

Extremadura



Extremadura is aptly named. This land of extremes, bordering Portugal at Spain's furthest western limit, is boiling in summer and biting cold in winter.

It's mostly broad, sparsely populated tableland. Geometrical patterns of wheat fields and grasslands roll to the horizon, their summer beige and fawn contrasting with the green of oak, cork and olive trees. Here storks plane against the evening sky or lord it from their higgledy-piggledy twig nests, piled atop church towers, pinnacles – anywhere small, flat and high.

Wooded sierras rise up along the region's northern, eastern and southern fringes. The north in particular has a sequence of beautiful ranges and green valleys dotted with villages full of character. Two of Spain's major rivers, the Tago and the Guadiana, cross Extremadura from east to west. The craggy Parque Nacional Monfragüe, straddling the Tago between Plasencia and Trujillo, has some of Spain's most spectacular bird life.

Reconquered from the Muslims in the 13th century, the land was handed to knights who turned it into one great sheep pen. Those who did not work the land often had only one choice – migration. Small wonder that many 16th-century conquistadors, including Pizarro and Cortés, sprang from this land. The riches they brought back from the Americas are reflected in the lavish mansions they constructed.

Long before Pizarro and Cortés, the Romans flourished in the city of Mérida, and plenty of evidence of this remains. The urban splendour continues in the old centre of Cáceres, while on a smaller scale towns such as Trujillo and Guadalupe are enchanting.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Prowl Ciudad Monumental's cobbled streets in **Cáceres** (p819)
- Spot majestic birds of prey as they wheel over the **Parque Nacional Monfragüe** (p818)
- Explore Spain's finest Roman ruins in **Mérida** (p830)
- Travel to **Trujillo** (p824), home town of some of Latin America's most (in)famous conquistadors
- Walk the Ruta del Emperador, following the traces of Carlos I's last journey to tranquil Monasterio de Yuste at **La Vera** (p810)
- Wander among white buildings in the southern town of **Zafra** (p836)



■ AREA: 41,634 SQ KM

■ AVE SUMMER TEMP: HIGH 38°C, LOW 26°C

■ POP: 1.084 MILLION



NORTHERN EXTREMADURA

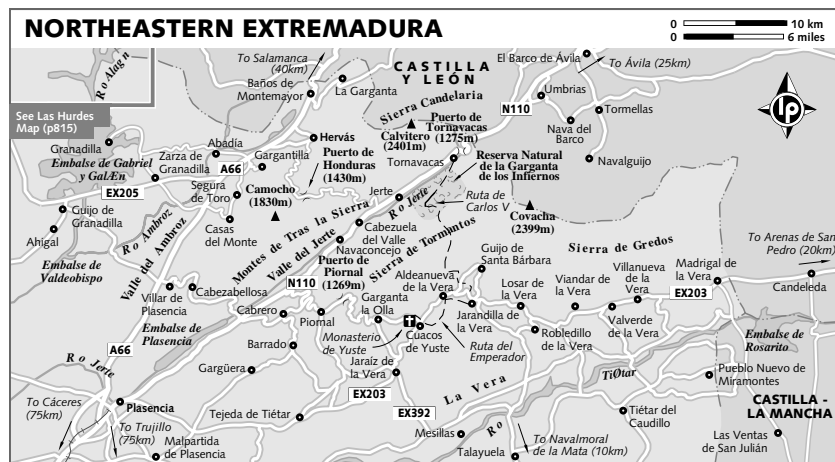
The western reaches of the Cordillera Central arch around Plasencia from the Sierra de Gredos in the east to the Sierra de Gata in the west. In the northeast are three valleys: La Vera, Valle del Jerte and Valle del Ambroz. Watered by mountain streams and dotted with ancient villages, they offer a good network of places to stay and some fine walking routes.

The once remote Las Hurdes region in the northernmost tip of Extremadura has a harsh beauty, while the Sierra de Gata in the northwest is pretty and more fertile.

LA VERA

Fertile La Vera, on the northern side of Río Tíetar valley, produces raspberries, asparagus, figs and, above all, paprika (*pimentón*), sold in old-fashioned tins and locally called *oro rojo* (red gold). Here too grows 80% of Spain's tobacco (look out for the brick drying sheds with their honeycombs of air vents). Much of the country's tobacco crop is subsidised by the EU, though Brussels' support for the cultivation of something with proven health risks is increasingly challenged.

Typical too of La Vera are half-timbered houses leaning at odd angles, their overhanging upper storeys supported by timber or stone pillars.



Information

Asociación de Turismo de la Vera (www.aturive.com in Spanish) Useful website for the valley, with tips on walks, villages and accommodation.

Comarca de la Vera (www.comarcadelavera.com) Another useful regional website.

Tourist office (☎ 927 17 05 87; Avenida de la Constitución 167, Jaraz de la Vera; h 9.30am-2pm & 5-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun) If you're here to hike, ask for its useful walking brochure describing signed walks in and around the valley.

Tourist office (☎ 927 56 04 60; www.jarandilla.com in Spanish; Plaza de la Constitución 1, Jarandilla de la Vera; h 10am-2pm & 4-6pm Tue-Sun)

Sights & Activities

Cuacos de Yuste, 45km northeast of Plasencia, is rich in typical La Vera half-timbered houses, including **Casa Juan de Austria** (Plaza Juan de Austria); look for the bust of Carlos I before it. Here, the emperor's illegitimate son (Don Juan de Austria, later a charismatic admiral who beat the Turks at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571), reputedly stayed while visiting his father at the Monasterio de Yuste.

The **Monasterio de Yuste** (☎ 927 17 21 30; 30-min guided tour in Spanish €2.50; h 9.30am-12.30pm & 3-6pm Mon-Sat, to 11.15am & 3-6pm Sun) is 2km northwest of Cuacos. The gouty Carlos I of Spain (also known, confusingly and with equal frequency, as Carlos V of Austria, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire) withdrew here in 1557 to spend his dying years, having divided the world's biggest empire between his brother and his legitimate son, Felipe II. A closed order

of Hieronymite monks occupies the monastery itself but you can visit the outlying church with its Gothic and Plateresque cloisters, and the modest royal chambers where the ailing monarch's bed was placed to give him a direct view of the altar. Ask for the accompanying pamphlet in English.

A pocked, narrow road offering spectacular views continues 7km beyond the monastery (if you're hesitant, take the better quality one from Jaraz de la Vera) to **Garganta la Olla**, a picturesque, steeply pitched village whose door lintels are inscribed with the date of construction and name of the original owner. Look out for the Casa de las Muñecas at No 3 on the main street. The House of the Dolls gets its name from the much weathered female form on the stone door archway. Painted in blue, the come-on colour of the time, it was a brothel in Carlos I's time. From the village you can make the spectacular drive over the 1269m **Puerta de Piornal** pass to the Valle del Jerte.

Jarandilla de la Vera, 10km northeast of Cuacos de Yuste, has a 15th-century fortified church on Plaza de la Constitución and a magnificent **parador** (opposite).

The **Ruta del Emperador**, a 10km walking trail, replicates the Emperor's route from Jarandilla to the Monasterio de Yuste. Follow the sign south from the church below the town's **parador** and turn right at a T-junction to leave town via Calle Marina.

Other La Vera villages with fine traditional architecture are **Valverde de la Vera** and **Villanueva de la Vera**. The former is particularly

engaging; pretty Plaza de España is lined with timber balconies and water gushes down ruts etched into the middle of the cobbled lanes.

Sleeping & Eating

Many villages have camping grounds, often with good riverside positions, and there are some fine *casas rurales* (rural houses with rooms to let).

CUACOS DE YUSTE

Camping Carlos I (☎ 927 17 20 92; sites per adult/tent/car €4/4/4; h Easter-mid-Sep; s p) About 1km east of Cuacos de Yuste, this shady spot has a pool, tennis court and **restaurant** (h Jul & Aug). Bungalows (€59) accommodating up to four are open year round.

Hotel Moregón (☎ 927 17 21 81; www.moregon.com in Spanish; Avenida de la Constitución 77; s/d €30/48; a) Handy for the Monasterio de Yuste, this modern place has 16 varied rooms, most with elements of exposed brick wall, cool floor tiles and a colour scheme ranging from sunny yellow to wine red. There's also a good **restaurant** (mains €7-12).

GARGANTA LA OLLA

There are several good modest restaurants in the cramped little lanes off Plaza Diez de Mayo. **Restaurante La Fragua** (☎ 927 17 95 71; Calle de Toril 4; menú €10, mains €9-11) offers good local cooking in a busy dining room, all timber beams and exposed stone walls.

JARAZ DE LA VERA

Finca Valvellidos (☎ 927 19 41 43; www.valvellidos.com in Spanish; d €45-56; p n a) This impeccably restored farmhouse has five spacious double rooms and also bungalows and self-contained apartments (€60 to €75), all in a gentle

country setting 2km along a dirt track off the EX392, 2km south of Jaraz. Horse-riding (€24 for two hours) is an option and downstairs is a small restaurant for guests; breakfast is €3.50 and the €15 set menu is rich in local dishes.

JARANDILLA DE LA VERA

Camping Jaranda (☎ 927 56 04 54; campingjaranda@eresmas.com; sites per adult/tent/car €4/4/4; h mid-Mar-mid-Sep; s) This camping ground, 1.25km west of Jarandilla, is particularly good for walkers and provides sketch maps for gentle hikes in the area. It's beside a gurgling brook and has a restaurant, plenty of shade and also bungalows (€58 to €90).

Hotel Don Juan de Austria (☎ 927 56 02 06; www.donjuandeustria.com; Avenida Soledad Vega Ortiz 101; r €75; a i s) This longstanding hotel has recently grafted on a spa offering all sorts of watery activities and massages (including – lick this one if you can – *envoltura en chocolate*, being smothered in chocolate). Rooms, some with brass beds and others with dark-oak bedheads, are furnished in antique style and a few have vistas of the Sierra de Gredos and Valle Jaranda.

Parador (☎ 927 56 01 17; jarandilla@parador.es; Avenida de García Prieto 1; s/d €108/135; p n a s) Push out the boat and emulate the emperor by staying overnight in this stylish 15th-century castle-turned-hotel. Within the stout walls and turrets are tastefully decorated rooms with period furniture.

Getting There & Away

Up to three buses daily run between lower La Vera villages and Plasencia. The journey from Plasencia to Madrigal de la Vera (one daily), the most distant village, takes 1¼ hours.

EASTER SUFFERING

Villanueva de la Vera is the scene, on the day before Good Friday, of one of the more bizarre of Spain's religious festivities, **Los Empalaos** (literally 'The Impaled'). Several penitent locals submit to this Via Crucis, their arms strapped to a beam (from a plough) and their near-naked bodies wrapped tight with cords from waist to armpits, and all along the arms to the fingertips. Barefoot and with two swords strapped to their backs, veiled and wearing a crown of thorns, these 'walking crucifixes' follow a painful Way of the Cross, watched on in respectful silence by townsfolk and visitors from far and wide. Hanging from the timber are chains of iron that clank in a sinister fashion as the penitents make their painful progress. Guided by *cirineos* (guides who light the way and help them if they fall), the *empalaos* occasionally cross paths. When this happens they kneel and rise again to continue their laborious journey. Doctors stay on hand, as being so tightly strapped does nothing for blood circulation.

VALLE DEL JERTE

This valley, separated by the Sierra de Tormantos from La Vera, grows half of Spain's cherries and is a sea of white blossom in late March or early April. Go in May or early June and every second house is busy boxing the ripe fruit.

The Plasencia-Ávila N110 runs up the valley, crossing into Castilla y León by the Puerto de Tornavacas (1275m).

Information

Tourist office (☎ 927 47 25 58; www.turismovalledeljerte.com in Spanish; 11 10am-3pm Mon, to 3pm & 4-5.30pm Tue-Fri, to 2pm Sat) This office, 600m north of Cabezuela del Valle, covers the whole valley.

Valle del Jerte tourism (www.elvalledeljerte.com in Spanish) Another useful website.

Sights & Activities

Piornal (1200m), on the southeast flank of the valley and famous for its Serrano ham, is well placed for walks along the Sierra de Tormantos.

In **Cabezuela del Valle**, Plaza de Extremadura, leading into Calle Hondón, has some fine houses with overhanging wooden balconies. A spectacular, winding 35km road leads from just north of Cabezuela over the 1430m Puerto de Honduras to Hervás in the Valle del Ambroz.

Jerte is another good base for walks within the beautiful **Reserva Natural de la Garganta de los Infernos**. This nature reserve of 'Hell's Gorge' has a small display and **information office** (11 10am-2pm & 5-8pm Easter-Sep, 9am-1pm & 3-6pm Oct-Easter) beside Camping Valle del Jerte. Ask for its illustrated brochure and map highlighting eight walks within the reserve. An easy 1½-hour 7km return walk from the office takes you to Los Pilones, with its strange, smooth rock formations through which the emerald-and-sapphire crystal-clear stream threads.

Tornavacas, yet another Extremaduran village with a huddled old quarter, is the starting point of the **Ruta de Carlos V**. Twenty-eight kilometres long, the trail (PR1) follows the route by which Carlos I was borne over the mountains to Cuacos de Yuste (p810) via Jarandilla de la Vera. You can walk it in one day – just as Carlos' bearers did in the 1550s. The route crosses the Sierra de Tormantos by the 1479m Collado (or Puerto) de las Yeguas.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Río Jerte (☎ 927 17 30 06; www.campingriojerte.com in Spanish; sites per adult/tent/car €4/4/4, 4-6 person bungalows €59-91; ☎) On the river's right bank 1.5km southwest of Navaconcejo, it hires out bikes (per hour/day €3/16) and has attractive stone bungalows. To cool off, you can choose from the natural riverside pool or a standard artificial one.

