

Castilla-La Mancha



Arguably the least appreciated region of Spain, Castilla-La Mancha acts as a natural buffer between the rich industrialism of northern Spain and Moorish, tourist-driven Andalucía. This is an area as diverse as it is colourful: flat, undulating plains of henna-coloured earth striped with olive groves, wheat fields and grape vines complemented by the drama of hilltop castles and deep canyons sliced into the landscape.

The region's crowning glory is Toledo, Spain's spiritual capital and an open-air museum of medieval buildings and cultural sights. Cuenca is another wondrous place, seemingly about to topple off its eagle's-eyrie perch high above a gorge. Lovely Sigüenza is yet another gem, its buildings and church spires piled high on a hill, topped by a castle like a cherry on the cake. Further south is Almagro, home to one of Spain's more unusual and striking main squares.

There are quiet mountainous stretches here as well, including the Montes de Toledo and the pine-clad valleys around Alcalá del Júcar.

Castilla-La Mancha is, however, most famous as the home of the potty, errant and idealistic Manchego (ie La Manchan) knight, Don Quijote. Cervantes' classic novel celebrated its 400th anniversary in 2005 with the establishment of a new Quijote pilgrim trail, meticulously signposted and covering 250km (see the boxed text, p255). The windmills are everywhere to be seen, most evocatively in Consuegra and Campo de la Criptana.

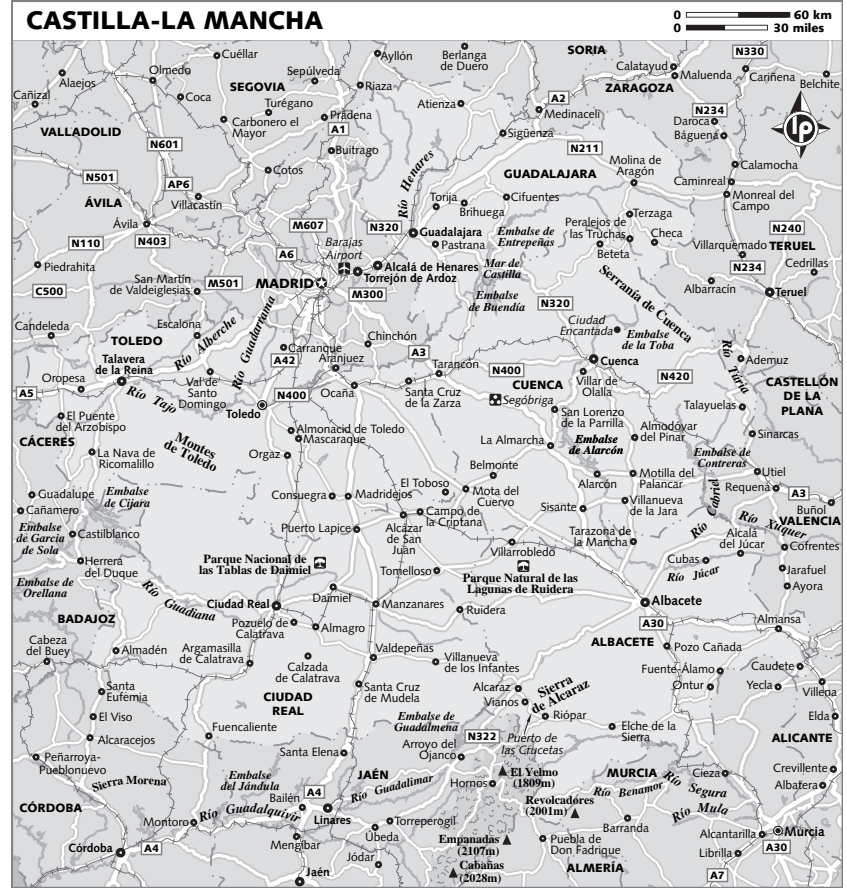
On a more sensory level, the largest vineyard in the world is here, appropriately complemented by the fact that this is also the capital for Spain's unrivalled and delicious Manchego cheese.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Explore the museums, monuments and tangle of medieval streets in **Toledo** (opposite)
- Enjoy the unspoilt beauty of the **Parque Natural de las Lagunas de Ruidera** (p254) with its crystal-clear turquoise lakes
- Take *the* holiday-brochure Don Quijote shot of the windmills overlooking **Consuegra** (p255)
- Kick back with a beer at a riverside bar beneath the castle and cascade of houses in pretty **Alcalá del Júcar** (p256)
- Visit the modern art museum in **Cuenca's** (p257) extraordinary hanging houses



■ AREA: 79,462 SQ KM ■ AVE SUMMER TEMP: HIGH 34°C, LOW 16°C ■ POP: 1.75 MILLION



TOLEDO

pop 55,062 / elevation 655m
Toledo is known as La Ciudad Imperial (Imperial City) for a reason; this is Iberia's Rome with a cultural slug of mosques, synagogues, churches and museums, plus the added high of a lofty setting, perched on a rocky ridge above Rio Tajo. Like the Middle East grafted onto Catholic Spain, Toledo's labyrinth of narrow streets, plazas and inner patios is reminiscent of the *medinas* (towns) of Damascus, Cairo or Morocco's Fez. Yet from Toledo's heart rises the Gothic grandeur of the cathedral and the grim composure of the Alcázar. The artistic legacy bequeathed by the city's former

inhabitants of Romans, Jews and Muslims is reflected in this intriguing mosaic of architecture, as well as in its cultural values.

Toledo's charms can be dampened somewhat if the streets are choked up with tour groups. Try and stay until dusk, if you can, when the city returns to the locals and the streets take on a moody, other-worldly air.

HISTORY

The Romans were the first to single out this site as a strategic crossroads near the geographical centre of the Iberian Peninsula; ancient Toletum became an important way-station in Roman Hispania. By the 6th century, Roman influence was already a distant memory and Visigothic King Atanagild moved the site of

his capital from Seville to Toletum, thus creating the Catholic heartland of the Visigothic kingdom. Over time, endless feuds between Visigothic nobles sent the kingdom into decline and its capital became vulnerable. As a result, the Muslims conquered Toledo with little difficulty after crossing the Straits of Gibraltar in 711.

Toledo rapidly grew to be the most important city of central Muslim Spain and, after the collapse of the caliphate in Córdoba in 1031, became the capital of an independent Arab *taifa* (small kingdom). For the following 50 years the city was unrivalled as a centre of learning and arts in Spain and, for a brief period, its power ranged across all modern Castilla-La Mancha extending to Valencia and even to Córdoba.

Alfonso VI marched into Toledo in 1085, marking a significant victory on the long road of the Reconquista. Shortly thereafter, the Vatican recognised Toledo as a seat of the Church in Spain. In the centuries that followed, the city was one of the primary residences of choice for the Castilian monarchy. Its alliance with the archbishop of Toledo, a vocal proponent of the Reconquista and the monarchs' right-hand man at this time, ensured that Toledo became a place of considerable power. Initially, Toledo's Christians, Jews and Muslims coexisted tolerably well. However, soon after Granada fell to the Catholic Monarchs (Reyes Católicos) in 1492, Spain's Muslims and Jews were compelled to convert to Christianity or flee; a grievous tragedy in this city of many faiths.

In the 16th century, Carlos I considered making Toledo his permanent capital, but his successor, Felipe II, dashed such ideas with his definitive move to Madrid, and Toledo went into decline.

In the early months of the 1936–39 civil war, Nationalist troops (and some civilians) were kept under siege in the Alcázar, but were eventually relieved by a force from the south. However, by diverting his units to Toledo, Franco missed an opportunity to reach Madrid before the arrival of the International Brigades, a miscalculation that many believe prolonged the war.

In 1986 Unesco declared the city a monument of world interest. Despite this, people are abandoning the old city for the characterless but comfortable modern suburbs sprawled out beneath it, leaving behind public servants,

tourists, the rent-protected elderly and a medieval city in urgent need of attention.

ORIENTATION

Toledo is built upon a hill around which Río Tajo flows on three sides. The bus station is northeast of the old town, and the train station is further east across the Tajo. Both are connected by local buses to the centre. Plaza de Zocodover is the main square of the old town.

INFORMATION

Emergency

Cruz Roja (☎ 925 22 22 22) For ambulances.

Policía Nacional (☎ 092; Plaza de la Ropería)

Internet Access

Locutorio Miradero Sicra (Calle Venacio Gonzales 9; per hr €2; ⌚ 10am–11.30pm)

Post

Main post office (Calle de la Plata 1)

Tourist Information

Main tourist office (☎ 925 25 40 30; www.t-descubre.com; Plaza del Ayuntamiento s/n; ⌚ 10.30am–2.30pm Mon, 10.30am–2.30pm & 4.30–7pm Tue–Sun) Across from the cathedral.

Tourist office (☎ 925 22 08 43; fax 925 25 26 48; Carretera de Madrid; ⌚ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 9am–7pm Sat, 9am–3pm Sun) This smaller tourist office is just outside Puerta Nueva de Bisagra. Both tourist offices offer a choice of themed guided tours of the city.

SIGHTS

In summer, many of Toledo's attractions open for up to three hours longer than the times cited.

Plaza de Zocodover

This lively square is most people's introduction to Toledo; its cafés are prime places for people-watching.

From 1465 until the 1960s, Zocodover was the scene of the city's Tuesday market and successor to the Arab *souq ad-dawab* (live-stock market), from which the square derives its unusual name. It was also here that *toledanos* for centuries enjoyed their bullfights or morbidly gathered to witness autos-da-fé (public burnings at the stake) carried out by the Inquisition.

Juan de Herrera, who built San Lorenzo de El Escorial, wanted to convert the square into

a grand Castilian *plaza mayor* (main plaza) in the late 16th century, but he was blocked by Church interests. The result is something of a hotchpotch of architectural styles. The elegant eastern façade is all Herrera managed to erect along the line of the former Arab city wall, punctuated by the gate now known as the Arco de la Sangre. The southern flank dates from the 17th century – the McDonald's certainly does not.

Alcázar

Just south off Zocodover, at the highest point in the city, looms Toledo's most recognisable edifice, the Alcázar. Abd ar-Rahman III raised an *al-qasr* (fortress) here in the 10th century, which was altered after the Christians retook the town in the following century. Alonso Covarrubias and Herrera rebuilt it as a royal residence for Carlos I, but the court moved to Madrid and it became a white elephant, eventually winding up as the Academia de la Infantería, one of the most significant army academies in Spain (now located across the Tajo valley to the east).

The Alcázar was largely destroyed during the republican siege of Franco's forces in 1936, but Franco had it rebuilt and turned into a military museum. At the time of research, the museum was closed for major renovations, to enable the relocation here of Madrid's Museo del Ejército (Army Museum). It's not expected to reopen until 2008 (at the earliest). Prior to the renovation, the exhibits eloquently reflected Spain's ambiguous approach to its past and to Franco himself. Historians eagerly await the reopening to see how this sensitive period of Spanish history will be portrayed.

Museo de Santa Cruz

Just outside what were once the Arab city walls, the **Museo de Santa Cruz** (☎ 925 22 10 36; Calle de Cervantes 3; admission free; ⌚ 10am–6.30pm Mon–Sat, 10am–2pm Sun) was built in the early 16th century and is a beguiling combination of Gothic and Spanish Renaissance styles. The cloisters and carved wooden ceilings are superb, as are the upstairs displays of ceramics from across Spain. The ground-level gallery contains a number of El Grecos (look for the *Asunción de la Virgen* and the superbly rendered *La Veronica*); a painting attributed to Goya (*Cristo Crucificado*); the wonderful 15th-century *Tapestry of the Astrolabes*; and a mixed bag of religious objects.

Catedral de Toledo

Toledo's **catedral** (adult/child €6/free; ⌚ 10.30am–6.30pm Mon–Sat, 2–6pm Sun) dominates the skyline, reflecting the city's historical significance as the heart of Catholic Spain.

