



Alcazaba fortress

# Secret Spain

**Holly Payne** discovers the Spanish coast's hidden gem, Almería.

**V**ast empty beaches. Towering mountains. Sublime seafood. Islamic history. These are some of the ways passengers might describe Almería, a little-known destination on the east coast of Andalusia.

## History

Echoes of Almería's colourful past emanate from the iconic Alcazaba fortress, whose construction started in 955 AD – an imposing sight for cruise passengers as they sail into the port. It's Spain's second largest Muslim construction after the Alhambra Palace in Granada and harbours three enclosures: the first containing a large garden and ponds, the second, palace buildings, military baths and once the site of the Almotacín Palace, and the third, a Christian castle within the Muslim fortification. Elevated above the city, around 2km from the port, sweeping views of the metropolis are the reward for climbing numerous steps to experience the destination's main attraction.

Passengers can continue the journey of Islamic history via a stroll along Almedina Street leading from the Moorish fortification – one of the main streets during the Islamic period – before venturing to the nearby Plaza Vieja (Old Square) the site of a souk (traditional marketplace) during the 10th-15th century. Today, it houses the city hall and eateries, with a monument that pays tribute to 24 soldiers executed in Almería in the 19th century for their resistance against the monarchy of King Ferdinand VII.

The 16th century cathedral, built in Gothic



Almería Cathedral



Rosario Soto, Almería Port Authority president

and Renaissance architectural styles, is another must-see historical site within easy walking distance (2.3km) of the port. Built both as a place of worship and to defend the city from attacks by Berber pirates, its substantial

courtyard was used to store weapons. This space can be hired for special events, such as weddings and concerts.

To discover Almería's more recent history, passengers can take their exploration below ground to walk 1km of the 4km of tunnels that snake below the city, built for sheltering the local population during the Spanish Civil War. Inside, passengers can learn about life in the tunnel system, step into the hospital wing where surgeries were carried out and visit sections of the tunnel made private for more affluent Almerians.

The journey 9mtr below ground requires online booking in advance to avoid

disappointment, although passengers may purchase tickets in person on the day, pending availability. The guided tours which run four times daily cater to a maximum of 25 passengers and there is no disabled access.

Above ground, the Cable Inglés – or English Pier – is another important piece of Almería's heritage. Built for the transport of iron ore and dating to 1904, it is an example of Almería's industrial heritage, where passengers can walk the 16mtr high track for views out to sea.

## Culture

After a visit to Kiosco Amalia for an Almerían Americano – a bubble-gum pink drink made of milk, sugar, lemon zest, cinnamon and a local cream liqueur – passengers can stroll Almería's Walk of Fame or take a behind the scenes tour of the local theatre, said to be haunted. Alternatively, they can visit filming locations of well-loved movies, from Indiana Jones to Wonder Woman.

Alternatively, for a more profound understanding of Spanish culture, passengers



Guitar Museum

can embark on a journey through almost 100 years of works by local artists at the free entry Doña Pakyta Museum of Art, open Tuesday-Sunday and wheelchair accessible. The Guitar Museum is a further option for Spanish music lovers, detailing the history of the Spanish guitar. The local food and drink market, Mercado Central de Almería, is where the popular red shrimp can be purchased, in addition to other fish, meat, fruit and vegetables.

**Into the desert**

Outside of the city centre, roads weave their way between towering mountains scattered with olive trees and the occasional building, harking back to a time when the hills were inhabited.



