

Castilla y León



CASTILLA Y LEÓN

Castilla y León is Spain without the stereotypes. While the package tourists head for the beach, discerning travellers looking for a window on the Spanish soul make for Castilla y León.

Some of Spain's most beautiful cities are here, rising up from the lonely plains of the country's central plateau with dazzling architecture that provides the backdrop to night-time carousing of the highest order. Salamanca is a glorious temple to Plateresque and Renaissance sandstone, but it does anything but live in the past thanks to its vibrant student population who take the nights by storm. Segovia is similarly alive, its buzzing streets watched over by an astonishing Roman aqueduct and a fairy-tale castle that seems to belong (and once did) in Disneyland. Elsewhere, the cathedrals of León and Burgos are among Europe's most impressive, while the multiturreted walls of Ávila are everything you dreamed they would be.

But the story of Castilla y León is just as accurately told through the quiet back roads, isolated villages and captivating castles that appear in the most unlikely places and which the tourist hordes have yet to discover. From the scenic Sierra de Francia in the southwest to Covarrubias, Calatañazor and Medinaceli in the east, this is the hidden Spain that most foreign travellers never dreamed still existed.

Food is another central element of the Castilian charm. Here, cured meats have been perfected to an art form and roasted *cordero* (lamb) or *cochinillo* (suckling pig) provide central Spain's hearty riposte to the dominance of paella.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Spend as long as you can in **Salamanca** (p183), a lively university town that is one of Castilla's most beautiful
- Dream of Disneyland at the Alcázar and marvel at the ingenuity of the ancients at the Roman aqueduct in **Segovia** (p194)
- Savour the sepulchral light in León's **catedral** (cathedral; p214), a kaleidoscopic vision of glass and stone
- Lose yourself in the land time forgot amid the stone-and-timber villages of the **Sierra de Francia** (p192)
- Dine on *cordero asado* (roast lamb) like a Castilian in the pretty hilltop towns of **Lerma** (p229) or **Sepúlveda** (p230)
- Disappear into the quiet Castilian heartland to the enchanting village of **Calatañazor** (p236)



■ AREA: XX94,224 SQ KM	■ AVE SUMMER TEMP: HIGH 31°C, LOW 14°C	■ POP: 2.51 MILLION
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THE SOUTHWEST

Southwestern Castilla y León is one of the region's most engaging corners, home as it is to Salamanca and Ávila, the beautiful mountain scenery of the Sierra de Gredos and the timeworn villages of the Sierra de Francia.

ÁVILA

pop 52,610 / elevation 1130m

Your first glimpse of Ávila is one you'll never forget with mountains in the distance providing an evocative backdrop to the impregnable stone wall and the 88 watchtowers that seem to spring from a fairy tale. Within the walls lies an old town of rare beauty, home to an

extraordinary cathedral and 16th-century monuments that tell the story of Ávila's favourite daughter: Santa Teresa de Ávila. It all adds up to a wonderful day trip from Madrid, or even better, an overnight stay along one of its quiet medieval streets.

History

According to myth, one of Hercules' sons founded Ávila. The more prosaic truth, however, gives the honour to obscure Iberian tribes who were later Romanised and then, for their troubles, Christianised. For almost 300 years, Ávila changed hands regularly between Muslims and Christians, until the fall of Toledo to Alfonso VI in 1085, whereafter Ávila has worn its Christian identity proudly on its sleeve.

'Ávila of the Knights' went on to become an important commercial centre with a well-established noble class, although the 1492 edict expelling all Jews from Spain robbed the city of much of its lifeblood. Meanwhile, Fray Tomás de Torquemada, the infamous 15th-century leader of the Spanish Inquisition (see the boxed text, p202), ended his days in Ávila.

By the end of the 16th century, the city's heyday was over and it has only recently begun to shake off the deep slumber that ensued.

Orientation

The old centre fans out to the west from the *catedral* (cathedral) which abuts the eastern wall. The bus and train stations are a five- and 10-minute walk respectively northeast of the *catedral* in the nondescript new town. The best accommodation and eating options are all close to the *catedral*.

Information

EMERGENCY

Cruz Roja (% 920 22 22 22) For ambulances.

Policia Nacional (% 920 25 10 00, emergencies 091; Paseo San Roque 34)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital Provincial (% 920 35 72 00; Calle de Jesús de Gran Poder 42)

MONEY

Banks that exchange money and have ATMs are everywhere in the eastern end of the old town and close to Plaza de Santa Teresa.

POST

Main post office (% 920 35 31 06; Plaza de la Catedral) Almost opposite the *catedral*.

TELEPHONE

Telephone office (Plaza de la Catedral; h 8am-8pm)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (% 920 21 13 87; www.avilaturismo.com; Plaza de la Catedral 4; h 9am-2pm & 5-8pm) Additional tourist information kiosks open outside Puerta de San Vicente and the train station from June to September.

Sights

CATEDRAL

Ávila's 12th-century *catedral* (% 920 21 16 41; admission €2.50; h 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-7pm Sat, noon-7.30pm Sun) is not just a house of worship, but also an ingenious fortress: its stout granite

apse forms the central bulwark in the heavily fortified eastern wall of the town. This is the earliest Gothic church in Spain, although the grey, sombre façade betrays some unhappy 18th-century meddling in the main portal.

The interior is a different story, with playful red-and-white limestone columns. To fully appreciate its splendour, you'll need to seek out the inner sanctum, cloisters, sacristy and small museum, which are superb. In the museum, highlights include a painting by El Greco and a splendid silver monstrance by Juan de Arfe. Within the church itself are Renaissance-era carved walnut choir stalls and a dazzling altar painting begun by Pedro de Berruguete, showing the life of Jesus in 24 scenes.

You can catch a partial peek of the interior for free, but to see the inner sanctum (and museum) you'll have to produce the €2.50.

BASÍLICA DE SAN VICENTE

Outside the great fortified gate of the same name, the subdued elegance of the Romanesque *basílica* (% 920 25 52 30; admission €1.20; h 10am-1.30pm & 4-6pm) makes it one of the most striking buildings in Ávila. A series of largely Gothic modifications in sober granite contrasts with the warm sandstone of the Romanesque original. Work started in the 11th century, supposedly on the site where three martyrs – San Vicente and his sisters – were slaughtered by the Romans in the early 4th century. Their canopied sepulchre is an outstanding piece of Romanesque work. The Jardín de San Vicente across the road was once a Roman cemetery.

EL MONASTERIO DE SANTO TOMÁS

Commissioned by the Reyes Católicos (Catholic Monarchs), Fernando and Isabel, and completed in 1492, this complex (% 920 22 04 00; admission €1; h 10am-1pm & 4-8pm) is an exquisite example of Isabelline architecture and is amazingly rich in historical resonance. Three interconnected cloisters lead up to the church that contains the alabaster tomb of Don Juan, the monarchs' only son. It's backed by an altarpiece by Pedro de Berruguete depicting scenes from the life of St Thomas Aquinas. The magnificent choir stalls, in Flemish Gothic style, are accessible from the upper level of the third cloister, the Claustro de los Reyes, so called because Fernando and Isabel often attended Mass here. It's thought that the inquisitor Torquemada is buried in the sacristy.



IN SANTA TERESA'S FOOTSTEPS

Santa Teresa – a Catholic mystic and reformer of the Carmelites in the 16th century – casts a long shadow over Ávila.

The **Convento de Santa Teresa** (☎ 920 21 10 30; admission free; h 9am-1.30pm & 3.30-7.30pm), built in 1636 over the saint's birthplace, is the epicentre of the cult surrounding Teresa. The room where she was born in 1515 is now a chapel smothered in gold and lorded over by a baroque altar by Gregorio Fernández and featuring a statue of the saint. An adjoining relics room (admission free; h 9.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-7pm) is crammed with Teresa relics, including her ring finger (complete with ring), which supposedly spent the Franco years by the Generalísimo's bedside. There's also a small museum (admission €1.80; h 10am-1.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm) dedicated to the saint, accessible from Calle Aizpuru. Both the convent and museum are open longer hours in the summer.

Nearby, the 16th-century **Iglesia de San Juan Bautista** (☎ 920 21 11 27) contains the baptismal font in which Teresa was baptised; it's only open during Mass. A five-minute walk east of the *catedral* is the unremarkable **Convento de San José** (☎ 920 22 21 27; admission free; h 10am-1.30pm & 3-6pm), the first convent Teresa founded in 1562; the saint herself is said to have helped build it.

North of the city walls, the unadorned **Monasterio de la Encarnación** (☎ 920 21 12 12; admission €1.20; h 9.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1.30pm & 4-6pm Sat & Sun) is where Santa Teresa fully took on the monastic life and lived for 27 years, launching her reform movement. A Renaissance complex modified in the 18th century, it contains further mementos of her life as well as a replica of her spartan cell.

CITY WALL

With its eight monumental gates and 88 towers, Ávila's *muralla* (city wall; adult/concession €3/1.20; h 10am-2pm & 4.30-7.30pm Tue-Sat, 10.30am-2pm Sun) stretches for 2.5km and is one of the world's best-preserved medieval defensive perimeters. Raised to a height of 12m between the 11th and 12th centuries, on the remains of earlier efforts by the Muslims and Romans, the wall has been much restored and modified, with various Gothic and Renaissance touches and even some Roman stones re-used in the construction.

The most impressive gates, the **Puerta de San Vicente** and **Puerta del Alcázar**, are

flanked by towers more than 20m high and stand on either side of the *catedral's* apse.

Walking along the walls affords fabulous views out over the countryside and down into the town. Access is from **Puerta del Alcázar**, **Puerta de los Leales** and **Puerta del Carmén** and if you only want to walk one (albeit extensive) section of the wall, the price drops to €1.80.

CHURCHES & MANSIONS

The Romanesque **Iglesia de Santo Tomé El Viejo** (Plaza de Italia; admission €1.20, Sat & Sun free; h 10am-2pm & 4.30-7.30pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) dates from the 13th century, and it was from this pulpit that Santa Teresa was castigated most vehemently for her reforms of the Carmelite order. It has been impressively restored to house mostly Roman foundation stones and a splendid floor mosaic. It's an annexe of the **Museo Provincial** (☎ 920 21 10 03; adult €1.20, Sat & Sun free; h 10am-2pm & 4.30-7.30pm Tue-Sat, 10.30am-2pm Sun) and can be entered on the same ticket.

The **Iglesia de San Pedro** (☎ 920 22 19 04; Plaza de Santa Teresa; h 10am-12.30pm) was built a little later and its light, sandstone exterior is a pleasant complement to the granite austerity that reigns inside the city walls. North of the old city, the 12th-century **Iglesia de San Andrés** is Ávila's oldest church and a pure example of the Romanesque. The interior is closed to the public.

The city also has its fair share of noble mansions. **Palacio Los Serrano** (☎ 920 21 22 23; Plaza de Italia; admission free; h 7.30-9.30pm Mon-Fri, noon-2pm & 7.30-9.30pm Sat & Sun) is a typically successful Spanish fusion of the old and the new and is used for contemporary art exhibitions.

LOS CUATRO POSTES

Just northwest of the city on the road to Salamanca, this spot not only affords fine views of Ávila's walls, but also marks the place where Santa Teresa and her brother were caught by their uncle as they tried to run away from home. They were hoping to achieve martyrdom at the hands of the Muslims.

Festivals & Events

Ávila's principal festival, **Fiesta de Santa Teresa** (15 October) honours the city's patron saint with 10 days of processions, concerts and fireworks.

Ávila is one of the best places in Castilla y León to watch the solemn processions of **Semana Santa** (Easter). It all begins on Holy Thursday and the most noteworthy event is the early morning (around 5am) Good Friday procession, which circles the outside of the city wall.

Sleeping

Hostal San Juan (☎ 920 25 14 75; hostalsanjuanavila@hotmail.com; Calle de los Comuneros de Castilla 3; s/d Nov-May from €24/38, Jun-Oct €30/48) Recently renovated and with warm tones throughout, the San Juan is pleasant, friendly and close to everything in Ávila.

Hostal El Rastro (☎ 920 21 12 18; fax 920 25 16 26; Plaza del Rastro 4; s/d from €26/32) With eight quaint rooms overlooking a quiet square, this is one of those Spanish surprises that provides character, location and an outrageously reasonable price tag.

Hostería Las Cancelas (☎ 920 21 22 49; www.las-cancelas.com; Calle de la Cruz Vieja 6; s/d €45/65) Another top choice, the rooms here are spacious and the half-timbered decoration and exposed brickwork are lovely touches that generate plenty of warmth. The rooms are also nice and large.

Hospedería La Sinagoga (☎ 920 35 23 21; www.lasinagoga.net; Calle de los Reyes Católicos 22; s/d €57/80) Centrally located and hidden away down a quiet cobblestone lane, this delightful hotel is carved from the shell of a 15th-century synagogue although the rooms are bright, spacious and modern.

Hotel Las Moradas (☎ 920 22 24 88; www.hotellas-moradas.com; Calle de Don Gerónimo 3; s/d/tr from €69/87/115) There are places around town with more character than Las Moradas, but the rooms are enormous, attractively renovated

and come with kitchenettes. Given the location in the heart of the old town and the helpful service, it's supremely good value.

Parador Raimundo de Borgoña (☎ 920 21 13 40; avila@paradores.es; Marques de Canales y Chozas 2; d €110-120) Occupying a 16th-century palace hard up against the wall in the north of the old town, Parador Raimundo de Borgoña has all of the essential elements of the *parador* chain: elegant public areas, helpful staff and stylish bedrooms.

Eating

RESTAURANTS & CAFÉS

Ávila is famous for its *chuleton avileño* (T-bone steak) and *judías del barco de Ávila* (white beans, often with chorizo, in a thick sauce).

Cafetería Hergós (☎ 920 21 33 70; Calle de Don Gerónimo 1; meals from €3.50) This pastry shop and café is the place to tuck into good-value *platos combinados* (combination plate; €6 to €8), burgers (€3.50) and *bocadillos* (bread rolls with filling, usually without butter; €2.50 to €4.25).

Posada de la Fruta (☎ 920 22 09 84; Plaza de Pedro Dávila 8; mains €8-15) This restaurant has a split personality. There's an informal café-bar in the light-filled courtyard where you'll encounter a fairly standard selection of *raciones* (large tapas servings) and a traditional *comedor* (dining room) that serves *menúes* (set meals) and à la carte dishes. The latter is well-suited to those who've learned, like the Spanish, to eat their main meal at lunchtime.

Reyes Católicos (☎ 920 25 56 27; Calle de Reyes Católicos; mains €12-15, menú €18.60) If you are crying out for a break from the sombre ambience of wood-panelled Castilian *comedores* (dining rooms), this slick and super-modern alternative provides a welcome respite. The food blends the creative with Ávila staples, and the service is more stylish and young than bow-tied and grumpy.

Mesón del Rastro (☎ 920 21 12 18; Plaza del Rastro 4; lunch/dinner menú €13/14.50) This atmospheric midrange choice is rare in that it dishes up superb-value *menúes* for both lunch and dinner. The dining room, with its dark-wood beams, exudes Castilian charm, and the *cochinillo* is particularly good.

El Almacén (☎ 920 25 44 55; Carretera de Salamanca 6; starters €6-12, mains €12-23) One of Ávila's premier restaurants, you'll pay top dollar here for excellent food (*chuleton avileño* is €16.50), wine and views of the city wall.

PASTELERÍAS

La Flor de Castilla (☎ 920 25 28 66; Calle de San Gerónimo) Ávila's local speciality is the *yema de Ávila*, an ultra-sweet, sticky business made of egg yolk and sugar, allegedly invented by Teresa herself. You'll see it all over town, but this is one of the best places to try it.

Drinking

Ávila nights aren't particularly lively, but there are a few spots worth seeking out. Otherwise, the streets around Plaza del Mercado Chico have bars and tapas.

Café del Adarve (Calle de San Segundo 40; h 3pm-late) This place has a hip, youthful vibe with occasional live music during winter.

El Bar (Calle de San Segundo; h 11am-3am) Almost next door to the Adarve, El Bar is an appealing place with its much-coveted outdoor seats.

La Bodeguita de San Segundo (Calle de San Segundo 19; h 11am-late) A gem of a wine and tapas bar: standing-room only, and the setting in the 16th-century Casa de la Misericordia is superb.

La Bodega de Paquita (Calle de San Segundo) Next door to La Bodeguita de San Segundo, Paquita's similarly good.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Buses leave from Ávila's bus station (☎ 920 22 01 54; Avenida de Madrid) for Madrid (€6.55, 1½ hours, eight departures daily Monday to Friday, four daily on weekends), Salamanca (€4.90, 1½ hours, four daily Monday to Saturday, twice on Sunday) and Segovia (€3.90, one hour, six times daily on weekdays, twice daily on weekends). Destinations in the Sierra de Gredos include Navarredonda de Gredos (€3.80, 1¼ hours, two to three times daily) and Arenas de San Pedro (€4.80, 1¼ hours, twice daily).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

To get to Madrid, head northeast on the N110 and at Villacastín turn onto the NV1 or the parallel A6 *autopista* (tollway). From Ávila, the N501 heads north to Salamanca, the N110 east will take you to Segovia and the N403 north to Valladolid. For the Sierra de Gredos, take the N502.

In Ávila, underground parking stations (€8 to €10.50, 12 hours) abound in the new part of town east of the city walls, but there are very few within the walls where streets are narrow.

TRAIN

From the train station (☎ 920 24 02 02; Paseo de la Estación), more than 30 trains run daily to Madrid (from €6.05, 1½ hours) and a handful to Salamanca (€7.75, 1½ hours).

Getting Around

Local bus 1 runs past the train station to Plaza de la Catedral.

SIERRA DE GREDOS

West of Madrid and south of Ávila, the plains of Castilla yield to the precipitous Sierra de Gredos. It's a secret world of lakes and granite mountains rising up to the Pico de Almanzor (2592m) and while the occasional castle or sanctuary may catch the eye, the overriding appeal is the scenery. The Sierra is also popular with walkers, mountain bikers and rock climbers and is at its best for these activities in spring (March to May) and autumn (September to November); summer (June to August) can be stifling, while in winter (December to February) the trails are covered in snow. The region overflows with Spanish tourists on weekends but sees very few foreign tourists, which is, of course, part of its charm.

Public transport to and throughout the Sierra is intermittent at best (and almost nonexistent on weekends), so renting a car is essential to getting the best from the region. Of the three main routes through the Sierra, the C502 travels north-south, paralleling an old Roman road (still visible in parts) through a steep valley. Cutting across the northern foothills, the C500 affords scenic views of the mountains while the C501 follows the southern flank of the mountain chain and passes through some outstanding scenery en route to Extremadura's La Vera Valle.

Arenas de San Pedro & Around

Arenas de San Pedro (pop 6656, elevation 620m) is a convenient gateway to the southern Sierra and while it does have its pretty corners, it's more the sort of place you'd use as a base than visit for its own sake. It's a popular summer escape for people from the capital.

The tourist office (☎ 920 37 00 05; Plaza de la Nueva España 1; h 10am-1.30pm & 4-8pm) in Arenas has walking suggestions, as does the Ávila tourist office (☎ 920 21 13 87; www.avilaturismo.com; Plaza de la Catedral 4; h 9am-2pm & 5-8pm).

In the town centre, sights worth a quick look include the stout 15th-century Castillo

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Hostal Arco San Vicente (☎ 920 22 24 98; www.arcosanvicente.com; Calle de López Núñez 6; s/d €40/60) For its combination of comfort, friendly owners and value for money, this place is outstanding. The rooms are spacious, well appointed and have strong hints of character. The rooms at the back are quieter and have a private terrace. Tucked away in a quiet corner of the old town but a stone's throw from everything, it's terrific value.

de la Triste Condesa, the sober 14th-century Gothic parish church and the Roman bridge. A 10-minute walk north of here is the neoclassical Palacio del Infante Don Luis de Borbón, a gilded cage for Carlos III's imprisoned brother.

Far more attractive than Arenas de San Pedro, but with access to walking trails, are Guisando, El Hornillo and El Arenal, a trio of villages at a distance of 5km, 6km and 9km from Arenas, respectively. All three are served by a bus (weekdays only).

One popular walking trail leads from El Arenal to Puerto de la Cabrilla. Gaining some 1000m over a distance of 4.5km, it's a strenuous five- to seven-hour workout.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hostal El Castillo (☎ 920 37 00 91; Carretera de Candeleda 2, Arenas de San Pedro; s/d €23/35) On the main road through Arenas is Hostal El Castillo, with pleasant, clean rooms with heating and TV.

Hosteria Los Galayos (☎ 920 37 13 79; www.losgalayos.com; Plaza de Condestable Dávalos 2, Arenas de San Pedro; s/d from €32/46) At this comfortable three-star place in the heart of Arenas de San Pedro, the tired décor distracts only momentarily from the fact that rooms are good and spacious and the location is a winner.

Hostal El Fogo de Gredos (☎ 920 37 40 18; Calle Linarejo 6, Guisando; s/d €45/60) This is the most attractive option in Guisando, offering pretty rooms with minibar, heating and satellite TV. It's even better known as a restaurant (meals €20) where hearty meat dishes emerge from the kitchen.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

At least four buses run daily from Arenas de San Pedro to Madrid (€10.60, twice daily except Sunday), and two buses per weekday do the trip to Ávila (€4.80, 1¼ hours).

Northern Flank of the Sierra de Gredos

If you find the crowds drawn to Arenas de San Pedro a little overwhelming, the range's less-frequented northern flank also has some spectacular views, fine walks and excellent hotels. Public transport is even less frequent here than further south.

Running west off the N502, near Puerta de Pico, the scenic C500 leads past Navarredonda de Gredos and on to Hoyos del Espino from where the small AV931, leads into the Sierras, ending after 12km at La Plataforma. This is the jumping-off point for one of the most

picturesque walks, leading to the Laguna Grande, a glassy mountain lake in the shadow of the Pico de Almanzor. The easy-to-moderate walk along a well-defined 8km trail takes about 2½ hours each way. Next to the lake is a *refugio* (mountain shelter), which is often full, and good camping. From here it's possible to climb to the top of the Almanzor (2592m; difficult) in about two hours or to continue for two hours west to the Circo de Cinco Lagunas (easy to moderate). From there you could either backtrack or descend via the Garganta del Pinar towards the town of Navalperral de Tormes, a rigorous endeavour that can take five hours. For maps and further information on these routes, visit the tourist office in Arenas de San Pedro (p181) or Ávila (p177), or visit one of the bookshops in Madrid (p84).

SLEEPING & EATING

Navarredonda de Gredos has the best choice of accommodation.

Albergue Juvenil (☎ 920 34 80 05; albnrgredos@dvnet.es; Navarredonda de Gredos; dm under/over 26yr €7/10; 15 Mar-15 Dec; Ⓢ) This place offers spotless rooms, its own Olympic-sized swimming pool and breathtaking mountain views for those who are counting their euros.

Hostal Refugio de Gredos (☎ 920 34 80 47; www.refugiodegredos.com; Navarredonda de Gredos; s/d €45/55) Housed in a lovely old building with sturdy stone walls, this well-run place has good rooms with occasional hints of character and an excellent restaurant.

La Casa de Arriba (☎ 920 34 80 24; www.casadearriba.com; Calle de la Cruz 19, Navarredonda de Gredos; s/d €67/79) Brimful of rustic charm, La Casa de Arriba is a touch of class with wooden beams, wood floors, antique furnishings that are never overdone and thick stone walls. The restaurant is one of the best in the area.

Parador de Gredos (☎ 920 34 80 48; www.parador.es; Carretera Barraco-Béjar Km42, Navarredonda de Gredos; d €90-110) This beautifully colonnaded stone building is typical of the *parador* chain – supremely comfortable, awash with character and with excellent service. The views of the Sierra from here are unrivalled.

Hoyos del Espino is another reasonable base with dozens of *casas rurales* (rooms in private homes).

El Milano Real (☎ 920 34 91 08; www.elmilano real.com; Calle de Toledo s/n, Hoyos de Espina; d from €98) This is a gorgeous place to stay with stylish, spacious rooms hiding behind the old-world façade;

each room is different but the attic rooms have a stylish Japanese feel. Wonderful views, a delightfully peaceful setting and a fine restaurant (starters €9 to €12, mains €16 to €20) are other highlights.

SALAMANCA

pop 160,331

Salamanca is something special and is undoubtedly Castilla's liveliest, most beautiful city. Its secret is an irresistible combination of stunning uniform, old-world architectural elegance and a feel-good Spanish buzz that flows through the streets almost without respite. In few other places will you witness such virtuosity in Plateresque and Renaissance styles, with the exceptional Plaza Mayor the undoubted jewel in the city's considerable crown. Behind and beneath the sandstone façades, with their ochre hints of Latin inscriptions, you'll find an eclectic and vibrant collection of bars, cafés and restaurants invariably filled with Salamanca's enormous student population (Spanish and international) that provide Salamanca with so much life.

History

In 220 BC, Celtiberian Salamanca was besieged by Hannibal. Later, under Roman rule, it was an important staging post on the Via Lata (Ruta de la Plata, or Silver Route) from the mines in Asturias to the south. After the Muslim invasion of Spain, it changed hands repeatedly.

Possibly the greatest turning point in the city's history was the founding of the university (initially the Estudio General) in 1218. It became the equal of Oxford and Bologna, and by the end of the 15th century was the focal point of some of the richest artistic activity in the country. The city followed the rest of Castilla into decline in the 17th century, although

by the time Spanish literary hero Miguel de Unamuno became rector at the university in 1900, Salamanca had essentially recovered.

Orientation

The old centre, north of Río Tormes and with the Plaza Mayor at its heart, is compact and easily walked. The train and bus stations are equidistant from the centre of town, the former to the northeast and the latter to the northwest. Buses connect both to the town centre and taxis are cheap. Most accommodation and eating options, as well as the major monuments, can be found close to Plaza Mayor.

Information

EMERGENCY

Cruz Roja (☎ 923 22 22 22) For ambulances.

Policía Nacional (☎ 091; Ronda de Sancti-Spiritus 8)

INTERNET ACCESS

Cyberspace (Plaza Mayor 10; per hr €2; 11 10.30am-2am)

Cyber Anuario (Calle de La Latina 8; 11 10am-midnight Mon-Sat, 2-11pm Sun) Internet prices start from as low as €0.75 per hour, depending on the time of day.

LAUNDRY

Laundry (Calle de Pasaje Azafranal 18; per wash €3.15; 11 9.30am-2pm & 4-8pm Mon-Fri, 10.30am-2pm Sat) Coin operated and offers free soap powder and internet access (per hour €2).

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital Clínico Universitario (☎ 923 29 11 00;

Paseo de San Vicente 108)

Hospital Santísima Trinidad (☎ 923 26 93 00; Paseo de las Carmelitas 74-94)

MONEY

There is no shortage of banks around the centre, particularly along Rúa Mayor.

FROG SPOTTING

A compulsory task facing all visitors to Salamanca is to search out the frog sculpted into the façade of the Universidad Civil. Once pointed out, it's easily enough seen, but you can spend considerable time in vain searching otherwise.

Why bother? Well, they say that those who detect it without help can be assured of good luck and even marriage within a year. Some hopeful students see a guaranteed examinations victory in it. If you believe all this, stop reading now. If you do want help, look at the busts of Fernando and Isabel. From there, turn your gaze to the largest column on the extreme right of the façade. Slightly above the level of the busts is sculpted a series of skulls, atop the leftmost of which sits our little amphibious friend (or what's left of his eroded self).

SALAMANCA

0 300 m
0 0.2 miles

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Cyber Anuario.....1 B5	Torre del Clavero.....25 C5	Meson Las Conchas.....47 C4
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Laundry.....3 D3	Universidad Civil (University of Salamanca).....27 B5	Patio Chico.....49 B5
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Policia Nacional.....6 D4		
Regional Tourist Office.....7 B5		

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Hostal Plaza Mayor.....31 C4	O'Hara's.....53 C4
Hostal Sara.....32 B4	Taberna La Rayuela.....54 C5
Hosteria Casa Vallejo.....33 C4	Tío Vivo.....55 C4
Hotel El Toboso.....34 C4	Vinodiario.....56 C5
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Municipal Tourist Office Shop.....62 C4	Universitatís Salamantinae.....63 B6
Universitatís Salamantinae.....63 B6	Mercatus.....63 B6

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POST

Main post office (☎ 923 28 14 57; Calle Gran Vía 25-29)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Municipal tourist office (☎ 923 21 83 42; Plaza Mayor 14; 9am-2pm & 4.30-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-8pm Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) Concentrates on the city and is open longer hours in summer.

Regional tourist office (☎ 923 26 85 71; Rúa Mayor s/n; 9am-2pm & 5-8pm) This office in Casa de las Conchas covers both the city and the surrounding province.

Sights

Although Salamanca is easy to explore on foot (see p186), a good way to get an overview of the old town is aboard the quaint **tren turístico** (tourist train: ☎ 649 62 57 03; Plaza Anaya; adult/child €3.50/1.50; noon-2pm & 4-8pm). It lasts for 20 minutes and is open longer hours in summer.

PLAZA MAYOR

Built between 1729 and 1755, Salamanca's exceptional grand square is widely considered Spain's most beautiful central plaza, particularly at night when illuminated to magical effect. Designed by Alberto Churriguera, it's a remarkably harmonious and controlled baroque display. The medallions placed around the plaza bear the busts of famous figures (you'll even find a recently freshened-up bust of Franco in the northeastern corner), and bullfights were held here well into the 19th century; the last ceremonial *corrida* (bullfight) took place here in 1992. Its outdoor tables are a place to linger, watch the passing parade and marvel at the beguiling beauty of the architecture. Chances are you'll find yourself drawn here again and again.