From the earliest days of the Visigothic occupation, the modern site of the cathedral has been the city's centre of worship. In 646, Toledo's archbishop was first recognised as the primate of the Catholic Church in Spain. During the three centuries of Muslim rule, the Visigoths' basilica was converted into Toledo's central mosque. In 1085 Alfonso VI promised that the mosque would be preserved as a place of worship for Toledo's considerable Muslim population. The promise was broken, however, and the mosque subsequently destroyed. The construction of the cathedral dates from the 13th century.

Essentially a Gothic structure, the cathedral is nevertheless a melting pot of styles, reflecting the mixed history of the city. Mudéjar elements are plain to see in the interior decoration, and the Spanish Renaissance makes itself felt in the many chapels that line the church naves.

The **Puerta Llana** at the side takes you into the cathedral's main nave. The centre is dominated by the **coro** (choir stalls), a feast of sculpture and carved wooden stalls. The lower tier was carved in the 15th century in Late Gothic style and depicts the conquest of Granada, while the Renaissance upper level features images of saints and apostles, many by Alonso de Berruguete.

Opposite is the **Capilla Mayor**, too small to accommodate the choir stalls as originally planned, but an extravagant work of art dating back to 1498. This altar serves in part as a mausoleum for Cardinal Mendoza (prelate and adviser to Isabel and Fernando) and several kings. The masterpiece is the *retablo* (altarpiece) in Flemish Gothic style, depicting scenes from the life of Christ and culminating with a *Calvario* and an *Asunción de la Virgen*. The oldest of the cathedral's magnificent stained glass is the rose window above the **Puerta del Reloj**, to your left as you're facing the *capilla* (chapel).

Behind the main altar lies a mesmerising piece of churrigueresque baroque, the **Transparente**. A lavish 18th-century embellishment, it also serves to remedy the lack of light in the cathedral.

All the chapels and rooms off the main church body are well worth visiting, but the

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EL GRECO IN TOLEDO

After a long apprenticeship in Crete, where he was born in 1541, Domenikos Theotokopoulos moved to Venice in 1567 to be schooled as a Renaissance artist. He learned to extract the maximum effect from 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.

He came to Spain in 1577 hoping to get a job decorating the 16-century palace-monastery complex of El Escorial outside Madrid (see p166), but was rejected as a court artist by Felipe II and settled in Toledo. Despite being in the grip of evident decline, the city did not suffer from intellectual stagnation and there were several patrons to support him. El Greco favoured the company of the upper echelons, and by all reports did not suffer from a lack of modesty: 'As surely as the rate of payment is inferior to the value of my sublime work, so will my name go down to posterity as one of the greatest geniuses of Spanish painting,' he famously pronounced.

Pompous, rebellious and extravagant, El Greco hired musicians to play while he ate and prided himself on his refusal to comply with his clients' demands. The cathedral administrators withdrew their patronage, while many of his contemporaries despised him as a rebel who fought a solitary philosophical battle against those who demeaned his profession as an artist.

El Greco liked the high life, and took rooms in a mansion on the Paseo del Tránsito. As Toledo's fortunes declined, however, 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 where many have remained to this day.

El Greco's paintings of Toledo are among Europe's first pure landscapes.

highlights are the gilded **Capilla de Reyes Nuevos**, the **Capilla de la Torre** and the **sacristía** (sacristy). The latter contains a small gallery packed to the rafters with magnificent paintings by such masters as El Greco, Zurbarán, Crespí, Titian, Rubens and Velázquez, while the former houses the extraordinary **Custodia de Arfe**, by the celebrated 16th-century goldsmith Enrique de Arfe. With 18kg of pure gold and 183kg of silver, this 16th-century conceit bristles with some 260 statuettes. Its big day out is the feast of Corpus Christi (p247), when it is paraded around Toledo's streets.

The **sala capitular** (chapterhouse) features a remarkable 500-year-old **artesonado** (Mudéjar ceiling) in the so-called Cisneros style and Renaissance murals depicting the life of Christ and the Virgin Mary.

The cathedral's cool and pretty **daustro** (cloister) is entered through the **Puerta del Mollete** facing the square under the Arco del Palacio, which links the cathedral to the Palacio Arzobispal (Archbishop's Palace).

El Greco Trail

The exceptional paintings of El Greco are among the most popular of Toledo's sights and they adorn many of the monuments across town. **Iglesia de Santo Tomé** (% 925 25 60 98; www.santotome.org; Plaza del Conde; admission

€1.90; 10am-6pm) is a must-see, containing El Greco's masterpiece, *El Entierro del Conde de Orgaz* (The Burial of the Count of Orgaz). When the count, a 14th-century benefactor of the church, was buried in 1322, Sts Augustine and Stephen supposedly descended from heaven to attend the funeral. El Greco's work depicts the event, complete with miracle guests, as well as himself, his son and Cervantes among the onlookers.

Similarly bewitching is the **Museo de El Greco** (% 925 22 40 46; Calle de Samuel Levi s/n; admission €2.40; 10am-2pm & 4-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun), with its exhibition including *Vista y Plano de Toledo*, and a small collection of pieces from the 17th-century Toledo, Madrid and Seville schools.

One of the oldest convents in Toledo, the **Monasterio de Santo Domingo El Antiguo** (% 925 22 29 30; admission €1.50; 11am-1.30pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat, 4-7pm Sun) dates from the 11th century and includes some of El Greco's early commissions (most are copies). Visible through an iron grating is the crypt and wooden coffin of the painter himself.

Other spots in Toledo where you can contemplate El Greco's works include Museo de Santa Cruz (p241), the **sacristía** of the Catedral de Toledo (p241) and Museo Duque de Lerma (opposite).

Jewish Quarter

Near the Museo de El Greco is what was once the **judería** (Jewish Quarter). 'Once' because, as a huge plaque in the cathedral proudly proclaims, the bulk of Toledo's Jews, like those elsewhere in Spain, were expelled in 1492. In the centuries prior to this, Toledo's Jews worshipped in 11 synagogues.

Of the two synagogues still standing, the more interesting is **Sinagoga del Tránsito** (% 925 22 36 65; Calle de los Reyes Católicos; adult/child €2.40/1.20; 10am-2pm & 4-9pm Tue-Sat), built in 1355 by special permission of Pedro I (construction of synagogues was by then prohibited in Christian Spain), though its main prayer hall has since been expertly restored. The Mudéjar decoration is particularly striking. From 1492 until 1877 it was variously used as a priory, hermitage and military barracks. It now houses the **Museo Sefardi** (www.museosefardi.net in Spanish), which gives an insight into the history of Jewish culture in Spain. Note that at the time of research the synagogue was temporarily closed due to a fire but was due to reopen shortly, hopefully with little evident damage.

A short way north, **Sinagoga de Santa María La Blanca** (% 925 22 72 57; Calle de los Reyes Católicos 4; admission €1.90; 10am-6pm) is characterised by the horseshoe arches that delineate the five naves – classic Almohad architecture. Originally the upper arches opened onto rooms where women worshipped; the men worshipped down below.

Centro de Interpretación del Toledo Histórico

The city's latest attraction is this excellent **Centro de Interpretación** (% 925 22 16 16; Calle de la Trinidad 7; adult/child €4/2; 10.30am-6pm Wed-Mon) comprising an expansive audio-visual display covering a rambling 800 sq metres. The surrounding exhibits highlight the cultural and religious history of the city with models, photos, soundtrack and film. Currently the explanations are only in Spanish, however there are plans to introduce English audio-guides in the near future.

San Juan de los Reyes

A little further north lies one of the city's most worthwhile sights. The **Franciscan monastery & church** (% 925 22 38 02; admission €1.90; 10am-6pm) is one of the more light-filled churches in Toledo and notable for its delightful cloisters.

Provocatively built in the heart of the Jewish Quarter, San Juan de los Reyes was founded by Isabel and Fernando to demonstrate the power of the crown over the nobles and the supremacy of the Catholic faith in Spain. The rulers had planned to be buried here, but when they took the greater prize of Granada in 1492 they opted for the purpose-built Capilla Real.

Begun by the Breton architect Juan Gúas in 1477, San Juan de los Reyes was finished only in 1606. Throughout the church and two-storey cloister the coat of arms of Isabel and Fernando dominates, and the chains of Christian prisoners liberated in Granada dangle from the walls, most graphically on the northern exterior façade. The prevalent late Flemish Gothic style is enhanced with lavish Isabelline ornament and counterbalanced by unmistakable Mudéjar decoration, especially in the cloister, where typical geometric and vegetal designs stand out.

Islamic Toledo

Though architectural traces of Toledo's medieval Muslim conquerors remain, there's little that is specifically Moorish.

On the northern slopes of town you'll find the **Mezquita de Cristo de la Luz** (adult/child €1.90/1.40; 10am-2pm & 3.30-6.40pm), a modest mosque which is nonetheless quite beautiful. Built at the turn of the 1st millennium, it suffered the usual fate of being converted to a church – as the religious frescoes make clear. The narrow, steep Calle del Cristo de la Luz continues past the mosque and its charming gardens and under a gate the Muslims knew as **Bab al-Mardum** (also the original name of the mosque).

Outside the City Walls

Large portions of the old city walls remain intact and, for many people, the first sight of old Toledo is the imposing turrets of the **Puerta Nueva de Bisagra** (1550), emblazoned with Carlos I's coat of arms.

Just outside the Puerta Nueva de Bisagra is a shady park that hosts the **mercadillo** (market) every Tuesday. Down the hill to the west is another park where you can see the ruins of the former **Circo Romano** (Roman Circus).

Nearby, on the road to Madrid, is the one-time Hospital de Tavera, which now houses the **Museo Duque de Lerma** (% 925 22 04 51; Calle de Cardenal Tavera 2; admission €3; 10.30am-1.30pm &

3.30-6pm). Built in 1541, it contains an interesting array of art, including some of El Greco's last paintings.

For some of the best views of the city, head over the Puente de Alcántara to the other side of Río Tajo. Alternatively, you can get the tiny, free **cable ferry** in summer from near Hotel El Diamantista, and walk up the opposite bank. Scattered about this hinterland are many *cigarrales* (country estates of wealthy *toledanos*).

WALKING TOUR

Stock up on band-aids and explore Toledo on foot, in a fascinating journey through history that could be completed in three hours or last all day. Start off in central **Plaza de Zocodover** (1; p240), then pass through the **Arco de la Sangre** (2) on the eastern side of the square to the rewarding **Museo de Santa Cruz** (3; p241) on the left. Up the hill to the south is Toledo's signature **Alcázar** (4; p241), beyond which there are some fine views over the Río Tajo. Follow the spires down the hill to the west, passing en route the remnants of a mosque, **Mezquita de las Tornerías** (5), before reaching the **Catedral de Toledo** (6; p241), the

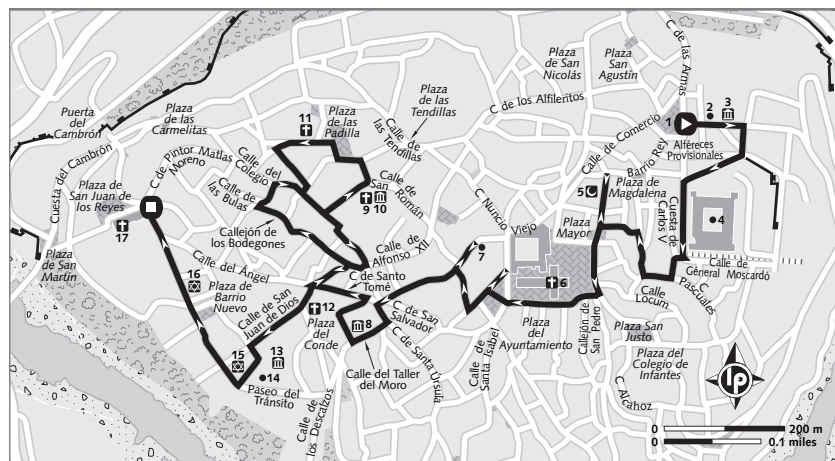
spiritual home of Catholic Spain. From the nearby Plaza del Ayuntamiento, head north up Calle de la Trinidad and check out the entertaining **Centro de Interpretación del Toledo Histórico** (7; p245). Retrace your steps and twist your way west to the 14th-century **Taller del Moro** (8; % 925 22 45 00; Calle del Taller del Moro s/n). Although the museum is closed until late 2007, the building is still interesting for its architecture.

