

magazine Traveling

ENGLISH EDITION

TRAVEL AND GASTRONOMY MAGAZINE

No. 77 Year 2026 Price: America \$ 9,50 - Europe 8,00 €



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islands and nature

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Welcome aboard

Every issue of Traveling is created with the same purpose: to explore destinations with care, taking time to understand their history, landscapes and way of life. In this edition we once again bring together travel, architecture, culture and gastronomy with the independent editorial spirit that has defined the magazine from the beginning.

We begin in Costa Rica's Gulf of Nicoya, where the Pacific reveals a quieter side among islands, nature and endless light. From there we head to Orlando, discovering its parks at a gentler pace. Architecture takes us to the work of Jeanne Gang, while Innsbruck reminds us how closely Alpine cities remain connected to the mountains.

The journey continues along Italy's ancient pilgrimage routes, where roads to Rome still preserve villages, landscapes and centuries of history. Leipzig reveals a city shaped by music, trade and culture. León welcomes us with kings, stained glass and fine food; Guadalajara celebrates its heritage; while Mértola, beside the Guadiana, offers a quieter way to discover Portugal's Alentejo region.

We also travel through the Navia Porcia region of Asturias, made for slow journeys; pause at La Sagrada Familia, one of Europe's greatest living architectural projects; and visit Leuven, where history and university life go hand in hand.

Food remains at the heart of this issue. We travel to Crete, once the Mediterranean's great larder, and to Armenia, one of the world's oldest wine regions. The Añana Salt Valley tells a story of landscape, craftsmanship and history. Our restaurant reviews take us to Gran Reserva in Briñas, RUGE in the Guadarrama Mountains and Origine in Madrid.

This issue is an invitation to keep travelling with curiosity, attention and respect for every destination. In print and online, Traveling is made for readers who still enjoy travel writing at its best.

Thank you for joining us. Your journey starts here.



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Legal Deposit: M-1097-2018

ISSN: 2660-8146





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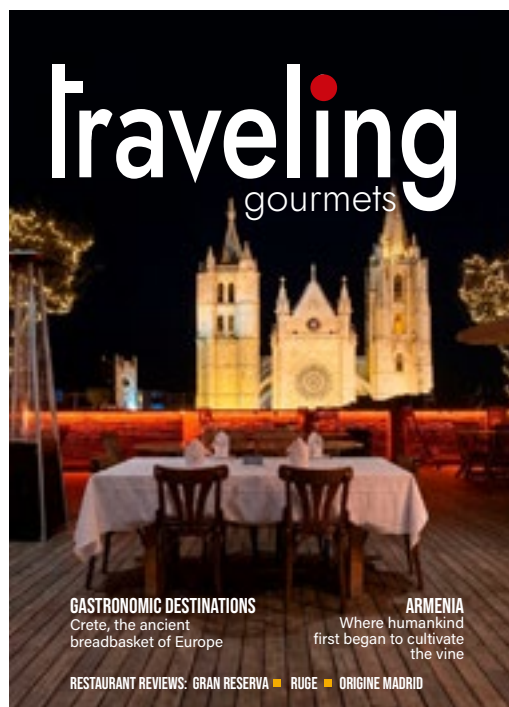
Traveling MAGAZINE No.77

Year 2026



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Hummingbird in Flight, Costa Rica
Archive Photograph



COVER

Terrace in León with the Cathedral in
the Background
© León City Council

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Gulf of Nicoya

Costa Rica's Most Intimate Pacific

Text and photography: José A. Muñoz

The Gulf of Nicoya is one of Costa Rica's greatest coastal landscapes. From Puntarenas, the Pacific reaches inland through fishing villages, mangrove forests and islands such as Chira, Venado, Caballo, San Lucas and Tortuga. Its waters wash the shores of both Guanacaste and Puntarenas.

The journey begins in Puntarenas and follows the Gulf of Nicoya as far as Venado Island. It is a route of small boats, mangrove forests, seabirds, fishing communities and tables set above the water. This is a quieter, less familiar side of Costa Rica, closely connected to the sea and to the rhythm of those who live beside it. By day, the route reveals islands, fishing boats and peaceful beaches. By night, darkness gives way to bioluminescence, with thousands of tiny flashes appearing beneath the water with every movement.

From Puntarenas across the Gulf of Nicoya

The journey starts at La Penca jetty in Puntarenas, where Costa Rica seems to change pace. The Pacific is not presented here as one long surfing beach but as a landscape of water, colour, small boats and simple shores from which the crossing to the Gulf begins. Everything happens naturally: a boat tied alongside the bank, a few plastic chairs, a food truck, people gathering little by little while others load supplies onto another vessel. Beyond them, the sea slowly opens towards the islands.

We set off from the shore aboard Don Mario's boat, operated by Coco Tours, for our journey across the Gulf of Nicoya



From the very beginning, it becomes clear that this journey belongs to a more authentic Costa Rica. Here, local people, goods and curious visitors all come together. There are brief conversations before departure and that unmistakable feeling that, in the Gulf, the day will be shaped by the tide, the wind and the light.

The boat gradually leaves the shore behind and the water becomes calmer, almost sheltered like a bay. This is not the open Pacific but a maze of channels, islets, mangroves and small communities accustomed to living between land and sea. The Gulf of Nicoya reveals itself little by little: a low shoreline, a fishing boat, birds skimming the surface and, in the distance, the outline of an island beginning to emerge.

Soon familiar names from local geography appear: San Lucas, Chira, Caballo, Bejuco and Venado. Some islands have remarkable histories of their own, such as San Lucas, which for decades housed the country's former prison. Others have retained a simpler way of life, centred on fishing, daily boat crossings and a form of tourism that has not yet altered their character. Along the gulf, the scenery changes almost unnoticed: scattered houses, low shores, engines heard long before the boats come into view and the unmistakable feeling of entering a landscape that has no need to show off.

Venado Island, a life shaped by the sea

Venado Island is the heart of this journey. Set in the Gulf of Nicoya, opposite the mainland and close to Bejuco and Caballo, it is neither large nor famous. Instead, it has just the right scale to spend a few days, meet local people and understand what life is like on an island where the sea dictates the rhythm. Simple wooden houses offer accommodation, allowing visitors to share, for a while, a way of life centred on fishing, mangroves and a close-knit community.

Life on Venado Island is best understood by watching the boats. They lie moored beside the houses, close to the fishing nets and engines, while children play in the water and conversations almost always begin with the state of the sea. Artisanal fishing has long been the foundation of the local economy. Here, the sea is not scenery for visitors but work, food, a calendar and a constant concern. Almost every family has a direct connection with the water, and that changes the way the landscape is seen.



Wooden holiday cabins on Venado Island



Wooden houses and fishing boats on Venado Island

Dirt roads crossing Venado Island





Local minibus used to explore Venado Island

The island combines hardship with beauty, as many small places do. There are no excesses here. Just dirt tracks, modest homes, warm days, welcome shade and a pace of life far removed from Costa Rica's better-known tourist destinations.

The island combines the ruggedness and beauty so often found in small places. There is nothing excessive here. Just dirt tracks, modest homes, warm sunshine, welcome shade and a pace of life far removed from Costa Rica's best-known tourist destinations. We travelled in May, just as the rainy season was about to begin, although the heavier downpours had not yet arrived. Even so, the vegetation was already abundant. This was not dense rainforest or an overwhelming sea of green, but a landscape of tropical dry forest, with resilient trees, patches of mangroves and a more restrained, though ever-present, natural beauty.

Touring the island aboard an old local minibus, you immediately sense that close relationship with the surrounding landscape. There is dappled shade, unpaved roads, birdsong and, from time to time, an opening towards the coast.

Cattle Egret





Great Egret – inset: Love Bridge, Venado Island





Opposite Venado Island, the floating restaurant perfectly captures life on the gulf: tables set above the water, freshly prepared fish and small aquaculture ponds where sea bass and other species are raised. Everything unfolds at an unhurried pace, with boats moored alongside and the Pacific setting the rhythm.



- 1.- Interior of the floating restaurant.
- 2.- Scallops with vinaigrette.
- 3.- Assorted platter of freshly caught fish.
- 4.- Exterior view of the floating restaurant.

The mangroves, meanwhile, seemed to belong to another world. Their roots disappeared beneath the water, supporting a rich ecosystem that often went unnoticed: small fish, crabs, resting birds and that fragile strip where land and sea become one.

We continued our journey by boat. The launch skirted tiny islets and rocky outcrops, giving the excursion the feel of a natural observatory without ever becoming contrived. Above us, frigatebirds appeared, those long-winged black birds that glide effortlessly through the sky. Close to the water, brown pelicans could be seen, heavy in appearance yet remarkably precise when plunging into the sea. There were also herons, white egrets, cormorants and the occasional kingfisher, quick and restless, flashing like a streak of colour across the water. Around the mangroves it was common to see other birds searching for food in the mud. The gulf is full of these small moments, and much of the pleasure of the journey lies in discovering them one by one.

Our next stop was one of the most unusual places of the entire trip: Venado Island's floating restaurant, known as Proyecto Camarón. It is no ordinary restaurant, nor does it need to be. Built above the water and run in partnership with a local cooperative, it combines aquaculture and tourism as a way of diversifying the island's economy. On arrival, it feels partly like a working platform, with its floating ponds and breeding facilities, and partly like a family dining room suspended above the gulf. Voices drift across the decks, boats nudge gently against the pontoons and the water murmurs beneath the timber floor.





Sunset at Playa Naranjo, O'Pacífico Hotel Boutique

Next to the restaurant are the aquaculture ponds, where shrimp and several species of fish are raised. Sea bass is the first name that comes up in conversation, although other staples of Costa Rica's coastal cuisine, such as corvina and red snapper, are also farmed here. The visit makes it easy to understand that behind every fish dish lies far more than a recipe: there are tides, constant care, maintenance, cooking and family livelihoods that depend on everything working as it should.

Naturally, we ordered fish. In a place like this, anything else would have felt out of place. Fresh fish, shrimp, rice, patacones (fried green plantain), salad and simple homemade sauces. Nothing overly sophisticated, and perhaps that was precisely what made it so memorable. Dining above the water has something special about it. You look down at the plate, admire the variety of fish and seafood, then lift your eyes and suddenly understand exactly where you are: water all around, fishing boats, aquaculture ponds, seabirds and the people who keep the project alive just a few metres away. Everything becomes part of the meal, even if it never reaches the plate.

Playa Naranjo – A Welcome Pause

After lunch, we climbed back into the boat with that pleasant drowsiness brought on by sunshine, fresh fish and the sea breeze. We continued to Playa Naranjo, on the mainland, where O'Pacífico Hotel Boutique was waiting for us—a small, carefully run hotel with a warm, personal atmosphere. It lacks the grandeur of the large beach resorts, but it has no need for it.



Among tropical greenery, open-air dining and the beach at O'Pacífico Hotel Boutique
Hammocks beneath the trees on the beach



GULF OF NICOYA, COSTA RICA

Its charm lies on a different scale. The hotel has a welcoming, family-run atmosphere, carefully looked after yet with a discreet touch of style that never feels overdone. Sun loungers surround the swimming pool, hammocks sway beneath the trees by the beach and there are plenty of comfortable places to relax, swim, read or simply gaze out at the sea. The calm waters are also ideal for paddleboarding and kayaking. Susana, the owner, is an experienced paddleboard instructor who offers lessons and guided outings for anyone wishing to try the sport in complete safety. Between the pool, the beach, the sea and the sunsets, O'Pacífico Hotel Boutique provides the perfect pause in the journey.

The sunset was magnificent, as it so often is along this stretch of coast when the sky clears. The sun slowly sank towards the horizon, bathing the gulf in shades of orange, copper and violet, while the silhouettes of the distant hills stood quietly against the fading light. There was little to say. Some moments are better understood when we stop trying to describe them.

But the day was not over yet.

Our final excursion took us to a small cove to witness one of nature's most extraordinary spectacles:

bioluminescence. We set off as dusk settled, with that child-like feeling of heading off in search of a secret. The scientific explanation is simple enough: tiny marine microorganisms known as dinoflagellates emit light whenever the water is disturbed, rather like fireflies, although here everything happens on an infinitely smaller scale. The theory is easy to understand; what is far harder is describing the feeling when the sea begins to glow around you.

The boat dropped us on the shore. We waited for darkness to fall and, little by little, every movement started to leave a luminous trail beneath the water. As we moved our hands, the sea answered with fleeting flashes of light. They were not great bursts of brightness but tiny, delicate points of living light, like millions of natural LEDs scattered beneath the surface, or glitter dissolved into the sea itself. We tried to photograph the glowing particles, but it simply was not possible.

The greatest surprise came when a shoal of small fish swam past us. For a few magical seconds we could make out their glowing outlines beneath the water and the shimmering trails they left behind. It was one of those rare sights that seems almost impossible to describe without sounding exaggerated. Bioluminescence has something both humble and magical about it. It needs no stage, no music and no dramatic words.

Sailing towards the bioluminescence



Only darkness, still water and the slightest movement of a hand. It was then that I realised this journey had little in common with the Costa Rica most travellers imagine. It was not the familiar postcard of volcanoes, waterfalls, lush rainforest or exotic wildlife, although all of that exists and fully deserves its reputation.

Instead, it revealed another face of the country: quieter, more maritime and far more intimate. A world of small islands, fishermen, mangroves, birds, floating restaurants, discreet boutique hotels and nights when the sea lights up at the gentlest touch.

We returned late, our skin still salty and carrying that quiet happiness that only makes sense afterwards. The expression "Pura Vida", so often reduced to a tourist slogan, recovered its truest meaning here. It was not a phrase printed on T-shirts, but a way of living: eating what the sea provides, watching the sky without hurry, sailing between islands, listening to the people who call this place home and accepting that beauty is not always found in the country's most famous destinations.

Sometimes it appears on a small island in the gulf, at a table suspended above the water, in the stillness of a heron standing among the mangroves, or in that handful of light that comes alive at night with the simple movement of a hand beneath the sea.



Jetty and pier at O'Pacífico Hotel Boutique

Travel Notes

Getting There

Costa Rica is served by direct flights from Europe to Juan Santamaría International Airport in San José. From Spain, Iberia operates a non-stop service between Madrid and San José, with six flights a week and a journey time of around 11 hours 35 minutes. Lufthansa also offers direct flights from Frankfurt three times a week, on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.

Where to Stay

For this journey, it is worth looking beyond Puntarenas itself, where the choice of quality hotels is fairly limited. Across the gulf, at Playa Naranjo, O'Pacífico Hotel Boutique is the best option: a small beachfront hotel with a swimming pool, restaurant and a peaceful atmosphere, making it an excellent base for exploring the Gulf of Nicoya. On the mainland, a larger alternative is Fiesta Resort Central Pacific, in El Roble. This all-inclusive beachfront resort is better suited to families, groups and travellers looking for a wider range of facilities. For a more authentic experience, Venado Island also offers simple wood-

den houses for rent, allowing visitors to spend a few days living like the locals.

Where to Eat

In Puntarenas, Coco's Bar & Grill is a popular choice for seafood before or after exploring the gulf. On Venado Island, the Floating Restaurant offers the area's most distinctive dining experience, serving local fish and seafood alongside produce from its own aquaculture ponds. At Playa Naranjo, La Cangreja, the restaurant at O'Pacífico Hotel Boutique, provides an excellent finale to the route along this side of the peninsula.

Climate

Costa Rica has a tropical climate, so it is wise to be prepared for rapidly changing weather conditions. The dry season generally runs from December to April, while May to November brings more frequent rainfall, often in the form of short but intense afternoon showers. Along the Pacific coast and throughout the Gulf of Nicoya, warm temperatures, high humidity and bright, sunny days are the norm.

Currency

The official currency is the Costa Rican colón (CRC). US dollars are widely accepted in hotels, on excursions and in most tourist areas, while credit cards can be used almost everywhere.

What to Pack

Pack lightweight, breathable clothing, swimwear, sandals, comfortable closed shoes, a cap or sun hat, sunglasses, high-factor sunscreen, insect repellent and a lightweight waterproof jacket, particularly during the green season. For boat excursions, a waterproof **dry bag is highly recommended to protect cameras, mobile phones and other valuables.**

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RICA**



Puntarenas



Jeanne Gang

Architecture for a city on the move

Text: Larissa Rolley - LarissaRolley@outlook.com

Photography: Larissa Rolley and Studio Jeanne Gang

Aqua Chicago Building © Larissa Rolley



That perspective helps explain Aqua. Completed in 2009, close to the Chicago River, the building immediately stands out among the city's rectilinear towers. Its balconies project and recede in irregular waves, as though the façade had been shaped by water or gradually worn smooth by time. From a distance, its silhouette is striking; from close up, something even more remarkable happens: shadows break across the glass, reflections fragment, and the tower no longer reads as one continuous surface.

For decades, glass has been one of the defining symbols of modern architecture. It is light, bright, clean and almost immaterial. Yet it can also be deceptive. To many birds, a reflective façade may appear to be open sky, trees or water. What we perceive as transparency or elegance can become an invisible barrier to them. The problem is not confined to tall buildings. It often occurs close to the ground, where reflections of vegetation and wetlands attract birds looking for places to rest or feed.

Jeanne Gang explaining the birds' migration routes

Gang's response has not been to reject glass, but to ask how it can be used more intelligently. At Aqua, the balcony railings incorporate vertical elements that make the façade easier for birds to read. In other projects, Studio Gang employs etched patterns, ceramic frits or subtle markings on glazing. Visitors scarcely notice them, but to a bird they can mean the difference between recognising a solid surface and flying into it.

The importance of this idea lies precisely in the fact that it does not require dramatic gestures. Sometimes a simple drawing on glass, a visible pattern, a warmer material or a decision taken at the very beginning of the design process is enough. Architecture also evolves when it embraces real problems and resolves them with care.

That perspective helps explain Aqua. Completed in 2009, close to the Chicago River, the building immediately stands out among the rectilinear towers of downtown Chicago. Its balconies project and recede in irregular waves, as though the façade had been shaped by water or slowly sculpted by the passage of time.





Aqua Chicago Building @Larissa Rolley

From a distance, its silhouette is striking. Up close, something even more interesting happens: shadows break across the glass surface, reflections fragment, and the tower ceases to read as one continuous screen.

For decades, glass has been one of the defining symbols of modern architecture. It is light, bright, clean and almost immaterial. Yet it can also be deceptive. To many birds, a reflective façade may appear to be open sky, trees or water. What we perceive as transparency or elegance can become an invisible barrier to them. The problem is not confined to the upper floors. It often occurs closer to the ground, where reflections of vegetation and wetlands attract birds looking for places to rest or feed.

