

## DAY TRIPS

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Located as it is in the geographical heart of Spain, Madrid is an ideal base for exploring the country. While well-developed road and rail networks connect the city to just about anywhere in Spain, there are a host of beautiful historical towns and other extraordinary sights, all of which can easily be visited as a day trip from the capital.

If you're a city person, Toledo, Segovia and Ávila can all be reached in an hour by train. Awash with extraordinary monuments, a visit to any of these cities takes you on a journey through the country's polyglot history, from the soaring Roman remains of Segovia, to the medieval defensive battlements of Ávila and the grand monuments, to religious enlightenment in Toledo.

If you're needing a break from city life, villages like Chinchón and those of the Sierra de Guadarrama or Sierra Pobre provide an antidote to the clamour. In the sierras, you can also leave behind the last outposts of civilisation and hike out into the wilderness and still be back in Madrid for a late dinner. Alcalá de Henares straddles the two experiences, with all the life and energy of an elegant university town grafted onto a place with the intimacy of a large village.

The royals who have always made Madrid their capital also understood that a country retreat was sometimes necessary from all the noise of the city. From a ledge in the mountains to the west of the city, the magnificence of San Lorenzo de El Escorial is one of the most extraordinary palace-monasteries in Spain. South of Madrid, Aranjuez is equally eye-catching, with a stately palace surrounded by monumental gardens that are the height of sophistication. And on any of the day trips covered in this chapter, you'll find restaurants where you can eat like a king.

Although you could easily stray further and make it back to Madrid by nightfall, you'd be rushing to do so. For this reason, we have restricted our coverage in this chapter to places that require no more than a two-hour round trip. We understand, however, that if you have more time, you may wish to stay overnight in cities such as Toledo, Segovia and Ávila with their many attractions – for this reason we've included a handful of sleeping options.

## BEAUTIFUL CITIES

**Toledo** (p242) is a grandly austere city that once rivalled Madrid for the role of capital. Coming here is like stepping back into the Middle Ages, into a history when Christians, Muslims and Jews turned this into one of Spain's most enlightened cities. **Ávila** (p249), too, resonates with history, most notably in its imposing cathedral and encircling medieval walls. The Unesco World Heritage-listed old city of **Segovia** (p245) has an entirely different, light-filled charm as it surveys the surrounding mountains from its hill-top perch. The exceptional **alcázar** (Muslim-era fortress) and Roman-era aqueduct are its signature sights, but it's also a place where eating is an art form.

## ROYAL PLAYGROUNDS

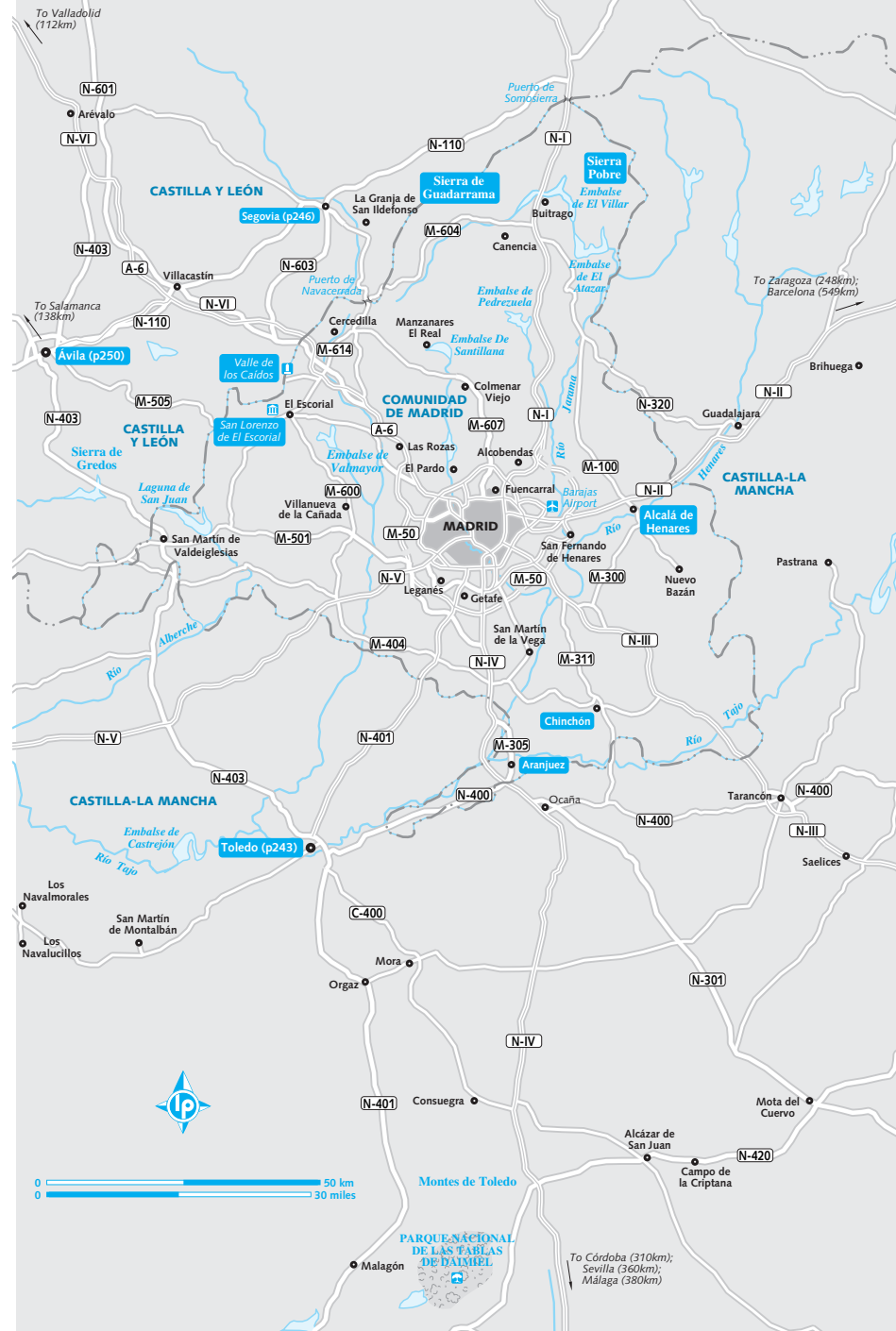
The imposing 16th-century monastery and palace complex of **San Lorenzo de El Escorial** (p252) guards the gateway to Madrid from the north-west and is a terrific excursion. Nearby the **Valle de los Caídos** (p253) is a curious monument to General Francisco Franco's delusions of

grandeur – not royalty, but he would have liked to have been. Graceful **Aranjuez** (p254) is home to a magnificent palace and expansive gardens, and now serves as a fine retreat from the noise and bustle of Madrid just as it did for Spanish royalty down through the ages.

## FIESTAS & FESTIVALS

It's worth planning a trip to coincide with some of the extravagant fiestas going on in the towns around Madrid:

- **Semana Santa** (Easter week) – Elaborate, sombre processions by pointy-hatted penitents fill Toledo, Ávila and Chinchón for one of the year's holiest festivals.
- **Corpus Christi, Toledo** (June) – Several days of festivities culminate in a solemn procession.
- **Fiesta Mayor, Chinchón** (12–18 August) – The town's splendid plaza is turned into a bullring each morning.
- **Santa Teresa, Ávila** (around 15 October) – Held in honour of Saint Teresa, this festival sees the town indulge in days of celebrations and processions.



## VILLAGES & MOUNTAINS

**Chinchón** (p255), southeast of Madrid, has a stunning, ramshackle charm; its uneven, porticoed Plaza Mayor ranks among Spain's most enchanting plazas. Chinchón is also a fine place for eating. **Alcalá de Henares** (p256), east of the capital, has almost outgrown its village origins, but is worth as much time as you can give it. It was the birthplace of Miguel de Cervantes, is still home to one of Spain's oldest universities and is rich in architectural elegance. Protecting Madrid from the north, the **Sierra de Guadarrama** (p256) and **Sierra Pobre** (p257) shelter charming old villages, including **Manzanares El Real** (p256) and **Buitrago** (p257).

## TOLEDO

Toledo is an imperial and imperious city, a one-time crossroads of religions, its architecture looking for all the world like the Middle East grafted onto Spanish soil with mosques, synagogues and a labyrinth of narrow streets, plazas and inner patios. Rising above it all is the Gothic grandeur of the cathedral and forbidding *alcázar*, which survey the surrounding *campesía* from a rocky ridge high above the Río Tajo.

'Toletum', as the Romans called it, was always a strategically important city. In the 6th century it was the capital of the Visigoth empire and after 711 it became an important Muslim centre of power. Under the Muslims Toledo was a flourishing centre of art, culture and religion, a multi-faith city, which was home to peacefully coexisting Jews, Christians and Muslims. Alfonso VI wrestled the city back into Christian hands in 1085, and shortly after it was declared 'the seat of the Church' in Spain. This marked the beginning of a golden age where Toledo's power knew few limits, a state of affairs that lasted through the Inquisition and into the 16th century.

But too powerful for its own good, Toledo was bypassed as capital in 1561 as a nervous Felipe II favoured the more compliant and then-less-grand Madrid as its seat of power. Ever since, Toledo has glowered out across the plains.

The old city and the most important sights are stacked stone upon stone in a crook of the Río Tajo. The hills here make for a steep climb up to the centre; for a more relaxing view of the old city, hop on the **Zoco Tren** (☎ 925 23 22 10; adult/child €4/1.75), a small train that does a 45-minute loop up the hill and through Toledo.