Camping Valle del Jerte (☎ 927 47 01 27; www.campingbungalowvalledeljerte.com in Spanish; sites per adult/tent €4/8, 2-8 person bungalow €45-96; 11 mid-Mar-mid-Sep; ☎) Just outside Jerte, this camping ground boasts a tennis court, bar-restaurant and mini-market.

Hotel Aljama (☎ 927 47 22 91; Calle Federico Bajo s/n, Cabezuela del Valle; s/d €26/45; a) Almost touching the church across the street as it overhangs the very narrow lane, this hotel preserves several traditional architectural features of the region such as cork floors and plenty of wooden beams. Rooms are spacious and the restaurant offers generous mains (€6 to €11) and a *menú del día* (€9).

Hospedería La Serrana (☎ 927 47 60 34; www.hospederiaserrana.com in Spanish; Carretera Garganta la Olla s/n; s/d €38/60 with breakfast; p) Constructed as a sanatorium for TB patients and located 1km east of Piornal, this low-slung house in the country offers large, well-furnished, excellent-value rooms. It's ideally placed for exploring the sierra's signed walking trails.

Hotel Los Arenales (☎ 927 47 02 50; www.hotel-arenales.com; s €30-4, d €42-52; a p v) Just 1.5km southwest of Jerte on the N110, this is a decent roadside stopover with 33 rooms (two equipped for the handicapped) and a restaurant. It's about 500m from Río Jerte and the Garganta de los Infernos park.

The valley is known for its *casas rurales*, (village houses or farmhouses) often booked well in advance on weekends. **El Cerezal de los Sotos** (☎ 927 47 04 29, 607 752197; www.elcerezaledelosotos.net in Spanish; Jerte; d with breakfast €70; 11 mid-Feb-mid-Dec; p s a) is a wonderful six-bedroom sprawling stone house set amid cherry orchards above the east bank of Río Jerte. Follow signs from Jerte and the N110 and do book in for dinner (€20), rich in local specialities.

Getting There & Away

From Plasencia there's one weekday bus to Piornal and up to four along the valley as far as Tornavacas.

DEHESAS

The Spanish word *dehesa* means simply 'pastureland', but in parts of Extremadura, where pastures are often dotted with evergreen oaks, it takes on a dimension that sends environmentalists into rapture. *Dehesas* of *encina* (holm oak) or *alcornoque* (cork oak) are textbook cases of sustainable exploitation. The bark of the cork oak can be stripped every nine years for cork (*corcho*) – you'll see the scars on some trees, a bright terracotta colour if they're new. The holm oak can be pruned about every four years and the wood used for charcoal. Meanwhile, livestock can graze the pastures, and in autumn pigs are turned out to gobble up the fallen acorns (*bellotas*) – a diet that produces the best ham of all.

Such, at least, is the theory. In practice a growing number of Extremadura's *dehesas* are used to less than their full potential. Some belong to absentee landlords, who use them only for shooting; others are left untended because people are finding easier ways of earning a crust. More recently, the increasingly widespread use of plastic corks threatens an important element in Extremadura's ecocycle.

VALLE DEL AMBROZ

This broader valley west of the Valle del Jerte, once split by the Roman Vía de la Plata (see the boxed text p814), nowadays carries the N630 and advancing A66 motorway, running from Plasencia to Salamanca in Castilla y León. The area's **tourist office** (☎ 927 47 36 18; www.valleambroz.com in Spanish; Calle Braulio Navas 6; 11 10am-2pm & 4-6pm or 5-7pm Tue-Fri, to 2pm Sat & Sun) is in Hervás.

Hervás

pop 3900

This colourful town has Extremadura's best surviving **barrio judío** (Jewish quarter), which thrived until the 1492 expulsion of the Jews, when most families sought refuge in Portugal. Explore especially Calles Rabilero and Cuestecilla then, for a fine view, climb up to the **Iglesia de Santa María**, on the site of a ruined Knights Templar castle.

The **Museo Pérez Comendador-Leroux** (☎ 927 48 16 55; Calle Asensio Neila; admission €1.20; 11 4-8pm Tue, 11am-2pm & 4-8pm Wed-Fri, 10.30am-2pm Sat & Sun), in an impressive 18th-century mansion on the main street, houses works of Hervás-born 20th-century sculptor Enrique Pérez Comendador and his wife, the French painter Magdalena Leroux.

The **Museo de la Moto Clásica** (☎ 927 48 12 06; Carretera de la Garganta; adult/child €10/5; 11 10.30am-1.30pm & 4-7.30pm Tue-Fri, 10.30am-8pm Sat & Sun), on a hillock 200m north of the river, has lots of classic motorcycles, ranging from Harleys to Zundapps. In separate pavilions are collections of classic cars and horse-drawn carriages.

The small **Centro de Interpretación Ferrocarril** (☎ 927 01 47 14; Paseo de la Estación; admission free; 11 10am-2pm & 4-7pm), in Hervás' decommissioned station,

has a multimedia display recounting the history of the railway in Extremadura.

SLEEPING & EATING

Camping El Pinajarro (☎ 927 48 16 73; www.campingel-pinajarro.com in Spanish; sites per adult/tent/car €4/4/4, 2/4 person bungalows €44/61; 11 mid-Mar-Sep, Fri-Sun Oct-mid-Mar) On the EX205, 1.5km southwest of Hervás, this shady, top-class camping ground is run by a welcoming young couple. With a shop, restaurant (July and August), nature talks and plenty of children's activities in summertime, it's warmly recommended.

Albergue de la Vía de la Plata (☎ 927 47 34 70; albergueviaplata@hotmail.com; Paseo de la Estación s/n; per person €20) Here's a delightfully original, brand new hostel-type place, open to all. With one double with private bathroom and four quads with shared bathroom, it's in a converted railway station building (no noise though; the last train steamed by in 1984), furnished in bright colours. There's a bar as well as self-catering facilities.

Hospedería Valle del Ambroz (☎ 927 47 48 28; www.hospederiavalledelambroz.com in Spanish; Plaza del Hospital s/n; s/d €65/105; a s p) Occupying a beautifully restored 17th-century monastery, this place is not all it seems. The monumental façade belies a rather more modern interior, where you are met by soft pastel colours and contemporary art.

Granadilla

About 25km west of Hervás, **Granadilla** (admission free; 11 10am-1pm & 5-7pm Mon-Fri, 5-7pm Sat, 10am-1pm Sun) is a picturesque village complete with its own turreted castle. Abandoned after the creation in the 1960s of the reservoir that

RUTA DE LA PLATA

The name of this ancient highway, also called the Via de la Plata, derives from the Arabic *bilath*, meaning tiled or paved (and no, if you remember your schooldays Spanish, it's nothing to do with *plata*, meaning silver). But it was the Romans in the first century who originally laid this 1000km-long artery, linking Seville in the south with the coast of Cantabria and Bay of Biscay. Along its length moved goods, troops, travellers and traders. Later, it also served an alternative pilgrim route for the faithful walking from Andalucía to Santiago de Compostela along the Camino Mozarabe.

Nowadays it's closely paralleled by the N630, which has usurped large tracts for motor traffic. But much of the original remains and alternative walking tracks often run where the highway has intruded. Entering Extremadura south of Zafrá, it passes through Mérida, Cáceres and Plasencia, then heads for Salamanca in Castilla y León.

Neglected and virtually abandoned when motorised transport first dominated, it's now promoted as a valued tourist and cultural resource. Take a look at www.rutadelaplata.com or pick up its equivalent guide (€3) from tourist offices on the route. And should you be tempted to trek a stretch or two, pack *Walking the Via de la Plata* by Ben Cole and Bethen Davies.

laps around it and located in a lush green setting amid pinewoods, Granadilla is gradually being restored by visiting school and student groups. To get here, drive to Abadía or Zarza de Granadilla and follow the signs.

Baños de Montemayor

Water and wicker bring visitors to this small spa town, 7km north of Hervás. Its two springs, both dispensing sulphurous waters at 43°C, were first tapped by the Romans, whose baths soothed the muscles of weary travellers along the Via de la Plata. At the **Balneario de Baños de Montemayor** (% 923 42 83 02; www.villateral.com; Avenida de las Termas 57; 1 Mar–mid-Dec) you can follow a 45-minute water-based relaxation programme (€40) in the remains of the Roman bathhouse. A host of other treatments are also available.

The **Centro de Interpretación Via de la Plata** (% 923 02 03 28; Calle Castañar 48; admission free; 1 10am–2pm & 4–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–2pm Sat) uses modern media within a restored traditional building to recount the history of this vital communications route from Roman times onward.

Baskets of all shapes and sizes, mats, even hats, cascade from the wicker shops along the main street. Check the label if something takes you fancy; much of what's on sale nowadays comes from the Far East.

Getting There & Away

Up to five buses daily run between Cáceres, Plasencia and Salamanca via the Valle del Ambroz, calling by Hervás (€2.25) and Baños de Montemayor (€2.60).

LAS HURDES

Las Hurdes has taken nearly a century to shake off its image of poverty, disease and chilling tales of witchcraft, even cannibalism. In 1922 the miserable existence of the *hurdanos* prompted Alfonso XIII to declare during a horseback tour, 'I can bear to see no more'. A decade later Luis Buñuel made *Las Hurdes – Terre Sans Pain* (Land without Bread), his short, harrowing documentary about rural poverty. Today the slick roads and growth of could-be-anywhere housing have robbed much of the picturesque feel from its villages but notably improved locals' living standards. Even so, outsiders are still a rare enough phenomenon to attract stares.

The austere, rocky terrain yields only small terraces of cultivable land along the riverbanks. The few remaining original, squat stone houses resemble slate-roofed sheep pens as much as human dwellings and in the hilly terrain donkeys and mules remain more practical than tractors. Here and there clusters of beehives produce high-quality honey.

Information

The **tourist office** (% 927 43 53 29; www.todohurdes.com; Avenida de Las Hurdes s/n; 1 10am–2pm & 4.30–7pm Tue–Sat, 11am–1.30pm Sun Jun–Sep, 10am–2pm & 4–7pm Tue–Sat, to 2pm Sun Oct–May), beside the EX204 in Caminomorisco, is the area's lone information office. Within the Casa de la Cultura (Cultural Centre), it has a useful map outlining walks and drives in Las Hurdes.

Sights & Activities

The valley of Río Hurdano, slicing northwest from Vegas de Coria and cut by the EX204, is at the heart of Las Hurdes. From Nuñomoral, 7.5km up the valley, a road heads west up a side valley to **El Gasco**, from where there's a particularly good one-hour return walk to **El Chorro de la Meancera**, a 70m waterfall. This side valley, the most picturesque of the area, has hard-won farming terraces carved out of the ravine's steep banks and clusters of traditional stone and slate-roofed houses huddled together in hamlets such as **Cottolengo**.

Back in the main valley **Casares de las Hurdes**, 9km northwest of Nuñomoral, has a pleasant main square with good views down the valley. To get a feel for Las Hurdes at the pace it demands, set aside a day to walk the PR40, a near-circular 28km route that follows ancient shepherd trails from here to Las Heras via La Huestre.

Beyond Casares de las Hurdes, the road winds up through Carabusino and Robledo to the border of Salamanca province, from where you can continue 25km to Ciudad Rodrigo (p191).

Alternatively, take a right turn 20m before the border marker to wind 9km down through forest to the isolated villages of **Riomalo de Arriba**, **Ladrillar** and **Cabezo** as far as **Las Mestas**, at the junction of the forest-lined road that leads up into the Peña de Francia towards La Alberca (p192). Las Mestas is a pretty stop, with a *piscina natural* (river swimming spot) and several local stores selling honey and pollen products.

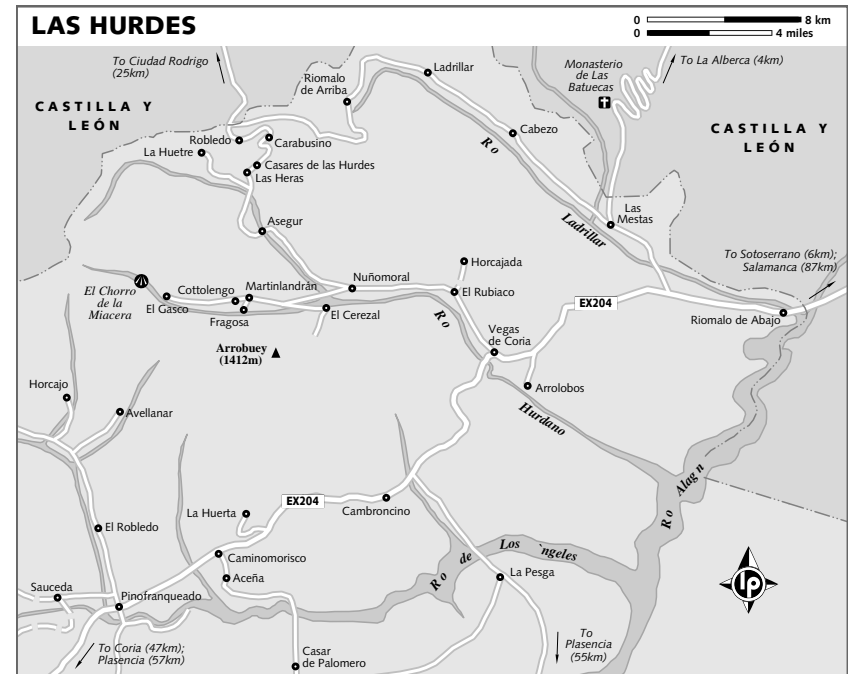
Sleeping & Eating

Most of the main villages of Las Hurdes have at least one hotel, which usually has its own restaurant.