Gang's response is not to reject glass, but to ask how it can be used more intelligently. At Aqua, the balcony railings incorporate vertical elements that make the façade easier for birds to recognise. In other projects, Studio Gang uses etched patterns, ceramic frits or subtle markings on the glazing. Visitors scarcely notice them; to a bird, however, they can mean the difference between recognising a solid surface and flying straight into it.

The idea matters precisely because it requires no dramatic gestures. Sometimes a simple pattern on the glass, a visible texture, a warmer material or a decision taken at the very beginning of the design process is enough. Architecture also evolves when it addresses real problems and resolves them with care.

That same sensitivity runs through many of the studio's other projects. At the Women's Leadership Center, on the shores of Lake Geneva, terraces and gardens soften the boundary between the building and the surrounding landscape.

Women's Leadership Center

View of the St Regis Chicago © Larissa Rolley ►







- 1.- Gang - Chicago Architecture Centre © Larissa Rolley
- 2.- Jeanne Gang at the presentation © Larissa Rolley
- 3.- Jeanne Gang's Aqua Tower in Chicago © Steve Hall, courtesy of Studio Gang





David Rubenstein Treehouse at Harvard University

At Harvard's David Rubenstein Treehouse, bird-friendly glazing sits alongside meeting spaces and views into the tree canopy. Here, architecture seeks connection rather than mere presence.

The same conversation is taking place in Europe. In Paris, the John W. Boyer Center at the University of Chicago uses warm materials and vertical fins to blend into its neighbourhood. In Amsterdam, Q Residences combines housing, gardens and public space. In London, Studio Gang's projects continue to explore the same questions: how to build in dense cities without losing sight of nature, light, water and the life unfolding around them.



The John W. Boyer Centre, the University of Chicago's academic and research hub in Paris

Back at the Chicago Architecture Center, illuminated migration routes stretch across a large map. Coloured lines run from Canada to South America, passing through Chicago before continuing south. The exhibition begins with a local story but speaks to a global issue. Birds cross continents. Glass remains one of contemporary architecture's defining materials. And, when considered early enough, the solutions can be far simpler than we imagine.

Flyway City does not present Jeanne Gang as an architect of slogans. Instead, it reminds us of something fundamental: every building affects others. The people who live in it, those who walk past it and even species we rarely notice. Gang recognised a problem, took it seriously and chose to design differently. That, perhaps, is the true strength of her work: seeing the city from a less obvious perspective and proving that outstanding architecture can begin there too.

Jeanne Gang, City Hyde Park.





Orlando Without the Thrills

Theme parks can also be enjoyed at a gentler pace: strolling, exploring, stopping for a meal, watching shows, discovering beautifully crafted settings and choosing the right attractions. Not everything in Orlando has to be about thrills, adrenaline and a racing heart.

Text and Photography: Jose A. Muñoz

Disney Castle; an icon of the Magic Kingdom

Orlando has a reputation problem. Mention that you are spending a few days there and someone will almost always ask, usually with a knowing smile, "Are you going on all the rides?" As though the whole trip were about proving your courage on a steel structure. I see it differently. Buying a ticket, joining a queue and coming off with your stomach somewhere near your throat has never seemed the best route to happiness.

Orlando can also be enjoyed in another way. With both feet on the ground, your eyes wide open and your stomach exactly where it belongs. No rides that launch, shake or leave you wondering whether all your internal organs will ever return to their proper place. There is another Orlando, inside the parks and beyond them: one of strolls, remarkable scenery, lights, shops, restaurants, shows, aquariums and streets created with such precision that they soon feel surprisingly real.

This journey takes in three very different worlds: ICON Park, Walt Disney World Resort and Universal Orlando Resort. ICON Park is the smallest, most relaxed and easiest to explore. Disney is immense, almost ceremonial, with its unique ability to turn nostalgia into an industry. Universal is the world of cinema, with The Wizarding World of Harry Potter as one of its greatest attractions and, for many visitors, the real reason to come.

ICON Park – Orlando at its Most Relaxed

ICON Park is perfect for anyone wanting to experience Orlando without diving straight into the machinery of a major theme park. It stands on International Drive, one of those avenues where hours disappear among restaurants, shops, lights and attractions.

Its greatest advantage is its scale. There is no need for a marathon day, no studying maps the night before and no endless walks beneath the Florida sun. Everything is close at hand. Restaurants, shops and attractions can be enjoyed at an easy pace, without the feeling of racing against the clock.

Its best-known landmark is The Orlando Eye, a giant observation wheel rising 122 metres (400 feet) above the city. That may sound daunting to anyone who treats high balconies with respect, but this is no thrill ride. The cabins are spacious, enclosed and move gently. There are no sudden drops, no violent spins and no pressure to scream. It simply lifts you above Orlando, reveals the city from a different perspective and quietly returns you to the ground.

For those of us who regard heights with a certain suspicion and ferris wheels as the enemy, even when they are as gentle as a boat ride, there is a rather unusual indoor mini-golf course, complete with air conditioning and glowing neon. For me, ICON Park comes into its own towards evening. The light softens, the heat eases and everything takes on that postcard glow Orlando does so well. Besides the observation wheel, you can pose with wax figures at Madame Tussauds, explore SEA LIFE Orlando Aqua-



The Orlando Eye

ORLANDO THEME PARKS

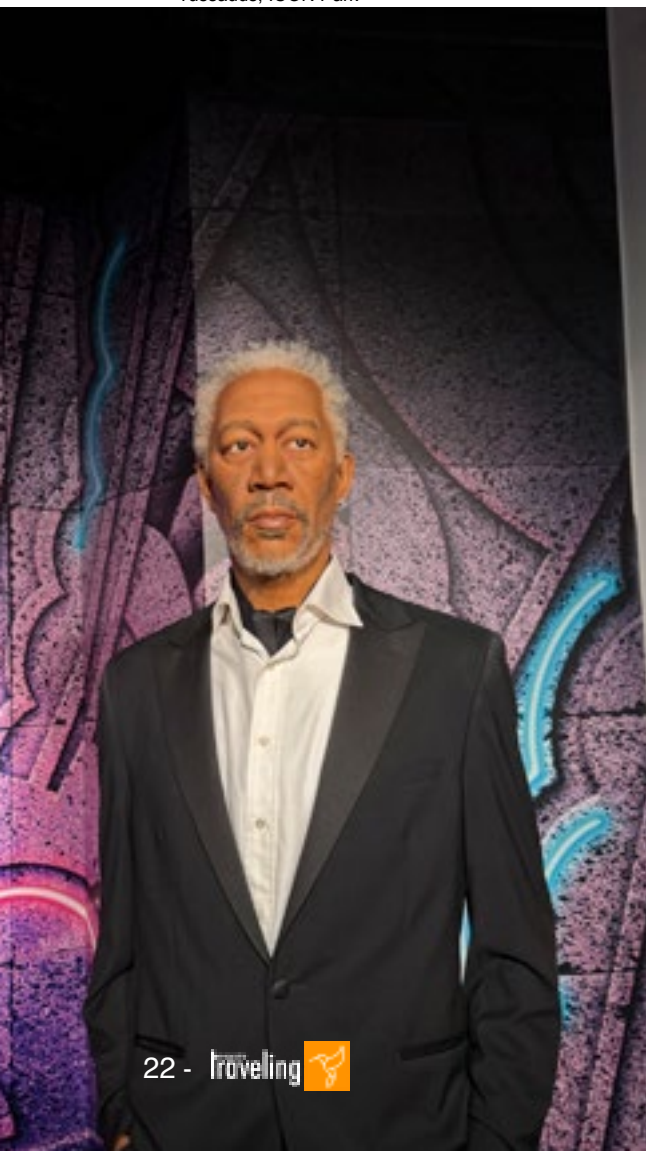
rium or spend time at the Museum of Illusions, where rooms, perspectives and visual tricks play with your senses without putting you at risk. It is an easy way to enjoy Orlando before tackling the larger parks.

Then there is the simplest pleasure of all, and often the best: walking. Stopping for something to eat. Sitting for a while. Watching people drift past carrying oversized drinks, wearing impossible T-shirts and displaying that easy-going holiday happiness of visitors with nowhere else to be. ICON Park has all the appeal of a theme park without actually being one. It is the perfect place to begin a trip, end one or simply enjoy a quieter afternoon away from Orlando's giants. A few hours here can be far more enjoyable than spending a whole day trying to prove you are still young enough for heroic rides.

Disney, Without the Rush

Walt Disney World Resort plays in a league of its own. It is so vast that it is worth remembering one thing from the outset: this is not a single park but a resort with four major theme parks – Magic Kingdom, EPCOT, **Disney's**

Morgan Freeman at Madame Tussauds, ICON Park



Themed mini-golf, ICON Park

Aquarium, ICON Park



Hollywood Studios and **Disney's Animal Kingdom**. The temptation is to see everything, ride everything and photograph everything. That is the quickest way to turn Disney into hard work.

Disney is best enjoyed when you stop trying to tick boxes and simply let the day unfold. For adults who are not chasing adrenaline, **EPCOT** is perhaps the most rewarding park. It feels part World's Fair, part international promenade and part carefully crafted fantasy. allows visitors to wander through pavilions inspired by different countries, enjoying food, shopping and a miniature journey around the world without ever unpacking a suitcase. It is not a park for rushing; it is one for wandering.

Inside the France Pavilion, **Remy's Ratatouille Adventure** is a family attraction that is imaginative, entertaining and delightfully chaotic, inspired by the famous animated film. It is ideal for adults looking for something enjoyable without venturing into white-knuckle territory. Not every memorable attraction has to leave your legs shaking.

Spaceship Earth, housed inside EPCOT's iconic geodesic sphere, is equally worthwhile. It offers a gentle journey through the history of communication, from the earliest civilisations to the digital age. It belongs to that increasingly rare type of attraction that leaves an impression without trying to frighten anyone.



United Kingdom area in World Showcase, Epcot Park.
Decor: Peter Pan and Captain Hook

China Pavilion at Epcot



ORLANDO THEME PARKS



Exterior detail of the Spaceship Earth dome

Living with the Land, meanwhile, is a peaceful boat ride through greenhouses and experimental crops, an unexpectedly delightful experience among so much excitement. You simply sit back, look around, learn something new and silently appreciate that nobody felt obliged to add a dramatic final drop.

Gran Fiesta **Tour Starring The Three Caballeros**, in the Mexico Pavilion, is another wonderfully low-key attraction: a leisurely boat ride filled with music, colour and absolutely no need to prove your bravery. The Seas with Nemo & Friends, Journey of Water, Inspired by Moana, together with EPCOT's seasonal shows, complete a side of Disney that is calmer, more relaxed and far more grown-up than many visitors expect.

Magic Kingdom? Of course. But sensibly. There is no need to begin with **Space Mountain** or pretend you can handle anything. Start along Main Street, admire the castle and enjoy **Pirates of the Caribbean**, **Haunted Mansion** or "it's a small world". Have something to eat and wait for the fireworks. Magic Kingdom is more about emotion than adrenaline. And that emotion, even if you arrive with a touch of scepticism, soon wins you over.

Disney's Hollywood Studios is livelier, yet much of its appeal lies in the film sets, the at-

Daily parade on Main Street





The entrance sign to Universal Orlando Resort; it is not an attraction

mosphere and Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge. Walking through Batuu is part of the experience, even before deciding whether to go on a ride. At **Disney's Animal Kingdom**, Kilimanjaro Safaris and the park's scenic trails offer a slower pace, surrounded by lush vegetation, wildlife and beautifully designed natural settings.

The secret to Disney is simple: do not get carried away. You can be an adult, take things easy and still have a wonderful time. You can even sit with a cold drink while everyone else queues for something called Cosmic or Expedition, which, to be honest, already sounds like a bad idea.

Universal – Where the Movies Take Centre Stage

Universal Orlando Resort deserves more time because it changes the whole mood of the trip. If Disney celebrates childhood, Universal celebrates the movies, adventure and that part of us still eager to step inside a film, even with no intention of going on the rides. The resort has several parks and entertainment areas, but

the highlights are Universal Studios Florida and Islands of Adventure, home to The **WIZARDING World of Harry Potter**.

Universal Studios Florida is especially rewarding for visitors who enjoy the atmosphere as much as the attractions. Its streets, façades, music, characters and shops create the constant feeling of walking through a working film set. Here, simply wandering around is part of the experience. Not everything has to end with a safety harness.

The place not to miss is **Diagon Alley**. And yes, it deserves the emphasis. You arrive almost without noticing, as though slipping through a narrow gap between the real and the magical worlds. Suddenly the alley opens before you, with its shops, signs, Gringotts Bank and the dragon perched on the rooftop. It is one of those rare places where the scenery stops feeling like scenery because every detail has been so carefully considered: the shop windows, the signs, the alleyways, the light and the shadows. Even visitors who are not devoted Harry Potter fans soon realise there is something genuinely magical about the place.

ORLANDO THEME PARKS

The real charm of Diagon Alley lies in the fact that it is far more than a single attraction. You can wander through its streets, browse the shop windows, explore Knockturn Alley, buy a wand, watch the street performances, enjoy an ice cream at Florean Fortescue's Ice-Cream Parlour or sit in the Leaky Cauldron with a pint in hand. To many of us it feels more like an old tavern than a pub, with its warm, dimly lit interior where you half expect the barman to know a secret or two.

The alley's main attraction is Harry Potter and the Escape from Gringotts. It combines motion, large-format screens, special effects and spectacular scenery. It is not an extreme roller coaster, but neither is it a gentle boat ride. It sits somewhere in between, so each visitor should judge their own limits. If simulators and sudden movements are not for you, simply enjoy the bank, the dragon, the shops and the alley itself. Diagon Alley is more than rewarding without ever stepping through that door.

The Hogwarts Express is another highly recommended experience, provided you have a ticket allowing travel between the two parks. It links **King's Cross**, in Universal Studios Florida, with Hogsmeade, in Islands of Adventure.



Diagon Alley and the Wizarding World shop

View of the rollercoaster near the village of Hogsmeade





The Hogwarts Express and Platform 9¾ – a recreation that also takes us from one park to another on a magical journey

It is a gentle, story-driven attraction, perfect for immersing yourself in the world of Harry Potter without leaving with your hair blown about or your nerves in pieces.

At Islands of Adventure lies **Hogsmeade**, with Hogwarts Castle as its centrepiece. Although the castle is currently undergoing refurbishment, it remains well worth visiting. Even those unfamiliar with the books or films enjoy wandering its corridors, watching the talking portraits and stepping inside **Dumbledore's office**. It is also home to Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey, one of Universal's most popular attractions, combining motion simulation and special effects to create the illusion of flying through the Wizarding World. It is not a roller coaster, but it does involve sharp movements, tilting and a convincing sensation of flight. If strong simulators leave you feeling unwell, it may be wiser to give it a miss. The same applies to more intense rides, such as **Hagrid's Magical Creatures Motorbike Adventure**, which are better left to thrill-seekers. Fortunately, Hogsmeade is just as enjoyable at a slower pace: browse the shops, admire the snow-covered rooftops, try a Butterbeer, take photographs and simply soak up the atmosphere of a place that feels like an enormous film set brought wonderfully to life.

Hogwarts Castle; the 'Harry Potter and the Forbidden Journey' attraction area



ORLANDO THEME PARKS

Beyond the world of Harry Potter, Universal offers plenty for visitors who prefer to keep both feet on the ground. The Simpsons Ride and E.T. Adventure still capture the charm of the park's classic attractions: gentle, nostalgic experiences that feel refreshingly old-fashioned. The Bourne Stuntacular is another excellent choice for anyone wanting action without handing themselves over to a machine. Stunt performers, giant screens, special effects and cinematic pacing create all the excitement. Universal Orlando's Horror Make-Up Show is equally worth a visit, blending comedy, make-up, movie monsters and the timeless pleasure of discovering how film magic is created.

It also helps to know when to say no. Revenge of the Mummy, Hollywood Rip Ride Rockit, Hagrid's Magical Creatures Motorbike Adventure and VelociCoaster are spectacular attractions for thrill-seekers, but they are by no means essential to enjoying Universal. There is no point spoiling your day out of pride. There is something wonderfully satisfying about admiring a roller coaster from the ground, appreciating its engineering and then wandering into an air-conditioned shop instead. The colourful designs and architecture of many attractions are attractions in themselves. And, I must admit, there is also something rather amusing about watching people as they come back. Some return beaming from ear to ear; others look as though they are still trying to make peace with their stomachs.



Entrance to The Simpsons ride at Universal Studios

Universal Studios' 'The Mummy Returns' Attraction





Transfers by boat, cable car or monorail to travel from one park to another

A Short Guide to Enjoying Orlando Without the Thrills

The first rule is simple: stop feeling guilty. You do not enjoy thrill rides, and that is perfectly fine. Some people dislike oysters, others never drink red wine, and some of us look at any machine designed to fling human beings through the air with healthy suspicion. Orlando is full of visitors who feel exactly the same. The best part is that the parks are just as enjoyable when you decide to keep your feet – and your dignity – firmly on the ground.

The second rule is to read the signs before joining the queue. Orlando's parks explain everything clearly: minimum height, intensity, sudden movements and health warnings. If an attraction mentions sharp turns, intense simulation, steep drops or high speeds, it is probably not speaking your language. The third is to treat each park as an experience, not a checklist. At ICON Park, a leisurely afternoon is all you need. At Disney, EPCOT is

the perfect choice for visitors who prefer a gentler pace. At Universal, Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade alone make the trip worthwhile, even if you skip the biggest rides.

The fourth is to remember that eating well, taking breaks and slowing down are all part of the holiday. A ride on the monorail, the Skyliner or a boat between parks, a few photographs at Madame Tussauds, or the slow panorama from The Orlando Eye can be just as memorable as any headline attraction. Some of Orlando's finest moments happen between the rides, when you stop rushing and simply start looking around.

Orlando is not only for adrenaline seekers. It is also for curious travellers, relaxed walkers, adults who appreciate beautifully designed scenery and anyone who would rather leave a park smiling than negotiating peace with their neck muscles. In the end, the best trip is not the one with the most screams, but the one remembered with the biggest smile. And in Orlando, even if you hardly go on a ride, smiling comes remarkably easily.



Travel Notes

Before You Travel

To visit the United States, you will need an approved ESTA, valid for tourist stays of up to 90 days under the Visa Waiver Program. Even so, arriving in Orlando is often easier than expected, with efficient immigration procedures, well-organised baggage reclaim and clear signage. Airport information is displayed in both English and Spanish, and Spanish-speaking staff are easy to find, making those first moments especially straightforward.

Getting There

Iberia's direct Madrid–Orlando service, launched in October 2025, makes travelling from Spain far easier, avoiding stopovers and flying straight to the home of the theme parks. The route operates four times a week with Airbus A330 aircraft, offering Business, Premium Economy and Economy cabins.