Just off the square, the pretty 12th-century Romanesque **Iglesia de San Martín** (Plaza del Corriolo; 11am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sun) lies wedged among a huddle of houses.

CATEDRAL NUEVA

The tower of the late-Gothic **Catedral Nueva** (☎ 923 21 74 76; Plaza de Anaya; 9am-8pm) lords over the centre of Salamanca, its compelling churrigueresque dome visible from almost every angle. It is, however, the magnificent Renaissance doorways, particularly the Puerta del Nacimiento on the western face, that stand out as one of several miracles worked in the city's sandstone façades. Walk around to the Puerta de Ramos, facing Plaza Anaya, which

is decorated with similar flourish and contains an encore to the 'frog spotting' challenge on the university façade (see the boxed text, p183): look for the little astronaut and ice-cream cone chiselled into the portal by stonemasons during recent restorations.

Inside, the most notable features include the elaborate choir stalls, main chapel and retrochoir, all courtesy of the prolific José Churriguera. The ceilings are also exceptional.

For a unique perspective on the interior, as well as fine views over old Salamanca, head to the southwestern corner of the cathedral façade and the **Puerta de la Torre** (Ieronimus; Plaza de Juan XXIII; admission €2.50; 10am-7.15pm), from where stairs lead up through the tower, past labyrinthine but well-presented exhibitions of cathedral memorabilia, then along the interior balconies of the sanctuaries of the Catedral Nueva and Catedral Vieja and out onto the balconies.

CATEDRAL VIEJA

The Catedral Nueva's largely Romanesque predecessor, the **Catedral Vieja** (adult/student €3.50/2; 10am-7.30pm) was begun in 1120 and remains something of a hybrid: there are Gothic elements while the unusual ribbed cupola, the Torre del Gallo, reflects a Byzantine influence. The otherwise simple, towering apse of the *capilla mayor* (chapel containing the high altar) is adorned with an exquisite 15th-century altarpiece whose 53 panels depict scenes from the life of Christ and Mary, topped by a representation of the Final Judgement – it's one of the most beautiful Renaissance altarpieces to be found beyond Italy's shores. The cloister was largely ruined in the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, but in the Capilla de Anaya there's an extravagant alabaster sepulchre and one of Europe's oldest organs, a Mudéjar work of art dating from the 16th century. The entrance is inside the Catedral Nueva.

UNIVERSIDAD CIVIL

The visual feast of the entrance façade to Salamanca's **university** (☎ 923 29 44 00; Calle de los Libreros; adult/student €4/2, Mon morning free; 9.30am-1pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1pm & 4-6.30pm Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) is stunning. Founded initially as the Estudio General in 1218, the university came into being in 1254 and reached the peak of its renown in the 15th and 16th centuries. The façade, more a tapestry in sandstone, bursts with images of mythical heroes, religious

scenes and coats of arms. It's dominated in the centre by busts of Fernando and Isabel, but it's the elusive frog that draws the crowds (see the boxed text, p183).

Among the small lecture rooms arranged around the courtyard inside the building, the Aula de Fray Luis de León was named after the celebrated 16th-century theologian and writer who taught here and whose statue stands in the Patio de las Escuelas Menoras outside. It conserves the original benches and lectern from Fray Luis' day. Arrested by the Inquisition for having translated the Song of Solomon into Spanish, the sardonic theologian returned to his class after five years in jail and resumed lecturing with the words, 'As I was saying yesterday...'

Upstairs, the university library has fine late-Gothic features and a beautiful *techumbre* (carved wooden ceiling). Some 2800 ancient manuscripts gather dust in what is one of the oldest university libraries in Europe.

CONVENTO DE SAN ESTEBAN

Standing proudly in the southeastern corner of the old city, the Convento de San Esteban's church (☎ 923 21 50 00; admission €2; h 10am-1pm & 4-8pm Wed-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun, 4-8pm Mon & Tue) has an extraordinary altarpiece façade with the stoning of San Esteban (St Stephen) as its central motif. Inside is a well-presented museum dedicated to the Dominicans and their missionary work in the Americas. The splendid Gothic-Renaissance cloister, in particular, has strategically placed mirrors which enable you to fully appreciate the fine ceiling. Climb to the 1st floor from where you can access the church's choir stalls. In the church's main sanctuary, the centrepiece is a *retablo* (altarpiece), an ornate masterpiece by José Churriguera.

Walking Tour

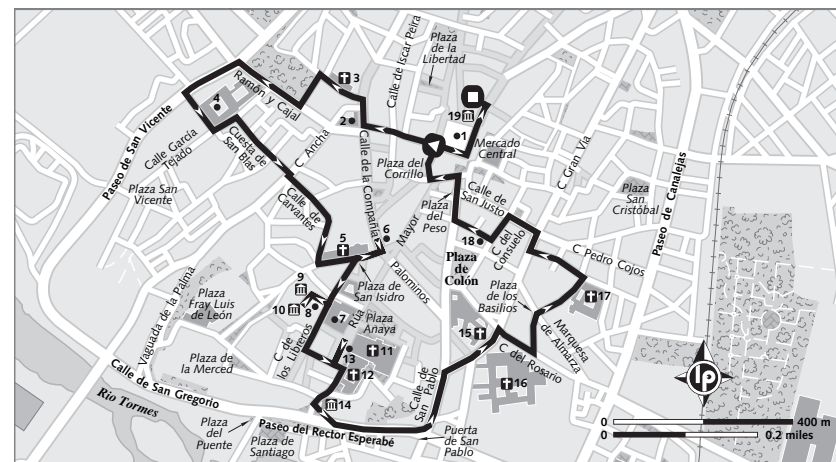
Start your exploration of Salamanca in the incomparable Plaza Mayor (1; p185), the centrepiece of monumental Salamanca and the modern city's beating heart. Heading west off the southwestern corner of the plaza, take Calle del Prior which leads to the Palacio de Monterrey (2), a 16th-century holiday home of the Duques de Alba and a seminal piece of Spanish Renaissance architecture; it's not open to the public but the façade is superb. A short detour north yields the Convento de las Ursulas (3; ☎ 923 21 98 77; Calle de Ursulas 2;

admission €2; h 11am-1pm & 4.30-6pm), a late-Gothic nunnery, which was founded by Archbishop Alonso de Fonseca in 1512 and is now home to his magnificent marble tomb, sculpted by Diego de Siloé. It's closed on the last Sunday of each month. There's also a Spanish twist: the nuns rent out part of the space to a nightclub called Camelot (p190). Crossing the tranquil Campo de San Francisco brings you to the 16th-century Colegio del Arzobispo Fonseca (4; ☎ 923 29 45 70; Paseo de San Vicente; adult/student €0.60/0.30; h 10am-2pm & 4-7pm), a sober Plateresque structure notable for its fine entrance, pleasing courtyard and antique clock collection.

Climb the Cuesta de San Blas and then wind your way southeast to the Real Clericia de San Marcos (5; Universidad Pontificia; ☎ 923 27 71 00; Calle de la Compañía; admission €2; h 10.30am-12.50pm & 5-7.30pm Tue-Fri, 10am-1.20pm & 5-8pm Sat, 10am-1.20pm Sun), a colossal baroque church. Directly opposite is the Casa de las Conchas (6; ☎ 923 26 93 17; Calle de la Compañía 2; admission free; h 9am-9pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm & 4-7pm Sat & Sun), one of the city's most endearing buildings and named after the scallop shells clinging to its façade. Its owner, Dr Rodrigo Maldonado de Talavera, was a doctor at the court of Isabel and a member of the Order of Santiago, whose symbol is the shell. It now houses the public library, entered via a charming bi-level courtyard.

From Plaza de San Isidro, head southwest along Calle de los Libreros to the Universidad Civil (7; p185), which faces onto the Patio de las Escuelas Menoras (8), a small square where you'll find the Museo de Salamanca (9; ☎ 923 21 22 35; Patio de las Escuelas Menoras 2; adult/concession €1.20/0.60, Sat & Sun free; h 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun). Housed in the former residence of Queen Isabel's doctor, it's more interesting for the picture of tranquil Salamanca residential life offered by the attractive patios than for the paintings and sculptures within. Almost next door, off a small cloister, the main attractions of the Museo de la Universidad (10; Patio de las Escuelas; h 9.30am-1.30pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1pm & 4-6.30pm Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) are the ceiling fresco of the zodiac and two *techumbres*: one clearly Mudéjar and the other with Italian Renaissance influences. Entry is free if you're visiting the university.

After visiting the Catedral Nueva (11; p185), Catedral Vieja (12; p185) and climbing up through the Puerta de la Torre (13; p185), head southwest down the hill to the Museo de Art



WALK FACTS

Start Plaza Mayor
Finish Museo Taurino
Distance 3.5km
Duration three hours

Nouveau y Art Decó (14): Casa Lis; ☎ 923 12 14 25; Calle de El Expolio 14; adult/student €3/2; h 11am-2pm & 5-9pm Tue-Fri, 11am-9pm Sat & Sun), a gallery devoted to both styles in a Modernista (Catalan Art Nouveau) house.

Walking east along Paseo del Rector Esperarabe, then north along Calle de San Pablo, brings you to the Dominican Convento de las Duenas (15; ☎ 923 21 54 42; Gran Via; admission €1.50; h 10.30am-12.45pm & 4.30-6.45pm), home to what is easily the city's most beautiful cloister. Directly opposite is the sublime Convento de San Esteban (16; opposite), while quiet streets lead away to the northeast to the Convento de Santa Clara (17; ☎ 923 26 96 23; adult/child €2/0.50; h 9.30am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-3pm Sat & Sun). This much-modified convent started life as a Romanesque structure and you can climb up some stairs to inspect at close quarters the 14th- and 15th-century *artesonado* (Mudéjar ceiling).

As you make your way northwest to the old town, pause at the Torre del Clavero (18; Calle del Consuelo), a 15th-century octagonal fortress with an unusual square base and smaller cylindrical towers. Continue up Calle de San Pablo, skirt the Plaza Mayor and then seek out the Museo Taurino (19; ☎ 923 21 94 25; Calle de Doctor Piñuela 2;

adult/senior €3/2; h 11.30am-1.30pm & 6-8pm Tue-Sat, 11.30am-1.30pm Sun), just north of Plaza Mayor and packed with bullfighting memorabilia.

Courses

Salamanca is one of the most popular places in Spain to study Spanish and the University of Salamanca (Universidad Civil; ☎ 923 29 44 18; www.usal.es; Calle de los Libreros) is the most respected language school. Courses range from a six-hour course spread over two weeks (€310) to a 10-week course of five hours a week (€1425). It can also arrange accommodation with local families. The municipal tourist office (☎ 923 21 83 42; Plaza Mayor 14) also has a list of accredited private colleges.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Albergue Juvenil (☎ 923 26 91 41; www.albergue.salamanca.com; Calle de Escoto 13-15; dm €11.90, s/d €24.40/36) Salamanca's hostel is ideal for those looking for travel buddies as it's a popular, well-run place with large, clean dorms. It's a five-minute walk down the hill from the old town, but the area is quiet and has plenty of character. Breakfast is €1.80 and lunch or dinner €7.

Pensión Los Angeles (☎ 923 21 81 66; Plaza Mayor 10; s/d from €15/26) In a prime location – smack-bang on Plaza Mayor – and with cheap prices to boot, this place is a winner. Those with balconies overlooking the plaza are for three to five people (up to €75).

Pensión Lisboa (☎ 923 21 43 33; 2nd fl, Calle de Meléndez 1; s/d with shared bathroom €16/24, d with private

bathroom €32) Run by friendly young owners, this very good choice has comfortable rooms. Some of the singles are on the small side but some do have a private terrace. What sets this place apart is its rooftop terrace with *catedral* views.

MIDRANGE

All rooms in the following places have private bathroom or shower, TV, phone and air-con.

Hostal Catedral (% 923 27 06 14; Rúa Mayor 46; s/d €30/45) Just across from the *atedrales*, this well-run hostel has a few extremely pretty, clean-as-a-whistle, bright bedrooms with shower. All look out onto the street or *catedral*, which is a real bonus, as is the motherly owner who treats her visitors as honoured guests.

Le Petit Hotel (% 923 60 07 73; www.lepetithotel.net; Ronda de Sancti-Spiritus 39; s/d €33/43) Overlooking a peaceful square in a quiet part of town, this place has individually designed rooms that are good value, especially the renovated ones on the 4th and 5th floors. Some of the rooms are smallish and the floral wallpaper in one or two may not be to everyone's taste, but the welcome is warm and the quality high.

Hostal Plaza Mayor (% 923 26 20 20; hostalplaza-mayor@hotmail.com; Plaza del Corriño 20; s €30-36, d €50-60) A few steps from Plaza Mayor, this hostel has a fabulous location and is one of the best in this price range, with stylish and clean rooms with satellite TV and a touch of character. If you're a light sleeper, ask for a room at the back.

Hostería Casa Vallejo (% 923 28 04 21; www.hosteria-casavallejo.com; Calle de San Juan de la Cruz 3; s €30-50, d €60-90; i) This pretty little place promises spacious rooms with hints of character in the form of exposed brickwork and wooden beams. The front door is barely 100m from the Plaza Mayor.

Hostal Sara (% 923 28 11 40; www.hostalsara.org; Calle de Meléndez 11; s €35-50, d €38-60, d with kitchen from €50) This friendly new *hostal* (cheap hotel) gets it right in all the right places – friendly staff, large and well-equipped rooms (unusually for this price range, the bathrooms have hairdryers) and a location in the heart of the old town.

Aparthotel El Toboso (% 923 27 14 62; www.hotel-toboso.com; Calle del Clavel 7; s/d €30/45.25, 3-/4-/5-person self-contained apt €76/84/93) Even if the rooms are ageing at this friendly place, they're super value, especially the enormous apartments which come with kitchens and renovated bathroom. It's ideal for families or if you're planning to stay in Salamanca for a while.

Hostal Concejo (% 923 21 47 37; www.hconcejo.com; Plaza de la Libertad 1; s/d Sun-Thu from €40/50, Fri & Sat from €45/56; p) A cut above your average drab and functional Spanish *hostal*, the stylish Concejo has polished wood floors and some rooms have balconies overlooking a pretty square. Plaza Mayor is also just around the corner. Parking costs €7 to €9.

Rua Hotel (% 923 27 22 72; www.hotelrua.com; Calle de Sánchez Barbero 11; s with breakfast €45-65, d with breakfast €65-90; i) This engaging place has largely modern decoration but it does have a family-run feel and all rooms are apartments of around 30 sq metres. All come with kitchen and are filled with light, but the best rooms are those facing north with terrific views. The breakfast room in the basement includes a 13th-century stone arch.

TOP END

Hotel Las Torres (% 923 21 21 00; www.hthotels.com; Calle de Concejo 4-6; d from €60; i) Part of the quality High-Tech chain, this stylish new hotel has lovely dark-wood furniture, designer lamps and bathrooms, and a generally classy feel. Official prices go for well over €200, but more often a normal double goes for considerably less, sometimes including breakfast. The rooms overlooking the Plaza Mayor (Salamanca's best view) start at €120, again depending on the season.

NH Palacio de Castellanos (% 923 26 18 18; www.nh-hotels.com; Calle de San Pablo 58-64; d €99-162; p i) Housed in an old palace just down the hill from the cathedral, this place is all lofty patios and antique staircases. The character doesn't spill over much into the rooms, but they're supremely comfortable and service is good. Parking costs €14.

Eating

El Grillo Azul (% 923 21 92 33; Calle Grillo 1; mains €6-8, menú €8.40; v) If you can tear yourself away from the old town, the vegetarians among you will enjoy this quiet restaurant with high-quality salads, organic rice and pasta. The *croquetas de calabacín, zanahoria y piñones* (zucchini croquettes with carrots and pine nuts) is one of the many highlights.

El Bardo (Calle de la Compañía 8; mains €10-16, menú €10) This high-calibre restaurant is beloved by locals in search of good tapas, while its sit-down menu is very well-priced considering the surrounds. Unusually, there's a separate lunchtime *menú* for vegetarians.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

El Pecado (% 923 26 65 58; Plaza de Poeta Iglesias 12; starters €10-18, mains €16-21, menú €20) One of the trendy places to regularly attract Spanish celebrities in recent times, El Pecado (Sin) has an intimate dining room and quirky, creative menu. *El secreto de la druida* (the secret of the druid), which is lasagne stuffed with the best local cured ham and hazelnuts, is just one of dozens of intriguing choices.

Meson Las Conchas (% 923 21 21 67; Rúa Mayor 16; mains €7-13, menú €11) Similarly atmospheric and with a choice of outdoor tables or an atmospheric bar and dining area, Meson Las Conchas caters less to a tourist crowd than to locals who know their *embutidos* (cured meats).

Mesón Cervantes (% 923 21 72 13; Plaza Mayor 15; raciones €7-12, menú €12) This is another great place where you can eat at the outdoor tables in the plaza itself, but the dark wooden beams and atmospheric buzz of the Spanish crowd on the 1st floor should be experienced at least once.

Mater Asturias (% 923 21 83 86; Calle de Concejo 3; mains €10-12) 'Mother Asturias' is a slick new bar-restaurant all decked out in lime green and with an irresistible buzz that may have something to do with the fact that it serves two glasses of Asturian *sidra* (cider) and a tapa for €1.80. There's also a range of *menús de degustación* (€20 to €24) and plenty of *fabada* (a bean stew), seafood and hearty steaks.

Casa Paca (% 923 21 89 93; Plaza del Peso 10; mains €11-22) Established in 1928 and still going strong, Casa Paca is rumoured to be where the king dines when in town. Both the restaurant and its most famous patron are known for their love of hearty, deceptively simple dishes – expect to pay at least €35 for a full meal.

Grana & Oro (% 923 26 14 05; Plaza del Ángel; starters €9-15, mains €14-20, menú €15) A cool, clean-lined place, Grana & Oro specialises in grills, with some fine combinations of tastes – *mar y tierra* (sea and land) combines inland Spain's best cured ham with the finest fish from Cantabria.

Along Calle de Meléndez, you'll find a number of excellent places serving tapas

and sit-down meals. They include: **Patio Chico** (% 923 26 86 16; Calle de Meléndez 13; menú €11), a lively place with an extensive and creative menu; and the super-chic **Delicatessen Café** (% 923 28 03 09; Calle de Meléndez 25; platos combinados €7-10) which is a very cool place to be seen.

Drinking

Salamanca, with its myriad bars, is the perfect after-dark playground. Nightlife here starts very late – even on weeknights – with many bars not filling until midnight or even later and the partying continuing until the wee hours. Clearly many of Salamanca's students have better things to do than hit the books.

Taberna La Rayuela (Rúa Mayor 19) This low-lit upstairs bar buzzes with a 20-something crowd and is an intimate place, popular early in the evening for 'first drinks'.

Café El Corriño (www.cafecorriño.com; Calle de Meléndez 18) Café El Corriño is great for a beer and tapas at any time, and live jazz on Friday and Saturday nights.

Tío Vivo (Calle de Clavel 3; h 3.30pm-late) Here you can sip drinks by flickering candlelight. It's in the must-visit category, if only to peek at the whimsical décor of carousel horses and oddball antiques.

Delicatessen Café (Calle de Meléndez 25) This super-cool café is all curves, soft lighting and chic décor. It's more *pijo* (beautiful people) than student hang-out.

Vinodiario (Plaza de los Basílios 1) Away from the crowds of the old-city centre, this delightfully chilled wine bar is surrounded by pretty streets, staffed by knowledgeable bar staff and loved by locals who fill the outdoor tables when the weather's warm.

Salamanca's two lively Irish pubs, **O'Hara's** (Calle Zamora 14) and the **Irish Rover** (Calle Rúa Antigua), pull in the thirsty crowds and get started a touch earlier than many Spanish bars; both serve good, cheap food.

The collection of so-called 'litre bars' on Plaza de San Juan de Bautista are fun nighttime hang-outs with a young crowd. Here you can guzzle a 1L *cerveza* (beer) for €2.50 or a *cubalibre* (rum and coke with lemon juice) for €5.10.

Entertainment

Many of Salamanca's café-bars morph into dance clubs after midnight, and there's usually no cover charge.

Posada de las Almas (Plaza de San Boal) Decked out in a curious design mix of looming papier-mâché figures, doll houses and velvet curtains, this place attracts a mixed crowd – gay and straight, Spanish and foreign.

Camelot (Calle de la Compañía) One of our favourites, this lively disco is actually part of the Convento de las Úrsulas. The décor is an incongruous sandstone-industrial fusion that works terrifically well but soon gets forgotten once the DJs get started. To get in, we wouldn't turn up in anything less than smart casual.

Potemkin (Calle del Consuelo) Salamanca's grungy alternative to the sophisticates elsewhere can be found at Potemkin, where you'll catch live rock music most nights. The neighbouring bars are similar, so dress down.

Other *discotecas* (clubs) with a touch more character and buzz than most and where you can shake your hands in the air like you just don't care include the following:

Cum Laude (Calle del Prior 7) Sprawling mock-palace interior and a crowd that knows all the words.

Garamond (Calle del Prior 24) Rather baronial décor and a great selection of music.

Morgana (cnr Cuesta del Carmen & Calle de Iscar Peira) Rave or Latino create one helluva good time, especially around 5am.

Shopping

Salamanca overflows with souvenir shops, running the whole gamut from the tasteful to the tacky.

Universitatis Salamantinae Mercatus (923 29 46 92; Calle de Cardenal Plá y Deniel s/n; 10am-2pm & 4.30-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) The official shop of the University of Salamanca has a stunning range of stationery items, leather-bound books and other carefully selected reminders of your Salamanca visit.

El Fotografo (923 26 64 92; Calle de Meléndez 5; 10.30am-1.50pm & 5-8.30pm Mon-Fri, 11am-2pm & 6-8.30pm Sat) This small photography shop sells beautiful B&W photos of Salamanca, coffee-table books as well as photographic equipment.

Municipal tourist office shop (Plaza Mayor; 9.30am-1.30pm & 5-8pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-2pm Sun) In addition to the small range of posters, pens and other attractive Salamanca souvenirs sold in the tourist office (p185), there is another shop, under the arches on the north side of Plaza Mayor, which has more to choose from and it's all good.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The **bus station** (923 23 67 17; Avenida de Filiberto Villalobos) is northwest of the town centre. **Auto Res** (902 02 00 52; Avenida de Filiberto Villalobos) has 24 buses daily to Madrid (regular/express €11.20/17.10, three/2½ hours); six buses also serve Valladolid (€6.90, 1½ hours); and four go to Ávila (€4.90, 1½ hours).

There's at least one bus daily, except Sunday, going to La Alberca (€4.20). Regular buses head to Ciudad Rodrigo (€5.15, 1½ hours), Segovia (€9.25, three hours) and Zamora (€3.85, one hour), and there are services to Béjar (€4.15, one hour) and Candelario (€4.95, 1¾ hours).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The N501 leads southeast to Madrid via Ávila, while the N630 heads north to Zamora. Heading for Portugal, take the N620 west via Ciudad Rodrigo. For the Sierra de Francia, take the C512.

There are few underground parking stations (12 hours €9 to €11.50) in the old part of town – your best bet is along or just off Gran Via.

TRAIN

Up to six trains depart daily for Madrid's Chamartin station (€15.30 express, 2½ hours) via Ávila (€7.75, 1¾ hours, eight daily). There are also frequent services to Valladolid (from €6.90, 2½ hours).

Getting Around

Bus 4 runs past the bus station and around the old town perimeter to Gran Via. From the train station, the best bet is bus 1, which heads into the centre along Calle de Azafraán. Going the other way, it can be picked up at the Mercado Central.

AROUND SALAMANCA

The town of Alba de Tormes makes for quite an interesting and very easily accomplished half-day excursion from Salamanca. Apart from the stout and highly visible Torreón – the only surviving section of the former castle of the Duques de Alba – people come from far and wide to pay homage to Santa Teresa who is buried in the Convento de las Carmelitas she founded in 1570. There are plenty of buses from Salamanca to Alba de Tormes.

CIUDAD RODRIGO

pop 14,129

Close to the Portuguese border and away from well-travelled tourist routes, somnambulant Ciudad Rodrigo is one of the prettiest towns of western Castilla y León. It's an easy day trip from Salamanca, 80km away, but sleeping within the sanctuary of its walls enables you to better appreciate its medieval charm and have the sloping Plaza Mayor all to yourself.

Information

Post office (Calle de Dámaso Ledesma 12)

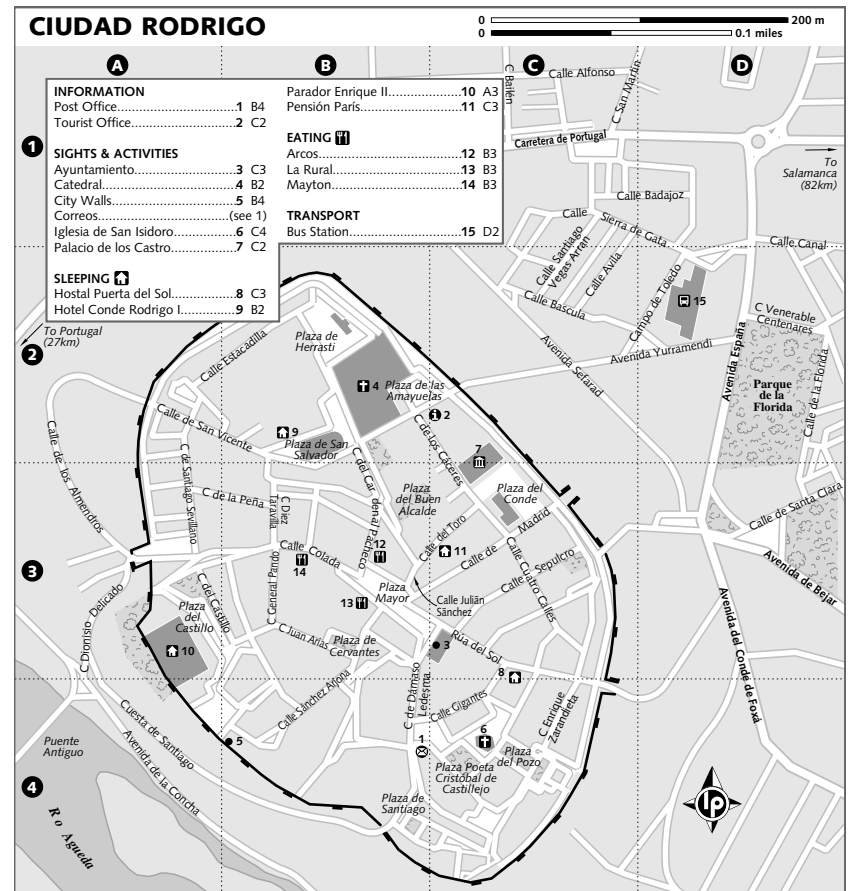
Tourist office (923 46 05 61; www.ciudadrodrigo.net; Plaza de las Amayuelas 5; 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Mon-Fri, 11am-2pm & 4.30-8.30pm Sat & Sun)

Sights

The **catedral** (Plaza San Salvador; admission €1.50, Wed afternoon free; 10am-1pm & 4-9pm), begun in 1165, towers over the old walled town. Of particular interest are the Puerta de las Cadenas, with Gothic reliefs of Old Testament figures; the elegant Pórtico del Perdón; and, inside, the exquisite carved-oak choir stalls.

Even if you've nothing to post, the **correos** (post office; Calle de Dámaso Ledesma 12) is worth passing by to admire the *artesonado*, while the 1st-floor gallery of the **ayuntamiento** (town hall) is a prime vantage point overlooking the Plaza Mayor.

Ciudad Rodrigo is liberally strewn with palaces, mansions and churches. The fusion of 12th-century Romanesque-Mudéjar elements



with later Gothic modifications makes the Iglesia de San Isidoro one of the more interesting stops. The 16th-century Palacio de los Castro (Plaza del Conde 3; admission free; 11 9am-7pm Mon-Sat) boasts one of the town's most engaging Plateresque façades; of the rest only the patio is open to visitors.

You can also climb the city walls and follow their length of about 2.2km around the town for good views over the town and surrounding plains.

Festivals & Events

Carnaval in February is a very unique time to be in Ciudad Rodrigo. Apart from the outlandish fancy dress and festivities, you can witness (or join in) a colourful *encierro* (running of the bulls) and *capeas* (amateur bullfights). It's one of the earliest events in the Spanish bullfighting calendar.

Sleeping

Pensión París (% 923 48 23 49; Calle del Toro 10; s/d with shared bathroom €15/25) There's nothing inspirational about these simple rooms, although they are well-kept and tidy. The location is ideal, down a quiet street within sight of Plaza Mayor.

Hostal Puerta del Sol (% 923 46 06 71; fax 923 46 06 71; Rúa del Sol 33; s €34-40, d €40-58) One of the better *hostales* within the city walls, the Puerta del Sol has comfortable rooms with satellite TV and 24-hour room service.

Hotel Conde Rodrigo I (% 923 46 14 08; Plaza de San Salvador 9; s €50-70, d €55-75) This long-standing Ciudad Rodrigo favourite has good rooms – some are enormous, some could do with a style overhaul and some overlook the pretty Plaza de San Salvador. There is also an excellent restaurant with a wood-fired oven.