Pensión Hurdano (% 927 43 30 12; Avenida Padre Rizabala; Nuñomoral; s/d without bathroom €18/27, d with bathroom €30) Deep into the valley and run by an engaging old couple, this is a little gem that also runs a bar and restaurant.

Hostal Montesol (% 927 67 61 93; Calle Lindón 7; r without/bathroom €30/32; a p) In Casares de las Hurdes, high up in the austere valley, it has rear rooms with great views. There's also a restaurant serving hearty fare.

Las Cabañas de Mestas (% 927 43 40 25; www.lasmestas.com; Finca La Viña Grande; cabins €45–55; a p)



These cabins, accommodating up to four people, and each having a porch, kitchen and a scratch of garden, enjoy a lovely setting amid olive groves. You may find the service as rustic as the bungalows.

Getting There & Away

Transport isn't easy here. On weekdays, one bus runs daily between Plasencia and Vegas de Coria (€4.90, 1½ hours) and Casares de las Hurdes (€6, 2¼ hours). Another runs between Riomalo de Arriba and Vegas de Coria (€2.30, 30 minutes), connecting with the Plasencia service. Two Coria-Salamanca buses call by Caminomorisco Monday to Saturday and one bus connects the town with Plasencia on weekdays.

SIERRA DE GATA

The Sierra de Gata, to the southwest of Las Hurdes, is almost as remote, its villages just as appealing. It's a land of wooded hills and valleys, through which poke spectacular outcrops of granite, the building material of choice in the vernacular architecture, with its carved stonework and external staircases.

Hoyos, formerly the summer residence of the bishops of Coria, has some impressive *casas señoriales* (mansions). The solid sandstone mass of its 16th-century Iglesia de Nuestra Señora del Buen Varón is surrounded on three sides by wide plazas and balconies bright with cascading flowers. About 5km out of central Hoyos (follow the signs for *piscina natural* just outside the east exit) is a popular local freshwater stream that widens out and is used as a local summer pool.

Santibáñez el Alto, high up on a lonely wind-swept ridge to the east, has the dinkiest bull-ring you'll ever see, built into the partially ruined walls of the mostly 13th-century castle that once guarded this vantage point.

Of all the hamlets in the sierra, the most engaging is **San Martín de Trevejo**. Beside cobblestone lanes with water coursing down central grooves, traditional houses jut out upon timber-and-stone supports. A couple of *casas rurales* offer rooms in the old village centre and several bars and a restaurant have food. On the northern edge of the village you can stroll out along an original Roman road. Here and in the two next villages looking west, **Eivas** and **Valverde del Fresno**, the folk speak their own isolated dialect, a strange mix of Spanish and Portuguese.

Getting There & Away

From Coria, four buses run daily to Hoyos (€2.25), and one or two to Valverde del Fresno (€4.40, 1¾ hours). There's one bus daily on weekdays from Plasencia to Valverde del Fresno (2¾ hours) via San Martín de Trevejo. Two run from Plasencia to Hoyos and another to Santibáñez (one hour).

CORIA & AROUND

pop 12,950

South of the Sierra de Gata, massive and largely intact protective walls surround Coria's old quarter, its whitewashed houses watched over by a mighty keep.

Information

Esitat-Coria (Calle Almanzor 12; per hr €3; 11am-2pm & 4-11pm) Internet access.

Tourist office (% 927 50 13 51; Avenida de Extremadura 39; 11am-2pm & 5-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun) It has a pamphlet in English with a plan and description of the old town's main sights.

Sights & Activities

The **cathedral** (Plaza de la Catedral; 10am-1pm & 4-6.30pm), primarily Gothic, has intricate Plateresque decoration around its north portal. Attached is a small **ecclesiastical museum** (admission €2). On the plain below is a fine stone bridge, abandoned in the 17th century by Río Alagón, which now takes a more southerly course.

The **Convento de la Madre de Dios** (Calle de las Monjas s/n; admission €1.50; 10am-12.45pm & 4.15-6.45pm Sun-Fri, 4.15-6.45pm Sat) is a thriving 16th-century convent with an elegant cloister. The sisters sell a variety of delicious home-made sweets and pastries.

The **Museo de la Carcel Real** (Calle de las Monjas 2; admission €1.20; 10.30am-2pm & 5.30-8.30pm Wed-Sun), once the town's lock-up, houses Coria's tiny archaeological museum. Step inside the dark, poky *celda del castigo* (punishment cell), then see how the cushy first floor cells differed from the plebs' prison below.

Galisteo, 26km east of Coria on the EX109, has near-intact Muslim-era walls, the remains of a 14th-century fort with a curiously disproportionate cone-shaped tower added later and a Mudéjar brick apse to its old church.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel los Kekes (% & fax 927 50 40 80; Avenida de la Sierra de Gata 49; s/d €22/36) In the heart of town, these neat, well-furnished rooms make for an inviting stop. Prices rise a little in August.

El Bobo de Coria (% 927 50 07 95; Calle de las Monjas 6; mains €11; 11am-2pm Tue-Sun) Particularly strong on local mushroom dishes in season, The Idiot of Coria (named after a Velazquez painting) is also rich in traditional Extremadura dishes. The food's safe here; the walls are scarcely visible for the collection of locks, keys and bolts that adorn them.

Casa Campana (% 927 50 00 38; Plaza San Pedro 5; meals €20-25; 11am-2pm Wed-Mon) The slightly kitsch décor of the dining room, with its hunk of Roman wall and orange paint job, doesn't detract from Casa Campana's fine country cooking. And you can always dine on the terrace if it offends you.

Getting There & Away

The **bus station** (% 927 50 01 10; Calle de Chile) is in the new part of town, about 1km from the old quarter. Buses run to/from Plasencia (€3.85, three daily) and Cáceres (€5.25 five daily).

PLASENCIA

pop 39,600

This pleasant, bustling town is the natural hub of northern Extremadura. Rising above a bend of Río Jerte, it retains long sections of its defensive walls. Founded in 1186 by Alfonso VIII of Castilla (see his handsome equestrian statue outside Puerta del Sol), Plasencia only lost out to Cáceres as Extremadura's premier town in the 19th century. It has an attractive old quarter of narrow streets and stately stone buildings, many emblazoned with noble coats of arms. Sights are well signed in both Spanish and English.

Information

Municipal tourist office (% 927 42 58 43; www.aytoplasencia.es/turismo in Spanish; Calle Santa Clara 2; 11am-2pm & 4-9pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm & 4-8pm Sat & Sun)

Regional tourist office (% 927 01 78 40; www.turismoextremadura.com; off Avenida del Ejército; 11am-2pm & 5-7pm Mon-Fri, 9.45am-2pm Sat & Sun Jun-Sep, 9am-2pm & 4-6pm Mon-Fri Oct-Apr) Within Torre Lucia.

Sights

Heart of town is lively, arcaded **Plaza Mayor**, meeting place of 10 streets and scene of a Tuesday farmers market since the 12th century. The little fellow who strikes the hour on top of the much-restored Gothic transitional **town hall** is El Abuelo Mayorga (Grandpa Mayorga), an unofficial symbol of the town.

Plasencia's **cathedral** (Plaza de la Catedral; 11am-1pm & 5-7pm Mon-Sat, to 1pm Sun May-Sep, to 2pm & 4-6pm Mon-Sat, to 1pm Sun Oct-Apr) is actually two in one. The 16th-century **Catedral Nueva** (admission free) is mainly Gothic with a handsome Plateresque façade and robustly carved early-16th-century choir stalls that mix sacred and secular. Within the Romanesque **Catedral Vieja** (admission €2), entered through the Catedral Nueva via its bijou of a cloister, are the fine Capilla de San Pablo and the cathedral museum with 15th- to 17th-century Spanish and Flemish art.

Nearby is the **Museo Etnográfico-Textil** (% 927 42 18 43; Plazuela Marqués de la Puebla; admission free; 11am-2pm & 5-8pm Wed-Sat, to 2pm Sun), which displays local handicrafts and costumes.

The **Centro de Interpretación Torre Lucia** (% 927 41 68 40; off Avenida del Ejército; admission free; 11am-2pm & 5-8pm Jun-Sep, 10am-2pm & 4-6pm Oct-Apr) tells the history of medieval Plasencia through a video, models and artefacts. It also gives access to a hunk of the city wall, which you can walk along.

Sleeping

Hotel Rincón Extremeño (% 927 41 11 50; www.hotelrincon.com in Spanish; Calle Vidrieras 6; s/d €30/39; a) This unpretentious hotel has good, clean rooms and also runs a popular restaurant. It's down a busy little lane cluttered with eateries and bars just off Plaza Mayor.

Hotel Alfonso VIII (% 927 41 02 50; www.hotelalfonsoviii.com in Spanish; Avenida Alfonso VIII 32; s €60-70, d €105-20; p a n) Cool and gracious, on a busy street just outside the old city walls, this early-20th-century hotel offers comfortable, sound-proofed, spacious rooms, though the décor's a little dated. It runs a highly regarded restaurant. Wi-fi and parking (€11) are available.

Parador (% 927 42 58 70; plasencia@parador.es; Plaza San Vicente Ferrer s/n; s/d €112/140; p n a) The austere outside of this 15th-century Dominican convent gives no hint of the resplendent Renaissance cloister, the delightful rooms (with wi-fi) and richly tiled dining room, once the monks' refectory. Parking is €12.

Eating

Tapas are the thing in Plasencia. At lunch-time and sunset the bars and terraces on and around the Plaza Mayor fill up with eager punters, downing *cañas* (a small draught beer) or the local *pitarrá* red at €1 a shot. With each tittle comes a tapa for free. Depending on your tolerance for the grog, you can easily lunch or dine this way!

La Pitarra del Gordo (☎ 927 41 45 05; Plaza Mayor 8) This is one of myriad busy tapas bars. Favourites are its sausages and sliced ham (see the fat legs dangling from the bar's roof). It has two other branches around town.

Casa Juan (☎ 927 42 40 42; Calle Arenillas 5; mains €12-15; 11 Fri-Wed) Tucked away in a quiet lane, Casa Juan does well-prepared *extremeño* meat dishes such as shoulder of lamb and suckling pig. The chef's French; for starters, try his homemade melt-in-the-mouth *foie gras*. Eat in the vast dining room or on the smaller rear terrace.

Shopping

Casa del Jamón (Calle Zapatería 15) is a pleasantly pungent, tempting delicatessen with a great selection of wines, sausages, cheeses and boutique beers.

Getting There & Away

The **bus station** (Calle de Tornavacas 2) is about 750km east of Plaza Mayor. The **train station** is off the Cáceres road, about 1km southwest of town.

Up to five buses daily run to/from Cáceres (€3.25, 50 minutes) and five to seven to/from Madrid (2½ hours).

Local services, weekdays only, include La Vera (up to three daily), Hervás (up to five daily), Coria (three daily), Hoyos (two daily) and one each to Caminomorisco, and Valverde del Fresno. Up to five services run to Salamanca (€7.40, 2½ hours).

Train depart from Plasencia to Madrid (€17.85, three to 3½ hours, two to six daily), Cáceres (€4, 1½ hours, up to five daily) and Mérida (€6.90, 2½ hours, two to three daily).

PARQUE NACIONAL MONFRAGÜE

Spain's 14th and newest national park, created in 2006, is a hilly paradise for bird watchers. Straddling the Tajo valley, it's home to some of Spain's most spectacular colonies of raptors and more than 75% of Spain's protected species. Among some 175 feathered varieties are around 250 pairs of black vultures (the largest concentration of Europe's biggest bird of prey) and populations of two other rare large birds: the Spanish imperial eagle and the black stork. At ground level, you'll be very lucky indeed to spot the endangered lynx, which still just manages to hang on in the park. The best time to visit is between March and October since storks and several raptors winter in Africa.

The park **information centre** (☎ 927 19 91 34; 11 9am-7.30pm Apr-Oct, 9am-6.30pm Nov-Mar) is in the hamlet of Villarreal de San Carlos on the EX208 Plasencia-Trujillo road. Ask there for the English version of its excellent illustrated map, which describes three signed walking trails of between 2½ and 3½ hours and shorter loops too. You can also drive to several of the hides and lookout points, such as the hilltop **Castillo de Monfragüe**, a ruined 9th-century Muslim fort. It's 20 minutes on foot from the castle car park or an attractive 1½-hour walk from Villarreal.

On the Peña Falcón crag, over on the opposite (west) bank of Río Tajo, are griffin vultures, black storks, Egyptian vultures, peregrine falcons, golden eagles and eagle owls.

The park maintains a couple of **Centros de Interpretación**, one about water (its video has an optional English soundtrack) and the other presenting the park's natural environment.

The nearest towns with accommodation are Torrejón el Rubio, 16km south of Villarreal, and Malpartida de Plasencia, 18.5km north. Villarreal has a couple of *casas rurales* and reservations are normally essential.