The train leaves hourly and tickets are available from the tourist office.

Toledo lacks a true centre – its rich concentration of monuments is scattered throughout the old city – but the **Plaza de Zocodover**, at the northeastern end of the old city, is a good place to start. This oddly shaped plaza was once an Arab livestock market and later became the main city market, but is now lined with terrace cafés and filled with day-trippers. On the eastern side of the square, pass through the **Arco de la Sangre** (Gate of Blood), which once marked the city's walls, and down to the rewarding **Museo de Santa Cruz** (☎ 925 22 10 36; Calle de Cervantes 3; admission free; ☎ 10am–6.30pm Mon–Sat, 10am–2pm Sun), a splendid early 16th-century pastiche of Gothic and Spanish Renaissance styles, fine cloisters and a number of El Greco paintings, including *La Asunción de la Virgen*.

Up the hill to the south is Toledo's signature fortress, the four-spired **Alcázar**, which began life as a Roman military base, later became an Arab fortress and then a Christian one rebuilt by Alfonso VI in the 11th century. Later, Carlos V converted the harsh square block of a building into a royal visitors palace until it was damaged by fire in 1710. The palace burned again in 1810 (thanks to Napoleon) and was nearly destroyed yet again during the civil war. It remains closed while restoration works prepare it for its new role as the Museo del Ejército (Army Museum). In the meantime, this is the highest point in Toledo and just beyond the *alcázar* to the east are some fine views out over the Río Tajo.

Follow the spires west down the hill to **Catedral de Toledo** (☎ 925 22 22 41; Plaza de Ayuntamiento; adult/child €6/free; ☎ 10.30am–6.30pm Mon–Sat, 2–6pm Sun), the spiritual home of Catholic Spain

### TRANSPORT: TOLEDO

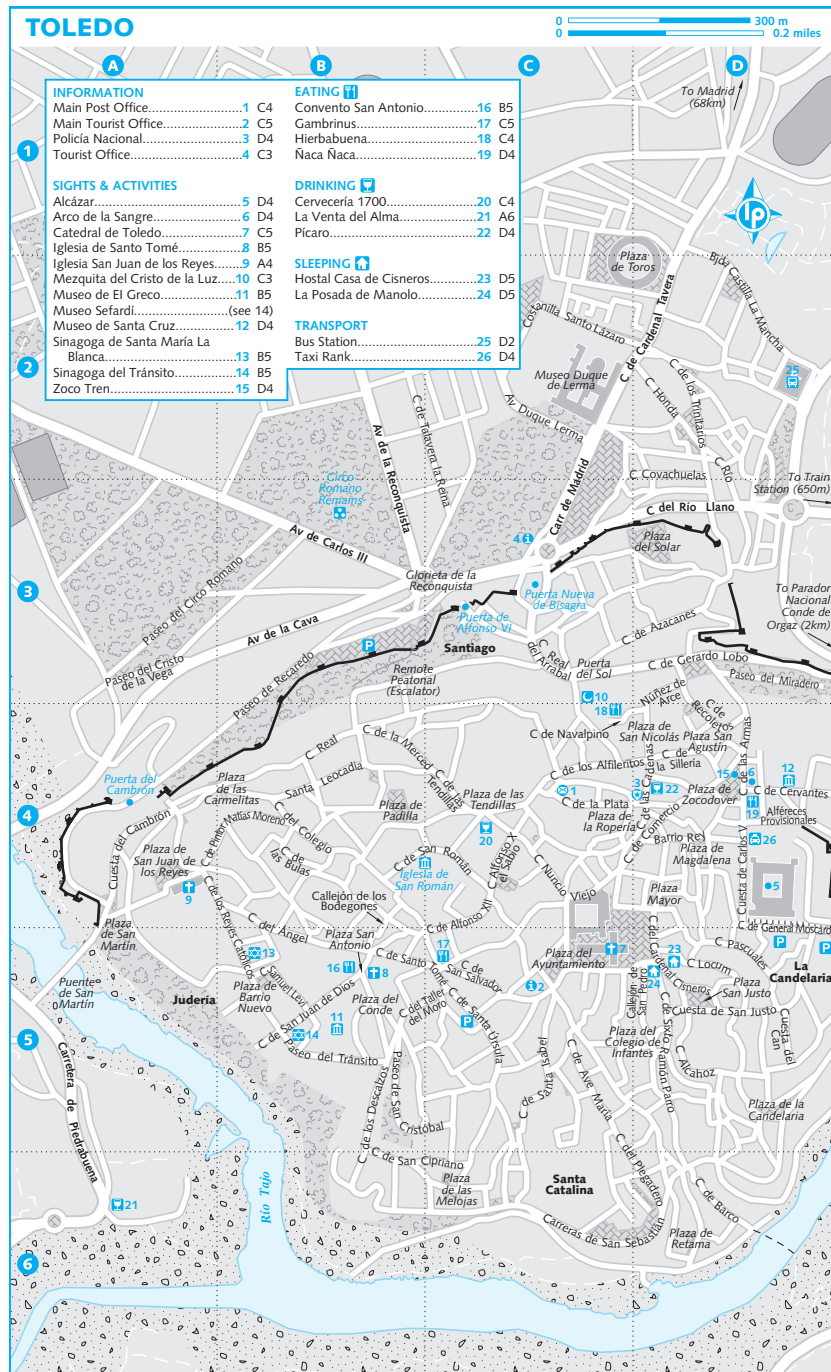
Distance from Madrid 68km

Direction Southwest

**Car** From Madrid, head south on the N-401 highway, which leads to Toledo. In town, follow the signs to the *centro urbano* (town centre). Driving time is 55 minutes.

**Bus** Bargas buses (€3.95) make the 75-minute trip from Madrid's Estación Sur (ticket windows 43–46) to Toledo every half-hour.

**Train** Renfe's new high-speed **AVANT rail link** (☎ 902 240 202; www.renfe.es; one way/return €9/€16) is the best way to get to Toledo, with up to 20 trains daily. The trip takes 30 minutes.



INFORMATION		EATING	
Main Post Office.....	1 C4	Convento San Antonio.....	16 B5
Main Tourist Office.....	2 C5	Gambrinus.....	17 C5
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SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		DRINKING	
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Museo de El Greco.....	11 B5		
Museo Sefaradí.....	(see 14)		
Museo de Santa Cruz.....	12 D4		
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Sinagoga del Tránsito.....	14 B5		
Zoco Tren.....	15 D4		

SLEEPING		TRANSPORT	
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## EL GRECO IN TOLEDO

Few artists are as closely associated with a city as El Greco is with Toledo – many travellers come here for his paintings alone.

Born in Crete in 1541, Domenikos Theotokopoulos (El Greco; the Greek) moved to Venice in 1567 to be schooled as a Renaissance artist. Under the tutelage of masters, such as Tintoretto, he learned to express dramatic scenes with few colours, concentrating the observer's interest in the faces of his portraits and leaving the rest in relative obscurity, a characteristic that remained one of his hallmarks.

El Greco came to Spain in 1577 hoping to get a job decorating El Escorial, although Felipe II rejected him as a court artist. In Toledo, the painter managed to cultivate a healthy clientele and command good prices. His rather high opinion of himself and his work, however, did not endear him to all. He had to do without the patronage of the cathedral administrators, who were the first of many clients to haul him to court for his obscenely high fees. El Greco liked the high life and took rooms in a mansion on the Paseo del Tránsito, where he often hired musicians to accompany his meals.

As Toledo's fortunes declined, so did El Greco's personal finances, and although the works of his final years are among his best, he often found himself unable to pay the rent. He died in 1614, leaving his works scattered about the city.

and one of the largest and most opulent cathedrals in the world. An essentially Gothic creation with a few *mudéjar* (a Moorish architectural style) afterthoughts, it was built in the 13th century atop an earlier mosque. All the chapels and side rooms are worth peeking into, especially the **Capilla de la Torre** (Tower Chapel) in the northwestern corner and the **Sacristía** (Sacristy). The latter boasts a lovely vaulted ceiling and works by El Greco (see the boxed text, *above*), Rubens, Zubarán, Titian and Velázquez, while the Tower Chapel has one of the most extraordinary monstrosities in existence, the 16th-century **Custodia de Arfe**. With 18kg of gold and 183kg of silver, this shimmering mass of metal has an astonishing 260 statuettes. Behind the main altar, the **Transparente** is a mesmerising piece of churrigueresque baroque. A lavish 18th-century embellishment, it also serves to remedy the lack of light in the cathedral.

Down the hill is a cluster of must-sees for El Greco fans, among them the wonderful **Iglesia de Santo Tomé** (☎ 925 25 60 98; www.santotome.org; Plaza del Conde; admission €1.90; ☹ 10am–6pm), which houses arguably El Greco's greatest work, *El Entierro del Conde de Orgaz* (The Burial of the Count of Orgaz). The painting tells the legend of the pious count's funeral in 1323, when St Augustine and St Steven appeared to lay the body in the tomb. Among the onlookers are El Greco himself and Cervantes. The **Museo de El Greco** (☎ 925 22 40 46; Calle Samuel Levi; admission €2.40; ☹ 10am–2pm & 4–6pm Tue–Sat, 10am–2pm Sun, until 9pm summer Tue–Sat) is nearby, with around two dozen of the master's minor works, although it, too, was closed for restoration at the time of research.