Parador Enrique II (% 923 46 01 50; www.parador.es; Plaza del Castillo 1; d €110-120) Ciudad Rodrigo's premier address is a plushly renovated castle that's built into the town's western wall. The views are good, the rooms brimful of character and the restaurant easily the best in town.

Eating

Arcos (Plaza Mayor; 11 9am-late) A good spot for breakfast and snacks or just a coffee, this is a fine front-row seat for watching the town's goings-on.

La Rural (Plaza Mayor; raciones €3-4.50; 11 8am-midnight Mon-Sat) Across the square from Arcos, La Rural is always busy and deservedly so for its cheap tapas (from €0.75).

Mayton (% 923 46 07 20; Calle Colada 9; mains €7-15, menú €9.20) Set in an old stone mansion but without the prohibitive price tag you'd expect, Mayton promises quality home-style cooking, with the region's outstanding *embutidos* featuring alongside *cordero* and an overflowing, atmospheric wine cellar.

Getting There & Away

Up to a dozen buses run daily from Ciudad Rodrigo to Salamanca (€5.15, 1½ hours). For the Sierra de Francia, you need to go via Salamanca.

SIERRA DE FRANCIA

Hidden away in a forgotten corner of southwestern Castilla y León, this mountainous region with wooded hillsides and pretty stone-and-timber villages is among Castilla y León's best-kept secrets. Quiet mountain roads connect villages that you could easily spend days exploring and where the pace of life remains untouched by the modern world. Its architecture is yet to succumb to the ill-conceived developments that have come to blight other once-idyllic corners of Spain.

This was once of Spain's most god-forsaken regions. Malaria-ridden until the early 20th century, the region hadn't improved much in 1932 when Luis Buñuel came to film *Las Hurdes – Terre Sans Pain* (Land Without Bread). When King Alfonso XIII visited in June 1922, the only milk available for his coffee was human! Touched by this abject misery, he was supposedly responsible for the introduction of the area's first cows.

Today the area is popular for walking, biking and trout fishing.

La Alberca

pop 1118 / elevation 1048m

La Alberca is one of the largest and most beautifully preserved of the Sierra de Francia's villages, a historic and harmonious huddle of narrow alleys flanked by gloriously ramshackle houses built of stone, wood beams and plaster. Numerous stores sell local products such as *jamón* (ham) and *turrón* (nougat), galleries of local artists abound, and cosy bars and restaurants cluster on the pretty-as-a-postcard Plaza Mayor and along Calle de Tablado. Spanish tourists threaten to overwhelm the town on summer weekends, so plan to come during the week and make an overnight stop to see La Alberca at its best.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Hotel Doña Teresa (% 923 41 53 08; www.hoteldeateresa.com; Carretera Mogarraz; s/d €60/78) La Alberca's classiest hotel, Hotel Doña Teresa is a perfect fit for the village's old-world charm and is just a short stroll from the Plaza Mayor. The large rooms have writing desks and combine character (wooden beams and exposed stonework) with all the necessary mod-cons (minibar and newly renovated bathrooms). Check out the offers on the website for the best deals. It also has a good restaurant.

Housed in one of La Alberca's most evocative half-timbered buildings, **Hostal La Alberca** (% 923 41 51 16; www.hostalalberca.com; Plaza del Padre Arsenio; s/d with bathroom €24/33) is a charming place with comfortable, renovated rooms.

Buses travel between La Alberca and Salamanca (€4.20) twice daily on weekdays and once a day on weekends.

Around La Alberca

Having your own car enables you to immerse yourself in quiet villages such as **Mogarraz**, east of La Alberca, which has some of the most evocative old houses in the region and is famous for its *embutidos*. **Miranda del Castañar**, further east again, is similarly intriguing, strung out along a narrow ridge, but **San Martín del Castañar** is the most enchanting, with half-timbered stone houses, fountains cascading from balconies, a bubbling stream and a small village bullring at the top of the town.

Hotels are rare in these parts, but *casas rurales* abound with a handful in each village. Alternatively, **Hostal Las Madras** (% 923 43 71 15; www.lasmadras.com; Calle de Barrionuevo 27; d €40) in the quiet, pretty little village of **Villanueva del Condé** is a wonderful choice. The rooms are warm and filled with wood and tiles, the owners are friendly and there are views from the balconies over the village square or to the surrounding hills. The restaurant is also top quality. You can even see the village mayor riding through town on a horse and announcing the latest news to the men passing the day by the fountain.

For further information and maps of this area, visit the tourist offices in Salamanca (p185) or Ciudad Rodrigo (p191).

Valle de las Batuecas

The drive south into Extremadura through this dreamy valley is spectacular. Just beyond La Alberca, a sweeping panorama of cascading lower mountain ranges reminiscent of green velvet opens up before you. The road corkscrews down into the valley before passing through a beautiful landscape that has been praised by poets and by the playwright Miguel de Unamuno, and which is especially nice in spring when purple heather blankets the hillsides and wildflowers are in bloom.

Peña de Francia

Head north from La Alberca along the C512 and you'll soon strike the turn-off to the highest peak in the area, Peña de Francia (1732m), topped by a monastery and reached by a road that turns perilous after rain. From here views extend east to the Sierra de Gredos, south into Extremadura and west to Portugal.

SIERRA DE BÉJAR

Between the Sierra de Francia and the Sierra de Gredos, the Sierra de Béjar is home to more pretty villages, rolling mountain scenery and a character all its own. The centre of the region is the eye-catching town of Béjar, whose partly walled old quarters line up at the western end of a high ridge. Among worthwhile sights is the eye-catching 16th-century Palacio Ducal, just west of Plaza Mayor. The most charming place to stay in Béjar is the **Antigua Posada** (% 923 41 03 33; Calle Victor Gorzo 1; d €49), close to the centre of town and in a lovely old building, while **Hotel Colón** (% 923 40 06 50; www.hotelcolonbejar.com; Calle Colón 42; s/d €48/66) has a spa and beauty complex.

Just east of the mountains, the C500 leads to **El Barco de Ávila**, which has a pretty setting on Río Tormes and is lorded over by a proud if ruinous castle.

Candelario

The most scenic village in this region, tiny Candelario is a 5km detour from Béjar. Rubbing against a steep mountain face, this charming enclave is a popular summer resort and a great base for outdoor activities. Like the villages of the Sierra de Francia, the village is dominated by mountain architecture of stone and wood houses clustered closely together to protect against the harsh winter climate.

Hotel Cinco Castaños (% 923 41 32 04; www.candelariohotel.com; Carretera de la Sierra s/n; s/d Oct-Jun €39/54, Jul-Sep €54/60) has two stars and is our pick of

the places to stay around town; it's set amid the hills within walking distance of the village. It has simple but pleasant rooms, great views and a fine restaurant.

For something a little cheaper, try **Hostal La Sierra** (☎ 923 41 33 15; Calle Mayor 69; d€40) which is in the heart of the village and represents good *hostal* value.

Meson La Romana (☎ 923 41 32 72; Calle de Núñez Losada; mains from €7.10, menú €10) does reasonably priced meats cooked on an open wood-fire grill.

Getting There & Away

Béjar and Candelario are served by sporadic bus services from Salamanca and various other destinations, including Madrid and Plasencia.

THE CENTRAL PLATEAU

The sweeping rural plains of Castilla y León's central plateau are home to some of the region's most interesting towns – legendary and magical Segovia, energetic Valladolid and the more provincial Zamora and Palencia. The further north you go, the more spectacular the scenery.

SEGOVIA

pop 55,942 / elevation 1002m

Strung out along a ridge overlooking the confluence of Río Eresma and Río Clamores, Segovia is one of those towns that could only exist in Spain – reeking with charm, studded with monuments and with a clamorous nightly soundtrack of noisy bars and great restaurants. In 1985, Unesco recognised the old city and aqueduct of Segovia as World Heritage sites. You could visit Segovia on a day trip from Madrid, but it amply rewards those who linger.

History

The Celtic settlement of Segobriga was occupied by the Romans in 80 BC and rose to become an important town of Roman Hispania. As Christian Spain recovered from the initial shock of the Muslim attack, Segovia became something of a frontline city until the invaders were definitively evicted in 1085. Later a favourite residence of Castilla's roaming royalty, the city backed Isabel and saw her proclaimed queen in the Iglesia de San Miguel

in 1474. After backing the wrong side in the War of the Communities in 1520, Segovia slid into obscurity until the 1960s when tourism helped to regenerate the town.

Orientation

The old town of Segovia rises in the east and peaks in the fanciful towers of the Alcázar (Islamic-era fortress) to the west. If you arrive by train, bus 2 will take you to Plaza Mayor, site of the *catedral*, tourist office and plenty of hotels, restaurants and bars. From the bus station, it's about a 10-minute walk north. The road connecting Plaza Mayor and the aqueduct is a pedestrian thoroughfare that locals know simply as Calle Real.

Information

EMERGENCY

Cruz Roja (☎ 921 44 02 02, 061) For ambulances.
Policia Nacional (☎ 091; cnr Paseo de Ezequiel González & Carretera de Ávila)

INTERNET ACCESS

Mundo 2000 (per hr €2.40; 11am-11pm) Opposite the tourist office near the aqueduct.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital General (☎ 921 41 91 00) About 1.5km southwest of the aqueduct on the Ávila Hwy.

MONEY

Banks abound along Calle de Juan Bravo, near Plaza Mayor, and on Avenida de Fernández Ladreda.

POST

Main post office (Plaza de los Huertos 5)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Municipal tourist office (☎ 921 46 29 06; Plaza del Azoguejo 1; 11am-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-8pm Sat & Sun) By the aqueduct, this office is one of a number around town run by the city council.

Provincial tourist office (☎ 921 46 60 70; www.segoviaturismo.es; Plaza Mayor 6; 11am-2pm & 5-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Sat & Sun) Information about Segovia and the entire region.

Sights

ACUEDUCTO & AROUND

Segovia's most recognisable symbol is an extraordinary feat of engineering, made even more remarkable by the fact that it was first raised here by the Romans in the 1st century AD

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- Casa Duque..... 32 D3
- Cueva de San Esteban..... 33 C2
- La Almazara..... 34 C2
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DRINKING

- Bars (Calle de Carmen)..... 41 D4
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- Acueducto (Aqueduct)..... 6 D3
- Alcázar..... 7 A2
- Casa de los Picos..... 8 D3
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- Convento de los Carmelitas..... 11 A1
- Iglesia de la Vera Cruz..... 12 A1
- Iglesia de San Andrés..... 13 B2
- Iglesia de San Clemente..... 14 D4
- Iglesia de San Esteban..... 15 C2
- Iglesia de San Justo..... 16 E3
- Iglesia de San Martín..... 17 D3
- Iglesia de San Miguel..... 18 C3
- Iglesia de San Millán..... 19 D4
- Monasterio de El Parral..... 20 C1
- Museo Catedralicio..... (see 10)
- Museo de Arte Contemporáneo..... 21 D3
- Esteban Vicente..... 22 D3
- Plaza de San Martín..... 23 D3
- Torreón de Lozoya..... 24 D3
- Hostal Juan Bravo..... 25 C3
- Hostal Plaza..... 26 D2
- Hostería Ayala Berganza..... 27 D4
- Hotel Acueducto..... 28 E3
- Hotel Infanta Isabel..... 29 C3
- Hotel Las Srenas..... 30 D3
- Pensión Ferrí..... 31 C2

THE DEVIL'S WORK

Although no-one really doubts that the Romans built the aqueduct, a local legend asserts that two millennia ago a young girl, tired of carrying water from the well, voiced a willingness to sell her soul to the devil if an easier solution could be found. No sooner said than done. The devil worked through the night, while the girl recanted and prayed to God for forgiveness. Hearing her prayers, God sent the sun into the sky earlier than usual, catching the devil un-awares with only a single stone lacking to complete the structure. The girl's soul was saved, but it seems like she got her wish anyway. Perhaps God didn't have the heart to tear down the aqueduct.

and not a drop of mortar was used to hold the whole thing together. The 728m granite block bridge you see today is made up of 163 arches. The aqueduct was part of a complex system of aqueducts and underground canals which once brought water from the mountains 15km away, reaching as far as where the Alcázar now stands. At its highest point in Plaza del Azoguejo, it is 28m high.

At this end of town, there are a few churches worth your time. Iglesia de San Millán, off Avenida de Fernández Ladreda, is a time-worn example of the Romanesque style typical of Segovia, with porticoes and a Mudéjar bell-tower. A couple of other late Romanesque churches around here include the Iglesia de San Justo (Plaza de San Justo; 11am-1.30pm & 4.30-6.30pm Mon-Sat) and the Iglesia de San Clemente (Plaza de San Clemente).

TO THE CATEDRAL

From the Plaza del Azoguejo, beside the aqueduct, Calle Real winds up into the delightful heart of Segovia. About a quarter of the way up to Plaza Mayor is the Casa de los Picos (921 46 26 74; admission free; 11am-2pm & 6-8pm Mon-Fri Sep-Feb, noon-2pm & 7-9pm Mon-Fri Mar-Aug), a Renaissance mansion with a diamond-shaped façade that is home to a school of applied arts and hosts free exhibitions.

A little further on you reach Plaza de San Martín, one of the most captivating little squares in Segovia. The square is presided over by a statue of Juan Bravo and the 14th-century Torreón de Lozoya (921 46 24 61; admission free; 11am-5-9pm

Tue-Fri, noon-2pm & 5-9pm Sat & Sun), a tower that was once an armoury; the *pièce de résistance*, however, is the Romanesque Iglesia de San Martín, with the *segoviano* touch of a Mudéjar tower and arched gallery. The interior boasts a Flemish Gothic chapel.

In a perfect marriage of space and function, the Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Esteban Vicente (921 46 20 10; www.museoestebanvicente.es; Plazuela de las Bellas Artes s/n; adult/concession €2.40/1.20, Thu free; 11am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Fri, 11am-7pm Sat, 11am-2pm Sun) occupies a 15th-century palace of Enrique IV, complete with Renaissance chapel and Mudéjar ceiling. Some 148 abstract paintings and sculptures by Segovia-born artist Esteban Vicente (1903-2000), a fine painter of the abstract expressionist school, form the core of the exhibit.

The shady Plaza Mayor is the nerve centre of old Segovia, lined by an eclectic assortment of buildings, arcades and cafés and an open pavilion in its centre. The Iglesia de San Miguel, where Isabel was proclaimed Queen of Castilla, recedes humbly into the background before the splendour of the *catedral* across the square.

CATEDRAL

Started in 1525 after its Romanesque predecessor had burned to the ground in the War of the Communities, the *catedral* (921 46 22 05; 10am-2pm & 4-8pm Tue-Fri Sep-Jul, 10am-8pm Sat & Sun year-round, 10am-8pm daily Aug) is a final, powerful expression of Gothic architecture in Spain that took almost 200 years to complete. The austere three-naved interior is anchored by an imposing choir stall and enlivened by 20-odd chapels. One of these, the Capilla del Cristo del Consuelo, houses a magnificent Romanesque doorway preserved from the original church. The Capilla de la Piedad contains an important altarpiece by Juan de Juni, while the Capilla del Cristo Yacente and Capilla del Santísimo Sacramento are also beautiful. The Gothic cloister is lovely, while the Museo Catedralicio (921 46 22 05; admission €2; 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-1.15pm Sun Sep-Feb, 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-1.15pm & 1.30-6.30pm Sun Mar-Aug) will appeal to devotees of religious art.

TO THE ALCÁZAR

The direct route to the Alcázar from Plaza Mayor is via Calle Marqués del Arco. About halfway along you pass yet another Romanesque church, the Iglesia de San Andrés. Away to

the right is the Casa-Museo de Antonio Machado (921 46 03 77; Calle de los Desemparados 5; admission €1.50, Wed free; 11am-2pm & 4.30-7.30pm Wed-Sun). Machado, one of Spain's pre-eminent 20th-century poets, lived here from 1919 to 1932 and it still contains his furnishings and personal effects. A few paces further down the road rises the six-level tower of the 13th-century Romanesque Iglesia de San Esteban, which has a baroque interior.

ALCÁZAR

Rapunzel towers, turrets topped with slate witches' hats and a *deep* moat at its base make the Alcázar (921 46 07 59; www.alcazardesegovia.com; adult/concession €3.50/2.50, tower €1.50; 10am-9pm Mar-Aug, 10am-8pm Sep-Feb) a prototype fairy-tale castle, so much so that its design inspired Walt Disney's vision of Sleeping Beauty's castle. Fortified since Roman days, the site takes its name from the Arabic *al-qasr* (castle) and was rebuilt and expanded in the 13th and 14th centuries, but the whole lot burned down in 1862. What you see today is an evocative over-the-top reconstruction of the original. Admission is free for EU citizens on the third Tuesday of every month.

Highlights include the Sala de las Piñas, the ceiling of which drips with a crop of 392 pineapple-shaped 'stalactites', and the Sala de Reyes (Kings' Room), featuring a three-dimensional frieze of 52 sculptures of kings who fought during the Reconquista. The views from the Torre de Juan II are truly exceptional, and put the old town's hilltop location into full context.

CHURCHES & CONVENTS

Another smorgasbord of religious buildings stretches across the luxuriant valley of Río Eresma to the north of the city.

The most interesting of Segovia's churches, and the best preserved of its kind in Europe, is the 12-sided Iglesia de la Vera Cruz (admission €1.50; 10.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-7pm Tue-Sun Mar-Aug, 10.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-6.30pm Tue-Sun Sep-Feb, closed Nov). Built in the 13th century by the Knights Templar and based on the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, it long housed what is said to be a piece of the Vera Cruz (True Cross), now in the nearby village church of Zamarramala (on view only at Easter). The curious two-storey chamber in the circular nave is where the knights stood vigil over the holy relic. For fantastic views of the town and

the Sierra de Guadarrama, walk uphill behind the church for approximately 1km.

Just west of Vera Cruz is the Convento de los Carmelitas Descalzos (921 43 13 49; 10am-1.30pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sun, 4-7pm Mon), where San Juan de la Cruz is buried. It's open longer hours in summer. A bit further east is the Monasterio de El Parral (921 43 12 98; admission by donation; 10am-12.30pm & 4.15-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 10-11.30am & 4.15-6.30pm Sun). Ring the bell to see part of the cloister and church, the latter is a proud, flamboyant Gothic structure. The monks chant a Gregorian Mass at noon on Sunday and daily in summer at 1pm, and the monastery is open longer hours in summer.

About 1.3km southeast of the aqueduct, just off Avenida de Padre Claret, the Convento de San Antonio El Real (adult/under 12yr €2/free; 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) is also worth a look. Once the summer residence of Enrique IV, its Gothic-Mudéjar church has a splendid ceiling.

Festivals & Events

Segovianos let their hair down for the Fiestas de San Juan y San Pedro, celebrated from 24 to 29 June with parades, concerts and bullfights. Fiesta San Frutos, on 25 October, celebrates the town's patron saint.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Pensión Ferri (921 46 09 57; Calle de Escuderos 10; s/d with shared bathroom €15/22) Occupying an old house in a superb location, this is a good budget choice. The rooms are simple but quaint and incorporate some of the building's original wood and brick work.

Hostal Juan Bravo (921 46 34 13; Calle de Juan Bravo 12; d with washbasin/private bathroom €32/38) Another excellent choice with sparkling rooms, Hostal Juan Bravo has rooms at the back with stunning views of the Sierra de Guadarrama; the friendly owners round out a great package.

Hostal Plaza (921 46 03 03; www.hostal-plaza.com; Calle del Cronista Lecea 11; s with washbasin €22, s/d from €33/42) The real drawcard here is the location, a few steps off Plaza Mayor. Ask to see a few rooms as size and comfort levels vary, but most are worth what is asked. Unusually in this price range, you can also pay with credit card. Our only complaint? The bedspreads sport colour schemes that your grandmother used to love.

Hostal Fornos (96 /fax 921 46 01 98; Calle Infanta Isabel 13; s/d from €32/45) Deservedly popular, this high-quality *hostal* has delightful, spacious rooms with that fresh white-linen-and-wicker-chair look. The owners are welcoming and the location's a winner.

MIDRANGE

Hotel las Sirenas (96 921 46 26 63; hotelsirenas@terra.es; Calle de Juan Bravo 30; s/d from €48/64) This is another popular choice and it's not hard to see why. The rooms are spacious and some come with the barest hint of character. You're also tucked away in a quiet street close to the city walls which you'll appreciate as *segovianos* begin their weekends of revelry.

Hotel Infanta Isabel (96 921 46 13 00; www.hotelinfantaisabel.com; Plaza Mayor 12; s/d from €50/78) A great place in a great location, this historic hotel has period touches (some are a bit overdone) and the rooms with balconies overlooking the plaza are wonderful (if noisy on weekend nights). Utterly charming.

Hotel Acueducto (96 902 25 05 50; www.hotelacueducto.com; Calle de Padre Claret 10; s/d €65/100) If you don't mind being just outside the old town, this place is a very comfortable choice with large, modern rooms. What sets it above the others are the uninterrupted views towards the aqueduct from some of the balconies and the rooftop terrace.

TOP END

Hosteria Ayala Berganza (96 921 46 04 48; www.partner-hotels.com; Calle de Carretas 5; d €110-133) This charming boutique hotel has supremely elegant, individually designed rooms (all have tiled floors, beautiful bathrooms and rustic accents) within a restored 15th-century palace. It's not far from the aqueduct, but it's quiet and oozes style.

Parador de Segovia (96 921 44 37 37; segovia@parador.es; Carretera de Valladolid; d €130-140) On a hilltop perch about five minutes' drive from the centre, this is one of the more modern *paradores* in Spain. It's nonetheless deluxe and you'll leave pampered. Breakfasting in the glass-walled dining room as the sun glitters on the Alcázar and the cathedral is one of Segovia's greatest pleasures.

Eating

Segovianos love their pigs to the point of obsession, which would be worrying if the fruits of their passion were not so delicious. Just about every restaurant proudly boasts its

horno de asar (roasts) and they say that 'pork has 40 flavours – all of them good'. The main speciality is *cochinillo asado* (roast suckling pig), but *judiones de la granja* (lima beans with pork chunks) also looms large on menus. The local dessert is a rich, sweet concoction drenched in *ponche*, a popular Spanish spirit, and hence known as *ponche segoviano*.

RESTAURANTS

Mesón de Campesino (Calle de la Infanta Isabel 12; menú €6) This place dishes up the cheapest *menú* in town – it's as simple as that.

Mesón José María (96 921 46 60 17; Calle del Cronista Lecea 11) Arguably the best tapas bar in town, this respected *segoviano* favourite has a rustic bar, while you can also dine on *cochinillo* (€15) in the formal dining room.

Cueva de San Esteban (96 921 46 09 82; Calle de Valdeláguila 15; menú €12.15) One of the only restaurants in Segovia not forcing suckling pig upon its customers, this popular spot focuses on seasonal dishes, serves varied tapas, and has a lively atmosphere and an excellent wine list.

Zarzamora (96 921 46 12 47; 11 5pm-midnight Tue-Sun) Around the corner from Cueva de San Esteban, this is another gem offering healthy pasta and meat dishes, fruit tarts and other home cooking. It's like eating in your own cosy kitchen.

La Almuzara (96 921 46 06 22; Calle Marqués del Arco 3; dishes under €8; 11 lunch Tue-Sat, dinner Tue-Sun) If you're a vegetarian, you don't need to feel like an outcast in this resolutely carnivorous city. La Almuzara features lots of vegetarian dishes, pastas and salads and the ambience is warm and artsy.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Casa Duque (96 921 46 24 87; www.restaurant-eduque.es; Calle de Cervantes 12; mains €12-17; 11 noon-11.30pm) Segovia's oldest dining establishment (open since 1895) is a local institution and a great place to sample *cochinillo* (suckling pig). It's a classy place with an old-world atmosphere and consistently great food and wine that draws Madrid celebrities for weekend lunches when reservations are essential. For less formality, try its *cueva* (cave) – which can be entered at Calle de Santa Engracia 10 – in the same building where you can get tapas and yummy *cazuelas* (stews).

Mesón de Cándido (96 921 42 81 03; Plaza del Azoguejo 5; mains €10-16, meals €30) At the foot of the aqueduct, this is another one Segovia's most popular places for *cochinillo* although it doesn't quite have the fame of Casa Duque.

CAFÉS

La Colonial (Avenida de Fernández Ladreda 19; 11 8.30am-11pm) Near the aqueduct, La Colonial does a roaring trade in coffees and cakes served at its outdoor tables.

Limón y Menta (96 921 44 21 41; Calle de Isabel la Católica 2; 11 8am-11pm) This is the place to head for a mouthwatering array of biscuits and pastries, including some of the best *ponche segoviano* around.

Drinking & Entertainment

Calle de la Infanta Isabel is one of those Spanish streets that you'd hate to live above and on a warm summer's evening, you'll definitely hear it before you see it; locals call it 'Calle de los Bares' (Street of the Bars) as it's the scene of serious carousing and general merriment, especially from Thursday to Saturday nights.

La Tasquina (96 921 46 19 54; Calle de Valdeláguila 3; 11 9am-late) A wine bar that draws crowds large enough to spill out onto the pavement nursing their good wines, *cavas* (sparkling wines) and cheeses.

Places come and go, but **Disney** (Calle de la Infanta Isabel 5) and **Santana** (Calle de la Infanta Isabel 18) have stood the test of time as popular watering holes.

Bars and discos also cluster at the plaza end of Calle de los Escuderos and along Calle de Carmen near the aqueduct, but they don't launch into action until at least 10pm (Thursday to Saturday only).

In fine weather, Plaza Mayor is the obvious place for hanging out and people-watching, but a quieter alternative is Plaza de San Martín. Near this square is **Saxo Bar** (Seminario 2), which sometimes has live music, usually jazz.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The bus station is just off Paseo de Ezequiel González, near Avenida de Fernández Ladreda. Buses head to Madrid up to 30 times daily (€5.95, 1½ hours). Regular buses go to Coca (€2.90, one hour), Salamanca (€9.25, three hours), Valladolid (€6.80, 2¾ hours) and Ávila (€3.90, one hour).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Of the two main roads down to the NVI, which links Madrid and Galicia, the N603 is the prettier. The alternative N110 cuts south-west across to Ávila and northeast to the main Madrid-Burgos highway. Although there is underground parking at a few points in the old town, the streets can be narrow and difficult to negotiate so it's better to leave the car in one of stations (12 hours €9 to €11) close to Plaza del Azoguejo.

TRAIN

Madrid-bound trains leave at two-hour intervals up to nine times daily (€5.45, 1¾ hours).

AROUND SEGOVIA

La Granja de San Ildefonso

It's not hard to see why the Bourbon King Felipe V chose this site to recreate in miniature (it's all relative) his version of Versailles, the palace of his French grandfather Louis XIV. In 1720 French architects and gardeners, together with some Italian help, began laying out the elaborate and decidedly baroque gardens (admission €3.40; 11 10am-6.30pm Oct-Mar, 10am-7pm Apr, 10am-8pm May-mid-Jun & Sep, 10am-9pm mid-Jun-Aug, 10am-6pm Nov-Feb) in the western foothills of the Sierra de Guadarrama, 12km east of Segovia. La Granja's centrepiece is the garden's 28 extravagant fountains which depict ancient myths such as *Apollo and the Baths of Diana*. Some are switched on at 5.30pm on Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday during *Semana Santa*.

The 300-room **Palacio Real** (96 921 47 00 19; www.patrimonionacional.es/granja/granja.htm; adult/concession €5/2.50; 11 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-1.30pm & 3-5pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Oct-Mar), once a favoured summer residence for Spanish royalty and restored after a fire in 1918, is impressive but perhaps the lesser of La Granja's jewels. You can visit about half of the palace's rooms, although the **Museo de Tapices** (Tapestry Museum) was closed for restoration at the time of research.

Buses to La Granja depart regularly from Segovia's main bus station off Paseo de Ezequiel González (€1.10, 20 minutes).

Pedraza de la Sierra

pop 472

The captivating walled village of Pedraza de la Sierra, about 37km northeast of Segovia, is eerily quiet during the week; its considerable number of restaurants and bars spring to life

with the swarms of weekend visitors. At the far end of town stands the lonely **Castillo de Pedraza** (admission €4; 11am-2pm & 5-8pm Wed-Sun Mar-Aug, 11am-2pm & 4-6pm Wed-Sun Sep-Feb), unusual for its intact outer wall. The excellent **Hospedería de Santo Domingo** (% 921 50 99 71; www.hospederiadestodomingo.com; Calle Matadero 3; d €90-125) has terrific rooms with balconies, most of which overlook a small garden and the terracotta-tiled floors are a nice touch. Bus services to Pedraza are sporadic at best.

Turégano

pop 1074

Turégano, about 30km north of Segovia, is dominated by a unique 15th-century castle-church complex built by the then-Archbishop of Segovia, Juan Arias Dávila, who decided to make a personal fortress of the town. The castle walls are built around the façade of the Iglesia de San Miguel.

Coca

pop 1960

A typically dusty, inward-looking Castilian village 50km northwest of Segovia, Coca is presided over by a stunning all-brick castle (guided tours €2.50; 11am-11pm Mon-Fri), a virtuoso piece of Gothic-Mudéjar architecture. It was built in 1453 by the powerful Fonseca family and is surrounded by a deep moat. The beautiful multiturreted exterior was once matched by an equally breathtaking Renaissance interior, which was stripped of its ornamentation in the 19th century. Entry is by guided tour only. Up to five buses run daily between Coca and Segovia (€2.90, one hour).