On Board

For a flight of this length, Premium Economy is well worth considering. It offers more space than Economy, a quieter cabin and greater comfort before several busy days exploring the parks.

Where to Stay

Walt Disney World Swan and Dolphin Resort is one of the most convenient places to stay within the Walt Disney World area. The complex includes three hotels: Walt Disney World Swan, Walt Disney World Dolphin and Walt Disney World Swan Reserve. Its location is particularly convenient for visiting EPCOT and Disney's Hollywood Studios, both reachable by boat or even on foot.

Where to Eat

The resort offers an excellent choice of restaurants, including Bourbon Steak, Il Mulino, Kimonos, Todd English's Bluezoo, Amare and Rosa Mexicano. For more casual dining, try Garden Grove, Tangerine, Cabana Bar & Beach Club, The Fountain, Fuel, Java or Grounds.

Getting Around

Distances in Orlando are considerable, but transport within Walt Disney World is excellent. From the Swan and Dolphin Resort, boats connect directly with EPCOT and Disney's Hollywood Studios, while buses serve the other parks and Disney

Springs. Visitors can also use the famous Monorail, the Disney Skyliner gondolas, boats and buses.

Useful Apps

Before travelling, download My Disney Experience for Walt Disney World and the Universal Orlando Resort App. Depending on your plans, SeaWorld App, Aquatica App and the LEGOLAND Florida Resort App are also useful. They provide maps, opening hours, waiting times, tickets, reservations and show schedules.

Top Tips

Comfortable shoes, a cap, sunscreen, a lightweight waterproof jacket and a refillable water bottle are essential. Above all, resist the temptation to do everything. Orlando is far more enjoyable when busy park days are balanced with time to slow down and relax.



Eight inherited cultures,
one story that leaves its mark.



IS THIS HAPPINESS?



Most likely, yes. And not by chance. It will be because of our sunshine and the easy access to our beaches. Because of our rich gastronomy. It will be because of the comfort of our cities and the authenticity of our towns. Because of our culture and our flair for innovation. It will be because here you make our way of life your own.

**MEDITERRANEAN
ATTITUDE**

Innsbruck

Mountains, Palaces and Alpine Life

Text: Rosario Alonso • **Photography:** Rosario Alonso and archive

Colourful houses in the Mariahilf district



The Tyrolean capital cannot be understood simply by walking beneath its arcades, admiring its painted façades or standing before the glittering Golden Roof. Its true character reveals itself only when you look up and realise that the city is quite literally embraced by the Alps. Here the mountains are not a backdrop but part of everyday life: a constant presence, a frontier, a promise and, in many ways, the very essence of Innsbruck. Its name already tells the story. Innsbruck quite literally means “**bridge over the River Inn.**”

The River Inn flows through the city with the cool serenity of Alpine waters, while the colourful houses of Mariahilf and St Nikolaus seem to lean towards it, as though watching over the ancient trade route that for centuries linked northern and southern Europe. Merchants, officials, soldiers, pilgrims and travellers heading for the Brenner Pass, the Alpine gateway between Austria and Italy, all passed this way. Long before becoming a winter postcard, Innsbruck was a place of passage. And places of passage, when fortune smiles, become places where people meet.



INNSBRUCK

The city grew thanks to its strategic position. In the fifteenth century, Frederick IV moved the seat of Tyrol to Innsbruck, and later Emperor Maximilian I turned it into one of the Habsburgs' great centres of power. The legacy of that period is still clearly visible in the Old Town. Walking into Herzog-Friedrich-Straße, the city gradually folds in on itself, as historic towns often do when protecting their memory. Here stands the **Golden Roof** (Goldenes Dachl), probably Innsbruck's best-known landmark: a late Gothic ceremonial balcony commissioned by Maximilian I between 1497 and 1500 and covered with 2,657 gilded copper tiles. From here, the emperor watched festivals, tournaments and everyday life unfold in the square below.

Just a few steps away, the Hofkirche (Court Church) preserves another of the city's great icons: the cenotaph of Maximilian I, surrounded by imposing bronze figures. It is not a tomb in the strict sense, but a remarkable stage set to imperial memory. Nearby, St James' Cathedral, modest from the outside, surprises visitors with its magnificent Baroque interior and the striking illusionistic paintings across its vaults. Innsbruck knows that history is also built through symbols. A short walk away, the Imperial Palace (Hofburg) recalls that legacy of power, reshaped during the reign of Maria Theresa with unmistakable Baroque elegance. Yet the city never feels overwhelming. It is perfectly scaled for exploring on foot, while inviting visitors to slow down and linger.

The walk should continue along Maria-Theresien-Straße, a broad, elegant avenue where medieval Innsbruck gives way to its more bourgeois side. Halfway along stand St Anne's Column and the Triumphal Arch, with its two contrasting façades commemorating both a royal wedding and a death. Together they frame one of the city's finest urban vistas: historic façades, cafés, shops, trams and, always beyond them, the mountain wall. This is one of Innsbruck's greatest qualities. Few European capitals allow you to enjoy breakfast in a lively square and, shortly afterwards, breathe the air of the high mountains.

The best example is the Innsbruck–Nordkette route. From the city centre, visitors first take the Hungerburg funicular before continuing on the Seegrube and Hafelekar cable cars. The experience is more than panoramic; it almost feels like a story unfolding.

The city gradually falls away below, neatly arranged between the river, the towers and the rooftops, while the mountains steadily take command.



Goldenes Dachl, the Golden Roof

Within minutes, Innsbruck changes scale. The Nordkette forms part of the Karwendel Nature Park, Austria's largest protected natural area, and from Hafelekar the panorama stretches across 360 degrees: the city on one side, the rugged Karwendel range on the other. Nordkette proudly describes itself as the "Top of Innsbruck", carrying visitors from the centre to 2,256 metres in remarkably little time.

The ascent perfectly reflects the Tyrolean spirit: a cultured, administrative and university city that never forgets nature has the final word. In winter, Innsbruck remains one of the Alps' leading capitals, strengthened by its Olympic heritage from 1964 and 1976. In summer, the mountains become the domain of hikers, viewpoints and open-air terraces. Bergisel, with its ski jump designed by Zaha Hadid, adds another dimension to this dialogue between architecture and landscape.

Nearby stands the Tirol Panorama, whose vast circular painting, covering almost 1,000 square metres, depicts the 1809 Battle of Bergisel, a defining episode in Tyrolean identity, while paying tribute to Andreas Hofer, leader of the uprising. The Tyrolean State Museums also include the Tyrolean Folk Art Museum, the Zeughaus and the Ferdinandeum, one of the region's principal museums, currently undergoing renovation until 2028.



The cenotaph of Maximilian I in the Hofkirche. Bottom photo: Maria-Theresien-Straße with the Column of St Anne





Mundos de Cristal de Swarovski

It was transformed in the sixteenth century by Archduke Ferdinand II, who assembled there one of Europe's great Renaissance collections. Today, Ambras is regarded as the world's first museum preserved in the very place where it was created. Its Armouries, the Chamber of Art and Curiosities and the Spanish Hall rank among the finest Renaissance interiors in Central Europe.

A little farther east, around twenty kilometres from Innsbruck, lies Wattens, home to Swarovski Crystal Worlds. Here, the brilliance of crystal has been transformed into architecture, art and experience. Swarovski Kristallwelten should not be seen simply as a shopping stop.

Innsbruck is not defined solely by its imperial past. In recent years the city has embraced new ways of presenting its culture. Rather than speaking simply of "new museums", it is more accurate to speak of new museum languages. Experience Tirol, in the heart of the city, offers an immersive one-hour journey through five multimedia rooms that explain the history, culture and landscapes of Tyrol. It does not replace the traditional museum; it complements it for visitors who want more than display cases and prefer to step inside a story.

Another highlight is the AUDIOVERSUM ScienceCenter, an interactive museum dedicated to hearing, where medicine, technology, education and art come together. Its main exhibition explores the ear and sound through hands-on installations designed for adults and families alike.

It reveals a contemporary, curious side of Innsbruck, less solemn than its imperial heritage might suggest.

This balance between historical heritage and contemporary culture defines Innsbruck's evolution. The city never renounces its past, yet it never stands still. Nearby stands Schloss Ambras, or Ambras Castle, perched on a hillside overlooking Innsbruck. It is far more than a simple excursion outside the city.

From the moment it opened, the site was conceived as a creative universe centred on crystal, with chambers of wonders, gardens, artistic installations and family-friendly experiences.



Swarovski was founded in 1895 by Daniel Swarovski, and its relationship with Tyrol forms part of the region's industrial identity. Swarovski Crystal Worlds is located in Wattens, about twenty kilometres from Innsbruck, and can also be reached by direct shuttle bus from the city.

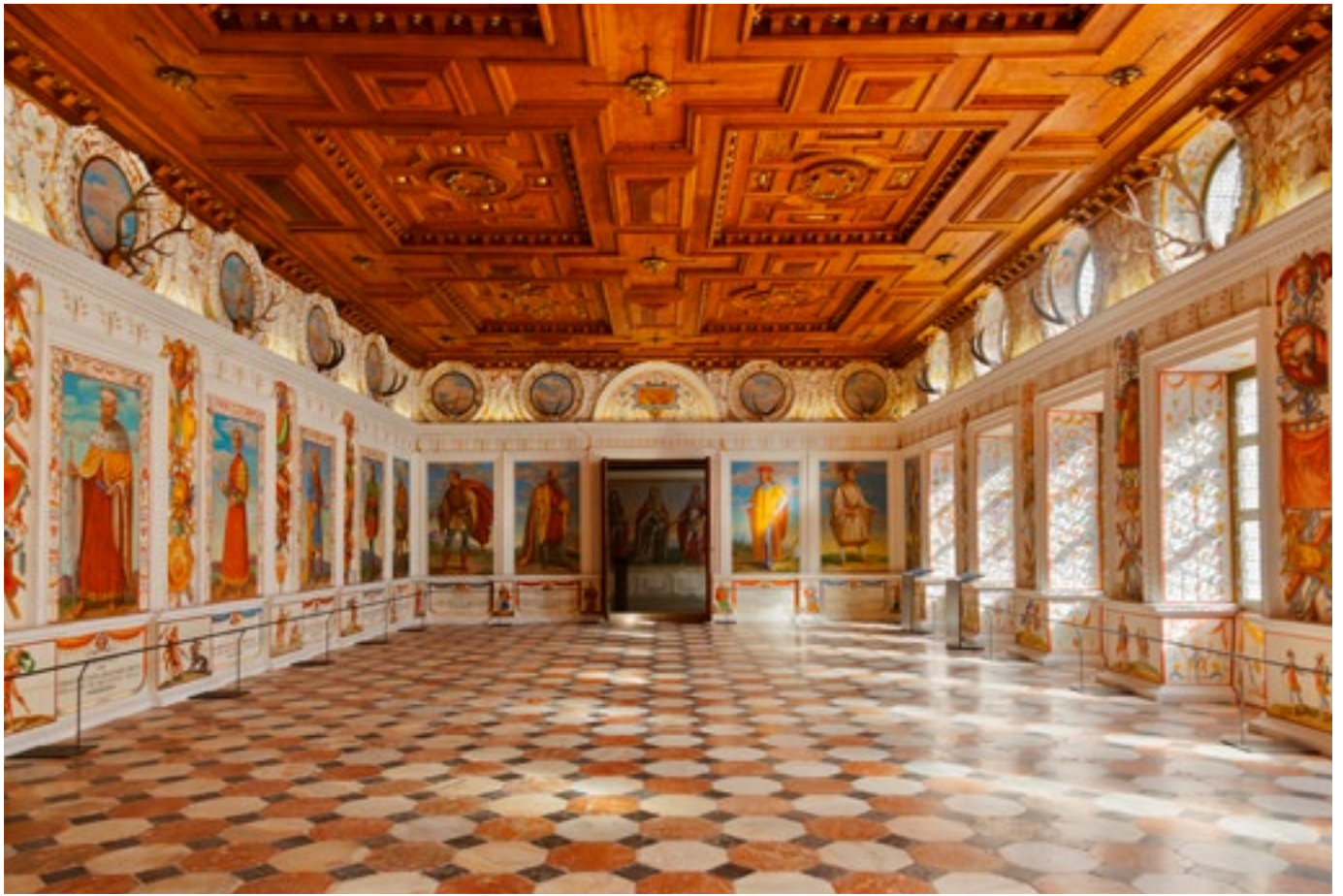
This excursion adds a different dimension to the journey. If Innsbruck speaks the language of stone, timber, metal and mountains, Swarovski introduces the language of light. The famous Giant at the entrance, the Chambers of Wonder and the gardens create an itinerary built around surprise. It is especially appealing for families, but also for anyone interested in discovering how a Tyrolean company transformed an industrial craft into an imaginative and dreamlike world. One of Innsbruck's greatest strengths is the ease with which all these layers coexist.

The imperial, university, Alpine, Olympic, contemporary and family-friendly city overlap naturally rather than competing. In the morning you can climb to Nordkette; at midday wander through the old town; in the afternoon visit an interactive museum or an art gallery; the following day explore Ambras before continuing to Wattens. The journey involves very little travelling yet offers constant changes of perspective.

As evening falls and the last light touches the façades of the old town while Nordkette begins to disappear into shadow, Innsbruck returns to its truest image. Below, the River Inn continues its course. Above, the mountains keep their silence. Between the two, the city quietly reminds every traveller that some destinations really do have it all.

Ambras Castle





Spanish Hall at Ambras Castle

Travel Notes

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Das Innsbruck is an excellent choice. In the heart of the Old Town, opposite the River Inn and the colourful riverside houses, it is perfectly located. It offers an indoor pool, two spa areas with saunas, spacious contemporary rooms and an outstanding breakfast.

Just a short walk away is Markthalle Innsbruck, the city's market hall. Its beautifully presented stalls, outstanding local produce and the aroma of Tyrolean cheeses make it well worth a visit.

WHERE TO EAT

Innsbruck has an excellent food scene, from traditional gasthäuser and markets to modern bistros. Try Tyrolean classics such as game stews, smoked mountain cheeses, Kaspressknödel, Käsespätzle, Speckknödel, Leberknödel and Wiener Schnitzel.

STIFTSKELLER

A Tyrolean classic in the Old Town (Stiftgasse 1), with a large Biergarten, traditional atmosphere and hearty regional cuisine.

GASTHOF RIESE HAYMON

A local institution serving refined Tyrolean cuisine that combines regional produce with modern techniques. It also has a Biergarten in historic Wilten.

LA SPECKERIA

Ideal for a light lunch of smoked meats, mountain cheeses and Tyrolean charcuterie.

WILDERIN

Seasonal regional cuisine based on local produce, with creative dishes and excellent offal specialities.





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Ancient Pathways of Italy

When All Roads Led to Rome

Text: Editorial Staff Photography: ENIT and archive

There is an Italy you cannot truly appreciate if you rush through it. It is there, never hidden, but it asks for a different approach. It is not enough to arrive, take a photograph and move on. You have to walk, even grow tired, allowing the landscape to unfold before you without expecting anything in particular. That is when things reveal themselves: a bell tower rising among the trees, a fountain by the roadside, an abbey perched on a hilltop, a village where everything seems closed until someone opens a door and the inviting aroma of coffee and freshly baked bread drifts out.

That is the Italy of the ancient pathways. Routes that, for centuries, carried pilgrims, monks, merchants and travellers towards Rome. They were hardly romantic roads. There was mud, cold, hunger, fear and endlessly long days. But there were also hospices, monasteries, markets, bridges, shrines and that simple hospitality which made it possible to carry on. Rome was the destination, certainly, but the journey began long before.

Italy is now looking at these routes with fresh eyes. The Antichi Cammini d'Italia project, promoted by ENIT and the Ministry of Tourism, focuses on five great routes crossing

Lazio and leading to the capital: the Via Francigena, the Romea Strata, the Via Romea Germanica, the Way of St Francis and the St Benedict Way. The aim is clear: to revive these historic routes, encourage a slower pace of travel and bring visitors to places that do not always feature on the best-known itineraries.

The idea works because it does not feel contrived. These routes have always been there. What has changed is the way we see them. Today there is talk of sustainable tourism, year-round travel, digital experiences and new maps for modern travellers. All of that makes sense. Yet, in the end, what really matters remains remarkably simple: set out in the morning, glance up at the sky, adjust your rucksack and start walking.

The Via Francigena

It is the most celebrated of them all. Its historic route links Canterbury with Rome, crossing England, France, Switzerland and Italy. In its Italian section, it descends from the Alps through some of the country's most iconic landscapes: Lucca, Siena, San Gimignano and the Val d'Orcia. It then reaches Lazio, passing Lake Bolsena, Montefiascone, Viterbo and the final approach to Rome.

Set out like that, it sounds like a wonderful list of places, but a route is never just that. There are long

stages, quiet country roads, stretches without shade, and moments when you wonder why you did not choose a café terrace in Florence instead of a dusty climb. Yet that is precisely its appeal. The Via Francigena is not defined solely by its monuments, but by everything that happens between them: a brief conversation, an open bakery, an empty square, the cool interior of a church at midday, a meal in a small osteria. Small moments, but essential ones.

The Romea Strata

It is less well known and perhaps all the more appealing for that. It was a network of routes linking the Baltic and Central European regions with Rome. Entering Italy through Tarvisio, in the Alps, it crossed Friuli Venezia Giulia and Veneto, passing through cities such as Vicenza and Padua, before continuing through Emilia-Romagna, Tuscany and Lazio, taking in places including Nonantola, Fucecchio, Bolsena and Orvieto. Its name evokes layers upon layers of history, routes shaped and reshaped by centuries of travellers.

There is something profoundly European about this route. Not a Europe designed in offices, but one of mountain passes, market squares, different languages and travellers who understood one another as best they could. First come the mountains, then the plains, followed by inland villages and, at last, Lazio. The landscape changes almost without warning. That is one of the greatest pleasures of travelling on foot or by bicycle: with every step, the scenery quietly transforms.

San Gimignano



ANCIENT PATHWAYS OF ITALY

The Vía Romea Germanica

It also looks northwards. The route is associated with Abbot Albert of Stade, who, in the 13th century, recorded various roads leading to Rome in the *Annales Stadenses*. It is a historical detail, certainly, but one that deserves more than a passing footnote. It reminds us that Europe was already being crossed on foot long before the age of modern maps; that people were willing to traverse borders, mountains and unfamiliar lands in order to reach Rome. From northern Germany, the route headed south through cities such as Stade, Augsburg, Trento and Verona before entering the Italian peninsula on the way to Rome. At the time, the city was one of the great urban centres of the world, and reaching it could mean salvation, protection, prestige or the hope of a better life.