Al Mofrag (☎ 927 19 90 86; www.casauralalmofrag.com in Spanish; Cañada Real 19; s/d incl breakfast €35/50) Six cosy rooms in a fully renovated house, opened in 2006.

El Cabrerín (☎ & fax 927 19 90 02; Calle Villarreal 3; s/d €35/48) Ask at the bar opposite the information centre.

Precisely 14km north of Villarreal on the EX208 is **Camping Monfragüe** (☎ 927 45 92 33; www.campingmonfrague.com in Spanish; sites per adult/tent/car €4/4/4, 4-person bungalows €40-62; 11 year-round; s), a mature, shady camping ground with restaurant, shop and pool. It rents out bikes and does four-hour 4WD guided tours of the park (€25).

CENTRAL EXTREMADURA

CÁCERES

pop 89,050

Extremadura's largest city after Badajoz is a lively place. Given extra vitality by a sizable student population, it has some great restaurants and a vigorous nightlife.

The Ciudad Monumental, the old town with its cobbled streets, mansions and public buildings, is a joy to wander through. Protected by defensive walls, it has survived almost intact from its 16th-century heyday. It owes its construction to wealth brought in by migrating nobles from León in the wake of the Reconquest, supplemented richly by loot from the Americas.

Stretching at its feet, arcaded Plaza Mayor is one of Spain's finest public squares.

Orientation

The Ciudad Monumental rises above the 150m-long Plaza Mayor. Around both, a tangle of streets, mostly pedestrianised, extends to Avenida de España. From Plaza de América, at its southern end, Avenida de Alemania runs 1km southwest to the train and bus stations.

Information

Ciberjust (Calle Diego Maria Crehuet 7; per hr €2; 11 10.30am-11.30pm Mon-Fri, 5pm-11.30pm Sat & Sun) Closest internet café to the Ciudad Monumental.

Junta de Extremadura tourist office (☎ 927 01 08 34; Plaza Mayor 3; 11 9am-2pm & 4-6pm or 5-7pm Mon-Fri, 9.45am-2pm Sat & Sun)

Municipal tourist office (☎ 927 24 71 72; Calle Ancha 7; 11 10am-2pm & 4.30-7.30pm or 5.30-8.30pm Tue-Sun)

Post office (Paseo Primo de Rivera 2)

Ciudad Monumental

'Monumental City' captures it. The churches, palaces and towers are indeed huge and hugely impressive but no-one lives here and there's only a sprinkling of bars and restaurants. The place lacks soul, especially after dark. But let's not be churlish. It's magnificent and merits at least two visits: first by day, then by night to enjoy the buildings illuminated.

Many of the mansions – all carved with the coats of arms of their founding families – are still in private, often absentee, hands; others are used by the provincial government, the local bishop and the Universidad Extremeña.

PLAZA DE SANTA MARÍA

Entering the Ciudad Monumental from Plaza Mayor through the 18th-century **Arco de la Estrella**, you'll see ahead the **Concatedral de Santa María** (Plaza de Santa María; 11 10am-1pm & 5-8pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-2pm & 5-8pm Sun), Cáceres' 15th-century Gothic cathedral. On its southwest corner is a modern statue of San Pedro de Alcántara, a 16th-century *extremeño* ascetic (see how his toes have been worn shiny by the hands and lips of the faithful). Inside, drop €1 in the slot to the right of the Santa Rita chapel to light up the magnificent carved 16th-century cedar altarpiece. There are several fine noble tombs and a small **ecclesiastical museum** (admission €1).

Also on Plaza de Santa María, the Ciudad Monumental's most impressive plaza, are the **Palacio Episcopal** (Bishop's Palace), the **Palacio de Mayoralgo** and the **Palacio de Ovando**, all in 16th-century Renaissance style. Just off the plaza's northeast corner is the **Palacio Carvajal** (Calle Amargura 1; admission free; 11 10am-2pm & 5-9pm Mon-Sat, to 2pm Sun). Within this late-15th-century mansion, there's a small, very visual display of sites of interest throughout northern Extremadura.

Not far away, in the northwest corner of the walled city, the **Palacio Toledo-Moctezuma** was once the home of a daughter of the Aztec

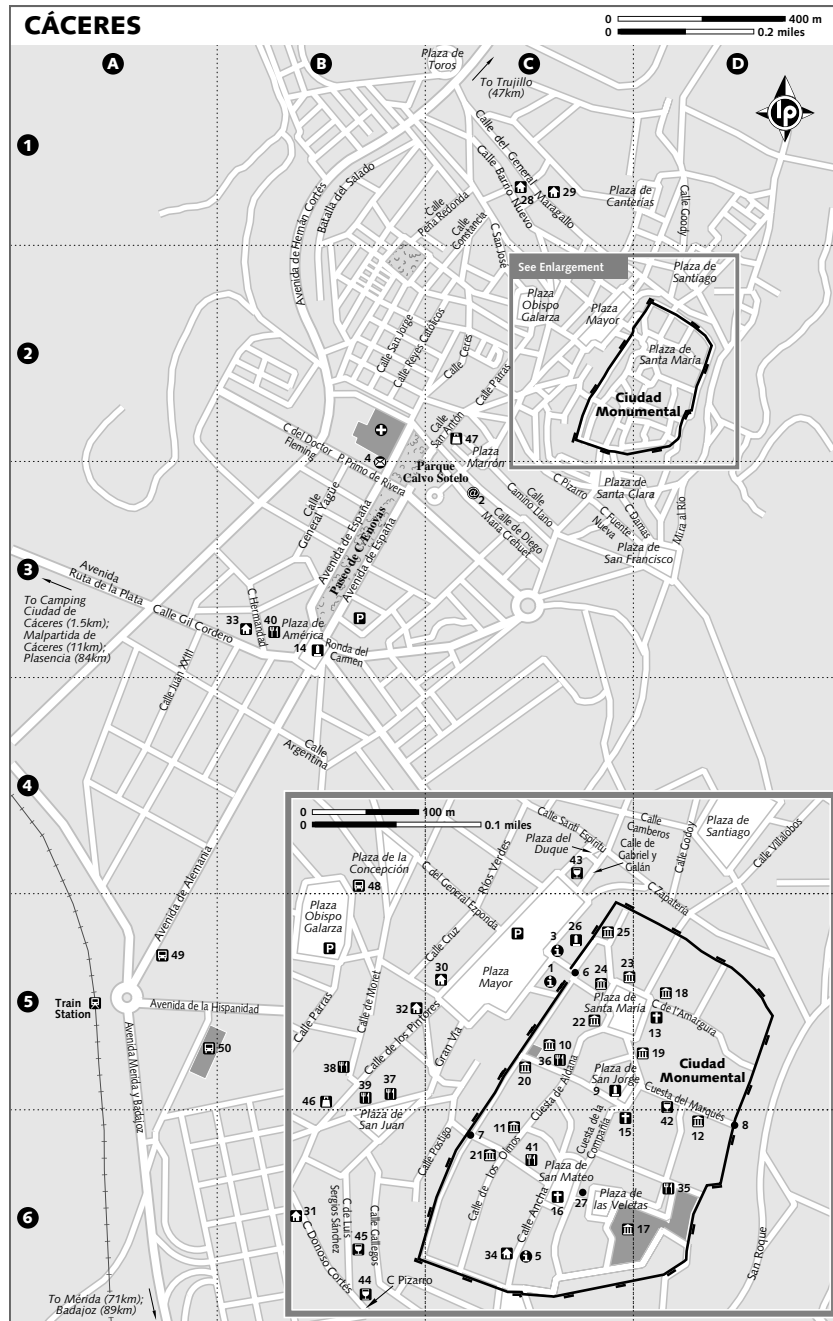
WOOLLY WANDERERS

If you travel the byways of Extremadura, Castilla y León, Castilla-La Mancha or western Andalucía you may find your road crossing or running beside a broad grassy track, which might have signs saying *cañada real* (royal drove road) or *via pecuaria* (secondary drove road). What you've stumbled upon is one of Spain's age-old livestock migration routes. The Visigoths were the first to take their flocks south from Castilla y León to winter on the plains of Extremadura – a practice that avoided the cold northern winter and allowed pastures to regenerate.

This twice-yearly *trashumancia* (migration of herds) grew to epic proportions in the late Middle Ages, when sheep became Spain's economic mainstay. The vast network of drove roads is estimated to have totalled 124,000km.

The biggest of them – veritable sheep freeways measuring up to 75m wide – were the *cañadas reales*. The Cañada Real de la Plata, which roughly followed the Roman Via de la Plata from northwest to southwest Spain, passes just west of Salamanca, enters Extremadura by the Valle del Ambroz, crosses the Parque Natural Monfragüe, and then follows stretches of the EX208 to Trujillo.

In modern times the drove roads fell into disuse, although since the late 1990s an effort has been made to maintain some of them and even resuscitate the *trashumancia*. The most publicised example takes place in Madrid, where in autumn a flock of 2000 or so sheep is driven through the city centre as a symbolic act.



emperor Moctezuma, who was brought to Cáceres as the bride of conquistador Juan Cano de Saavedra. Just around the corner, heading back towards Arco de la Estrella, you can climb the 12th-century **Torre de Bujaco** (adult/child €2/free; ⌚ 10am-2pm & 4.30-7.30pm or 5.30-8.30pm Mon-Sat, to 2pm Sun). From the top of this tower, there's a good bird's eye view (literally: you're within feather-ruffling distance of a couple of stork nests) of the Plaza Mayor.

PLAZA DE SAN JORGE

Southeast of Plaza de Santa María, past the Renaissance-style **Palacio de la Diputación**, is Plaza de San Jorge, above which rises the **Iglesia de San Francisco Javier**, an 18th-century Jesuit church. Beside it, the 15th-century **Casa de los Becerra** (Plaza de San Jorge 2) is a recently restored mansion, now functioning as a cultural centre, which you're free to wander around.

Nearby, the **Casa-Museo Árabe Yussuf Al-Borch** (Cuesta del Marqués 4; admission €1.50; ⌚ very irregular) is a private house decked out by its owner with an eccentric mix of Oriental and Islamic trappings. The **Arco del Cristo**, at the bottom of this street, is a Roman gate.

PLAZA DE SAN MATEO & PLAZA DE LAS VELETAS

From Plaza de San Jorge, Cuesta de la Compañía climbs to Plaza de San Mateo and the **Iglesia de San Mateo**, traditionally the church of the landowning nobility and built on the site of the town's Arab mosque.

Just to the east is the **Torre de las Cigüeñas** (Tower of the Storks). This was the only Cáceres tower to retain its battlements when the rest were lopped off in the late 15th century, on Isabel la Católica's orders, to exert royal authority and put a stop to rivalry between the city's fractious nobility.

Below the square is the excellent **Museo de Cáceres** (9% 927 01 08 77; Plaza de las Veletas 1; admission/EU citizens €1.20/free; ⌚ 9am-2.30pm & 4-7.15pm or 5-8.15pm Tue-Sat, 10.15am-2.30pm Sun). This museum is in a 16th-century mansion built over an elegant 12th-century *aljibe* (cistern), the only surviving element of Cáceres' Muslim castle. It has an impressive archaeological section, rooms devoted to traditional crafts and costumes and a good little fine-arts display, with works by El Greco, Picasso and Miró.

OTHER BUILDINGS

Also worth a look within the Ciudad Monumental are the **Palacio de los Gólfines de Arriba** (Calle de los Olmos 2), where Franco was declared head of state in 1936, and the **Casa Mudéjar** (Cuesta de Aldana 14), still showing Muslim influence in its brickwork and 1st-floor window arches. On opposite sides of Plaza de los Caldereros are the **Palacio de la Generala** and **Casa de los Rivera**, both now university administrative buildings.

Tours

The **Asociación de Guías Turísticas** (Tourist Guides Association; Plaza Mayor 2) leads regular 1½-hour tours (€4.50, Tuesday to Sunday) in Spanish of the

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Ciudad Monumental, starting from its office on Plaza Mayor. Ask for the accompanying pamphlet in English.

Festivals & Events

For three hectic days in May, Cáceres stages the Spanish edition of **Womad** (World of Music, Arts and Dance; www.granteatrocc.com in Spanish), with international bands ranging from reggae and Celtic to African, Indian and Australian Aboriginal, playing in the old city's squares.

From 21 to 23 April the town celebrates the **Fiesta de San Jorge** in honour of its patron saint.

Sleeping

Albergue Turístico Las Veletas (‰ 927 21 12 10; www.alberguesturisticos.es; Calle General Maragallo 36; dm €20, d without/with bathroom €43/56; h Tue-Sun; h j) This modern hostel with its large rear garden offers agreeable accommodation in rooms of two, four or more. Reserve in advance, especially out of season, since it works primarily with groups.

Hostal Alameda (‰ 927 21 12 62; Plaza Mayor 33; d €45; a) This hostel is a great deal; it's on the 3rd floor, and it has five spacious rooms with comfortable beds and tile flooring. They're high enough above the busy main square to escape most of summer's nocturnal party-going street noise.

Hotel Don Carlos (‰ 927 22 55 27; www.hoteldoncarloscaceres.net in Spanish; Calle Donoso Cortés 15; s €33-48, d €48-65; a) Rooms are tastefully decorated at this welcoming, family-owned hotel, which has been recently and sensitively created from a long-abandoned early-19th-century private house. The hotel has free internet connection.

