

Visit to the Alcazaba

[1] Malaga's Alcazaba is one of the most important defensive precincts preserved in Spain. When visiting it is important to bear in mind that you are going to explore the two walled precincts[1] and the entry fortifications that make up the monument. The visit starts in the exterior precinct which is characterised by the conservation of elements from the earliest period of construction, especially in the northern section, where rectangular towers can be seen. Like the towers typical of Caliphate fortresses, these do not protrude very far. The eastern and southern sections have square towers that protrude further, and some of these are hollow since they are constructions made during the Nasrid remodelling.

The upper precinct retains towers with the same Caliphate characteristics and this area was reinforced in the 14th century with the Torre del Homenaje (Keep), built over a smaller one from the 11th century. There are also the towers that were close to the mosque, the Torre de los Arcos (Tower of the Arches) and some others of lesser importance.

But the defensive system was even more complex, because in addition to the two interior precincts, in order to access the Alcazaba from the city, and before entering the lower precinct, people had to pass through the "entry fortifications" as Torres Balbás called them, referring to the area of walls and gates which were a first obstacle for anyone who wanted to penetrate the fortifications by force.

[1] The information presented in these texts was extracted from the book written by Fanny de CARRANZA SELL, Alcazaba de Málaga, Colección Domus Aurea, Ediciones Esirtu, Malaga, 2010.

Entry Fortifications

These were built during the great reform carried out by Badis, the Zirid king of Granada, when he annexed Malaga to his Taifa in 1057.

The first thing that attracts the visitor's attention when approaching the fortress to start the visit is a large tower that leads from the fortification into the city, in the Plaza de la Aduana. This is an Albarrana Tower[1], or a tower that separated the main circuit from the ramparts, connected to these by a wall-walk and which served as a defensive spur, controlling the access to the fortification from all angles. In the Arab era this Albarrana Tower also projected into the city on the edge of the sea. This is the only tower of these characteristics in the Alcazaba and slightly more than half of it is restored; the large ashlar from the Roman Theatre, which make up its corners, are clearly visible. In the interior there are three small floors built in the 1940s.

After climbing a few steps the visitor reaches a terrace, presided over by the bust of John Temboury Álvarez, who devoted his life to the restoration of the monument.

On the right, on the section of wall over which the wall-walk runs to the Albarrana Tower, a marble wall fountain from the 18th century and brought from another point of the city was placed, together with two coats of arms of the same material. This creates a harmonious and sober whole in this space that had been freed of constructions in 1940 and that was paved with recycled flagstones. Among these there are a few on which hinges can be seen and others which have been carved. A stairway of boulders leads to the reception building, and on the left is the path that leads to the Roman Theatre. This newly created space was designed by the architects Isabel Cámara Guezala and Rafael Martín Delgado, and was built in the 1990s, over very slight traces of houses from the Emirate period. This is a very lightweight building, separated from the original walls, with one of its walls made of glass so that the walls can be viewed, and it contains a scale model of the monument.

After leaving the reception building, the visitor comes out into the stony outdoor space again and accesses the monument through the original 15th century gate. The door is made of two leaves of wood lined by thick strips of iron plate, held in place with large nails of the same material. Once through these doors, you will see the first rebuilt arch. This is the area that Leopoldo Torres Balbás defined as the Entry Fortifications, and you can immediately appreciate its characteristics: this is a path constrained by walls dotted with small stout towers, with a wall-walk and a profusion of defensive gates. On the right we have the Torre del Horno (Tower of the Oven), so called because of the small room inside, which is covered by a dome of bricks.

We now find ourselves in the first sloped passageway where we can see another of the built characteristics of the whole fortress. Rather than seeking symmetry or regularity, the construction follows the structure of the hill, adapted to the living rock on which it stands. In many cases it is possible to see that the towers were built without foundations.

On the external face of the section of wall on the right, the visitor can appreciate the different construction systems used in the different phases of building: first the living rock on which the wall stands, over this the wall faced with irregular masonry, i.e. medium-sized stones, of diverse materials more or less shaped on one of their faces and completed with some bricks, over this a space with no stone facing where it can be seen that the interior of the wall is made of rammed earth with a lot of lime mortar, and over this another wall finishing or covering, here using regular stonework, in other words, rows of stones and brick one after the other, product, in this case, of a modern restoration. This whole section is topped by battlements.