Today, the route offers a way of reading that shared history through a contemporary lens. The Germanic world, the Alps, the Italian peninsula, its valleys, cities and monasteries all form part of the same southward journey. It was never an easy undertaking, yet it was one filled with purpose. Every stage brought pilgrims closer to Rome while leading them across a Europe that was diverse, demanding and often remarkably beautiful. Much of its enduring appeal still lies in that blend of effort, landscape and destination.

The Way of St Francis

The mood changes completely here. This is a quieter, more contemplative route. From La Verna to Assisi and then onwards to Rome, it follows places closely linked to the life and spirituality of Francis. There are forests, olive groves, hermitages, stone-built towns and silent valleys. Assisi naturally takes centre stage, but the journey neither ends there nor should it be reduced to the town alone.



Piazza dei Signori, Vicenza



Verona

Marmore Falls





Castelluccio di Norcia

Spoletto, the Valnerina, Marmore Falls, Lake Piediluco and the Rieti Valley all belong to a landscape where nature and spirituality speak for themselves. This is not a route for grand declarations. Instead, it invites a quieter frame of mind. Walk, spend a while in silence, simply look. The figure of Francis still resonates because he represents something increasingly rare today: simplicity, voluntary poverty, a deep respect for nature and a conscious distance from excess.

The St Benedict Way

It belongs to a different Italy, more austere and more inward-looking. Stretching for around 300 kilometres over 16 stages, it links Norcia, Subiaco and Montecassino. Norcia marks the birthplace of the saint; Subiaco recalls his years of retreat; Montecassino is home to the great abbey that became one of the defining symbols of Western monasticism.

This is not a route that seeks to impress at every turn. Its beauty is quieter and more restrained. Mountains, valleys, small villages, lightly travelled roads and rural paths shape the journey. It has something of the ancient pilgrimage about it, perhaps because the figure of St Benedict calls to mind words we rarely use today: rule, work, hospitality and moderation. They may not sound fashionable, but they remain essential. Walking this route means discovering an Italy that is less ornamental and far more profound.

These ancient routes also serve a very practical purpose. Italy welcomes vast numbers of visitors, and some of its cities are overcrowded for much of the year.



Historic buildings in Spoleto
Benedictine Abbey of Montecassino





Walking route in Norcia. Lower photograph: view of Trento.



Historic routes offer a sensible alternative: bringing visitors to lesser-known regions, spreading economic activity more evenly and extending the travel season. Those who walk do not pass through places as though they were scenery. They stay the night, share a meal, shop, ask questions, lose their way, re-trace their steps, wander into a local shop and leave something behind.

Technology certainly helps. Today's walkers check digital maps, download route stages, book accommodation and keep an eye on the weather forecast. None of that diminishes the experience when used wisely. Yet what truly matters remains reassuringly timeless. One step after another. The weariness at the end of the day. The quiet satisfaction of taking off your boots. A hot meal. A simple bed. The following morning.

It is fitting that Italy chose Santiago de Compostela to launch this campaign. Santiago understands the true value of a pilgrimage route. It knows that a trail is far more than a line marked out in kilometres; it is an entire culture of signposts, stages, hospitality, shared stories and shared fatigue. From Galicia, the invitation to walk towards Rome feels like a natural bridge between two of Europe's great spiritual destinations.

Italy's ancient pathways do not promise the discovery of a new country. Italy has always been there. What they offer is a different way of arriving. With less haste. Without trying to see everything. Accepting that some days will be beautiful, while others will simply be necessary. Rome will still be waiting at the end, as it has for centuries. But perhaps, when you arrive by one of these routes, you understand something that travelling by train or car can never quite reveal: that the journey does not begin in the city, but long before, and that, in the end, **all roads lead to Rome**.



Castel Sant'Angelo, Rome



The Spanish Steps, Rome

St Peter's Square, Vatican City



Leipzig

Culture, Commerce and Music

By; Joaquín del Palacio – joaquineografo@gmail.com

Leipzig Opera House, Augustusplatz. © LTM Philipp Kirschner





A thousand years ago, the region of Saxony in present-day Germany where Leipzig now stands was little more than forests, lakes and small rivers. The city's name derives from the old Slavic word *lipa*, meaning the linden tree. The soothing greenery of those linden woods, still surrounding the lakes today, provides a natural haven for Leipzig's 600,000 residents, who enjoy this peaceful landscape to the sound of birdsong. Yet, for truly great music, the city itself takes centre stage.

Capital of Music

Amid these forests lay a historic crossroads where the Imperial Road, linking Rome with the Baltic Sea, met the Via Regia, stretching from Russia to Finisterre. It was at this junction that trade and commerce gradually took root, laying the foundations of Leipzig. And just as, in legendary crossroads tales, a blues guitarist might sell his soul to the devil to become the greatest, here Faust did the same in Goethe's masterpiece. In a different way, Johann Sebastian Bach also forged his own pact with the church organ, and classical music found a lasting home in Leipzig.

The city bears countless musical traces of great figures such as Mendelssohn, Robert and Clara Schumann, and Wagner, all of whom were drawn here, perhaps sensing that Leipzig possessed a remarkable acoustic spirit. They felt that Leipzig had its own unique magic..

Beside the park where Wagner's bust stands, opera and ballet are performed in all their splendour at the Opera House. Directly opposite, beyond the waters of the monumental Mendeburgen Fountain, the Concert Hall completes an architectural ensemble of outstanding harmony.

A similar harmony resonates from the church organ of St Nicholas' Church, a bright and luminous building, filled with light and distinguished by its striking palm-shaped columns. It can also be heard from the organ of St Thomas' Church, where Bach once sang

LEIPZIG

and played, reached by passing through the Mendelssohn Portico after pausing before the statue of Johann Sebastian himself. All these performances are presided over by Bach, who is buried in the chancel of the church, while his likeness in a stained-glass window watches over the entire interior and the square outside, where his museum stands and his digital avatar continues to perform intimate virtual concerts.

From Passage to Passage...

Leipzig hides its secrets in a network of passageways where, the moment you cross the threshold, it feels as though you have stepped into another world. Some run straight through a single building, while others weave their way through several properties in a labyrinth of corridors, revealing the hidden, enchanting and wonderfully original inner city concealed within Leipzig itself. You can enter through one façade and emerge, for example, in the Town Hall Square, passing through buildings ingeniously adapted to the demands of the city's historic trade fairs, where architecture and commerce came together with remarkable elegance. It is a complex urban layout that can easily disorientate, yet wandering through these passages is part of Leipzig's unique charm.

Other routes unfold into a series of small squares that branch off in different directions, creating a network of shops, archways and covered spaces with a life of their own, always leaving you wonde-

ring where you will eventually emerge. They originated from the constant flow of carts delivering goods, providing dedicated loading and unloading areas so that the main streets remained free from congestion.

Beneath the Ground and Close to the Sky

Soft, filtered light streams through the translucent roof of the Mädlar Passage, illuminating the statues of Goethe and Faust opposite the three newly enchanted students. These two sculptural groups frame the arcade, leading to a pair of staircases descending into the ground. As you make your way down, the light gradually fades. Below lies Auerbachs Keller, a unique and legendary dining hall that has remained almost unchanged for nearly five centuries. An underground

Leipzig Opera House. © LTM Adam Kumiszczka



Leipzig Town Hall. © LTM Punctum



restaurant seating 500 guests beneath low vaults and richly coloured arches, yet without a single window. Lit only as much as necessary. The perfect setting to experience the dark atmosphere that inspired Goethe to choose this inn as the place where his Faust finally struck his bargain with Mephistopheles.

Emerging from Faust's underworld in search of daylight, you come close to heavenly tranquillity at the Panorama Tower, the city's highest vantage point. From beside the windows of its restaurant or out on its terrace, with Leipzig spread out at your feet, you can admire its broad avenues—though not its hidden passageways—and its rooftops, even if their church organs cannot be heard. Nearby, beyond a park, stands Europe's largest railway station. And on the outskirts, half concealed by woodland, you can glimpse a factory and a racing circuit where magnificent cars roar into life and speed around the track..

Del silencio al relincho del caballo

Few would have predicted that the surname of the designer behind the first German people's car, the Volkswagen Beetle, would become a symbol for motoring enthusiasts, but for an entirely different reason. Porsche. An evocative name. A museum, two circuits and a factory—although calling it a factory hardly does it justice; it is more like an immaculate, precise and fast-paced kitchen where cars are carefully crafted. Perhaps what is produced here is not simply a vehicle, but a unique driving philosophy of its own, one that anyone can experience by becoming a racing driver for a while.

Porsche's legendary sports cars have been on the road for nine decades, and their engines produce such a distinctive, unmistakable sound that in Leipzig it feels like another instrument in the city's own philharmonic orchestra. The horse on the emblem comes from the coat of arms of Stuttgart, the brand's birthplace, but among these forests surrounded by lakes, those steeds gallop proudly beneath the shade of the linden trees.



Bach statue beside St Thomas' Church. © LTM Tom Williger



Auerbachs Keller Restaurant. © LTM Philipp Kirschner

Porsche 911. © Porsche AG



LEÓN

LEÓN

Among Kings, Stained Glass and Fine Dining

Text: Editorial Staff – Photography: León City Council Tourism Office

León carries almost two thousand years of history and yet retains a welcoming, human scale. It is a hospitable city, shaped by crossroads, the Way of St James and a legacy of cultures that can be felt throughout its streets. It has something of an old kingdom and something of a comfortable, cultured and truly lived-in city. Its excellent connections, including a high-speed train from Madrid, make it an easy destination for a two-day getaway.

The monumental tour has one unavoidable landmark: the Cathedral. The Pulchra Leonina, begun in the mid-13th century, is one of the finest examples of pure Gothic architecture in Spain. Its most recognisable feature is its stained glass, covering around 1,900 square metres of light and colour, transforming the interior into a different experience depending on the time of day. In Plaza de Regla, the walk continues towards the Sierra Pambley Museum, which recreates the social life and decorative fashions of a 19th-century bourgeois family.

Nearby stands Casa Botines, one of the few works Antoni Gaudí created outside Catalonia. Built in the final decade of the 19th century for the merchant Juan Homs y Botinás, it retains that blend of functionality, imagination and visual strength that makes the architect instantly recognisable. Its presence in León becomes even more significant when one remembers that the province is home to another major Gaudí masterpiece in Astorga, the Episcopal Palace.

The Basilica of San Isidoro holds another essential place in the city. It is one of the most complete expressions of Spanish Romanesque architecture and a stone testament to the former Kingdom of León. Its Royal Pantheon, known as the “Sistine Chapel of Romanesque art”, houses the remains of various monarchs. León also highlights here its role as the birthplace of parliamentarianism, thanks to the Decreta of 1188, linked to the Cortes summoned by Alfonso IX.



Casa Botines

Interior of León Cathedral





Collegiate Church and Royal Pantheon of San Isidoro





Church of Our Lady of the Market or Santa María del Camino
Convent of San Marcos, León

The Way of St James is also deeply woven into the identity of the city. The San Marcos Bridge and, beside it, the current Parador de León, recall its historic role as a place of passage and welcome. San Marcos was once a pilgrims' hospital and is now one of the great Renaissance buildings in Spain, with an exceptionally rich Plateresque façade. It has also served as a convent, military barracks and prison, where Francisco de Quevedo was held captive.

Exploring the old town means walking through a city where heritage and everyday life exist side by side. There are remarkable buildings, squares, arcades, narrow streets and an atmosphere that changes throughout the day. León cannot be reduced to its monuments alone. It is also understood through its shops, terraces, bars, markets and that distinctive way it moves effortlessly from history into conversation.

The city, moreover, does not live solely on its past. The Auditorium, the Exhibition and Congress Centre and the MUSAC reveal a León that has embraced contemporary architecture and cultural activity while preserving its human scale. The MUSAC, opened in 2005 and designed by Mansilla + Tuñón, received the Mies van der Rohe Award in 2007. Its coloured glass façade echoes the memory of the Cathedral's stained-glass windows through a distinctly contemporary language.





MUSAC; Museum of Contemporary Art of León

This balance between past and present is reinforced by a lively cultural calendar: concerts, theatre, museums, festivals, exhibitions, sporting events and traditions. León works well at any time of year. Autumn brings the San Froilán festivities; winter warms the city's bars with broths and garlic soups; spring arrives with Holy Week, limonada and Las Cabezadas; and summer stretches the evenings long into the night.

Flavours and Gastronomy

León is also a city to be savoured at the table. Its cuisine is born from a rich and powerful larder, shaped by the Way of St James, the kitchens of palaces and monasteries, local fairs, the mountains and the plateau. Added to this tradition is a strong wine culture, with the wines of the León Designation of Origin and nearby wineries that complete the experience.

The markets help reveal this close relationship with local produce. The one in Plaza Mayor preserves a tradition dating back to medieval times, while the Mercado del Conde showcases everyday provisions beneath the watchful presence of the Palacio del Conde Luna.

León for tapas

If there is one tradition that defines the city, it is the art of tapeo. In the Barrio Húmedo and

Calle del Barrio Húmedo with the Cathedral in the background





Typical León tapas and cheeses for a happy ending



the Barrio Romántico, although not exclusively there, tapas naturally accompany a glass of wine or a beer. Morcilla, cecina, cured meats, potatoes, meats, pickles, cheeses, roasted peppers from El Bierzo, Sahagún leeks, trout, seasonal mushrooms and tortillas guisadas all appear on bar counters where flavour matters far more than size.

This miniature cuisine is a true hallmark of local identity. Many bars are known almost as much for their tapa as for their own name. The best approach is simply to look around, choose and taste.

Gastronomic León

León's cuisine also offers more substantial dishes: cocido maragato, botillo del Bierzo, La Bañeza beans, garlic soups, morcilla, cecina, cheeses and sweet specialities such as nicanores de Boñar and mantecadas de Astorga. Alongside these classics, the city also embraces contemporary cuisine and renowned restaurants such as Cocinandos and Pablo, proving that León's larder can combine tradition with a modern perspective.

León is a city to return to: for its monuments, its cuisine, its cultural life and for that simple way of enjoying what truly matters.



Navia Porcía Lands

The Asturias That Invites You to Slow Down

Text: Editorial Team – **Photography:** Navia Porcía

Port of Vega



Ancient heritage, the unspoilt Cantabrian Sea, gastronomy with a strong identity and pristine nature come together in a land that proudly preserves the authenticity of Asturias' lesser-known side. Discover it for yourself..



There are places you visit and others that stay with you. Western Asturias belongs firmly to the latter. Far from the busiest routes, far from the great tourist destinations and far from the pace of everyday life, this corner of northern Spain has managed to preserve what has become increasingly valuable today: authenticity, landscape, heritage and a way of life closely connected to its surroundings.

It is a land where the sea and the mountains are separated by only a few kilometres, where history appears around every corner and where time seems to move at a gentler pace. Travelling through the Navia Porcía Lands means discovering a mosaic of landscapes and traditions whose greatest attractions are nature, heritage and local customs.

Colours that define a land and leave their mark

Slate black dominates the landscape. The region's greatest archaeological treasure lies in its castros, the fortified settlements where its earliest inhabitants once lived, scattered across every valley. The Castro of Coaña impresses with its scale and its remarkable state of preservation after two thousand years. Built in dark slate, it is a place where history can still be felt. Keep exploring, because that same history also lives on in Mohías, Pendia and Chao Samartín.

In more recent centuries, people also built with black slate. In every village, the roofs covering the houses share the same colour; slate supports them, protects them and keeps them standing. Villages such as Argul and San Esteban de los Buitres are living examples of this striking black architecture. Yet throughout the region this tradition still waits to be discovered. The land is ready to welcome you, but it is best explored without haste.

Slate also tells the story of its people, including those who left for the Americas at the beginning of the twentieth century in search of a better life. Their departure left a lasting mark on many villages, where they financed public and private buildings inspired by architectural styles far removed from local tradition. Following the Indianos Route through Boal, or simply strolling around Navia, reveals another fascinating chapter of this heritage.

A landscape washed in green. From the viewpoint at Pico Villayón, everything within sight is green. It is the vivid green of spring, but one that accompanies the traveller throughout the year. Valleys and mountainsides are covered with oak, chestnut, birch and pine forests, together with strawberry trees, hawthorn, cork oaks, heather and gorse, interspersed with meadows and maize fields. Every season has its own shade: brilliant in spring, softer in summer, edged with ochres in autumn and more subdued during winter. Whether wal-

king, cycling or simply stopping at one of the many picnic areas, pause for a moment and you will find yourself surrounded by green.

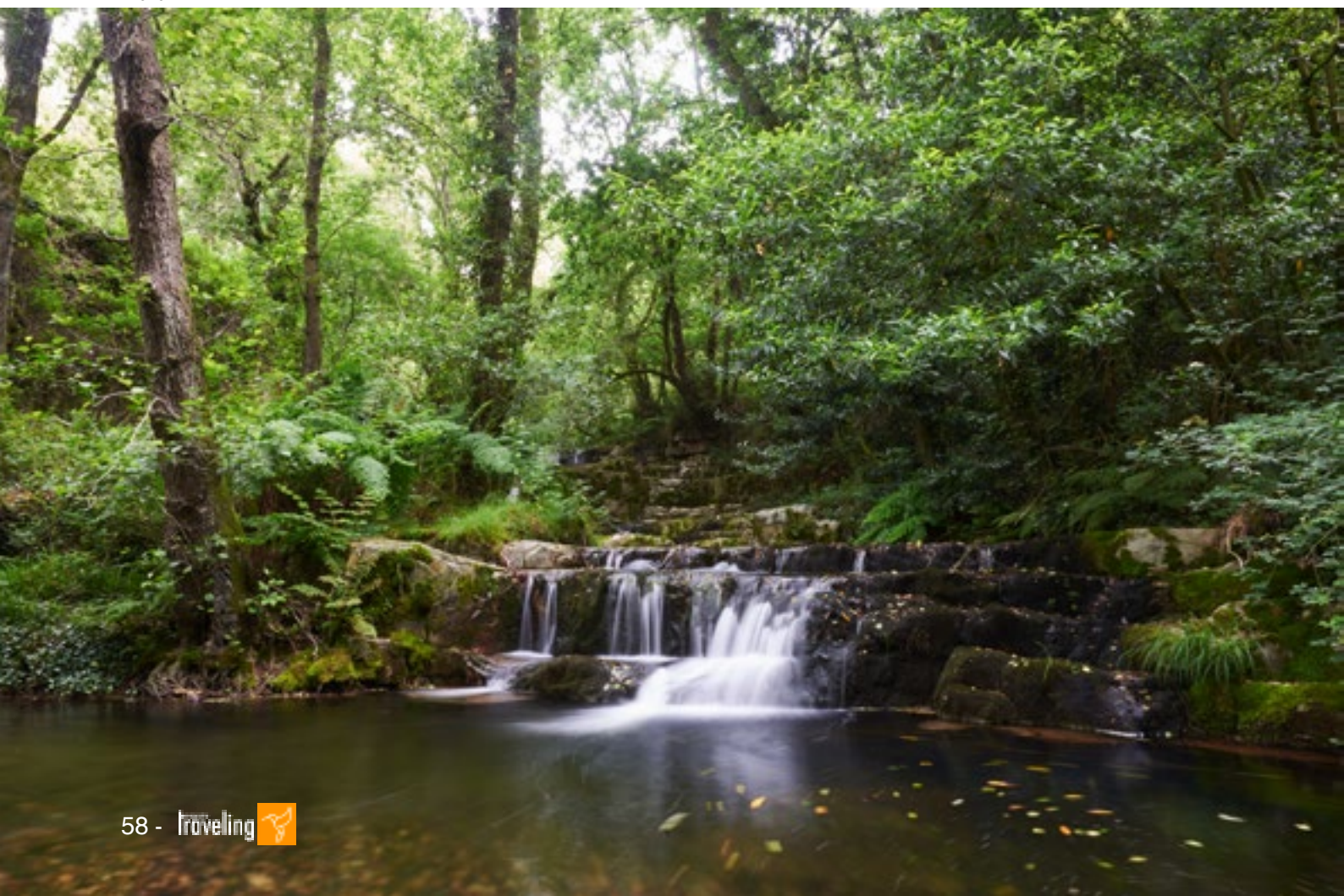
Blue water. Nature takes on another dimension whenever water comes into view.