A lane leading to Alcazaba fortress



Mercado Central de Almería



Macael – Olula del Río

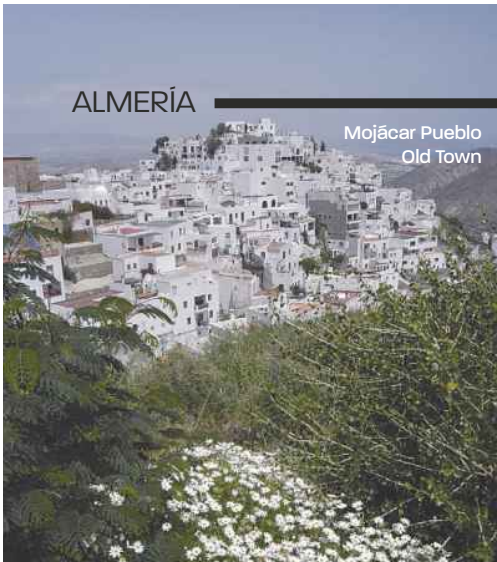
As the brushland gives way to the Tabernas Desert, passengers can take a visit to Castillo de Tabernas olive mill less than 50km from the port to learn about the different varieties of olives, methods of oil extraction and see olive production in motion. After heading out into the olive groves, visitors have a chance to watch a film about olives and purchase various olive oil products.

Tabernas Desert is also where passengers can find ‘Mini Hollywood,’ a Spanish Western-styled theme park offering Western shows and reenactments and cancan performances. A mini train, cactus garden, cinema museum, VR roller coaster, wagon museum, swimming pool, costume shop, photo studio and restaurants are among its other features. Having recently celebrated the 50th anniversary of the construction of the set for Spaghetti Western ‘For a Few Dollars More’ – used a year later for ‘The Good, The Bad and The Ugly’ – it has opened a new room focused on the attraction’s history.

Venture on and less than an hour away (or 87.1km from the port) passengers can visit the municipality of Macael recognised for its marble quarries from which is extracted the majority of all Spanish white marble. Marble is the building material of choice, from countless statues to the largest pestle and mortar in the world over 10ft high.

**FACTS**

According to NASA astronaut Pedro Duque, the man-made structures most visible from space are the greenhouses of Almería, followed by the Pyramids of Giza in Egypt and the Great Wall of China.



Mojácar Pueblo  
Old Town



Macenas Resort

**Natural park and beaches**

Mojácar Pueblo Old Town 95km from the port captures the holiday spirit, picturesque white buildings lining its narrow winding streets full of shops selling art, handicrafts, clothing and more. Its pristine sandy beach exudes luxury, where passengers can pay a visit to one of several upmarket beach clubs before wading into warm waters.

To delve deeper into nature, the Cabo de Gata Natural Park (Parque Natural del Cabo de Gata-Níjar) offers stunning panoramic views with rock formations rising out of the sea. 57km from the city, the crystal-clear waters are ideal for diving, snorkelling and kayaking. Salt pans dotted with flamingos and various other bird

species can also be found at Cabo de Gata, serving as an additional attraction. The quaint fishing hamlet of La Isleta del Moro, a settlement of 200 people, is a hidden gem.

Between the Sierra Nevada and the Sierra de Gádor in Laujar de Andarax, the Cortijo El Cura winery 69km from the port, offers visitors the chance to admire the landscape of the Sierra Nevada Natural Park from among almond, olive and fruit trees. Wine tasting accompanied by olives and almonds grown on the family farm follows a tour encompassing the barrels room where the best wines are kept. A small agricultural museum captures traditional farming methods. 50 cruise passengers may be accommodated at once, but the family-owned winery recommends groups of 20-30

Salt pans in Cabo de Gata



Castillo de Tabernas

visitors in order to provide a personal touch. A two-hour tour is recommended.

Additionally, Alpujarra is where the Padules Channels can be found, a haven of natural pools within a gorge separating Sierra Nevada and Sierra de Gádor.



Cortijo El Cura winery



La Isleta del Moro

**FACTS**

The Port of Almería has a multipurpose berth suitable for the largest sized cruise ships and a 220mtr-long berth. A limited number of buses and English-, French- and German-speaking guides are available. A new project is underway at the port, which includes changing the configuration of entry/exit points for passengers making their way into the city centre. Further information on the project, expected to conclude in 2027, is yet to be revealed.