VALLADOLID

pop 321,001

Valladolid doesn't see many tourists and that in itself may be reason enough to visit as it's a lively city with a very Spanish character. By day, it works hard and showcases a sprinkling of first-rate monuments, a fine Plaza Mayor and excellent museums. In the evenings and on weekends, locals put on their Sunday best and stroll through the traffic-free streets of the city centre. And at night, the city comes alive as Valladolid's large student population overflow from the city's boisterous bars. It is an easy city to find your way around with the reasonably compact city centre lying east of Río Pisuerga.

History

Little more than a hamlet in the early Middle Ages, Valladolid had become a major centre of commerce, education and art by the time Fernando of Aragón and Isabel of Castilla discreetly contracted matrimony here in 1469. As Spain's greatest-ever ruling duo, they carried Valladolid to the height of its splendour. Its university was one of the most dynamic on the peninsula and Carlos I made Valladolid the seat of imperial government and a magnet for some of the most famous names of Spanish history, among them the merciless Inquisitor General Fray Tomás de Torquemada (see the boxed text, p202) and Christopher Columbus who ended his days in the city.

Felipe II was born here in 1527, but 33 years later, he chose to make Madrid (which had a population almost half the size of Valladolid) the capital, much to the displeasure of the *vallasoletanos*. It's also the administrative capital of the Autonomía de Castilla y León.

Information

You'll find banks with ATMs along Calle de Santiago.

Algún Lugar (Plaza de la Universidad; per hr €2;

11am-11pm Mon-Sat) Internet café in a buzzing bar.

Hospital de la Cruz Roja Española (% 983 22 22 22; Calle de Felipe II 9)

Main post office (Plaza de la Rinconada)

Policia Nacional (% 091, 983 36 61 00; Calle de Felipe II 11)

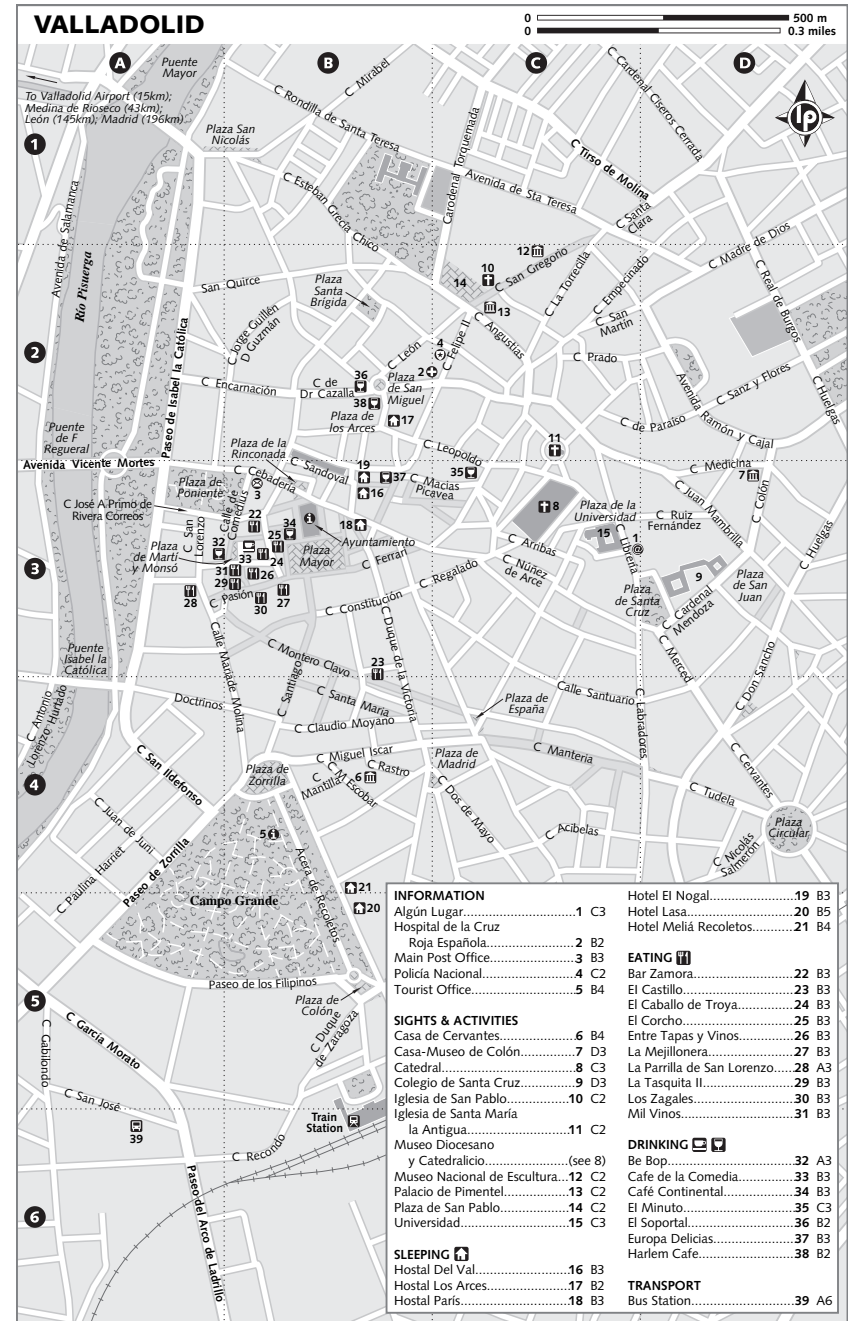
Tourist office (% 983 21 94 38; www.turismocastilla yleon.com; Acera de Recoletos; 9am-2pm & 5-8pm mid-Sep-mid-Jun, 9am-8pm Sun-Thu & 9am-9pm Fri & Sat mid-Jun-mid-Sep)

Sights

MUSEO NACIONAL DE ESCULTURA

This museum (% 983 25 03 75; http://museoescultura.mcu.es; Calle de San Gregorio 2; adult/child/concession €2.40/free/1.20, Sat afternoon & Sun free; 10am-2pm & 4-9pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun mid-Mar-Sep), Spain's premier showcase of polychrome wood sculpture, is housed in the former Colegio de San Gregorio (1496), a flamboyant example of the Isabelline Gothic style where exhibition rooms line a splendid two-storey galleried courtyard.

Alonso de Berruguete, Juan de Juni and Gregorio Fernández are the star attractions, especially some enormously expressive fragments from Berruguete's main commission,



THE DARK PRINCE OF THE INQUISITION

The Spanish Inquisition casts a long shadow over Spanish history and there were few more notorious advocates of this dark era than the zealot Fray Tomás de Torquemada (1420–98). Immortalised by Dostoevsky as the articulate Grand Inquisitor who puts Jesus himself on trial in *Brothers Karamazov*, and satirised by Monty Python in the *Flying Circus*, Torquemada was born in Valladolid to well-placed Jewish *conversos* (converts to Christianity).

A Dominican, Fray Tomás was appointed Queen Isabel's personal confessor in 1479. Four years later, Pope Sixtus IV appointed this rising star to head the Castilian Inquisition.

Deeply affected by the Spanish cult of *sangre limpia* (pure blood), the racist doctrine that drove the 800-year struggle to rid Spain of non-Christian peoples, Torquemada gleefully rooted out *conversos* (despite his background) and other heretics, including his favourite targets, the *marranos* (Jews who only pretended to convert but continued to practise Judaism in private).

The lucky sinners had their property confiscated which served as a convenient fund-raiser for the war of Reconquista against the Muslims. The condemned were then paraded through town wearing the *sambenito*, a yellow shirt emblazoned with crosses that was short enough to expose their genitals, then marched to the doors of the local church and flogged.

If you were unlucky, you underwent unimaginable tortures before going through an auto-da-fé, a public burning at the stake. Those that recanted and kissed the cross were garrotted before the fire was set, while those that recanted only were burnt quickly with dry wood. If you stayed firm and didn't recant, the wood used for the fire was green and slow-burning.

In the 15 years Torquemada was Inquisitor General of the Castilian Inquisition, he ran some 100,000 trials and sent about 2000 people to burn at the stake. Many of the trials were conducted in Valladolid's Plaza Mayor, the executions in Plaza de Zorrilla.

On 31 March 1492, Fernando and Isabel, on Torquemada's insistence, issued their Edict of Expulsion, as a result of which all Jews were forced to leave Spain within two months on pain of death.

The following year, Torquemada retired to the monastery of Santo Tomás in Ávila, from where he continued to administer the affairs of the Inquisition. In his final years he became obsessed with the fear that he might be poisoned, and refused to eat anything without having a unicorn's horn nearby as an antidote. Unlike many of his victims, he died in his sleep in 1498.

the high altar for Valladolid's Iglesia de San Benito. Downstairs is a small wing dedicated to Fernández, whose melodramatic intensity is especially well reflected in his painfully lifelike sculpture of a dead Christ.

The museum opens shorter hours from September to mid-March.

PLAZA DE SAN PABLO

Virtually next to the Museo Nacional de Escultura, this open square is dominated by the Iglesia de San Pablo, the main façade of which is an extravagant masterpiece of Isabelline Gothic, with every square inch finely worked, carved and twisted to produce a unique fabric in stone. Also fronting the square is the Palacio de Pimentel, where, on 12 July 1527, Felipe II was born. A tiled mural in the palace's entrance hall depicts scenes from the life of the king. The palace hosts occasional exhibitions.

CATEDRAL & AROUND

Valladolid's 16th-century *catedral* is not one of Castilla's finest, but it does have a fine altarpiece by Juni and a processional monstrance by Juan de Arfe in the attached Museo Diocesano y Catedralicio (☎ 983 30 43 62; Calle de Arribas 1; admission €2.50; 10am–1.30pm & 4.30–7pm Tue–Fri, 10am–2pm Sat & Sun).

More interesting is the Iglesia de Santa María la Antigua, a 14th-century Gothic church with an elegant Romanesque tower. The grand baroque façade to the east of the *catedral* belongs to the main building of the *universidad* and is the work of Narciso Tomé.

East of the *catedral* and the church is the early Renaissance Colegio de Santa Cruz (1487). The main portal is an early Plateresque example; wander inside to see the three-tiered and colonnaded patio and, in the chapel, Fernández' super-realistic *Cristo de la Luz* sculpture.

CASAS DE CERVANTES & COLON

Cervantes was briefly imprisoned in Valladolid, and his house (☎ 983 30 88 10; Calle del Rastro; adult/under 18 & senior €2.40/free, Sun free; 19.30am–3pm Tue–Sat, 10am–3pm Sun) is happily preserved behind a quiet little garden.

The Casa-Museo de Colón (☎ 983 29 13 53; Calle de Colón; admission free; 10am–2pm & 5–7pm Tue–Sat, 10am–2pm Sun) is a replica of the house in which Christopher Columbus lived and ended his days in 1506. It was closed for major renovations when we visited.

Sleeping

Valladolid's hotels see more businesspeople than tourists during the week – prices at many hotels drop considerably from Friday to Sunday.

Hostal Del Val (☎ 983 37 57 52; benidiopor@terra.es; Plaza del Val 6; s/d with washbasin €15/27, with bathroom €27/36) Run by the same owner as Hostal Los Arces, this *hostal* is good value, especially those with private bathroom that overlook the quiet square. It's a steep three-storey climb to reach reception.

Hostal Los Arces (☎ 983 35 38 53; benidiopor@terra.es; Calle de San Antonio de Padua 2; s/d with washbasin €15/30, with bathroom €27/39) This place is outstanding value with pleasant, renovated rooms with TV, most of which overlook a reasonably quiet square. The owner is also friendly in an understated, Castilian kind of way.

Hostal París (☎ 983 37 06 25; www.hostalparis.com; Calle de la Especiería 2; s/d from €41.20/48.50; P) One of the closest places to stay to the Plaza Mayor, Hostal París has comfortable, modern rooms with all the trimmings (including satellite TV) and good service. There's parking from 8pm to 10am for €9.50.

Hotel El Nogal (☎ 983 34 03 33; www.hotelnogal.com; Calle Conde Ansuérez 10–12; s/d €46/68) Hotel El Nogal has a mixture of old and new, with most of the rooms sporting polished floorboards, ample space (even the singles) and modern bathrooms, some with hydro-massage showers. All face out onto either a plaza or a quietish street.

Hotel Lasca (☎ 983 39 02 55; www.hotellasca.com; Acera de Recoletos 21; s/d Mon–Thu €47/82, Fri–Sun €39/50; P) Handy for the train station and geared towards business travellers, Hotel Lasca's warmly decorated rooms have a nice blend between antique furnishings, shiny parquet floors, modern bathrooms and a sharp attention to detail. Parking costs €11.

Hotel Meliá Recoletos (☎ 983 21 62 00; www.solmelia.com; Acera de Recoletos 13; s/d Mon–Thu €39/50, Fri–Sun €47/82, d with breakfast Fri–Sun €75; P) This excellent four-star hotel has a touch of class that elevates it above other hotels in this category. At once part of a chain but with a boutique-hotel intimacy, it offers large luxurious rooms and impeccable service. Parking is €12.

Eating

BREAKFAST

El Castillo (Calle de Montero Calvo; 19.30am–11.30am Mon–Sat) This buzzing *churrería* (Spanish-style doughnut shop) is ideal for kick-starting your day with good coffee and *tostada* (toasted rolls) or *churros* (doughnuts) for €1.20.

TAPAS

Valladolid is a great town to get into the tapas habit and you need look no further than the bars west of the Plaza Mayor. **Bar Zamora** (Calle de Correos 5) has won prizes for its tapas, while **El Corcho** (Calle de Correos 2), a few doors up, wins the prize of public opinion from many locals.

It is said that Spaniards consume 30 million kilograms of mussels every year and it's our guess that a fair proportion of these are downed in **La Mejillonera** (Calle de la Pasión 13). A good place to try for its range of *tostas* (toasts) is **La Tasquita II** (Calle Caridad). For a slightly more upmarket take on the tapas obsession, try **Entre Tapas y Vinos** (Calle de la Pasión 6).

RESTAURANTS

La Parrilla de San Lorenzo (☎ 983 33 50 88; Calle de Pedro Niño; mains €11–15; 19.30am–late, restaurant lunch & dinner) Both a rustic stand-up bar and a much-lauded restaurant with vaulted ceilings, La Parrilla de San Lorenzo has upmarket Castilian cuisine (hearty stews, legumes and

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

El Caballo de Troya (☎ 983 33 93 55; www.elcaballodetroya.com; Calle de Correos 1; raciones €5.30–10.90, menú €11.80–20.50) The 'Trojan Horse' is a Valladolid treat, ranged around a stunning interior courtyard with a taberna downstairs for brilliant *raciones* – we recommend the *bandeja surtidas* (tasting platters) for a rich and varied combination of tastes – while the restaurant is as sophisticated in flavours as the dining room is classy in design.

steaks play a leading role) with a relaxed ambience. The menu looks like a medieval religious document!

Mil Vinos (☎ 983 34 43 36; www.milvinos.com; cnr Plaza Marti y Monsó & Calle de Comedias; mains €12-16; 1 Tue-Sun) Hardwood floors and lime-green walls go together surprisingly well at this trendy place where the wines and desserts are a feature, but the mains spring their own, creative surprises. The *ensalada de centollo* (spider crab salad) is our favourite.

Los Zagales (☎ 983 38 08 92; Calle de la Pasión 13; mains €15; 1 lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) The bar here is awash with hanging local produce and the occasional pig's head mounted on the wall – all are also represented in the tapas varieties lined up along the bar. But Los Zagales is best known for its restaurant where the servings are generous and the food excellent.

Drinking

Central Valladolid brims with welcoming bars and cafés and you'll quickly find a personal favourite.

El Minuto (Calle de Macías Pícarva 15; 1 9am-late) Near the *catedral*, this smooth café-bar is popular with students and is flanked by several other prospects for late-night drinking.

Café Continental (Plaza Mayor 23; 1 8am-3am) This hip spot is the pick of the bars and *terrazas* (terraces) that surround the delightful Plaza Mayor. It features live music upstairs most nights, and you could easily spend the best part of a night here without feeling the need to move.

Calle de Paraíso and its surrounding streets (called 'El Portu' by locals) and Plaza de San Miguel draw bar-hoppers like moths to a flame. At the latter, **El Soportal** (Plaza de San Miguel), with its leopard-skin pillars, is a good place to start your night, while the **Harlem Cafe** (Calle de Padua) around the corner is similarly good. Not far away, **Europa Delicias** (Calle Conde Ansurez 18) is one of those places that comes into its own the longer the night goes on.

The Plaza Marti y Monsó also has a sprinkling of bars. **Café de la Comedia** (Plaza Marti y Monsó) is noisy with people and a convivial atmosphere while **Be Bop** (Plaza Marti y Monsó) is all pink stilettoes and a super-cool crowd.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Ryanair has a four flights a week from Valladolid to London (Stansted) and six weekly

flights to Brussels (Charleroi). Iberia operates up to five daily flights to Barcelona with connections to other cities in Spain.

BUS

Buses travel to Madrid at least hourly between 6.30am and 9.30pm (€11.35, 2¼ hours), while others go hourly to Palencia (€2.85, 45 minutes).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The N620 motorway passes Valladolid en route from Burgos to Tordesillas, where it picks up with the NVI between Madrid and A Coruña in Galicia. The N601 heads northwest to León and south to hit the NVI and A6 west of Segovia.

Parking stations (€8.50 to €12, 12 hours) are plentiful throughout the centre of town, and most hotels and hostels can point you in the right direction.

TRAIN

Valladolid is a major train hub and up to 20 trains daily go to Madrid (from €11.85, about three hours); when the fast train AVE line is completed, you'll be whisked there in under an hour. More than 10 trains run daily to León (from €8.90, about two hours) and Burgos (€7.55, about 1½ hours). There are also frequent services to Palencia (from €2.95, 35 minutes) and Salamanca (from €6.90, 1¾ hours), one train to Zamora (€7.15, 1½ hours) and three to Bilbao (from €19, about 3½ hours).

Getting Around

Valladolid's airport is 15km northwest of the city centre. Many bus services along the N601 stop at the airport, while a dedicated *Linecar* (☎ 983 23 00 33) has up to five daily services from Valladolid to the airport (€3) and three services going the other way. A taxi between the airport and the city centre costs €18 from Monday to Saturday and €19.50 on Sunday and holidays.

Local buses 2 and 10 pass the train and bus stations on their way to Plaza de España.

AROUND VALLADOLID

Medina de Rioseco

pop 5024

Medina de Rioseco, a once-wealth trading centre, is a shadow of its former medieval self, but it retains some worthwhile sights that the

tourist office (☎ 983 72 03 19; turismo@medinaderioseco.com; Calle La Dársena del Canal de Castilla s/n; 1 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun), close to Plaza Mayor, can direct you to.

The **Iglesia de Santa Maria de Mediavilla** (☎ 983 70 09 82) is a grandiose Isabelline Gothic work with three star-vaulted naves and the famous **Capilla de los Benavente**. Anchored by an eye-popping altarpiece by Juan de Juni, it's sometimes referred to as 'the Sistine Chapel of Castilla' which is only a slight exaggeration. Down the hill, the portals of the light-flooded **Iglesia de Santiago** blend Gothic, neoclassical and Plateresque architectural styles.

The **Museo de Semana Santa** (☎ 983 70 03 27; adult/under 14yr €3/free; 1 11am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sun Sep-May, 11am-2pm & 5-8pm Jun-Aug) is dedicated to *pasos* (Holy Week figures) and an extensive range of other Easter memorabilia within an old church. Medina de Rioseco is famous for its Easter processions.

Hostal Duque de Osuna (☎ 983 70 01 79; Avenida de Castilviejo 16; s/d from €21/33), not far from the bus station, is excellent value, especially as the rooms come with private bathroom. They aren't anything special but they're clean and it's an excellent Medina de Rioseco base.

Hostal La Muralla (☎ 983 70 05 77; Plaza de Santo Domingo 4; d €24-30) offers huge, bright rooms with small bathrooms, balcony and fan.

Two places for a great feed are **Restaurante La Rúa** (☎ 983 70 07 83; Calle de San Juan 25; menú €8) and the more upmarket **Restaurante Pasos** (☎ 983 70 10 02; Calle de Lázaro Alonso 44; menú €12).

Each day up to eight buses run to León (€5.15, 1¼ hours) and up to 10 go to Valladolid (€2.55, 30 minutes).

Tordesillas

pop 8643

Commanding a rise on the northern flank of Río Duero, this charming little town has a historical significance that belies its size. Originally a Roman town, it later became part of the frontline between the Christians and Muslims. It then played a major role in world history, when, in 1494, Isabel and Fernando, the Catholic Monarchs, sat down with Portugal here to hammer out a treaty determining who got what in Latin America. Portugal got Brazil and much of the rest went to Spain.

The **tourist office** (☎ 983 77 10 67; www.tordesillas.net; 1 10.30am-1.30pm & 4-6.30pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) is in Casas del Tratado, near the Iglesia de San Antolín.

SIGHTS

Real Convento de Santa Clara

The history of Tordesillas has been dominated by this Mudéjar-style convent (☎ 983 77 00 71; adult/student & senior €3.60/2, EU citizens free Wed; 1 10.30am-1.30pm & 4.30-6.30pm Tue-Sat, 10.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-5.30pm Sun Apr-Sep), still home to a few Franciscan nuns living in near-total isolation from the outside world. What started in 1363 as a palace for Alfonso XI later became a residence for the mistress of Pedro I. In his testament, Pedro I charged his daughter Beatriz with turning it into a convent. In 1494, the signing of the Treaty of Tordesillas took place here.

It was also home to the crazy queen Juana la Loca after her husband, Felipe I, died in 1506; she stayed until her own death in 1555 and in fact was buried here for 19 years before her body was transferred to Granada (as she had wished).

The guided tour of the convent takes in some remarkable rooms, including a wonderful Mudéjar patio left over from the palace, and the church – the stunning *techumbre* of which is a masterpiece of woodwork. The Mudéjar door, Gothic arches and Arabic inscriptions are really superb, as are the **Arab baths** (admission €2.25, combined ticket with convent €4.60), which also contain some extremely delicate paintings.

The tour is included in the entry free and the convent is open shorter hours from October to March. The baths are open by appointment only.

Around Town

The **Museo del Tratado del Tordesillas** (☎ 983 77 10 67; Calle de Casas de Tratado) is dedicated to the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas and the informative displays look at the world as it was before and after the treaty. There's a reproduction of the treaty itself and a map that suggests Spain did very well out of the negotiations. It's open by appointment.

The **Museo de San Antolín** (Calle de Tratado de Tordesillas s/n; admission €1.80; 1 10.30am-1.30pm & 4.30-6.30pm Tue-Sun, 10.30am-1.30pm Sun), in a deconsecrated Gothic church, houses a collection of religious art with some ornate altars among the highlights.

The heart of town is formed by the pretty, porticoed **Plaza Mayor**, the mustard-yellow paintwork of which contrasts with dark brown woodwork and black grilles.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hostal San Antolin (☎ 983 79 67 71; sanantolin@telefonica.net; Calle San Antolin 8; s/d €27/45) This is the best place to stay in the old town, although the overall aesthetic and rooms are modern. The attached restaurant, the Mesón San Antolin, is one of the most popular eateries in town with good *raciones* downstairs and a fine fancy restaurant upstairs. It's just off Plaza Mayor.

Parador (☎ 983 77 00 51; www.parador.es; Carretera de Salamanca 5; d €110-140) Tordesillas' most sophisticated hotel is the ochre-toned *parador* where some rooms have four-poster beds (it's that sort of place) and many look out onto the tranquil gardens. This is one of the *parador*'s flagship properties and is worth every euro.

There are a few pleasant cafés and restaurants on Plaza Mayor, including **Don Pancho** (☎ 983 77 01 74; Plaza Mayor 9; menú €8, mains from €9) which is known for its meats cooked in a wood-fire oven, homely atmosphere and home cooking. For tapas, try **Viky** (☎ 983 77 10 61; Plaza Mayor 14; menú €7.50, mains from €11; h Tue-Sun).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The **bus station** (☎ 983 77 00 72; Avenida de Valladolid) is near Calle de Santa María. Regular buses depart for Madrid (€9.20, 2¼ hours), Salamanca (€4.90, 1¼ hours), Valladolid (€1.95, 30 minutes) and Zamora (€4.05, one hour).

Toro

pop 9466

Modern Toro, which lies north of Río Duero, is somewhat overshadowed by the town's historical significance – Fernando and Isabel cemented their primacy in Christian Spain at the Battle of Toro in 1476 – but it has settled comfortably into provinciality at the heart of a much-loved wine region.

The town's **tourist office** (☎ 980 69 18 62; h 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Oct-Jun, 10am-2pm & 4-8pm Tue-Sat Jul-Sep) is in the *ayuntamiento* on Plaza de España.

SIGHTS

Romanesque churches appear on seemingly every street corner in Toro. The **Colegiata Santa María La Mayor** (h 10am-1pm & 4-7pm) rises above the town and boasts the magnificent Romanesque-Gothic Pórtico de la Majestad. Treasures inside include the famous 15th-century painting called *Virgen de la Mosca* (Virgin of the Fly); see if you can spot the fly on the virgin's robe.

From behind the *catedral* you have a superb view south across the fields to the Romanesque bridge over Río Duero. The nearby **Alcázar**, dating from the 10th-century, conserves its walls and seven towers.

Southwest of town, the **Monasterio Sancti Spiritus** (☎ 980 10 81 07; h 10.30am-12.30pm & 4.30-6.30pm Tue-Sun) features a fine Renaissance cloister and the striking alabaster tomb of Beatriz de Portugal, wife of Juan I. Guided tours (€3.60) are offered from Tuesday to Sunday at 10.30am, 11.30am, noon, 5.30pm and 7pm in summer, or 10.30am, 11.15am, noon, 4.30pm and 5.15pm in winter.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hostal Doña Elvira (☎ 980 69 00 62; Calle Antonio Miguelez 47; s/d with washbasin €11.40/16.85, d €27.65) One of the cheapest *hostales* in Tordesillas, Hostal Doña Elvira has a few floors of simple, clean rooms, all with TV.

Hotel Juan II (☎ 980 69 03 00; http://hoteljuanii.com; Paseo del Espolón 1; s/d from €48/66) With fine balcony views, parquet floors and plenty of space, Hotel Juan II is probably Toro's best. It's also in the heart of town and has a lovely rooftop terrace.

Plaza Mayor and surrounds bustle with plenty of places to eat.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Regular buses operate to Valladolid (€2.95, one hour) and Zamora (€1.85, 25 minutes) and there are two direct services to Salamanca (€4.35, 1½ hours) on weekdays.

ZAMORA

pop 66,123

Another strategic fortress town on the northern bank of Río Duero, Zamora is one those Castilian towns that conceals a wealth of medieval monuments behind its otherwise provincial air, so many in fact that it's popularly known as the 'Romanesque Museum'.

History

Roman **Ocelum Durii** was a significant way station along the Ruta de la Plata (Silver Route) from Astorga to southern Spain. The Romans yielded to the Visigoths, who were in turn overwhelmed by the Muslims, who twice laid waste to Zamora. By the 12th and 13th centuries, when a fever of church-building formed the architectural core of what you see today, Zamora had reached its zenith

as a commercial centre and its deeply religious character had begun to take root.

Orientation

The bus and train stations are a good half-hour walk northeast of the town centre. In the opposite direction, the *catedral* and the heart of the old town are a 15-minute walk southwest from the modern centre.

Information

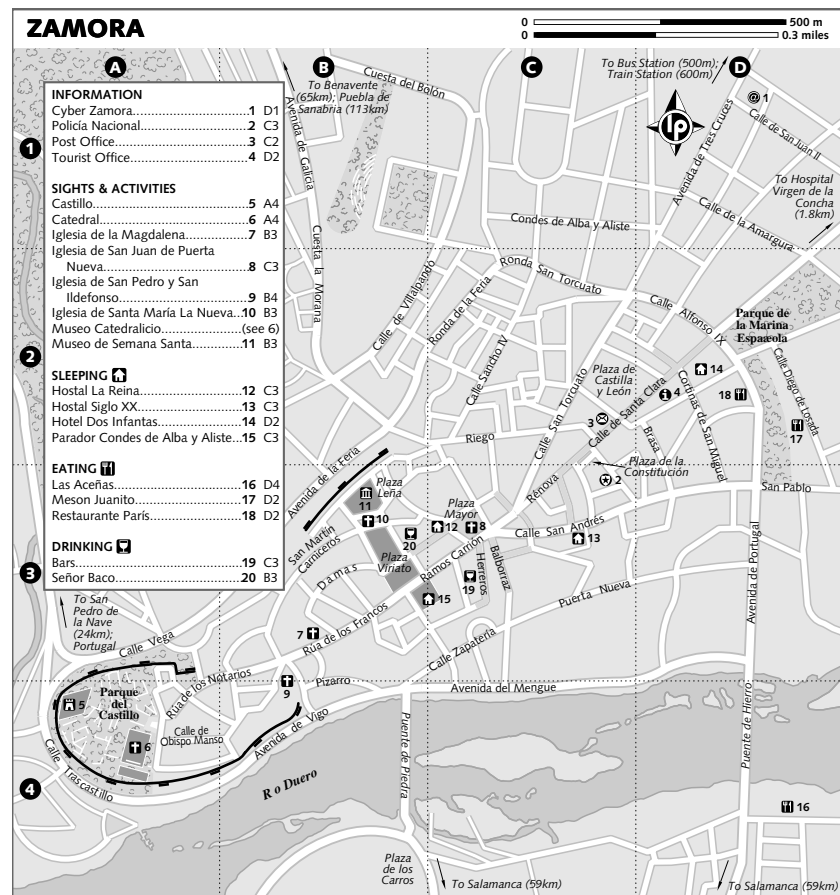
Cyber Zamora (☎ 980 67 24 13; Calle de San Juan II 10; per hr €2; h 10.30am-1am)

Emergency (☎ 091)

Hospital Virgen de la Concha (☎ 980 54 82 00;

Avenida Requejo s/n) One kilometre east of the old town.

