

Moorish Cultural Landscapes of Las Alpujarras, Spain

by

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Photography by authors

Spain's Sierra Nevada reveals a cultural landscape that challenges our geographic assumptions. In this European setting, dozens of relict Berber, or Moorish, farming villages dominate a remote region called Las Alpujarras. The inlays and overlays of Muslim conquest and Christian reconquest are etched in the land like the whirls of an arabesque mosaic—intricate, beautiful, and lavishly complex. We arrive in Andalusia with certainties; experiencing Granada, the Alhambra, and high alpine terrain. We emerge with abundant mysteries.

The Spanish Reconquista and Moriscos

In 711, Moors invaded the Iberian Peninsula under the command of Tarik Ibn Ziyad (Lane-Poole 2007). As violent and unprovoked as it was, the coming of Muslims might be seen as the liberation of diverse cultures from Visigoth tyranny (Menocal 2003). The narrative of the conquest of a culturally advanced Spain is a myth, since nothing like Spain yet existed and the landscape was fraught with feudalistic turmoil. In truth, Muslims brought superior agriculture, scholarship, and science to a fractured region.

The forces that conquered the Iberian Peninsula largely consisted of Berbers from North Africa (places we now call Morocco, Mauritania, and Algeria) combined with smaller Arab armies from the Middle East (Carr 2001). The bow wave of Islamic diffusion crossed the Strait of Gibraltar less than a century after Mohammad fled Mecca. More remarkably, in just two years, Moors claimed nearly all of current Spain except portions of Galicia and the Basque region. The rule of the Caliphate of Damascus and other dynasties, while hardly gentle, ushered in a creative tri-cultural era for Muslims, Christians, and Jews that lasted centuries (Menocal 2003). That legacy can still be seen today in the ethnic/religious

districts of Toledo, Segovia, Seville, Granada, and other cities. Sephardic Jews in Spain still refer to this period as the "Golden Age" due to a surprising level of tolerance for Judeo-Christian religious practices.

However, Moorish rule was not entirely benign, and Christians mounted a centuries long *reconquista* (reconquest) of the landscape (Fletcher 2006). Between 730-1492, in a dazzlingly nuanced process, alliances between the kingdoms of Aragon, Catalonia, Castile, Estremadura, Andalusia and others formed and fell away. Peace and accommodation between Christians and Moors alternated with hostility and war. The creation of fortified hill villages and walled cities became common. As Muslims lost more territory, they moved their capitol to Granada, where a spectacular royal city and castle was created called the Alhambra.

The ethnic and nationalistic idea of "Spain" was born during this long, unifying fight against a perceived common enemy. When Granada fell in 1492, the legend of the pure-blooded Spaniard was constructed to define the newly formed kingdom. However, this warrior culture actually evolved from many bloodlines—Celt Iberians, Phoenicians, Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Vandals, Franks, Visigoths, and, ironically, the Moors themselves.

The Treaty of Granada promised but did not deliver religious freedom for Muslims. *Mudejars* (Arabic for "those who remained") were persecuted during the Spanish Inquisitions, and, by 1502, as many as three million Muslims were expelled to North Africa. Muslims who converted to Christianity and stayed in Spain were derisively called *Moriscos* (Little Moors), revealing a profound suspicion of the depth of their faith (Perry 2005). As a peace offering, Boabdil, the last Moorish ruler of Granada, was given a land grant called Las

Alpujarras on the south slopes of the Sierra Nevada, which was already home to thousands of Muslims (Carr 2001). Berbers had settled here as early as the 8th century and created essentially Moroccan farming villages in an area first settled by Celt Iberians and Romans. Following the creation of the land grant, thousands more Muslims of both Berber and Arab ethnicity sought refuge in the mountains.

Yet across Spain coexistence between Christians and Muslims proved impossible. The Inquisitions made it illegal to practice Islam, speak Arabic, wear traditional dress, and practice plural marriage (Harvey 1992). *Moriscos* were accused of conspiring with the Ottoman Turks in planning a reinvasion of Spain. The growing of silk was banned in Las Alpujarras, thus destroying a vital source of revenue. In 1568, these and other more violent persecutions led to the bloody *Morisco* Rebellion across what Muslims called "al Andulus" (Andalusia). King Felipe II sent an army into the fray led by his half brother Don Juan of Austria (Perry 2005). When Christian forces prevailed, the *Morisco* leader Ibn Humeya was executed in the main square in Granada.