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Alameda Palacete (‰ 927 21 16 74; www.alamedapalacete.com; Calle General Maragallo 45; s/d/tr/q €44/60/75/85; a) Restored with taste and flair by the owner herself, this elegant two-storey early-20th-century townhouse has eight beautifully arranged rooms. Three, big as small studios, can sleep up to four. Exquisite ceramic floors, high ceilings and the small patio, where plants and fresh flowers tumble, make for a pleasant stay. Little details, such as silk flowers in the bathrooms, make all the difference.

Hotel Iberia Plaza Mayor (‰ 927 24 76 34; www.iberiahotel.com in Spanish; Calle de los Pintores 2; s/d/tr €40/50/60; a) Located in an 18th-century building just off Plaza Mayor, this 36-room hotel, decorated with flair, is full of character.

Iberia Plaza América (‰ 927 21 09 06; www.iberiahotel.com in Spanish; s/d/tr €40/50/60; Calle Hermandad 12; p a) Rooms in this sister hotel to the Iberia Plaza Mayor are neat and trim. In a modern building down a quiet side street, it has its own underground garage (€8) and a tranquil rear patio.

Parador de Cáceres (‰ 927 21 17 59; caceres@parador.es; Calle Ancha 6; s/d €108/135; p r a) A grand 14th-century noble townhouse is the scene for this elegant accommodation (with wi-fi) in the walled town. Sit around in the courtyard or dine in its fine restaurant. Parking costs €14.

Eating

You'll find several cheap and cheerful restaurants and cafés around Plaza Mayor.

El Corral de las Cigüeñas (Cuesta de Aldana 6; h 8am-1pm Mon-Fri, 7pm-3am Tue-Sat, 5-11pm Sun) The sunny, quiet courtyard with its two towering palm trees is the perfect spot for one of the best-value breakfasts around: fresh orange juice, coffee and pastry or toast, all for €2!

Mesón Ibérico (‰ 927 21 67 19; Plaza San Juan 10; menú €12, mains €6-15; h Wed-Mon) Head upstairs from the bar to the tiny dining room for fresh local food. Start with a *tabla* (platter) of mixed cheeses and ham, then proceed to a hearty meat main. Round off with *técula mécula*, a divine and heavy dessert made of egg yolk, almonds and acorns.

Figón de Eustaquilo (‰ 927 24 43 62; Plaza San Juan 14; menú €16-19, mains €9-19) In this venerable, low-beamed, multi-roomed option, in business for 60 years, you'll be treated to such dishes as *vacuno a la crema de anchoa*, strange bedfellows of steak in a cream of anchovy sauce. The lengthy menu will be a test of your speed-reading talent.

Quin Qué (‰ 927 22 08 84; Calle Hermandad 9; mains €14-17; h Tue-Sat & lunch Sun) This chic restaurant offers creative avant-garde cuisine, confectioning dishes such as *manitas de cerdo glaseadas rellenas de cerezas de Jerte y piñones* (glazed pigs trotters stuffed with Jerte cherries and pine nuts). There's live jazz on Friday nights.

Mesón El Asador (‰ 927 22 38 37; Calle Moret 34; menú €15-26, mains €15-18; h Mon-Sat) The pork here has crackling that really crackles – you won't taste better roast pork or lamb in town. Its

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Restaurante Torre de Sande (‰ 927 21 11 47; Calle Condes 3; menú €42, mains €14-19; h Tue-Sat & lunch Sun) Inside is pleasantly cosy and intimate but really you should be dining in the gorgeous courtyard. High walls are masked by a thick cloak of ivy, to which swifts dart home to roost and feed their fledglings. There's an extensive cellar (the wine list reads like a book) and the cuisine delightfully prepared and presented. More modestly, you could simply stop for a drink and a tapa (€4.50) on the terrace of their interconnecting **Taperia**.

bar also serves *bocadillos* (bread rolls with filling) and a wide range of *raciones* (large tapas servings).

Chez Manou (‰ 927 22 76 82; Plaza de las Veletas 4; menú €26.40, mains €13-18.50; h Tue-Sat & lunch Sun) Dark-wood tables and chairs spread beneath the lofty, sloping, timber ceiling of this fine old house. On offer is an enticing mix of local and French dishes. On cold winter's days it's the perfect refuge; on a hot summer's night, dine under the stars on the terrace.

Drinking

The northern end of Plaza Mayor and offshoots such as Calle General Ezponda (known to locals as Calle de los Bares), Calle Gabriel y Galán and Plaza del Duque, are lined with lively late-night bars, most playing recorded music.

Just beyond the walls on the south side of the Ciudad Monumental more bars, such as **Habana** (Calle Pizarro 1) and **María Mandiles** (Calle de Luis Sergio Sánchez) line Calle Pizarro and its continuation, Calle Luis Sergio Sánchez. The new part of the city also offers plenty of action, including several clubs, in an area known as La Madrila and around Calle Doctor Fleming.

Farmacia de Guardia (Plaza Mayor 20; h 6pm-2.30am), far from being a pharmacy, is a lively bar with a terrace.

For a warm mood, head to **El Lancelot** (Rincón de la Monja 2; h 8pm-1am Wed-Mon). Surrounded by stained wood and rustic panelling, this is a great spot for a tippie and live (generally Irish) music on Sunday. If you are after a cool place to drink, check out **El Corral de las Cigüeñas** (opposite), which occasionally stages live music.

Shopping

La Jamoneria de Pintores (Calle Pintores 30) This is a good shop for local hams, sausages, cheeses and liquors.

Sala de Promoción de la Artesanía (Calle San Antón 17) This enterprise is run by the provincial government, and you can see and buy typical *extremeño* handicrafts.

Getting There & Away

Bus services include Trujillo (€3.20, 45 minutes, eight daily), Plasencia (€3.25, 50 minutes, up to five daily), Guadalupe (€9.10, 2½ hours, two daily), Mérida (€4.50, 50 minutes, up to three daily), Badajoz (€7.70, 1¼ hours, up to eight daily) and Madrid (€21.50, four hours, eight daily).

Up to five trains per day run to/from Madrid (€22.75 to €27.60, four hours), Plasencia (€4, 1½ hours) and Mérida (€4.85, one hour).

Getting Around

Bus L-1 from the stop outside the train station – close to the bus station – will take you into town.

For a taxi, call h 927 21 21 21.

VALENCIA DE ALCÁNTARA

pop 6100

This pretty town is 7km short of the Portuguese frontier and 92km west of Cáceres. Its well-preserved old centre is a curious labyrinth of whitewashed houses and mansions. One side of the old town is watched over by the ruins of a medieval castle and the **Iglesia de Rocamador** (which sounds like something from a Tolkien novel).

The surrounding area is known for its busy cork industry and some 50 ancient dolmens scattered about the countryside.

Up to three buses run daily from Cáceres (€4.55, 1½ hours).

ALCÁNTARA

pop 1750

Alcántara is Arabic for 'The Bridge'. West of town, a six-arched **Roman bridge** – 204m long, 61m high and much reinforced over the centuries – spans Río Tajo below a huge dam retaining the Embalse de Alcántara. An inscription above a small Roman temple on the river's left bank honours the bridge's original architect, Caius Julius Lacer – though no-one knows how many, if any, of his original building blocks remain.

EXTREMADURA & AMERICA

Extremeños jumped at the opportunities opened up by Columbus' discovery of the Americas in 1492.

In 1501 Fray Nicolás de Ovando from Cáceres was named governor of all the Indies. He set up his capital, Santo Domingo, on the Caribbean island of Hispaniola. With him went 2500 followers, many of them from Extremadura, including Francisco Pizarro, the illegitimate son of a minor noble family from Trujillo. In 1504 Hernán Cortés, from a similar family in Medellín, arrived in Santo Domingo too.

Both young men prospered. Cortés took part in the conquest of Cuba in 1511 and settled there. Pizarro, in 1513, accompanied Vasco Núñez de Balboa (from Jerez de los Caballeros) to Darién (Panama), where they discovered the Pacific Ocean. In 1519 Cortés led a small expedition to what's now Mexico, rumoured to be full of gold and silver. By 1524, with combined fortitude, cunning, luck and ruthlessness, Cortés and his band had subdued the Aztec empire. Though initially named governor of all he had conquered, Cortés soon found royal officials arriving to usurp him. He returned to Spain in 1540.

Pizarro, after forays south of Panama had led to contact with the Inca empire, won royal backing for his plan to subjugate the territory and was named, in advance, governor of newly styled Nueva Castilla.

Before returning to Panama, Pizarro visited Trujillo, where he received a hero's welcome and collected his four half-brothers – Hernando, Juan and Gonzalo Pizarro, and Martín de Alcántara as well as other relatives and friends. Their expedition set off from Panama in 1531, with just 180 men and 37 horses. Pizarro and his force crossed the Andes and managed to capture the Inca emperor Atahualpa, despite the emperor having a 30,000-strong army. The Inca empire, with its capital in Cuzco and extending from Colombia to Chile, resisted until 1545, by which time Francisco had died (he is buried in the cathedral of Lima, Peru).

About 600 people of Trujillo made their way to the Americas in the 16th century, so it's no surprise that there are about seven Trujillos in North, Central and South America. There are even more Guadalupes, for conquistadors and colonists from all over Spain took with them the cult of the Virgen de Guadalupe in eastern Extremadura, one which remains widespread throughout Latin America.

centuries, the house contains a small informative display (in Spanish) on the Inca empire and the Pizarros. Whether Francisco Pizarro ever lived here is doubtful. Though he was the eldest of his father Gonzalo's nine children (by four women), Francisco was illegitimate and never accepted as an heir. What's attested is that his siblings brought Francisco in triumph to this house on his visit to Trujillo in 1529.

At the top of the hill, Trujillo's castle, of 10th-century Muslim origin (evident by the horseshoe-arch gateway just inside the main entrance) and later strengthened by the Christians, is impressive, even though bare, but for a lone fig tree. Patrol the battlements for magnificent 360-degree sweeping views.

Festivals & Events

The last weekend in April is a pungent period as cheese makers from all over Spain and elsewhere display their best at Trujillo's *Feria del Queso* (Cheese Fair). The town's annual *Fiestas*

de Trujillo, with music, theatre and plenty of partying, are spread over a few days around the first Saturday in September.

Sleeping

Mesón La Cadena (% 927 32 14 63; fax 927 32 31 16; Plaza Mayor 8; s/d €35/43; a) Occupying part of a 16th-century mansion on the grand central square, this place's location is unbeatable. Its nine austere, cell-like rooms offer monastic comfort; their air-con makes for a welcome retreat from a hot summer day. Three overlook the plaza while 206 and 207 have good views sweeping up to the castle.

Hostal Orellana (% 927 32 07 53; Calle Ruiz de Mendoza 2; d €42; a) The lovingly restored rooms in this 16th-century house, just a short walk from the centre, are all the more attractive for the exposed stone walls, dark timber and warm décor.

Hôtel Victoria (% & fax 927 32 18 19; Plaza del Campillo 22; s/d €58/72; p n a) The rooms of this

early-20th-century hotel open onto the central atrium with its slender pillars and delicate wrought-ironwork into which light floods. Those on the ground and 1st floors are more spacious. With a grassy rear garden, it's an excellent midrange choice, including wi-fi facilities. Parking costs €6.

Posada Dos Orillas (% 927 65 90 79; www.dosorillas.com; Calle de Cambrones 6; d Sun-Thu €70-90, Fri & Sat €81-107; a i) This tastefully renovated 16th-century mansion in the walled town once served as a silk-weaving centre. Its 13 beautifully appointed double rooms replicate Spanish colonial taste. Those in the older wing bear the names of the 'seven Trujillos' of Extremadura and the Americas. The more recent six are named after various Central and South American countries. Relax in the sunny patio or dine in its courtyard restaurant (right).

Hôtel Melia Trujillo (% 927 45 89 00; www.solmelia.com; Plaza del Campillo 1; r€80-145; p n a s) If you favour 21st-century pampering in a historic setting, this renovated convent, styling itself a boutique hotel despite having 77 rooms, is your place. Rooms, furnished in warm, attractive orange-and-brown fabrics, have marble bathrooms and the dining room occupies the old monastery refectory. Buffet breakfasts are especially lavish; there's no comparison with the monks' meagre fare. Parking costs €12.85.

Parador de Trujillo (% 927 32 13 50; trujillo@parador.es; Calle Santa Beatriz de Silva 1; s/d €96/120; p n a) Also located in a beautiful former convent with a peaceful cloistered courtyard and gently bubbling fountains, this hotel makes a fine retreat in the winding back streets of the old town. Wi-fi is available and parking costs €15.

Eating

Restaurante Pizarro (% 927 32 02 55; Plaza Mayor 13; menú €20-31, mains €9-16; h Wed-Mon) Much esteemed

locally and run by two sisters, this spot has been offering subtle versions of traditional fare and winning gastronomic awards since 1985. The setting is appropriately grand, to accompany the house special of *gallina trufada* (chicken prepared with truffles), when in season, and various roasts.

Posada Restaurante Dos Orillas (mains €15-18; v) Just as the hotel is a gem, so the restaurant is a place of quiet, refined eating, whether al fresco in the patio or dining room with its soft-hued fabrics. There's ample choice for vegetarians.

Mesón Alberca (% 927 32 22 09; Calle de Cambrones 8; menú €15-22; h Thu-Sun) Dark-timber tables laid with gingham cloths, set in a restored house within the old walled city, create a warm atmosphere for classic *extremeño* cooking. The speciality is oven roasts.

