Good things come in small packages. Just when you thought you knew Spain, another hidden gem reveals itself and makes you look at the country anew. Beyond the major cities we know and love, Spain is strewn with smaller settlements that are blissfully unaware of the modern world. Onetime Roman capitals, Arab strongholds and the last resting place of saints, these formidable cities affirm the splendor of human enterprise, and walking their streets will leave you inspired and humbled. The area is also blessed with some of the best food and wine on the planet. Eating is one of the biggest joys of Spanish life, and, happily for visitors, it’s a joy they love to share—nowhere is this more on show than at these cities’ frequent and flamboyant fiestas. All the cities in this guide have been protected by UNESCO as World Heritage sites, an honor reserved for the most bewitching spots on earth. As you start to explore them yourself, you’ll soon see why.
ALCALÁ DE HENARES
Located 30 km east of Madrid (a 30-minute drive) and 14 km from Barajas Airport, Alcalá was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 1998 for its rich monumental legacy in the region of Madrid.

Four-hundred-year-old walls surround churches, convents and university buildings, offering a glimpse of life in Castilia during the Spanish Golden Age. The old Roman city of Complutum and the Muslim Al-kala-en-Nahr thrived after the creation of the Universitas Complutensis, founded by Cardinal Cisneros in the 15th century, and, from that point on, Alcalá was known as a cultural center. Architect Alonso de Covarrubias completed the main facade of the Archiepiscopal Palace during the 16th century and the castle, surrounded by works from the Open-Air Museum of Sculpture, still hosts a traditional production of Don Juan in its interior courtyard each November. Close by sit the convents of San Bernardo and Madre de Dios (currently home to the Madrid Regional Archaeological Museum).

Famous as the birthplace of Don Quixote’s author Cervantes, the city today features world-class restaurants, hotels and activities. Lovers of the outdoors will appreciate the Henares River and the Los Cerros Nature Reserve, while linksmen can practice their swing at the renowned Encín golf course.

Tourism Office Contact: Plaza de los Santos Niños s/n 28801, Alcalá de Henares; 34-918-810-634; otssnn@ayto-alcalahenares.es; www.turismoalcala.com

TOP SLEEPS | Stay at the 128-room Parador de Alcalá de Henares, housed in the 17th-century Dominican Convent of Saint Thomas Aquinas. Enjoy traditional Spanish gastronomy, a lively bar, outdoor swimming pool and sumptuous on-site spa. Colegios, 8; 34-918-880-330; www.parador.es

TOP EATS | Take a culinary odyssey back in time to Spain’s Golden Age with dinner at the Parador’s Hosteria del Estudiant. Harnessing the rich offerings of the surrounding mountains and rivers, the cuisine includes salads, stews, top-notch fish and choice cuts of meats. The Michelin-recommended Hostal Miguel de Cervantes boasts a scrumptious menu in a charming 16th-century abode. Choose one of the steak or fish specialties and be sure to ask for a pairing from the wine cellar.

ACTIVITIES & EXCURSIONS | Travel through time at Alcalá’s museums, palaces and religious sites. A fixture of the town, the university Colegio de San Ildefonso contains lecture rooms from the original structure, plus beautiful Renaissance and Baroque courtyards and a 16th-century facade. Castilian Cervantes Birth House-Museum is where the author of Don Quixote was born and raised. The Laredo Palace combines a neo-Mudejar style with Modernist, Gothic, Renaissance, Nasrid and Moorish decorative motifs. A more utilitarian dwelling, the Episcopal Palace of Alcalá de Henares housed the archbishops of Toledo from the 13th to the 19th century. The Gothic-style Cathedral of Santos Niños Justo y Pastor, the Renaissance La Imagen Carmelite Convent and the 16th-century Casa de la Entrevista monastery are all also worth a visit.

FESTIVALS | April: Cervantes’s April offers literary and cultural programs. June: Alcalá’s XI Classics theater festival has troupe performances. October: Cervantes Week pays tribute to the famed author. November: The town hosts Don Juan in Alcalá, Europe’s largest mass-theater performance.
ÁVILA

Some 110 km northwest of Madrid, a drive just a little over an hour, Ávila was founded in the 11th century to protect the Spanish territories from the Moors. Rebuilt by 15th-century knights after the Reconquista (Christian conquest), the city has kept much the same structure since and won UNESCO heritage status in 1985.