Policia Nacional (☎ 980 53 04 62; Calle San Atilano 3)



Adjacent to the main entrance is the **Museo Catedralicio** (admission €2; 11am-2pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sun). Its star attraction is a collection of Flemish tapestries, the oldest of which, depicting the Trojan War, dates from the 15th century.

For a look at what's left of the city wall and its *castillo* (castle), head to the little park just west of the *catedral*.

CHURCHES

Zamora's churches (11am-1pm & 5-8pm Mar-Oct, 10am-1pm & 4-7pm Fri-Sun Nov-Apr) are of Romanesque origin, but all have been subjected to other influences. Among those retaining some of their Romanesque charm are the **Iglesia de San Pedro y San Ildefonso** (with Gothic touches) at Rúa de los Francos 3, **Iglesia de la Magdalena** (the southern doorway is considered the city's finest) on Rúa de los Francos and **Iglesia de San Juan de Puerta Nueva** on Plaza Mayor. **Iglesia de Santa María La Nueva** on Calle de San Martín Carniceros is actually a medieval replica of a 7th-century church destroyed by fire in 1158.

MUSEO DE SEMANA SANTA

Zamora is famous for its elaborate celebrations of *Semana Santa*, and this museum (adult/under 12yr €2.70/1.20, camera €3; 11am-2pm & 5-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) showcases the carved and painted *pasos* that are paraded around town during the colourful processions.

Sleeping

Zamora has a decent spread of accommodation. Prices can almost double during *Semana Santa*.

Hostal Siglo XX (980 53 29 08; Plaza del Seminario 3; s/d with washbasin €22/32) Located in a secluded nook, **Hostal Siglo XX** has five bright, simple rooms that are great for those on a tight budget. The *hostal's* location is good, you're close to the main sights in Zamora on a quiet street.

Hostal La Reina (980 53 39 39; Calle de la Reina 1; s/d Oct-Jun €25/28, Jul-Sep €30/35) A slightly better deal, **Hostal La Reina** offers spacious rooms, some with balconies that overlook Plaza Mayor, making it one of the best budget choices in town. Prices rise over Easter.

Hotel Dos Infantas (980 50 98 98; www.hotel-dosinfantas.com; Calle Cortinas de San Miguel 3; s/d €50/75) This place is superb value: a real touch of class at upper midrange prices. The large rooms come with minibar, satellite TV and a warm welcome. The only drawback is that it's in a

largely new part of town, though it it's an easy walk to Zamora's monuments.

Parador Condes de Alba y Aliste (980 51 44 97; www.parador.es; Plaza Viriato 5; d €110-140) Set in a sumptuous 15th-century palace (previous 'guests' included Isabel and Fernando), this is modern luxury with myriad period touches and an impressive attention to detail. Unlike many other *paradores* around the country, it's right in the heart of town. A fantastic choice.

Eating & Drinking

Several café-restaurants line Plaza Mayor, so take your pick.

Mesón Juanito (980 51 19 59; Calle Diego de Losada 10; menú €6.60) If cheap, simple meals are your thing, this is a good choice in a green corner of Zamora. In Zamora terms, it's a long way from the centre; in reality, it's a pleasant 10-minute walk.

Las Aceñas (980 53 02 34; Calle de Aceñas de Píñilla s/n; menú €7.60; 11am-9pm) Just over Puente de Hierro, **Las Aceñas** has riverside views of Zamora, a filling *menú* and a devoted local following – it's more earthy than stylish but that's a big part of its charm.

Restaurante Paris (980 51 43 25; Avenida de Portugal 14; menú €12.40) This is one of Zamora's best restaurants and was once voted one of the best 1000 restaurants in Spain; that may not sound like much, but given the number of restaurants in this food-obsessed country... Local specialities (steaks, salads and roasted meats) rule and the price tag is less painful than you usually pay for this quality.

Plaza Mayor and the streets emanating from it are great places for cafés and bars. One particular street abuzz with evening *marcha* (action) is Calle de los Herreros. Elsewhere, **Señor Baco** (980 53 04 61; Calle Corral Pintado 5; 11am-late) is a café-bar with sophisticated surrounds.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Regular bus services operate to/from Salamanca (€3.85, one hour), León (€6.40, 1½ hours), Valladolid (€5.80, 1½ hours) and Madrid (€18.60, 2¾ hours) via Toro and Tordesillas.

TRAIN

Trains head to Valladolid (€7.15, 1½ hours, one daily), Madrid (€5, 3¾ hours, three daily), Ávila (€18.20, two hours, three daily) and Ourense (€23.40, two hours, two daily).

AROUND ZAMORA San Pedro de la Nave

This lonely 7th-century church, about 23km northwest of Zamora, is a rare and outstanding example of Visigothic church architecture, with blended Celtic, Germanic and Byzantine elements. Of special note are the intricately sculpted capitals. The church was moved to its present site in El Campillo during the construction of the Esla reservoir in 1930. To get there from Zamora, take the N122, then follow the signs to El Campillo.

Puebla de Sanabria

pop 1593

Nestled between the Sierra de la Culebra and Sierra de la Cabrera and close to the Portuguese border, this captivating little village is a tangle of medieval alleyways which unfold around a 15th-century castle and trickle down the hill. You can enter the castle at will and wander around the walls, while the view up towards town from the bridge is very pretty indeed.

The village is worth an overnight stop; the quiet cobblestone lanes feel like you've stepped back centuries. **Posada Real la Cartería** (980 62 03 12; www.lacarteria.com; Calle Rúa 16; d €70-105) is as enjoyable as the village itself, with delightful, large rooms with exposed stone walls and wooden beams, not to mention a gym, good restaurant and professional service.

There are sporadic bus services to Puebla de Sanabria from Zamora (from €5.55, 1¼ hours). If travelling by car, leave Zamora on the N630, then pick up the N631 at the Embalse de Ricobayo, which eventually merges with the N525.

PALENCIA

pop 81,439

Quiet, subdued Palencia boasts an immense Gothic *catedral*, the sober exterior of which belies the extraordinary riches that await within; it's widely known as 'La Bella Desconocida' (Unknown Beauty). Although much of the city is given over to modern apartment blocks, you'll find some pretty squares (particularly the Plaza Mayor and Plaza de la Inmaculada), a colonnaded main street (Calle Mayor) and a slew of other churches and several museums.

History

Known to the Romans as Pallantia and later an important Visigothic centre, Palencia was repeatedly destroyed in the early centuries

AD. King Sancho el Mayor de Navarra re-stored the town in 1035 and Palencia reached its zenith when King Alfonso VIII founded Spain's first university here in 1208. Decline set in rapidly after the 15th century.

Information

EMERGENCY & MEDICAL SERVICES

Emergency (980 112)

Hospital General Río Carrión (980 979 16 70 00;

Avenida Donantes de Sangre s/n) South of the city centre.

INTERNET ACCESS

Sala de Juegos (Plaza Mayor; per hr €0.90; 11am-10pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2.30pm & 5-9pm Sat & Sun)

POST

Post office (980 979 72 20 00; Plaza de León 4)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Municipal tourist office (980 979 74 99 74; Plaza de San Pablo; 11am-10.30am-2pm & 5-8.30pm) This is the best office for information about the city; it's open longer hours in the summer.

Patronato de Turismo (980 979 71 51 30; Calle Mayor 31; 11am-3pm & 5-8pm) Information about Palencia Province.

Regional tourist office (980 979 74 00 68; Calle Mayor 105; 9am-2pm & 5-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun) Everything you need to know about Castilla y León; it's open longer hours in summer.

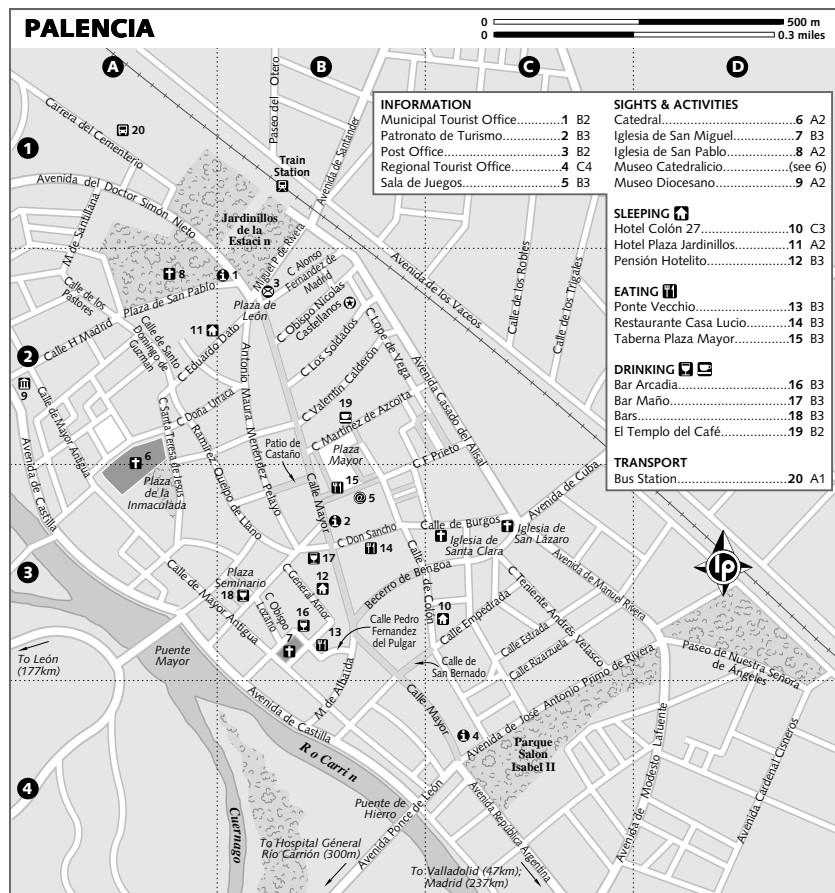
Sights

The **Puerta del Obispo** (Bishop's Door) is the highlight of the façade of the imposing *catedral* (11am-8.45am-1.30pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat, 9am-1pm Sun), which, at 130m long, 56m wide and 30m high, is one of the largest of the Castilian cathedrals.

The interior contains a treasure-trove of art. One of the most stunning chapels is the Capilla El Sagrario; the ceiling-high altarpiece tells the story of Christ in dozens of exquisitely carved and painted panels. The stone screen behind the choir stalls, or *trascoro*, is a masterpiece of bas-relief attributed to Gil de Siloé and is considered by many to be the most beautiful retrochoir in Spain.

From the retrochoir, a Plateresque stairwell leads down to the crypt, a remnant of the original, 7th-century Visigothic church and a later Romanesque replacement. Near the stairwell is the oak pulpit, with delicate carvings of the Evangelists by Juan de Ortiz.

In the attached **Museo Catedralicio** (guided tours €1.80; 11am-10.30am-1pm & 4-7pm) you'll see



some fine Flemish tapestries and a painting of San Sebastián by El Greco. A whimsical highlight is a trick painting by 16th-century German artist Lucas Cranach the Elder. Looking straight on, it seems to be a surreal dream-cape that predates Dalí by some 400 years. Only when viewed from the side is the true image revealed – a portrait of Emperor Carlos V. Tours last 45 minutes and the museum is open longer hours in summer.

Iglesia de San Miguel (Calle de Mayor Antigua; h 9.30am-1.30pm & 6-7.30pm) stands out for its tall Gothic tower with a castlelike turret. San Miguel's interior is unadorned and austere but beautiful, a welcome antidote to the extravagant interiors of other Castilian churches. According to legend, El Cid (see the boxed

text, p225) was betrothed to his Doña Jimena here.

Of the numerous other churches around town, it's worth seeking out the **Iglesia de San Pablo** (Plaza de San Pablo; h 7.30am-12.30pm & 6.30-8.15pm) with its Renaissance façade and an enormous Plateresque altarpiece in the main chapel.

Of note too is the **Museo Diocesano** (979 70 69 13; Calle de Mayor Antigua; guided tour €3; h 10.30am & 11.30am Mon-Sat) which is a gem. Its rooms showcase art from the Middle Ages through to the Renaissance. Pride of place goes to works by Pedro Berrugete and an altarpiece starring the Virgin (attributed to Diego de Siloé).

Sleeping

Pensión Hotelito (979 74 69 13; hotelito@yahoo.com; Calle del General Amor 5; s/d with shared bathroom €18/28, d with private bathroom €32.50) The best of Palencia's budget digs, this *pensión* (small, private hotel) is tidy, friendly and quiet, despite being quite central.

Hotel Plaza Jardiniillos (979 75 00 22; Calle de Eduardo Dato 2; s/d €27/30) You don't find value for money like this very often. Some of the rooms come with splashes of colour, most are spacious (including the singles) and the overall sense is of a midrange hotel at budget prices.

Hotel Colón 27 (979 74 07 00; www.hotelcolon27.com; Calle de Colón 27; s/d €29/41) This place is excellent value with bright, spacious and attractive rooms with good bathrooms and TV.

Eating & Drinking

Ponte Vecchio (979 74 52 15; Calle de Doctrinus 1; starters €4-8, pasta & pizza €6-9; h lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) If you're craving a well-cooked pasta in classy surrounds, Ponte Vecchio is Palencia's best Italian restaurant. If you order fish or steak, your bill will double.

Taberna Plaza Mayor (979 74 04 10; Plaza Mayor 8; mains €12) If you can grab an outdoor table in the Plaza Mayor on a summer's evening, you've snaffled one of Palencia's best places to eat and pass the time. Dishes range from sardines stuffed with cured ham to steaks, while the tapas inside at the bar are also good.

Restaurante Casa Lucio (979 74 81 90; Calle de Don Sancho 2; mains €12-16; h 1.30-11.30pm) That great Spanish tradition of a packed bar laden with tapas yielding to a quieter, more elegant restaurant is alive and well at this terrific, central bar-restaurant. Sidle up to the bar for a creative tapa or consider the Castilian speciality of *cordero asado* (€38 for two).

El Templo del Café (979 10 71 21; Calle de Martínez de Azcoitia; h 7.30am-11pm Sun-Thu, 7.30am-1am Fri & Sat) This African-style café is not the sort of place you expect to find in a provincial Castilian town, but it's popular for its world-blend of coffees and African handicrafts for sale on the walls. It also does *chocolate con churros* (€2.70).

Bar Maño (Calle del General Franco 5; h 8am-11pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3am Sat, 10am-11pm Sun) This casual, hip bar is alive with a convivial buzz at all hours of the day and the hip magenta walls with hints of semi-industrial décor give it a classier edge than most Palencia bars.

Drinking is taken seriously by the late-night crowd who frequent the handful of bars that

encircle the tiny Plaza Seminario; drinks are cheap and the décor is the sort that you drink to forget. **Bar Arcadia** (Plaza San Miguel) is similar, but a cooler place to hang out.

Getting There & Away BUS

From the bus station (979 74 32 22; Carrera del Cementerio), there are regular services to Valladolid (€2.85, 45 minutes), Madrid (€13.80, 3¼ hours, seven daily), Aguilar de Campoo (€4.45, 1½ hours, four daily), Frómista (€2.25, 30 minutes, two daily) and Paredes de Nava (€1.35, 25 minutes, five daily).

TRAIN

Trains are usually a good bet, with regular departures from Palencia's busy little train station (979 74 30 19) throughout the day to Madrid (around €17, 3¼ hours), Burgos (from €4.10, one hour), León (from €6.60, 1¼ hours) and Valladolid (€2.95, 45 minutes).

AROUND PALENCIA Baños de Cerrato

Close to the singularly unattractive rail junction of Venta de Baños lies Spain's oldest church, the 7th-century **Basílica de San Juan** (admission €1, Wed free; h 10.30am-1pm & 4-6pm Tue-Sun) in Baños de Cerrato. Built by the Visigoths and modified many times since, its stone-and-terracotta façade exudes a pleasing, austere simplicity and a 14th-century alabaster statue of St John the Baptist. To get there, take a train from Palencia to Venta de Baños, then walk the final 2km.

Paredes de Nava

The eminent 16th-century sculptor Alonso de Berrugete was born in Paredes in 1488. Sadly, most of Paredes' churches are in great disrepair, save for the eclectic, 13th-century **Iglesia de Santa Eulalia** (979 83 04 69; Plaza Mayor; admission €2; h 10.30am-1.30pm & 4.30-7.30pm) with its pretty steeple with many arched windows. Its museum contains some important artworks, including several pieces by Berrugete.

Several trains travel daily to Palencia (€2.05, 15 minutes), and a couple of buses (€1.35) also ply the route.

Frómista

The main (and some would say only) reason for stopping here is the exceptional Romanesque **Iglesia de San Martín** (h 10am-2pm &

4.30-8pm Mar-Nov, 10am-2pm & 3.30-6.30pm Dec-Feb), one of those gems that seem to rise up from the plains of Castilla in the most unlikely villages. Harking back to 1066 and restored in the early 20th century, the squat façade of this harmoniously proportioned church is adorned with a veritable menagerie of human and zoomorphic figures, while the capitals inside are also richly decorated.

If you get stuck here overnight, **Pensión Marisa** (☎ 979 81 00 23; Plaza Obispo Almaraz 2; s/d €15/24) has spotless, bright rooms and great home cooking, while **Hotel San Martín** (☎ /fax 979 81 00 00; Plaza San Martín 7; s/d €32/42) promises a little more comfort.

There are two buses daily from Palencia (€2.20, 30 minutes).

MONTAÑA PALENTINA

These hills in the far north of Castilla y León offer a beautiful preview to the Cordillera Cantábrica, which divides Castilla from Spain's northern Atlantic regions.

Aguilar de Campóo

Aguilar de Campóo is not Castilla y León's loveliest town, but it does boast a medieval castle, and the town is a good base for exploring the region; there are no fewer than 55 Romanesque churches in the cool, hilly countryside.

The **tourist office** (Plaza de España 30; h 10am-1.45pm & 4-5.45pm Tue-Sat, 10am-1.45pm Sun) is on the elongated Plaza de España, capped at its eastern end by the **Colegiata de San Miguel**, a 14th-century Gothic church with a fine Romanesque entrance.

Downhill from the castle is the graceful Romanesque **Ermida de Santa Cecilia**. Just outside town on the highway to Cervera de Pisuerga is the restored **Monasterio de Santa María la Real** of Romanesque origin. Its 13th-century Gothic cloister with delicate capitals is a masterpiece.

There's plenty of accommodation around town and the square is swarming with cafés, bars and a couple of restaurants. The sprawling **Hotel Valentin** (☎ 979 12 21 25; www.hotelvalentin.com; Avenida Ronda 23; s/d Oct-Jun €33/48, Jul-Sep & Easter €42/55) is central and easily the best choice around town with large rooms.

Regular trains link Aguilar de Campóo with Palencia (€4.95, 1¼ hours), but the station is 4km from town. Buses bound for Burgos, Palencia and Santander depart at least once daily.

Romanesque Circuit

The area around Aguilar is studded with little villages and churches. At Olleros de Pisuerga there's a little church carved into rock, while further south, on a quiet back road, the Benedictine **Monasterio de Santa María de Mave** has an interesting 13th-century Romanesque church. The **Monasterio de San Andrés de Arroyo** (guided tours €1.50; h tours hourly 10am-1pm & 4-6pm) is an outstanding Romanesque gem, especially its cloister, which dates from the 13th century.

The C627 highway heading to Cervera de Pisuerga is lined with still more little churches dating from as far back as the 12th century. Cervera de Pisuerga itself is dominated by an imposing late-Gothic church, the **Iglesia de Santa María del Castillo**.

The N621 north from Cervera is a lovely road into Cantabria and to the southern face of the Picos de Europa.

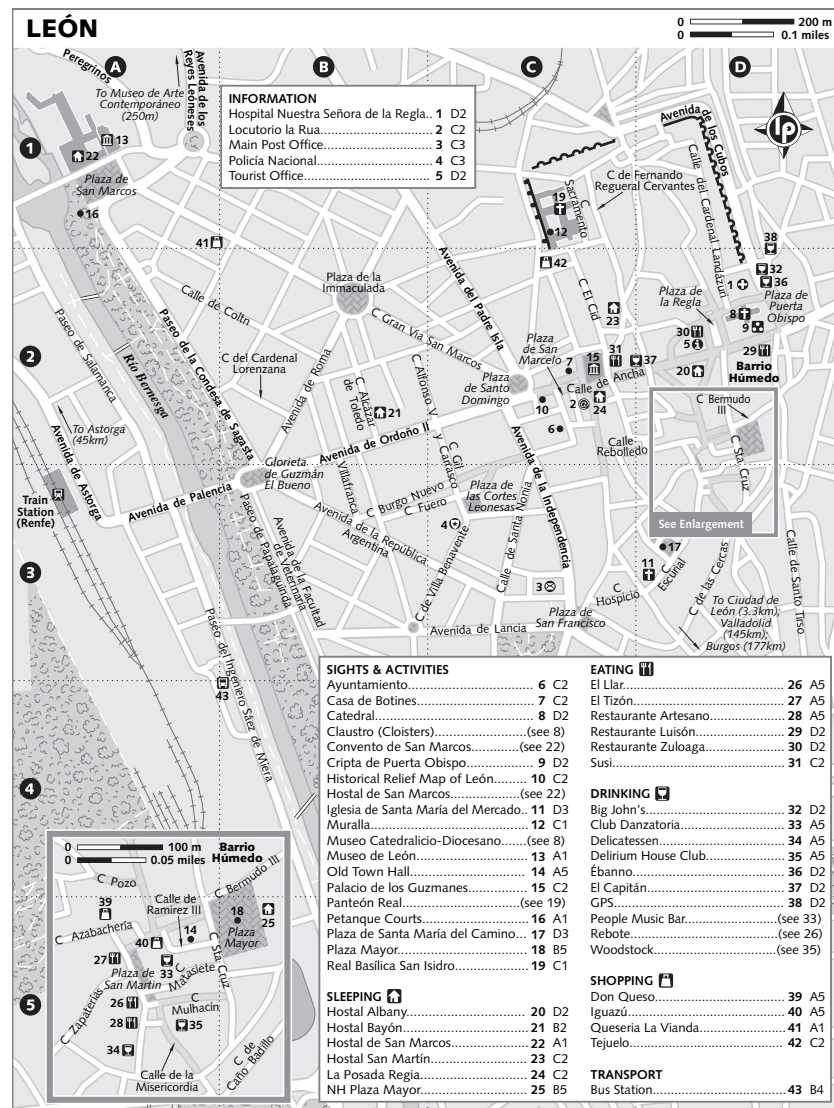
THE NORTHWEST

Once the centre of Christian Spain, León now stands like a sentinel at the rim of the great Castilian heartland. The last major city on the Camino de Santiago before it climbs west into the sierras that separate Castilla from Galicia, León has an extraordinary cathedral and its hinterland is full of interesting diversions and gems such as Astorga.

LEÓN

pop 136,414 / elevation 527m

León's astonishing cathedral is one of the finest in Spain, but, spectacular as it is, the cathedral is merely your entry point to a very charming city. By day you will encounter the León with its roots firmly planted in the soil of northern Castilla: a rich concentration of austere beautiful architecture, a loyal Catholic heritage that has made the city one of the premier attractions along the Camino de Santiago and a conservative and often inward-looking populace that is fiercely proud of its independent past. By night, León is taken over by the city's large student population, who provide it with a deep-into-the-night soundtrack of revelry that floods the narrow streets and enchanting plazas of the city's picturesque old quarter, the **Barrio Húmedo**. It is a fascinating and intoxicating mix.



History

A Roman legion set up camp here in AD 70 as a base controlling the gold mines of Las Médulas (p221). In the 10th century the Asturian king Ordoño II moved his capital here from Oviedo and, although it was later sacked by the Muslim armies of Al-Mansour, León was maintained by Alfonso V as the capital

of his growing kingdom. As the centre of power shifted south, León went into decline until mining brought the city back to life in the 1800s.

To get an idea of how León has grown, look for the historical relief map of the city in Plaza de San Marcelo showing the city in the 1st, 10th and 20th centuries.

Orientation

The train and bus stations lie on the western bank of Río Bernesga, while the heart of the city is on the eastern side. From the river to the *catedral* it's about 1km. The old town, the Barrio Humedo, lies immediately south of the *catedral*.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Iguazú (☎ 987 20 80 66; Calle de Plegarias 7; 10am-2pm & 5-8.30pm Mon-Fri, 10.30am-2.30pm Sat) This fine little travel bookshop sells a good range of maps and guides to the local area and beyond.

EMERGENCY

Emergency (☎ 112)

Policía Nacional (☎ 091, 987 20 73 12; Calle de Villa de Benavente 6)

INTERNET ACCESS

Locutorio la Rúa (☎ 987 23 01 06; Calle de la Rúa 8; per hr €2; 1 9.30am-2.30pm & 4-10.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm & 5-9.30pm Sat)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital Nuestra Señora de la Regla (☎ 987 23 69 00; Calle del Cardenal Landáuzuri 2)

MONEY

Banks with ATMs and exchange services are concentrated along Avenida de Ordoño II.

POST

Main post office (☎ 987 87 60 81; Avenida de la Independencia)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (☎ 987 23 70 82; Plaza de la Regla; 1 9am-2pm & 5-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Sat & Sun) Opposite the *catedral* and extremely helpful, it also organises guided city tours (€8; twice daily July to September, and twice each Saturday and Sunday March to June and October). Night tours (€4.50; Friday and Saturday July and September, nightly in August) also run in summer.

Sights

CATEDRAL

León's 13th-century *catedral* (☎ 987 87 57 70; www.catedraldeleon.org; 1 8.30am-1.30pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-2.30pm & 5-7pm Sun Oct-Jun, 8.30am-1.30pm & 4-8pm Mon-Sat, 8.30am-2.30pm & 5-8pm Sun Jul-Sep), with its soaring towers, flying buttresses and truly breathtaking interior, is the city's spiritual heart. Whether spot-lit by night or bathed in

the glorious northern sunshine, the *catedral*, arguably Spain's premier Gothic masterpiece, exudes a glorious, almost luminous quality.

The extraordinary façade has a radiant rose window, three richly sculpted doorways and two muscular towers. After going through the main entrance, lorded over by the scene of the Last Supper, an extraordinary gallery of stained-glass windows awaits. French in inspiration and mostly executed from the 13th to the 16th centuries, the *vidrieras* (stained-glass windows) evoke an atmosphere unlike any other cathedral in Spain; the kaleidoscope of coloured light is offset by the otherwise gloomy interior. There seems to be more glass than brick – 128 windows with a surface of 1800 sq metres in all – but mere numbers cannot convey the ethereal quality of light permeating this *catedral*.

Other treasures include a silver urn on the altar, by Enrique de Arfe, containing the remains of San Froilán, León's patron saint. Also note the magnificent choir stalls and the rich chapels in the ambulatory behind the altar, especially the one containing the tomb of Ordoño II.

The peaceful, light-filled *claustró* (cloister; admission €1), with its 15th-century frescoes, is a perfect complement to the main sanctuary and an essential part of the cathedral experience. The **Museo Catedralicio-Diocesano** (admission incl *claustró* €3.50; 1 9.30am-1.30pm & 4-7pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1.30pm Sat Oct-Jun, 9.30am-2pm & 4-7.30pm Mon-Fri, to 7pm Sat Jul-Sep), which is entered via the cloisters, has a quality collection encompassing works by Juní and Gaspar Becerra alongside a precious assemblage of early Romanesque carved statues of the Virgin Mary. That said, most visitors without a specialist interest find the cathedral and cloisters more than enough to savour.

To add depth and context to your visit, consider the **guided tours** (€4.50) which leave from the door of the tourist office and take in the sanctuary and cloisters. They set out twice daily (usually midday and 4pm) and guides sometimes speak English.

CRIPTA DE PUERTA OBISPO

Beneath the footpath below the southern wall of the *catedral* is the **Cripta de Puerta Obispo** (admission free), the foundations from the northern gate of the Roman camp where León was founded. The future of the site was unclear at the time of writing – it recently opened to the public but only on a temporary basis.

REAL BASÍLICA DE SAN ISIDORO

Older even than the *catedral*, the Real Basílica de San Isidro provides a seminal Romanesque counterpoint to the former's Gothic strains. Fernando I and Doña Sancha founded the church in 1063 to house the remains not just of the saint, but also of themselves and 21 other early Leonese and Castilian monarchs. Sadly, Napoleon's troops sacked San Isidoro in the early 19th century, leaving behind just a handful of sarcophagi, although there's still plenty to catch the eye.

The main basilica is a hotchpotch of styles, but the two main portals on the southern façade are pure Romanesque. Of particular note is the **Puerta del Perdón** (on the right), which has been attributed to Maestro Mateo, the genius of the *catedral* at Santiago de Compostela. The church remains open night and day by historical royal edict.

The attached **Panteón Real** (☎ 987 87 61 61; admission €3, Thu afternoon free; 1 10am-1.30pm & 4-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-1.30pm Sun Sep-Jun, 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun Jul & Aug) houses the remaining sarcophagi, which rest with quiet dignity beneath a canopy of some of the finest Romanesque frescoes in Spain. Motif after colourful motif drenches the vaults and arches of this extraordinary hall, held aloft by marble columns with intricately carved capitals. Biblical scenes dominate and include the Annunciation, King Herod's slaughter of the innocents, the Last Supper and a striking representation of Christ Pantocrator. The agricultural calendar on one of the arches is equally superb.