You're now in the heart of the **judería** (Toledo's old Jewish Quarter). Here, the **Sinagoga**

**del Tránsito** (☎ 925 22 36 65; Calle Samuel Levi; adult/child €2.40/1.20; ☹ 10am–2pm & 4–9pm Tue–Sat Mar–Nov, 10am–2pm & 4–6pm Tue–Sat Dec–Feb) should on no account be missed. Built in 1355 by special permission of Pedro I (construction of synagogues was by then prohibited in Christian Spain), the rich *mudéjar* decoration in the main prayer hall has been expertly restored. It's now the **Museo Sefardi**, which provides an insight into the history of Jewish culture in Spain.

A short way northwest, the **Sinagoga de Santa María La Blanca** (☎ 925 22 72 57; Calle de los Reyes Católicos 4; admission €1.90; ☹ 10am–6pm Nov–Mar, 10am–7pm Apr–Oct) is less grand but definitely worthwhile for its 29 horseshoe arches. Further along Calle de los Reyes Católicos is the imposing **Iglesia San Juan de los Reyes** (☎ 925 22 38 02; Plaza de San Juan de los Reyes; admission €1.90; ☹ 10am–6pm Oct–Mar, 10am–6.45pm Apr–Sep), a fine Franciscan monastery and church with tranquil cloisters and the chains of Christian prisoners liberated in Granada dangling from the walls.

For a glimpse of Muslim Toledo, head to the **Mezquita del Cristo de la Luz** (☎ 925 25 41 91; Cuesta de los Carmelitas Descalzas 10; admission €1.90; ☹ 10am–2pm & 3.30–6pm Oct–Mar, until 7pm Apr–Sep). During Muslim rule, there were 10 mosques in the city; this one, quite beautiful, is typical of its style and is the only one that remains.

## INFORMATION

**Policía Nacional** (☎ 092; Plaza de la Ropería)

**Main Post Office** (☎ 925 49 04 21; Calle de la Plata 1; ☹ 8.30am–8.30pm Mon–Fri, 9.30am–2pm Sat)

**Main Tourist Office** (☎ 925 25 40 30; www.t-descubre.com; Plaza del Ayuntamiento; ☹ 10.30am–2.30pm Mon, 10.30am–2.30pm & 4.30–7pm Tue–Sun) Across from the cathedral.

**Tourist Office** (☎ 925 22 08 43; Carretera de Madrid; ☹ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–7pm Sat, 9am–3pm Sun) Outside the Puerta Nueva de Bisagra.

## EATING

Of Toledo's specialities, *cuchifritos* (a potpourri of lamb, tomato and egg cooked in white wine with saffron) is especially good, while *carcamusa* (a pork dish) is also popular. Otherwise, it's good, hearty Castilian fare.

**Hierbabuena** (☎ 925 22 39 24; Calle de Navalpino 45; meals €35–40; ☹ lunch & dinner Mon–Sat, lunch only Sun) Expensive but imaginatively classy, Hierbabuena is a dress-for-dinner restaurant serving food that's a cut above the usual traditional cooking with plenty of steaks, pâté and tasty meals.

**Gambrinus** (☎ 925 21 44 40; Calle de Santo Tomé; raciones €5–14, menú del día €9.50) As good for a meal as for beer and tapas, this place has pleasant outdoor tables and it does Tex-Mex if you're after something a little more spicy.

**Ñaca Ñaca** (Plaza de Zocodover; bocadillos €2.50–4; ☹ 9am–11pm Mon–Thu, 9am–4am Fri, 9am–6am Sat, 11am–11pm Sun) This place is good for chunky *bocadillos* (filled rolls) deep into the night.

**Convento San Antonio** (☎ 925 22 40 47; Plaza San Antonio 1; ☹ 11.15am–1.30pm & 4–6pm) The Franciscan nuns here sell their sweet speciality, *corazones de San Antonio* (San Antonio hearts) for €8 a box.

## DRINKING

**Cervecería 1700** (☎ 925 22 25 60; Plaza de las Tendillas 1; ☹ 10am–11pm Mon–Sat) The tables of this relaxed beer bar spill out onto the cobblestones and it serves decent tapas to accompany your drink.

**La Venta del Alma** (☎ 925 25 42 45; Carretera de Piedrabuena 35; ☹ 3.30pm–2am Sun–Thu, 3.30pm–6am Fri & Sat) Mild-mannered during the day, La Venta del Alma really gets going on Friday and Saturday. It's just outside the city; cross Puente de San Martín, turn left up the hill and it's 200m up on your left.

**Picaro** (☎ 925 22 13 01; Calle de las Cadenas 6; ☹ 4pm–2.30am Sun–Wed, 4pm–6am Thu–Sat) Picaro is a popular *café-teatro* (theatre) serving an eclectic range of *copas* (drinks) and there's live music every Friday night. It really gets going after 2.30am on weekends.

## SLEEPING

Toledo's charms can be diminished somewhat when it's overwhelmed by tour groups, so staying after dusk rewards those eager to ex-

perience the city when it returns to the locals and the streets take on a brooding, otherworldly air.

**Hostal Casa de Cisneros** (☎ 925 22 88 28; www.hostal-casa-de-cisneros.com; Calle del Cardinal Cisneros s/n; d Sun–Thu/Fri & Sat €60/75) Just across from the cathedral, this upmarket *hostal* is built on the site of an 11th-century Muslim palace, which is visible through the lobby floor. The rooms are decked out in stone and pretty wood beams and have renovated bathrooms.

**La Posada de Manolo** (☎ 925 28 22 50; www.laposadademano.com; Calle de Sixto Ramón Parro 8; s €42–50, d €72–85) This boutique hotel has themed each floor with furnishings and décor reflecting one of the 'three cultures' of Toledo. The views of the old city and cathedral from the rooftop terrace are stunning.

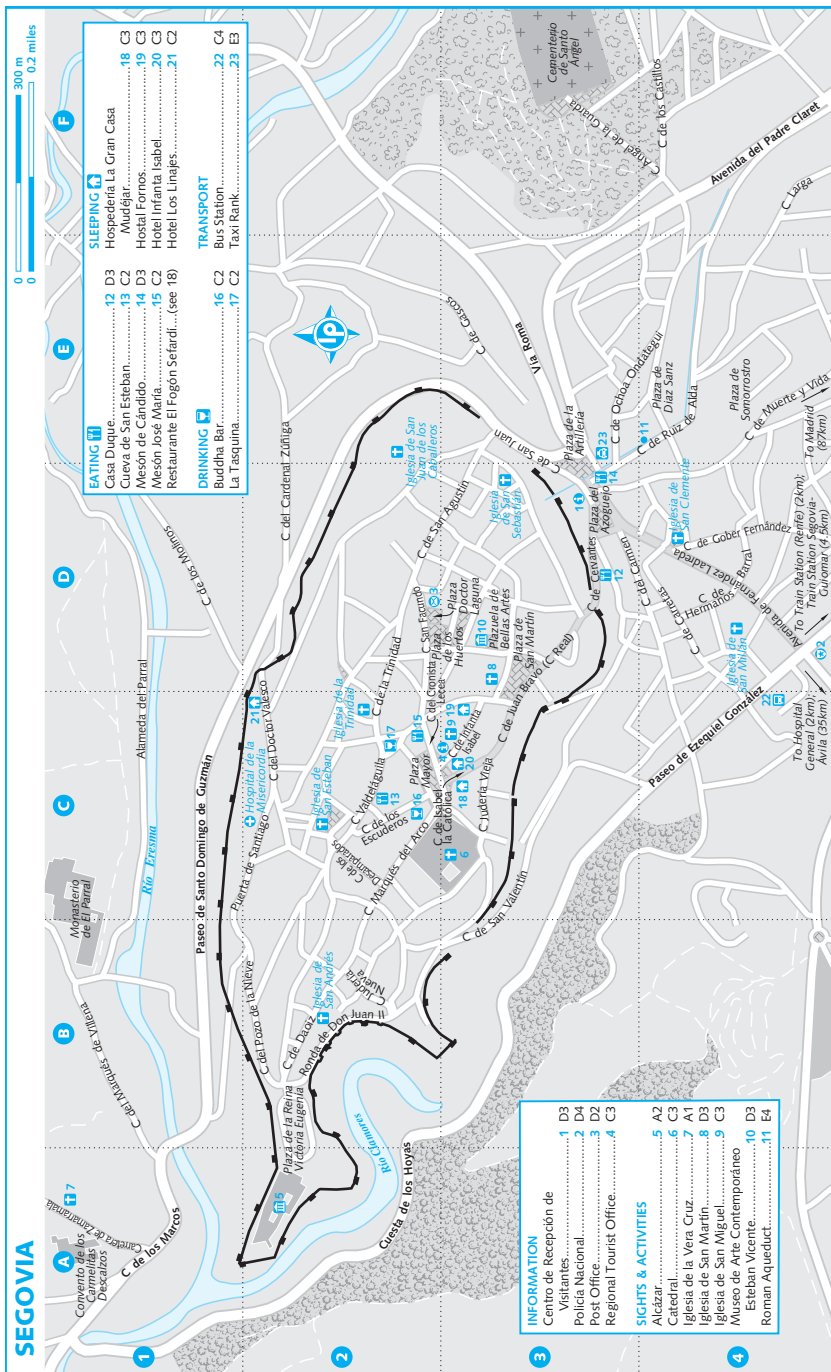
**Parador Nacional Conde de Orgaz** (☎ 925 22 18 50; www.parador.es; s/d from €115/160, d with views from €185) High above the southern bank of the Río Tajo, Toledo's parador boasts a classy interior and breathtaking views of the city.