A striking relic of Spain’s military might in the Middle Ages, the city, located in the region of Castile and León, is defined by the fortified wall that hugs its perimeter and today provides a fine vantage point for a stroll. One of the best preserved structures of its kind, the complete wall stands 40 feet tall and ten feet deep, with 88 crenellated towers punctuating the surrounding hillside.

In the old quarter, a labyrinth of small streets leads you from sleepy plazas and convents, to palaces, Romanesque and Gothic churches, and the imposing fortress-cathedral. A rich mystic tradition pervades the city, with the 16th-century teachings of Saint Teresa still followed by the resident nuns today, while the Museum of Mysticism pays tribute to Moshe de Leon, who completed the Book of Splendor, the last part of the Jewish Cabbalistic mystic trilogy, within Ávila’s fortified embrace.

Tourism Office Contact: Avda. de Madrid, 39, 05001 Ávila; 34-920-344-000 ext. 790/791; avila@ciudadespatrimonio.org; www.avilaturismo.com

TOP SLEEPS | Housed in the 16th-century Piedras Albas Palace, Parador Ávila offers bright, spacious rooms—some with four-poster beds—granite floors and views of the city wall. Enjoy the peace of the glass-roofed courtyard, and admire the archaeological remains in the garden. Function rooms are available for events. Marqués Canales de Chozas, 2; 34-920-211-340; www.parador.es

TOP EATS | Close to the cathedral in the city center, Doña Guimara is well loved among both locals and visitors thanks to the cozy atmosphere and creative menu. Local art adorns the walls and the extensive wine list includes some fine rioja and manchego. For traditional, seasonal cuisine, head to The Charolés where hearty cocido stew is served in the charming stone-walled dining room.

ACTIVITIES & EXCURSIONS | Walking along the ancient city muralla (wall) is a must. Stretching 1.5 miles around the city, this awe-inspiring structure has been enhanced over the centuries, with Roman, Moorish, Gothic and Renaissance elements still ingrained in the masonry today. Of the eight gates, the Puerta de San Vicente and Puerta del Alcázar steal the show with their 65-foot towers flanking the apse of Ávila Cathedral. Built as both fortress and place of worship, the cathedral itself forms a robust bulwark in the city wall. Behind the original Romanesque facade are significant 16th-century additions that made Ávila the first Gothic church in Spain.

To see some Isabelline architecture at its best, explore the 15th-century Real Monasterio de Santo Tomás, thought to entomb the Grand Inquisitor Torquemada and home to the intriguing Museo Oriental. The mystically minded will enjoy Saint Teresa’s Convent and La Encarnación Monastery.

FESTIVALS | March/April: Easter Week in Ávila. June: Ávila Tapas Contest. June to September: Theater on the Wall brings the wall to life with costumed performers recounting its history. First weekend in September: A Medieval festival recreates the city as it was.
CÁCERES

With origins as far back as the late Paleolithic period 2.6 million years ago, Cáceres, a 3.5-hour, 300km drive from Madrid or an hour’s drive from Mérida, is a treasure trove for the history buff. The Roman, Medieval, Moorish and Renaissance periods have all left their mark on the city’s architecture, and the well-preserved old town has lent itself to many a period movie.

Seat of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Coria-Cáceres and located in the region of Extremadura, Cáceres is capital of the province of the same name. Displaying an altogether different culture, the city’s Barrio de San Antonio de la Quebrada, one of Spain’s oldest Jewish quarters, showcases its irregular archways, shop-strewn arcades and whitewashed walls with a singular pride. Look out, too, for the Palacio Toledo-Moctezuma—this domed palace was once home to the daughter of Aztec emperor Moctezuma, brought to Cáceres as a conquistador’s bride.

Walking among the sandy-hued churches and palaces, you’ll glimpse the ghosts of Cáceres past, beasts on heraldic shields and the occasional stork as she descends from her nest on high. Outside the city center you’ll find Plaza Mayor, built in 1229 after Christian forces recaptured Cáceres from the Moors. This peaceful square was once the bloody site of jousting, as medieval knights defended their honor with steel and steed. Let your imagination stray and listen for the thunder of hooves through the ages.

