



THE WONDERS OF WESTERN SPAIN

Extremadura and Castile and León



Slow down for a moment. Take a deep breath. Visualise dehesas dotted with holm oaks and cork trees, verdant foothill valleys and picturesque villages nestled in montane forests. Welcome to western Spain, an area often overlooked despite its resplendent biodiversity and culture, encompassing 14 UNESCO World Heritage Sites.

Through the regions of Extremadura and Castile and León, from Cáceres to Salamanca, you'll birdwatch in the Monfragüe National Park and Biosphere Reserve, visit the historic cities of Trujillo and Plasencia, hike and mountain bike in the Jerte Valley and Las Batuecas-Sierra de Francia Nature Reserve, and delight your palate with a rich diversity of regional dishes.

EXTREMADURA

Extremadura is a haven for the senses. You can still hear waterfalls and rivers rumbling, birds chirping, and gaze at an unpolluted starlit sky. In Badajoz and Cáceres – Spain's two largest provinces, which comprise the region – echoes and traces of its Roman, Visigoth, Arab and Christian past remain. Take Mérida, Extremadura's current capital and once the capital of the Roman province of Lusitania,

whose archaeological ensemble is one of the world's best preserved.

When the white storks flock towards the UNESCO Old Town of Cáceres, the faint rays of sunlight illuminate its majestic Almohad wall atop Roman foundations. Climb the imposing 12th-century Bujaco Tower and walk along the magnificent Arco de la Estrella archway to view the labyrinthine cobbled streets lined with Renaissance-style palaces and Gothic religious buildings. The Co-Cathedral of Santa María and the iconic Church of San Francisco Javier, flanked by two white bell towers, are highlights.

Extremadura is a bastion of Spanish cuisine, and Cáceres is its finest representative. Its traditional dishes have been enriched by Roman, Arab and Jewish culinary influences. Savour it at the wide variety of gourmet and signature cuisine restaurants, including Atrio, with its three Michelin stars, run for more than three decades. Every spring, Cáceres celebrates Extregusta, a tapas fair offering more than a hundred creations crafted with top-quality local ingredients. Make sure you try the world's finest acorn-fed Iberian ham, Dehesa de Extremadura, and creamy Torta del Casar cheese. »



THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Los Barruecos; Hervás; Salto del Gitano in Extremadura; Torta del Casar on toasted bread; Aqueduct of San Anton in Plasencia in Cáceres.



From *dehesas* and meadows to valleys and mountains, Extremadura's spectacular scenery and wildlife come to life in its nature reserves, including the Biosphere Reserves of La Siberia, Tajo-Tejo Transboundary, and Monfragüe National Park.

If you love birdwatching, Extremadura is the permanent and temporary home to more than 350 bird species. In Monfragüe – halfway between Trujillo and Plasencia – you'll easily spot some of the most majestic, including the black and griffon vultures, Egyptian vultures and the Iberian imperial eagle.

On the banks of the Jerte River, Plasencia stands out for its splendid Medieval walls and 16th-century aqueduct. Stroll the cobbled streets of its historic centre and be awed by the masterful granite craftsmanship of its buildings, notably the Town Hall's double Renaissance arcade and the Palace of Mirabel's cannon and hanging garden. Plasencia's most emblematic example is the outstanding Plateresque façade of the New Cathedral, outshining the exquisite Gothic alabaster rose window of the Romanesque style Old Cathedral.

Plaza Mayor is Plasencia's epicentre. Here, every Tuesday and Friday morning, farmers and producers from surrounding villages and valleys, including Alagón, Ambroz, Jerte and La Vera, sell the best fruit, vegetables and legumes from their orchards. This tradition dates back to Plasencia's founding in the late 12th century and is commemorated on *Martes Mayor*, when the old town becomes a bustling market with live folk

performances on the first Tuesday in August. Make your stay unforgettable by slumbering at the former Convent of San Vicente Ferrer, now the Parador de Plasencia and one of Extremadura's grandest hotels.

Any time of year is ideal for discovering the Jerte Valley, about nine miles north of Plasencia. Yet spring reveals its full splendour, as more than 1.5 million cherry trees flower, covering its steep slopes. During the Cherry Blossom Festival, the Jerte Valley villages host food and craft markets, folk music concerts, and offer tastings of typical products, with cultural and hiking routes organised by locals.

Wander through Cabezuela del Valle's narrow streets and admire its charming whitewashed stone houses featuring wooden details and balconies. Once you've learned about cherry culture in the Jerte Valley at the Museo de la Cereza, sample some local specialities, such as cherry gazpacho and Iberian acorn-fed steak with cherry sauce.

After the shower of petals, the valley turns green and reflects in the cool, crystalline waters of the Jerte River natural pools. Venture into the Garganta de los Infernos Nature Reserve, a natural paradise covered in Pyrenean oak, strawberry trees, and hawthorn forests. Hike to Garganta de La Serrá, an ancient glacial valley, across spectacular waterfalls, such as the Manto de la Virgen, and a distinctive natural monument: Los Pilones, a succession of giant's kettles that create natural pools, perfect for a dip on a hot summer day.



THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Trujillo's main square (Plaza Mayor); A street in Cabezuela del Valle in Extremadura; Cherry blossom in Jerte Valley, Cáceres; The Old Town of Cáceres; The monastery of Santa María de Guadalupe; Plasencia main square and city hall; Los Pilones in Extremadura. »



CASTILE AND LEÓN

Leaving Extremadura behind and travelling north, you'll enter Castile and Leon, Spain's largest region and home to an impressive number of the country's World Heritage masterpieces: Segovia's Roman aqueduct, the medieval walls of Ávila and Burgos's Gothic Cathedral. But equally impressive are its landscapes, sculpted by the mighty force of nature. The Glacial Cirques of Urbión and its Black Lagoon encompass Soria province's highest peak (7310ft), Douro River's source, and glacial lakes surrounded by extensive forests. And it's home to a profusion of fauna, including alpine accentor, beech marten and the protected rosalia longicorn.

Regional highlights include the dramatic cliffs of the Hoces del Río Duratón, the Neila Glacial Lakes, and the striking karst walls of the Río Lobos Canyon. Enhance your experience by following the scenic route to the 12th-century Templar chapel of San Bartolomé, and walking or cycling the 14-mile GR-86 trail across the peaceful villages of Ucero, Casarejos and San Leonardo de Yagüe.

One of Salamanca province's best kept secrets is Las Batuecas-Sierra de Francia Natural Park, where leafy, tranquil mountains and valleys harbour picturesque stone villages awaiting discovery. Everything in La Alberca will enchant you: its adobe-covered houses with flower-filled wooden balconies, granite-columned arcades and the melodious murmur of its fountains. Make the most of your stay by tracing a Nature Art Trail: four six-mile circular hiking routes through the forests where you'll find artistic interventions blended with nature, reflecting the Sierra de Francia villages' culture and history.

This journey through western Spain culminates in a contemplative moment, gazing at the reflection of the UNESCO Old City of Salamanca in the waters of the River Tormes from the Mirador del Embarcadero viewpoint. Yet this is only the beginning of your journey to discover the rich natural and cultural heritage of Extremadura and Castile and León. Think you know Spain? Think again and come experience it for yourself.

THIS SPREAD, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The historic city of Salamanca; The aqueduct of Segovia; The medieval village of La Alberca; Salamanca's Plaza Mayor at night; The Romanesque Hermitage of San Bartolomé, a 12th/13th-century chapel in Río Lobos Canyon; A donkey in Las Batuecas – Sierra de Francia Nature Reserve.



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