## SEGOVIA

Strewn with monuments and filled with life, this beautiful town was inscribed on Unesco's World Heritage List for its extraordinary Roman aqueduct, fine medieval monuments, fairytale *alcázar* and lovely setting amid the rolling hills of Castile.

Segovia has always had a whiff of legend about it. Perhaps it's because some city historians have claimed that Segovia was founded by Hercules or by the son of Noah. It may also have something to do with the fact that nowhere else in Spain has such a stunning monument to Roman grandeur survived in the heart of a vibrant modern city. Or maybe it's because art really has imitated life Segovia style – Walt Disney is said to have modelled Sleeping Beauty's Castle in California's Disneyland on Segovia's *alcázar*. Whatever it is, the effect is stunning with a city of warm terracotta and sandstone hues set against the backdrop of the often-snowcapped Sierra de Guadarrama.

The medieval walled city is in the far western corner of modern Segovia. The **11th-century walls** stretch from the Roman aqueduct to the *alcázar* on the edge of town, encompassing just about everything worth seeing in a short visit. Two major plazas, the **Plaza del Azoguejo** near the aqueduct and the **Plaza Mayor** by the cathedral, are the nerve centres of the city. The



lively commercial streets of **Calle de Cervantes** and **Calle de Juan Bravo** (together referred to as '**Calle Real**') serve as the main artery connecting the two plazas.

Start your visit at the **Roman aqueduct** (El Acueducto), an 894m-long engineering wonder that looks like an enormous comb plunged into Segovia. It's 28m-high, has 163 arches and was built without a drop of mortar, just good old Roman know-how using more than 20,000 uneven granite blocks. It was most probably built around AD 50 to bring water to the Roman settlement from 18km away. The aqueduct's pristine condition is attributable to a major restoration project in the 1990s.

From the Plaza del Azoguejo, climb Calle Real into the ancient heart of Segovia, passing the sunny **Plaza de San Martín**, crowned with the lovely 13th-century Romanesque **Iglesia de San Martín** (☞ before & after Mass), with a *mudéjar* tower and arched gallery. The interior boasts a Flemish Gothic chapel. Well worth a brief detour is the **Museo de Arte Contemporáneo Esteban Vicente** (☎ 921 46 20 10; www.museoestebanvicente.es; Plazuela de las Bellas Artes; admission €2.40, free Thu; ☞ 11am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue & Wed, 11am-2pm & 4-8pm Thu & Fri, 11am-8pm Sat, 11am-3pm Sun), which showcases modern artworks in a 15th-century palace of Enrique IV, complete with Renaissance chapel and *mudéjar* ceiling.

Calle de Isabel la Católica leads to the shady, elongated **Plaza Mayor**, which is adorned by a fine pavilion. At the western end of the plaza the **Catedral** (☎ 921 46 22 05; Plaza Mayor; admission €3; ☞ 9.30am-5.30pm Oct-Mar, 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Sep) towers over the plaza. Completed in 1577, 50 years after its Romanesque predecessor had been destroyed in the revolt of the Comuneros, the cathedral is one of the most homogenous Gothic churches in Spain. The austere, three-naved interior is delicate and refined, with a handful of side chapels, a fine choir stall and

## 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 throughout 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 unawares 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.

stained-glass windows dating from the 1600s. You can visit the cloister and museum, with its fantastic collection of sacred art and 17th-century Belgian tapestries. The smaller **Iglesia de San Miguel** recedes humbly into the shadows by comparison to the cathedral, despite its historical significance – Isabel was crowned Queen of Castile in this small church.

From the Plaza Mayor head down Calle Marqués del Arco to reach the fortified **alcázar** (☎ 921 46 07 59; www.alcazardesegovia.com; Plaza de la Reina Victoria Eugenia; admission €4, tower €2, free 3rd Tue month for EU citizens; ☞ 10am-6pm Oct-Mar, 10am-7pm Apr-Sep), a fairytale castle perched dramatically on the western edge of Segovia. Fortified since Roman times, the site takes its name from the Arabic *al-qasr* (castle), but what you see today is a reconstruction of a 13th-century structure that burned to the ground in 1862. Inside is an interesting collection of armour and military gear, but even better are the 360-degree views from the *alcázar's* tower overlooking the hills and pastures of Castile.

From here you can make out one of Segovia's most interesting churches, the 12-sided

## TRANSPORT: SEGOVIA

Distance from Madrid 90km

Direction Northwest

**Car** From Madrid, take the A-6 motorway to the N-603 national highway, which will take you to the city centre. Driving time is 1¼ hours.

**Bus** Buses of **La Sepulvedana** (☎ 921 42 77 07; Paseo de Ezequiel González) leave every half-hour from Madrid's Paseo de la Florida bus stop and arrive in Segovia's central bus station ½ hours later. Tickets cost €5.87.

**Train** There are two options by train, both operated by **Renfe** (☎ 902 240 202; www.renfe.es). Up to nine normal trains run daily from Madrid to Segovia (two hours, one way €5.90), leaving you at the main train station 2.5km from the aqueduct. The faster option is the high-speed AVE (35 minutes, one way €9), which deposits you at the new Segovia-Guiomar station, 5km from the aqueduct.

**Iglesia de la Vera Cruz** (Church of the True Cross; ☎ 921 43 14 75; Carretera de Zamarramala; admission €1.75; 🕒 10.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-7pm Tue-Sun Mar-Aug; 10.30am-1.30pm & 4-6pm Tue-Sun Sep-Feb), built in the 13th century following the floor plan of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. A relic of what was said to be the 'true cross' was once housed in the church. For great views of the town and countryside, hike uphill behind the church.

## INFORMATION

**Centro de Recepción de Visitantes** (Tourist Office; ☎ 921 466 720; www.turismodesegovia.com; Plaza del Azoguejo 1; 🕒 10am-7pm Sun-Fri, 10am-8pm Sat)

**Policía Nacional** (☎ 091; Paseo de Ezequiel González 22; 🕒 24hr)

**Post Office** (☎ 921 461 616; Plaza Doctor Laguna 5; 🕒 8.30am-8.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-2pm Sat)

**Regional Tourist Office** (☎ 921 460 334, 902 203 030; www.turismocastillayleon.com; Plaza Mayor 10; 🕒 9am-2pm & 5-8pm mid-Sep–June, 9am-8pm Sun-Thu, 9am-9pm Fri & Sat Jul–mid-Sep)

## EATING

If you love your meat, you'll love Segovia. People come here from all over Spain for delicious *cochinillo asado* (roasted suckling pig) and *asado de cordero* (roasted lamb). Reservations are highly recommended, especially on weekends.

**Casa Duque** (☎ 921 46 24 87; www.restauranteduque.es; Calle de Cervantes 12; menú del día €21-39.50; 🕒 lunch & dinner daily) This place has been serving suckling pig (€19) since the 1890s and long ago mastered the art. For the uninitiated, try its *menú segoviano* (€31), which includes *cochinillo*, or the *menú gastronómico* (€39.50), which gives a taste of many local specialities. Downstairs is the informal *cueva* (cave), where you can get tapas and yummy *cazuelas* (stews).

**Mesón de Cándido** (☎ 921 42 59 11; www.mesondecandido.es; Plaza del Azoguejo 5; meals €30-40; 🕒 lunch & dinner daily) Set in a delightful 18th-century building in the shadow of the aqueduct, Mesón del Cándido is famous throughout Spain for its suckling pig and roast lamb.

**Mesón José María** (☎ 921 46 11 11; www.rtejosemaria.com, in Spanish; Calle del Cronista Lecea 11; meals €30-40; 🕒 lunch & dinner daily) Close to Plaza Mayor, this *mesón* offers great tapas in the bar and five dining rooms serving exquisite *cochinillo* (€21.35) and other local specialities.

**Cueva de San Esteban** (☎ 921 46 09 82; www.lacueva.destanesteban.com, in Spanish; Calle Valdeláguila 15; meals €35; 🕒 11am-midnight) One of the only restaurants in Segovia not devoted to suckling pig, this popular spot focuses on seasonal dishes, with a few Galician treats and an excellent wine list.

**Restaurante El Fogón Sefardi** (☎ 921 46 62 50; www.lacasamudejar.com; Calle de Isabel La Católica 8; meals €30-40; 🕒 lunch & dinner daily) This place serves Sephardi cuisine in a restaurant with an intimate patio or a splendid dining hall with original, 15th-century *mudéjar* flourishes. There are also cheaper Sephardi tapas in the bar downstairs, as well as *cochinillo* in the main restaurant.

## DRINKING

By night, head for Calle de Infanta Isabel, which is known locally as the 'Calle de los Bares' (Street of the Bars). This is the destination for serious drinking, cheap eating and merriment all around.

**La Tasquina** (☎ 921 461 954; Calle de Valdeláguila 3; 🕒 9pm-late) Just off Plaza Mayor, this wine bar spills out onto the footpath and you can get good wines, *cavas* (sparkling wines) and cheeses.

**Buddha Bar** (Calle de los Escuderos; 🕒 9pm-late) Located on another lively bar-filled street in the area, Buddha Bar has lounge music that can turn more towards house as the night wears on.

## SLEEPING

You can get a taste of Segovia as a day trip from Madrid, but there are outstanding hotel choices if you'd like to linger longer.