Tourism Office Contact: Plaza Mayor, s/n 10003 Cáceres; 34-927-255-765; caceres@ciudadespatrimonio.org; www.turismo.caceres.es

TOP SLEEPS | Set in the 14th-century palaces of the marquises of Torreorgaz and Ovando Mogollón, Parador de Cáceres strikes a nice balance between historic beauty and modern amenities. Rooms are light and fresh, and the tree-shaded terrace provides a delightful spot for a glass of wine. Other facilities include a restaurant, café and guest lounge. C/ Ancha, 6; 34-927-211-759; www.parador.es

TOP EATS | Some of the finest cuisine in the province can be found at two-Michelin-star Atrio, where chef Toño Pérez creates rich, regional flavors as well as more Continental fare. The menu changes frequently to make the best of each season, and truffle lovers are well catered for.

For a contemporary menu in the heart of the old town, head to Torre de Sande with its historic interiors and smart lawned terrace.

ACTIVITIES & EXCURSIONS | Walking through the cobbled streets of the old town makes a charming introduction to Cáceres, with many of the mansions and public buildings standing strong since the 16th century. The town has migrating León nobles to thank for its grand architecture, as well as not a little loot from Spanish colonies in the Americas.

Outside the old town you’ll find Plaza Mayor, surrounded by intriguing monuments like the Palacio Toledo-Moctezuma, the Bujaco and Los Púlpitos towers, as well as the Foro de los Balbos forum, the Arco de la Estrella gateway, the Ermita de la Paz (Chapel of Peace) and the Ayuntamiento [town hall]. From here, explore the Co-cathedral of Santa María—an impressive Gothic structure with Romanesque and Renaissance features—and admire the neighboring palaces built for bygone nobility. The Old and New Jewish quarters are also good for a scenic stroll.

FESTIVALS | March/April: Holy Week—colorful processions, statues and traditional music. April: San Jorge—Moors and Christians stage a mock battle to celebrate the recapture of Cáceres by King Alfonso IX. August: August Moon—weekend concerts in the Old Jewish Quarter. November: The Medieval Market of the Three Cultures honors the city’s Christian, Jewish and Islamic heritage.

CÁCERES

HILLTOP CITYSCAPE

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The smell of fresh geraniums and orange blossom greets you as you enter Córdoba’s old town, luring you into this glorious piece of Spanish history. Located in the Andalusia region and capital of Hispania Ulterior during the Roman Republic, by the Middle Ages Córdoba was one of the world’s most populous cities and an intellectual hub of Europe, with Jewish, Arab and Christian scholars flocking here from far and wide.

The star attraction of Córdoba, which is located an hour and a half by high-speed train from Madrid, is the central Mezquita-Catedral (Cathedral-Mosque), first a pagan temple, then a Visigothic Christian church, a mosque under the Umayyad Moors, and finally a cathedral after the Reconquista. This architectural gem has kept the best features of each epoch, giving colorful insight into Córdoba’s past.

Stepping through the Jewish quarters’ medieval gate one is greeted by 12th century homes, the Plaza de Tiberíades, built in honor of one of Sephardic Judaism’s greatest intellectuals, and a venerated Yishak Maheb-built synagogue. Get acquainted with history by admiring its Hebrew inscriptions from the Book of Psalms and Mudejar plaster-adorned prayer room.

Tourism Office Contact: C/ Rey Heredia, 22, Córdoba; 34-957-201-774; consorcio@turismodecordoba.org; www.turismodecordoba.org
TOP SLEEPS | What was once the summer palace of Abd-ar-Rahman I is now Parador de Córdoba, surrounded by vegetation at the foot of the Córdoba Sierra. A peaceful retreat, the hotel offers cool interiors, a swimming pool, city views and lush gardens with an orange grove and the first palm trees in Europe. Avda. de la Arruzafa, 37; 34-957-275-900; www.parador.es

TOP EATS | Chef Kisko García makes excellent use of local produce in Michelin-starred Choco. Specialties include vegetables of Guadalquivir, oxtail casserole and a ginger citrus pastry. El Caballo Rojo offers fine regional cuisine with Andalusian, Mozarabic and Sephardic favorites, plus pleasant views from the second floor terrace.