The *reconquista* was finally complete—76 years after the conquest of the Alhambra.

The Berber/Moorish villagers of Las Alpujarras were forcibly evicted from Spain or scattered across the country. King Felipe II then moved 12,542 Christian families from Galicia and Asturias into 200 vacated mountain towns. Today, despite 440 years of Spanish occupance, these striking cultural landscapes still clearly reveal their Berber/Moorish structural roots.

Moorish Cultural Landscapes

Las Alpujarras embraces the southern slopes of the Sierra Nevada from the 11,412-foot summit of Mulhacen to the *ramblas* (arroyos) of the Rio Guadalfeo Valley



Figure 1: The Moorish region of Las Alpujarras in southern Spain.

(Figure 1). The river's name is derived from the Arabic "al wadi" (*guadal*), a phrase meaning "the river." *Guadalfeo* means "River of Faith." For centuries, orange, lemon, and olive orchards have produced the riparian fragrance of perceived rural virtue here.

The Moorish landscapes of Las Alpujarras are reached by a steep and narrow loop of a road from Orgiva, the primary trade town. Switchbacks wind through citrus groves, prickly pear cactus, terraced fields, live oak and chestnut woodlands (*dehesa*), and poplar-filled canyons to high villages that appear like a Cubist dream. The stone buildings are square and whitewashed, stairs stepping up steep mountainsides. Some 50 *caserios* (villages), or *lugacillos* (hamlets), remain of the original 200. In his post-WWI account of the region, Gerald Brenan described the scene, "washed by the ocean of air, cut off by the precipices and the height, the villages hugged life to itself." (Brenan 1957, 261). Much of that airy remoteness remains. Villages are arranged like strings of pearls along the steep-walled *barrancas* (canyons).

The Contraviesa Mountains rise to the south but do not obscure remarkable views of the Mediterranean from many villages. On clear days, the Rif Mountains of Morocco are visible across the wine dark sea.

This is a vernacular, hydraulic landscape. Berber and Moorish settlers dug hundreds of *acequias* (ditches) that brought flows from the Sierra Nevada to the pastures, orchards, fields, and houses of their last refuge. High lakes are called *Ojos del mar* – translated as either "Springs of the Sea," or "Eyes of the Sea." A folk belief once held that the lakes were linked to the ocean in more than a metaphoric sense.

Acequias still function as the landscape's irrigation system. The word is derived from the Arabic *al-saqiyya*—"the ditch." *Acequias* remain floored with soil and rocks and are cleaned annually under the direction of a *mayordomo* (water master). Spanish settlers replicated this system in northern New Mexico, but many of those irrigated landscapes are now threatened by subdivision development (Crawford 1988). The *acequias* of Las Alpujarras are narrow (3-foot wide) and built along the contour to

assure a brisk but manageable current. Vernacular design and centuries of meandering give them the look of naturalized streams. On a walk above Capileira in March, the *acequia madre* (mother ditch) carries significant flow even while snow-covered above 8,000 feet. The chimneys of abandoned farmhouses bear painted crosses laying spiritual claim to this contested land. Higher still are the snowcapped peaks of the Sierra Nevada, a range Pliny called Mons Solorius (Mountains of the Sun) and Arabs called Jebel Sholair (Mountains of the Sun), Al-Bugscharra (Mountains of Pasture), or al-Pujarra (Mountains of Whiteness, Mountains of Grass). Whatever name is used, the latest monument to religious tenure stands on the summit of Mulhacén—a Christian pilgrimage shrine with a cross raised high above all else.