**Hospedería La Gran Casa Mudéjar** (☎ 921 46 62 50; www.lacasamudejar.com; Calle de Infanta Isabel 8; d €60-160) Spread over two buildings, this place has been magnificently renovated, blending genuine, 15th-century *mudéjar* ceilings with modern amenities. In the newer wing, where the building dates from the 19th century, the rooms on the top floors have fine mountain views out over the rooftops of Segovia's old Jewish quarter.

**Hostal Fornos** (☎ 921 46 01 98; www.hostalfornos.com, in Spanish; Calle de Infanta Isabel 13; s €34-41, d €48-55) This tidy little hostel has a cheerful air thanks to its tasteful rooms, which have that fresh white-linen-and-wicker-chair look. Some are a bit larger than others, but the value is unimpeachable.

**Hotel Los Linajes** (☎ 921 46 04 75; www.hotelloslinajes.com; Calle del Doctor Valesco 9; s €66-78, d €89-106) For some of the best views in Segovia, Hotel Los Linajes is exceptionally good. The rooms are large, filled with character and all look out onto the hills; many also have cathedral and/or *alcázar* views.

**Hotel Infanta Isabel** (☎ 921 46 13 00; www.hotelinfantaisabel.com; Plaza Mayor 12; s €64-128, d €83-128) Sitting right on Plaza Mayor, this charming hotel is a fine choice. The colonnaded building provides some hint to the hotel's interior, where the large rooms have period furnishings and plenty of character. Those with balconies overlooking the Plaza Mayor are the best.

## ÁVILA

The walled city of Ávila is one of Spain's most spectacular skylines. This is also a deeply religious city of pilgrims and churches, a city whose austere architecture and hearty cuisine fortifies the inhabitants against the elements in the same way that the walls have always protected Ávila against the armies that buffeted the city down through the centuries. As such Ávila is the essence of Castile, the epitome of old Spain.

Medieval kingdoms battled over Ávila for centuries and each ruler in his turn reinforced

the city until it reached its current, stunning manifestation of eight monumental gates, 88 watchtowers and more than 2500 turrets (to protect archers); the walls are illuminated to magical effect at night. If you're here in winter when an icy wind whistles in off the plains, it can seem as if the walls were built to protect the city from the harsh Castilian climate – Ávila is one of the highest and windiest cities in Spain and winters can be bitterly cold – with the old city huddling behind the high stone walls. Within the walls, Ávila can appear as if caught in a time warp. Its many churches, convents and high-walled palaces, all built of sombre stone, date back to the city's golden age, the 15th century, when the city's defining figure, Santa Teresa (see boxed text, below), was born. Shortly after her death in 1582, the city's fortunes began a downward spiral that ended in its economic ruin; Ávila has only recently shaken off its slumber.

The **Catedral** (☎ 920 21 16 41; Plaza de la Catedral; admission €4; 🕒 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-8pm Sat, noon-6pm Sun Jun-Sep, shorter hours rest of year) is embedded in the eastern wall of the old city. Although the main façade hints at the cathedral's 12th-century, Romanesque origins, the church was finished 400 years later in a predominantly Gothic style, making it the first Gothic church in Spain. The grey, sombre façade betrays

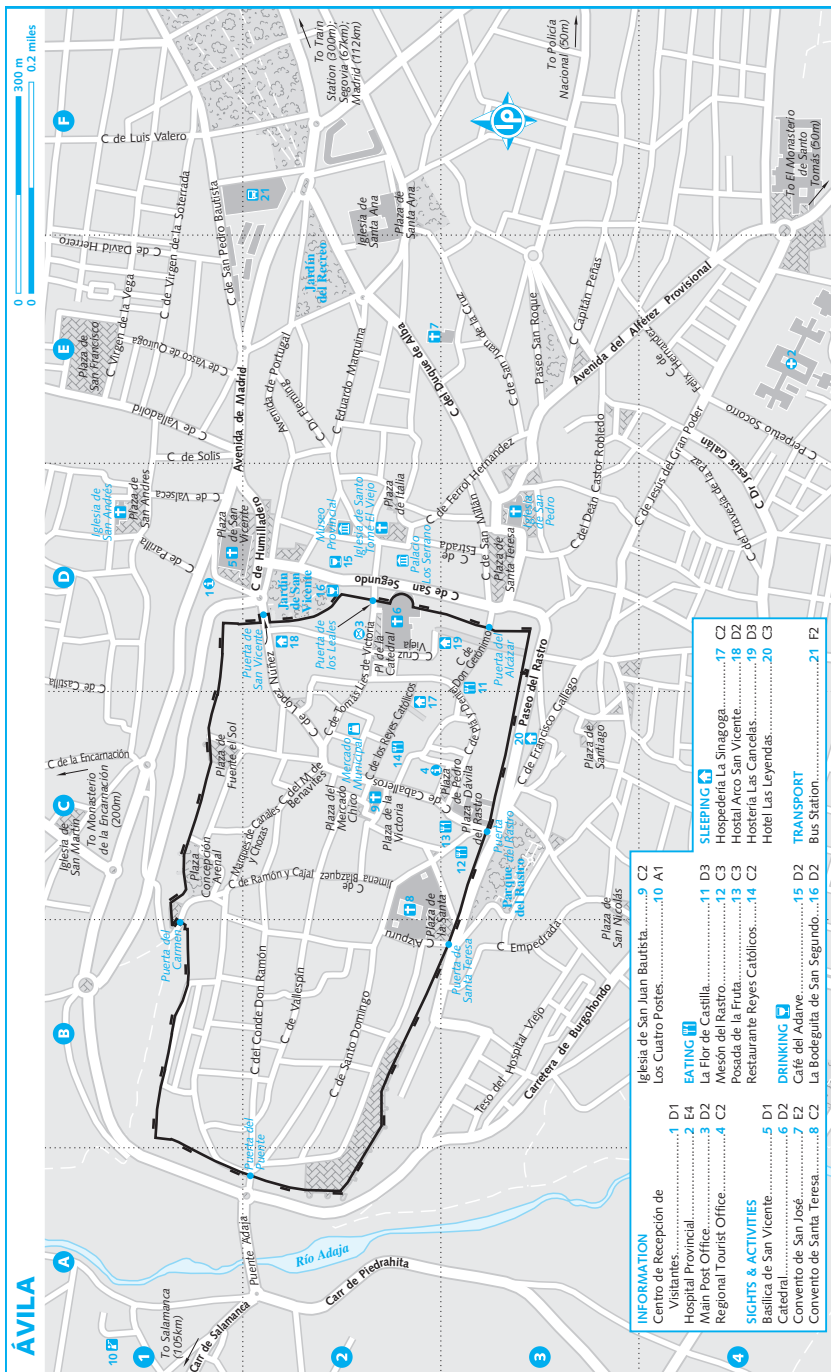
## IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF SANTA TERESA

Probably the most important woman in the history of the Catholic church in Spain, Santa Teresa spent most of her life in Ávila. From the convent, plaza and gate that bear her name to the sweet *yemas de Santa Teresa* (yummy biscuits made with egg yolk and supposedly invented by the saint) her trail seems to cover every inch of the city.

Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada – a Catholic mystic and reformer – was born in Ávila on 28 March 1515, one of 10 children of a merchant family. Raised by Augustinian nuns after her mother's death, she joined the Carmelite order at age 20. After her early, undistinguished years as a nun, she was shaken by a vision of Hell in 1560, which crystallised her true vocation: she would reform her order.

With the help of many supporters Teresa founded convents of the Carmelitas Descalzas (Shoeless Carmelites) all over Spain. She also co-opted San Juan de la Cruz (St John of the Cross) to begin a similar reform in the masculine order, a task that earned him several stints of incarceration by the mainstream Carmelites. Santa Teresa's writings were first published in 1588 and proved enormously popular, perhaps partly for their earthy style. She died in 1582 in Alba de Tormes, where she is buried. She was canonised by Pope Gregory XV in 1622.

After a visit to the **Convento de Santa Teresa** (☎ 920 21 10 30; Plaza de la Santa; museum/relic room/church €2/free/free; 🕒 museum 10am-1.30pm & 3.30-5.30pm Nov-Mar, 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct-7pm, relic room 9.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-7.30pm Tue-Sun, church 8.45am-1.30pm & 3.30-9pm Tue-Sun), you can pop into the nearby **Iglesia de San Juan Bautista** (☎ 920 21 11 27; Plaza de la Victoria; admission free; 🕒 before & after Mass), where she was baptised. The first convent she founded, **Convento de San José** (☎ 920 22 21 27; Calle del Duque de Alba; admission €1.20; 🕒 10am-1.30pm & 3-6pm Nov-Mar, 🕒 10am-1.30pm & 4-7pm Apr-Oct), is here, too, and you can visit its small museum packed with Teresa artefacts and memorabilia. To see a replica of her monastic cell, head to the **Monasterio de la Encarnación** (☎ 920 21 12 12; Paseo de la Encarnación; admission €1.70; 🕒 9.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm & 4-6pm Sat & Sun, closing time 1hr later May-Sep) outside the city walls where she lived and worked for 27 years.



some unhappy 18th-century meddling in the main portal, but within are rich walnut choir stalls, a dazzling altar painting begun by Pedro de Berruguete showing the life of Jesus in 24 scenes and a long, narrow central nave that makes the soaring ceilings seem all the more majestic. The cloisters, sacristy and small museum are superb; the latter includes a painting by El Greco.