Here the Cantabrian Sea meets and embraces the Navia and Porcía rivers, blending the many shades of blue that define the region. Water is everywhere. It sustained the ancient hillfort communities and continues to shape the lives of those who live here today. Always water. Always blue.

From the coast, the Porcía Valley stretches inland towards the mountains, while the Navia Valley climbs steadily until the river reaches its source in neighbouring Galicia. There are free-flowing waters that never stop, still waters held in the three reservoirs created during the twentieth century and now fully integrated into the landscape, and the vertical waters of the waterfalls at Oneta and Penadecabras.

Meanwhile, along the coast, the Cantabrian crashes against dramatic cliffs sculpted from slate and sandstone. From these rocky headlands, natural balconies overlook a deep blue sea that has always been the source of life for villages such as Puerto de Vega, Ortiguera, Viavélez and Tapia.

Illano





Villayón

Tapia de Casariego



NAVIA PORCÍA

Fishing harbours, riverside mills, fishing boats, surfing championships and open-water races along the estuary... Always water. Always blue.

A whole world of browns is scattered across every village and every valley. Autumn transforms the landscape once a year, and it is hard not to surrender to its beauty. Every tree dresses itself in its own shade of brown, creating a spectacle as painterly as it is unrepeatable, for by the following day the colours will already have changed.

Boal



El Franco





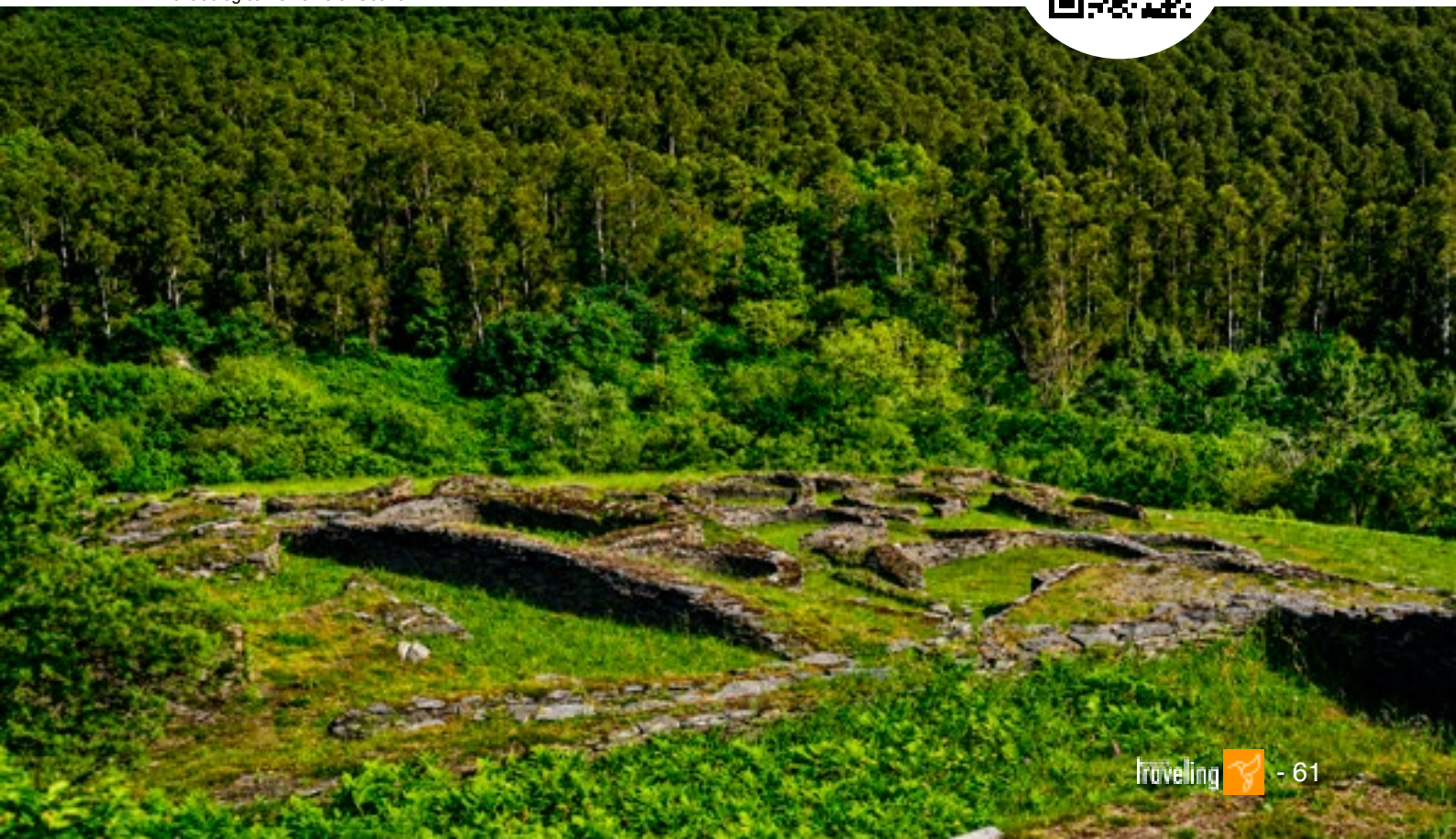
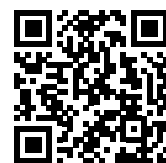
Grandas of Salime

Every colour can be found along the Camino de Santiago. Along the Caminos, in the plural. Whether following the coast or heading inland, the pilgrimage routes to Santiago all pass through these lands. If the Camino Primitivo was the first pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela, then its first royal pilgrim, King Alfonso II, travelled through Grandas de Salime, the last stage before entering Galicia at A Fonsagrada. Meanwhile, the Northern Coastal Way passes through Navia, Coaña, El Franco and Tapia de Casariego.

Archaeological remains of Coaña

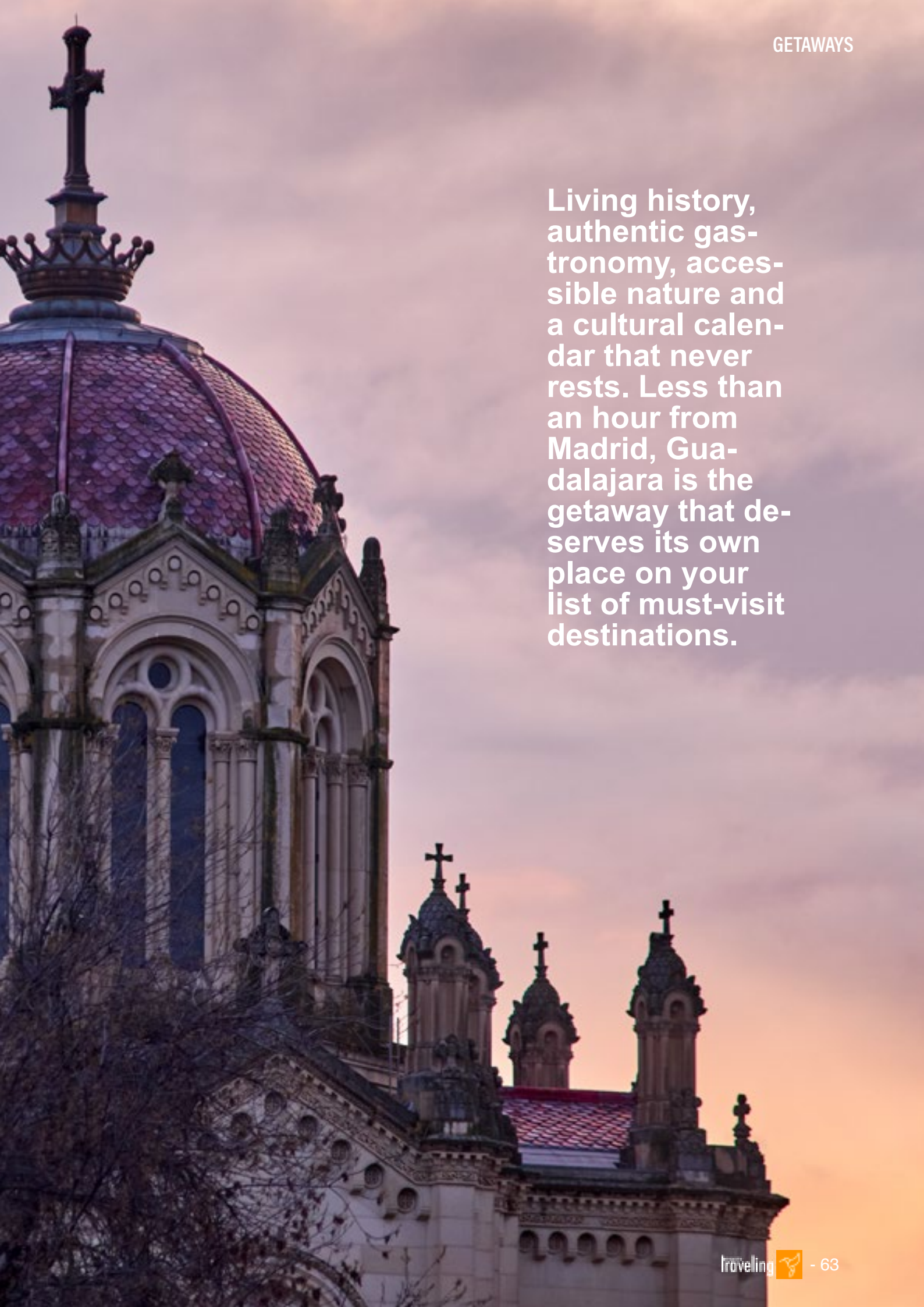


Tierras del
Navia-Porcía



Guadalajara: the city that has it all, at any time of year

Text: Helena Carazo Ruiz – helenacarazo@hotmail.es



Living history, authentic gastronomy, accessible nature and a cultural calendar that never rests. Less than an hour from Madrid, Guadalajara is the getaway that deserves its own place on your list of must-visit destinations.

Guadalajara is close, welcoming and full of layers waiting to be discovered. The capital of La Alcarria offers travellers a combination that is not always easy to find: first-class historical heritage, cultural events of international standing, gastronomy deeply rooted in the land and natural spaces that invite you to slow down. All this in a city that can be explored on foot, without haste and away from the crowds.

A Heritage That Tells Its Own Story

Walking through the streets of Guadalajara means stepping into centuries of history. The majestic Palacio del Infantado, the city's undisputed emblem, welcomes visitors with its spectacular diamond-point façade and the grandeur of its Patio de los Leones, where late Gothic architecture embraces the first glimpses of the Renaissance. Commissioned at the end of the 15th century by the second Duke of the Infantado as a stone declaration of his family's supremacy, it is now one of the great landmarks of Spanish civil architecture.

Very close by, other treasures of equal value await. The Luis de Lucena Chapel, known as Guadalajara's small Sistine Chapel, preserves

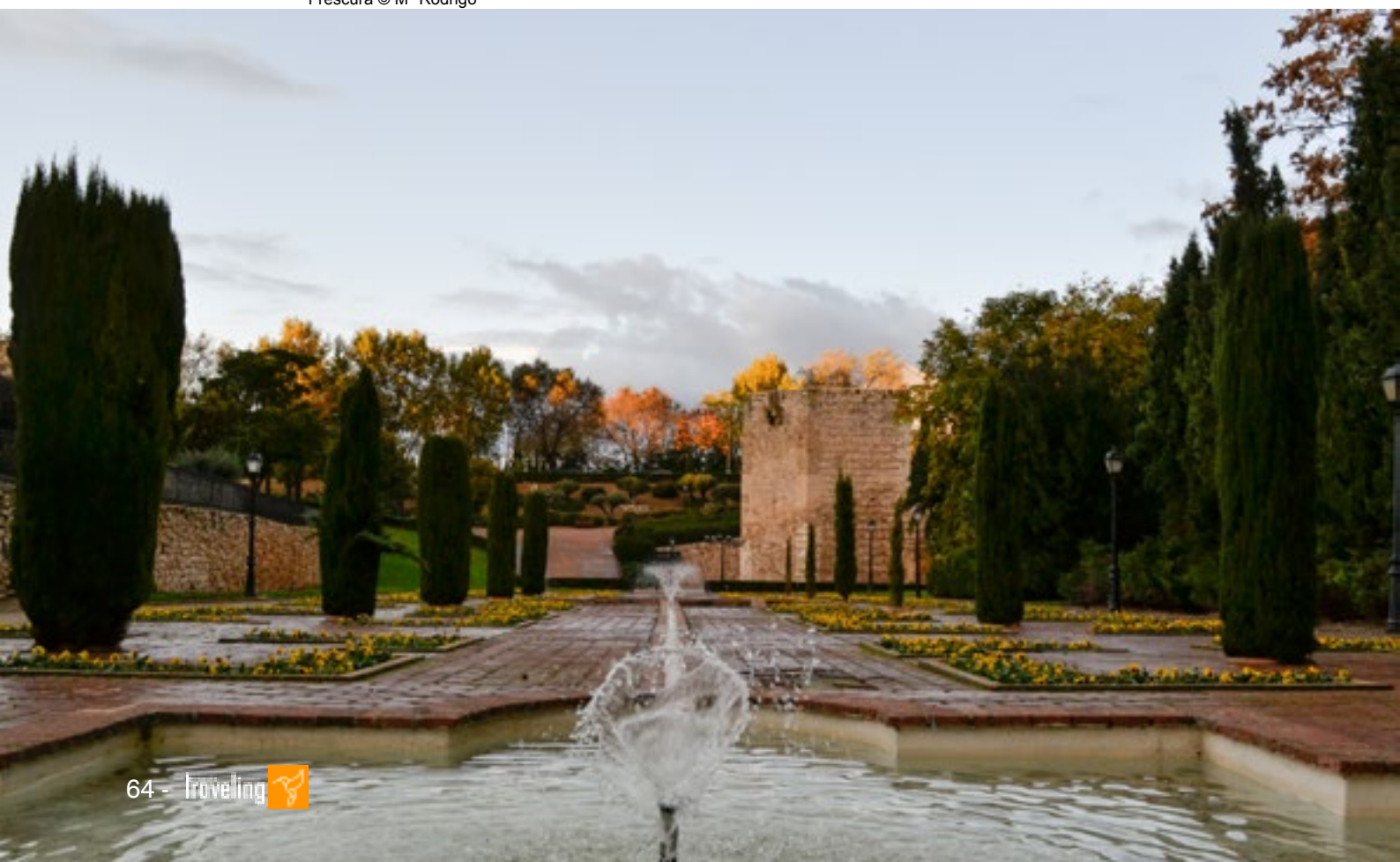
an extraordinary iconographic programme painted by the Italian artists Pietro Morone and Pietro de Montalbergo. The fascinating Mendoza family Ducal Crypt, located beneath the altar of a former Templar church, was built in the likeness of the Royal Pantheon at El Escorial. The Palace of Antonio de Mendoza represents one of the earliest examples of Renaissance architecture in Castile, while the Palacio de la Cotilla houses a truly unique jewel: the Chinese Salon, decorated with rice-paper wallpaper from the workshops of the Qing dynasty, of which very few comparable examples survive anywhere in the Western world. This journey through the city's heritage concludes at the San Diego de Alcalá Foundation, home to the Pantheon of the Countess of Vega del Pozo, a Byzantine-style masterpiece considered one of the most impressive private pantheons in the world thanks to the exceptional quality of its materials..

A Cultural Calendar All Year Round

Guadalajara is a vibrant city that transforms culture into a multi-sensory experience, with a festive calendar that leaves no season without a remarkable event to enjoy.

Every June, it becomes the international capital

Frescura © Mª Rodrigo





Palacio del Infantado © Adrián Loej

Before or after discovering its heritage, Guadalajara invites visitors to experience culture 365 days a year, with a calendar that turns every season into an opportunity to enjoy unique experiences.

Maratón de cuentos © Emilio Sanz



of storytelling thanks to its legendary Maratón de Cuentos. Since 1992, this festival, declared of Regional Tourist Interest, has filled the Palacio del Infantado, its squares and its most iconic corners for more than forty-eight uninterrupted hours. Storytellers from around the world, local residents and visitors share tales in an atmosphere that turns the entire city into one vast stage. A gathering that long ago ceased to be merely a cultural event and became one of Guadalajara's defining symbols.

With the arrival of summer, music takes centre stage with the Solsticio Folk festival, an essential event for lovers of tradition, folklore and popular culture. Crafts, gastronomy, concerts and outdoor activities create a festive atmosphere that captivates visitors of all ages.

GUADALAJARA

Autumn, meanwhile, has its own special magic. The Jornadas Mendocinas celebrate the legacy of the lineage that shaped the city as we know it today. And on the eve of All Saints' Day comes the Tenorio Mendocino, one of the most unique and moving cultural experiences in central Spain. The theatre group Gentes de Guadalajara transforms the historic quarter into a living stage: cobbled streets, palace courtyards and medieval corners become the natural setting for an open-air performance that blends literature, heritage and emotion. The legend of Don Juan Tenorio takes on a different dimension here, more intimate and more powerful, as the actors perform among walls that have witnessed centuries of history. It is an evening that those who experience it rarely forget. The Ancient Music series and Guadalajara by Candlelight complete this cultural autumn programme with events that turn monuments and squares into scenes of extraordinary beauty.