Corral del Rey (% 927 32 30 71; Corral del Rey 2; mains €18-26; h Mon-Sat, lunch Sun) As if hiding away in a little corner chipped off the main square, this grand restaurant offers worthy fare. Settle for a simple *menú del día* (€16) or be more adventurous and choose from a tempting range of grills, roasts and fish dishes.

Getting There & Away

The bus station (% 927 32 12 02; Avenida de Mijadas) is 500m south of Plaza Mayor. There are services to/from Madrid (€14.90 to €19, three to 4¼ hours, up to 10 daily), Guadalupe (€5.45, two daily), Cáceres (€3.18, 45 minutes, eight daily), Mérida (€7, 1¼ hours, three daily) and Salamanca (one daily) via Plasencia.

GUADALUPE

pop 2250

Approached from the north along the EX118 road, the bright, white town of Guadalupe (from the Arabic meaning 'hidden river') appears as though from nowhere, huddled around

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Restaurante La Troya (% 927 32 13 64; Plaza Mayor 10; set meal €15) The restaurant and its owner, Concha Alvarez, whose dour countenance glowers from a wall full of photos of her with celebrities great and small, are *extremeño* institutions. Since shortly after WWII, the restaurant has stuck to a simple formula in this rambling old mansion. You will be directed to one of several dining areas and there, without warning, be presented with a plate of tortilla, chorizo and salad, served with wine and water. You are then asked in machine-gun fashion what you want for a first course (ranging from gazpacho to hearty bean stews and paella). Shortly thereafter staff will want to know your choice of main (listen out for *pruebas de cerdo*, tender paprika-spiced morsels of roast pork). Servings are truly gargantuan and staff take an obvious pride in their reputation for speed and efficiency. You drop the standard €15 on the way out.

the massive stone hulk of the Real Monasterio de Santa María de Guadalupe. This engaging town, with its uneven cobbled squares, squat porticoed houses and bubbling fountains is a bright jewel set in the green crown of the surrounding ranges and ridges of the Sierra de Villuercas. Thick woods of chestnut, oak and cork mesh with olive groves and vineyards, great for peaceful walks and drives.

At the heart of the village, crouched at the base of the monastery steps, is Plaza Santa María de Guadalupe, usually called simply Plaza Mayor.

Information

Fotobías (Calle Gregorio López 24; per hr €1.80;

10am-2pm & 5-8.30pm Mon-Sat) Internet access.

Tourist office (% 927 15 41 28; Plaza Mayor;

10am-2pm & 4-6pm or 5-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun)

Sights

REAL MONASTERIO DE SANTA MARÍA DE GUADALUPE

The **monastery** (% 927 36 70 00; Plaza Santa María de Guadalupe; 9am-8pm), a Unesco World Heritage site, was founded in 1340 by Alfonso XI on the spot where, according to legend, a shepherd had found an effigy of the Virgin, hidden years earlier by Christians fleeing the Muslims. It remains one of Spain's most important pilgrimage sites.

In the 16th century, the Virgin of Guadalupe was so revered that she was made patron of all Spain's New World territories. On 29 July 1496, Columbus's Indian servants were baptised in the fountain in front of the monastery, an event registered in the monastery's first book of baptisms. The Virgin of Guadalupe, patron of Extremadura, remains a key figure for many South American Catholics.

Inside the **church** (admission free) the Virgin's image occupies the place of honour within the soaring *retablo* (altarpiece). The 45-minute **guided tour** (adult/child €3/1.50; 10 tours 9.30am-1pm & 3.30-6.30pm) of the rest of the complex, although only in Spanish, should not be missed. To get the most out of it, buy in advance the English version of the visitors guide (€2), which, in stilted English, describes the route followed.

At the centre of the monastery is a 15th-century Mudéjar cloister, off which are three museums. The **Museo de Bordados** displays wonderfully embroidered altar cloths and vestments; the **Museo de Libros Miniados**

has a fine collection of illuminated choral song books from the 15th century onwards; and the **Museo de Pintura y Escultura** includes three paintings by El Greco, a Goya and a beautiful little ivory crucifixion attributed to Michelangelo. In the elaborately decorated baroque **sacristía** (sacristy) hang 11 paintings by Zurbarán and a lantern captured from the Turkish flagship at the 1571 Battle of Lepanto (notice the twin holes made by the bullet that passed right through it). The **Relicario-Tesoro** houses a variety of other treasures, including a snaking 18th-century Italian chandelier and a 200,000-pearl cape for the Virgin. Finally the tour reaches the **camarin**, a chamber behind the altarpiece where the image of the Virgin is revolved for the faithful to contemplate her at close quarters and kiss a fragment of her mantle.

Walking

One splendid option is to take the Madrid-Miadas bus to the village of **Cañamero**, southwest of Guadalupe, and hike back along the **Ruta de Isabel la Católica**, a well-signed 17km trail. The tourist office has plans and printed material in Spanish describing other shorter and easier circular routes of three to five hours.

Festivals & Events

Colourful processions wind through the heart of the town during **Easter Week**, between the 6 and 8 September in honour of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and on 12 October, the **Día de la Hispanidad**, celebrated throughout the Spanish-speaking world. Wednesday is the local market day.

Sleeping

Camping Las Villuercas (% 927 36 71 39; sites per adult/tent/car €3/3/2.50; 1 Apr-Dec; s) Being the nearest camping option to Guadalupe, it has a pretty site in a river valley a short distance off the EX102, 3km south of the village. It also has self-catering apartments (two/four people €32/50).

For such a tiny place that can be overwhelmed with visitors, Guadalupe has some excellent value choices.

Cerezo (% 927 36 73 79; www.hostalcerezo.com in Spanish; Calle Gregorio López 20; s/d/tr €29/43/52; a) This 16-room *hostal*, a mere 50m from the Plaza Mayor, has neat rooms, all with bathtub. Ask for one at the rear with balcony, overlooking the quiet countryside. Its more-than-decent

restaurant (menú €9-19, mains €8.40-15.20) has a picture window offering the same view beyond a tangle of citrus and fig trees. Its smaller sister, **Cerezo II** (% 927 15 41 77; Plaza Mayor 23), on the main square, offers similar facilities.

Hospedería del Real Monasterio (% 927 36 70 00; Plaza Juan Carlos I; s/d €43/61; a p) Centred on the monastery's beautiful 16th-century Gothic cloister, this is *the* sleeping option in Guadalupe with by far the most character and offers excellent value. Some rooms look directly onto the heart of the cloister. Book well ahead as it is frequently full with wedding parties.

Posada del Rincón (% 927 36 71 14; www.posadadelrincon.com in Spanish; Plaza Mayor 11; s €42-47 d €65-72) Behind its tiny façade, Posada del Rincón, first mentioned in writing in the late 15th century, has 20 warm-coloured rooms, exposed brick and stonework, dark-timber furniture and oak ceilings. It's a fine option with a long bar and bijou internal patio.

Parador Zubarán (% 927 36 70 75; guadalupe@parador.es; Calle Marqués de la Romana 12; s/d €96/120; a s p) Guadalupe's premier hotel occupies a converted 15th-century hospital opposite the monastery. Spacious rooms are tastefully decorated and the internal courtyard is a pleasure to relax in.

Eating

In addition to the following, the restaurants in the Parador Zubarán and Posada del Rincón also have quality restaurants.

Mesón El Cordero (% 927 36 71 31; Calle Alfonso El Onceno 27; menú €12, mains €11.50-15; 1 Tue-Sun Mar-Jan) This is the best place in town for the house speciality, *cordero asado* (roast lamb). Wash it down with a porcelain jug of house *vino pitarra* (simple, robust red). The setting is rustic, with polished wooden floors, old leather and wooden seats. Shame about the TV blaring in the background.

Hospedería del Real Monasterio (see above; meals €25) In summer it's a delight to take up a seat in the magnificent Gothic cloister. Inside are two grand dining halls rich with 17th-century timber furnishings and antique ceramics. There's a competent range of both meat and fish dishes, and most of the desserts are rustled up in the kitchens.

Shopping

There's a lot of tat around. Amid the gewgaws and piled-up ceramics are some fine food products, among them *vino pitarra*, *queso di*

Ibores (local goat's cheese), various honeys and liqueurs produced in the monastery, and the rich, sweet *rosco di muégado* (made of a dough composed of wheat, flour, egg, aniseed, oil and cilantro, deep fried in strips and drenched in toasted honey). Take your pick of the goodies at **Atrium** (Calle Alfonso El Onceno 6), which is also a neat little café.

Getting There & Away

Buses stop on Avenida Conde de Barcelona near the town hall, a two-minute walk from Plaza Mayor. **Mirat** (% 927 23 48 63) runs two services daily to/from Cáceres (€9.10, 2½ hours) via Trujillo (€5.45). **La Sepulvedana** (% 902 22 22 82) has two daily buses to/from Madrid (€14, 3¼ hours). The tourist office has timetables.

SOUTHERN EXTREMADURA

MÉRIDA

pop 53,100

Mérida, seat of the Junta de Extremadura, the regional government, feels further south. The scent of orange blossom in season and the bright, low houses along the cobbled lanes lend a distinct touch of Andalucía to its centre. Founded as Augusta Emerita in 25 BC for veterans of Rome's campaigns in Cantabria, it has Spain's most complete Roman ruins and a magnificent classical museum.

Difficult to imagine today but, with more than 40,000 inhabitants, Mérida was the capital of the Roman province of Lusitania, the largest city on the Iberian Peninsula and its political and cultural hub.

Orientation

The train station is a 10-minute walk from central Plaza de España. From the **bus station** (Avenida de la Libertad), 150m west of Río Guadiana, a 15-minute walk takes in a spectacular view of the Puente Romano from the Puente Lusitania, a modern suspension bridge designed by the internationally renowned Spanish architect, Santiago Calatrava.

The most important Roman ruins are within easy walking distance of each other on the east side of town. Pedestrianised Calle Santa Eulalia, heading northeast from Plaza de España, is the main shopping street.

Information

Friends on Line (Calle Romero Leal 5; per hr €2;

11am-2pm & 4pm-midnight) Internet access.

Junta de Extremadura tourist office (☎ 924 00 97

30; otmerida@eco.juntaex.es; Avenida José Álvarez Saenz

de Buruaga s/n; 9am-1.45pm & 4-6pm or 5-7pm

Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1.45pm Sat & Sun) Right beside the gates to the Roman theatre and amphitheatre.

Municipal tourist office (☎ 924 33 07 22; Calle Santa

Eulalia 64; 9.30am-2pm & 4-7pm or 5-8pm)

Post office (Plaza de la Constitución)

Sights

ROMAN REMAINS

The **Teatro Romano**, built around 15 BC to seat 6000 spectators, has a dramatic and particularly well-preserved two-tier backdrop

of stone columns. The adjoining **Anfiteatro**, opened in 8 BC for gladiatorial contests, had a capacity of 14,000. Nearby, the **Casa del Anfiteatro**, the remains of a 3rd-century mansion, has some reasonable floor mosaics.

Los Columbarios (Calle del Ensanche) is a Roman funeral site, well documented and illustrated in Spanish. A footpath connects it with the **Casa del Mitreo** (Calle Oviedo), a 2nd-century Roman house with several intricate mosaics (especially the *mosaico cosmológico* with its allegories and bright colours) and a well-preserved fresco.

The **Puente Romano** over Río Guadiana, 792m long with 60 granite arches, is one of the longest bridges built by the Romans. The 15m-high **Arco de Trajano** over Calle de

Trajano may have served as the entrance to the provincial forum, from where Lusitania province was governed. The **Templo de Diana** (Calle Sagasta) stood in the municipal forum, where the city government was based. Parts were incorporated into a 16th-century mansion, built within it. The restored **Pórtico del Foro**, the municipal forum's portico, is just along the road. The **Centro de Interpretación Las VII Sillas** (Calle José Ramón Mérida 20; admission free) has the remains of a noble mansion and a sizable hunk of Roman, Visigoth and Arab wall. A 13-minute DVD in Spanish takes you on a virtual tour of the Roman city.

Northeast of the amphitheatre are the remains of the 1st-century **Circo Romano**, the only surviving hippodrome of its kind in Spain, which could accommodate 30,000 spectators. Inside you can see brief footage in Spanish about Diocles, a champion *auriga* (chariot racer) who served his apprenticeship in Mérida before going on to the big league in Rome. Further west, the **Acueducto Los Milagros** (Calle Marquesa de Pinares), highly favoured by nesting storks, once supplied the Roman city with water from the dam at Lago Proserpina, about 5km out of town.

MUSEO NACIONAL DE ARTE ROMANO

This excellent **museum** (☎ 924 31 16 90; Calle José Ramón Mérida; adult/child €2.40/1.20; 10am-2pm & 4-6pm or 4-9pm Tue-Sat, to 2pm Sun) houses a superb collection of statues, mosaics, frescoes, coins and other Roman artefacts. Designed by the architect Rafael Moneo, the grand brick structure, reminiscent of the best in Roman engineering, makes a remarkable home for the collection.

ALCAZABA

This large **Muslim fort** (Calle Graciano) was built in AD 835 on a site already occupied by the Romans and Visigoths. The 15th-century monastery in its northeast corner now serves as the Junta de Extremadura's presidential offices. Its *aljibe* (cistern) incorporates marble and stone slabs with Visigothic decoration that were recycled by the Muslims. Climb up to the walls to gaze out over the Guadiana.