Among Ávila's highlights are splendid **12th-century walls** (murallas; ☎ 920 21 13 87; admission €2.50/4), which rank among the world's best-preserved medieval defensive perimeters. At the time of writing, the two access points are at the **Puerta del Alcázar** (☎ 11am-6pm Tue-Sun Oct-Apr, 11am-8pm Tue-Sun May-Sep) and the **Puerta de los Leales** (Casa de las Carnicerías; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Oct-Apr, 10am-8pm Tue-Sun May-Sep), which allow walks of 300m and 800m respectively; the same ticket allows you to climb both sections of the wall. By the time you read this, a third section of the wall from **Puerta del Carmen** to **Puerta del Puente** should have opened. The most impressive gates are the **Puerta de San Vicente** and **Puerta del Alcázar**, which are flanked by towers more than 20m high and stand on either side of the cathedral's apse. The last tickets are sold 45 minutes before closing time.

From close to the Plaza de la Catedral, the pedestrianised **Calle de los Reyes Católicos**, which is lined with shops and bars, runs down into the pretty **Plaza del Mercado Chico**. Southwest of the plaza, the **Convento de Santa Teresa** is even more beloved by locals and pilgrims than the cathedral because it was built on the site where Santa Teresa was born. This church was built in 1636 and today you can see its simple interior and the gold-smothered chapel that sits atop Teresa's former bedroom, though more interesting are the relics (including a piece of the saint's ring finger!) and the small museum about her life.

So much of Ávila's religious architecture is brooding and sombre, but the graceful

**Basílica de San Vicente** (☎ 920 25 52 30; admission €1.20; ☎ 10am-1.30pm & 4-6pm) is a masterpiece of the subdued elegance of the Romanesque style. 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 with nods to the Gothic.

Just northwest of the city on the road to Salamanca, **Los Cuatro Postes** affords the finest views of Ávila's walls; it 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.

## INFORMATION

**Centro de Recepción de Visitantes** (Tourist Office; ☎ 902 102 121; www.avilaturismo.com; Avenida de Madrid 39; ☎ 10am-6pm Nov-Mar, 9am-8pm Apr-Oct)

**Hospital Provincial** (☎ 920 35 72 00; Calle de Jesús del Gran Poder 42; ☎ 24hr)

**Main Post Office** (☎ 920 31 35 06; Plaza de la Catedral 2; ☎ 8.30am-8.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-2pm Sat)

**Policía Nacional** (☎ 091; Paseo San Roque 34; ☎ 24hr)

**Regional Tourist Office** (☎ 920 21 13 87; www.turismocastillayleon.com; Plaza de Pedro Dávila 4; ☎ 9am-2pm & 5-8pm mid-Sep–Jun, 9am-8pm Sun-Thu, 9am-9pm Fri & Sat Jul–mid-Sep) Run by the Castilla y León regional government.

## EATING

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

**Mesón del Rastro** (☎ 920 21 12 19; Plaza del Rastro 1; menú del día €20; ☎ lunch & dinner Thu-Sat, lunch only Sun-Wed) The dining room at Mesón del Rastro,

## TRANSPORT: ÁVILA

Distance from Madrid 101km

Direction West

**Car** From Madrid, take the A-6 motorway northwest, then take the N-110 west. Driving time is around one hour; the toll costs €6.85.

**Bus** Up to nine buses run by **Larrea/La Sepulvedana** (☎ 902 222 282; www.lasepulvedana.es, in Spanish) connect Madrid's Estación Sur and Ávila (1hr 20 mins, €7.09) from Monday to Friday, with around five daily on weekends. Contact the **bus station** (☎ 920 25 65 05; Avenida de Madrid 2) for more information.

**Train** The company **Renfe** (☎ 902 240 202; www.renfe.es) has up to 30 trains to Ávila daily. The trip takes up to two hours (one way from €6.50), although the occasional train runs express, takes 1¼ hours and costs €8.40.

with its dark-wood beams, announces immediately that this is a bastion of Castilian cooking. Expect hearty, delicious mainstays, such as *chuleton de avileño* (€13), *judías del barco de Ávila* (€7) and *cordero asado* (roast lamb; €15).

**Restaurante Reyes Católicos** (☎ 920 25 56 27; Calle de los Reyes Católicos 6; meals €25-35, menú del día €16.90; ☎ lunch & dinner daily) Most *asadors* (restaurants serving roasted meats) in Ávila are old-school with dark, wood-panelled dining areas, whereas this slick, modern restaurant is a refreshing change. The cuisine offers a mix of traditional and fusion dishes. The restaurant has a range of set menus (€18 to €48) in addition to the *menú del día*; at lunchtime from Monday to Friday, don't be shy to ask for the latter even as it tries to steer you towards à la carte choices.

**Posada de la Fruta** (☎ 920 22 09 84; Plaza de Pedro Dávila 8; meals €10-18; ☎ lunch & dinner daily) Simple, informal meals can be had at the café-bar in a light-filled, covered courtyard, while the traditional *comedor* (dining room) serves *menús* (fixed-price meals) and à la carte dishes.

**La Flor de Castilla** (☎ 920 25 28 66; Calle de San Gerónimo; ☎ 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Mon-Sat) This is a fine place to buy the *yema de Santa Teresa*, a sticky ultrasweet biscuit made of egg yolk and sugar, which is said to have been invented by the saint.

## DRINKING

**La Bodeguita de San Segundo** (☎ 920 22 59 17; www.vinoavila.com, in Spanish; Calle de San Segundo 19; ☎ 11am-midnight Thu-Tue) This gem of a wine and tapas bar is standing-room only most nights and more tranquil in the quieter afternoon hours. The setting in the 16th-century Casa de la Misericordia is superb and the wines here are excellent.

**Café del Adarve** (Calle de San Segundo 40; ☎ 5pm-late) About as lively as Ávila gets, Café del Adarve has quirky décor, weekend DJs and occasional live music during winter.

## SLEEPING

Given that Ávila nights can be pretty quiet, the only real reason to linger after dark (or overnight) is to catch a glimpse of the city's walls lit up like in a fairytale.

**Hospedería La Sinagoga** (☎ 920 35 23 21; lasinagoga@vodafone.es; Calle de los Reyes Católicos 22; s/d/tr from €53/74/106) This delightful little hotel incorpo-

rates details from Ávila's main 15th-century synagogue with bright, spacious rooms. Rates for doubles can drop to as low as €42 on weekdays in winter.

**Hostal Arco San Vicente** (☎ 920 22 24 98; www.arcosanvicente.com; Calle de López Núñez 6; s €45-50, d €60-70) Another terrific option, this engaging *hostal* has lovely, brightly painted rooms and friendly owners. The location, just inside the city walls, is also a winner.

**Hostería Las Cancelas** (☎ 920 21 22 49, www.lascancelas.com; Calle de la Cruz Vieja 6; s/d/tr from €53/76/107; ☎ Feb-Dec) Tucked away behind the cathedral close to the Puerta del Alcázar, this place has large rooms with traditional furniture. The restaurant is equally good.

**Hotel Las Leyendas** (☎ 920 35 20 42; www.lasleyendas.es; Calle de Francisco Gallego 3; s €55-67, d €67-85) Occupying the house of 16th-century Ávila nobility, this intimate hotel is wonderful, with period touches (original wooden beams, exposed brickwork) wedded to modern amenities.

## SAN LORENZO DE EL ESCORIAL

Home to the majestic monastery and palace complex of **San Lorenzo de El Escorial** (☎ 91 890 78 18; www.patrimoniacional.es; admission €8, free Wed for EU citizens, combined ticket with Valle de los Caídos €8.50; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar), this one-time royal getaway rises up from the foothills of the mountains that shelter Madrid from the north and west. Although it attracts its fair share of foreign tourists, this prim little town is overflowing with quaint shops, restaurants and hotels (many of which close when things are quiet) that cater primarily to madrileños who are intent on escaping the city on weekends: the fresh, cool air, among other things, has been drawing city dwellers here since the complex was first built on the orders of King Felipe II in the 16th century. Admission to the basilica is free.

Several villages were razed to make way for the massive project, which included a monastic centre, a decadent royal palace and a mausoleum for Felipe's parents, Carlos I and Isabel. Architect Juan de Herrera oversaw the project.

The *monastery's* main entrance is to the west. Above the gateway a statue of St Lawrence stands watch, holding a symbolic gridiron, the instrument of his martyrdom (he was roasted alive on one). From here you'll first enter the

## TRANSPORT: SAN LORENZO DE EL ESCORIAL

**Distance from Madrid** 59km

**Direction** Northwest

**Car** Take the A-6 motorway to the M-600 highway, then follow the signs to El Escorial. Driving time 40 minutes.

**Bus** Every 15 minutes (every half-hour on weekends), **Herranz bus company** (Map pp116-17; ☎ 91 896 90 28) runs a service (buses 661 and 664) to El Escorial from platform 30 of Madrid's Moncloa Intercambiador de Autobuses station. The one-hour trip costs €3.15.

**Train** A few dozen **Renfe** (☎ 902 240 202; www.renfe.es) C8 *ceranía* (local train network) trains make the one-hour trip (€2.45) daily from Madrid's Atocha or Chamartín stations to El Escorial.

**Patio de los Reyes** (Patio of the Kings), which houses the statues of the six kings of Judah.

Directly ahead lies the sombre *basilica*. As you enter, look up at the unusual flat vaulting by the choir stalls. Once inside the church proper, turn left to view Benvenuto Cellini's white Carrara marble statue of Christ crucified (1576).