The cultural landscape traits of mountain farming villages such as Pampaneira, Baubián, Capileira, Trevélez, Valór, Pitres, and Yégen are typical. Each stands alone but within sight and sound of another connected by ancient paths, *acequias*, and narrow roads. Water flows into the villages through either ancient Moorish ceramic pipes or modern conduits to a central *fuelle* (fountain) beside a public *lavadero* (collection of wash basins). Women still gather here to handwash clothes and talk. Villages are often divided into *barrios* (quarters), each with its own



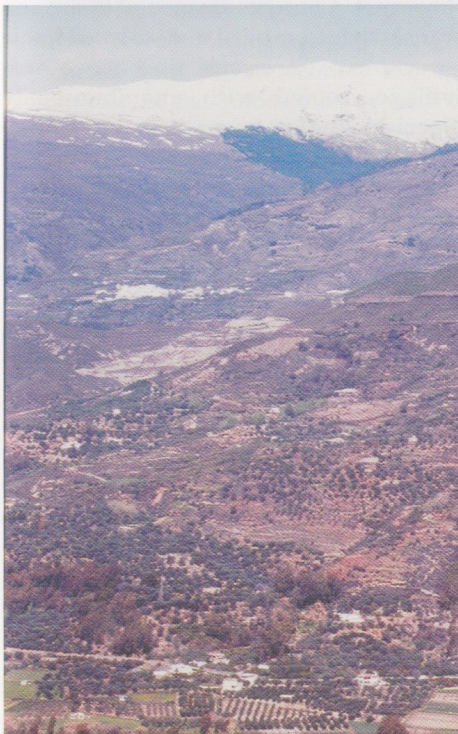
Ancient Acequia: hand dug irrigation ditch carrying water from the Sierra Nevada to the fields below.



Village of Capileira: Moorish style houses with Catholic Church spire and terraced fields in background.

fuelle.

Old men lead donkeys carrying firewood or crops through a cultivated landscape covered in the scent of rosemary, thyme, and lavender. Each village is ringed by privately owned *cortijos* (farms), terraced fields, pastures, and orchards served by one or more *acequias*. Some farms also have a *balsa* (irrigation pond) where terrain



Altitudinal Zones: from citrus groves in the valley, through oak forests, to pine plantations, to alpine snows of the Sierra Nevada.

permits. Oak and chestnut trees demarcate the margins of fields. Lower elevations in the Rio Guadalfeo Valley yield olives, oranges, lemons, almonds, bananas, sugar cane, avocados, and mangos. The mountain villages produce eggplant, figs, beans, melons, grapes, corn, onions, artichokes, Swiss chard, lettuce, spinach, pumpkins, cauliflower garlic, tomatoes, pimientos, pomegranates, cherries, apricots, quinces, raspberries, and apples.

In the 1880s, an outbreak of phyloxera killed most commercial grapevines in the region. Half the population of some villages left, many to South America, and the population has never fully recovered. A local saying reveals deep caution—*La vida es un soplo*. (Life is a puff of air.)

As altitude increases, the diversity of crops declines until only wheat, rye, and grass hay are grown in terraced, irrigated fields that abruptly end at the edge of a Scot's pine plantation or merge into the tussock grasslands of the high country. Alpine summer pastures once served as *ejidos* (commons), but their management is now part of the Sierra Nevada National Park.

Pigs, goats, sheep, horses, donkeys, and cattle are grazed in small herds and flocks throughout Las Alpujarras, with pigs given preference wherever oak forests remain. Local dishes reflect the variety of domestic and wild foods—trout, fennel stew, kid in garlic, gazpacho, and spicy rabbit—but the region is mostly known for the quality of its air-cured hams. The entrance sign to Trevelez reads *Bienvenidos a*

Trevelez: El Pueblo las mas alta en España—Depuete si bien jamón y hospitalidad (Welcome to Trevelez: The Highest Town in Spain—Famous for good ham and hospitality). In a local bar, slices of *jamón serrano* (dried ham), green olives, and hard bread are placed before the patron who orders *una caña* (a beer). The signature dish of the region, *El Plato Alujarreño* (the Alpujarran Plate) consists of fried ham, sausage, eggs, peppers, potatoes, and blood pudding. Dessert is often a sweet almond cake derived from a Moorish recipe. The strenuous life of the region still calls for highly caloric food with little concern for our modern dietary concerns.