IGLESIA DE SANTA EULALIA

Originally built in the 5th century in honour of Mérida's patron saint, this church was completely reconstructed in the 13th century. Beside it, a museum and open excavated areas

enable you to identify Roman houses, a 4th-century Christian cemetery and the original 5th-century basilica.

MUSEO DE ARTE VISIGODO

Many of the Visigothic objects unearthed in Mérida are exhibited in this **museum** (☎ 924 30 01 06; Calle Santa Julia; admission free; 10am-2pm & 4-6pm or 5-7pm Tue-Sat, to 2pm Sun), just off Plaza de España.

ZONA ARQUEOLÓGICA DE MORERÍA

This excavated Moorish quarter along Paseo de Roma contains the remains of a cemetery, walls and houses dating from Roman to post-Islamic times.

Festivals & Events

The prestigious summer **Festival de Teatro Clásico** (www.festivaldemerida.es in Spanish; admission €10-30; 11am-11pm most nights Jul & Aug), at the Roman theatre and amphitheatre, features Greek and more recent drama classics, plus music and dance. Mérida lets its hair down a little later than most of Extremadura in its **Feria de Septiembre** (September Fair; 1-15 September).

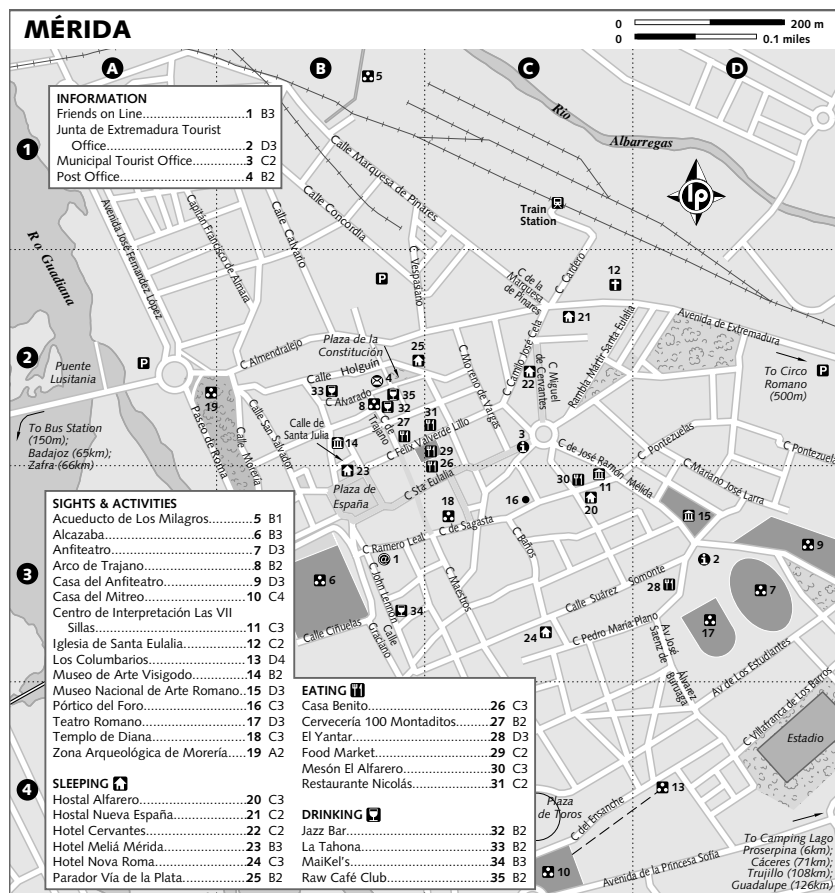
Sleeping

Hostal Nueva España (☎ 924 31 33 56; Avenida de Extremadura 6; s/d €25/38; a) With 18 bright, modern rooms, all with bathtub, this central cheapie makes a reasonable choice. It's beside a busy road so ask for a room at the rear.

Hostal Alfarero (☎ 924 30 31 83; www.hostalalfarero.com; Calle Sagasta 40; r €45; a) This pretty little yellow house, right in the heart of town, is the choice budget option. It has rustic décor, a pleasant little internal patio and lounge, and jolly, quirky ceramics by the original owner's father.

Hotel Cervantes (☎ 924 31 49 61; www.hotelcervantes.com; Calle Camilo José Cela 8; s €40-50, d €60-70; a p) This smallish, family-run hotel is a comfortable, reliable midrange option, aimed mostly at a small, local business market. Parking costs €6.

Hotel Nova Roma (☎ 924 31 12 61; www.novaroma.com in Spanish; Calle Suárez Somonte 42; s/d €62/84; a) What a bizarre place. The tall brick frontage hides a pseudo-Roman Empire interior, complete with heavy layers of marble and copies of headless statues. The rooms themselves at this tour group favourite – bright and spacious with light pastel-coloured décor – are altogether less kitsch. Parking is an extra €10.50.



Parador Via de la Plata (☎ 924 31 38 00; merida@parador.es; Plaza de la Constitución 3; s/d €108/135; p n a s) You're sleeping on the site of a Roman temple in a building that started life as a convent (get spiritual in its lounge, once the chapel), then served as both hospital and prison. In the gardens, the assembled hunks of Roman, Visigoth and Mudéjar give a brief canter through Mérida's architectural history. Rear room balconies look onto a quiet garden with fountains. Parking costs €10.50.

Hotel Meliá Mérida (☎ 924 38 38 00; www.solmelia.com; Plaza de España 19; r€120; p n a i s) The hotel occupies two adjacent and strikingly different buildings: a 16th-century palace with a gorgeous if over-restored patio and a 19th-century town house with a lovely filigree wrought-iron atrium. Rooms are spacious with Roman-style mosaic décor and muted timber furniture.

Eating

Cervecería 100 Montaditos (Calle Felix Valverde Lillo 3; 11am-midnight) Yes, you've a choice of 100 fillings to your *montadito* (miniroll; €1 to €1.20). Fill in the order form at your table, choose a drink and present it at the counter. Speedy, superb value and served on wooden platters.

Mesón El Alfarero (☎ 924 30 29 59; Calle de Sagasta 29; mains from €7) At this friendly place, opposite the companion Hostal Alfarero (p831), you can sip a fine wine, nibble on tapas or enjoy a full-scale meal. Around the walls are photos of Rafael Ortega, the potter who made the ceramics that bedeck the place, in the company of the great and good.

El Yantar (☎ 924 31 63 54; Avenida José Álvarez Saez de Buruaga; meals €25) This cheerful *mesón* (tavern) is popular for the freshness of the local pro-

duce it uses. Taste small servings of *extremeño* dishes. Gourmets should plunder the shop for its top-quality ham, Torta del Casar cheese and other goodies.

Restaurante Nicolás (☎ 924 31 96 10; Calle Felix Valverde Lillo 15; mains €8-11; 11 Mon-Sat, lunch Sun) Long admired as a local favourite, this is one of the classier city dining options. Its relaxing ground-floor bar serves *raciones* while upstairs the food is decidedly more exciting than the restaurant's rather drab décor.

Casa Benito (☎ 924 33 07 69; Calle San Francisco 3; mains €11-17) Squeeze onto a tiny stool in the wood-panelled dining room, prop up the bar or relax on the sunny terrace for tapas and *raciones* at this bullfight enthusiasts' hang-out, its walls plastered with photos, posters and memorabilia from the ring.

Self-caterers can ferret out plenty of delights in Mérida's busy **food market**.

Drinking

Calle John Lennon is lined with noisy little bars, a couple of clubs, snack bars and other eateries. You'll find a more diverse selection of bars in and around Plaza de la Constitución.

La Tahona (Calle Alvarado 5; 11 1pm-2.30am), a sprawling, spit-and-sawdust place much beloved of local youth, belts out 'Span pop' hits of the 1990s, puts on Argentine grilled meat in its adjacent restaurant and occasionally gets in local bands to jam.

Raw Café-Club (Plaza de la Constitución 2; 11 5pm-3am Wed-Mon) has a cool café-bar upstairs, where you can chill and look out over the square. Head to **Jazz Bar** (Calle Alvarado 10; 11 4pm-2am Tue-Sat) for a soothing atmosphere while tipping. **Maikel's** (Calle John Lennon 19; 11 10pm-5am Thu-Sat) is the place to move your booty in downtown Mérida.

Getting There & Around

Bus destinations include Badajoz (€4.05, one hour, five to nine daily), Seville (€11.55, 2½ hours, five daily), Cáceres (€4.50, 50 minutes, two to four daily), Trujillo (€7, 1¼ hours, three daily) and Madrid (€20.20 to €25, four to five hours, eight daily).

There are four trains to Madrid (€28 to €31.30, 4½ to 5½ hours) and two to Seville (€11.85, five hours) via Zafra (€3.60). Up to six trains run to/from Cáceres (€4.85, one hour).

For a **taxi**, call ☎ 924 37 11 11.

BADAJOZ

pop 143,100

Badajoz, provincial capital of the southern half of Extremadura, straddles Río Guadiana just 4km from Portugal. It's a sprawling, primarily industrial city with a dilapidated historic heart that's gradually being turned around thanks to generous local and European Union investment and a number of prestige constructions on a grand scale.

The town has had more than its share of strife. After centuries of Muslim occupation, it was first occupied by Portugal in 1385, then again in 1396, 1542 and 1660. It was besieged during the War of the Spanish Succession, then three times by the French in the Peninsular War. In 1812 the British expelled the French in a bloody battle that cost 6000 lives. In the Spanish Civil War, the Nationalists carried out atrocious massacres when they took Badajoz in 1936. The latest of its many trials was in 1997 when Río Guadiana burst its banks and flash floods coursed through the city causing 24 deaths.

Orientation

Plaza de España is the centre of the old town. The pedestrianised streets to its west are full of eateries and bars. The main commercial centre is to the south, around Avenida Juan Carlos I and Paseo San Francisco.

The **bus station** (Calle José Rebollo López) is 1km south of the city centre. The **train station** (Avenida de Carolina Coronado) is 1.5km northwest of the city centre, across the river.

Information

Junta de Extremadura tourist office (☎ 924 01 36 59; Plaza de la Libertad 3; 11 9am-2pm & 4-6pm or 5-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun)

Municipal tourist office (☎ 924 22 49 81; www.turismobadajoz.com; Pasaje San Juan s/n; 11 10am-2pm & 4-6pm or 6-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) The better choice for town information.

Post office (Plaza de la Libertad)

Sights

Here's something that better-endowed tourist towns might like to copy: admission to all Badajoz's sights, except for the cathedral museum, is free.

Highlights of the **Catedral de San Juan** (Plaza de España; 11 11am-1pm & 6-8pm Tue-Sat), built in the 13th century on the site of a mosque and subsequently much altered, are the Baroque altar-

piece, elaborate even by Spain's lavish standards, and the shimmering chandelier, weighing in at 3.7 tonnes. Its **museum** (entry from Calle San Blas; admission €1; 11 11am-1pm & 5-7pm Tue-Sat) contains a treasure chest of religious objects and artworks.

The unkept remains of the walled Arab **Alcazaba** stand on the hilltop north of the centre. Guarding all is the **Torre Espantaperros** (Scare-Dogs Tower), symbol of Badajoz, constructed by the Arabs and topped by a 16th-century Mudéjar bell tower. At its feet is the **Plaza Alta**, spruce and freshly painted after years of neglect. Within the fort area, a restored Renaissance palace houses the **Museo Arqueológico Provincial** (☎ 924 00 19 08; admission free; 11 10am-3pm Tue-Sun), with artefacts from prehistoric times through Roman, Islamic and medieval Christian periods.

The **Museo de Bellas Artes** (☎ 924 21 24 69; Calle Duque de San Germán 3; admission free; 11 10am-2pm & 4-6pm or 6-8pm Tue-Fri, to 2pm Sat & Sun) is an excellent gallery with works by Zurbarán, Morales, Picasso, Dalí, plus striking works by the 19th-century Badajoz-born artist Felipe Checa.

The **Puente de Palmas**, an impressive 582m-long granite bridge built in 1596, leads over Río Guadiana from the 16th-century **Puerta de Palmas** city gate, so insensitively over-restored that it could be an import from Disneyland.

Badajoz's pride and joy is the **Museo Extremeño e Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporáneo** (MEIAC; ☎ 924 01 30 60; Calle Virgen de Guadalupe 7; admission free; 11 10am-1.30pm & 5-8pm Tue-Sat, 10.30am-1.30pm Sun). This commanding modern building, dedicated to Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American contemporary art, houses a wide-ranging collection of avant-garde painting and sculpture.