From here, possible detours include heading northeast to the **Iglesia de San Román** (9), an impressive hybrid of Mudéjar and Renaissance styles and home to the **Museo de los Concilios y Cultura Visigoda** (10; % 925 22 78 72; Calle de San Román; adult/child & senior €0.60/free; h 10am-2pm & 4-6.30pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun), with Visigothic artefacts; or to the **Monasterio de Santo Domingo El Antiguo** (11; p244).

Down the hill are a cluster of must-sees for El Greco enthusiasts – the wonderful **Iglesia de Santo Tomás** (12; p244) and the **Museo de El Greco** (13; p244) – encountered before entering the heart of Toledo's old **Jewish Quarter** (14; p245). Here, the **Sinagoga del Tránsito** (15; p245) should on no account be missed, while the **Sinagoga de Santa María La Blanca** (16; p245) is also worth a look. These synagogues take on special poignancy if you continue along Calle de los Reyes Católicos to the splendid **San Juan de los Reyes** (17; p245), which Spain's Catholic rulers hoped would represent the ultimate endpoint of the city's history and, thus, seems a fitting spot to end your walk.

WALK FACTS

Start Plaza de Zocodover
Finish San Juan de los Reyes
Distance 2km
Duration from three hours



COURSES

The University Castilla-La Mancha runs an ESTO (Spanish in Toledo) programme with various language courses; visit www.uclm.es/fundacion/esto for more details.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

The **Feast of Corpus Christi** falls on the Thursday of the ninth week after Easter and is the most extraordinary event on Toledo's religious calendar – and one of the finest Corpus Christi celebrations in Spain. Several days of festivities reach a crescendo to a solemn procession featuring the massive Custodia de Arfe (see p244).

Easter in Toledo is also marked by several days of solemn processions by masked members of *cofradías* (brotherhoods). In the key days of Semana Santa (Holy Week) some of these processions occur around midnight.

The **Feast of the Assumption** is on 15 August. On this day of the Sagrario de la Virgen, you can drink of the cathedral's well water, believed to have miraculous qualities – the queues for a swig from an earthenware *botijo* (jug) can be equally astonishing.

SLEEPING

Toledo's good range of accommodation is offset by the number of visitors, especially from Easter to September. To avoid suitcase-trundling over cobbles, book well in advance.

Budget

Camping El Greco (% /fax 925 22 00 90; site per person/tent/car €5.55/5.35/5.35, pool adult/child €4.70/3.20; s) Located 2.5km southwest of town (catch bus 7), on the road to La Puebla de Montalbán, El Greco has superb facilities including five-star views of Toledo from the pool.

HI Albergue Juvenil en San Servando (% 925 22 45 54; ralberguesto@jccm.es; dm under/over 26yr €9.50/12) In a castle just across Río Tajo, this youth hostel has a grand setting with fine views. A membership card is required.

Pensión Arrabal (% 925 25 31 34; Calle Alfonso VI 1; s & d with shared bathroom €30) Clean and acceptable, this central *pensión* is on the main road up to the old town, so can be noisy from the front-facing rooms.

Virgen de la Estrella (% 925 25 31 34; Calle Airoas 1; s & d with shared bathroom €30) The owner also runs the restaurant of the same name nearby as well as the Arrabal. The plus here is a quieter, prettier location opposite the Santiago church.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Hostal Casa de Cisneros (% 925 22 88 28; www.hostal-casa-de-cisneros.com; Calle Cardenal Cisneros; s/d €60/80; a) Across from the cathedral, this seductive *hostal* (cheap hotel) is built on the site of an 11th-century Muslim palace, parts of which can be spied via a glass port-hole in the lobby floor. In comparison, this building is a 16th-century youngster with pretty stone-and-wood-beamed rooms and exceptionally voguish en-suite bathrooms.

Midrange & Top End

Hostal Nuevo Labrador (% 925 22 26 20; fax 925 22 93 99; Calle Juan Labrador 10; s/d/tr €30/46/60; a) This friendly hotel offers good value for money with smart, if smallish, rooms in a central location.

Hostal Santo Tomás (% 925 22 17 12; www.hostalsantotome.com; Calle de Santo Tomás 13; s/d €39/52; p a) Full of charm, this family-owned *hostal* (cheap hotel) has benefited from a revamp and sports sparkling pine-clad rooms; go for a balcony with rooftop views.

La Posada de Manolo (% 925 28 22 50; www.laposadademanolos.com; Calle de Sixto Ramón Parro 8; s/d with breakfast from €42/66) This boutique-style hotel has themed each floor with furnishings and décor reflecting one of the three cultures of Toledo. There are stunning views of the old town and cathedral from the terrace.

Hostal Alfonso XII (% 925 25 25 09; www.hostal-alfonso12.com; Calle de Alfonso XII; s/d with breakfast from €44/55; n a) A newbie on the *hostal* scene, this gingerbread cottage of a place has original beams, terracotta tiles and stylish rooms decorated with impeccable taste.

Hostal del Cardenal (% 925 22 49 00; www.hostaldelcardenal.com; Paseo de Recaredo 24; s/d from €49/63; p a) This wonderful 18th-century mansion has soft ochre-coloured walls, arches and columns. The rooms are grand, yet welcoming, with dark furniture, plush fabrics and parquet floors; several overlook the lush garden with its ponds, fountains and a dazzle of brilliantly coloured flowers.

Parador Nacional Conde de Orgaz (% 925 22 18 50; www.parador.es; Cerro del Emperador s/n; s/d €120/150; p a s) High above the southern bank of Río Tajo, Toledo's *parador* (luxurious, state-owned hotel) boasts a classy interior and breathtaking city views.

EATING Restaurants

The cuisine of Toledo is based on simple peasant fare. *Perdiz* (partridge), cooked in a variety of fashions, is typical. *Carcamusa*, a pork dish, is also popular, as is *cuchifritos*, a potpourri of lamb, tomato and egg cooked in white wine with saffron.

Naca Naca (Plaza de Zocodover 7; bocadillos €2.50-3.50; h 8am-1am Mon-Fri, 8am-3am Sat, 8.30am-midnight Sun) What this place lacks in atmosphere it makes up for with good *bocadillos* (filled rolls) and munching potential into the wee hours.

Adolfo (☎ 925 22 42 44; Calle Nuncio Viejo 1; snacks from €4; v) A chic sophisticated setting for enjoying excellent wines along with decadent light eats including salmon with a cream cheese and yogurt dressing, plus vegetarian bites and more carnivorous fare.

Gambrinus (☎ 925 21 44 40; Calle de Santo Tomás; raciones €5-12, mains €7-14) There are outdoor tables on this buzzing street plus beer on tap and international-style fare, including Tex Mex for those suffering from hot-and-spicy withdrawal.

Bacus (☎ 925 25 01 64; Calle de Travesi Descalzos 1; menú €10; h 9am-11pm Mon-Sat, 9am-5pm Sun) The huge *menú del día* (daily set menu) is the order of the day here and its paella is homemade.

La Naviera (☎ 925 25 25 32; Calle de la Campana 8; mains from €10, menú €15; h closed Mon) Diners swoop like seagulls on La Naviera's free tables, ready for the best seafood in Toledo.

Palacio (☎ 925 21 59 72; Calle Alfonso X el Sabio 3; menú from €17) Stained glass, beams and smiling service combine with traditional cuisine for a memorable night out; partridge takes the star turn.

Hierbabuena (☎ 925 22 39 24; Calle de Navalpino 45; mains €17-21, menú €31.70; h closed Sun night) A dress-for-dinner restaurant with a Moorish interior patio dishing up classy cuisine such as sirloin of beef with goose-liver pâté in a wine-based sauce.

Tan Agustito (☎ 925 25 75 53; Calle Alfonso X el Sabio 2; meals from €18; v) The interior here is modern and arty and the menu predictably innovative with vegetarian choices and decadent desserts such as marzipan ice cream with an almond-and-cinnamon sauce.

Rincón del Bohemio (☎ 925 21 37 32; Sierpe 4; meals from €18) Eat al fresco on this pretty cobbled square chowing down on hearty fare such as *patatas revolconas* (grilled potatoes with peppers and onions).

Plaza Mayor (Plaza Mayor 2; meals from €18) Fussy families will appreciate the variety here with crepes and baked potatoes, as well as traditional dishes, such as partridge. Vegetarians may feel queasy about the ceiling of hanging hams.

Aurelio (Plaza del Ayuntamiento 4; meals from €25; h closed Sun night) The three restaurants under this name are among the best of Toledo's expensive restaurants (the other locations are Calle de la Sinagoga 1 and 6). Game, fresh produce and traditional Toledan dishes are prepared with panache.

Cafés

La Venta del Alma (☎ 925 25 42 45; Carretera de Piedrabuena 35; h closed Mon) A charming old homestead where you can enjoy your brew on the patio.

Parador Nacional Conde de Orgaz (☎ 925 22 18 50; www.parador.es; Cerro del Emperador s/n) For sweeping views and even more expensive drinks, head to this fancy *parador*.

The outdoor cafés on Plaza de Zocodover are pleasant for a coffee or drink.

DRINKING & ENTERTAINMENT Bars & Clubs

Toledo doesn't have the most dynamic nightlife in Spain, but there are enough bars and discos to ensure you miss bedtime.

Cervecería 1700 (☎ 925 22 25 60; Plaza de las Tendillas 1; h closed Sun) Kick-start your evening at this relaxed beer bar with its tables spilling out onto the cobblestones.

Pícaro (☎ 925 22 13 01; Calle de las Cadenas 6) A popular *café-teatro* (theatre) serving an eclectic range of *copas* (drinks). From Monday to Thursday it's perfect for a quiet beverage, while the weekend gets rowdy, peaking on Friday and Saturday nights when the disco ball starts spinning at 2.30am.

Camelot (Calle del Cristo de la Luz 10) This disco gets the thumbs-up from young locals and expats.

La Venta del Alma (☎ 925 25 42 45; Carretera de Piedrabuena 35; h closed Mon) For an older crowd, La Venta is mild-mannered during the day, but really gets going on Friday and Saturday when the full-on atmosphere hits a prolonged high. It's just outside the city; cross Puente de San Martín and turn left up the hill and it's about 200m up on your left.

Sithons (Callejón del Lucio; h late-early) Most revellers finish the night at Sithons a *discoteca* (disco) with a throbbing dance floor and pulsating lights.

El Pellejito (☎ 925 25 46 16; Calle de las Tendillas 14; h 8.30am-late Thu-Sat) is near Cervecería 1700, and cosier, along with neighbour **El Ambigü** (Calle de las Tendillas 8), with its half-tiled interior, artwork and arches.

Also tempting in summer are the outdoor tables in the courtyard just off Plaza de Magdalena, including Bar-Restaurante Ludeña and Bar El Corralito.

Serving a variety of Spanish and foreign beers is **Lúpulo** (Calle de Aljibillo 4) and, for a cooler crowd, **La Abadía** (Calle de Nuñez de Arce 3). For the student-oriented bars shimmy down to the streets around La Abadía, particularly Calle de los Alfileritos and Calle de la Sillería.

On Calle de Santa Fe there's **El Trébol** (Calle de Santa Fe 1) and **La Tabernita** (Calle de Santa Fe 10), which specialises in *sidra* (cider). Nearby, on a hidden-away square, is **Enebro** (Plaza de Santiago de los Caballeros), a popular spot for all ages with a second branch on Plaza San Justo.

Theatre & Cinema

Teatro Rojas (☎ 925 22 39 70; Plaza Mayor) This theatre often has a rewarding programme of theatre and dance. Tuesday nights are reserved for a 'film club'. Toledo's only venue for original soundtrack films. Check for weekend kids' matinées.

Live Music

Círcula de Arte Toledo (www.circuloartetoledo.org; Plaza de San Vicente 2) There are several venues for enjoying foot-tapping live sounds, including this classy place with its regular programme of classical, jazz and blues concerts.