The pantheon, which once formed the portico of the original church, is now a small museum where you can admire the shrine of San Isidoro, a mummified finger of the saint and other treasures. A library houses a priceless collection of manuscripts.

Abutting the southwestern corner of the basilica is a fragment of the former *muralla* (old city walls), a polyglot of Roman origins and medieval adjustments.

HOSTAL DE SAN MARCOS

More than 100m long and blessed with a glorious façade, the **Convento de San Marcos** has more the appearance of a palace than the pilgrim's hospital it was from 1173. The Plateresque exterior, sectioned off by slender columns and decorated with delicate medallions and friezes, dates to 1513, by which time the edifice had become a monastery of the Knights of Santiago.

Much of the former convent is now a supremely elegant *parador* (p216). Although you need to stay here to appreciate its full splendour, the former chapterhouse, with its splendid *artesonado*, and the exquisite cloister are both open to the public. The cloister is technically part of the **Museo de León** (☎ 987 24 50 61; adult/student €1.25/free, Thu free; 1 10am-2pm & 3-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun), accessible through the church at the eastern end of the convent and given over mostly to archaeology.

If you're here on a weekend, head to the riverbank, next to the Puerta de San Marcos, where you may find old men with balls of steel playing *pétanque* as well as some peculiarly Spanish pursuits.

MUSEO DE ARTE CONTEMPORÁNEO

León's showpiece **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo** (Musac; ☎ 987 09 00 00; www.musac.org.es; Avenida de los Reyes Leoneses 24; admission free; 1 10am-3pm & 4-9pm Tue-Sun) is part of the new wave of innovation sweeping Spanish architecture. The building is a work of art and, for many, may appeal more than the works it contains. A pleasing square-and-rhombus edifice of colourful glass and steel, the museum won the Spanish architecture prize in 2003 and has been acclaimed for the 37 shades of coloured glass which adorn the façade; they were gleaned from the pixelisation of a fragment of one of the stained-glass windows in León's cathedral. Although the museum has a growing permanent collection, it mostly houses temporary displays of cutting-edge Spanish and international photography, video installations and other similar forms. Musac also hosts musical performances and is fast becoming one of northern Spain's most dynamic cultural spaces.

BARRIO HUMEDO

On the fringes of León's old town (also known as the Barrio Gótico), Plaza de Santo Domingo is home to the **ayuntamiento** which occupies a charming Renaissance-era palace; the Renaissance theme continues in the form of the splendid **Palacio de los Guzmanes** (1560), where the façade and patio stand out. Next door is Antoni Gaudí's contribution to León's skyline, the castlelike neo-Gothic **Casa de Botines** (1893); the zany architect of Barcelona fame seems to have been subdued by more sober León.

Down the hill, the **Plaza de Santa María del Camino** (also known as Plaza del Grano) feels

like a cobblestone Castilian village square and is overlooked by the Romanesque Iglesia de Santa María del Mercado.

At the northeastern end of the old town is the beautiful and time-worn 17th-century Plaza Mayor. Sealed off on three sides by porticoes, this sleepy plaza is home to a bustling fruit and vegetable market on Wednesday and Saturday. On the west side of the square is the superb late-17th-century baroque old town hall.

Festivals & Events

León is famous for its solemn *Semana Santa* processions of hooded devotees, while the city really lets its hair down from 21 to 30 June for the Fiestas de San Juan y San Pedro.

Sleeping

Hostal Bayón (☎ 987 23 14 46; Calle del Alcázar de Toledo 6; s/d with washbasin €15/25, with shower €25/35) At Hostal Bayón, the laid-back and friendly young owner watches over cheerful, brightly painted rooms with pine floors. How good the location is depends on your perspective – you're surrounded by modern León, but just a five-minute walk from the old town (and its noise).

Hostal San Martín (☎ 987 87 51 87; www.sanmartin-hostales.com; 2nd fl, Plaza Torres de Omaña 1; s with shared bathroom €19, s/d/tr with private bathroom €27/39/51) This engaging little place in a splendid, recently overhauled 18th-century building is an outstanding choice with light, airy and modern rooms (most with balcony). The owners are friendly, the location central but quiet and the rooms and bathrooms immaculate. Breakfast is €2.

Hostal Albany (☎ 987 26 46 00; www.albanyleon.com; Calle de la Paloma 13; s/d/tr €35/50/80) The sort of place you'd expect to find in Barcelona or Madrid, Hostal Albany is a high-class *hostal* with a hints of minimalism. Clean lines, plasma TVs, great bathrooms and cheerful colour schemes abound and a few rooms have partial cathedral views; those facing onto the interior patio are quieter.

NH Plaza Mayor (☎ 987 34 43 57; www.nh-hotels.es; Plaza Mayor 15; d Sun–Thu €75, Fri & Sat €90) Part of the stylish NH chain which has a knack of finding a great location in need of tender loving care, the NH Plaza Mayor has the perfect combination of comfort, muted colour schemes, great service and an intimate ambience. Best of all, 19 rooms overlook the plaza.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

La Posada Regia (☎ 987 21 31 73; www.regialeon.com; Calle de Regidores 9-11; s/d from €55/90) You won't find many places better than this anywhere in northern Spain. We know that's a grand claim, but if you found a 14th-century building, magnificently restored (wooden beams, exposed brick and understated antique furniture), with individually styled rooms, character which overflows into the public areas and supremely comfortable beds and bathrooms, how would you describe it?

Hostal de San Marcos (☎ 987 23 73 00; www.parador.es; Plaza de San Marcos 7; r Nov–Feb €120, Mar–Oct €175) León's sumptuous *parador* (see p215) is one of the finest hotels in Spain. With palatial rooms fit for royalty and filled with old-world charm, this is one of the excellent *Parador* chain's flagship properties.

Eating

Restaurante Luisón (☎ 987 25 40 29; Plaza Puerta Obispo 16; mains €5-9, menú €7.80) This place could only happen in Spain – basic surrounds, offhand waiters and terrific, hearty food that keeps the locals fortified during cold winters. You'll often need to book ahead, especially at lunchtime when locals can't get enough of the local *botillo berciano*, a succulent pork dish, or *cocido leónés* (León-style chickpea stew).

Susi (☎ 987 27 39 96; Calle de López Castrillón 1; mains €15, menú €11; r lunch & dinner Tue–Sat, lunch Sun & Mon) Intimate dining and creative cooking make for a fine evening at this stylish new temple to good taste. The service is cool and attentive, the wine list is long, and the menu has some dishes that will live in the memory – *solomillo relleno con foie and datiles* (steak filled with foie gras and dates) is one that stands out.

El Tizón (☎ 987 25 60 49; Plaza de San Martín 1; menú from €11.80; r lunch & dinner Fri–Wed) The tapas are good here, but the small sit-down restaurant, with an abundant set lunch, is even better. House specialities include *embutidos* and the delicious *gambas envueltas a la crema* (prawns wrapped in bacon with a cream sauce). It also has an extensive wine list.

Restaurante Zuloaga (☎ 987 23 78 14; Sierra Pambley 3; meals €25, menú €12) This fabulous place in the vaults of an early-20th-century palace has a

well-stocked cellar and classy menu. The walls feature original mosaics by the artist Ignacio Zuloaga.

Restaurante Artesano (☎ 987 21 53 22; www.palaciojabalquinto.com; Calle de Juan de Arfe, 2; mains from €13.20, menú €17) One of the classier places to eat in León, Restaurante Artesano combines creative food, modern art and the renovated 17th-century Palacio Jabalquinto. It's the ideal spot for a special occasion, and the choices of what to order are many and varied, from *embutidos to brocheta de pato con frutos y frutos secos con manzana glaseada* (duck brochette with fruits, nuts and glazed apple).

El Llar (☎ 987 25 42 87; Plaza de San Martín 9; mains from €12) This old León *taberna* (bar) is a great place to *tapear* (eat tapas) or dine upstairs in the sit-down restaurant. Either way, you'll come across an abundance of local wines, cheeses, cured meats and other specialities of the region. For a typical León taste, order the *tabla de embutido* (plate of cured meats).

Drinking

The Barrio Humedo's night-time epicentre is the Plaza de San Martín, where popular bars abound – the crowds will tell you where the buzz is. For example, a good night could begin at **Rebote** (Plaza de San Martín 9), then move on to funky **Delicatessen** (Calle de Juan de Arfe 10). Just around the corner and down the hill is the **Delirium House Club** (Calle de la Misericordia 9; r 11pm–5am Thu–Sat) where the name says it all, or **Woodstock** (Calle de la Misericordia 9; r 11pm–5am Thu–Sat) where it's all about peace and love. If slick and stylish and moody lighting is your thing, head up to **Club Danzatoria** (Calle de Ramírez III 9) or **People Music Bar** (Calle de Ramírez III 9) where things get started after midnight and don't stop until many hours later.

Tucked away behind the cathedral to the east, there are three bars that together provide the pulse for a whole new centre of activity. **Big John's** (Avenida de los Cubos 4; r 7pm–2am), is a jazz hang-out with live jazz at 10.30pm from November to January; at other times you're just as likely to hear REM. **GPS** (Avenida de los Cubos 8-10; r 10am–3am) has funky lighting, wi-fi for those inclined to lug their laptops to the bar, live comedy acts on Thursday at 10.30pm and a dress code that's more formidable on paper than it is in practice. **Ébano** (Avenida de los Cubos 2; r 4pm–late) has a similar vibe.

A great place day or night for a drink is the hip **El Capitán** (Calle de Ancha 8; r noon–late) with red

velvet curtains, candlelight, mirrors and an ambience somewhere between boudoir and retro. **El Capitán** is perfect for an intimate conversation.

Shopping

Don Queso (Calle Azabachería 20; r 10am–2pm & 5.30–8pm Mon–Fri, 9.30am–2.30pm Sat) Cheese lovers will want to make a stop here; you'll find every imaginable variety.

Queseria La Vianda (☎ 987 24 03 70; Gran Vía de San Marcos 45; r 10am–3pm & 6–9pm Mon–Fri, 10am–3pm Sat) If you've acquired a taste for the local produce, this small shop overflows with *productos artesanales* (homemade products) from chestnuts in cinnamon or trout cake to *nicanores* (a local sweet pastry).

Tejuelo (☎ 987 23 88 22; Calle de Ruiz de Salazar 18; r 10.30am–2pm & 5–8pm Fri & Sat, 11am–2pm Sat) Hand-made paper products, fountain pens, leather-bound books and a small but rich range of homemade, classically upmarket stationery make this place stand out.

Getting There & Away

BUS

ALSA (☎ 902 42 22 42) has buses which leave from the bus station on Paseo del Ingeniero Sáez de Miera to Madrid (€19.90, 3½ hours, 12 daily), Burgos (€12.50, 3¼ hours, four daily), Astorga (€3, 45 minutes, 16 daily), Ponferrada (€7.35, two hours, 12 daily), Oviedo (€7.85, 1½ hours, nine daily) and Valladolid (€8, two hours, eight daily).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The N630 heads north to Oviedo, though the AP66 *autopista* that runs parallel to the west is faster (the two roads merge at Campomanes). The N630 also continues south to Seville via Salamanca. The N120 goes west to Galicia via Astorga, where it merges with the A6. If you avoid the Barrio Humedo, parking stations (€8.50 to €12, 12 hours) abound in the streets surrounding Plaza de Santo Domingo.

TRAIN

Trains travel to Astorga (€2.95, 40 minutes, four daily), Valladolid (€8.90, two hours, 10 daily), Burgos (from €17.20, two hours, four daily), Oviedo (from €6.60, two hours, seven daily), Madrid (from €20.75, 4¼ hours, seven daily) and Barcelona (from €43.80, 10 hours, two daily).

EAST OF LEÓN

Iglesia de San Miguel de Escalada

Rising up from Castilla's northern plains, this beautifully simple treasure was built in the 9th century by refugee monks from Córdoba on the remains of a Visigothic church dedicated to the Archangel Michael. Although little trace of the latter remains, the church (h 10am-2pm & 4.30-8pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun May-Oct, 10am-2pm & 4-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Nov-Feb) is notable for its Islamic-inspired horseshoe arch, the like of which is rarely seen so far north in Spain. The graceful exterior porch with its portico is balanced by the impressive marble columns within; the entrance dates from the 11th century.

To get there, take the N601 southeast of León. After about 14km, take the small LE213 to the east; the church is 16km after the turn-off.

Sahagún

pop 2937 / elevation 807m

An unremarkable place today, Sahagún was once home to one of Spain's more powerful abbeys. Today the abbey is a crumbling ruin, evocative in an abandoned kind of way although its more important remnants are kept in a small museum run by Benedictine nuns. More often than not the place is closed and there's not a nun to be seen.

Next to the former abbey is the early 12th-century **Iglesia de San Tirso** (h 10.30am-1.30pm & 4-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-3pm Sun), an important stop on the Camino de Santiago and known for its pure Romanesque design and Mudéjar bell-tower laced with rounded arches. The **Iglesia San Lorenzo**, just north of Plaza Mayor, has a similar belltower but is open only for Sunday Mass.

Low on charm but high on comfort, the modern **Hotel Puerta de Sahagún** (% 987 78 18 80; www.hotelpuertadesahagun.com; Calle de Burgos; s €38-45, d €60) seems a bit out of place in provincial Sahagún, but it's spick, span and a haven from dusty Camino trails.

Trains run regularly throughout the day from León (€4.10, 40 minutes) and Palencia (€4.10, 35 minutes).

WEST OF LEÓN

Astorga

pop 12,275 / elevation 870m

Perched on a hilltop on the frontier between the bleak plains of northern Castilla and the mountains that rise up to the east towards Galicia, Astorga is a fascinating little town

with a wealth of attractions far out of proportion to its size. In addition to its fine cathedral, the city boasts a Gaudí-designed palace, a smattering of Roman ruins and a personality dominated by the Camino de Santiago which passes through town.

HISTORY

The Romans built the first settlement, **Astúrica Augusta**, here at the head of the Ruta del Oro. During the Middle Ages, the trade in precious metals began to decline, although by this time Astorga was well-established as a waystation along one of Europe's most important pilgrimage routes. By the 15th century, Astorga had become wealthy and important, which inspired the construction of the *catedral* and the rebuilding of its 3rd-century walls which still encircle the city.

Astorga is the capital of a district known as the Maragateria. Many claim the *maragatos*, who, with their mule trains, dedicated themselves almost exclusively to the carrying trade, were descendants of the first Berbers to enter Spain in the Muslim armies of the 8th century. Other theories argue that Celtic and Phoenician tribes were their long-time ancestors.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Astorga's old centre is small and easily navigated. The *catedral* and **Palacio Episcopal** huddle together in the northwestern corner of the old town, along with the **tourist office** (% 987 61 82 22; turismo@ayuntamientodeastorga.com; h 10am-2pm & 4-8pm May-Oct, 10.30am-1.30pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat Nov-Apr). For internet, head to **Inter@stor** (% 987 618 632; cnr Calles de Puerta Obispo & de Escultor Amaya; per hr €2; h 10am-2.30pm & 4-10pm Mon-Sat).

SIGHTS

Catedral

The most striking element of Astorga's *catedral* (% 987 61 58 20; h 9.30am-noon & 4.30-6pm Oct-Mar, 9am-noon & 5-6.30pm Apr-Sep) is its Plateresque southern façade, made from caramel-coloured sandstone and dripping in sculptural detail. Work began in 1471 on the site of its Romanesque predecessor, and proceeded in stop-start fashion over three centuries, resulting in a mix of styles. The interior has soaring ceilings and is mainly Gothic, with the 16th-century altar-piece by Gaspar Becerra monopolising your gaze among the many gilt-edged flourishes. The attached **Museo Catedralicio** (admission €2.50, combined ticket with Museo de los Caminos €4; h 10am-



2pm & 4-8pm Apr-Sep, 11am-2pm & 3.30-6.30pm Oct-Mar) features the usual religious art, documents and artefacts.

Palacio Episcopal (Museo de los Caminos)

The Catalan architect, Antoni Gaudí left his mark on Astorga in the fairy-tale turrets, frilly façade and surprising details of the **Palacio Episcopal**. Built for the local bishop from the end of the 19th century, it now houses the **Museo de los Caminos** (% 987 61 82 22; admission €2.50, combined ticket with Museo Catedralicio €4; h 10am-2pm & 4-8pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Apr-Sep, 11am-2pm & 4-6pm Tue-Sat, 11am-2pm Sun Oct-Mar). It's an eclectic collection with Roman artefacts and coins in the basement; contemporary paintings on the top floor; and medieval sculpture, Gothic tombs and silver crosses dominating the ground and 1st floors. The highlight (apart from the playful Gaudiesque interior) is the chapel with its stunning murals, tilework and stained glass.

Museo del Chocolate

Proof that Astorga does not exist solely for the virtuous souls of the Camino comes in the

form of this small and quirky private museum (% 987 61 62 20; Calle de José María Goy 5; admission €2, combined ticket with Museo Romano €3; h 10.30am-2pm & 4.30-7pm Tue-Sat, 11am-2pm Sun). Chocolate ruled Astorga's local economy in the 18th and 19th centuries, as evidenced by this eclectic collection of old machinery, colourful advertising and fascinating lithographs. It offers a refreshing, indulgent and, some would say, sinful break from Castilla's religious-art circuit. Best of all, you get a free chocolate sample at the end. There's also a shop where the *chocolate artesano* (homemade chocolate) is divine and the wrappers are works of art.

Ruta Romana

Housed in the Roman *ergastula* (slave prison), the **Museo Romano** (% 987 61 69 37; Plaza de San Bartolomé 2; admission €2.50; h 10am-1.30pm & 4.30-7pm Tue-Sat, 10.30am-1.30pm Sun Jul-Sep, 10.30am-1.30pm & 4-6pm Tue-Sat, 10.30am-1.30pm Sun Oct-Jun) has a modest selection of artefacts and an enjoyable big-screen slide show on Roman Astorga.

Ask at the tourist office about the Ruta Romana Spanish-language guided tours (€3.09, noon and 5pm Easter to October) which seek

out the other Roman ruins dotted around town. Among these are the town walls, thermal baths, sewers and Las Domus del Mosaico; the latter is a Roman floor plan with a few mosaics just 50m southeast of the museum. The tours last for 1½ hours and leave from the tourist office, although the departure times vary.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

During the last week of August, Astorga awakes from its customary slumber to celebrate the **Festividad de Santa Marta** with fireworks and bullfights.

SLEEPING

Pensión La Peseta (☎ 987 61 72 75; www.restaurantelapeseta.com; Plaza de San Bartolomé 3; d Jun-Aug & Easter €48.15, Sep-May €52.45) Although a touch overpriced (the rooms are fine if a little uninspiring), the owners are super-friendly and keen to make your stay comfortable. They readily admit that the attached restaurant (below) is their passion, so spend more time there than in your room.

Hotel Gaudi (☎ 987 61 56 54; www.hotelgaudiastorga.com; Calle de Eduardo de Castro 6; s/d Jun-Aug & Easter €50/66, Sep-May €48/60) There aren't many places in the world where you can see a Gaudi flight of fancy from your bed – ask for a street-facing room. The large carpeted rooms are otherwise pretty good although the décor could do with a fresh look.

Hotel Astur Plaza (☎ 987 61 89 00; www.asturplaza.com; Plaza de España 2; s/d/ste €60/83/94; ☐) This modern hotel is comfortable and while you may lament the lack of character in the rooms, if you have one facing the pretty Plaza de España, you'll leave more than happy. It's worth asking if it has any special offers. Parking costs €6 and buffet breakfast is €5.70

EATING

The local speciality is *cocido maragato*, a stew of chickpeas, various meats, potatoes and cabbage. Unlike elsewhere, *astorgan* tradition dictates that you first eat the meat, then the vegetables before finishing up with the broth. Portions are huge, so one order usually feeds two.

La Peseta (☎ 987 61 72 75; www.restaurantelapeseta.com; Plaza de San Bartolomé 3; mains from €9, menú €10.80; ☐ lunch & dinner) Famous for its *cocido* (€16.05), the excellent La Peseta also has other local specialities, including *morcilla* (blood sausage) and *alúbias* (small white beans). Service is

friendly and obliging and, unusually, their cut-price *menús* also run at night. They sometimes offer cheaper *menús* for pilgrims.

Restaurante Las Termas (☎ 987 60 22 12; Calle de Santiago 1; mains from €9, menú €9) Renowned for the quality of its *cocido* (€16.50), Las Termas also does a great *ensalada maragata* (salad of chickpeas and cod).

Restaurante Serrano (☎ 987 61 78 66; Calle de la Portería 2; menú from €16; ☐ Tue-Sun) The upmarket **Restaurante Serrano** is a little different to the other darkish, wood-panelled restaurants around town. Décor is bright and the menu creative; the *ensalada de mango con carne de centolla* (mango salad with spider-crab) is an example of this.

Cervecería La Esquina (☎ 987 61 57 97; Plaza de España 5) For tapas, this is probably the best place for local *leones* specialities and it has a wonderful house dish called *patatas esquinadas* (lightly seasoned potato slices). You'll also get service with a smile here, not to mention 18 varieties of beer to choose from.

Pastry shops all over town also churn out the local *mantecadas*, a cakelike sweet that's peculiar to Astorga. Places to try include **Confitería Alonso** (Plaza de España) and **La Mallorquina** (cnr Calles de Los Sitos & de Santiago), both of which keep erratic hours. A small/large box costs €2.90/5.80.

DRINKING

GPS (Calle La Bañeza 9) This café-pub is popular with Astorga's younger set; it has a cosy, living-room ambience (assuming your living is adorned with cool modern furniture and framed artwork).

Boca Boca (Calle del Gabriel Franco 10) Around the corner in Calle del Gabriel Franco you'll find Astorga's nightclub strip which cranks up late on Thursday, Friday and Saturday. Boca Boca is our pick of the bunch.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Regular bus services connect Astorga with León (€3, 45 minutes, 16 daily) and Ponferrada (€4.40, 1¼ hours, 10 daily). There are also departures for Oviedo (€9.95, 2½ hours, two daily) and Madrid (€19.65, four hours, five daily). There are also trains to/from Ponferrada (€4.50, one hour, nine daily) and León (€2.95, 40 minutes, four daily) which stop at Astorga's train station; the station is inconveniently located a couple of kilometres north of town.

Around Astorga

Castrillo de los Polvazares, 6km west of Astorga, is a 17th-century hamlet built from vivid ferrous stone, its blazing orange colour made all the more striking by the brilliant green paint job on the doors and window frames. If you'd like to stay, look no further than **Hostería Casa Cascolo** (☎ 987 69 19 84; www.casacoscolo.tk in Spanish; d/tr €54/74). It has four brightly painted rooms in a renovated stone building with open rafters. The restaurant downstairs serves up *cocido maragato*. **Hostería Cuca La Vaina** (☎ 987 69 10 34; www.cucalavaina.com; Calle Jardín; d from €55) is another well-run place with warm service and rooms filled with character.

Ponferrada

pop 65,984 / elevation 508m

Ponferrada, about 60km west of Astorga, is not among the region's more enticing towns, but its castle and remnants of the old town centre (the area around the stone clocktower) make it a worthwhile stop en route to or from Galicia. The **tourist office** (☎ 987 42 42 36; ☐ 10am-2pm & 4.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 10.30am-1.30pm & 4.30-6.30pm Sat, 10.30am-1.30pm Sun) lies in the shadow of the castle walls.

SIGHTS

Built by the Knights Templar in the 13th century, the walls of the fortress-monastery **Castillo Templario** rise high over Río Sil, and the square, crenellated towers ooze romance and history. The **castle** (adult/student €2/1; ☐ 11am-2pm & 5-8.30pm Tue-Sat, 11am-2pm Sun May-Sep, 11am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat, 11am-2pm Sun Oct-Apr) has a lonely and impregnable air and is a striking landmark in Ponferrada's otherwise bleak urban landscape.

Among Ponferrada's churches, the Gothic-Renaissance **Basilica de la Virgen de la Encina**, up the hill past the tourist office, is the most impressive, especially its 17th-century painted wood altarpiece from the school of Gregorio Fernández.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hostal Santa Cruz (☎ 987 42 83 51; hsantacruz@wanadoo.es; Calle Marcelo Macías 4; s/d €26/33) A largish place with reasonable rates, **Hostal Santa Cruz** is a good midrange choice, and the rooms all come with TV and the friendly service comes free.

Hotel AC Ponferrada (☎ 987 40 99 73; www.ac-hotels.com; Avenida de Astorga 2; d from €56-71) Part of the quality AC Hotels chain, this modern

four-star place won't win any prizes for personality, but the service is attentive and the rooms supremely comfortable.

For meals, both **Mesón Mosteiro** (☎ 987 42 68 05; Calle del Reloj 10; meals from €5.15) and **Mesón El Quijote** (☎ 987 42 88 90; Calle de Gregoria Campillo 3; menú €5.35), in the new town, offer cheap set meals.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The bus station is at the northern end of town (take local bus 3 to/from the centre). Regular buses connect Ponferrada with Villafranca del Bierzo, León (via Astorga), Madrid (€22.75, five hours, seven daily) and most Galician cities, including Lugo.

Las Médulas

The ancient Roman gold mines at Las Médulas, about 20km southwest of Ponferrada, once served as the main source of gold for the entire Roman Empire – the final tally came to a remarkable three million kilograms. An army of slaves honeycombed the area with canals and tunnels (some over 40km long!) through which they pumped water to break up the rock and free it from the precious metal. The result is a singularly unnatural natural phenomenon and one of the more bizarre landscapes you'll see in Spain.

To get to the heart of the former quarries, drive beyond Las Médulas village (4km south of Carucedo and the N536 highway). Several trails weave among chestnut patches and bizarre sunset-coloured formations left behind by the miners.

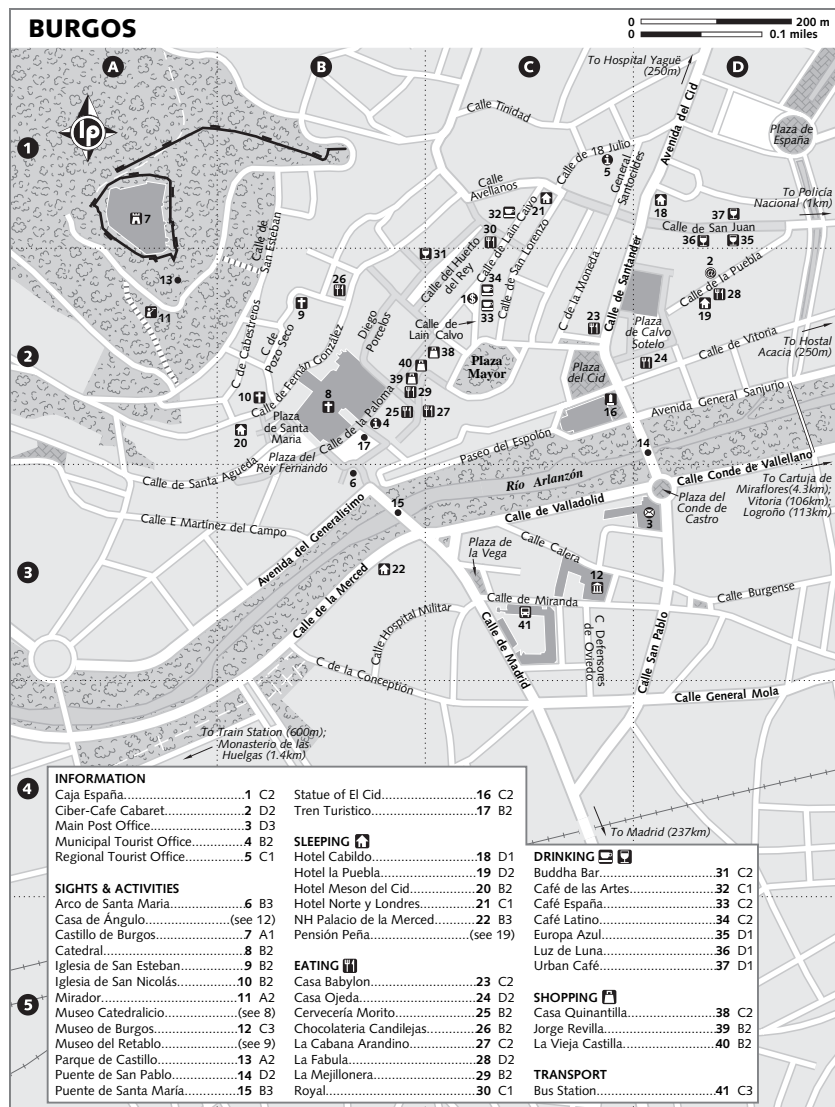
THE EAST

The east of Castilla y León is like a journey through the Castilian heartland, with delightful Burgos and provincial Soria acting as bookends to a region rich in charming villages, isolated monasteries, quiet roads and scenic landscapes.

BURGOS

pop 172,421 / elevation 861m

Burgos is dominated by its Gothic *catedral*, one of Spain's glittering jewels of religious architecture. If you allow your gaze to wander from this extraordinary structure, you'll find a compact, elegant city of pretty promenades, traffic-free plazas, good food and an attractive small-town feel. There's even a whiff of



legend about the place – beneath the majestic spires of the *catedral* lies Burgos' favourite and most roguish son, the almost mythical El Cid (p225).