You'll be led through rooms containing various treasures, including some tapestries and an El Greco painting – impressive as it is, it's a far cry from the artist's dream of decorating the whole complex – and then downstairs to the northeastern corner of the complex. You pass through the **Museo de Arquitectura** and the **Museo de Pintura**. The former tells (in Spanish) the story of how the complex was built, the latter contains a range of 16th- and 17th-century Italian, Spanish and Flemish art.

Head upstairs into a gallery around the eastern part of the complex known as the **Palacio de Felipe II** or **Palacio de los Austrias**. You'll then descend to the 17th-century **Panteón de los Reyes** (Crypt of the Kings), where almost all Spain's monarchs since Carlos I are interred. Backtracking a little, you'll find yourself in the **Panteón de los Infantes** (Crypt of the Princesses).

Stairs lead up from the **Patio de los Evangelistas** (Patio of the Gospels) to the **Salas Capitulares** (chapterhouses) in the southeastern corner of the monastery. These bright, airy rooms, whose ceilings are richly frescoed, contain a minor treasure chest of works by El Greco, Titian, Tintoretto, José de Ribera and Hieronymus Bosch (known as El Bosco to Spaniards).

Just south of the monastery is the **Huerta de los Frailes** (Friars Garden), which merits a stroll, while the **Jardín del Príncipe**, which leads down to the town of El Escorial (and the train station), contains the **Casita del Príncipe**, a little neo-Classical gem built under Carlos III for his heir, Carlos IV.

## INFORMATION

**Tourist Office** (☎ 91 890 53 13; www.sanlorenzoturismo.org; Calle de Grimaldi 2; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-7pm Sat & Sun)

## EATING

The tourist office's website has a list of restaurants and bars in town. These are two of our favourites.

**La Cueva** (☎ 91 890 15 16; www.mesonlacueva.com; Calle de San Antón 4; meals €35-40; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Just a block back from the monastery complex, La Cueva has been around since 1768 and it shows in the heavy wooden beams and hearty, traditional Castilian cooking – roasted meats and steaks are the mainstays, with a few fish dishes.

**La Fonda Genara** (☎ 91 890 16 36; www.restaurantegenara.com; Plaza de San Lorenzo 2; meals €35; ☎ lunch & dinner daily) This is another bastion of traditional cooking, although here the décor is a little brighter. The kitchen is presided over by a father-son team, who make the odd concession to vegetarians.

## VALLE DE LOS CAÍDOS

This extraordinary basilica and stone monument, the **Valle de los Caídos** (Valley of the Fallen; ☎ 91 890 55 44; www.patrimoniacional.es; Carretera 600; admission €5, combined ticket with El Escorial €8.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat Oct-Mar, 10am-6pm Tue-Sat Apr-Sep), is built into the side of a mountain 15km north of San Lorenzo de El Escorial. Conceived in the grandiose imagination of the dictator Francisco Franco, it served as a memorial of the those who died during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), though in reality it has always glorified Franco's side and was constructed by Franco's prisoners of war, many of whom died in the process. It has long been a pilgrimage site for the



## TRANSPORT: VALLE DE LOS CAÍDOS

Distance from Madrid 45km

Direction Northwest

**Car** Take the A-6 motorway to the M-600 highway, then follow the signs. Driving time 35 minutes.

**Bus** One **Herranz** (☎ 91 896 90 28) bus heads to the monument from El Escorial at 3.15pm Tuesday to Sunday. It returns at 5.30pm. You can catch the bus at El Escorial's Plaza de la Virgen de Gracia. The combined price of the bus and entry ticket to the site is €7.50.

small reactionary rump of Franco supporters, who come here especially on November 20 – the anniversary of Franco's death – to reminisce about Franco's rule, complete with stiff-armed fascist salutes. Spain's Socialist government has plans to transform the site into a broader memorial.

The mammoth stone cross sits atop a bunker-like basilica dug into the mountainside in the middle of a pristine pine forest. Walking into the basilica, you enter into the heart of the mountain. Franco's body is interred by the altar, although given the unclear changes proposed for the site by the national government, no-one knows how long his body will remain there. Near the basilica are walking trails and a picnic area.

You can take a **funicular** (admission €2.50; ☎ 11am-4.30pm Tue-Sat Oct-Mar, 11am-5.30pm Tue-Sat Apr-Sep) up the mountain to the base of the cross, where, if the wind doesn't blow you away, you can enjoy great views of the surrounding sierra.

## ARANJUEZ

Aranjuez was founded as a royal pleasure retreat, away from the riff-raff of Madrid, and it remains a place to escape the rigours of city life. The palace is opulent and its grandeur is amplified by its setting amid the greenery of lovely, expansive gardens.

The **Palacio Real** (☎ 91 892 15 32; www.patri-monionacional.es; child, senior & student/adult €2.50/5, EU citizens free Wed, gardens free; ☎ palace 10am-5.15pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar, 10am-6.15pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, gardens 8am-6.30pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar, 8am-8.30pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep) started as one of Felipe II's modest summer palaces but took on a life of its own as a succession of royals, inspired by the palace at Versailles in France, lavished money upon it. By the 18th century, its 300-plus rooms had

turned the palace into a sprawling, gracefully symmetrical complex filled with a cornucopia of ornamentation. Of all the rulers who spent time here, Carlos III and Isabel II left the greatest mark.

The obligatory guided tour (in Spanish) provides insight into the palace's art and history. And a stroll in the lush **gardens** takes you through a mix of local and exotic species, the product of seeds brought back by Spanish botanists and explorers from Spanish colonies all over the world. Within their shady perimeter, which stretches a few kilometres from the palace, you'll find the **Casa de Marinós**, which contains the **Museo de Falúas** (☎ 91 891 03 05; admission €2; ☎ 10am-5.15pm Oct-Mar, 10am-6.15pm Apr-Sep), a museum of royal pleasure boats from days gone by. If it has reopened after restoration, the **Casa del Labrador** (☎ 91 891 03 05; child, senior or student/adult €2.50/5) is also worth a visit. Further away, towards Chinchón, is the **Jardín del Príncipe**, an extension of the massive gardens. The **Chiquitren** (☎ 902 088 089; www.arantour.com; child/adult €3/5; ☎ 11am-5.30pm Tue-Sun Oct-Feb, 10am-8pm Tue-Sun Mar-Sep), a small tourist train, loops through town and stops at all the major sites.

## INFORMATION

**Tourist Office** (☎ 91 891 04 27; www.aranjuez.es, in Spanish; Plaza de San Antonio 9; ☎ 10am-6.30pm Nov-Apr, 10am-8.30pm May-Oct)

## EATING

**Casa José** (☎ 91 891 14 88; www.casajose.es; Calle de Abastos 32; meals €35-40; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sat, lunch only Sun) The quietly elegant Casa José is the proud owner of a Michelin star and is packed on

## TRANSPORT: ARANJUEZ

Distance from Madrid 50km

Direction South

**Car** From Madrid take the N-IV south to the M-305, which leads to the city centre.

**Bus** The **AISA bus company** (☎ 902 198 788; www.aisa-grupo.com, in Spanish) sends buses (route number 423) to Aranjuez from Madrid's Estación Sur every 15 minutes or so. The 45-minute trip costs €3.20.

**Train** C3 *cercanía* trains leave every 15 or 20 minutes from Madrid's Atocha station. The 45-minute trip costs €2.45.

## THE STRAWBERRY TRAIN

You could take a normal train from Madrid to Aranjuez, but for romance it's hard to beat the *Tren de la Fresa* (Strawberry Train; ☎ 902 240 202, 902 228 822; adult/child return €24/16; ☎ late-March–mid-June). Begun in 1985 to commemorate the Madrid–Aranjuez route – Madrid's first and Spain's third rail line, which was inaugurated in the 1850s – the Strawberry Train is a throwback to the time when Spanish royalty would escape the summer heat and head for the royal palace at Aranjuez.

The journey begins at 10.05am on Saturday and Sunday between early April and late June when an antique Mikado 141F-2413 steam engine pulls out from Madrid's Atocha station, pulling behind it four passenger carriages that date from the early 20th century and have old-style front and back balconies. During the 50-minute journey, rail staff in period dress provide samples of local strawberries – one of the original train's purposes was to allow royalty to sample the summer strawberry crop from the Aranjuez orchards. Upon arrival in Aranjuez, your ticket fare includes a guided tour of the Palacio Real, Museo de Falúas and other Aranjuez sights, not to mention more strawberry samplings. The train leaves Aranjuez for Atocha at 6pm for the return journey.

Tickets can be purchased at any Renfe office or any travel agency that sells train tickets.

weekends with madrileños drawn by the beautifully prepared meats and local dishes with some surprising innovations.

**El Rana Verde** (☎ 91 891 13 25; www.aranjuez.com/ranaverde; Plaza Santiago Rusiñol; meals €25-35; ☎ lunch & dinner daily) The 'Green Frog' is a classic riverside restaurant whose speciality is frogs legs, but it does all sorts of local treats, including, of course, strawberries for dessert.

## CHINCHÓN

Chinchón is just 45km from Madrid yet worlds apart. Although it has grown beyond its village confines, visiting its antique plaza is like stepping back into another era to a charming, ramshackle world. The heart of town is its unique, almost circular **Plaza Mayor**, which is lined with sagging, tiered balconies – it gets our vote as one of the most evocative plazas mayor in Spain. In summer the plaza is converted into a bullring (see boxed text, p240). It's also the stage for a popular passion play shown at Easter. Chinchón's other main attraction is made up of the traditional **mesón-style restaurants** scattered in and around the plaza, some with wonderful balcony tables.