Garciaso Club (☎ 925 22 91 60; Calle Rojas 5) An easy-going urbane crowd frequents this funky club with live rock bands and dance space plus an upstairs chill-out zone.

El Último (☎ 925 21 00 02; Plaza del Colegio de Infantes 4) Situated in a 16th-century building, El Último is a hotbed for live jazz, blues and soul.

SHOPPING

For centuries, Toledo was renowned for the excellence of its swords, and you'll see them for sale everywhere. Another big seller in Toledo is anything decorated with *damasquinado* (damascene), a fine encrustation of gold or silver in Arab artistic tradition. A reliable outlet is **Pedro Maldonado** (Calle San Juan de Dios 10).

Toledo is also famed for its ceramics and marzipan, which every shop seems to sell regardless of the quality. The Santo Tomás

brand is reputable and there are several outlets in town, including one on Zocodover. Even the local nuns get in on the marzipan act – visit **Convento Santa Úrsula** (h 11am-1.30pm & 4-7pm) and **Monasterio de Santo Domingo El Antiguo** (h 11am-1.30pm & 4-7pm), behind the church of the same name.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

For most major destinations, you'll need to backtrack to Madrid.

Bus

From Toledo's **bus station** (☎ 925 22 36 41) buses depart for Madrid every half-hour from about 6am to 10pm daily (8.30am to 11.30pm Sunday and holidays). Direct buses (€4.20, one hour) run hourly; other services (1½ hours) go via villages along the way. Regular buses go to Alcázar de San Juan (€4, 1¼ hours, nine daily), Consuegra (€4.05, one hour) and Talavera de la Reina (€5.35, 1¼ hours), while occasional buses go to El Toboso (€7.10, two hours) and Guadalajara (€7.20, 2¼ hours). There are also services on weekdays and Sunday to Albacete (€12, 2¼ hours), Ciudad Real (€6.60, 1½ hours) and Cuenca (€9.30, 2¼ hours).

Car & Motorcycle

The N401 connects Toledo with Madrid. If you want the A4 Autovía de Andalucía, the main motorway running south from Madrid to Córdoba and Seville, take the N400 for Aranjuez. The N403 heads northwest for Ávila and continues as the N501 for Salamanca.

Train

Built in 1920, the **train station** (☎ 925 22 30 99) is a pretty introduction to the city. The high-speed AVE service runs every hour or so to Madrid's Atocha station (€8.10, 30 minutes).

GETTING AROUND

You won't need wheels to explore Toledo's old town, but buses do circulate through it and connect with outlying suburbs. Handy buses run between Plaza de Zocodover and the bus station (bus 5) and train station (buses 5 and 6).

A fun way to see Toledo is on the **Zocotren** (adult/child €3.90/1.70; h 11am-9pm), a 50-minute non-stop train trip. It leaves Zocodover on the hour from October to March, every half-hour April to September. There are also night rides (after 9pm, depending on demand) year-round.

Information

The **tourist office** (☎ 926 20 00 37; www.castillalamancha.es; Calle de Alarcos 21; 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) has a reasonable stock of information on the province; it shares the same building as the city's second post office. The main post office is on Plaza de la Constitución.

Sights & Activities

Coming from the north, you'll enter Ciudad Real by the **Puerta de Toledo** (1328), the last remaining gate of the original eight, built in Mudéjar style by Alfonso XI.

The **Museo Provincial** (Calle del Prado 4; admission free; 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun; ♾) has exhibits of archaeological finds and an art collection covering the past four centuries. For Quijote fans, the one-of-a-kind **Museo del Quijote** (Ronda de Alarcos 1; admission free; 10am-2pm & 6-9pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) has a Cervantes library stocked with hundreds of Don Quijote books, including some in Esperanto and Braille, and others dating back to 1724. You'll have to understand Spanish to get the most out of the inventive audiovisual displays.

Of the swag of churches to be seen, the most striking is the 14th-century Gothic **Iglesia de San Pedro**, the work of Gil de Siloé.

Sleeping & Eating

Pensión Esteban (☎ 926 22 45 78; Calle Reyes 15; s/d €20/30) Within confessional distance of the cathedral, this no-nonsense *pensión* has a friendly owner, soppy cat and adequate rooms with pine furniture and sparkling bathrooms.

Hotel Alfonso XII (☎ 926 22 42 81; Calle de Carlos Vázquez 8; s/d €60/120; p a w) Not far from Plaza Mayor, this is an upmarket place where old façade meets renovated interior with success. The modern carpeted rooms come with all the swish trimmings, plus wi-fi coverage on the 2nd floor.

La Deliciosa (☎ 926 21 38 01; Calle de Alarcos 11; 8.30am-11pm) Located near the tourist office, this is a handy spot for breakfast, *bocadillos* and coffee.

Self-caterers should head for the vast covered **mercado** (market; Calle de las Postas). The handful of café-bars along Calle de Palma serve some of the best-sized tapas in town. But for most of your dining and drinking pleasures, head for Avenida del Torreón del Alcázar and the parallel Calle de los Hidalgos. The former is lined with eateries such as **El Torreón** (Avenida del Torreón del Alcázar 7), which specialises in game.

Drinking

You'll find bars such as **Australian Pub** (Avenida del Torreón del Alcázar s/n) and, on the same street, the Irish Hunter near El Torreón. On Calle de los Hidalgos you can nibble tapas and sip *cervezas* (beers) in a string of bars. Move on to the city's best-known moving-and-shaking discos: La Ribera and Isla Tortuga, in Playa Park, east of town beyond the train tracks.

Getting There & Away

BUS

The **bus station** (☎ 926 21 13 42) is southwest of the town centre. Up to three daily buses head to Albacete (€12.75, 2¾ hours) and Toledo (€6.85, 1½ hours), and five per day head off to Madrid (€10.10, 2½ hours). Most surrounding towns, including Almagro (€1.85, 30 minutes, up to five daily), can be reached by bus.

TRAIN

You'll find the **train station** (☎ 926 22 02 02) east of the town centre. The bulk of trains linking Madrid with Andalucía stop at Ciudad Real. There are regular departures to Madrid (from €17.80, one hour) and Córdoba (from €22.90, one hour), while there are daily departures for Valencia (from €26, five hours, two daily) and southeast to Almagro (€2.10, 30 minutes).

Getting Around

Local bus 5 swings past both the train and bus stations bound for the town centre; catch it from Plaza del Pilar when you're leaving town.

CIUDAD REAL PROVINCE

Almagro

pop 9092

An architecturally gem-studded town, the jewel in the crown of Almagro is the extraordinary Plaza Mayor with its wavy tiled roof, stumpy columns and dark-green porticoes. Although it looks quasi-oriental, the 16th-century plaza has Germanic roots, dating back to the reign of Carlos I when several well-heeled bankers and traders moved here. The town is a delight to wander around, its relatively traffic-free cobbled streets flanked by Renaissance palaces, churches and museums.

INFORMATION

The **tourist office** (☎ 926 86 07 17; www.ciudad-almagro.com in Spanish; Plaza Mayor 1; 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Tue-Fri, 10am-2pm & 5-7pm Sat, 11am-2pm Sun), in the

ayuntamiento (town hall), has information about a number of distinguished buildings around town.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Opening onto the plaza is the oldest theatre in Spain: the 17th-century **Corral de Comedias** (Plaza Mayor 18; adult/concession €1.50/1; 10am-2pm & 5-7pm Tue-Sat, 11am-2pm & 5-7pm Sun Sep-Jun, 10am-2pm & 6-9pm Tue-Fri, 10am-2pm & 6-8pm Sat, 11am-2pm & 6-8pm Sun Jul & Aug), an evocative tribute to the Golden Age of Spanish theatre with rows of wooden balconies. It's still used for performances, especially during July's **Festival Internacional de Teatro Clásico** (www.festivaldealmagro.com in Spanish). This is nicely complemented by the **Museo de Teatro** (Calle de Gran Maestre 2; adult/concession €2.40/1; 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Fri, 11am-2pm & 4-6pm Sat, 11am-2pm Sun Jun & Aug, 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Fri, 11am-2pm & 4-6pm Sat, 11am-2pm Sun Jul), just across the square, with exhibits on Spanish theatre from the 18th century in rooms around a restored courtyard.

SLEEPING

Almagro has some real show-stopping accommodation for such a small town.

Hospedería Almagro (☎ 926 88 20 87; Calle de Ejido de Calatrava s/n; s/d €27/46; a) Located in a 15th-century convent, the beamed rooms are small and simple with original terracotta tiles. Inspiring utter devotion is the lovely leafy courtyard with its adjacent restaurant and bar; Plaza Mayor is a short stroll away.

Posada Almagro (☎ /fax 926 26 12 01; www.laposa.dadealmagro.com; Calle de Gran Maestre 5; s/d from €30/48; a) This place has rustic character with just 11 rooms set around a couple of inner courtyards. Rooms have an air of gentility with original tiled bathrooms, but the downstairs bar-restaurant means you may need earplugs on a Saturday night.

Retiro del Maestre (☎ 926 26 11 85; www.retirodelmaestre.com in Spanish; Calle San Bartolomé 5; s/d €60/75; p a i w) Enjoy five-star treatment and style without the hurly burly of a big hotel at this exquisite new place with its spacious rooms washed in ochre and blue, inner courtyard and wi-fi in the lobby.

Parador (☎ 926 86 01 00; www.parador.es; Ronda de San Francisco 31; s/d €108/135; p a w) In a spruced-up convent in a quiet corner of Almagro, this *parador* has a luxurious, old-world charm complete with lace-makers in the lobby.

Also recommended is the **Hostal Rural San Bartolomé** (☎ 926 26 10 73; Calle San Bartolomé 12; s/d €55/64; a).

EATING

There are several cafés and bars spilling out onto Plaza Mayor, most serve the usual suspects (*raciones*, *platos etc*) at the standard Plaza Mayor prices.

Queso de Oveja (☎ 926 86 05 02; Calle Feria 2) Pick up your wheel of well-aged local Manchego cheese from the experts here.

Bar Las Nieves (☎ 926 86 12 90; Plaza Mayor 52; snacks from €4) This is one of the better Plaza Mayor bars with chairs on the square and inexpensive light eats.

Meson Cepa Veja (☎ 926 26 12 61; Ronda de Santo Domingo 45; meals from €15) Better for a hot dinner than a hot date, this brightly lit place has a no-fuss traditional menu. Try the excellent *pisto* (peppers, tomatoes, garlic and egg).

El Corregidor (☎ 926 86 06 48; Calle de Jerónimo Ceballos 2; meals from €40; 1 closed Mon except Jul) The town's best restaurant with a menu of high-quality Manchegan cooking, a wall full of culinary awards and a hotchpotch décor that somehow works.

Both the **Posada Almagro** (☎ /fax 926 26 12 01; Calle de Gran Maestre 5) and the **parador** (☎ 926 86 01 00; Ronda de San Francisco 31) restaurants are worth checking out, too.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Two trains go daily to Madrid (€12.85, 2¾ hours), with up to six to Ciudad Real (€2.10, 15 minutes) and two to Valencia (€24.95, 4¼ hours); for destinations to the south, change in Ciudad Real. Buses also run reasonably often to Ciudad Real (€1.75, 30 minutes), but there are none on Sunday.

Castillo de Calatrava

About 30km south of Almagro, the fortress-like castle-and-monastery complex of **Castillo de Calatrava** (Calatrava La Nueva; admission free; 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sun) commands magnificent views across the *sierra* (mountain range) of the same name. The complex was once a forward base of the medieval order of knights that long controlled this frontier area of La Mancha during the Reconquista. Even if it's closed, it merits a visit for the site and view alone. From Calzada de Calatrava, it's 7km southwest along the CR504 and is accessible only with your own vehicle.

Parque Nacional de Las Tablas de Daimiel

The reedy marshes of Las Tablas, 11km north of Daimiel, are no great inspiration – unless you're a bird-watcher. This is a favourite stop-over for migratory birds, such as the purple heron. The park's **tourist centre** (h 8am-dusk) has information, but there's no public transport to the park.