Moorish village landscapes are morphologically unusual in Spain. There is no grid pattern of streets, no dominant central plaza, and no *paseo* or promenade. These places arose from Berber geographic thought and not from the tenets that emerged in 1573 as Spain's Laws of the Indies and which guided New World settlement (Fentress and Brit 1996; Walton 2003). While both cultures shared a significant concern for refuge and security, and each tended to create plazas and courtyards, the steep terrain of Las Alpujarras did not lend itself to geometric regularity like flatland sites did. Some of the settlements were built using remnants of Celt Iberian, Roman, or Visigoth towns and may be called "Berberized villages." Still others were built on bare ground



Moorish Style Home: piled, whitewashed stones and flower pots.



Estilo Moro: Moorish style villages stairstepping up a Sierra Nevada canyon: Capileira is at the top.

between the 12th and 16th centuries. All evoke patterns still seen in Algerian and Moroccan mountain villages, such as "Thaddart" (defensive villages overlooking valleys), "Ksar" (fortified villages), and "Tighremt" (isolated villages) (Lawless 1972, Brown & Thahar 2001).

Houses, barns, churches, *tiendas* (stores), and *posadas* (inns) are typically built in what Spaniards call *estilo moro* (Moorish style). How much of this is authentically Moorish or a syncretic mixture with Spanish traits is open to debate, but these buildings do strongly evoke structures still seen in the Morocco (Brown and Thahar 2001). Each building is constructed of piled, uncut, flat stones with *launa* (clay) used as mortar. Slate, dolomite, and limestone are the dominant rocks taken from nearby cliffs. The outer walls are left jagged and are usually not sealed with stucco, as is the custom in adobe construction. This vernacular stacking of country rock is still widely seen in Atlas and Rif Mountains of Morocco and Algeria, but stucco is now often used there to seal exterior walls and structures are rarely whitewashed. However, African buildings and compounds are structurally similar to those in the Sierra Nevada.

Buildings in Las Alpujarras are oriented south to capture the warmth of the winter sun. Nearly all buildings are

whitewashed today, but as recently as the 1920s, this practice was rare (Brenan 1957). Outlying farmhouses are left as bare stone or wood. Village buildings are commonly attached to each other for practical and defensive purposes, but each home belongs to one family. The flat roofs form *terrados* (terraces) used for drying grapes and figs and for enjoying a spectacular view of the Sierra or the sea. The original, more sobering purpose was to see approaching Christian forces. *Terrados* are sealed with *launa* and have drain spouts that shed winter rain into street runnels that carry water to nearby fields. *Azoteas* (attics) are built over part of the roof for drying tomatoes, corn, eggplant, or red pimientos. Strings of corn cobs and red peppers hang from balconies next to pots of geraniums and carnations, with snapdragons and pinks planted in small flowerbeds. *Aleros* (chestnut joists or slats) jut out over the edge of the roof to protect the walls and block the intense summer sun. A circular family dinner table (*la mesa camilla*) is still seen in traditional homes. An echo of this bonding tradition is seen in the "taco table" of Chicano households in the United States (Chávez 2006). Chimneys are capped with flat stones, another visual signature of the Berbers. Windows are small, often with metal bars. Front door curtains (*jarapas*) woven of brightly dyed local wool are used

during the warm season. The curtains blow slightly open in the breeze suggesting hospitality while preserving privacy.

In many villages, a Catholic church stands on the site of the former *mezquita* (mosque). Churches are modest in size and vary in style from piled stone to wood frame structures. A steeple rises above each village, roofed with unambiguously Spanish tile. Most towns do not have a true central plaza. However, the church in Baubión stands on a small, angular plaza built of hand-riven paving stones. Yégen is another exception, with its *Plaza de Brenan* named for the author who made the village famous. While most churches fully replaced the Muslim shrine, in Cordoba the essential structure of the mosque was preserved while lancing its spiritual heart with a Christian spire. This powerfully symbolic practice was repeated across Latin America, where Catholic shrines were built atop former Native American sacred sites (Plaza Mayor, Mexico City; Esquipulas, Guatemala; Chimayo, New Mexico). A cemetery is placed near the church or on the edge of town. The name for this feature in Las Alpujarras reveals a fatalistic philosophy of life and death here *la tierra de la verdad* (land of the truth). As does the name of a local canyon—*Barranco de la Sangre* (Canyon of Blood).