This section and the next, from the Puerta de la Bóveda (Gate of the Vault) to the Puerta de las Columnas (Gate of the Columns) have been modified the most, and our passage is interrupted by an arch that gives access to a small courtyard presided over by a monolith dedicated by the City Council to Fernando Guerrero-Strachan, the architect responsible for restoration from 1937 to 1941. The tower located on the left hand side is known as Torre Tembours (Tembours Tower) and has been substantially rebuilt. On the right there is a large tower with a bent entrance called Puerta de la Bóveda Vaída (Gate of the Sail Vault), named after the beautiful brick vault that covers it. This defence system is one of the most interesting aspects of the fortification. The tower dates to the 11th century and the passage through the gate is made of a succession of arches. The first, which was renovated in the 16th century, is a semi-circular arch made out of brick; the second, which is a structural arch that defines the space of the vault, is a horseshoe arch from the 11th century; the one on the other side of the square is also a horseshoe arch from the 11th century, and rests on shafts of reutilised stone. Next, there is another horseshoe arch with stone and brick voussoirs that are horizontal in the lower section, dating back to the 11th century, which opens to a vaulted space at the exit of the tower. It rests on large shafts of reutilised Roman columns.

Again a pathway flanked by the ramparts directs us to another gate, and on the left can be seen a good stretch of a grand staircase of large marble steps, possibly material reused in the modern age and that was left in place during the restoration.

The Puerta de las Columnas (Gate of the Columns) consists of three arches in total. The first is a brick entrance with reutilised white marble shafts and Corinthian capitals; the second is an interior horseshoe arch, supported on pilasters; and the third is the exit, which is truly beautiful: under a load relieving lintel, a horseshoe arch with an alfiz (moulding that encloses the outward side of an arch) has alternating stone and brick voussoirs, achieving a two-tone effect that imitates the characteristics of the Caliphate arches found in the Mosque of Cordoba. The masonry of the walls gives great plasticity to the construction. This door gives direct access and to the right you can climb up on the wall-walk which leads to the top of the Albarrana Tower.

From the esplanade the Cuesta de Cristo (Slope of Christ) starts. Halfway up, there is a tower with the base of another gateway giving direct access that has not been rebuilt, leaving only the base attached to the tower on the right.

Inside the Torre del Cristo (Tower of Christ) is the second bent entrance, a Taifa construction that was renovated in the Nasrid period. The entrance arch, with horizontal voussoirs in the lower section and an alfiz, is made of brick, and its keystone is a stone voussoir into which a key has been sculpted, like the one found in the Puerta de la Justicia (Gate of Justice) in Granada's Alhambra. Above the entrance arch there are two stone corbels, the remains of a defensive machicolation. The gate, also covered by a sail vault, is made up of a series of arches. The first is found in the entrance, which is a small space covered by a barrel vault to bridge the difference in level; the next are the interior structural arch, which supports the vault that covers the passage, and that of the exit, both horseshoe arches, leading to another vaulted space before the final arch at the exit of the tower. The central sail vault, made of brick, preserves the remains of the decoration it had, painted in almagra (deep ochre). The name Puerta del Cristo (Gate of Christ) comes from an altarpiece with a figure of Christ that was inside, in the niche that is still visible today, which turned the space into a kind of street chapel from the 17th century.

Lower Precinct

The Puerta del Cristo gives access to the lower precinct, the large space that completely surrounds the upper precinct that contains the Palace.

We begin the ascent from the south, with the wall-walk that crosses the middle part of the Torre del Cristo on the right. Here there are several towers, all of them restored, and on the left hand side a hillside that is relatively wild. From the second viewpoint, the highest, we get a good view of all the lower defensive area and, toward the interior, of the so-called Torre de los Abencerrajes (Tower of the Abencerrajes) or Torre del Socorro (Tower of Relief) with the gate giving access to the Coracha (fortified walkway).