Parque Natural de las Lagunas de Ruidera

Make a detour here and you won't be disappointed; the scenery is just stunning. A ribbon of 14 small lakes is surrounded by lush parkland, camp sites, picnic areas and discreetly situated restaurants and hotels. Foreign tourists are rare; it's most popular as a chill-out zone for hot and bothered *madrileños* (Madrid residents).

The **tourist office** (☎ 926 52 81 16; Avenida Castilla La Mancha s/n, Ruidera; h 10am-2pm & 4-6pm Wed-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) has lots of glossy information on accommodation and activities, such as hiring rowing boats, kayaks or mountain bikes.

Camping Los Batanes (☎ 926 69 90 76; www.losbatanes.com; site per person/tent/car €5/5/5.40, d bungalow €42; p) is a leafy camping ground on Laguna Redondilla.

Push the boat out and stay in the windmill suite at **Hotel Albamanjon** (☎ 926 69 90 48; www.albamanjon.net; Laguna de San Pedro 16; d from €89, ste €150; a) with a view of the turquoise lake. All the rooms have private terraces and there's an

excellent restaurant where you can sample owner Raúl's superb cooking.

La Vega (☎ 967 37 80 39; Calle San Pedro 7, Lagunas de Ruidera; meals from €12) is wonderfully situated on the lake with a large terrace and small beach. Expect a good grilling; barbecued meats are the speciality.

Villanueva de los Infantes

pop 6050

The fruit of a repopulation campaign in La Mancha as the Muslims fell back into Andalucía after the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212, Villanueva de los Infantes is an attractive and busy provincial town. A highlight here is the **Plaza Mayor**, with its deep ochre-coloured buildings, wooden-and-stone balconies and lively bars and restaurants.

On the square stands the 15th-century **Iglesia de San Andrés**, where the 16th-century poet Francisco de Quevedo is buried. Like Almagro, Villanueva is studded with the houses of old nobles and deserves a wander. The **tourist office** (☎ 926 36 13 21; Plaza Mayor s/n; h 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) organises guided walks of the town.

Hospedería El Buscón Queveda (☎ /fax 926 36 17 88; www.hosteriasreales.com; Calle Frailes 1; s/d Sun-Thu from €45/58; a), a lovely former convent four streets south of Plaza Mayor, has handsome regency-style rooms and magnificent public areas with original tapestries and oil paintings.

Buses run to Ciudad Real three times daily from Monday to Friday (€5, 1½ hours).

THE WINES OF VALDEPEÑAS

Standing at the exact midpoint between Madrid and Córdoba, the large and otherwise uninviting town of Valdepeñas offers weary travellers one (and only one) very good reason to break the journey. Surrounding the town is what some experts believe to be the largest expanse of vineyards in the world, although true aficionados of the humble grape argue that quantity does not easily translate into quality. There's an element of truth to this view – Valdepeñas has historically been to the mass market what La Rioja is to the quality end of the market (see the boxed text, p494).

That said, things are changing. You're still more likely to come across Valdepeñas wines in the cheap, cask variety than served in Spain's finest restaurants, but some of the Valdepeñas bodegas (cellars) have begun to make inroads into the quality end of the market. Doubtless you'll want to form your own opinion, but don't expect Napa Valley-style tasting here; most of the bodegas only offer tours and tastings with previous appointments and charge to boot. Check the websites for details to avoid going thirsty. One bodega to visit in town is **Bodegas Arúspide** (☎ 926 34 70 75; www.aruspide.com; Calle Franci Morales 102; per person €8) which includes a bottle to take home in the tasting price, while **Bodegas Real** (☎ 926 33 80 01; Carretera Cozar, km12.8; €3.50) includes a tour of the vineyards, bodega and a tasting of two or more wines for a fairly modest price.

IN SEARCH OF DON QUIJOTE

Part of the charm of a visit to Castilla-La Mancha is the chance to track down the real-life locations into which Miguel de Cervantes placed his picaresque hero. These days it requires less map-reading skills as, to celebrate the fourth centenary of this epic tale, the 250km Route of Don Quijote has been created and painstakingly signposted leading you along paths, cattle routes and historic routes throughout the region. Out of all the places and sights you can ponder along the way the *molinos de vientos* (windmills) are the most obvious, for it was these 'monstrous giants' that so haunted El Quijote and with which he tried to battle. Although Consuegra's are the most attractive, those that are specifically mentioned in Cervantes' novel are the windmills of **Campo de la Criptana** (below) and **Mota del Cuervo** (p256). Other highlights on the trail include the castle of **Belmonte** (p256) and **El Toboso** (p256), where the knight discovered the lovely Dulcinea.

The anniversary also kicked off a yearlong party and saw bookshops overflowing with new editions, some with CD-ROMs, and complimentary texts while institutes, universities and local authorities organised an exhausting list of seminars, conferences, theatre works and concerts not just in Spain, but across the globe. At the time of writing there were at least two films being produced looking to introduce the whimsical errant knight to a new generation of film-goers. One is the Ines Paris comedy *Miguel and William* about an improbable, but not impossible, meeting between Cervantes and William Shakespeare. Hopefully these will hit the screen despite the superstition that Don Quijote's tales of disaster seem to rub off on those who would seek him. Legendary director Orson Welles spent 20 years trying, but never succeeded. And Monty Python creator Terry Gilliam's effort, starring Johnny Depp, suffered logistical problems that included filming being constantly disrupted by US aircraft taking off and the set being washed away.

SOUTHEAST TO ALBACETE

The sweeping, windswept plains of south-eastern Castilla-La Mancha can seem dull but once you get off the highway, this is a land of ancient windmills, quiet villages and, of course, our favourite nutty knight – Don Quijote (see the boxed text, above).

Consuegra

This is *the* place for the novice windmill-spotter where you can get that classic shot of a dozen *molinos de vientos* (windmills) flanking the 13th-century **castle** (admission €2; h 9.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-5.30pm). Consuegra once belonged to the Knights of Malta; a few rooms in the castle have been done up to give a good indication of how the knights would have lived.

The **tourist office** (☎ 925 47 57 31; h 9am-2pm & 4.30-7pm Mon-Fri, from 10.30am Sat & Sun) is in the Bolero mill (they all have names), which is the first you come to as the road winds up from the town. They can advise on *casas rurales* (country homes) if you want to stay overnight.

Bar Castillo (☎ 925 48 14 79; meals from €25) stays firmly in classical mould with a rustic-style dining room and robust local dishes. The *sopa de almendra* (almond soup) is excellent.

There are regular weekday buses (three on weekends) running between Consuegra and

Toledo (€4, one hour), and up to seven buses daily to Madrid.

Alcázar de San Juan

Apart from the 18th-century **Iglesia de Santa María** (it's thought Cervantes was baptised here), there's nothing much to draw you to Alcázar but its transport options.

Hostal Aldonza (☎ 926 54 15 54; Calle de Alvarez Guerra 28; s/d €20/35), opposite the pretty train station, has clean, if poky, blue-and-white rooms with TV. The La Bollega restaurant and bar downstairs heaves with locals. For bopping nightlife strut over to the Vanyty disco across the street.

Trains leave from here for destinations throughout the country, including Albacete, Alicante, Barcelona, Ciudad Real, Jaén, Madrid, Málaga, Seville and Valencia. There are occasional buses that serve Belmonte, Cuenca and Toledo.

Campo de la Criptana & Around

The windmills of Don Quijote fame are the main feature of this pleasant town all dressed in white. They sit atop the town's summit and their proximity to the surrounding houses marks an interesting contrast with Consuegra. The **tourist office** (☎ 926 56 22 31; h 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) is in the Poyatos mill.

There are a few small *hostales* in town, including the simple, but adequate, **Hostal Egos** (☎ 926 56 43 04; Calle de García León 51; s/d €25/44), around a 300m walk from Plaza Mayor. Go for a room with a balcony. The downstairs restaurant has a €10 *menu*.

Campo de la Criptana is served by the odd train and regional bus, but options are greater 8km away in Alcázar de San Juan. About four buses run daily between the two towns, but none on Sunday.

El Toboso

Another stop on the Quijote trail is El Toboso, a 12km detour off the N420. This pretty town is the literary home of Dulcinea, and Don Quijote pilgrims can check out the mildly entertaining **Casa-Museo de Dulcinea** (☎ 925 19 72 88; Calle Don Quijote 1; adult €0.60; h 9.45am-2pm & 4-6.45pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun). There's a small **tourist office** (☎ 925 56 82 26; h 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) in the centre. There are three direct buses every day to Madrid (€6.50, two hours).

There are more pretty windmills at **Mota del Cuervo**, 29km northeast of Campo de la Criptana, at the junction of the N301.

Belmonte

About 25km northeast of Mota del Cuervo, Belmonte has one of the better-preserved Castilian castles. Set on a knoll above the pretty village, the 15th-century **castle** (adult/child €2/1; h 10.30am-1pm & 4-6pm Tue-Sun Sep-Mar, 5-7pm Tue-Sun Apr-Aug) was for a while home to France's Empress Eugénie after her husband Napoleon III lost the French throne in 1871. Also well worth a visit is **Iglesia Colegial de San Bartolomé** (Colegiata), which has an impressive altarpiece.

La Muralla (☎ 967 17 10 45; s/d €15/30) has plain comfortable rooms with a cavernous downstairs bar where old men in flat caps play dominoes. **Palacio Buenavista Hospedería** (☎ 967 18 75 80; fax 967 18 75 88; Calle José Antonio González 2; s/d/ste with breakfast from €45/70/90; p a) is a classy boutique hotel with stylish rooms set around a central patio with skylight. Go for a castle view.

By bus from Belmonte, you can get to Alcázar de San Juan and Cuenca.

ALBACETE

pop 160,000

This mildly down-at-heel provincial city is no star, but is useful as a transport hub and a place to pause between Spain's central plains and the Mediterranean *costa* (coast).

If you're passing through, the town's **cathedral** is appealing enough with its four Ionic columns. On a hot summer's afternoon, the leafy **Parque de Abelardo Sánchez** (Calle de Tesifonte Gallego), home of the **Museo Provincial** (admission €1.20; h 10am-2pm & 4.30-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun), offers some respite. The **tourist office** (☎ 967 58 05 22; Calle del Tinte 2; h 10am-2pm & 4.30-6.30pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat, to 3pm Sun) should be able to muster more enthusiasm for the town than we can. Check your emails at **Mailboxes etc** (☎ 967 61 61 00; Calle Cura 5; per hr €3; h closed Sun).

Hotel Altozano (☎ 967 21 04 62; Plaza del Altozano 7; s/d €35/58; p a) has an ace location on a pretty main square, the rooms are hotelly modern with satellite TV. For more memorable charm, the **parador** (☎ 967 24 53 21; s/d €88/110; p a i) is possibly the highlight of the town.

The bus and train stations are next to each other at the northeastern end of town. Buses serve many major cities around the country. There are five daily buses to Cuenca (€9.10, two hours), three daily to Ciudad Real (€12.50, 2¾ hours), up to three to Toledo (€12.50, 2¾ hours, none on Saturday) and at least daily Monday-to-Friday services to Almansa, Chinchilla de Monte Aragón and Ruidera. Trains head to Alicante (€21.40, 1½ hours, up to 11 daily), Ciudad Real (€14.75, 2¾ hours, five daily), Madrid (€11, three hours, hourly), Murcia (€21.90, two hours, seven daily) and Valencia (€21.40, 1½ hours, up to 15 daily).

AROUND ALBACETE

Just off the N430 motorway to Valencia, a restored fortress overlooks **Chinchilla de Monte Aragón**, a whitewashed village with a beautiful Plaza Mayor. About 60km further on, a square-turreted castle built by the Muslims stands high above the town of **Almansa**. Both towns are served by bus from Albacete.

