one, as he wasn’t a Bourbon as they are. But regardless of his dynasty, he was – as they are – a Catholic, grandson of the heroes of the Reconquista. ‘So why on earth did he build himself a palace with extracts from the Qur’an on the walls?’ I wonder, baffled, in the courtyard of the Alcázar one January afternoon. It’s not the first time I’ve felt like this in this corner of Europe.

Disorientation is a state of mind Spain causes easily. It ought to be visited as part of a bewilderment tour, there should be special maps, one should have to follow the

routes and paths that heighten uncertainty and exacerbate cognitive confusion, intellectual discomposure and a not entirely pleasant itch somewhere at the back of your skull.

One of the points on the map would have to be the city of Teruel in Aragon, for instance. When I woke up in a hostel there one summer, I thought I was in a beehive. It was only when I reached one of the squares in the old town that I realised the noise was people sitting at café tables in the summer morning sun. I remember that surreal sight: people buzzing like a swarm of bees and looming above their heads, a huge minaret decorated in a green and white motif. It was the tower of the city’s fourteenth-century church.

The map of confusion would also have to include Toledo station, which looks more like a Moorish castle than a place where trains bring people to their workplaces every day. Toledo should feature on the map for many reasons, actually. I was again struck by the feeling that I was looking at a visual rebus – something that in no way fits with anything I know and which I can’t, even loosely, classify – in El Tránsito synagogue, which is full of Arabic inscriptions and toothy arches, more closely resembling a mosque. You would also have to add to the list the Chapel of the Holy Cross, with its depiction of Christ Pantocrator added to the arch of a customary Arabic inscription wishing happiness and good fortune.

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Selected awards

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Grand Press Award for journalists – nomination (2015)