Nature at the Heart of the City

Guadalajara is also a surprisingly green city. Its extensive network of parks and gardens places it among the Spanish provincial capitals with the highest proportion of natural spaces per inhabitant. Parque de la Concordia, Parque de San Roque—with its collection of remarkable trees—or the banks of the Henares River invite visitors



Tomás Beldad Park

The Tenorio Mendocino





to stroll, relax and reconnect with nature without leaving the city. The Municipal Zoo, a benchmark for the recovery of native wildlife, is one of the favourite attractions for visiting families.

Gastronomy with a Taste of the Land

No trip to Guadalajara would be complete without exploring its cuisine. An authentic gastronomy with deep roots, combining the best of Castilian recipes with the privileged larder of La Alcarria. Migas alcarreñas, wild asparagus, pulses and stews, Sierra beef, lamb and kid goat flavoured with el breve—the traditional aromatic herb seasoning of this land—come together to create a generous and memorable table.

The region's pastry tradition, inherited from Arab culture, has its most recognisable ambassador in the bizcocho borracho: moist, aromatic, soaked in a syrup infused with liqueur and capable of delighting from the very first bite. Alongside it are La Alcarria honey, protected by a Designation of Origin and enjoying international recognition, as well as a new generation of products—craft beers, acclaimed wines, cheeses and artisan jams—that enrich a local larder in constant evolution.

The city's restaurants reflect this moment: establishments that work with local produce, carefully respecting the origin of each ingredient and offering both deeply rooted traditional cuisine and creative interpretations that renew heritage without betraying it. And for those who prefer a more informal experience, enjoying tapas in Guadalajara is an attraction in itself: Alcarria hospitality, good local wine and small bites that capture the character of the city on every table..

A City That Leaves Its Mark

Comfortable, accessible, easy to explore on foot and full of charm, Guadalajara is the perfect destination for those seeking a different kind of getaway. A city where every street tells a story, every monument holds a secret and every visit invariably leaves you wanting to return..

**Because some places surprise you once.
Guadalajara surprises you every time.**



Liquor-Soaked Sponge Cake





Eco destinations

Mértola

The Guadiana in a Whisper

Text: Diego Ruiz Gil – **Photography:** Archive

Nature, History and Slow Living in the Most Borderland Alentejo

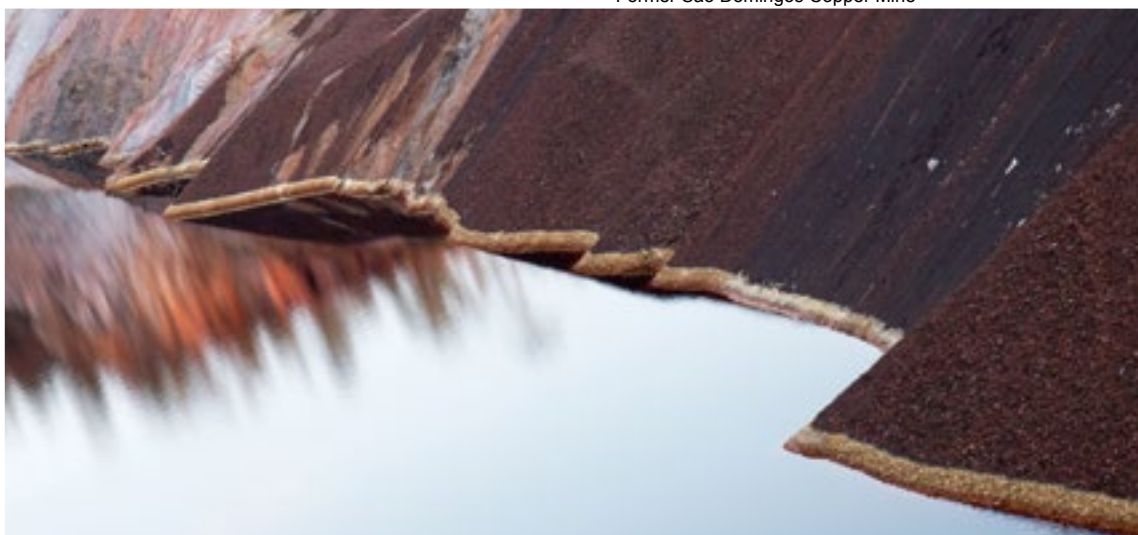
Mértola rises on a hill in the Lower Alentejo, with the Guadiana River at its feet. The image is simple, yet it explains the essence of the place. For centuries, the river gave life to the village: it was a route, a border, a river port and a commercial pathway towards southern Portugal. Even today, it is difficult to understand this corner of the Alentejo without first looking towards the Guadiana, which appears broad or tightly enclosed depending on the stretch, shaping the landscape and giving meaning to much of its history.

We are in the district of Beja, in one of the quietest areas of southern Portugal, within the Parque Natural do Vale do Guadiana. This protected area covers almost 70,000 hectares and extends across parts of the municipalities of Mértola and Serpa, following the middle course of the river. It is not a park of towering mountains or dense forests. Its appeal lies elsewhere: gentle hills, open plains, ravines, holm oak groves, Mediterranean scrubland, dirt tracks and a Guadiana that appears and disappears between the rocks.

The landscape perfectly reflects the understated character of the inland Alentejo: pale earth, vast horizons, small villages and a light that changes dramatically throughout the day. In summer, the river takes centre stage. The river beaches and nearby bathing areas make it far more than a feature of the scenery: it becomes a place for relaxation and a simple way of enjoying the landscape. The itinerary naturally adapts to the rhythm of the surroundings: in the morning, the village and the natural park; during the hottest hours, the water; in the afternoon, once again, the whitewashed streets, viewpoints and gastronomy.



Former São Domingos Copper Mine





Aerial view of the river beach and the former São Domingos copper mine.

One of the best-known spots in the park is Pulo do Lobo, where the Guadiana narrows and plunges between the rocks. It does not need to be presented as a spectacular waterfall. Its appeal lies in the power of the landscape and in the way the water has carved its path over centuries. Here, the character of this part of the Alentejo becomes clearer: open, dry, austere and deeply connected to the river.

The village is not defined by nature alone. It combines landscape, history and everyday life in a way that feels entirely natural. It is explored by climbing and descending narrow streets, among whitewashed façades, small squares, simple doorways and viewpoints overlooking the Guadiana. The main church preserves the memory of the former mosque on which it was built, while traces of other eras remain visible in the stone, the urban layout and that strategic position, always keeping watch over the river.

The Islamic legacy is essential to understanding the town. The Mértola Museum is not confined to a single building, but operates as a network of small sites spread throughout the village and municipality. These include spaces dedicated to Islamic art, the Roman house, the early Christian basilica, sacred art, the former mosque converted into the main church, the citadel, weaving and metalwork. This dispersed museum concept fits perfectly with the character of the place: rather than separating the exhibits from the town, it encourages visitors to discover Mértola by walking through it.

Clock Tower



As an eco-destination, this corner of the Lower Alentejo impresses through its balanced scale. It does not need major infrastructure or any artificial staging. It has a small village, a river, a natural park, well-interpreted heritage and paths that allow visitors to approach the surroundings without turning everything into a spectacle. The journey can be enjoyed simply: staying in rural houses, exploring the historic centre on foot, visiting some of the museum sites, walking down to the Guadiana and ending the day with an Alentejo dinner.

This simplicity does not mean there is little to do. Rather, it suggests that there is no need to fill every hour. The place invites you to wander down towards the river, explore an archaeological site, follow a trail or pause in a square at sunset. Some destinations are quickly consumed because they reveal everything at once. Here, the opposite happens: travellers discover the place gradually.

The surrounding area is also particularly appealing for birdwatching and for those seeking Mediterranean landscapes. You do not need to be an expert to appreciate the value of this territory. The river, streams, valleys, scrubland, open fields and rural life combine to create a landscape that is unmistakably southern Portuguese. It is best explored by understanding that its attraction lies in what it already is, rather than in trying to resemble other, more famous destinations.

The gastronomy perfectly complements the journey. In the Lower Alentejo, bread, olive oil, aromatic herbs, cheese, cured meats, porco preto and a cuisine rooted in rural traditions take centre stage. On the table, you may find an açorda à alentejana, simple and fragrant; migas with pork; ensopado de borrego; cozido de grão or, during the warmer months, an Alentejo-style gaspacho. Alongside the Guadiana, river fish recipes, caldeiradas and seasonal game dishes also have their place.

The visit can easily be enjoyed over two or three days. The first is devoted to the village: the church, some of the museum sites, the streets and the viewpoints. The second to the Parque Natural do Vale do Guadiana, Pulo do Lobo and a stretch of the river. And a third, if time allows, simply to slow down: return to a favourite street, sit in the shade, visit a river beach or let the afternoon light fall over the whitewashed houses.

This is not a destination that seeks to impress at first sight. Its appeal lies in the relationship between the village and the Guadiana, in the whitewashed streets, the open landscape of the natural park and that discreet way of belonging to the land. Mértola does not try to be more than it is. And perhaps that is precisely why it stays in the memory.

Church of Our Lady of the Annunciation





La Sagrada Familia

A Living Laboratory of Architecture

Text: Rosario Alonso - **Photography:** Rosario Alonso and Archive photographic

Entering the Sagrada Família is not simply a matter of arriving, raising your camera and leaving. Before it, it is worth pausing for a moment, accepting the noise of Barcelona, the movement of groups, the impatience of queues, and looking. Truly looking. Because Antoni Gaudí's great masterpiece is not merely a temple or a tourist icon. It is a lesson in architecture written over almost a century and a half, a work that has grown alongside the city and that, even today, forces us to ask what it means to build something designed to endure.

The story began on 19 March 1882, when the foundation stone of the temple was laid, following the initial project by architect Francisco de Paula del Villar. A year later, in 1883, Antoni Gaudí took over the direction of the work and completely transformed its destiny. What could have been just another Neo-Gothic church became an incomparable architectural creation, born from faith, from the observation of nature and from an almost artisanal understanding of construction. The basilica itself recalls that five generations have witnessed the progress of the temple ever since, more than 140 years after that first stone was placed.

Gaudí did not conceive the Sagrada Família as an isolated monument. He imagined it as a living organism. Its columns are not merely supports: they branch out like tree trunks reaching towards the light. Its vaults do not weigh downwards; they rise. Its façades do not simply decorate; they tell stories. Everything appears to follow an inner logic, as though the building had emerged from a natural law rather than from a drawing board. The architect studied complex geometries, ruled surfaces, hyperboloids, paraboloids and structural solutions that allowed the space to open up and soar while maintaining perfect balance. The modernity of the Sagrada Família does not lie in looking modern, but in having been modern from within.

This is perhaps one of its greatest paradoxes. The Sagrada Família is a deeply ancient work in its ambition

and, at the same time, radically contemporary in its language. Ancient because it belongs to the tradition of Europe's great temples, those buildings conceived not for a single generation but for many. Contemporary because it has continued to incorporate new techniques, calculation methods, construction systems and a way of organising the work that bears little resemblance to Gaudí's era. Yet the essential question remains unchanged: how do you continue a work without betraying its spirit?

The Nativity Facade, begun during Gaudí's lifetime, preserves that initial force of a work conceived almost as a hymn carved in stone. It is the part closest to his hand and his artistic sensibility. Here, architecture seems to grow rather than be composed. Figures, animals, plants, religious symbols and details inspired by nature create a living, exuberant surface, at times almost overflowing with detail. There is no academic coldness. Instead, there is narrative, devotion and craftsmanship. Together with the crypt, this facade forms part of the elements of the Sagrada Família included in UNESCO's inscription of the "Works of Antoni Gaudí" World Heritage Site.

The Passion Facade is entirely different: more austere, more stripped back, defined by harsh lines and restrained expression. Its language has provoked contrasting opinions, as has almost every stage in the history of the temple. Yet this tension is also part of the Sagrada Família itself. This is not a building frozen at a particular moment in time, but a work that has continued to live on after its creator's death.

Sculpture of the Coronation of Mary



Sculptures on the Passion Facade



LA SAGRADA FAMILIA

And every living work provokes debate. Architecture, when it truly matters, rarely leaves anyone indifferent.

Gaudí died on 10 June 1926, after being struck by a tram in Barcelona. He was 73 years old. His death, so often retold, still carries something of a parable: the architect who had devoted his final years to the temple was initially mistaken for a beggar. He was buried in the crypt of the Sagrada Família, where his work remained open, unfinished and awaiting those who would continue it. In 2026, the centenary of his death is commemorated, turning the year into a particularly symbolic moment for Barcelona and for the basilica.

This symbolism is reinforced by the Tower of Jesus Christ, the central and highest tower of the entire complex. The Sagrada Família has set its final height at 172.5 metres, crowned by a four-armed cross. The inauguration and blessing of the tower on 10 June 2026 coincides with the centenary of Gaudí's death. This is no minor detail: the temple thus reaches one of the most eagerly awaited milestones in its long construction and once again reshapes Barcelona's skyline.

It is worth pausing to consider that height. Gaudí did not want his temple to rise above Montjuïc mountain.



Nativity Facade

Passion Facade



For him, architecture should not compete with creation. This idea, which today may sound almost naïve in an age of skyscrapers, rankings and displays of power, contains a lesson in humility. The Sagrada Família rises extraordinarily high, but it does not seek to dominate everything around it. It wants to be a landmark, not an imposition. It aims to draw the gaze upwards, not overwhelm the city that surrounds it.

And here another essential issue emerges: the relationship between the basilica and Barcelona. The Sagrada Família was born in a very different setting, in the former municipality of Sant Martí de Provençals, when the Eixample was still shaping its future. Over time, the temple has become surrounded by the modern city: homes, shops, traffic, visitors, residents and urban debates. Today, it is impossible to discuss the Sagrada Família without also addressing tourism pressure, public space, mobility and the challenge of coexistence with the neighbourhood.

But the Sagrada Família also belongs firmly within the worlds of Design and Architecture. It is not merely a masterpiece to be admired from afar. It is a building in use, under construction and subject to debate. It is heritage, but also everyday city life. It is a religious symbol, but also a cultural icon. It is a universal postcard, yet at the same time a concrete urban challenge, involving streets, residents, access routes and decisions still to be made. True architecture always ends up touching daily life.

The Glory Facade, still under development, concentrates much of this debate. Conceived as the main entrance to the temple, it is intended to complete the great theological and architectural narrative of the basilica. Yet its development involves complex urban issues, particularly in the immediate surroundings. The Sagrada Família is not completed on paper; it is completed within a real city. And that distinction is fundamental.



Tower of Jesus crowned by the cross

The Sagrada Família cannot be understood in a hurry. You have to look upwards and allow the light to glide across the columns and bring order to the space.





Interior of the Sagrada Família

Every project that aspires to greatness must also confront the consequences of its own creation.

What is remarkable is that, despite all the controversy, the Sagrada Família continues to generate an emotion that is difficult to explain. Its interior preserves one of the most powerful spatial experiences in contemporary European architecture. Upon entering, visitors do not feel as though they are stepping into a dark church, but rather into a luminous forest. Light passes through the stained-glass windows and colours the stone with an intensity that changes throughout the day. There are colder mornings, golden afternoons, moments when the space appears tinted with blue, green, orange or red. Gaudí understood that light was not a decorative addition, but a material of architecture itself.

He also understood the value of detail. In an age that tends to simplify everything, the Sagrada Família recalls the dignity of slow craftsmanship. Behind every stone, every sculptural element and every technical solution lies a chain of different trades. Architects, site managers, sculptors, model makers, artisans, engineers and construction workers have all extended a project that no longer belongs to a single hand. This collective continuity does not diminish Gaudí's role; on the contrary, it confirms the power of his vision. Only great ideas allow others to continue working on them without exhausting their possibilities.

The Sagrada Família also raises an uncomfortable yet beautiful question: when is a work of architecture truly

finished? Some buildings are inaugurated and then remain closed chapters. This one, however, has made its own construction part of its identity. For decades, Barcelona has lived alongside cranes, scaffolding, workshops and new phases of work. Many people have known it only as an unfinished building. For some, this condition was part of its mystery. For others, it represented an unresolved obligation. In any case, the progress of the central towers marks the end of one stage and opens another perspective: that of a Sagrada Família closer to its architectural completion, although work still remains.

Its status as an expiatory temple should not be forgotten. The Sagrada Família was not born as a state project or a royal commission. Its origins lie in private initiative and popular devotion. This foundation explains part of its uniqueness. Unlike many of Europe's great cathedrals, the Barcelona basilica belongs to a modernity that is urban, bourgeois and popular all at once. It does not look to the Middle Ages in order to copy them, but to reinterpret an ambition: the creation of a building capable of giving meaning to time.

Perhaps that is why it continues to fascinate even those who do not approach it from a religious perspective. The Sagrada Família speaks of architecture, beauty, patience, transmission and limits. It speaks of a long sense of time that our era barely knows how to embrace. Today, almost everything is born with an expiry date; the basilica, by contrast, reminds us that some works require generations. Not because of inefficiency, but because their scale belongs to another way of understanding life.

In today's Barcelona, a city often accelerated, debated and watched by the world, the Sagrada Família maintains a strange authority. It is not a silent authority, because the temple attracts crowds. But it is a profound one. It stands above the noise, compelling people to look upwards. Its silhouette has become part of the city's visual memory, alongside the sea, the mountains, the Eixample and the modernist chimneys. Yet unlike other icons, it cannot be reduced to a single image. The more you look, the more questions it raises.

That is why the Sagrada Família is not merely a postcard of Barcelona, but the narrative of a great story of design, architecture and culture. It is a work in which the past is not preserved as something dead, but kept alive. Where tradition does not prevent innovation. Where craftsmanship coexists with technology. Where faith becomes structure, nature becomes geometry and the city becomes an unavoidable stage.

Gaudí left behind an unfinished work, but not a silent one. The Sagrada Família continues to speak. It speaks through its façades, its columns, its towers and that interior light that seems to come from somewhere before architecture itself. In 2026, as the centenary of his death once again places it at the centre of international attention, it is worth remembering that the importance of the Sagrada Família lies not only in its progress towards completion, but in its enduring ability to teach us how to look.



Detail of the Passion Facade





48

Hours in Leuven

The Belgian city where history still walks around with a student backpack

Text: Rosario Alonso - Photos: Visit Flanders

Half an hour from Brussels, this Flemish city preserves something many capitals have lost: the feeling that every stone belongs to a different age and, at the same time, still has a purpose today. Here, Gothic architecture is not merely decoration, the university is not just an institution and beer is not simply another tourist attraction. Everything is part of the same way of life: cultured, youthful, peaceful and deeply European.

The best way to explore Leuven in 48 hours is on foot, following the city's natural rhythm. First, the historic heart. Then, university Leuven. Later, the quieter neighbourhoods, gardens, contemporary art and that terrace culture that comes alive as evening falls.