Río Júcar

Northeast of Albacete, the deep, tree-filled gorge of Río Júcar makes a stunning detour. About halfway along the CM3218, the breathtaking town of **Alcalá del Júcar** comes into view as you descend via hairpin turns. Its restored 15th-century **castle**, an unmistakable landmark, towers over the houses that spill down the steep bank of the Júcar gorge. At the foot of the town there's a leafy meeting-and-greeting plaza, home of a small tourist office with sporadic opening hours, and several plaques which detail local hikes. **Naragua** (☎ 969 23 16

A BATTY CAVE

Forget stalagmites, cave drawings and coach tours – Alcalá's **Cuevas y Mirador del Diablo** (☎ 637 418 297; San Lorenzo 7; admission €3) is not your conventional cave. The first inkling comes when owner Juan José Martínez appears to collect your entrance fee sporting a sweeping Dalí-clone mustache. It transpires he grew up in the maestro's home town of Cadiz. OK, so that makes sense – sort of. The real adventure starts with a 70m-long tunnel, which apparently dates back to Moorish times when it was used for stabling animals. With the next exhibit the large no-smoking sign at the entrance suddenly makes sense. Don't take *any* drugs on this excursion. Spy through the porthole on your left and you are met with the astonishing sight of strobe lights in a quasi-disco setting. Next you emerge into a bar (Juan has 10 children so there's no shortage of staff). After your free drink you can enjoy an extraordinary museum; a collectables heaven with old cameras, lottery tickets, farming implements, cash registers, radios, sewing machines, news clippings and Juan's poems.

Next, climb several flights of stairs and you emerge into a fabulous *mirador* (lookout) set into the side of the cave, complete with chairs for contemplating the vista. Then there is another passage and another bar (different children) where taxidermy seems to be the main theme. Nothing as ordinary as squirrels and rabbits, you understand – think along stuffed gorilla terms.

There's something particularly apt about finding such an eccentric in the depths of La Mancha country – Cervantes would have definitely approved.

56; www.naragua.com in Spanish; Carretera Ciudad Encantada, Km7, Cuenca; €25) organises canoe trips on Río Júcar.

There are a few very well-priced hotels, including **Hostal El Júcar** (☎ 967 47 30 55; Calle Batán 1; s/d with breakfast €25/40) with pine-clad rooms and **Hostal Rambla** (☎ 967 47 40 64; Paseo Los Robles 2; s/d with breakfast €25/45). Both have restaurants; the one at Hostal Rambla does great char-grilled meats served at outdoor tables.

For an alternative route back to Albacete, a small back road takes you through the gorge with houses cut into the cliff face. The more picturesque hamlets are at the western end where the gorge narrows. Tiny **Cubas** has an intriguing ceramic-tiled and domed church hollowed out of the cliff, while **Alcozarejos** is famed for its trout fishing.

Sierra de Alcaraz

Stretching across the southern strip of Albacete province, the cool, green peaks of the Sierra de Alcaraz, laced with small, intensively farmed plots and dotted with villages, offer a great escape from the dusty plains around Albacete.

The most scenic countryside is to be found along the CM412, particularly between **Puerto de las Crucetas** (1300m) and **Elche de la Sierra**, although a detour to **Vianos** is also worthwhile. Apart from in the wooded hills and on some craggy rock formations, donkey-mounted shepherds still watch their small

flocks of sheep in the more remote corners of the *sierra*.

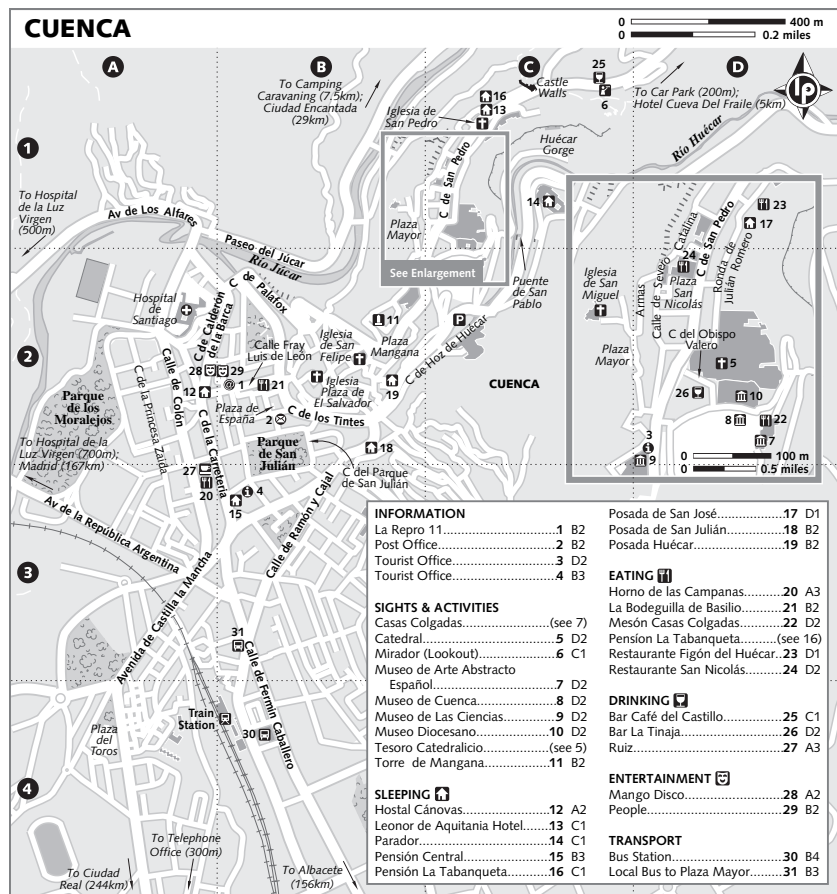
The largest choice of accommodation is in leafy **Riódar**, including the excellent **Camping Río Mundo** (site per person/tent/car €4.45/4.70/5.20) 6km east of town. You can also go horse trekking here with **La Ponderosa** (☎ 666 72 98 22; www.laponderosa.org; Fuente del Espino 23; per hr €32). The prettiest place to stay in these parts, however, is in sleepy hilltop **Alcaraz** with its medieval Plaza Mayor and lattice of narrow cobbled streets. At the top of the village, sporting magnificent views, is newish **Los Rosales** (☎ 967 38 01 28; Calle Granada s/n; s/d €43/48) with spruce and comfortably furnished rooms. Just down the hill, a handsome 16th-century building houses the **Mirador Sierra de Alcaraz** (☎ 967 38 00 17; Calle Padre Pareja s/n; d €75; a). Though the rooms may be too girly for some, with their flowery décor and drapes, the downstairs vaulted restaurant is definitely worth checking out.

THE NORTHEAST

CUENCA

pop 50,000

A World Heritage site, Cuenca is one of Spain's most enchanting cities, its old centre bristling with evocative medieval buildings. Its most emblematic sights are the *casas colgadas*, the hanging houses of Cuenca, which perch above the deep gorges that surround the town.



Like so many Spanish cities, the surrounding new town is modern and forgettable; keep the blinkers on during the approach – up the hill lies another world.

History

Probably inhabited in Roman times, Cuenca remained obscure until Muslim occupation. Fortified by one Ismail bin Dilnun early in the 11th century, the city became a flourishing textile centre. The Christians took their time conquering the place, and it fell only in 1177 to Alfonso VIII. Like much of Spain's interior, 16th-century Cuenca slipped once again into decline and hardship, something from which it only began to recover during the 20th century.

Orientation

Cuenca is compact and easily negotiable. The old town is home to all the sights and occupies the narrow hill at the northeastern end of town, between the gorges of Ríos Júcar and Huécar. At the foot of the hill down which the old town tumbles, the new town spreads out to the south. Near Cuenca's southern outskirts (a 10-minute walk from the foot of the hill), the train and bus stations are almost opposite each other, southwest of Calle de Fermin Caballero.

Information

EMERGENCY

Cruz Roja (% 969 22 22 00) For ambulances.

Police (% 091)

INTERNET ACCESS

La Repro 11 (% 969 23 14 40; Fray Luis de León 16; per hr €1.20; closed Sun)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital de la Luz Virgen (% 969 17 99 00) Off Avenida de la Cruz Roja.

POST

Post office (cnr Calles del Parque de San Julián & del Dr Fleming)

TELEPHONE

Telephone office (Paseo de San Antonio 42)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist office (% 969 32 31 19; www.aytocuenca.org in Spanish; Plaza Mayor s/n; 9am-9pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2.30pm Sun May-Sep, 9am-2pm & 5-8pm Mon-Sat, 9am-2pm Sun Oct-Apr) In the historic centre.

Tourist office (% 969 23 58 15; Plaza Hispanidad; 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Mon-Thu, 10am-8pm Fri-Sun) In the new town.

Catedral

The main façade of Cuenca's **cathedral** (adult/child €2.50/free) is hardly Spain's finest – a pastiche of unfortunate 16th-century Gothic experimentation and 20th-century restoration. Built on the site of a mosque, the relatively unadorned nave dates back to the early 13th century although other elements, such as the apse, were constructed in the mid-15th century. The cathedral's aesthetics are redeemed somewhat by the cheery, modern stained-glass windows and a small museum, the **Tesoro Catedralicio** (% 969 21 20 11; adult/child €2.50/free; 11am-2pm & 4-6pm Tue-Sat, 11am-2pm Sun), which is worth the entry fee.

Casas Colgadas

The most striking element of medieval Cuenca, the **casas colgadas** jut out precariously over the steep defile of Río Huécar. Dating from the 16th century, the houses with their characteristic layers of wooden balconies seem to emerge from the rock as if an extension of the cliffs. The finest restored examples now house an upmarket restaurant (see p261) and an art museum (right), which make excellent use of what was once an economical adaptation of limited living space. For the best views of the *casas colgadas*, cross the **Puente de San Pablo** footbridge, or walk to the northernmost tip of the old town where a *mirador* offers unparalleled views.

Museums

Old Cuenca can feel like a medieval museum and it's easy to get lost in its narrow steep streets of brick and stone.

Cuenca is not just a place to enjoy ancient history. The **Museo de Arte Abstracto Español** (% 969 21 29 83; adult/child €3/1.50; 11am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Fri, 11am-2pm & 4-8pm Sat, 11am-2.30pm Sun) is a superb exhibition space, occupying one of the *casas colgadas* and with a fine *artesonado* ceiling. Begun as an attempt by Fernando Zobel to unite the works of his fellow artists from the 1950s Generación Abstracta, the museum's constantly evolving displays include works by Chillida, Millares and Sempere. A range of art appreciation courses is also run.

Another innovative museum is the **Museo de Las Ciencias** (Science Museum; % 969 24 03 20; Plaza de la Merced; adult/child €1.20/free, weekends free; 10am-2pm & 4-8pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun), where displays range from a time machine to the development of the human species and a study of the resources of Castilla-La Mancha. There are plenty of interactive gadgets to keep kids of all ages happy, as well as a **planetarium** (admission €1.20).

The **Museo de Cuenca** (% 969 21 30 69; Calle del Obispo Valero 6; adult/child €1.20/free; 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat, 11am-2pm Sun) houses a modest archaeological collection, plus Roman artefacts, found in the Cuenca area.

Almost opposite, highlights at the **Museo Diocesano** (% 969 22 42 10; Calle del Obispo Valero 3; adult/child €1.80/free; 11am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat, 11am-2pm Sun) include two El Greco paintings and a 14th-century Byzantine diptych, the jewel in the crown. How such a piece ended up in Cuenca, no-one seems to know.

Torre de Mangana

The Torre de Mangana, near Plaza Mangana, is the last remnant of a fortress that was built by Cuenca's Muslim rulers. It is all that remains of Cuenca's days as a Muslim town.

Festivals & Events

Cuenca's **Semana Santa** celebrations are renowned throughout Spain, particularly for the eerie, silent processions through the streets of the old town. Also gaining international acclaim is the **Semana de Música Religiosa de Cuenca**, the city's celebration of sacred music. Usually held in March or April, it attracts international performers and spectators and, if it's your thing, is a great time to be in town. Contact the tourist office for more information.

Sleeping

Aside from the possible disadvantage of lugging bags up the hill, the atmospheric old town is *the* place to stay. That said, there are some reasonable options down the hill. Most places increase their rates during *Semana Santa* and the summer.

If you decide to camp, **Camping Caravaning** (☎ 969 23 16 56; site per person/tent/car €4.40/4.40/4; 📅 1 Mar-31 Oct) has superb facilities. It's 8km out of town on the road towards the *Ciudad Encantada*.