ACTIVITIES & EXCURSIONS | The Mezquita-Catedral should be your first port of call in Córdoba. Since its first stones were laid in 785 A.D., the vast complex has seen many changes—not least the cathedral built at its heart—as the city passed from pagans to Visigoths, Moors and Christians. Enter at Puerta del Perdón, a 14th-century Mudéjar gateway, and admire the Patio de los Naranjos (courtyard of orange trees) and the 16th/17th-century tower built around the remains of the Mezquta’s minaret. South of the Mezquita-Catedral, the well-restored Puente Romano is bookended by the Islamic Calahorra Tower and Puerta del Puente. Outside town, the ruined Medina Azahara hints at the ancient prestige of the caliphs (Arab rulers). Don’t miss the Salón de Abd-ar-Rahman III—the caliph’s throne hall—with its horseshoe arching, carved stuccowork and adjoining gardens.

FESTIVALS | January: Medieval Market. May: Fiesta de las Cruces—the city’s patios (courtyards) come alive with decorations and crosses in this Christian festival with pagan roots. June: Noche Blanca del Flamenco (white night of flamenco)—traditional dance performed throughout the city from dusk ‘til dawn.
CUENCA

Built on a steep mountainside between Madrid and Valencia, this onetime Moorish fortress has been clinging to the rocks here since the 8th century. The famous casas colgadas [hanging houses] loom over the gorge above the Huécar and Júcar rivers, making a dizzying sight that UNESCO has protected since 1996.

Among these dwellings is the Museum of Abstract Arts, the centerpiece of Cuenca’s art scene with one of the most important art collections in Spain. Located in the Castile-La Mancha region, less than an hour from Madrid by high-speed train, the surrounding streets also harbor a myriad of small galleries. Seek out one of country’s oldest Gothic structures Our Lady of Grace Cathedral, with its impressive ceilings and stained-glass windows, Plateresque and Renaissance-style domes and rejería iron grills. Don’t miss the Diocesan Museum in the Episcopal Palace, the pottery shops on Plaza Mayor and the Torre de Mangana, an Islamic tower whose clock marks the passing seasons.

Some of the best views of the city are from Puente de San Pablo, a narrow bridge connecting the old town to a 16th-century convent-turned-Parador hotel. Climb to the summit of Barrio del Castillo and find photogenic spots at Camilo José Cela on the Ronda del Júcar, Florencio Martínez Ruiz and Huécar.

Tourism Office Contact: C/ Alfonso VIII, 2, 16001 Cuenca; 34-969-241-051; cuenca@ciudadespatrimonio.org; www.cuenca.es
TOP SLEEPS | Perched on the Hoz del Huécar gorge, Parador de Cuenca occupies a 16th-century convent facing the city’s hanging houses. Rooms are furnished in leather and wicker, and the chapel, café and cloister offer respite from sightseeing. The building also boasts a dining room, bar and conference rooms for events. Subida a San Pablo, s/n; 34-969-232-320; www.parador.es

TOP EATS | In an avant-garde design museum of the same name, Ars Natura serves Spanish cuisine with international touches in a bright, minimalist space. Expect fine Manchego lamb, game and seafood prepared with flair by chef Manuel de la Osa. A very-Cuenca setting, Meson Casas Colgadas, one of the 15th-century hanging houses, serves Castilian-Manchego cuisine with great views over the gorge.

ACTIVITIES & EXCURSIONS | The Museum of Abstract Arts’ admirable collection of modern art and sculpture includes works by Chillida, Tápiesm, Millares and Eusebio Sempere. Our Lady of Grace Cathedral reveals the Anglo-Norman influence of Eleanor, daughter of the King of England, who married King Alfonso VIII in the 12th century. Additions to this Gothic edifice include a 15th-century apse-aisle (doble girola) and the Renaissance Esteban Jamete’s Arch. The facade was rebuilt in 1902 when the former bell tower collapsed. For outdoor adventures, venture to the source of the river Cuervo. Here, you can marvel at the natural beauty while hiking along the riverbank. Or, 1,500 meters above sea level, the gorgeous canyon known as Ciudad Encantada is an amazing spot to marvel at rock formations.