Religious processions of villagers

carrying banners of Christ, local saints, and *virgens* are common. "Viva la Purísima, Viva el Señor!" (Long live the Virgin, Long live Christ) is shouted followed by the firing of rifles to frighten away Satan. Cries of "Kill the Devil" can be heard echoing down the mountainsides. A *Moros y Cristianos* (Moors and Christians) festival is held annually in Valór, where costumed villagers reenact the *reconquista*. Ever since the eviction of the Moors, some communities continue the racist folk ritual of "killing Mohammad" using grotesque puppets. The Spanish government has called for an end to this practice nationwide, but memory runs deep. Upon leaving a home in Las Alpujarras, one can occasionally hear a warning, *Cuidado, hay moros en la costa* (Be careful, there are Moors at the coast).

Las Alpujarras evolved as a landscape of fear. It was once infested with monsters and witches. The *mantequero* was a bloodsucking, fat-eating creature that lived in the *barrancas* and preyed upon unsuspecting shepherds and wayward children. No recent sightings have been reported. Three types of witches are also said to exist. *Hechiceras* (hairy women) are rumored to possess demonic power and thrive on cruelty. *Brujas* can fly and cast spells but possess less malice. Finally, *duendes* are playful house sprites that do little more than cause mischief or amusement. Locals say that reports of witches decreased with the coming of roads. Witchcraft is a private matter, and the commotion of the automobiles seemed to disturb them. There is an old local saying, "the higher you go, the more witches you see." Gerald Brenan reported that in the 1920s, *la gente del campo* (country people) used to see them "floating by moonlight through the air, perching like owls in the poplar trees" (Brenan 1957, 19).

In 1923, Virginia Woolf, Maynard Keynes, and Bertrand Russell visited writer Gerald Brenan in the village of Yégen. Although they explored the region by mule, modernity had arrived. Las Alpujarras was now a place to be contemplated and written about, oriental exotica for intellectuals. During the 1960s, Europeans came seeking solitude or alternative lifestyles. However, roads linked all the villages by the 1970s, reducing their isolation. Chris Stewart's personal memoirs of life in Las Alpujarras, such as *Driving Over Lemons* and *A Parrot in the Pepper Tree*, brought wider attention to the region (Stewart 2001 and 2008). In the 1990s, Buddhists chose a local boy as a lama the reincarnation of an ancient spiritual

lineage. He was educated in Tibet, and a Buddhist and yoga center has been constructed in Pampaneira on ground claimed in succession by Pagans, Muslims, and Christians.

Las Alpujarras has also become a real estate opportunity. Sales of old, whitewashed stone houses are brisk, some fetching over \$150,000. British, Germans, Americans, and Spaniards are buying and remodeling Berber relicts as vacation and retirement homes. *Posadas*, craft shops, and restaurants catering to tourists are now a leading economic activity in many villages such as Pampaneira, Baubión, and Capileira.

Sierra Nevada National Park

Worldwide recognition of the unique mountain landscapes of Las Alpujarras began in 1986, when UNESCO recognized 171,000 hectares as a Biosphere Reserve (UNESCO 2007). In 1998, Spain created *Parque Natural y Nacional de Sierra Nevada*. The *Parque Nacional* safeguards biota while the *Parque Natural* maintains the Moorish village landscape as a surrounding buffer zone (Williams 2007). In the United States, special use permits and licenses are needed to provide services in national parks. In Spain, management boundaries blur in the *Parque Natural*, where vernacular cultural practices are codified by intentional policies to preserve architecture, agriculture, *acequias*, and an astonishing diversity of species.

Despite centuries of agriculture, Sierra Nevada National Park retains 70 endemic

plant species (Martinez 1996). The region served as an Ice Age refugia for species while much of northern Europe was encased in glaciers. As result, over 2,100 vascular plants are found, a quarter of all species in Spain. Alpine ecosystems support a variety of rare plants, such as glacier toadflax, pink violet Nevada saxifrage, and alpine rock cress. Below 9,000 feet, a mosaic of Mediterranean and exotic species grow including Scot's pine, Savin and common junipers, sedges, and thyme. These species can be viewed at the *Jardin Botánico de La Cortijuela* at the west edge of the park.