History

Like so many Castilian towns, Burgos began life as a strategic fortress – in 884 – in the

frontline between the Muslims and the rival kingdom of Navarra. It was surrounded by several *burgos* (villages), which eventually melded together to form the basis of a new city. Centuries later, Burgos thrived as a staging post for pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago and as a trading centre between the interior and the northern ports.

Orientation

The heart of old Burgos, dominated by the *catedral*, is wedged between Río Arlanzón and the hill to the northwest on which stands the town's old castle. South of the river, in the newer half of town, are the bus and train stations.

Information

EMERGENCY

Policía Nacional (☎ 947 22 04 66, 091; Avenida de Castilla y León 3)

INTERNET ACCESS

Ciber-Café Cabaret (Calle de la Puebla 21; per hr from €3; ☒ noon-1am Fri & Sat, 7pm-4am Sat & Sun) A hip place, but the charges are rather steep.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital General Yagüe (☎ 947 28 18 00; Avenida del Cid Campeador 96)

MONEY

There are banks all over central Burgos. One of the most central places to change money is **Caja España** (Calle de la Paloma 4).

POST

Main post office (Plaza del Conde de Castro)

TOURIST OFFICES

Municipal tourist office (☎ 947 28 88 62; turismo@aytoburgos.es; Plaza del Rey Fernando 2; ☒ 10am-2pm & 4.30-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1.30pm & 4-7.30pm Sat & Sun Oct-May, 10am-7.30pm daily Jun-Sep)
Regional tourist office (☎ 947 20 31 25; Plaza Alonso Martínez 7; ☒ 9am-2pm & 5-8pm mid-Sep-May, 9am-8pm Jun–mid-Sep)

Sights

OLD QUARTER

Burgos' old quarter is stately rather than grand, austere elegant in the manner of so many cathedral towns of Old Castilla. It can be accessed via two main bridges across Río Arlanzón including the historic **Puente de San Pablo**, beyond which looms a romanticised statue of El Cid with his swirling cloak and sword held aloft. About 300m to the west, the **Puerta de Santa María** leads to the splendid **Arco de Santa María** (☎ 947 28 88 68; admission free; ☒ 11am-1.50pm & 5-9pm Tue-Sat, 11am-1.50pm Sun), once part of the 14th-century walls and now home to temporary exhibitions. Running along the southeastern edge of the old town between the two bridges along the riverbank, is the Paseo

del Espolón, a lovely tree-lined pedestrian area with an antique carousel.

CATEDRAL

The *catedral* (☎ 947 20 47 12; Plaza del Rey Fernando; adult/children & pilgrims/student/senior €4/1/2.50/3; ☒ 9.30am-1.15pm & 4-7.15pm) is a masterpiece that is probably worth the trip to Burgos on its own, and it's open longer hours in summer. From humble origins as a modest Romanesque church, work began on a grander scale in 1221. Remarkably, within 40 years most of the French Gothic structure that you see today had been completed. The twin towers, which went up later in the 15th century, each represent 84m of richly decorated Gothic fantasy and they're surrounded by a sea of similarly intricate spires. Probably the most impressive of the portals is the **Puerta del Sarmental**, on the southern flank, although the honour could also go to the **Puerta de la Coronera**, on the northern side, which shows Christ surrounded by the Evangelists.

It's possible to enter the *catedral* from Plaza de Santa María for free, but doing so leaves the most worthwhile sections off-limits. Nonetheless, you'll still have access to the **Capilla del Santísimo Cristo**, which harbours a much-revered 13th-century crucifix (known as the *Cristo de Burgos*) made from buffalo hide, and the **Capilla de Santa Tecla** with its extraordinary ceiling.

Inside the main entrance, the main altar is a typically overwhelming piece of gold-encrusted extravagance, while directly beneath the star-vaulted central dome lies the tomb of El Cid. Another highlight is the **Escalera Dorada** (Gilded Stairway; 1520) on the northern side, the handiwork of Diego de Siloé.

The **Capilla del Condestable**, on the eastern end of the ambulatory behind the main altar, is a remarkable late-15th-century production. Bridging Gothic and Plateresque styles, its highlights include elegant pillars and three altars, all looked upon by unusual star-shaped vaulting in the dome. The sculptures facing the entrance to the *capilla* (chapel) are astonishing 15th- and 16th-century masterpieces of stone carving, portraying the passion, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ.

Also worth a look is the peaceful cloister, with its sculpted medieval tombs. Off the cloister is the **Capilla de Corpus Cristi**, where, high on the northwestern wall, hangs the coffin of El Cid. The adjoining **Museo Catedralicio** (☎ 947 20 47 12) has a wealth of oils, tapestries and ornate chalcices.

BURGOS CARD & TREN TURISTICO

The **Burgos Card** (☎ 902 877 996; www.burgoscard.com; 1/2 days €12/18) covers entrance for all the sights covered in this section, including the *tren turístico* (tourist train), as well as discounts at a range of shops, hotels and other businesses around town.

Also worth considering is the cutesy **tren turístico** (adult/child €3/1.50), which leaves from outside the tourist office and runs past all the major sights in town. Unfortunately, the only stop it makes on the 45-minute journey is at the *mirador* next to the *castillo* (castle), but it's a good way to get an overview of the town. It runs on Friday evenings, Saturday and Sunday, with more frequent departures in summer. Buy your ticket at the tourist office.

CHURCHES

Iglesia de San Esteban, a powerful Gothic structure built in the 14th century, houses the **Museo del Retablo** which was closed for renovation when we visited.

Iglesia de San Nicolás (☎ 947 20 70 95; admission €1, Mon free; 11am-1pm & 5-6pm Mon-Sat) is most noteworthy for its enormous stone-carved altar by Francisco de Colonia, with scenes from the life of St Nicolas. It's open longer hours in summer.

MONASTERIO DE LAS HUELGAS

A 30-minute walk west of the city centre on the southern bank of Río Arlanzón, this **monastery** (☎ 947 20 16 30; guided tours adult/student €5/4, Wed free; 10am-1pm & 3.45-5.30pm Tue-Sat, 10.30am-2pm Sun) was once among the most prominent monasteries in Spain. Founded in 1187 by Eleanor of Aquitaine, daughter of Henry II of England and wife of Alfonso VIII of Castilla, it's still home to 35 Cistercian nuns and is open long hours in summer.

Only a small section of the church is accessible without a guided tour, which you should join if you want to fully appreciate the monastery's treasures. The three main naves of the church are a veritable royal pantheon, containing the tombs of numerous kings and queens, including those of Eleanor and Alfonso. Also here is a spectacular gilded Renaissance altar topped by a larger-than-life Jesus being taken off the cross.

The highlight, though, is the **Museo de Ricas Telas**, reached via a lovely Romanesque cloister known as Las Claustrillas. It contains bejewelled robes and garments once worn by the very royals interred in the aforementioned tombs.

CARTUJA DE MIRAFLORES

The **church** (10.15am-3pm & 4-6pm Mon-Sat, 11am-3pm & 4-6pm Sun) of this strict Carthusian monastery, located in peaceful woodlands

4km east of the city centre, contains a trio of 15th-century masterworks by Gil de Siloé. The most dazzling of these is undoubtedly the ornate star-shaped alabaster tomb of Juan II and Isabel of Portugal, the parents of Isabel la Católica. Gil de Siloé also carved the tomb of her brother, the Infante Alfonso, and helped with the giant *retablo* that forms a worthy backdrop to the royal mausoleum.

The walk to the monastery takes about one hour along Río Arlanzón.

MUSEO DE BURGOS

This **museum** (☎ 947 26 58 75; Calle de Calera 25; adult/student & under-18 €1.20/free, Sat & Sun free; 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Oct-Jun, 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Jul-Sep), housed in the 16th-century Casa de Miranda, contains some fine Gothic tombs and other archaeological artefacts covering a wide period. In the adjoining **Casa de Angulo** is a fine-arts collection.

PARQUE DE CASTILLO

This leafy hilltop park is crowned by the massive fortifications of the rebuilt **Castillo de Burgos** (☎ 947 28 88 74; adult/student, senior & child €3.20/2.20; 11am-2pm Sat & Sun Oct-Mar, 11am-2pm & 4-7pm Sat & Sun Apr-Sep). Dating from the 9th century, the castle has witnessed a turbulent history, suffering a fire in 1736 before finally being blown up by Napoleon's retreating troops in 1813. Just south of the car park is a *mirador* (lookout) which offers fine views over the town.

Festivals & Events

Burgos' big fiestas take place in the last days of June and the first two weeks of July to celebrate the **Festividad de San Pedro y San Pablo** (Feast of Saints Peter and Paul). There are bullfights, processions and much merry-making, particularly on the first Sunday of

July, the **Día de las Peñas**. A slightly more low-key event is the **Festividad de San Lesmes** (for the city's patron saint) on 30 January. For other festivals and special events, pick up a copy of the *Calendario de Eventos* from the Municipal tourist office (p223).

Sleeping

Pensión Peña (☎ 947 20 63 23; Calle de la Puebla 18; s/d with shared bathroom from €15/23) This impeccable little place has rooms with delightful individual touches, such as hand-painted washbasins, and the central location is also a plus.

Hostal Acacia (☎ 947 20 51 34; www.hostalacacia.com; Calle de Bernabe Perez Ortiz 1; s/d with bathroom from €25/37, d with shower & washbasin from €29/80) Though some of the rooms here are small and ageing, most are pleasant and all are clean and come with TV. Run by a loquacious Trotsky-lookalike proprietor, this place is easy to recommend.

Hotel Norte y Londres (☎ 947 26 41 25; www.hotelnorteylondres.com; Plaza de Alonso Martinez 10; s €45-64, d €50-95; p i) Overflowing with understated period charm, this fine hotel in a converted palace, dating from the 16th century, boasts spacious rooms with antique furnishings, polished wooden floors and pretty balconies. The hotel has been around more than 100 years and it shows in the welcoming, old-world civility. Parking costs €10.40.

Hotel La Puebla (☎ 947 20 00 11; www.hotellapuebla.com; Calle de la Puebla 20; s/d Oct-May €56/71, Jun-Sep €58/88; p a i) Another great choice, this boutique hotel oozes style, fusing chic minimalism with professional service. The rooms aren't huge, but they are supremely comfortable. Highly recommended. Parking is €8.

Hotel Cabildo (☎ 947 25 78 40; www.hotelcabildo.com; Avenida del Cid 2; s/d €80/100; p n i) New to the Burgos hotel scene, Hotel Cabildo has quickly become one of the most comfortable places to stay in town. Combining natural light and suave, dark tones, the rooms are large and stylish and the service obliging. It's a classy place. Parking costs €10.

NH Palacio de la Merced (☎ 947 47 99 00; www.nh-hotels.com; Calle de la Merced 13; d from €104; p n i) Brimful of the quality we've come to expect from the NH chain, the outstanding Palacio de la Merced is one of Burgos' most distinguished addresses. Housed in a 16th-century palace with high domed ceilings, the old-world elegance of the building is wedded to super-modern, supremely comfortable rooms with hardwood floors and muted shades.

Hotel Meson del Cid (☎ 947 20 87 15; www.mesondelcid.es; Plaza de Santa María 8; s/d/st €103.20/129/152; p) The rooms here ooze old-world charm and if you can snaffle a room facing the main

EL CID: THE HEROIC MERCENARY

Few names resonate through Spanish history quite like El Cid, the 11th-century soldier of fortune and adventurer whose story tells in microcosm the tumultuous years when Spain was divided into Muslim and Christian zones. That El Cid has become a romantic, idealised figure of history known for his unswerving loyalty and superhuman strength owes much to the way his exploits captured the popular imagination as expressed in an anonymous 12th-century epic poem and the 1961 film starring Charlton Heston and Sophia Loren. Reality, though, presents a very different picture.

El Cid (from the Arabic *sidi* for 'chief' or 'lord') was born Rodrigo Diaz in Vivar, a hamlet about 10km north of Burgos, in 1043. After the death of Ferdinand I, he entered into the murky world of royal succession which saw the king's five heirs squabbling over the throne and, ultimately, El Cid's banishment from Castilla in 1076. With few scruples as to whom he served, El Cid offered his services to a host of rulers, both Christian and Muslim. With each battle, he became ever more powerful and wealthy.

It is not known whether he suddenly developed a loyalty to the Christian kings or smelled the wind and saw that Spain's future would be Christian. Either way, when he heard that the Muslim armies had taken Valencia and expelled all the Christians, El Cid marched on the city, recaptured it and became its ruler in 1094 after a devastating siege. At the height of his powers and reputation, the man also known as *El Campeador* (the Champion) retired to spend the remainder of his days in Valencia where he died in 1099. His remains were returned to Burgos, where he lies buried along with his wife, Jimena, in the *catedral*.

cathedral façade just 75m away, you'll have one of the most comfortable front-row seats in Burgos. The only drawback? For this price you don't expect indifferent service. Parking is €12 and breakfast €10.

Eating

Burgos is famous for its *queso* (cheese), *morcilla* (blood sausage made with rice and served with red peppers) and *cordero asado*.

TAPAS

La Cabaña Arandino (Calle de la Sombrerería; 11-11pm) Opposite Cervecería Morito, this place doesn't quite match the atmosphere, but it's popular with a young crowd and the tapas are good; locals love the *tigres* (mussels with spicy sauce).

La Mejillonera (Calle de la Paloma 33; 10am-11pm) Another popular stand-up place, La Mejillonera serves great mussels (€2.10 per plate), while the *patatas bravas* (potatoes with spicy tomato sauce) is another popular local order.

RESTAURANTS

Chocolatería Candilejas (Calle de Fernán González 36; desserts from €2; 11 from 6.30pm) A great place for dessert, come here for killer cakes, *churros* (€2) and *batidos* (milkshakes; €2.40), all homemade.

Royal (Calle del Huerto del Rey 23) If you can withstand the glaringly lit dining area, Royal serves a wide range of *raciones* (€2.70 to €6.50) and 18 choices of *bocadillo* (€2.60 to €4.50) that contain everything from old Spanish classics to salmon and other gourmet flourishes.

Casa Ojeda (96 947 20 90 52; Calle de Vitoria 5) This Burgos institution, all sheathed in dark wood, is one of the best places in Burgos to try the local Castilian speciality: *cordero asado* (€18.10). The upstairs dining room has outstanding food and faultless service, although we're not sure what we think of the menu which lists the calories and cholesterol for each dish. Prices for a more limited range of *platos combinados* are lower in the downstairs bar.

La Fabula (96 947 26 30 92; Calle de la Puebla 18; mains from €12) A good place for nouveau Castilian cuisine. La Fabula offers slimmed-down rice and fish dishes in a light, modern dining room filled with classical music. Dishes include *arroz con gambas* (rice with prawns), *calamares* (calamari) and *merluza y langostinos* (hake and king prawns).

Casa Babylon (96 947 25 54 40; www.casababylon.es; Plaza de Santo Domingo 3; mains from €12) Casa Babylon

opened to much fanfare when we were in Burgos and it's certainly an innovative newcomer on the local restaurant scene. There's a nod to local specialities such as *brick de morcilla de Burgos* (Burgos blood sausage) and *cordero asado*, but it's fused to international flavours such as tempura and moussaka. It's cool and flashy and we hope the buzz that surrounded the place continues because it deserves to be full.

Drinking

CAFÉS

Café España (Calle de Lain Calvo 12) A bastion of the Burgos café scene for more than 80 years with its old-world elegance. Other good options include **Café Latino** (Calle de Lain Calvo 16) and **Café de las Artes** (Calle de Lain Calvo 31), which has a magazine rack, occasional live music and an artsy vibe.

BARS

A great place to get your night started is along Calle de San Juan.

Luz de Luna (Calle de San Juan; 11 5pm-late Tue-Sun) This place is enduringly popular, as much for its exuberant vibe as the décor themed on the enchanted forest.

Europa Azul (Calle de San Juan 34) Europa Azul has an outdoor terrace out the back that's ideal in summer. It doesn't get the crowds until later, but they're pretty cool when they arrive.

Urban Café (Calle de San Juan) This place is seriously funky.

Calle del Huerto del Rey, just northeast of the cathedral and known locally as Las Llanas is another centre of night-time activity. It gets going a bit later than Calle de San Juan. We like **Buddha Bar** (Calle del Huerto del Rey), but it only just shades around 10 others.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Cervecería Morito (Calle de la Sombrerería; 11 1pm-midnight) Our pick of the Burgos eating scene, this classic Spanish tapas bar (noisy, attractive interior and great food) is always crowded, even on the quietest of Burgos nights; if it's full downstairs, there's more room on the 1st floor. A typical order is *alpargata* (lashings of cured ham with bread, tomato and olive oil; €2.70) and we challenge you to find better *calamares* (calamari) elsewhere.

Shopping

Jorge Revilla (96 947 27 40 40; Calle de la Paloma 29; 11 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) Local Burgos jewellery designer Jorge Revilla is fast making a name for himself beyond Spain's borders and it's not hard to see why – colourful silver pieces that are at once fun and sophisticated and with surprisingly reasonable prices.

Two good shops among the many that offer local produce (as ideal for a picnic as for a gift back home) are **La Vieja Castilla** (Calle de la Paloma 21; 11 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) with a crowded range of wines, cheeses and a host of other delights and, a few doors north, **Casa Quintanilla** (Calle de la Paloma 22; 11 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat).

Getting There & Away

BUS

From Burgos' bus station (Calle de Miranda 4), **Continental-Auto** (96 947 26 20 17) runs buses to Madrid (€14.75, 2¾ hours), Vitoria (€7, 1½ hours), Bilbao (€11.10, two hours) and San Sebastián (€14.90, 3¼ hours). **ALSA** (96 947 26 63 70) also has buses to León (€12.80, 3¼ hours), Pamplona (€13.35, 3¼ hours), Logroño (€6.25, two hours) and Valladolid (€8, two hours).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

For Madrid, take the A1 directly south. The N234 branches off southeast to Soria and on to Zaragoza and ultimately Barcelona. The N623 leads north to Santander, while the AP1 *autopista* goes most of the way to Vitoria and hooks up with the Ap68 *autopista* to Bilbao. There are parking stations (€8.50 to €12, 12 hours) all across central Burgos including, conveniently, beneath Plaza Mayor.

TRAIN

Burgos is connected with Madrid (€21.55, four hours), Bilbao (€16.20, three hours), León (from €17.20, two hours), Valladolid (from €7.55, 1¼ hours) and Salamanca (from €19.30, 2½ hours).

AROUND BURGOS

Quintanilla de las Viñas

If you take the N234 out of Burgos, a worthwhile stop some 35km out is the 7th-century **Ermita de Santa María de Lara** close to Quintanilla de las Viñas. This modest Visigothic hermitage has some fine bas-reliefs around its external walls, which are among the best surviving examples of religious art from the 7th century.

Covarrubias

pop 632 / elevation 975m

The picturesque hamlet of Covarrubias is one of Castilla y León's hidden gems. Spread out along the shady banks of Río Arlanza, it's sprinkled with arcaded half-timbered houses overlooking intimate cobblestone squares. There is a small tourist office (96 947 40 64 61; 11 10.30am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat, 10.30am-2pm Sun Mar-Dec) under the arches of the village's imposing northern gate; pick up the free *Covarrubias: Castile Birthplace*, a handy pocket-sized guide to the sights around town; it also organises guided tours (€3 per person) of the village.

A good time to be here is the second week of July when the village hosts its Medieval Market & Cherry Festival.

SIGHTS

The squat 10th-century **Torreón de Doña Urraca** towers over the remains of the town's medieval walls, while the late-Gothic **Colegiata de San Cosme y Damián** (96 947 40 63 11; admission €2; 11 10.30am-2pm & 4-7pm Wed-Mon) has Castilla's oldest still-functioning church organ and attractive cloisters. It also contains the stone tomb of Fernán González, the 10th-century founder of Castilla. **Casa Doña Sancha** is the best preserved of Covarrubias' 15th-century half-timbered houses.

SLEEPING & EATING

Casa Galín (96 947 40 65 52; www.casagalín.com; Plaza de Doña Urraca 4; s/d €20/38) This place has comfortable, brightly painted rooms with recently renovated bathrooms in an old-fashioned timbered building overlooking the main plaza. It's home to a popular restaurant with a well-priced *menú* (€8).

Los Castros (96 947 40 63 68; www.casaruralloscastros.com; Calle de los Castros 10; d with breakfast €50) A historic *casa rural*, Los Castros has just five gorgeous doubles filled with all sorts of eclectic furnishings, which somehow reflect this enchanting town.

Hotel Rey Chindasvinto (96 947 40 65 60; hotel.chindas@wanadoo.es; Plaza del Rey Chindasvinto 5; s/d €35/55) The classiest hotel in town, the Rey Chindasvinto has lovely, spacious rooms with wooden beams and exposed brickwork, friendly owners and a good restaurant. This is ideal for those who want to enjoy Covarrubias after sunset when the weekend crowds have returned home.

Restaurante de Galo (☎ 947 40 63 93; mains from €12, menú €10) This fine restaurant in the heart of the village is recommended for its robust traditional dishes cooked in a wood-fired oven. This is a good place to sample the regional speciality of *cerdo asado* (€12.60).

SHOPPING

La Alacena (☎ 947 40 65 63; Calle de Monseñor Vargas 8; 10am-2pm & 5-7.30pm Tue-Sun) For homemade chocolate and other local foods, step inside this friendly shop in the heart of the village.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Two buses travel between Burgos and Covarrubias on weekdays, and one runs on Saturday (€2.40, one hour).

Santo Domingo de Silos

pop 311

Nestled away in the rolling hills south of Burgos, this tranquil, pretty village has an unusual claim to fame: monks from this monastery made the pop charts in the mid-1990s in Britain with recordings of Gregorian chants. The monastery is one of the most famous in central Spain, known for its stunning cloister.

SIGHTS

The church (10am-2pm & 4-9.30pm), which is notable for its pleasingly unadorned Romanesque sanctuary dominated by a multidomed ceiling, is where you can hear the monks chant (admission free; 9am Mon-Sat, noon Sun). Hours may vary slightly throughout the year.

The jewel in the attached monastery's crown is the two-storey cloister (☎ 947 39 00 68; 10am-1pm & 4.30-6pm Tue-Sat, 4.30-6pm Sun & Mon), a treasure chest of some of the most imaginative Romanesque art anywhere in the country. Although the overall effect is spectacular, the sculpted capitals are especially exquisite, depicting everything from lions to Harpies, intermingled with floral and geometrical motifs betraying the never-distant influence of Islamic art in Spain; look for the unusually twisted column on the western side. The pieces executed on the corner pillars represent episodes from the life of Christ, while the galleries are covered by Mudéjar ceilings from the 14th century. In the northeastern corner sits a 13th-century image of the Virgin Mary carved in stone, and nearby is the original burial spot of Santo Domingo.

Although much of the monastery is off-limits to visitors, the compulsory guided tour (€3) will show you inside the 17th-century botica (pharmacy) and a small museum containing religious artworks, Flemish tapestries and the odd medieval sarcophagus.

Tucked away in the streets of the village (though well-signposted) is the Museo Nacional de la Tierra (Calle de Las Condesas; admission €1; 10am-2pm & 5-7pm Tue-Sat, 5-7pm Sun Apr-Sep) which has interesting displays on local music traditions.

For sweeping views over the town, pass under the Arco de San Juan and climb the grassy hill to the south to the Ermita del Camino y Via Crucis.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hostal Cruces (☎ 947 39 00 64; Plaza Mayor 2; s/d €21/39) Decent if simple rooms – the cheapest in town – and friendly owners make this a good choice right in the heart of the village.

Hotel Arco de San Juan (☎ 947 39 00 74; fax 947 39 02 00; Pradera de San Juan 1; s/d €35/45) Just down the hill from the monastery, this simple but pleasant hotel has attractive though unexciting rooms, some with good views of the monastery.

Hotel Santo Domingo de Silos (☎ 947 39 00 53; www.hotelssantodomingodesilos.com; Calle de Santo Domingo; s/d €38/50) Although there is greater charm elsewhere, the proportion of price to quality at this hotel is hard to beat with well-appointed rooms.

Hotel Tres Coronas (☎ 947 39 00 47; fax 947 39 00 65; Plaza Mayor 6; s/d €52/76) This place is brimming with character (the suit of armour at the top of the grand staircase sets the scene) with rooms of thick stone walls and old-world charm. The rooms at the front have lovely views over the plaza. Our only complaint is that the service is somewhat cold.

Men can rent a heated room (with meals, €25) in the monastery, but you'll need to book well ahead. Call the Padre Hospedero (☎ 947 39 00 68) between 11am and 1pm. You can stay for a period of three to 10 days.

The village's best (and most expensive) restaurant is at the Hotel Tres Coronas (mains from €14), although the cheaper Hotel Santo Domingo de Silos (mains from €9) is not bad.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Autobuses Arceredillo (☎ 947 268 347, 947 485 266) runs one daily bus from Burgos to Santo Domingo de Silos (€4.80, 1½ hours) from Monday to Saturday.

Desfiladero de Yecla

A mere 1.3km down the back road (BU911) to Caleruega from Santo Domingo, the spectacular Desfiladero de Yecla, a splendid gorge of limestone cliffs, opens up. It's easily visited thanks to the installation of a walkway (the stairs lead down from just past the tunnel exit). There's a small information office (☎ 947 39 01 23; 9am-3pm Mon, Tue & Thu) in the *ayuntamiento* building in Santo Domingo de Silos.

NORTH OF BURGOS

The N623 highway carves a pretty trail from Burgos, particularly between the mountain passes of Portillo de Fresno and Puerto de Carrales. About 15km north of the former, a side road takes you through a series of intriguing villages in the Valle de Sedano. The town of the same name has a fine 17th-century church, but more interesting is the little Romanesque one above Moradillo de Sedano: the sculpted main doorway is outstanding.

Villages flank the highway on the way north, but *Orbaneja del Castillo* is the area's best-kept secret. Take the turn-off for Escalada and follow the bumpy road until you reach the waterfall. Park where you can, then climb up beside the waterfall to the village, which is completely hidden from the road. A dramatic backdrop of strange rock walls lends this charming spot an enchanting air.

SOUTH TO RÍO DUERO

Verma

pop 2744 / elevation 827m

If you're travelling between Burgos and Madrid and finding the passing scenery none-too-eye-catching, Verma rises up from the roadside like a welcome apparition.

An ancient settlement, Verma hit the big time in the early 17th century when Grand Duke Don Francisco de Rojas y Sandoval, a minister under Felipe II from 1598 to 1618, launched an ambitious project to create another El Escorial (see p166). He failed, but the cobbled streets and delightful plazas of the old town retain plenty of charm.

Pass through the Arco de la Cárcel (Prison Gate), off the main road to Burgos, climbing up the long Calle del General Mola to the massive Plaza Mayor which is fronted by the oversized Palacio Ducal, now a *parador* (see right) notable for its courtyards and 210 balconies. To the right of the square is the Dominican nuns' Convento de San Blas which

was closed for renovations at the time of research. A short distance northwest of Plaza Mayor, at the opposite end from the palace, a pretty passageway and viewpoint, *Mirador de los Arcos*, opens up over Río Arlanza. Its arches connect with the 17th-century Convento de Santa Teresa, which is also home to the tourist office (☎ 947 17 70 02; www.citlerma.com in Spanish; Plaza de Santa Clara; 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun). Guided tours (€3) of the town and most of its monuments depart from here.

SLEEPING & EATING

Posada La Hacienda de mi Señor (☎ 947 17 70 52; www.lahaciendademisenor.com; Calle de El Barco 6; s/d with breakfast €50/75) Apart from a few *casas rurales* dotted around the old town, this is your best midrange bet, with enormous rooms with free wi-fi in a renovated, historic building; the colour scheme will start to grate if you stay too long.

Parador de Lerma (10am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) Undoubtedly the most elegant and imaginative place to stay is this *parador*, which occupies the renovated splendour of the old Palacio Ducal. Like any *parador*, the rooms have luxury and character and the service is impeccable.

You're in the heart of Castilian wood-fired-oven territory and the Plaza Mayor is encircled by high quality restaurants with *cerdo asado* (€32 for two is a good price to pay) on the menu.

Asador Casa Brigante (☎ 947 17 05 94; www.todolerma.com/brigante; Plaza Mayor 5; meals for 2 €55; 10am-10pm Mon-Fri, lunch & dinner Sat Sep-May, lunch & dinner Thu-Tue Jun-Aug) Our favourite is this cosy and friendly place – you won't taste better roast lamb anywhere.

Vegetarians will need to head to the *parador* (menú €35-40).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Regular buses from Burgos (€2.90, 30 minutes) stop here and some buses coming north from Aranda de Duero or Madrid also pass through.

Aranda de Duero

pop 31,247 / elevation 802m

The big attraction in this otherwise unattractive crossroads town is the main portal of the late-Gothic Iglesia de Santa María. Its remarkably rich sculptural flourish was executed in the 15th and 16th centuries.

Other than that, Aranda de Duero is renowned as a bastion of classic Castilian cooking. Most of the better places serving *cordero* are on and around Plaza del Arco Isilla; look for the 'Asador' signs. Probably Aranda's premier *asador* is **Mesón de la Villa** (☎ 947 50 10 25; Calle de la Sal 3; meals €40, ☎ Tue-Sun), which does succulent lamb and complements it with excellent local wines. Reservations are essential on weekends.

Numerous buses and trains connect Aranda with Madrid and most major cities in Castilla y León.