FESTIVALS | February: Jueves Lardero (Maundy Thursday)—indulgent carnival commemorating the Last Supper. March/April: Religious Music Week (throughout Holy Week)—international choirs and orchestras perform old and new works. September: Fiesta de San Mateo—the townsfolk lead a bull through the streets, and eat and drink with gusto.
MÉRIDA

Founded by Emperor Augustus in 25 B.C. and located in Extremadura, Mérida was one of the most important cities in the Roman Empire and to this day boasts the most Roman monuments in Spain. Located an hour by car from Cáceres, Mérida boasts majestic structures that withstood the fall of the Roman Empire, and successive Visigoth, Arab and Christian rule, and continue to beguile visitors today.

The Puente Romano is the world’s longest existing Roman bridge, stretching half a mile across the Guadiana River and still used by pedestrians today. The Teatro Romano (Roman theater) is one of the best preserved in the Roman Empire with a two-tier colonnaded stage and expansive auditorium rebuilt to host Mérida’s annual Classical Theater Festival. Other Roman engineering feats include dams and aqueducts, well-planned streets, villas, thermal baths and a sewerage system, not to mention a 15,000-seat amphitheater where baying crowds could watch gladiators and wild animals.

For an indoor view of all things Roman, don’t miss the Museo Nacional de Arte Romano with its huge collection of statues, mosaics, frescoes, coins and other Roman artifacts. The Alcazaba fort reminds us of 9th-century Muslim pomp, its vast wall structure built with Roman and Visigoth granite to snuff local rumblings of rebellion.

Tourism Office Contact: Plaza de España, 1, 06800 Mérida; 34-924-380-117; merida@ciudadespatrimonio.org; www.merida.es

TOP SLEEPS | Parador de Mérida has preserved the structure of this former Franciscan convent, built in the 18th century on the ruins of a Roman temple. The old chapel now hosts civil weddings and all manner of events and celebrations. A secluded cloister and charming garden enhance the peace of the hotel rooms. Plaza de la Constitución, 3; 34-924-313-800; www.parador.es

TOP EATS | With an enviable riverside location, Altair affords winning views of the Roman Bridge and excels at classic regional dishes with a contemporary twist. Highlights include roast sucking pig with creamed potatoes, and roast duckling with honey and figs. Book one of the two private rooms for a more exclusive supper. Another top choice is Michelin-recommended Restaurant Alcazaba.

ACTIVITIES & EXCURSIONS | A good introduction to Mérida is the Puente Romano, its 60 ancient arches leading you over the river to the Alcazaba. Descend the steps to the aljibe (cistern) at the center of the Alcazaba and admire the marble stonework and Visigothic decoration. Northeast of the fort, wander through the 16th-century Plaza de España to the Renaissance mansion Templo de Diana, and see what’s left of the Roman forum beyond.

The Rafael Moneo-designed Museo Nacional de Arte Romano displays statues from the theater, including depictions of first Roman emperor Augustus, his son Tiberius and second emperor Drusus. For treasures you can take home, explore the city’s renowned pottery and craft workshops. Or, take a day trip to the town of Trujillo to check out impressive historic monuments and spend the afternoon browsing the town’s shops and sampling exquisite local cuisine.

FESTIVALS | Easter Wednesday/Thursday: Via Crucis (way of the cross)—an early morning procession from Procathedral of Santa María to the Roman amphitheater. July/August: Mérida Classical Theater Festival—international performances staged at the original Roman theater and other monuments. First week of September: Party hearty at the Feria de Septiembre (September fair).
Located in Castile and León and home to one of the world’s oldest universities, Salamanca’s rich academic history greets you at every turn. Founded in 1134, the University of Salamanca reached a peak in the 15th and 16th centuries. Christopher Columbus once made a fruitless bid to the university to back his explorations, and Hernán Cortés studied here before becoming Spain’s most fearsome conquistador. The central Plaza Mayor is perhaps Spain’s most glorious square, and throughout the city you’ll see exceptional Plateresque carving thanks to the soft sandstone. Nestled 2.5 hours (215 km) from Madrid, Salamanca has the moniker La Dorada (the golden city), and to this day the city glows pink and gold in the setting sun.

Two cathedrals grace Salamanca’s skyline, the Romanesque La Catedral Vieja (Old Cathedral) joined by the La Catedral Nueva (New Cathedral) when the city’s student population outgrew the first in the 16th century. The Old Cathedral features a distinctive Mozarabic tower—the Torre del Gallo—and a unique altarpiece, while its Gothic successor echoed this style on a grander scale. However, for all Salamanca’s noble history, the university still thrives and today’s students bring a youthful energy you’ll find infectious.