There are a few other sights worth seeking out, particularly the 16th-century **Iglesia de la Asunción** that rises above the Plaza Mayor and the late-16th-century Renaissance **Castillo de los Condes**, which is about 1km south of Chinchón and which was abandoned in the 1700s; the tourist office has details of their irregular opening hours (usually weekends). But Chinchón's real charm lies in the Plaza Mayor and eating fine **cordero asado** (roast lamb).

## INFORMATION

**Tourist Office** (☎ 91 893 53 23; www.ciudad-chinchon.com; Plaza Mayor 6; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 11am-3pm & 4-6pm Sat & Sun, longer hours summer) Small office but, staff are extremely helpful.

## EATING

**Café de la Iberia** (☎ 91 894 08 47; www.cafedelaliberia.com; Plaza Mayor 17; meals €35-40; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) This is definitely our favourite of the *mesones* (home-style restaurants) on the Plaza Mayor perimeter; it offers wonderful food served by attentive staff in an atmospheric dining area set around a light-filled internal courtyard or out on the balcony.

**Mesón Cuevas del Vino** (☎ 91 894 02 06; www.cuevasdelvino.com; Calle Benito Hortelano 13; meals €30-35; ☎ lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) From the huge goatskins filled with wine and the barrels covered in famous signatures, to the atmospheric caves underground, this is sure to be a memorable eating experience with delicious home-style cooking.

## TRANSPORT: CHINCHÓN

Distance from Madrid 45km

Direction Southeast

**Car** Head out of Madrid on the N-IV motorway and exit onto the M-404, which winds its way to Chinchón.

**Bus** The **La Veloz** (Map pp126-7; ☎ 91 409 76 02) bus 337 leaves half-hourly to Chinchón. The buses leave from Avenida del Mediterráneo, 100m west of Plaza del Conde de Casal. The 50-minute ride costs €3.20.

## ALCALÁ DE HENARES

So close to Madrid and just off an unappealing motorway, Alcalá de Henares is full of surprises with historical sandstone buildings seemingly at every turn. Throw in some sunny plazas and a legendary university, and Alcalá de Henares is a terrific place to go to escape the city.

The **university** (☎ 91 883 43 84; 6 free guided tours per day Mon-Fri, 11 per day Sat & Sun; ☎ 9am-9pm), founded in 1486 by Cardinal Cisneros, is one of the country's principal seats of learning. A guided tour gives a peek into the *mudéjar* chapel and the magnificent **Parainfo** auditorium, where the King and Queen of Spain give out the prestigious Premio Cervantes literary award every year. The town is also dear to Spaniards because it is the birthplace of the country's literary figurehead, Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (see p36). The site believed by many to be Cervantes' birthplace is recreated in the illuminating **Museo Casa Natal de Miguel de Cervantes** (☎ 91 889 96 54; www.museo-casa-natal-cervantes.org; Calle Mayor 48; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Jun-Sep), which lies along the beautiful, colonnaded Calle de Mayor.

## INFORMATION

**Tourist Office** (☎ 91 881 06 34; www.turismoalcala.com, in Spanish; Plaza de los Santos Niños; ☎ 10am-2pm & 5-7.30pm Jun-Sep, 10am-2pm & 4-6.30pm Oct-May)

## EATING

**El Ruedo** (☎ 91 880 69 19; Calle de los Libreros 38; meals €20-25; ☎ 9am-11pm Thu-Tue) With a quiet patio for outdoor eating, this is a great place to get informal fare, such as salads and mixed plates.

**Hostería del Estudiante** (☎ 91 888 03 30; Calle de los Colegios 3; meals €30-35) Based in the parador, this charming restaurant has wonderful Castilian cooking and a classy ambience in a dining

### TRANSPORT: ALCALÁ DE HENARES

**Distance from Madrid** 35km

**Direction** East

**Car** Head towards Zaragoza on the N-II highway. Driving time is 40 minutes.

**Bus** There are regular departures (every five to 15 minutes) from depots at the Avenida de América and Estación Sur. The trip takes about one hour (€1.55).

**Train** C1, C2 and C7 **Renfe** (☎ 902 240 202; www.renfe.es) *cercanía* trains make the 50-minute trip to Alcalá de Henares daily. The trip costs €1.15.

room decorated with artefacts from the city's illustrious history.

## SIERRA DE GUADARRAMA

North of Madrid lies the Sierra de Guadarrama, a popular skiing destination and home of several charming towns. In **Manzanares El Real** you can explore the small 15th-century **Castillo de los Mendoza** (☎ 91 853 00 08; Manzanares El Real; admission incl guided tour €2; ☎ 10am-2pm & 3-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-5pm Tue-Sun Oct-Mar), a perfectly preserved storybook castle with round towers at its corners and a Gothic interior patio.

**Cercedilla** is a popular base for hikers and mountain bikers. There are several marked trails through the sierra, the main one known as the **Cuerda Larga** or **Cuerda Castellana**. This is a forest track that takes in 55 peaks between the **Puerto de Somosierra** in the north and **Puerto de la Cruz Verde** in the southwest. Get more information at the **Centro de Información Valle de la Fuenfría**. Small ski resorts, such as **Valdesqui** (☎ 91 570 1224; Puerto de Cotos; lift tickets €25-34), welcome weekend skiers from the city.

## INFORMATION

**Ayuntamiento de Manzanares El Real** (www.manzanares.org, in Spanish)

**Centro de Información Valle de la Fuenfría** (☎ 91 852 22 13; Carretera de las Dehesas; ☎ 10am-6pm) Located 2km outside Cercedilla on the M-614.

**Navacerrada Tourist Information** (☎ 902 882 328; www.puertonavacerrada.com, in Spanish)

### TRANSPORT: SIERRA DE GUADARRAMA

**Distance from Madrid** 50-70km

**Direction** North

**Car** Take the A-6 motorway to Cercedilla.

**Bus** Bus 724 runs to Manzanares El Real from Plaza de Castilla in Madrid (€2.75, 40 minutes). From Madrid's Intercambiador de Autobuses de Moncloa, bus 691 heads to Navacerrada (€2.75, one hour) and bus 684 runs to Cercedilla (€3.15, one hour).

**Train** From Chamartín station you can get to Puerto de Navacerrada (C8B *cercanía* line; €1.85, two hours with train change in Cercedilla, four daily) and Cercedilla (C2 *cercanía* line; €1.30, one hour 20 minutes, 15 daily).

### DIY – GO FURTHER IN A DAY

Spain's ever-expanding network of super-fast AVE trains (Tren de Alta Velocidad España; known as *El AVE*) means that, for travellers short on time, many cities hundreds of kilometres from Madrid can now be visited as day trips from the capital, although we recommend longer stays if you have the time. For details, visit [www.renfe.es](http://www.renfe.es).

The most obvious choice is **Córdoba** (one way from €46.20, less than two hours, up to 15 departures daily), a beautiful town of whitewashed patios, twisting old streets and the Mezquita de Córdoba, one of the architectural jewels in Andalucía's considerable crown. Córdoba lies 400km south of Madrid.

Other possibilities include **Valladolid** (one way from €31.20, one hour), which has a pretty Plaza Mayor and excellent museums, and **Zaragoza** (one way from €42.40, 1½ hrs) with its stunning architecture and incessant energy. Even **Málaga** (one way from €68, two hours), **Sevilla** (one way from €65.30, 2½ hours) and **Barcelona** (one way from €101.30, 2¾ hours) could be done in a day, although you'd have to be in an unconscionable rush. Although not yet covered by AVE, **Salamanca** (one way from €16.50, 2½ hours) is another possibility, but here you'd also be mad not to stay overnight, although it is possible with an early start.

All of these destinations are covered at length in Lonely Planet's *Spain* guide.

## SIERRA POBRE

The 'Poor Sierra' is a toned-down version of its more refined western neighbour, the Sierra de Guadarrama. Popular with hikers and others looking for nature without quite so many creature comforts or crowds, the sleepy Sierra Pobre has yet to develop the tourism industry of its neighbours. And that's just why we like it.

Head first to **Buitrago**, the largest town in the area, where you can stroll along part of the old **city walls**. You can also take a peek into the 15th-century *mudéjar* and Romanesque **Iglesia de Santa María del Castillo** and into the small and unlikely **Picasso Museum** (☎ 91 868 00 56; Plaza Picasso; admission free; ☎ 11am-1.30pm & 4-6pm Wed-Mon), which contains a few works that the artist gave to his barber, Eugenio Arias.

Hamlets are scattered throughout the rest of the sierra; some, like **Puebla de la Sierra** and **El Atazar**, are pretty walks and are the starting point for winding hill trails.

### TRANSPORT: SIERRA POBRE

**Distance from Madrid** 73km

**Direction** Northeast

**Car** Take the N-I highway to Buitrago.

**Bus** The **Continental Auto Company** (☎ 91 745 63 00) has a dozen daily buses connecting Madrid's Plaza de la Castilla with Buitrago (€4.55, 1½ hours).

## INFORMATION

**Buitrago Tourist Office** (☎ 91 868 16 15; ☎ 9am-3pm Jul-Sep)

## EATING

**El Arco** (☎ 918 68 09 11; Calle Arco 6; mains €12-15; ☎ lunch only Fri-Sun mid-Sep–mid-Jun) The best restaurant in Buitrago, El Arco is known for its fresh, creative cuisine based on local ingredients and traditional Spanish dishes.

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