



Castile & León

The magnificent heart of Spain

13–22 October 2025 (ML 825)

£3,780 • 10 days

Lecturer: Gijs van Hensbergen

The cathedrals of Burgos and León. Much fine sculpture as well.

Walled villages, grand monasteries, hilltop castles and a backdrop of vast, undulating landscape.

Includes the 16th-century Palace of El Escorial.

Good food: suckling pig, slow-roast lamb and kid; good wine of the Ribera del Duero.

Since their fusion under one crown in the eleventh century, the ancient kingdoms of Castile and León have been responsible for some of the most emblematic periods of Spanish history. These former rival territories established themselves as the heart of Spain and exerted great influence over language, religion and culture far across the medieval map. Innumerable castles were built here (hence 'Castile') for this was the principal battleground of the Reconquista, the five-hundred-year war of attrition against the Moors which reclaimed Spain for Christendom.

The region occupies much of the Meseta, the vast and austere plateau in the centre of the Iberian peninsula. Here are many of Spain's finest cities, buildings and works of art. Lovers of Romanesque will feel particularly satisfied for there are many excellent examples of the style. Great Gothic churches are another magnificent feature, the cathedrals at León, Burgos, Segovia and Salamanca among them. French, German and English influences are to be found, though the end result is always unmistakably Spanish.

Another striking aspect of the tour is the wealth of brilliant sculpture, especially of the late-medieval and Renaissance periods. Castles, of course, abound, and some of the defensive curtain of frontier cities such as Ávila are remarkably well preserved.

As well as the prominent cities, we include a number of lesser-known places, all strikingly attractive, many with outstanding buildings or works of art, all barely visited by tourists.



Segovia, La Granja de San Ildefonso, watercolour by Mima Nixon, publ. 1916.

Itinerary

Day 1: Ávila, Salamanca. Fly at c. 9.15am from London Heathrow to Madrid (Iberia Airlines). Drive to Ávila: a fortress town built during the Reconquista, it retains its entire circuit of 11th-cent. walls complete with battlements and 88 turrets. The 12th-cent. Basilica of San Vicente has fine sculpture. First of two nights in Salamanca.

Day 2: Salamanca. Distinguished by the honey-coloured hue of its stone, Salamanca is one of the most attractive cities in Spain and home to its most prestigious university. See the magnificent 16th-cent. Gothic 'New Cathedral' and austere Romanesque 'Old Cathedral', the 18th-cent. Plaza Mayor and superb, elaborate Plateresque sculpture on the façades of the university and church of San Esteban. The University has 15th- and 16th-cent. quadrangles, arcaded courtyards and original lecture halls. The Convento de las Dueñas has a Plateresque portal and an irregular, two-tiered cloister.

Day 3: Zamora, León. On the Roman road that connected Astorga to Mérida, Zamora rose to importance during the Reconquista as a bastion on the Duero front. Much of its Romanesque

architecture survives, including the cathedral of Byzantine influence. Drive to León, former capital of the ancient kingdom, and visit the monastery of San Marcos (our hotel) with an exuberant Plateresque façade, magnificent late-Gothic church, Renaissance chapels and fine choir-stalls. First of two nights in León.

Day 4: León. A morning walk to some of the city's outstanding medieval buildings. The royal pantheon of San Isidoro is one of the first, and finest, Romanesque buildings in Spain, with important sculptures. The cathedral is truly superb Rayonnant Gothic with impressive stained glass. The afternoon is free to visit the archaeological or contemporary art museums.

Day 5: Palencia, Lerma, Santo Domingo de Silos. Palencia cathedral houses paintings by Pedro Berruguete and El Greco, and exquisite sculpture by Gil de Siloé and Simon of Cologne. The village of Lerma has a wealth of buildings from the early 17th cent. including an arcaded main square with ducal palace and the Collegiate church of San Pedro. Drive in the late afternoon to Santo Domingo de Silos, which has the finest Romanesque monastery in Spain, outstanding for the sculpture of the 12th-cent. cloister. First of two nights in Lerma.

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continued

Day 6: Burgos, Quintanilla de las Viñas, Covarrubias. Drive to Burgos, the early capital of Castile, whose cathedral combines French and German Gothic styles and has remarkable vaults and 16th-cent. choir stalls. On the outskirts is the convent of Las Huelgas Reales with its important early Gothic church. Visit the Visigothic chapel at Quintanilla de las Viñas. Covarrubias is an attractive walled village with a medieval Colegiata containing fine tombs.

Day 7: El Burgo de Osma, San Esteban de Gormaz, Segovia. El Burgo de Osma is a walled town with arcaded streets and one of the finest Gothic cathedrals in Spain. At San Esteban de Gormaz see the 12th-cent. churches of San Miguel and Del Rivero with exterior galleries. Built on a steep-sided hill, Segovia is one of the loveliest cities in Spain and architecturally one of the most richly endowed. First of three nights in Segovia.

Day 8: Segovia. Straddling the town, the remarkable Roman aqueduct is one of the biggest in Europe. See the outstanding Romanesque exteriors of San Martín, San Millán and San Esteban and the circular Templar church of La Vera Cruz. An afternoon walk includes the cathedral, a soaring Gothic structure, and the restored Alcázar (castle), dramatically perched at the prow of the hill.

Day 9: Segovia, La Granja. Free morning; suggestions include the contemporary art museum of Esteban Vicente and the Museum of Segovia. Drive to La Granja de San Ildefonso, the palace constructed for Philip V in the early 18th cent., with magnificent formal gardens.

Day 10: El Escorial. This vast retreat-cum-palace-cum-monastery-cum-pantheon was built from 1563 to 1584 for Philip II, successfully embodying his instructions for 'nobility without arrogance, majesty without ostentation, severity in the whole'. Fly from Madrid, arriving at London Heathrow at c. 6.15pm.

Lecturer

Gijs van Hensbergen. Art historian and author specialising in Spain and the USA. His books include *Gaudí*, *In the Kitchens of Castile*, *Guernica* and *La Sagrada Familia*, and he has published in the *Burlington Magazine* and *Wall Street Journal*. He read languages at Utrecht University and Art History at the Courtauld, and undertook postgraduate studies in American art of the 1960s. He has worked in England, the USA and Spain as exhibitions organiser, TV researcher and critic and is a Fellow of the Cañada Blanch Centre for Contemporary Spanish Studies at the LSE.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £3,780 or £3,620 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £4,230 or £4,070 without flights.

By train: London – Paris – Barcelona – Madrid: c. 14 hours.

Included: flights (economy class) with Iberia (aircraft: Airbus A320); travel by private coach; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 7 dinners and 1 lunch with wine or beer, soft drinks, water and coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. NH Collection Palacio de Castellanos, Salamanca (nh-collection.com): attractive 4-star hotel in a converted palace, close to the cathedrals and other key sites. **Parador de León** (parador.es): 5-star *parador* in grandiose Plateresque building. **Parador de Lerma** (parador.es): 4-star *parador* in the Ducal Palace. **Áurea Convento Capuchinos, Segovia** (eurostarsconventocapuchinos.com): 5-star hotel set in a converted 17th-century church and monastery complex. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? This is a long tour with a lot of walking in town centres where coach access is restricted, some of it on cobbled streets and uphill. There is a lot of standing in museums and churches. A good level of fitness is necessary. It should not be attempted by anyone who has difficulty with everyday walking and stair-climbing. Average distance by coach per day: 73 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.