OLD TOWN

Many of the hotel rooms in the old town have amazing views, so it's worthwhile seeing if you can get a room with *una vista* (a view).

Pensión La Tabanqueta (☎ 969 21 12 90; Calle de Trabuco 13; s/d with shared bathroom €15/30) A listed building, the prices are the best you'll find in the historic centre and some rooms have five-star views of Río Júcar. This place is plain but charming, and there's a popular eatery attached.

Posada Huécar (☎ 969 21 42 01; www.huecar.com; Paseo del Huécar 3; s/d €21/45; p a i) Feel luxurious on a tight budget; located squarely between the old and new towns, this upbeat place has large rooms with terracotta tiles, rustic furnishings and river views. There's free internet use for guests.

Leonor de Aquitania Hotel (☎ 969 23 10 00; www.hotelleonordeaquitania.com; Calle de San Pedro 60; s/d with breakfast from €73/109; a) In an 18th-century house, this is a well-aged classic although the rooms may be a touch fussy for some. The restaurant is excellent.

Parador (☎ 969 23 23 20; www.parador.es; Calle de Hoz de Huécar; d €125; p a) This majestic former

convent commands stunning view of the *casas colgadas*. The recently revamped rooms have a luxury corporate feel while the public areas are headily historic with giant tapestries and antiques. There's wi-fi in the lobby.

NEW TOWN

Pensión Central (☎ 969 21 15 11; Calle de Alonso Chirino 7; s/d/tr with shared bathroom €13/22/29.75; 📅) This is a cheap sleep in a clean and tidy *penión* (small, private hotel) in the new town. Rooms are large with TV and washbasin.

Hostal Cánovas (☎ 969 21 39 73; Calle Fray Luis de León 38; s/d €30/45) This upbeat and welcoming *hostal* has spacious rooms with polished floorboards, a warm colour scheme and bright modern bathrooms.

Posada de San Julián (☎ 969 21 17 04; Calle de las Torres 1; d €46) Just down the hill from the historic centre, revel in the 16th-century surroundings with lofty ceilings, creaking staircases and cavernous rooms. Family run, grandpa peels potatoes all day for the bustling restaurant downstairs.

Hotel Cueva Del Fraile (☎ 969 21 15 71; www.hotelcuevadelfraile.com; Hoz del Huécar s/n; s/d €80/106; p a s) This 16th-century former convent is 5km from Cuenca and has been resurrected as a chic welcoming hotel with rooms washed in earth colours and excellent facilities, including tennis courts and mountain bikes for hire.

Eating

There's plenty of choice in Cuenca, although the places in the historic quarter tend to hike the price.

La Bodeguilla de Basilio (☎ 969 23 52 74; Calle Fray Luis de León 3; raciones €5-10) Tummy rumpers can fill up with delicious *tapas* and *raciones* (large *tapas*) at this atmospheric places; try the *patatas pobres* (fried potatoes with peppers, tomatoes and garlic).

Restaurante San Nicolás (☎ 969 24 05 19; Calle de San Pedro 15; mains €15-18, menú €18) Another fine establishment for solid Castilian-Manchegan food although the service can be sniffy. The braised wild boar in a fennel and thyme sauce (€21.75) is particularly good.

Horno de las Campanas (☎ 969 23 10 00; Calle de San Pedro 58-60; meals from €16) This hotel restaurant lacks the views, but has an atmospheric dining room among the stone arches. Consider *energising* your morning with the generous €9 *desayuno* (breakfast).

Restaurante Figón del Huécar (☎ 969 24 00 62; Ronda de Julián Romero 6; mains €16-21, menú €27) Run by the same owners as *Mesón Casas Colgadas*, this dress-for-dinner place specialises in seafood and such Castilian specialities as suckling pig.

Mesón Casas Colgadas (☎ 969 22 35 52; Calle de los Canonigos 3; mains €10-22, menú €27) Housed in one of the *casas colgadas*, Cuenca's gourmet pride and joy fuses an amazing location with delicious traditional food, such as venison stew.

Also recommended are the restaurants at **Pensión La Tabanqueta** (menú €10) and **Posada de San José** (mains from €7).

Drinking

The bars and cafés on Plaza Mayor are well placed for kicking back with a *cerveza*.

Bar La Tinaja (Calle del Obispo Valero 4) Enjoying an ace position, right off Plaza Mayor, this place is typically heaving with crusty locals here for the delicious (and free) *tapas* provided with every drink.

Bar Café del Castillo (☎ 969 24 34 47; Calle de Larga 13; 📅 closed Sun) Well sited for views with a large terrace, this spirited place is perfect for that late-night coffee, with a dozen of the spiked variety on offer.

Ruiz (Calle de Carretería 12; 📅 closed Sun) Popular with powdered ladies here for the delicious cakes, pastries and light snacks to accompany their *café con leche* (coffee with milk).

Entertainment

You can join the under-twenty-sixes who gather together along Calle de San Miguel (old town) or Plaza de España (new town) for loads of noisy evening *copas*. There's a gaggle of bars in both areas.

If you're looking to improve your dance moves, head for the disco-pubs on Calle del Doctor Galíndez, near Plaza de España.

People (www.peoplecuenca.com in Spanish; Calle del Doctor Galíndez 10) We recommend this spot with its slick interior and nonstop party atmosphere.

Mango Disco (Calle del Doctor Galíndez 3) Also a hit with the young trendies firing up to a steamy dance pit post midnight.

Getting There & Away

BUS
Up to nine buses daily serve Madrid (€9.80, two hours). Other services include Valencia (€11.40, 2½ hours, up to three a day), Albacete (€9.20, two hours, up to three daily) and

Alcázar de San Juan (€10.80, three hours, 3pm weekdays) via Belmonte. There are also two buses to Toledo (€10, 2¼ hours) on weekdays and one on Sunday.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

From Cuenca, the quickest route to Madrid is west along the N400, turning northwest onto the A3 at Tarancón.

TRAIN

Cuenca lies on the train line connecting Madrid and Valencia. Trains to Madrid's Atocha station depart six times on weekdays and four times on weekends (€9.90, three hours). Trains to Valencia leave four times daily (€10.90, 3¼ hours).

Getting Around

Local buses 1 and 2 for Plaza Mayor leave from just north of the train station. There's free street parking at the top of the old town (follow the signs to *estacionamiento*).

SERRANÍA DE CUENCA

Spreading north and east of Cuenca, the Serranía de Cuenca is a heavily wooded and fertile zone of craggy mountains and green fields. Rios Júcar and Huécar flow through Cuenca from the high hinterland through landscapes that are well worth exploring if you have your own transport.

From Cuenca, take the CM2105 about 30km to the extraordinary *Ciudad Encantada* (Enchanted City; adult/child €3/free; 📅 10am-sunset). Surrounded by pine woods, limestone rocks have been eroded into fantastical shapes by nature. If you let your imagination carry you away, it's possible to see a boat on its keel, a dog and a Roman bridge. The shaded 40-minute circuit around the open-air rock museum is great for breaking up a car journey. It's crowded with *madrileños* at weekends, and there are several overpriced places to eat and drink.

You could then head back to the CM2105 and turn right in the direction of Uña and Tragacete. This part of the province is very pretty, dotted with sleepy villages and the clear blue lake of the *Embalse de la Toba*. About 5km on from the eye-catching *Huelamo*, a turn-off to the right (the sign says Teruel) leads 60km across the Montes Universales to the mesmerising medieval town of *Albarracín* (p445) – a perfect place to stroll at the end of a day's drive.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Posada de San José (☎ 969 21 13 00; www.posadasanjose.com; Ronda de Julián Romero 4; s/d with views from €55/83, with shared bathroom from €25/38) Owned by Antonio and his Canadian wife, Jennifer, this 17th-century former choir school retains an extraordinary monastic charm with its crumbling portal, uneven floors and original tiles. Enjoy spectacular views and fresh flowers in the room en lieu of satellite TV and be sure to sample the *tapas* in the downstairs bar; it's excellent.

An alternative route to the road east to Teruel, the CM2105 continues north to the **Nacimiento del Río Cuervo** (17km), a couple of small waterfalls where Río Cuervo rises. From here you could loop around towards **Beteta** (29km) and the gorge of the same name, or cross the provincial frontier into Guadalajara to make for the pleasant, if unspectacular, **Parque Natural del Alto Tajo**. To the west lies La Alcarria (right).

AROUND CUENCA

Alarcón

One hundred kilometres or so south of Cuenca is the seductive village of Alarcón. Stop at the **tourist office** (☎ 969 33 03 01; Calle Posadas 6; ⌚ closed Mon & Tue) for a map of walks around the village and beyond. Most famous here, however, is the triangle-based Islamic **castle** which has been converted into a sumptuous **parador** (☎ 969 33 03 15; www.parador.es; d €190; p a) offering old-world charm and supremely comfortable rooms.

Segóbriga

These **ruins** (☎ 629-752257; adult/child €4/2; ⌚ 9am-9pm Tue-Sun 15 Apr-15 Sep, 10am-6pm Tue-Sat 16 Sep-14 Apr) may date as far back as the 5th century BC. The best-preserved structures are a **Roman theatre** and **amphitheatre** on the fringes of the ancient city, looking out towards a wooded hillside. Other remains include the outlines of a Visigothic basilica and a section of the aqueduct, which helped keep the city green in what is otherwise a desert.

The site is near Saelices, 2km south of the A3 motorway between Madrid and Albacete. From Cuenca, drive west 55km on the N400, then turn south on the CM202.

GUADALAJARA

pop 69,521
A modern somewhat scruffy city, Guadalajara is more of historical than aesthetic interest.

Guadalajara (from the Arabic *wad al-hijaara*, or 'stony river') was, in its medieval Muslim heyday, the principal city of a large swathe of northern Spain under the green banner of Islam at a time when Madrid was no more than a military observation point. In 1085 Alfonso VI finally took Guadalajara as the Reconquista moved ponderously south. The city was repeatedly sacked during the War of the Spanish Succession, the Napoleonic occupation and the Spanish Civil War.

While little remains of Guadalajara's glory days, the much-restored **Palacio de los Duques del Infantado** (admission €2; ⌚ 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun), where the Mendoza family held court, is worth a visit if you're passing by. Its striking façade is a fine example of Gothic-Mudéjar work, and the heavily ornamental patio is equally entrancing. The town's **tourist office** (☎ 949 21 16 26; Plaza de los Caidos 6; ⌚ 10am-2pm & 4-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) is opposite the **palacio** (palace).

Guadalajara is a simple day trip from Madrid, but if you're stuck, **Pensión Venecia** (☎ 949 21 13 52; Calle de Dr Benito; s/d €15/30) is a clean and tidy place. For more creature comforts, check into **Hotel Pax** (☎ 949 24 80 60; www.hotelpaxchi.com in Spanish; s/d €55/60; a) with its air of all-round poshness and genteel pastel-coloured rooms. There's wi-fi in the lobby.

The **bus station** (☎ 949 88 70 94; Calle del Dos de Mayo) is a short walk from the **palacio**. Regular buses depart for Madrid (€3.75, 50 minutes) throughout the day between 6.15am and 10pm. Sigüenza (€5.20, 1½ hours) and Pastrana (€3.10, 25 minutes) get two connections daily on weekdays, one on Saturday, but none on Sunday.

From the **train station** (☎ 949 21 28 50), 2km north of town, there are regular AVE fast trains to Madrid (€12.50, 30 minutes) from about 5am to 11.30pm and far fewer slower trains (€4.10, 50 minutes). Regional trains go to Sigüenza (€5.40, one hour), but there's a bit of a lull in the middle of the day.

LA ALCARRIA & AROUND Mar de Castilla

Southeast of Guadalajara along the N320 (it soon becomes the CM200) is the Mar de Castilla, a collection of lakes formed by dams built in the late 1950s, in an area known as **La Alcarria**. Hardly spectacular, La Alcarria was nonetheless immortalised in an enchantingly simple account of a walking trip made there in 1946 by the Nobel Prize-winning writer Camilo José Cela, *Viaje a La Alcarria*.