The Coracha goes up the hill before losing itself in Gibralfaro Castle. Its zig-zag construction, which avoided the need to build Albarrana Towers, can be clearly seen. The Coracha is made up of two parallel walls crowned by a wall-walk, and is no more than the protected path that communicated the palace-fortress of the Alcazaba with the Castle, via a single access. The Castle's only door, which was monumental in nature, opened on to the Coracha, which on reaching the Castle, opened into a barbican.

From this viewpoint we have a superb perspective of the walls of the southern upper precinct, with its many small towers placed very close together and, in the angle, the imposing ruin of the Torre del Homenaje (the Keep). This tower was initially built in the Taifa period, with a large brick arch on its eastern face that may have been a separate access that led from the Medina in the interior of the primitive Alcazaba. It was filled in throughout its lower area and resurfaced in order to give it greater solidity. At the time of its restoration it was decided to respect the ruins and simply consolidate them, leaving them in their current romantic and evocative condition.

The visitor now meets a gateway that restricts access to the northern part of the fortress. Once you have passed through it, you find the Airón Well, a large 40-metre-deep well excavated into the rock of the hill, which reaches a natural vein of water. The base of a waterwheel used to extract the water which supplied the fortification can be found here too.

The open space that encircles the entire precinct has no remains in sight, and fits the irregular parallelepiped shape of the hill, constrained by the walls of the upper precinct, and those that give onto Calle Nuevo Mundo that culminate in the Torre del Tiro (Tower of the Shot).

The Torre del Tiro, which has also not been rebuilt, is now a large solid cube. From this tower a stretch of wall went down to the wall that surrounded the city.

The space inside the lower precinct narrows, finishing on the north in the two openings of the Dungeons. These are built following the same system as the silos: they are like a large inverted funnel, which made them impossible to scale, and both openings are quite narrow. In this area of the hill, these hollows are very damp, which must have made a period of residence within them very hard.

From this space, narrow in comparison with the rest of the precinct, the view of the small towers on the outer face of the upper precinct is very beautiful. These can be clearly seen by going up to the gateway that closes the passage near the Puerta de los Cuartos de Granada (Gate of the Quarters of Granada). At this point we turn back to see the view from the Puerta del Cristo, now going in the other direction, since currently the visitor is forced to retrace their steps to the Torre del Cristo from the viewpoint.

We are back at the exit from the Puerta del Cristo: in front you can see a space dug out of the ground which is a grain silo or warehouse, and whose opening is located in the floor of a Roman garum (fermented fish sauce) tank.

After passing under another arch we reach an esplanade, nowadays fully landscaped with a beautiful Hispanic-Arab garden, known as Plaza de Armas. The garden was designed by the architect Fernando Guerrero-Strachan Rosado. When the Plaza de Armas was restored, the remains of two Christian burials were found, which must have belonged to the Parish Church of Saint Louis, Bishop of Toulouse, the patron saint of the day the Catholic Monarchs entered the city (19th August).

The most striking feature of the Plaza de Armas is the ornamental richness offered by the simple materials, stone and brick, combined in a geometrical design, with the central area recessed, like a garden with crossing paths. The garden is furrowed with channels that lead the water from the upper area of the palace to the fountain that forms the centre of the garden, framed by four flowerbeds containing low hedges. Before leaving the Plaza it is worth looking through a little gateway opened in the lower area of the wall, to the left on its western side, to see the panoramic view of the three levels of the line of entry fortifications and the view of the lower area toward the Albarrana Tower and the access from the city.

In the Plaza de Armas there is another fountain that in the middle of two narrow stairways that cover the change in level from the inside of the courtyard toward the Puerta de los Cuartos de Granada, built when the garden was designed. This is a wall fountain with basin, of the same material as the previous one, red marble, which was placed at this location in the most recent phase of restoration of the monument in the 1990s.

From the Plaza de Armas it is very interesting to observe how you can go completely around the whole Alcazaba using the wall-walk. It runs over the sections of wall, entering and exiting the different towers, and going up and down, allowing everything to be monitored from the highest areas. In the case of the Torre del Cristo (Tower of Christ), the wall-walk crosses through it, leaving the room to the right. The wall-walk, also known as the patrol path, narrows even further at the only point where it connects with the upper precinct, over the arch that covers the modern gate that opens to a small passageway in the interior at the end of the only Tower that allows entry into the upper precinct.