Tourism Office Contact: Plaza Mayor, 19, Casa de Postas, 37002 Salamanca; 34-923-272-408; salamanca@ciudadespatrimonio.org; www.salamanca.es
TOP SLEEPS | Set on a small hill on the banks of the Tormes river, Parador de Salamanca faces the historic city center, its large windows affording lovely views of the cathedral towers. The marble-adorned bedrooms, public areas and meeting rooms are comfortable and spacious, while the city-facing pool is perfect for a picturesque dip. C/ Teso de la Feria, 2; 34-923-192-082; www.parador.es

TOP EATS | One-Michelin-star Víctor Gutiérrez offers innovative cuisine based on two tasting menus. Highlights include oyster ceviche, roast pigeon with quinoa stew and, in winter, roast woodcock in juice. The intimate dining room has a modern feel with contemporary art on the walls. Elsewhere, the centrally located Casa Paca offers a traditional, seafood-based menu in classically furnished dining rooms. Book one of the two private rooms, or sit in the busy tapas bar for something more casual.

ACTIVITIES & EXCURSIONS | Salamanca is best explored on foot. You’ll find Plaza Mayor in the city center, its stone arches celebrating figures from Spain’s past—look out for Don Quixote author Miguel de Cervantes. Restaurants line the square, so you could do a lot worse for a lunch stop or leisurely drink.

Salamanca’s two cathedrals are essential viewing. The New Cathedral displays late Gothic architecture at its finest, with an entrance decorated in exquisite detail, and the interior revealing the transition to Baroque. Accessed through its larger neighbor, the Old Cathedral houses the oldest organ in Europe (14th century) and hosted university lectures until the 16th century. Climb up the medieval Torre Mocha for great views of the city.

The area is also home to fantastic art, vibrant student nightlife and some of the best tapas in Spain. An afternoon spent perusing the Art Nouveau and Art Déco Museum can be capped off with an evening of dancing to work off all of those small plates.

FESTIVALS | March/April: Holy Week celebrations in the historic quarter. June to September: Summer in Salamanca—jazz, flamenco, chamber concerts, magic, theater and film. September: Etnohelmántica Music Festival; International Street Art Festival; La Virgen de la Vega (The Virgin of the Valley)—Salamanca honors her patron saint with concerts, fireworks and bullfights.
SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

The third holiest site in Christendom after Jerusalem and Rome, Santiago de Compostela is located in Galicia and has been a center of pilgrimage since the 9th century and still draws flocks of pilgrims today. According to legend, one of Christ’s apostles, St. James, was buried here and in 829 A.D. a church was built in his honor. That church is now the magnificent Santiago de Compostela Cathedral, and the destination for pilgrims on the gruelling Camino de Santiago (Way of St. James). As well as the Romanesque Portico de la Gloria and the awe-inspiring Obradoiro façade, the cathedral is famous for its Botafumeiro, the largest censer in the world, which swings its aroma 70 feet overhead.

An academic as well as spiritual hub one hour by plane from Madrid, Santiago de Compostela boasts a prestigious university, founded in the early 16th century and attracting a large student community to this day. In fact, students make up almost a quarter of the city’s small population, and their lust for life is as much a part of this place as the ancient stones they tread.

Most of all, this is a city built on receiving visitors, so whether you decide to arrive with a backpack and blisters, or a briefcase and brogues, expect a warm welcome.

Tourism Office Contact: Rúa do Vilar, 63, 15705 Santiago de Compostela; 34-981-555-129; santiagodecompostela@ciudadespatrimonio.org; www.santiagoturismo.com

TOP SLEEPS | The five-star Parador de Santiago de Compostela was once the Royal Hospital, built in 1499 to accommodate pilgrims arriving in droves and is now the world’s oldest continuously operating hotel. With its peaceful cloisters and sumptuous rooms, the hotel combines period charm with modern luxury. In the regal dining room guests can enjoy gourmet Galician cuisine.