Day 1. From Civic Gothic to the University Spirit

The journey should begin at Grote Markt, the city's great historic square. Standing before the visitor is the Town Hall, one of the finest examples of Brabantine Gothic architecture, with its intricate façade, almost like stone lacework, where saints, nobles and historical figures appear to watch over the city's daily life. It is not a building to be rushed past. It is worth admiring from a distance, then moving closer, losing oneself in its details and understanding why Leuven has succeeded in making its heritage part of everyday life.

Just a few steps away stands St Peter's Church, a collegiate church rather than a cathedral (there is only one other of its kind in Europe, in Alcalá de Henares), inseparable from the square and the city's historic identity. Its sober exterior contrasts with the artistic treasures inside, where the city recalls its connection with the Flemish masters and with a devotion that, for centuries, shaped the rhythm of time, trade and social life. Leuven was not only a university city; it was also a spiritual and artisan centre, a community built around its bells, guilds and squares.

From Grote Markt, the walk should continue towards Oude Markt, the city's most lively square.



College De Valk © Karl Bruninx

DAY 1

Grote Markt, the Gothic Town Hall and St Peter's Church open the route. Afterwards, cafés on Oude Markt and a visit to KU Leuven and its University Library.

Town Hall and Cathedral © KEV&CAM



LEUVEN

From Grote Markt, the walk should continue towards Oude Markt, the city's most vibrant square. It is known as "the longest bar in Europe" due to the concentration of cafés, bars and terraces that line it. The expression may sound exaggerated, but as evening falls it becomes easy to understand: students, locals and visitors fill the square with a natural atmosphere that feels nothing like a staged postcard. This is Leuven today: young and welcoming, gathered over a beer, yet still surrounded by historic façades.

Afterwards, it is worth heading into the university quarter. Leuven cannot be understood without its university. The present-day KU Leuven traces its origins back to 1425, when Pope Martin V authorised its foundation through a papal bull, with the support of the city and Duke John IV of Brabant. Six centuries later, that heritage continues to shape the city's character: streets filled with bicycles, bookshops, faculties, libraries, student residences and a young population that does not break with the past, but rather inhabits it. The essential stop is the University Library, on Ladeuzeplein.

Its imposing silhouette recalls a more recent and painful chapter: the destruction Leuven suffered during the twentieth century and the city's ability to rebuild without abandoning its memory. After the former library was destroyed during the First World War, it was rebuilt between 1921 and 1928 in a Neo-Renaissance style, with American funding. Climbing its tower, when visits allow, offers a complete view of the urban layout: rooftops, spires, squares, university courtyards and that welcoming scale that makes Leuven a true city.



Ladeuze (Library) © stad Leuven-Jan Crab





Grote Markt, © Stad Leuven-Jan Crab

DAY 2

The Great Beguinage opens the day with cobbled streets, canals and brick houses. Afterwards, the Botanical Garden, M Museum Leuven and, if time allows, Park Abbey. The day can end with a beer, an essential part of local life.

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The first day can end with a gentle return towards the centre. Unlike other monumental cities, Leuven does not come to life only during visiting hours. Its heritage continues at the table, in conversation and in the atmosphere of its cafés.

Day 2. Beguinages, Gardens and Leuven’s More Serene Side

The second day can begin in one of the most beautiful places in Flanders: the Great Beguinage or Groot Begijnhof. It lies to the south of the historic centre and is best reached on foot, without rushing, as if gradually leaving the bustle behind. The complex was recognised by UNESCO in 1998 alongside other Flemish beguinages, and it can also be visited freely.

The beguinage began as a community of religious women who lived outside the traditional monastic structures. In Leuven, it developed among cobbled streets, brick



Canals in the Beguinage © Karl Bruninx

Park Abbey © Van Park

houses, bridges and small canals that preserve an atmosphere of tranquillity, almost untouched. KU Leuven places its origins around 1232, beside the River Dijle, beyond the old city walls. The Church of St John the Baptist, whose construction began in 1305, is one of its oldest buildings.

Today, the Great Beguinage forms part of university and residential life, giving it a rare kind of beauty: it is not a frozen backdrop, but a lived-in historic neighbourhood, mainly home to university professors, and its church is where students can get married. This balance perfectly sums up Leuven. The city has not chosen between past and present. Instead, it has woven them together with harmony.

From there, the route can continue towards the Botanical Garden, the Kruidtuin. It is the oldest botanical garden in Belgium, created by the university in 1738 for medical students. The visit changes the pace of the journey: after Gothic architecture, squares and stone, come the greenhouses, medicinal plants, pathways and a domestic tranquillity that reveals another side of the city. Leuven was also a place of practical knowledge, applied science and the observation of nature.

The next natural stop is M Museum Leuven, the museum that brings together old masters and contemporary creation. Its collection ranges from historic artists to today's creators, offering a perspective that does not separate historical heritage from the



questions of the present. It is a highly suitable visit for understanding contemporary Leuven: a city that preserves, but does not simply preserve—it continues to create.

In the afternoon, if time allows, it is worth heading to Park Abbey (Park Abbey) on the outskirts. It is one of the best-preserved abbey complexes in Europe, surrounded by avenues, meadows, ponds and spaces connected with the Premonstratensian order. Its restored historic rooms, impressive library and cloister provide the perfect ending to a journey through a quieter, almost rural Leuven, where the landscape softens the historical density of the centre.

The return to the city should inevitably end with beer. Leuven is closely linked to Stella Artois, whose production in

the city dates back to 1926, although the local brewing tradition is associated with the former Den Hoorn brewery and several centuries of history. Beyond the brand itself, what matters is seeing how beer culture forms part of the urban fabric: not as a spectacle, but as a social custom passed down through generations.

In 48 hours, Leuven leaves a clear impression: it is a small city with unexpected depth. It has a Gothic town hall, churches, a university, a library, a beguinage, a botanical garden, a museum, an abbey and lively squares. Yet its true appeal lies in the continuity between all these places. Each stop seems to lead naturally to the next, without interruption. The Middle Ages meet the bicycle; the university meets the terrace; the silence of the beguinage meets student energy; beer meets conversation. Leuven is, ultimately, a city of human proportions. It is explored on foot, understood slowly and remembered for a long time.



Fonske Statue, a work by Jef Claerhout from 1975, represents Fons Sapientiae, a student filling his head with wisdom.

Travel Notes

HOW TO GET THERE

Flying to Brussels is undoubtedly the best option, with a journey of around 2 hours and 20 minutes from Madrid; once there, the train, with several departures every hour, is also ideal, as the journey from the airport takes less than 20 minutes.

ACCOMMODATION

PARK INN HOTEL, just a few steps from the Central Station, offers a centrally located stay only a few minutes from the historic centre. With 133 rooms, modern-style décor and ECO certification, it is undoubtedly a perfect choice for exploring the city and its surroundings.

WHERE TO EAT / DINE

Leuven's gastronomic scene is varied and of exceptional quality. Strongly focused on local produce and seasonality, it is masterfully paired with the city's extensive beer offering, where craft beers truly come into their own.

You can dine at GLORIA (Arnould Nobelstraat, 50), where the fusion of

Belgian and French cuisine with Mediterranean touches and sharing dishes introduces you to the rhythm of this Belgian city; or at DUDE KANTIEN (Haverlee), a Belgian brasserie set within the historic grounds of Arenberg Castle, a beautifully restored farmstead with a terrace and dining room offering contemporary cuisine based on the finest fresh, seasonal products from the region.

For dinner, BAR LOUIS (Grote Markt 2) comes highly recommended, not only for its brasserie and cocktail bar, but also for its location, right on the Market Square, with a terrace overlooking the city's magnificent Town Hall. From its exquisite menu, highlights include the Tuna Tataki and the Louis Burger. But without a doubt, HOP GASTRO-BAR (Vaartkom 1A) is a must for lovers of fine Belgian cuisine. Located in the Vaartkom harbour district, chef Bram Verbeken offers high-level gastronomy in a relaxed setting, with exceptional pairings of craft beers and natural wines. A set five-course menu, featuring local and seasonal produce, is an experience not to be missed.



Canillo

When the Mountains Dress for Summer

Trails, mountain valleys, Romanesque heritage and bee therapy in a parish that changes its character when the snow disappears.

Text and photos: Jose A. Muñoz



ANDORRA

Canillo is often imagined dressed for winter, with Grandvalira, ski lifts and snow-covered slopes. But when the white blanket disappears, the parish changes its pace and reveals another side: greener, more open and more closely connected to the mountains. Summer here does not have the rush of the great passing places. Instead, it invites visitors to walk, observe, breathe and let the Pyrenees set the rhythm of the day.

The foundation lies in a landscape of small villages, traditional bordas, roads that wind upwards and downwards, and mountains that are always present. Canillo makes it possible to combine gentle activities with more adventurous experiences, family-friendly routes with longer trails, viewpoints with Romanesque heritage and experiences linked to traditional crafts. There is no need to choose between nature and culture. In this part of Andorra, one naturally leads to the other.

There is also a sense of human scale that enhances the journey. Everything is relatively close, yet nothing feels crowded. You can start the morning in a cool valley, pause afterwards in front of a small stone church, enjoy a leisurely lunch and end the afternoon facing an open landscape, with the sound of water nearby and the light slowly falling across the slopes. This is perhaps Canillo's greatest luxury in summer: simplicity.

Ntra. Sra. de Meritxell





El puente tibetano, suspendido entre montañas, en el centro una plataforma para hacer puenting

The Tibetan Bridge and Roc del Quer Viewpoint

Before reaching the valleys, Canillo offers two stops that perfectly illustrate its elevated way of experiencing the landscape. The Tibetan Bridge, in the Vall del Riu at over 1,875 metres above sea level, spans the mountainside on a suspended walkway 603 metres long and barely one metre wide. At its highest point, it stands 158 metres above the ground. The figures are certainly impressive, but the real experience begins once you start walking. The valley lies far below, the air feels fresher and every step invites you to see the mountains from a different perspective.

Nearby, the Roc del Quer Viewpoint offers a different, shorter but equally memorable experience. Its platform projects over the void, with a partly transparent floor and sweeping views across Canillo and the surrounding slopes. You do not need a taste for extreme adventure to enjoy it. Simply step out, pause for a moment and understand why, in Andorra, the landscape is not only admired from below.

Vista del Mirador del Roc del Quer y al final la escultura de el Pensador o "El Gigante del Roc del Quer". Es obra del artista Miguel Ángel González



Incles Valley

The Incles Valley is one of the best reasons to visit Canillo in summer. Between El Tarter and Soldeu, it preserves a simple beauty: open meadows, traditional stone-and-timber mountain barns, clear streams and peaks that frame the horizon without overwhelming it. It is best visited early in the morning, when few people are around and the valley still holds that quiet first light that suits the mountains so well.

One of the most rewarding walks is the Obac d'Incles Trail, an easy family route of just under three kilometres. Following the river to the Baladosa Bridge, it offers an enjoyable walk without turning the outing into a sporting challenge. The path alternates between shaded stretches, gentle climbs and descents, interpretation panels on traditional mountain life and constant views of the water. Along the way, it tells the story of livestock farming, fishing, agriculture and even smuggling – a mountain economy that depended for centuries on making the most of every resource.

For those seeking a greater challenge, the valley is also the starting point for routes to mountain lakes and refuges such as Juclà, Siscaró and Cabana Sorda. These are more alpine walks, with greater elevation gain and full-day hikes that require proper preparation. That is one of Canillo's greatest strengths: one day you can enjoy a gentle family walk, the next set off on a far more demanding mountain adventure.



Verdes prados, pequeñas bordas, agua y caminos serpenteantes

Vista del Valle de Incles y el Pic d'Escobes. Con una altitud de 2.779 metros



Las abejas y el wellness

La naturaleza también puede entenderse desde lo pequeño. Auténtic Abelles Experiències, proyecto apícola andorrano fundado en 2018, abre al visitante el mundo de las colmenas. No se trata solo de comprar miel, sino de acercarse a las abejas, conocer cómo se organizan y comprender el papel que desempeñan en el equilibrio del entorno. Es una experiencia poco habitual: tumbarse sobre colmenas activas, con más de 80.000 abejas trabajando bajo una estructura protegida, y dejarse envolver por el calor y el zumbido constante. Después, la experiencia continúa con la inhalación del aire de la colmena a través de mascarillas individuales, cargado de aromas de cera, miel y propóleo. No es una actividad de apicultura, sino una pausa sensorial ligada al pequeño mundo de las abejas.

Relajación sobre colmenas de abejas



Románico de montaña

Canillo no termina en la naturaleza. Su patrimonio románico ayuda a leer el territorio con otra profundidad, como si cada iglesia marcara un punto de orientación en el paisaje. Sant Joan de Caselles, a la salida de Canillo en dirección a Francia, es una de las iglesias románicas mejor conservadas de Andorra, fechada entre los siglos XI y XII. Su arquitectura conserva ese lenguaje pirenaico de piedra, nave sencilla, cubierta de madera, ábside semicircular y campanario lombardo, hecho para resistir inviernos largos y permanecer en pie sin alardes. En el interior destacan una imagen románica de Cristo en estuco, restos de pintura mural y un retablo del siglo XVI de notable valor artístico.

En el núcleo de Canillo, Sant Serni mantiene también una presencia esencial. Su campanario, de 28,5 metros, es el más alto del país y recuerda la importancia visual y social que estas iglesias tuvieron durante siglos, cuando el templo era mucho más que un lugar de culto: era referencia, refugio y centro de la vida común. A partir de ahí, la parroquia va dejando otras pequeñas piezas de arquitectura religiosa, más discretas pero igualmente ligadas al paisaje, como Sant Miquel de Prats, Sant Bartomeu de Soldeu, Sant Jaume de Ransol o Sant Pere del Tarter. No siempre se imponen por tamaño; lo hacen por situación, por sobriedad y por esa forma tan andorrana de unir piedra, montaña y memoria.

Muy cerca, el Santuario de Meritxell añade otra capa a la identidad del país. El edificio actual, obra de Ricardo Bofill tras el incendio de 1972, convive con la memoria del antiguo santuario y con la devoción a la patrona de Andorra. Pero esa nueva construcción, por su peso simbólico y arquitectónico, merece contarse aparte, con el espacio que exige una obra llamada a hablar no solo de Canillo, sino de toda Andorra.

Santuario antiguo de Ntra. Sra. de Meritxell





Sant Joan de Caselles en Canillo

Gastronomía de montaña

La mesa completa esa lectura de Canillo. En las bordas y restaurantes aparecen platos de raíz pirenaica como la escudella, el trinxat, las carnes a la brasa, los embutidos, los quesos, las setas de temporada o la trucha. Sabores sencillos, de clima y despensa, que encajan bien después de una ruta por Incles, de una mañana en los miradores o de una jornada al aire libre.

El verano en Canillo tiene algo de volver a lo esencial. Caminar por Incles, cruzar un puente colgante, mirar desde el Roc del Quer, acercarse a las abejas, sentarse a comer en una borda o entrar en una iglesia románica son formas distintas de contar el mismo lugar. Cuando se apagan los remontes de invierno, aparece otra Andorra: más lenta, más verde y muy pegada a la vida de montaña.



Iglesia de San Miquel de Prats



Cala Luna

Luxury and Serene Calm

Tamarindo - Costa Rica

Text and photos: Jose A. Muñoz

Preferred
HOTELS & RESORTS

Cala Luna is located at Playa Langosta, just a few minutes from Tamarindo, Costa Rica, but it does not share Tamarindo's pace. That is one of its greatest advantages. The hotel is close enough to go out for dinner, take a walk or experience the local atmosphere, yet once you return everything changes: paths winding through vegetation, tropical gardens, rooms hidden among the trees and the sound of howler monkeys, sometimes heard even before they are seen. It does not feel like a place designed to observe nature from the outside, but rather to live alongside it at a gentler rhythm.

The hotel is part of Preferred Hotels & Resorts and embraces an idea of understated luxury, very much in tune with this coast when done well: comfort, a nearby beach, wellbeing and a direct connection with the landscape. The beach can be reached within a few minutes on foot, along trails shaded by trees. It is not a staged postcard. It is the Costa Rican Pacific: powerful tides, open stretches of sand, lush vegetation close by and those sunsets that alone explain why so many travellers end up extending the afternoon by the sea, barely checking the time. Here, the day unfolds naturally, between the sound of the waves and the warm shade of the trees.

Hotel Lobby





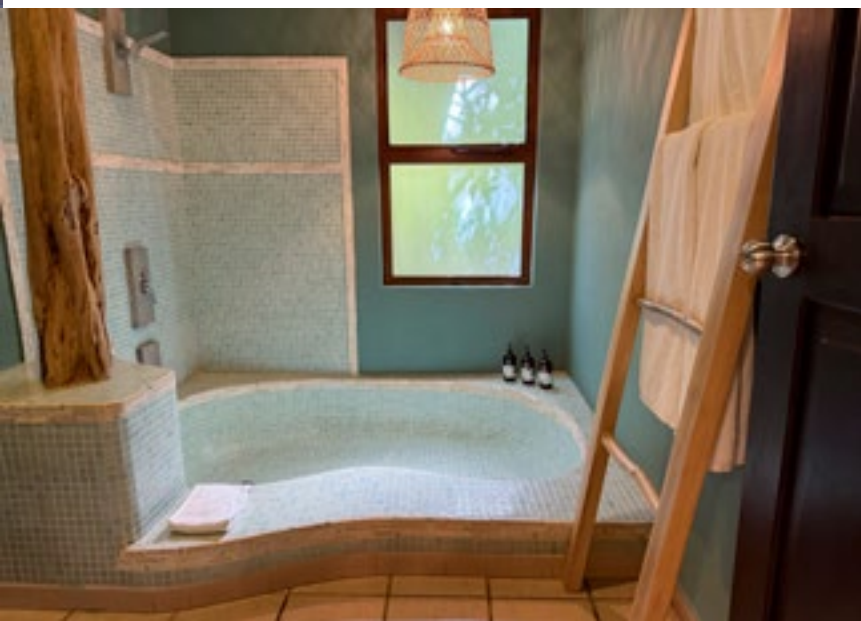
The villas feature private pools



Pathway to the beach



Superior Room and the immense bathtub, almost a swimming pool in the bathroom



Rooms and Villas

Cala Luna is not designed as a large beach resort. The rooms and villas are spread throughout gardens and low-rise buildings, surrounded by privacy and a remarkable sense of tranquillity. This layout greatly enhances the atmosphere of the stay. Guests do not step out of their room into an endless corridor, but rather onto a pathway filled with plants, birds, shade and, at times, monkeys moving through the treetops.

The superior and deluxe rooms follow a comfortable, bright style without excessive decoration. There are natural woods, light tones, terraces, outdoor spaces and spacious bathrooms. In some rooms, the bathtub is remarkably generous in size, almost like a small pool, becoming part of the experience: a place to slow down after a morning at the beach, an excursion or a warm day outdoors.