Sierra Nevada National Park also contains over 60 bird species of note (Clavell et al. 2005). Raptors include golden eagles, Bonelli's eagles, European honey-buzzards, pallid harrier, peregrine falcons, Egyptian vulture, griffon vulture, and the common kestrel. Rare black vultures are sometimes seen soaring over the villages. Alpine species, such as black redstarts, northern wheatear, rock thrush, rock bunting, red-billed chough, and sky larks, fly over flocks of sheep and goats. In farming areas, hoopoes, short-toed treecreepers, royal owl, coal tit, green woodpecker, goldfinch, and golden orioles share the terrain with farmers. Large stick nests of yellow-billed stork, Marabou stork, white stork, and black stork adorn village rooftops. Birds easily migrate between Africa and Spain reminding us of the stunning proximity of these biotic and cultural realms.

The signature mammal of the Sierra is the Spanish ibex (*Cabra hispanica*) – a



Sierra Nevada National Park Sign: "Natural" and "National" park designations.

mountain goat with curling horns. Herds graze in high alpine meadows, which also serve as summer pastures for sheep and cattle. Farmers obtain grazing permits from the government yet maintain *ejido* practices dating back centuries. Stone grazing shacks with no electricity or running water are still used by transhumant Alpujarrans.

Doe deer, muflon (an introduced sheep), wild boars, foxes, badgers, and beech martens are common in the mountains but the red deer (elk) was extirpated by hunting more than a century ago. The park also contains 78 endemic invertebrate species, mostly butterflies and beetles. Over 120 species of butterflies and 37 native beetles have been recorded, including an endemic rhinoceros beetle that seems out of place in Europe.

The cultural landscapes of the park are protected by regulations that block land subdivision, require *estilo moro* architectural styles, and stress what might be called "heritage agriculture." Thus far, the narrative of a rural, relict Moorish landscape has not been widely contested. Landowners comply with strict regulations in a way that would not occur in the United States. Environmentalists view the arrangement as a success in applied landscape ecology. Spain's one million Muslims have not mounted a concerted effort to recover a romanticized "lost Eden." Most are urban residents or new immigrants working on commercial farms along the coast. Jihadi terrorism, such as the 2004 Madrid train bombing, has thus far been motivated by Spain's participation in the Iraq War not by the struggle to recover Las Alpujarras (Christian Science Monitor 2007).

Conclusion

The Moorish cultural landscapes of Las Alpujarras are a reminder of the extraordinary power of relocation diffusion to transplant geographic thoughts to new lands. The Berbers/Moors who settled these villages and crafted this landscape did so with such foresight that Christian conquerors made few structural changes. From *acequias* to agriculture and architecture, the landscapes of Las Alpujarras remain strikingly Moorish, a fair reflection of life in North African mountains just across the sea.

Las Alpujarras is maintained today by the conscious decision of the government, who created Sierra Nevada National Park, and by Spanish villagers with fidelity to seemingly Moorish ways of land and life.

A conquered place has become culturally naturalized. Despite global insidencies for growth, the lure of money from commodity agriculture, potential windfalls from real estate development, and the challenges of illegal immigration across the Strait of Gibraltar, this place remains an isolated, intriguing, relict landscape.

Racist billboards in southern Spain, however, warn us that paranoia over a possible Muslim *reconquista* is not dead "Moros no!" (Robinson 2000, 20E7). When Christian settlers took over Las Alpujarras in 1568, two families of Moors were forced to stay behind in each village to explain how *acequias* worked, crops were grown, and structures were maintained. Conveyance of geographic knowledge under duress is hardly worth our admiration. Nonetheless, it did help transfer a relationship with the environment that is both functionally and ecologically reasonable. Today, as these striking landscapes become retirement retreats and national park gateway communities, who will be left to teach the lessons of land and life that give the place its emotional, ethical, and geographic complexity? As Las Alpujarras are replaced by amenity migrants, how will they understand, manage, and conserve this landscape in the future? This essential question is being faced everywhere as powerful confluences between culture and nature continue to transform a shrinking world.

Las Alpujarras say: *Venimos emprestados* "our lives are loaned to us." Perhaps it is the same with landscapes.

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