Pastrana

pop 1081
Of the many pueblos Cela called in at during his walking trip, Pastrana is the most enchanting. This unspoilt place has a Tuscan feel with its cobbled streets and honey-coloured stone buildings. Forty-two kilometres south of Guadalajara along the CM200, the heart and

soul of the place is the **Plaza de la Hora**, a large square dotted with acacias and fronted by the sturdy **Palacio Ducal**. It is here that the one-eyed princess of Éboli, Ana Mendoza de la Cerda, was confined in 1581 for a love affair with the Spanish King Felipe II's secretary. You can see the caged window of her 'cell', where she died 10 years later, and arrange a tour (Spanish only; €2) via the **tourist office** (☎ 949 37 06 72; www.pastrana.org in Spanish; Plaza de la Hora 5; ⌚ 10am-2pm & 4-7pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun).

Walk from the square along Calle Mayor and you'll soon reach the massive **Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de la Asunción** (Colegiata). Inside, the interesting little **museum** (adult/child €2.50/free; ⌚ 10.30am-1.30pm & 4.30-6.30pm) contains the jewels of the princess, some exquisite 15th-century tapestries and even an El Greco.

Hostal Moratin (☎ 949 37 01 16; Calle de Moratin 7; s/d from €25/40; a s) is a family-owned *hostal* just in from the main highway, with colourful stylish rooms and a large terrace and pool. There's a restaurant and bar downstairs. **Hostelería Real de Pastrana** (☎ /fax 949 37 10 60; s/d from €63/98; p a) should be a *parador*; it's gorgeous, with original oil paintings and antiques throughout and classic rooms with period touches and marshmallow-soft pillows. There's an adjacent museum of religious artefacts. If this fails to excite you'll need wheels – Pastrana is 2km away.

This town has plenty of restaurants and bars. Don't miss the locals' local **Casa Seco** (Calle Mayor 36) papered with faded bullfighting posters and run by a wonderfully matriarchal lady who keeps the flat-cap clientele under control. Round the corner, **Meson Castilla** (☎ 949 37 02 02; Calle Casino 2; meals from €18) is the pick of the restaurant bunch, its half-tiled dining room heaving with local families at weekends. Grilled meat is the speciality.

Two buses travel to Madrid (€4, 1½ hours) via Guadalajara every weekday morning.

Around Pastrana

Some 20km northeast of Pastrana is the area's main reservoir, the white-rimmed **Embalse de Entrepeñas**, where swimming is more an attraction than the views. From there you can push north on the CM204 to **Cifuentes**, with its 14th-century castle.

An alternative route to the lake goes via Guadalajara, from where you could follow the A2 northeast and turn off at **Torija**, which has a rather impressive castle out of proportion

to the size of the town. The **museum** (admission free; ⌚ 10am-2pm & 4-6pm Tue-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) within the castle is dedicated to Cela's *Viaje a La Alcarria*. From here, take the CM201 for La Alcarria's second town after Pastrana, **Brihuega**, a leafy village with stretches of its medieval walls intact. The drive east along Río Tajuña is one of the more pleasant in this part of Castilla-La Mancha. The road forms a T-junction with the CM204, from where you can head north for Sigüenza or south to the Embalse de Entrepeñas.

SIGÜENZA

pop 5000
Sleepy, historic and filled with the ghosts of a turbulent past, Sigüenza is well worth a detour. The town is built on a low hill cradled by Río Henares, and boasts a castle, a cathedral and several excellent restaurants set among twisting lanes of honey-coloured medieval buildings.

History

Originally a Celtiberian settlement, Segontia (as the town was previously named) became an important Roman and, later, Visigothic military outpost. The 8th-century arrival of the Muslims put the town in the frontline provinces facing the Christians. Sigüenza stayed in Muslim hands for considerably longer than towns further southwest, such as Guadalajara and Toledo, resisting until the 1120s. After a period of Aragonese occupation, the town was later ceded to the Castilians, who turned Sigüenza and its hinterland into a vast Church property. The bishops remained complete masters – material and spiritual – of the town and land until the end of the 18th century. Sigüenza's decline was long and painful as the town found itself repeatedly in the way of advancing armies: again a frontline during the War of the Spanish Succession and the civil war, when fighting here was heavy.

Information

The main **tourist office** (☎ 949 34 70 07; www.sigüenza.com in Spanish; ⌚ 10am-2pm & 4-6pm Mon-Thu, 10am-2pm & 4-8pm Fri, 9.30am-2.30pm & 4-7pm Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) is in the delightful Ermita del Humilladero; there's a smaller **tourist office** (☎ 949 34 7 0 09; Calle de Medina 9) just down the hill from the cathedral. Both can organise guided two-hour **town tours** (per person €6) for a minimum of six people.

You can check your emails cheaply at **Locuterio Sigüenza** (☎ 949 39 15 83; Calle Humilladero 21; per hr €2). The **post office** (Calle de la Villa Viciosa) is very central.

Catedral

Rising up from the heart of the old town is the city's centrepiece, the **catedral** (⌚ 9.30am-2pm & 4-8pm Tue-Sat, noon-5.30pm Sun). Begun as a Romanesque structure in 1130, work continued for four centuries as the church was expanded and adorned. The largely Gothic result is laced with elements of other styles, from Plateresque through Renaissance to Mudéjar. The church was heavily damaged during the civil war.

The dark (and very cold) **nave** (admission free) has some fine stained-glass windows and

an impressive 15th-century altarpiece along the south wall. To enter the chapels, sacristy and Gothic cloister, you'll need to join a Spanish-language only **guided tour** (€3; ⌚ 11am, noon, 4.30pm & 5.30pm Tue-Sat). The highlights of the tour include the **Capilla Mayor**, home of the reclining marble statue of Don Martín Vázquez de Arce (the statue is named *El Doncel*) who died fighting the Muslims in the final stages of the Reconquista. Particularly beautiful is the **Sacristía de las Cabezas**, with a ceiling adorned with hundreds of heads sculpted by Covarrubias. The **Capilla del Espíritu Santo** boasts a doorway combining Plateresque, Mudéjar and Gothic styles, and inside is a remarkable dome and an Anunciación by El Greco.

Museo Diocesano de Arte

Across the square from the cathedral, this **museum** (admission €3; ⌚ 11am-2pm & 4-7pm Tue-Sun) has an impressive selection of religious art from Sigüenza and the surrounding area, including a series of mainly 15th-century altarpieces.

Castillo

Calle Mayor heads south up the hill from the cathedral to a magnificent-looking castle which was originally built by the Muslims. Lived in by most of the kings and queens of Castilla, it was virtually destroyed during the Spanish Civil War only to be subsequently rebuilt under Franco as a **parador** (below).

Sleeping

As Sigüenza is a popular weekend jaunt for *madrileños*, accommodation gets quickly booked up.

Hostal El Doncel (☎ 949 39 00 01; www.eldoncel.com in Spanish; Paseo de la Alameda 3; s/d €35/48) Pastel-washed walls, spot lighting and shiny tiles—this family-owned place has class. Rooms on the 3rd floor have heady rooftop views. The adjacent restaurant is recommended.

Hospedería Porta Coeli (☎ 949 39 18 75; Calle Mayor 50; s/d €60/69) Housed in a handsome historic building, the light tiles and pale paintwork provide a bright fresh look to the good-sized bedrooms.

Parador (☎ 949 39 01 00; www.parador.es; Plaza del Castillo s/n; s/d from €108/120) Sigüenza's *parador* has the usual combination of luxury, attentive service and period furnishings. Set in the former archbishop's palace overlooking the town, its courtyard is a wonderful place to pass the time.

Eating & Drinking

Los Soportales (☎ 949 39 17 42; Plaza Mayor 3; snacks €2-4) Great location under the arches with tables on the square and free tapas with every drink.

Cafe-Bar Alameda (☎ 949 39 05 53; Paseo de la Alameda 2; snacks €5-10; ⌚ 10am-midnight) Join the locals at

this down-home bar, its counter heaving with tempting tapas including *caracoles* (snails) for the intrepid.

Taberna Seguntina (Calle Mayor 43; mains €8-15; ⌚ lunch only Tue, closed Wed; √) A swallow's swoop from the castle, the innovative menu here includes vegetarian choices such as thistles with Asturian goat's cheese and vegetable and almond soup.

Restaurante La Casa (☎ 949 39 03 10; Plaza de San Vicente s/n; mains €15-20) The town's newest restaurant is housed in a magnificent 12th-century house. Enjoy classic dishes such as *cabrito asado* (roast kid) in the stone-clad dining room.

Getting There & Away

Bus routes are infrequent and mostly serve towns around Sigüenza, including Guadalajara. They stop on Avenida de Alfonso VI. There are up to 10 regional trains to Madrid (Chamartin station; €8.10, 1½ hours). Some continue on to Soria.

Sigüenza lies north of the A2 motorway. The main exits are the C204, coming from the west, and the C114, from the east. The C114 then heads north towards Almazán or Soria in Castilla y León.

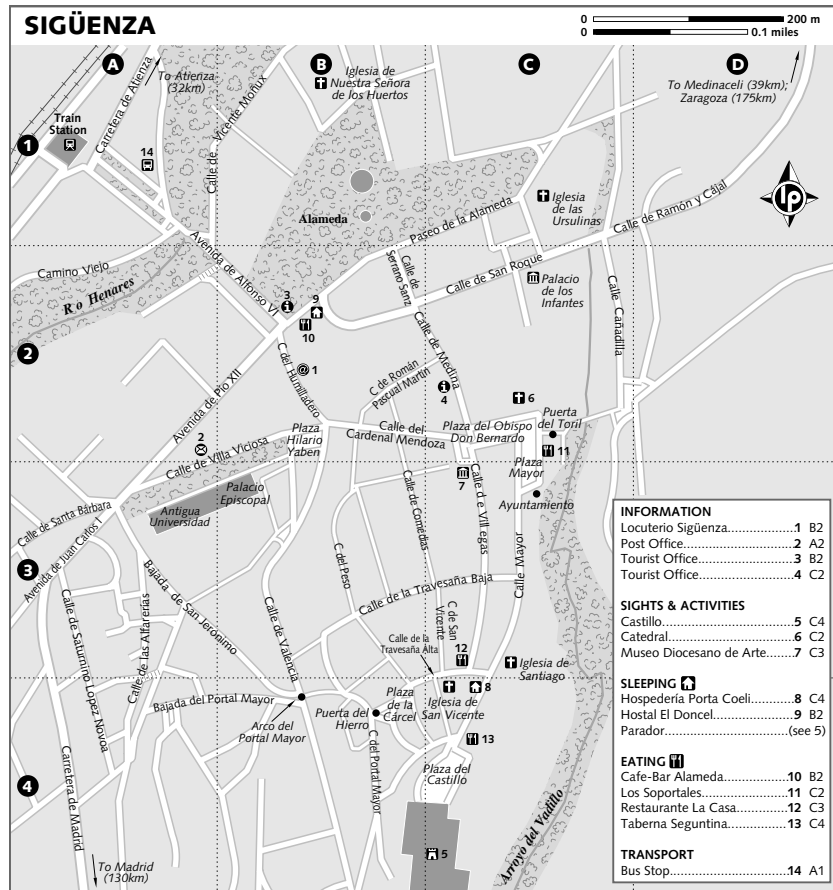
AROUND SIGÜENZA

Atienza

Some 31km northwest of Sigüenza, Atienza is a charming walled medieval village crowned by a castle ruin. This place is crammed with half a dozen mostly Romanesque churches and has two small **museums** (admission per museum €1.50, for both €2; ⌚ 10.30am-1.30pm & 4.30-6.30pm) in the Iglesia de San Gil and Iglesia de San Bartolomé.

If you come by bus, you'll have to stay. Fortunately, **El Mirador** (☎ 949 39 90 38; Calle Baruelo s/n; d with/without bathroom €43/30) offers good, if slightly overpriced, rooms and a cosy restaurant.

A couple of buses leave early in the morning, bound for Guadalajara, Madrid and Sigüenza.



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