Once you have climbed the staircase or ramp that is on your right, another small hill offers a magnificent view of the Puerta de los Cuartos de Granada, also known as Puerta del Tinel (Tinel Gate) or Puerta de los Arcos (Gate of the Arches), since ancient times. This large tower was demolished almost entirely in 1854, but was rebuilt following an etching dated from 1839. This is a double gate with direct access, meaning it has a first passage, then a small courtyard, and then a second passage, with a wall that cuts it off, forcing you to turn a sharp corner, this one under the open sky. This defensive system is very effective, because in the event that the first door in

the first passage was breached, it allowed the defenders to defend the access by throwing different materials from the upper area, turning the small courtyard into a veritable mousetrap. The restoration of the Tower, completed in 1938, was the work of the architect Fernando Guerrero-Strachan, and involved the creation in its interior of spaces that were originally used as rooms for showing restored ceramic pieces.

Upper Precinct

This powerful tower protects the western side of the upper precinct covering the highest area of the hill and perfectly adapted to its elongated form, while the Torre del Homenaje protects the east side. Between them the space is completely enclosed by walls with numerous small towers, and here the palace and the Neighbourhood of Dwellings or military district were located. This upper precinct is probably the oldest zone of the fortress and is the area that has been most modified due to its long use. Here residential and administrative functions were performed, and it was the seat of government of the city.

The path obliges the visitor to follow a specific route until we come across a small courtyard with another fountain, and a steep, narrow staircase that takes us up to the higher area, which was designed as a terraced garden around the silo in the centre by Fernando Guerrero-Strachan. The silo was dug in this place due to the nature of the terrain, meaning that for many years this area was known as the Patio de la Mazmorra (Patio of Dungeon). This garden serves as an entrance to the Halls of the Palace.

A new fountain was placed a little above the silo area. The idea was to channel the water from the upper area by means of culverts, taking the water from one fountain to another through open channels that would cool the gardens at the same time as providing the background music of water. This would also compartmentalise and regulate the space through a Hispanic Muslim garden design, playing with the colours of the stone, brick, vegetation and water, in a geometric ordering of the space, increasing the feeling of refuge.

This upper garden, like all the rest of the complex, is surrounded by the wall-walk from which fine views of the city and the Roman Theatre can be enjoyed, together with a large part of the centre to the north, and across the bay to the south.

The Palace, or rather, the two palaces that still have preserved remains, are well differentiated. In the first place, we find a space that is called Patio de los Surtidores (Courtyard of the Jets of Water), which was the central courtyard of the Taifa Palace, formed by two pavilions to the north and south of the courtyard, of which only the southern one is preserved.

The southern portico of the Taifa Palace has a room that is accessed from the wall-walk next to the Torre Maldonado (Maldonado Tower) through a large arch that gives access to a room that, in the passage to the portico that opens out on to the courtyard, has a triple horseshoe arch with an alfiz that follows the Caliphate models of the Salón Rico (Rich Hall) of the palatine city of Madinat al-Zahra, with the classic bond of red and white voussoirs, which are carved with arabesque decorative motifs, along with the intrados of the arches. The cylindrical columns are delicate and have no base, and are made of wood covered with plaster, with a Granada-style capital, above which there is a cymatium made of reddish stone.

From the Patio de los Surtidores, a Nasrid portico precedes the access to the interior of the room, formed by three arches, with the middle arch being the largest. The portico was renovated in the 13th - 14th century, but it already existed in the 11th century, as can be seen by the fact that the stone columns are supported on the bases of columns from the Caliphate period, indicating that it must therefore be a reconstruction. The portico

consists of three scalloped arches and rests on two stone columns. One of the columns is original (like its capital), quadrangular and carved with plant motifs, and is very rigid in its composition, similar to other contemporary work in the Alhambra. On the cymatiums there is still a phrase from the Quran written in letters from the Nasrid period, in white on red: "There is no victor but Allah".