Peñaranda de Duero

pop 568 / elevation 877m

About 20km east of Aranda on the C111, the village of Peñaranda de Duero exudes considerable charm. Originally a Celtic fortress village, most of its surviving riches are grouped around the stately Plaza Mayor. The **Palacio Condes de Miranda** is a grand Renaissance palace with a fine Plateresque entrance, double-arched patio and beautiful ceilings in various styles. Free guided tours operate up to eight times daily Tuesday to Sunday. The 16th-century **Iglesia de Santa Ana** integrates columns and busts found at the Roman settlement of Clunia into an otherwise baroque design. For superb views of the village and surrounding country, take a walk up to the medieval castle ruins.

There are at least four *casas rurales* in the area for you to choose from should you wish to stay. Most buses between Valladolid (€6, 1½ hours) and Soria (€5.85, 1½ hours) pass through town.

Sepúlveda

pop 1322 / elevation 1313m

With its houses staggered along a ridge carved out by the gorge of Río Duratón and famous for its *cordero asado* and *cochinillo*, Sepúlveda is a favourite weekend escape for *madrileños* (Madrid residents). Indeed, the warm ochre tones of Sepúlveda's public buildings, fronting the central Plaza de España are an enviable setting for a hot Sunday roast.

The *ayuntamiento* backs onto what remains of the old castle, while high above it all rises the 11th-century **Iglesia del Salvador**. It's considered the prototype of Castilian Romanesque, marked by the single arched portico.

Most visitors don't stay overnight, but if you'd like to enjoy the town's sleepy post-crowd

aspect, **Mirador del Castilla** (☎ 921 54 03 53; Calle del Conde Sepúlveda 26; s/d €40/50), just off Plaza de España, has very comfortable rooms.

For the *cordero* feast, you could pretty much take your pick (places serving mediocre *cordero* don't last long here) around Plaza de España, but **Restaurante Cristóbal** (☎ 921 54 01 00; Calle Conde de Sepúlveda 9; meals €30) and **Restaurante Figón Zute el Mayor** (☎ 921 54 01 65; Calle de Lope Tablada 6; meals €27) are both long-standing favourites with good wine lists. Reservations are essential on weekends.

At least two buses link Sepúlveda daily with Madrid, while Segovia is served once daily except Sunday.

Parque Natural del Hoz del Duratón

A sizable chunk of land northwest of Sepúlveda has been constituted as a natural park, the centrepiece of which is the **Hoz del Duratón** (Duratón Gorge) where it widens out behind the dam just south of Burgomillado. A dirt track leads 5km west from the hamlet of Villaseca to the **Ermita de San Frutos**. In ruins now, the hermitage was founded in the 7th century by San Frutos and his siblings, San Valentín and Santa Engracia. They lie buried in a tiny chapel nearby. This is a magical place, overlooking one of the many serpentine bends in the gorge, with squadrons of buzzards and eagles soaring above. It's a popular weekend excursion and some people take kayaks up to Burgomillado to launch themselves down the waters of the canyon. There's a small but informative **Centro de Interpretación** (☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri Oct-Jun, 10am-6pm Mon-Fri Jul-Sep) in Sepúlveda.

Castilnova

Some 12km south of Sepúlveda, this rather cute little castle (☎ 921 53 11 33; admission €3; 9am-1pm & 4-6pm Mon-Fri) has the air of a private conceit by some moneyed eccentric. Originally built in the 14th century and largely Mudéjar, it has undergone a lot of alterations. The castle is only open to groups on the weekend.

WEST ALONG RÍO DUERO Peñafiel

pop 5401 / elevation 758m

At the heart of the Ribera del Duero wine region, Peñafiel is home to the state-of-the-art **Museo Provincial del Vino**, cleverly ensconced within the walls of the mighty **Castillo de Peñafiel** (museum & castle €5, castle only €2; ☎ 11.30am-2.30pm & 4.30-8.30pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep). Telling a comprehensive

story of the region's wines – growing, production and history – this wonderful museum grabs the attention with interactive displays, dioramas, backlit panels and computer terminals. The pleasures of the end product are not neglected: wine tasting costs €7. Not to be missed. It's open shorter hours from October to March.

The castle itself, one of the longest and narrowest castles in Spain, is also worth exploring. Its crenellated walls and towers stretch over 200m, but are little more than 20m across, and were raised and modified over 400 years from the 11th century onwards. The sight of it in the distance alone is worth the effort of getting here.

Just like the wine museum, the cool, classy **Hotel Ribera del Duero** (☎ 983 88 16 16; www.hotelriberadelduero.com; Avenida de Escalona 17; s/d €56.65/67.60) is an unexpected find in little Peñafiel with understated but semiluxurious rooms, some with terrific views. It also organises tours and tastings at local wineries.

Just off the main square is the small, pedestrianised town centre, and on Calle Girón de Velasco you'll find several bars and **Restaurante El Bodegón** (☎ 983 88 07 43; Calle Girón de Velasco 16; menú €10.75), one of the best-value places in town for hearty Castilian dishes.

Four or five buses a day run to Valladolid, 60km west of here.

EAST ALONG RÍO DUERO San Esteban de Gormaz

pop 3158 / elevation 911m

This dusty little town contains a couple of Romanesque gems hidden away in its centre: the 11th-century **Iglesia de San Miguel** and **Iglesia del Rivero**. Both sport the porticoed side-galleries that characterise the Romanesque style of the Segovia and Burgos areas.

El Burgo de Osma

pop 5068 / elevation 943m

Some 12km east of San Esteban de Gormaz, this town is a real surprise packet. Once important enough to host its own university, it's now a somewhat rundown little old town, dominated by a quite remarkable *catedral* and infused with an air of decaying elegance.

SIGHTS

Your initiation into the old town is likely to be along the **Calle Mayor**, its portico borne by an uneven phalanx of stone and wooden

pillars. Not far along, it leads into the **Plaza Mayor** which is fronted by the 18th-century *ayuntamiento* and the more sumptuous **Hospital de San Agustín** (admission free), now a contemporary art gallery.

The ramshackle **Calle Mayor** leads to the **Plaza de San Pedro** and the *catedral* (☎ 975 36 00 48; ☎ 10am-1pm & 4-6pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar, 10am-1pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep). Begun in the 12th century as an essentially Romanesque building, it was continued in a Gothic vein and finally topped with a weighty baroque tower that rivals many of the great cathedrals of Spain. The sanctuary is filled with art treasures, including the 16th-century main altarpiece (a collaboration by Juan de Juni and Juan Pícaro) and the so-called **Beato de Osma**, a precious 11th-century codex (manuscript) that can be seen in the **Capilla Mayor**. Also of note is the light-flooded, circular **Capilla de Palafox**, a rare example of the neoclassical style in this region.

Outside the main approach to the town is the 16th-century Renaissance former university. If you exit **El Burgo** from near Plaza de San Pedro, take a left for the village of Osma, high above which stand the ruins of the **Castillo de Osma**.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hostal Mayor 71 (☎ 975 36 80 24; Calle Mayor 71; s €30-40, d €36-45) This is a cheap option and recommended as much for its central locale as for its tidy, well-kept rooms.

Posada del Canónigo (☎ 975 36 03 62; www.posadadelcanonigo.es; Plaza San Pedro de Osma 19; s €60-70, d €70-80) This is certainly the most imaginative choice with some rooms overlooking the *catedral* from an enchanting 17th-century building. The rooms have been lovingly restored and are overflowing with charm.

Hotel II Virrey (☎ 975 34 13 11; www.virreypalafox.com; Calle Mayor 2; s €53-63, d €80-93, ste €110-150; ☎ i) This place oozes old Spanish charm, with its sweeping staircase and heavily gilded furniture. Hardwood floors and wrought-iron furnishings dominate and the bathrooms are newly renovated; some of the suites have four-poster beds. Parking is €10 and room rates soar on weekends in the last half of January, February and March when people flock here for the ritual slaughter of a pig, after which diners indulge in all-you-can-eat feasts. At €40 per head it's not bad for one of the more unusual dining experiences. There's even a pig museum...

There are plenty of cafés and tapas bars in town, especially around the Plaza Mayor, where you can grab a snack.

Asador El Burgo (☎ 975 34 04 89; Calle Mayor 71; mains from €8, menú especial €25; 1 Fri-Sun) This place is popular with locals and does the usual meaty Castilian fare with aplomb, even if only on weekends.

Restaurante Asador El Arco (☎ 617 474 481; Calle Alvarez de Castro) This place is similar to Asador El Burgo.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses link El Burgo with Soria (€3.10, 50 minutes, six daily) and Valladolid (€14, 2¼ hours, three daily).

Parque Natural del Cañón del Río Lobos

Some 15km north of El Burgo de Osma, this park promises forbidding rockscapes and a magnificent, deep river canyon, not to mention abundant vultures and various other birds of prey. Just outside the park is an information centre (☎ 975 36 35 64; 1 mid-Mar–mid-Dec), and about 4km in from the road stands the Romanesque *Ermita de San Bartolomé*. You can walk deeper into the park but free camping is forbidden.

Camping Cañón del Río Lobos (☎ 975 36 35 65; sites per person/tent/car €4.50/4.50/5.75; 1 Easter-15 Sep; ☞) is near Ucero. If you're heading north along the switchback road that climbs up the canyon, you'll have some fine views back towards Ucero.

Gormaz

pop 18

Some 14km south of El Burgo, on Río Duero, is the virtual ghost town of Gormaz. The sprawling castle has 21 towers and was built by the Muslims in the 10th century and altered in the 13th. Its ruins still convey enormous dignity and the views alone justify the effort of getting here – this must have been a great perch for defending the surrounding country. The castle, which never closes, is reached via a winding road about 2km beyond the modern and largely uninteresting village.

Berlanga de Duero

pop 1085 / elevation 978m

About 15km east of Gormaz, Berlanga de Duero is lorded over by a powerful but ruinous castle. Down below, the squat *Colegiata*

de Santa María del Mercado is a fine late-Gothic church, with the star-shaped vaulting inside perhaps its most pleasing aspect. It's usually closed, but the area around the pretty Plaza Mayor, with the occasional Renaissance house, is equally charming. Outside the old town centre, on a desolate open plot, is the *Picota*, to which petty criminals were tied in the good old days.

Hotel Fray Tomás (☎ 975 34 30 33; fax 975 34 31 69; Calle Real 16; s/d €30/48) has comfortable rooms in a modified 14th-century building, while there are also a couple of *casas rurales* dotted around the old town centre.

Around Berlanga de Duero

About 8km southeast of Berlanga de Duero stands the *Ermita de San Baudelio* (admission €0.75; 1 10am-2pm & 4-6pm Wed-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Oct-Mar, 10am-2pm & 4-8pm Wed-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Apr-Sep) where the simple exterior conceals a remarkable 11th-century Mozarabic interior. A great pillar in the centre of the only nave opens up at the top like a palm tree to create horseshoe arches. Until recently, the hermitage's walls were decorated with Mozarabic and 12th-century Romanesque frescoes, but these have now been moved to the Prado in Madrid.

Another 17km south, the hilltop stone village of Rello retains much of its medieval defensive walls and feels like the place time forgot. The views from the village's southern ledge are superb. There's at least one *casa rural* if you love the peace and quiet.

The Road to Madrid

The N110 winds southwest from San Esteban de Gormaz to join up with the A1 highway between Madrid and Burgos.

The first village of note you'll come to is Ayllón, some 50km southwest of El Burgo de Osma and which bathes in the same orange glow that characterises El Burgo's townscape. You enter by a medieval archway and are immediately confronted on the right by the ornate façade of a late-15th-century noble family's mansion built in Isabelline style. The uneven, porticoed Plaza Mayor is capped at one end by the Romanesque *Iglesia de San Miguel*, and nearby stands the Renaissance-era *Iglesia de Santa María la Mayor*. Turn right behind this and follow the narrow street for about 500m and you'll come to the extensive remains of another Romanesque church, now oddly incorporated into a rambling private

residence. The simple *Hostal Velloso* (☎ 971 55 30 62; Avenida Conde Vellellano s/n; s/d with washbasin €10.80/18.05, d with bathroom €30.65) is the better of the two *hostales* in town.

About 20km south of Ayllón, Riaza has a charmingly ramshackle and circular Plaza Mayor: the sandy arena in the centre is still used for bullfights.

SORIA

pop 37,200 / elevation 1055m

Small-town Soria is one of Spain's smaller and least-visited provincial capitals. With an appealing and compact old centre, a sprinkling of stunning monuments, a setting on Río Duero and in the heart of backwoods Castilian countryside, it's a great place to escape tourist Spain. Calm and laid-back by day, Soria has a surprisingly lively nightlife.

Information

Several banks are near the tourist office.

Crúz Roja (☎ 975 22 22 22; Santo Domingo de Silos 3) For ambulances.

Hospital de Santa Barbara (☎ 975 23 43 00; Paseo de Santa Barbara) Soria's most central hospital.

Main post office (☎ 975 23 36 40; Paseo del Espolón 6)

Metropolis (Calle las Navas de Tolosa 17; per hr €3;

1 10am-11pm Mon-Sat) Internet access.

Tourist office (☎ 975 21 20 52; Calle de Medinaceli 2; 1 9am-2pm & 5-8pm mid-Sep-Jun, 9am-8pm Mon-Thu & Sun, 9am-9pm Fri & Sat Jul-mid-Sep)

Sights

CASCO VIEJO & AROUND

The narrow streets of Soria's *casco viejo* (old town) converge on Plaza Mayor, the heart of the quarter. Its appeal lies in its lack of uniformity and in the attractive Renaissance-era *ayuntamiento* (Plaza Mayor) and the *Iglesia de Santa María la Mayor* (Plaza Mayor), with its unadorned Romanesque façade and gloomy, gilt-edge interior. A block north is the majestic, sandstone, 16th-century *Palacio de los Condes Gomara* (Calle de Aguirre), which changes colour with the angle of the sun.

Further north again is the city's most beautiful church, the Romanesque *Iglesia de Santo Domingo* (Calle de Santo Tomé Hospicio; 1 7am-9pm). Its small but exquisitely sculptured portal is something special, especially at sunset when its reddish stone seems to be aglow.

At the *Iglesia de San Juan de Rabanera* (Calle de San Juan de Rabanera), which was first built in the 12th century, hints of Gothic and even

Byzantine art gleam through the mainly Romanesque hue of this building.

Heading east towards Río Duero you pass the *Concatedral de San Pedro* (Calle de San Agustín), with a 12th-century cloister (admission €1; 1 11am-2pm & 4.30-6.30pm Sat, 11am-2pm Sun) as its most charming feature; it's open longer hours in summer. The delicate arches are divided by slender double pillars topped with beautiful capitals adorned with floral, human and animal motifs. Also of note is the Plateresque main façade.

At the western end of the old town, the *Parque Alameda de Cervantes* is a beautifully shady park that's ideal for taking a stroll or having a picnic.

MUSEO NUMANTINO

Archaeology buffs with a passable knowledge of Spanish should enjoy this well organised museum (Paseo del Espolón 8; admission €1.20; 1 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Oct-Jun, 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Jul-Sep), dedicated to finds from ancient sites across the province of Soria (especially Numancia; see p236) – everything from mammoth bones to ceramics and jewellery, all accompanied by detailed explanations of the historical developments in various major Celtiberian and Roman settlements.

BESIDE RÍO DUERO

The most striking of Soria's sights is the 12th-century *Monasterio de San Juan de Duero* (Camino Monte de las Animas; admission €0.60, Sat & Sun free; 1 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Oct-Jun, 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Jul-Sep). What most catches the eye are the exposed and gracefully interlaced arches of the monastery's partially ruined cloister, which artfully blend Mudéjar and Romanesque influences. Inside the church the capitals are worth a closer look for their intense iconography.

A lovely riverside walk south for 1.3km will take you past the 13th-century church of the former Knights Templar, the *Monasterio de San Polo*, to the fascinating, baroque *Ermita de San Saturio* (Paseo de San Saturio; 1 10.30am-2pm & 4.30-8.30pm Tue-Sat, 10.30am-2pm Sun Jul & Aug, 10.30am-2pm & 4.30-7.30pm Tue-Sat, 10.30am-2pm Sun Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 10.30am-2pm & 4.30-6.30pm Tue-Sat, 10.30am-2pm Sun Nov-Mar). This octagonal structure perches right over the cave where Soria's patron saint spent much of his life.

Festivals & Events

Since the 13th century, the 12 *barrios* (districts) of Soria have celebrated, with some fervour, the *Fiestas de San Juan y de la Madre de Dios* during the second half of June. The festivals' main events take place on Jueves (Thursday) La Saca, when each of the districts presents a bull to be fought the next

day. The day following the bullfight some of the animals' meat is auctioned off, after which dancing and general carousing go on until the small hours of Sunday. Hangovers and all, the *cuadrillas* (teams) representing the 12 districts parade in all their glorious finery and perform folk dances the next morning.

SORIA

Scale: 0 to 1 km (0.5 miles)

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Sleeping

Hostal Alvi (☎ 975 22 81 12; hostalalvi@telefonica.net; Calle de Alberca 2; s/d €26/46) Spotless and central, this is one of the best-value places, with good rooms complete with TV and phone. The street itself is not Soria's prettiest, but you're a stone's throw from the centre.

Hostal Centro (☎ 975 22 21 09; www.soriadormir.com; Plaza Mariano Granados 2; s/d €45/48; a) If you're looking for hotel quality at *hostal* prices, Hostal Centro, part of a chain of *hostales* across Soria, promises stylish rooms with outstanding bathrooms, a downtown location and double-glazed windows to keep out the noise.

Hostería Solar de Tejada (☎ 975 23 00 54; www.hosteriasolardetejada.com; Calle de Claustro 1; s/d €47/52) This charming boutique hotel right in the middle of the pedestrianised zone is one of the best choices in Soria. Rooms, each individually designed, have whimsical décor, lots of Bohemian touches and beautifully tiled bathrooms.

Hotel Soria Plaza Mayor (☎ 975 24 08 64; www.hotelsoriaplazamayor.com; Plaza Mayor 10; s €65-85, d €75-95, ste €90-105) An excellent recent addition to the Soria hotel scene, this hotel has terrific rooms, each with their own decoration and all overlooking either the Plaza Mayor or a quiet side street. There are so many balconies in fact that even some bathrooms have them. The suites are *very* comfortable.

Eating

Café Nueva York (Plaza San Blas y el Rosel; h 7am-6pm) This café serves up great breakfasts until noon and is also a good spot to fill up on divine pastries.

Palafox (☎ 975 22 00 76; Calle Vicente Tutor 2; menú €5-7, mains €8-12) This is a classy and, some would say, more reasonably priced alternative, with an intimate dining area, an extensive wine list and professional service. If you can't decide what to eat, check out the list by the door of the year's most popular orders. For some reason, *la manita inocente* (pigs trotters) is always up there.

Casa Augusto (☎ 975 21 30 41; Plaza Mayor 5; starters €5-7, mains €8-12) This is a class act, and some would say, more reasonably priced alternative, with an intimate dining area, an extensive wine list and professional service. If you can't decide what to eat, check out the list by the door of the year's most popular orders. For some reason, *la manita inocente* (pigs trotters) is always up there.

Fogon del Salvador (☎ 975 23 01 94; Plaza El Salvador 1; mains from €13, menú €16) Another Soria culinary stalwart, Fogon del Salvador has a wine list as long as your arm (literally) and a fabulous

wood-fired oven churning out succulent meat-based dishes.

Mesón Castellano (☎ 975 21 30 45; Plaza Mayor 2; mains €13-22) With beamed ceilings and dangling flanks of ham, this is a local institution, with some of the best tapas in town and delicious full meals in its *comedor*. Remember, however, that eating doesn't come cheap. The *cabrito asado* (roast goat kid; €20) is a good order.

Drinking

Plaza San Clemente is perfect for kicking off the *marcha*. Of the handful or so bars around here, **Iruña** (Plaza San Clemente 2) and **Bar Patata** (Plaza San Clemente 1) have the best range of tapas to go with your drinks.

Another good spot to start the evening is Plaza Ramon Benito Aceña, where you'll find the hugely popular **Apolonia** (Plaza Ramon Benito Aceña) and the very cool **Café Latino** (Plaza Ramon Benito Aceña).

A super-cool alternative is **Café-Bar Soho** (☎ 975 22 19 11; Calle de Campo 16; h 8am-late Mon-Sat), which is good at any time of the day. Next door, **Kavanagh's** (Calle de Campo 16; h 11am-late) is your typical Irish pub.

For dancing try any of the late-night clubs that line Rota de Calatañazor, just north of the centre.

Getting There & Away

From the bus station (☎ 975 22 51 60; Avenida de Valladolid), a 15-minute walk west of the centre, there are regular services to Burgos (€9.75, 2½ hours), Logroño (€5.95, 1¾ hours), Madrid (€12.80, 2½ hours) and Valladolid (€12.85, three hours).

Provincial towns such as Medinaceli (€4.25, 45 minutes, two daily), Almazán (€2, 25 minutes, two daily) and Peñafiel (€9.65, 2½ hours, five daily) are served as well.

If you're driving, take the N111 north for Logroño; for Madrid, the same road connects with the N11 south of Soria. The N122 goes west to El Burgo de Osma. Going east, it merges with the A68 to Zaragoza.

Trains connect Soria with Madrid (€12.85, three hours, four daily), but there are few other direct services. The train station (Carretera a Madrid) is 2.5km southwest of the city centre.

Getting Around

Local buses connect the train station with Plaza Ramón Benito Aceña.

AROUND SORIA

Numancia

The mainly Roman ruins of Numancia (☎ 975 18 07 12; admission €0.60, Sat & Sun free; ⌚ 10am-2pm & 5-9pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Jun-Aug), 8km north of Soria, have a lonely, windswept aspect and what remains suggests little of the long history of this city which was inhabited as early as the Bronze Age. Numancia proved one of the most resistant cities to Roman rule – several attempts by the Romans to take control of it were frustrated until finally Scipio, who had crushed Carthage, managed to starve the city into submission in 134 BC. Under Roman rule, Numancia was an important stop on the road from Caesaraugustus (Zaragoza) to Asturica (Astorga). Ceramics unearthed here have revealed an advanced artistic tradition among not only the Romanised inhabitants of the city, but also their Celtiberian forebears. Now the city exists in low-slung, stone outline only.

To get to Numancia, take the N111 for around 5km north of Soria and then follow the signs to Garray. It's open shorter hours from September to May.

Sierra de Urbión & Laguna Negra

The Sierra de Urbión, northwest of Soria, is home to the beautiful Laguna Negra (Black Lake), a small glacial lake that resembles a black mirror at the base of brooding rock walls amid partially wooded hills. Located 18km north of the village of Vinuesa, the lake is reached by a winding and scenic road (there's no public transport) that is bumpy in patches but much better than it used to be. The road ends at a car park, where there's a small information office. It's a further 2km uphill to the lake, either on foot or via the bus (return €1, departing every half-hour from 10am to 2pm and 4pm to 6.30pm) that leaves you 300m short of the lake. From the lake, a steep trail leads up to the Laguna de Urbión in La Rioja or to the summit of the Pico de Urbión, above the village of Duruelo de la Sierra, and on to a series of other tiny glacial lakes.

Vinuesa makes a good base for the area. **Hostal Virginia** (☎ 975 37 85 55; www.hotelvirginia.rh.com; s/d €45/60) offers bright and pleasant rooms with wrought-iron beds; some rooms also have nice views. **Hostal Revinuesa** (☎ 975 37 81 47; s/d Sep-Jun €28/40, Jul & Aug €31/46), next door, has similarly pleasant rooms, some with nice wooden beams. Both places have restaurants.

Camping El Cobijo (☎ 975 37 83 31; www.campincobijo.com; sites per person/tent/car €4.10/3.95/4.10, d bungalows with kitchen €64; ⌚ Easter-Sep; ☔) is the nearest camping ground to the Laguna Negra (free camping is not permitted). It's a pleasant place set among ample greenery, 2km northwest of Vinuesa.

Calatañazor

pop 64 / elevation 1071m

One of Castilla y León's most romantic tiny hilltop villages of stone, Calatañazor, about 30km west of Soria, is a charming detour off the main road. Hardly visible from the highway just a kilometre away, it has a crumbling medieval air as you climb the crooked, cobbled lanes through the town gate and wander through the maze lined by ochre stone and adobe houses topped with red-tile roofs and conical chimneys. Believe it or not, scenes from the movie *Doctor Zhivago* were shot here. Towering above the village is the one-time Muslim fortress which gave the village its name (which comes from the Arabic Qala'at an-Nassur, literally 'the vulture's citadel'). Now in ruins, the views from the extant walls and watchtowers are exceptional, both down over the rooftops and north over a vast field called Valle de la Sangre (Valley of Blood). This was the setting of an epic 1002 battle that saw the Muslim ruler Almanzor defeated.

There are also two tiny museums, a church, artisan shops selling local products and three *casas rurales* if Calatañazor has captured your imagination and you fancy staying the night.

SOUTH OF SORIA

Almazán

pop 5727 / elevation 940m

Three of this small town's massive gates remain to testify to a past more illustrious than the present in this quiet backwater. It frequently changed hands between the Muslims and Christians, and for three short months was chosen by Fernando and Isabel as their residence.

The Romanesque **Iglesia de San Miguel** (☎ 975 31 07 02; Plaza Mayor; ⌚ 10.30am-2pm & 5-7pm Tue-Sun Jul-Oct) sports an unusual octagonal cupola-cum-belltower that reveals Mudéjar influences and a lovely circular apse. Inside is a bas-relief depicting the killing of Thomas à Beckett at the hands of the British king Henry II. The work was commissioned by Henry's

daughter, Eleanor of Aquitaine, the wife of Alfonso VII, as a gesture of penance on behalf of her father.

The attractive façade of the Gothic-Renaissance **Palacio de los Hurtado de Mendoza** looks out over Plaza Mayor. Inside is a nice patio and *artesonado*.

Hotel Villa de Almazán (☎ 975 30 06 11; www.hotelvilladealmazan.com; Avenida de Soria 29; s/d €42/69.50) promises large, well-appointed hotel-style rooms and the best restaurant in town.

There are four daily buses to/from Soria (€2, 30 minutes).

Medinaceli

pop 694 / elevation 1270m

Modern Medinaceli, along a slip road just north of the A2 motorway, is the modern equivalent of a one-horse town, but don't be fooled: old Medinaceli is one of Castilla y León's most rustic and beautiful *pueblos* (villages), draped along a high, windswept ridge 3km to the north. Its most incongruously placed landmark is a 1st-century-AD Roman **Arco Romano** (triumphal arch) overlooking the valleys far below, while there's also the moderately interesting Gothic **Colegiata de Santa María**. But Medinaceli's charm consists of rambling through tranquil cobblestone lanes and being surrounded by delightful stone houses redolent of the noble families that lived here after the town fell to the Reconquista in 1124. The area between Plaza de Santieste and the lovely, partly colonnaded **Plaza Mayor** is where you'll see Medinaceli at its best. The rather forlorn **castillo** stands at the southwestern corner of the village.

You can't miss the **tourist office** (☎ 975 32 63 47; Calle Campo San Nicolás; ⌚ 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Wed-Sun) which is at the entrance to town, just around the corner from the arch.

Lovely La Ceramica (☎ 975 32 63 81; www.laceramicasasarural.es; Calle de Santa Isabel 2; d €49, s/d Fri & Sat with breakfast & dinner €77/154) wins our bet for the friendliest staff, best location in the old town and all-round best deal. The rooms are intimate and comfortable with a strong dose of rustic charm. There's a two-night minimum stay.

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The style of the rooms at **Hostal Rural Bavieca** (☎ 975 32 61 06; www.hostalruralbavieca.com; Calle Campo San Nicolás 6; s/d with breakfast €48.15/69.55, with dinner €60/107) may not be to everyone's taste, but this is unmistakably a boutique hotel that offers high-quality rooms and ambience, although the service is much more personal at La Ceramica.

Both of the above sleeping options have good restaurants – again, La Ceramica is more cosy – but consider also **Asador de la Villa El Granero** (☎ 975 32 61 89; Calle de Yedra 10; mains €11-19; ⌚ lunch Wed-Mon Sep-Jun, lunch & dinner Jul & Aug), which is thought by many to be Medinaceli's best restaurant. The *setas de campo* (wild mushrooms) are something of a local speciality. There's also some local produce for sale here to take home.

Two daily buses to Soria (€4.25, 45 minutes) leave from outside the *ayuntamiento* in the new town. There's no transport between the old and new towns; it's quite a hike.

Santa María de la Huerta

pop 407 / elevation 818m

This dusty, largely insignificant village just short of the Aragonese frontier, contains a wonderful Cistercian monastery (☎ 975 32 70 02; admission €3; ⌚ 10am-1pm & 4-6.30pm Mon-Sat, 10-11.30am & 4-6.30pm Sun), founded in 1162, where monks lived until the monastery was expropriated in 1835. The order was allowed to return in 1930 and 25 Cistercians are now in residence. Before entering the monastery, note the church's impressive 12th-century façade with its magnificent rose window.

Inside the monastery, you pass through two cloisters, the second of which is the more beautiful. Known as the **Claustro de los Caballeros**, it's Spanish Gothic in style, although the medallions on the 2nd floor bearing coats of arms and assorted illustrious busts, such as that of Christopher Columbus, are a successful Plateresque touch. Off this cloister is the *refectorio* (dining hall). Built in the 13th century, it's notable for the absence of columns to support the vault.

A couple of buses per day connect the village with Almazán and Soria.