Plaza Do Obradoiro, 1, 34-981-582-200; www.parador.es

TOP EATS | Michelin-starred Casa Marcelo belies its stone facade with a contemporary interior, open kitchen and menus presented on digital displays. Chef Marcelo Tejedor serves creative cuisine with a choice of two tasting menus. On the first floor of the former Royal Hospital, you’ll find Michelin-starred Yayo Daporta, another modern dining room in a historic setting. Specialities include oyster ceviche and roast kid with potato soufflé with thyme.

ACTIVITIES & EXCURSIONS | The historic core of the city can be navigated easily on foot. The staircase and Obradoiro façade welcome you to Santiago de Compostela Cathedral, the headline act of your visit. Inside, the Pórtico de la Gloria features 200 Romanesque sculptures by Maestro Mateo and a throned Christ surrounded by his apostles.

Monuments of carved granite surround the cathedral, including the San Martín Pinario Monastery, the Praza da Inmaculada square, the Praza da Quintana and the Praza das Praterías. Wander through the labyrinth of medieval streets and soak up the history. Admire the ancestral houses on the Rúa do Vilar and Rúa Nova. Explore the market for artisan delights made by local country folk, or, for a greener view of the city, head to one of the city’s lush parks or nearby forests. For a midday snack, stop by the local farmers’ market, Mercado de Abastos, which will engage and tantalize all five senses.

Built on a limestone ridge where the Eresma and Clamores rivers meet, Segovia enjoys a fairytale location with fairytale buildings to match. The Romanesque churches are some of Spain’s finest and the Alcázar fortress inspired Disney’s Cinderella Castle. Only 30 minutes by train from Madrid and located in the Castile and León region, Segovia makes an easy day trip, though its wealth of monuments, culture and gastronomy rewards a longer stay.

Before Madrid became the capital of Spain in the 16th century, this was one of the most important cities in the country, a center of trade in wool and textiles, parliament’s base and the site of Queen Isabel’s coronation in 1474. Approaching the city, your eyes are drawn to the cathedral, a late Gothic beauty that took almost 200 years to complete and looms high above the patchwork of sandstone houses. No less impressive is the Roman Aqueduct, one of the best-preserved engineering works of its time. Nearly ten miles long and 90 feet tall, it was built from local granite in the first century A.D.—without an ounce of cement.

While UNESCO granted Segovia World Heritage status in 1985, this is not just a city of stone—concerts and exhibitions abound, and the myriad of bars and restaurants overflow with merrymaking and music. Tourism Office Contact: 1, Azoguejo, 140001 Segovia; 34-921-466-720; segovia@ciudadespatrimonio.org; www.turismodesegovia.com
TARRAGONA

Perched on a rocky hill on the Costa Dorada, about 90 km (30 minutes by train) from Barcelona, Tarragona enjoys a fresh seaside position, a noble history and some great wine. Founded in 218 B.C. by the Romans, who called it Tarraco, the city was made capital of the Tarraconensis province—roughly all modern Spain. When the Romans built, they built to last, and today you’ll find walls, temples, palaces, gates and theaters that have survived the ravages of the past two millennia.

So powerful was the Roman presence here that it shaped the development of the city over the centuries. The city, located in Catalonia, was defined by the enclosing walls, the original prayer assembly area prefaced the medieval cathedral, and the Foro de la Provincia (Roman forum) became a bustling hub in the Middle Ages. Even the present-day market is next to its old Roman counterpart.

Rambla Nova is Tarragona’s answer to Barcelona’s La Rambla, a buzzy boulevard that runs from the clifftop and teems with chic bars and cafes. The parallel Rambla Vella borders the old town and follows the Via Augusta, the great Roman road from Rome to Cádiz. Should you tire of solid ground, head to the beaches north of the city and treat your feet to some sand and sea.

Tourism Office Contact: C/ Major, 39, 43003 Tarragona; 34-977-250-795; turisme@tarragona.cat; www.tarragonaturisme.cat

TOP SLEEPS | In the heart of the fertile Ebro valley and sheltered by the Beceite mountains, Parador de Tortosa provides first-rate accommodation within easy reach of Tarragona. Once a fortress built by the Arab Caliph of Córdoba in the 10th century, the hotel still features La Zuda (a well), arabesque interiors and later additions like the splendid Catalan Gothic windows. Castillo de la Zuda, s/n; 34-977-444-450; www.parador.es

TOP EATS | In a prestigious address near the Club Náutico, Michelin-starred Rincón de Diego makes the best of local fish and seafood, serving traditional cuisine in a contemporary ambience. Choose from one of five menus or tailor your own bespoke menu. Another Michelin-starred restaurant is the large, family-run Can Bosch, which serves traditional cuisine with contemporary touches. Chef Joan Bosch excels at seafood and rice dishes, and the modern dining room also features a private eating area.

