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Columbus's bones: A tale of two tombs

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Seville tour guides joke that local hero Christopher Columbus did more travelling dead than alive. But where his body ended up has always been a serious matter in the Spanish city, both for civic pride and for the purposes of tourism.

Now, Sevillians have evidence to support their long-standing claim that Columbus's remains — or at least some of them — are buried in the explorer's tomb inside the Seville Cathedral. Researchers from the University of Granada released findings this month showing that DNA from bone fragments in the tomb match those of Columbus's brother Diego, who is also buried in the cathedral.

Unfortunately for Seville, the Dominican Republic is not abandoning its rival claim that the Columbus Lighthouse, a monumental tomb in its capital, Santo Domingo, is the real one. And since the Caribbean country refuses to open its burial spot to researchers, the possibility remains that some parts of the explorer's body parts may indeed be entombed on the island he claimed for Spain in 1492.

The journeys of the living Columbus (who thought he was in India when he landed in the Western Hemisphere) were financed by King Ferdinand V and Queen Isabella, who held court in Seville. After Columbus's death in Valladolid, Spain, in May, 1506 — 500 years ago this month — he was buried in the Seville Cathedral. The remains were moved to a Seville monastery in 1509, then to Santo Domingo in 1537.

After that, details get murky. Spain claims it moved the remains to Havana in 1795 after ceding Santo Domingo to the French, then back to Seville for safekeeping during the Spanish-American war. The Dominican Republic says the body stayed where it was.

Even if the DNA results had gone against Seville, tourists would continue to flock here. Seville has been a World Heritage Site since 1987, with Muslim and Christian monuments, including the cathedral, the neighbouring Alcazar (a Moorish palace), and the Archives of the Indies (a library of rare manuscripts).

Billed as the largest Gothic building in Europe, the Seville Cathedral stands on the site of an Almohad mosque. The courtyard stones were laid by Muslims in the 12th century and the bell tower, which tourists climb for a view of the city, was originally the mosque's minaret.

But the tomb of Columbus will continue to be the cathedral's major drawing card, just as the competing tomb across the Atlantic will keep attracting world travellers to Santo Domingo.

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