The Taifa Palace also has another element of great interest, which is the Pabellón de Arcos Lobulados (Pavilion of Lobed Arches), found to the right. This small original pavilion is decorative, which means the arches are not structural, and its purpose must have been to give greater political representation to this area of the palace, perhaps destined for government work, emulating the splendid art from the Caliphate period, but with the much poorer materials that were being used during the Taifa period. They date back to the middle of the 11th century (between 1026 and 1057), and the decoration serves to emulate the power of the Caliphate of Cordoba.

Once the rooms have been passed through, or when entering through their original access via the wall-walk, we arrive at a courtyard-terrace that opens out over the city, with the Torre de Maldonado on its righthand side. This imposing tower belongs to the defensive zone and was remodelled in the Almohad period, when it was endowed with the two beautiful marble columns, with Quranic text inscribed on them and with the triple arches through which it is accessed, which give it a certain representative character. From the west window of the tower or from the wall-walk itself, it is interesting to observe a solid tower in which the base and interior made of ashlar from the Taifa period can be seen very clearly, along with the subsequent masonry covering from the Nasrid period. We can also see how the construction took place directly on the rock.

Through the same corridor that, in the manner of a portico on the south side, precedes the Hall of the Taifa Palace, access is gained through a beautifully closed horseshoe arch of stone voussoirs, Taifa, which gives way to the other spectacular hall of the complex, the Sala del Siglo XVI (Hall of the 16th Century) or Sala de la Armadura Mudéjar (Hall of the Mudéjar Ceiling), which remains in its place of origin. The framing of the ceiling has a trapezoidal section, with four panels finished off in the centre with an octagonal central piece (almizate) decorated with a muqarnas cone, framed by another four smaller ones, all this surrounded by eight-pointed stars. Pieces called limas are used to assemble the four panels, in this case formed by two parallel beams that form dowels. In the lower part ceiling, there are two decorative bands, the upper one decorated with triglyphs and the lower one with abstract plant forms, drops and half circles, with the corners finished with moulded corbels with crosspieces in the angles. This room was remodelled by Mudéjar builders, and the windows that were opened in it must also belong to that time.

Returning to the centre of the Patio de los Surtidores you can access the palace from the Nasrid period, arranged around two courtyards. The current access is a product of the restoration, as it should have a bent access.

The area around the Nasrid Palace had very few original ruins and so the whole space was recreated in a historicist way, basing the work on the floor plans of the Granada palaces, with roofs and ceilings in some cases reused from other parts of the monument, recreating decorative elements from the fragments that had been preserved, but allowing freedom in terms of their placement. The distribution was around two courtyards with pavilions facing each other at the shorter ends (north-south), with porticoes with three arches, but it could not be ascertained whether they were supported by columns or pillars, what the arrangement of the alcove was, what the total height of the rooms was or what type of roof it had. It was equipped with doors and taqas in the style of the Taifa Palace.

The Patio de los Naranjos (Courtyard of Orange Trees) is set around two small pools, based on the traces of the originals discovered. The pavilions covered with domical vaults were painted by Hermenegildo Lanz, and the columns recreate those of the Nasrid palaces of Granada.

The second courtyard, the Patio de la Alberca (Courtyard of the Pool) or Patio de Arrayán (Myrtle Courtyard), is set around a large central pool whose waters mirror the architecture, surrounded on both sides by a myrtle hedge. At the northern end of the pavilion, a lookout tower was erected, after discovering remains of the tower and the base of the stairs. The room of the southern portico is covered by a wooden roof that was brought from the monument itself. The north wall of this Palace is currently occupied by several exhibition rooms. The Nasrid Palace can be visited at your leisure via a permanent exhibition of an educational nature, which opened in 2003.

After leaving the Palace there is another space that can be visited, whose access door is located next to the Gran Sala del Palacio Taifa (Grand Hall of the Taifa Palace). This room, in the southern part of the Patio de los Naranjos, serves as an entrance to the monument for visitors who make use of the lift leading to Calle Guillén Sotelo. This space is used for the entrance and exit of visitors, with explanatory panels focused on comparing the monumental complex formed by the Alcazaba and Gibralfaro Castle with the other contemporary Moorish alcazabas, such as the Alcazaba of the Alhambra in Granada and the Alcazaba of Almería.