ACTIVITIES & EXCURSIONS | The Romans administered the region from the Foro de la Provincia, built in Vespasian times around 73AD. Here, you’ll find a temple for worshipping the emperor, a huge plaza surrounded by arcades and galleries, and a circus where chariot races were held.

Outside the city, the Roman amphitheater is carved into a sea-facing slope, its tranquillity today betraying nothing of its grisly history. Nearby, see the Cantera del Mèdol Roman quarry—without which there would be no city—as well as Les Ferreres aqueduct, Los Escipiones Tower, the Berà Triumphal Arch and the Roman towns of Els Munts and Centcelles, with their statues, frescoes and mosaics.

Tarragona’s later history can be seen in the Romanesque-Gothic Cathedral of Santa María, the Jewish quarter, the stately Casa de Canals and Casa Castellarnau, not to mention the city’s modern architecture.

TOLEDO

Once the capital of Spain, Toledo is one of the nation’s most spectacular cities. Influenced by the Arabs, Christians and Jews that lived in peace here through the Middle Ages, Toledo’s landmarks have changed little since, showcasing a unique blend of the three cultures.

Built on the banks of the river Tagus, on a fortress-peaked hill, Toledo’s setting recalls the great imperial cities of North Africa or the Middle East. Diving into the maze of cobbled streets, you’ll find mosques, churches and synagogues jostling for space among the houses, and conspiring to get you very lost. However, there are few more scenic cities to get lost in, and simply wandering can be the best way to absorb this enchanting place.

While the Alcázar castle and Gothic cathedral are iconic sites, Toledo’s perhaps most prized possession is the artist El Greco (1541 to 1614) who spent his most productive years here. Painter, sculptor and architect of the Spanish Renaissance, El Greco remains a key figure in the history of art, and his most celebrated works hang in Toledo’s Museum of El Greco.

Located in the Castile-La Mancha region, this UNESCO World Heritage site makes an easy day trip from Madrid (a 90km, 30-minute train ride), yet savvy travelers stay longer and enjoy magical evenings when the floodlit city takes on an other-worldly air.

Tourism Office Contact: Plaza del Consistorio, 1, 45071 Toledo; 34-925-254-030; toledo@ciudadespatrimonio.org; www.toledo-turismo.com

TOP SLEEPS | Situated on a hill overlooking the city, Parador de Toledo offers luxurious accommodation in an historic setting. Interiors are spacious and tastefully furnished to complement traditional wooden beams, balustrades and Mudéjar tiles and rugs. The lounges, terrace and pool afford charming city views, and the restaurant serves local dishes from Castile-La Mancha. Cerro del Emperador, s/n; 34-925-221-850; www.parador.es

TOP EATS | For traditional cuisine with a modern twist, book a table at Michelin-starred Casa José. This large, family-run restaurant has a beautiful wooden ceiling and Chef Fernando del Cerro works wonders with the freshest local produce. Another top choice for regional delights is Michelin-starred El Bohío, serving authentic dishes like ropa vieja.

ACTIVITIES & EXCURSIONS | The cathedral and the Alcázar castle are Toledo’s most eye-grabbing sights. Erected on the remains of the great mosque, the 13th-century cathedral is largely Gothic in design, with some intriguing Renaissance and Baroque flourishes. Standing proud on the city’s highest hill, the Alcázar has served a range of functions through the ages—a military bastion under the Romans, a Muslim castle and the King of Spain’s palace among them.

Seek out the Mudéjar churches, monasteries and the Church of Santo Tomé—home to El Greco’s revered painting, The Burial of the Count of Orgaz. The mosques of El Cristo de la Luz, El Salvador and Tornerías are among the city’s most distinctive, and for Jewish heritage, visit the remarkable synagogues of Santa María la Blanca, El Tránsito and the old main synagogue.