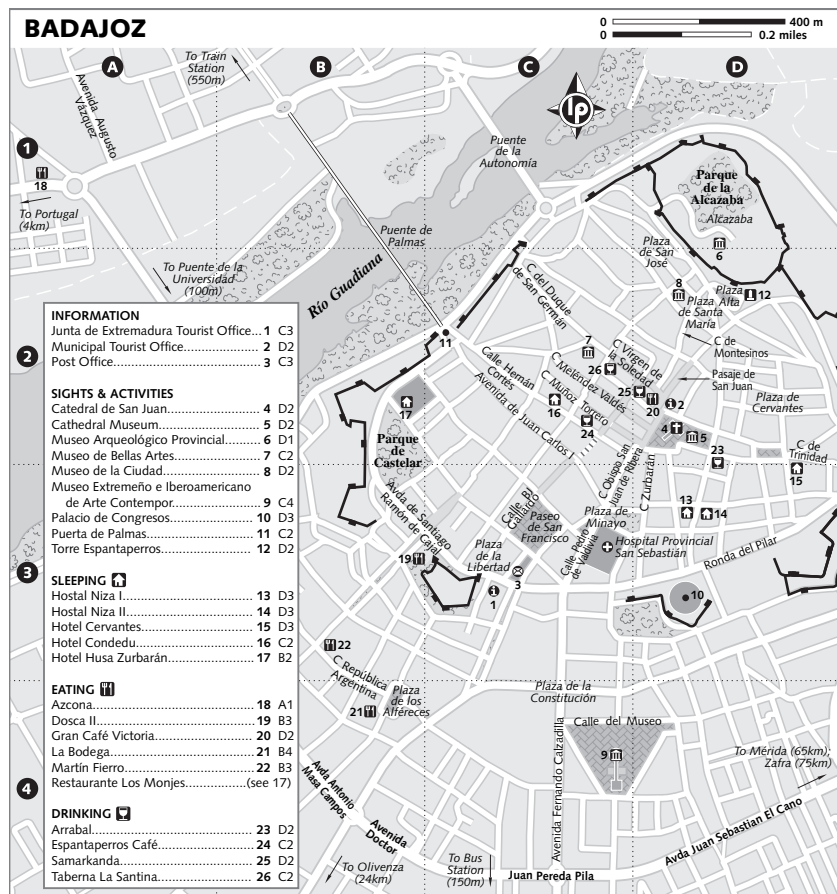
The **Museo de la Ciudad** (City Museum; ☎ 924 20 06 87; Plaza Santa María; admission free; 11 10am-2pm & 4.30-7.30pm or 6-9pm Tue-Sat, to 2pm Sun) is above all part of an attempt to regenerate this much rundown part of old Badajoz. Recounting the story of the city through illustrative panels and interactive displays (all in Spanish), it takes you through the glory days of Islamic Badajoz and the Reconquista to today.

Badajoz's latest prestige building is its innovative **Palacio de Congresos** (Conference Centre; Ronda del Pilar s/n), a huge, light-as-air circular (it's built over the one-time bullring) construction, with a state of the art auditorium.

Lusiberia (☎ 924 28 60 98; Avenida de Elvas, Antigua Frontera de Caya) is a gigantic family theme park, bang up against the Portuguese frontier,

THE TAPAS TRAIL

Here's a brilliant idea: a gastronomic pilgrimage around town and Mérida's equivalent of the pub crawl. Pick up a map and card from the municipal tourist office and visit any or all of the 14 participating bars, *mesones* and *tabernas*. Each offers a tapa and glass of wine for €2. Have your card stamped and, should you manage to visit all 14 (within a period of ten days), the tourist office will award you a bottle of Extremeño wine.



with a recently opened **water park** (adult/child €13/9.50).

Festivals & Events

Badajoz's big bash is the **Feria de San Juan**, celebrated for a full week around 24 June.

Running a close second are the town's **Car-naval** celebrations, among the most elaborate in Spain, in the build-up to Lent.

Sleeping

Hostal Niza II (% 924 22 31 73; Calle Arco Agüero 45; s/d €25/40; a) This place has light, decent rooms. Hostal Niza I across the road at No 34 is a recently constructed new building occupying the site of the original Niza. With less character, it offers more comfort.

Hotel Cervantes (% 924 22 37 10; Calle Trinidad 2; s/d €27/40; a p) This wonderful old-time place overlooks a leafy square. With ceramic walls around its green timber-banistered atrium, it has worn but evocative rooms in the old half and quieter, better equipped rooms in the newer wing. Parking costs €6.

Hotel Condedu (% 924 20 72 47; condedu@infonegocio.com; Calle Muñoz Torrero 27; s/d €40/55; a p) Constructed in the 1970s, the Condedu's strong point is its central location. Rooms are unspectacular but spacious, tranquil and spotless, each equipped with minibar and safe.

Hotel Husa Zurbarán (% 924 00 14 00; www.husa.es; Paseo Castelar s/n; r from €85; p s) Something of a concrete monster from the outside, the Zurbarán is considerably warmer and more

attractive within. A peacock struts by the pool and relaxation area, public areas are on the grand scale and rooms well furnished. It runs **Restaurante Los Monjes**, by common consent Badajoz's finest restaurant.

Eating

Gran Café Victoria (% 924 26 32 23; Calle Obispo San Juan de Ribera 3; breakfasts €2-3) With its huge central lamp arrangement, tall dark pillars and wine-red couches, this café has a dignified ambience for your morning coffee and croissant.

La Bodega (% 924 23 90 62; Plaza los Alféreces 8; menú €7.50, mains €6-10) The appropriately named La Bodega is one of several restaurants with sprawling terraces that ring this popular square. Within, you can dine among wine barrels and wood, darkened over the years. Whichever you choose, this is a splendid economical choice where the set lunchtime menu varies daily.

Dosca II (% 924 22 02 40; Avenida Colón 3; mains €9-16; h Tue-Sun) Opt for one of the generous, tender meat dishes at this unpretentious place. Then select from the list of tempting *postres caseros* (home-made desserts) rather than one of the photographed choices, which are bought in. Around the walls are photos of old Badajoz and each of the many hanging coloured cords is all that remains of a leg of ham that met its last here.

Azcona (% 924 27 24 07; Avenida Adolfo Díaz Ambrona 20; meals €20-25; h lunch daily, dinner Mon & Thu-Sat) This cheerful yellow-and-wine-red house rewards the long haul across Puente de la Universidad with its hearty local fare, impeccably prepared.

Martin Fierro (% 924 25 86 02; Calle República Argentina 16; mains €12-18) You can enjoy a tippie and dip into the ample selection of tapas at the bar with its dark-wood furniture and impressive array of wines. Or you can make your way to the dining room for something more substantial such as their juicy *chuletón de buey con dos salsas*, tenderest prime steak with a couple of accompanying sauces.

Drinking

Taberna La Santina (Calle Virgen de la Soledad 25b; h Mon-Sat) Bullfighting memorabilia bedecks this recently refurbished wine tavern with an Andalusian feel.

Late-night bars are scattered around the streets near the cathedral. Among the liveliest are **Espantaperros Café** (Calle Hernán Cortés 14A;

h 8pm-3am Mon-Thu & 4pm-4am Fri-Sun), **El Arrabal** (Calle San Blas 14; h 5pm-2.30am), with its garden bar, and **Samarkanda** (Calle Virgen de la Soledad 5A; h 4.30pm-2.30am), the pick of the crop.

Getting There & Around

You can get buses to most main points in the region from Badajoz. Further afield, buses run to/from Mérida (€4.05, one hour, five to nine daily), Madrid (€23.80, 4½ to 5½ hours; nine daily), Lisbon (€24, three hours, three daily) and Seville (€13.10, three hours; six daily) via Zafra (€5.25; 50 minutes).

Trains are much less frequent and the station awkwardly placed.

For a taxi, call % 924 24 31 01.

AROUND BADAJOZ

Albuquerque

pop 5650

Looming large above the small town, 38km north of Badajoz, is the intact **Castillo de la Luna** (admission free; h guided visits in Spanish 11am-1pm & 4-6pm Tue-Sun). The centrepiece of a complex frontier defence system of forts, the castle was built on the site of its Muslim predecessor in the 13th century and subsequently expanded. From the top, views dominate the Portuguese frontier (whence repeated attacks came until the Portuguese actually took the town for a few years in the early 18th century). Among many curiosities is a hole set in the wall of one of the towers. It was used by the castle's masters as a toilet – sending an unpleasant message to hostile forces below when under siege.

Up to four buses a day (€3.60, 45 minutes) between Badajoz and San Vicente de Alcántara stop by.

Olivenza

pop 11,400

Olivenza, 24km south of Badajoz, clings to its strong Portuguese heritage. The whitewashed houses, typical turreted defensive walls and penchant for blue-and-white ceramics give a hint of its past; it has only been Spanish since 1801.

The town was fortified because of its strategic position as a Portuguese outpost on the fertile Guadiana plain. Smack bang in its centre is the 14th-century **castle**, dominated by the **Torre del Homenaje**, 37m high, from which there are fine views. The castle houses an **ethnographic museum** (% 924 49 02 22; admission €1;

┌ 11am-2pm & 4-7pm or 5-8pm Tue-Fri, 10am-2pm Sun). Eternal Peter Pans will savour the collection of toy cars on the 1st floor. The most impressive section of the original **defensive walls** is around the 18th-century **Puerta del Calvario**, on the west side of town.

Restaurante Hostal Dosca (% 924 49 10 65; www.hoteldosca.com; Plaza de la Constitución 15; s/d €40/50; a), run by the same family and to the same high standard as Dosca II in Badajoz (p835), makes an excellent lunch stop (menú €11 to €21) or overnight stay.

Buses to Badajoz (€1.60, 30 minutes) run almost hourly during the week from the bus station on Calle Avelino, five minutes' walk east of Plaza de España.

ZAFRA

pop 15,700

The gorgeous old town of Zafra, as white as any of Andalucía's *pueblos blancos* to the south, was originally a Muslim settlement and makes a serene, attractive stop en route between Seville and Mérida.

The **tourist office** (% 924 55 10 36; www.ayto-zafra.com in Spanish; ┌ 9.30am-2pm & 4-7pm or 5-8pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1.30pm & 5-7pm or 6-8pm Sat & Sun) is on Plaza de España, the main square.

Zafra's 15th-century **castle**, now the town's *parador*, was built over the former Muslim Alcázar. **Plaza Grande** and the adjoining **Plaza Chica**, arcaded and bordered by cafés, are a pair of charming squares. Peek into the courtyard of the **ayuntamiento** (town hall; Plaza Pilar Redondo), its brick arches supported by slender pillars, and the 16th-century **Iglesia de la Candelaria** (Calle Tetuán; 10.30-1pm & 5.30-7.30 or 6.30-8.30pm Thu-Tue) with its fine altarpieces.

Sleeping & Eating

Albergue Convento San Francisco (% 924 02 98 17; Calle Ancha 1; dm €10) Open to all, this former monas-

tery is the choice of walkers along the Ruta Vía de la Plata (see the boxed text, p814). It has 18 beds in simple but comfortable rooms (one double and dorms sleeping five or six).

Hotel Huerta Honda (% 924 55 41 00; www.hotelhuertahonda.com; Calle López Asme 30; s €59, d from €74; p n a s) Although the 'olde-worlde' atmosphere is perhaps a trifle overdone, this charming number with its sunny patio and beautifully appointed rooms (dark ceramic floors, timber ceilings and four-posters in some) is tempting. Parking costs €7.

Parador Hernán Cortés (% 924 55 45 40; zafra@parador.es; Plaza Corazón de María 7; s/d €96/120; r a s) They say a man's home is his castle: well here it's the other way around. Its 51 bedrooms are spacious with plenty of warm, dark wood and you can dine in the mighty classical courtyard. Wi-fi is available.

Both the *parador* and Hotel Huerta Honda have enticing restaurants. For a coffee, wine or snack, try one of the many cafés and bars on Plaza Grande.

La Rebotica (% 924 55 42 89; Calle Boticas 12; meals €30-35; ┌ Tue-Sat, lunch Sun) Set in a modest house just off Plaza Chica, La Rebotica offers both Extremeño dishes and more international fare, subtly prepared (Rudy Koster, the chef, these days as Spanish as they come, hails from the Netherlands).

Getting There & Away

Zafra is on the main bus and train routes linking Seville to the south with Mérida and Badajoz.

AROUND ZAFRA

Roads through the rolling Sierra Morena into Andalucía head southwest through Fregenal de la Sierra into northern Huelva province, and southeast into the Parque Natural Sierra Norte in Sevilla province.

In **Fregenal de la Sierra** you'll find a castle and adjoining church, both dating from the 13th century, together with a bullring and market square in an unusual grouping. Walled and hilly **Jerez de los Caballeros**, 42km west of Zafra, was a cradle of conquistadors. It has a Knights Templar castle and several handsome churches, three with towers emulating the Giralda in Seville (the Iglesia de San Bartolomé is the most

exuberant). Quiet **Burguillos del Cerro**, southwest of Zafra, is overlooked by a 15th-century castle atop a grassy hill. Just outside **Casas de Reina** on the Guadalcanal road are impressive remains of a Roman theatre and a hilltop Muslim castle.

One weekday bus runs between Zafra and Fregenal de la Sierra (one hour), Jerez de los Caballeros (one hour) and Burguillos del Cerro (30 minutes).

AUTHOR'S CHOICE

Casa Palacio Conde de la Corte (% 924 56 33 11; www.condedelacorte.com in Spanish; Plaza Pilar Redondo 2; r with breakfast €96-120; p n a s) This delightful boutique choice (with wi-fi) has 15 large rooms ranged around a central atrium bordered by delicate wrought-iron pillars and balustrades. Go for No 103, which is especially big, with twin sinks, a kidney-shaped bath and separate shower cabin. The theme throughout is bullfighting (look for the photos of that pair of macho strutters, Ernest Hemingway and Orson Welles), a nod in the direction of the previous owner, who raised bulls for the *corrida* on the rolling plains of Extremadura. There's the cosiest of lounges with a library and carved wooden fireplace, a roof terrace with views and an extensive rear garden and patio. Parking is available for €7.

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