The villas are the hotel's most spacious offering. Available with two or three bedrooms, they are designed for families or groups of friends seeking greater independence. They feature living rooms, dining areas, fully equipped kitchens, outdoor terraces and private pools. They feel almost like a home within the hotel, combining the convenience of nearby services with a sense of complete privacy. In a destination like Guanacaste, where days can be shaped around the beach, the pool, relaxation and occasional outings, this freedom is especially appreciated.

CALA LUNA HOTEL

Wellbeing and Outdoor Living

Wellbeing at Cala Luna does not feel like an added extra simply to complete a brochure. It belongs naturally to the setting. The Lahari Wellness Center offers massages, body treatments, exfoliation rituals, aromatherapy, sound therapies, reiki, yoga sessions and more personalised experiences. Everything connects with the surroundings: the warmth, the vegetation, the sea air, the silence and that Costa Rican way of understanding rest without turning it into a rigid ceremony.

Mud treatments, oils, exfoliations and body rituals all reinforce this connection between the earth and the body. It is not just about leaving feeling relaxed, but about entering a different rhythm. At Cala Luna, wellbeing does not depend solely on a spa treatment room. It is also found in walking down to the beach, practising yoga, listening to the sounds of the garden in the morning or simply allowing time to pass without checking the clock.

The activities follow the same philosophy. The hotel can arrange yoga classes, wellness experiences, walks, water activities, local excursions and outings to discover more of Guanacaste. But the greatest appeal is that Cala Luna never forces guests to fill every hour. Plans are available, of course, but so is the freedom simply to stay. Sometimes, true luxury lies in having very little you need to do.



Horseback rides along the beach or relaxing in a natural pool at low Pacific tide



Table, Beach and Monkey

The gastronomy follows the same philosophy as the hotel. Cala Luna Origen works with fresh produce, organic ingredients and a close relationship with La Senda, the family farm connected to the project. The cuisine looks to the land without becoming overly formal: vegetables, herbs, tropical fruits, fish, light dishes, botanical cocktails and a way of eating that perfectly suits the climate. There is a clear commitment to the origin of the ingredients, but without turning every dish into a statement.

The nearby beach completes the experience. Playa Langosta has a quieter character than Tamarindo, perhaps with a less obvious beauty, but one that is more rewarding for those seeking silence, light and a slightly wilder Pacific coast. There, the sea does not always invite easy swimming; sometimes the tide dictates the rhythm, and at other times the waves do. But that is part of its appeal. It is not a beach designed around the hotel, but a landscape with a life of its own.



Delicious patacones with pico de gallo

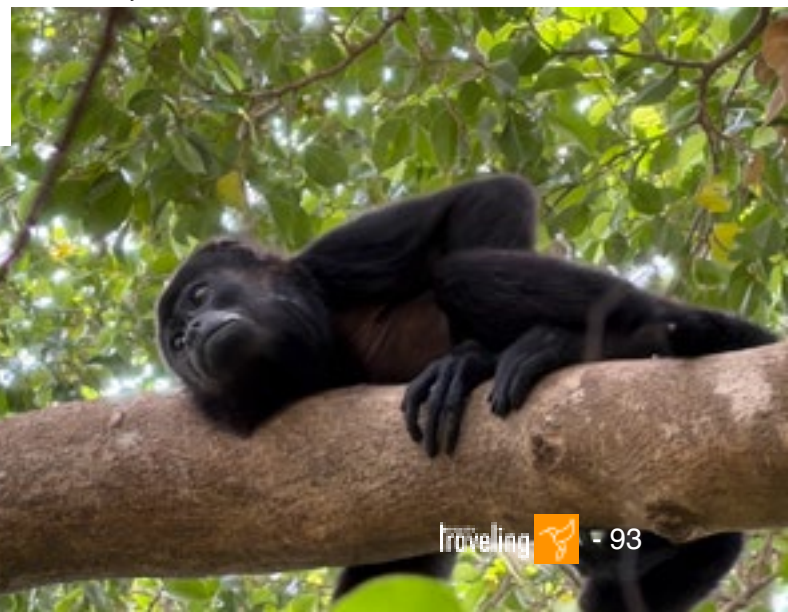
The monkeys are also part of the experience. They do not appear on demand, but when nature decides: they can be heard among the trees, crossing above the paths, pausing for a few seconds before disappearing again into the branches. For visitors arriving from abroad, their presence is surprising, but for the hotel it is simply part of everyday life. Cala Luna works so well because it does not try to imitate a luxury destination; instead, it allows nature to remain present.

In the end, what stays in the memory are the room, the pool, that almost exaggeratedly large bathtub, the spa, the sound of the oriental bowls, the beach and the unique sunsets, or the cuisine, entirely based on local produce from their La Senda farm, which we will explore in another issue. But also those unexpected moments when you look up and see monkeys moving through the treetops.



Room porch with hammock and swing

Howler monkeys



**Cala Luna
Hotel**



Catalonia Donosti Hotel

A Panoramic, Historic and Contemporary Hotel

Text and photos: Manena Munar – manena.munar@gmail.com

You enter through a modern building high on the hill and leave through a convent in the heart of the city. This strategic location is one of the many reasons to stay at this hotel, which proudly bears the prestigious Preferred Hotels & Resorts seal.



Hotel rooftop pool with views of La Concha





New façade of the Catalonia Donosti Hotel

The Catalonia Donosti plays with two eras: the contemporary architecture of its southern façade and the memory of the former 18th-century San Bartolomé convent, preserved in its northern façade. Between the two, the hotel creates an elegant interior with an English feel, where refined fabrics, earthy tones and subtle references to La Concha engage in dialogue with the historic walls.

The Catalonia Donosti Hotel is reached by climbing the slope of San Bartolomé hill. Once at the top, and after parking in the hotel's car park, guests enter a modern building that houses the southern façade of the Catalonia Donosti. Its English-inspired interior, furnished by Martínez Otero, is dressed with silk, linen and velvet fabrics in soft earth and beige tones. In most of its 128 rooms, the leather headboards, combined with tartan blankets, create an elegant Scottish-style atmosphere. Ancient walls emerge from the surfaces, while geometric ornamental details recall the balustrade of La Concha beach. The acoustic, fire-resistant and passage doors are by the renowned Vicaima, the Portuguese company specialising in carpentry.

Turning the building around, however, reveals a surprising contrast: the northern façade belongs to the former 18th-century San Bartolomé convent, which now houses the hotel. The project has preserved not only its façade with the two towers, but also part of the ori-

ginal walls that merge with the new structures, thanks to the architectural design by Jacinto Arqués Fusté, developed in collaboration with Verónica Quintanilla, an architect specialising in the restoration of historic heritage.

A Dreamlike Swimming Pool

The second, and greatest, surprise comes when stepping out onto the rooftop pool, where La Concha beach, the old town and the cathedral unfold before you —the very best of the city— as a beautiful panorama from the San Bartolomé hill, the setting of the Catalonia Donosti Hotel. Taking a dip while admiring this scenery is a true pleasure, in an outdoor area that features not only the pool and solarium, but also an ideal chill-out space for watching the night fall in 360 degrees, drink in hand.

As a complement, the spa, located on the first floor, offers facial and body treatments and features an excellent selection of facilities, including a hydrotherapy

CATALONIA DONOSTI HOTEL



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- 1.- The Catalonia Donosti Hotel is five minutes from La Concha beach, shops and pintxo bars.
- 2.- Hotel café.
- 3.- Hotel spa.
- 4.- Spaces that form part of the former convent.



3



2



4



- 1.- Façade of the former convent that now houses the Catalonia Donosti Hotel.
- 2.- Pintxo bars near the hotel
- 3.- Hat shop, one of the stores near the hotel.



pool with water jets, a Finnish sauna, a steam room and a cold-water pool.

Dining in Basque Style

The gastronomic chapter is led by Aldape-ta Gastrobar, a restaurant faithful to Basque roots, with a nod to Mediterranean cuisine and its rice dishes. The restaurant's modern décor contrasts with the convent building in which it is located, while the dishes served at the table reflect, with expertise, the excellence of Basque cuisine.

To the city centre in a matter of seconds

And the greatest surprise appears when, after walking through a winding corridor of the hotel, you take a lift that opens directly into the very heart of the city. From the entrance through the avant-garde building high on the hill, quiet and secluded, to the exit onto Calle Easo, full of energy and movement, La Concha beach is just a few steps away, and in the opposite direction, the Buen Pastor Cathedral. From there, the traditional shops begin to appear, along with those wonderful taverns that lead towards the old town, where you can enjoy a fine pintxo of spider crab, hake, tortilla or countless other creations, accompanied by a small beer (zurito) or a glass of local wine (txikito).

Catalonia Donosti Hotel





Manena's Window

Travel Anecdotes

Text and photos: Manena Munar – manena.munar@gmail.com

"It's those little things...", as Joan Manuel Serrat would sing, that linger in the memory after a journey and, when recalled, bring back a smile, tears, or bursts of laughter. I would like to take a few of them from the trunk of my memories and share them with you.

Bergen and the Fjords

Sailing through the Norwegian fjords, listening to tales of trolls and sailors with deep-blue eyes, to the strains of the music of the quintessentially Norwegian composer, Edvard Grieg.



The famous historic Bryggen Wharf, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The journey to Norway was truly special. My grandfather was Norwegian, so is my second surname, and I grew up surrounded by legends, folktales, Norwegian Christmas carols and family anecdotes that only deepened my desire to discover the Viking land of my ancestors. My grandfather adored Edvard Grieg, and I would listen to his music with him, music known as the call of the fjord, for Grieg himself claimed that his compositions drifted upon the waters of the fjord and that the aromas of cod and herring were woven into every note.

Arriving in Bergen and seeing the colourful wooden houses of Bryggen, on the city's old Hanseatic wharf, truly made my heart race. I imagined the day, more than a century ago, when my great-grandfather took my great-grandmother, a Sevillian, to live in the capital of the fjords. Those were times without telephones, mobile phones, television or anything of the sort... How disheartened the Andalusian woman must have felt as she contemplated her future in distant Bergen, cold and dark throughout the winter, though undeniably beautiful. The shock can hardly have worn off, for before long they returned to vibrant Seville, never to leave again.

It All Depends on the Lens Through Which You Look

A century later, however, their great-granddaughter looked upon Bergen through very different eyes. Oil had long since begun flowing from the Norwegian seabed, as vividly portrayed in the excellent series *State of Happiness* (Lykkeland), and Norway was no longer one of Europe's poorest countries, scraping a living from herring and cod. Quite the opposite: it had become a prosperous and wealthy nation with one of the world's highest standards of living and, according to the latest statistics, one of the happiest as well.

I thoroughly enjoyed wandering through the maze of Bryggen's charming wooden buildings, each more delightful than the last, until I found myself inside one of them, with its low ceilings and carefully preserved interior. It was the Bryggen Tracteursted restaurant, where I tasted whale meat for the first time. I wasn't especially impressed, to be honest. Just a few steps away is the Fløibanen funicular, which climbs Mount Fløyen. I stood there in amazement, gazing over the spectacular panorama of Bergen spread out below like a miniature model.

Grieg's Home

Visiting Troidhaugen marked a turning point in my journey through the fjords. The passion Edvard Grieg poured into creating his home can be felt in every room. Traditional house, fairy-tale castle, warm, welcoming and blessed with an unrivalled view over the Bergen

Fjord are just some of the descriptions that do justice to this grand wooden home, in whose garden, on the shores of the fjord he loved so dearly, the great composer rests, surrounded by kindly trolls—though, of course, there are mischievous and even wicked ones too.

A Dream Come True

Then comes the long-awaited moment to set sail for the fjords. My dream was coming true, surpassing even my most fanciful expectations. The boat leaving Bergen for the Sognefjord, Norway's longest and dee-



Panoramic view of Bergen from Mount Fløyen.

Troidhaugen, the original home of composer Edvard Grieg, now a museum dedicated to his work.



NORWAY

pest fjord, is full of students with backpacks slung over their shoulders, laughing and chatting all at once, eager to enjoy their country's extraordinary natural surroundings. At one of the fjord's small harbours, I watch the young people disembark, taking with them their iPods, from which loud music blares. I feel a twinge of sadness as the boat is left half empty. Quietly and almost wistfully, it sets off once more. And so, as we sail across the emerald waters reflected from the valley, I understand how Grieg's music was born of the fjord, its gentle meadows and the sheer cliffs that shape some of its winding inlets.

Cider, Lamb and Handsome Norwegians

In the little village of Ulvik, on the shores of the Hardangerfjord, Ingrid was waiting for me, the guide who, in true Fitipaldi style, whisked me around the village and its surroundings. There, snowfields in full thaw give way, near Ulvik, to lush green meadows dotted with apple orchards, whose delicious cider I was later fortunate enough to sample at the Hardanger Saft cider house.

Hans was the name of the farmer from the neighbouring farm, an attractive man with an irresistible smile, as well as an expert in smoking lamb. Hans told us that the winter smoking ritual comes to an end in spring, when the first call of the cuckoo announces its return from migration, signalling that the smoked leg of lamb has reached perfection and is ready to be enjoyed.

Farmer Hans with a smoked leg of lamb.



Sailing through the fjords during the school holidays.



Eidfjord, on the shores near the village of Ulvik.

Røvær, the island lost in the North Sea

I only caught a fleeting glimpse of Haugesund, the coastal town between Bergen and Stavanger, but it was enough to sense that it was a beautiful and prosperous place, set beside the Karmsundet Strait, where I boarded the ferry bound for the island of Røvær. Soon after setting sail, I noticed that all the passengers knew one another and even seemed aware that a journalist from somewhere in southern Europe had arrived to write a feature about their island. The waters we crossed were no longer those of the fjords but of the rough, grey North Sea. The sun struggled to break through the clouds, lending the voyage an almost ghostly atmosphere, until we reached a narrow, rocky channel flanked by two wooden houses, painted bright red with white trim. This was the island of Røvær, home to barely a hundred inhabitants, where there are no cars and where people rely on the ferry to reach the mainland. Nowadays it runs daily between Haugesund and Røvær, but only a few years ago, visits to the doctor or priest, as well as any official business, all had to wait for the monthly Haugesund–Røvær ferry.



Approaching the island of Røvær.

On the ferry from Haugesund to the island of Røvær, everyone knows one another.



NORWAY

The Sailor with the Deep-Blue Eyes.

If I began this chronicle with a love story, I shall end it with another, this time linked to Kulturhotell, the island's only place to stay. To tell it, we must go back to the 1940s, when the ferry called at Røvær just once a week, when the island lived from cod and herring fishing, and when an 18-year-old trainee teacher arrived there to complete her teaching placement. The young teacher quickly adapted to the fishermen's way of life; she loved teaching her pupils and gazing out at that wild, grey sea—the real sea, as she thought of it—the one that had claimed so many of the island's men.

Røvær was a place apart from the rest of the world and, naturally, the young woman missed Haugesund, the nearest town to the island, where she had been born and raised and where her family, friends and all the attractions of city life remained. The year on Røvær came to an end, and it was time to return to Haugesund. Reluctantly, the young teacher left the island and went back to her hometown and its social life: parties, celebrations and promising suitors who never quite won her heart, because between one and the next stood the deep-blue eyes of the herring fisherman she simply could not forget. Then, one day, she left behind the social life of Haugesund, her friends and her family, boarded once again the ferry that at the time still sailed to the island only

once a week, and embarked on the adventure that would change her life forever. She chose to spend her days with the sailor with the sea-blue eyes, and lived happily ever after on Røvær, where today two of her daughters run the hotel on the shores of the North Sea.



Sailing across the North Sea towards the island of Røvær

Kulturhotell on the island of Røvær



traveling

gourmets

GASTRONOMIC DESTINATIONS

Crete, the ancient
breadbasket of Europe

ARMENIA

Where humankind
first began to cultivate
the vine

RESTAURANT REVIEWS: GRAN RESERVA ■ RUGE ■ ORIGINE MADRID

Crete

The Ancient Larder of the Mediterranean

Text: Rosario Alonso - Photos: Archivo

Crete

Crete is Greece's largest island and one of the places where the essence of Mediterranean cuisine is best understood. Its gastronomy is not the result of a passing trend, but of a way of life deeply rooted in the land, the sea and seasonal produce. Olive oil, vegetables, pulses, aromatic herbs, cheeses, honey, wine, fish and simple meat dishes form the foundation of a cuisine that is ancient, wholesome and instantly recognisable.

In 2026, Crete was named European Region of Gastronomy, a distinction that recognises not only its dishes but also the way it produces, cooks and preserves its culinary heritage. For years, the island has been working to strengthen its gastronomic identity, support local producers and reveal to visitors a side of Crete that goes far beyond sun and sea.

The island's defining product is olive oil. In Crete, it is used every day and features in almost everything: salads, stews, vegetables, fish, bread and cheese. It is not a secondary ingredient but the very foundation of the local cuisine. Olive groves are an integral part of the landscape and underpin much of the island's rural economy. For food-loving travellers, visiting an olive mill or tasting local olive oils is one of the best ways to begin discovering Crete.

Olive Oil



Another essential ingredient is aromatic herbs. The mountains and countryside of Crete are home to plants such as thyme, oregano, rosemary, sage and dittany, all widely used in cooking as well as for herbal infusions. These herbs flavour meat, vegetables, cheeses and bread. Cretan cuisine rarely relies on heavy sauces, favouring instead olive oil, lemon, salt and herbs.

Cheese also plays a central role. Graviera, made mainly from sheep's milk, is one of the island's best-known varieties. It is enjoyed on its own, with bread, drizzled with honey or incorporated into hot dishes. Fresh cheeses such as mizithra are also widely used in both sweet and savoury recipes. In many tavernas, it is customary for small plates of local cheese, olives, bread and olive oil to be served before the main meal.

Among the island's most popular dishes is dakos, a simple recipe that perfectly represents Cretan cuisine. It is made with dried barley rusk, grated or chopped tomato, fresh cheese, olive oil and oregano. It is a humble dish, yet it captures the essence of the island's cooking: few ingredients, excellent produce and clean, authentic flavours. Equally common are kalitsounia, small pastries filled with cheese, herbs or vegetables, served in either sweet or savoury versions.



Aromatic Herbs and Graviera Cheese



Dakos and Kalitsounia



CRETE

Vegetable-based cooking is central to Cretan cuisine. Seasonal vegetables, pulses and wild greens are eaten in abundance, usually simply dressed with olive oil and lemon. Dishes featuring broad beans, chickpeas, aubergines, courgettes, artichokes and stuffed vegetables are everyday staples. It is straightforward cooking, but by no means plain. Its value lies in the quality of the produce and in preparing it without masking its natural character.

Meat is served mainly as lamb, goat or pork, often roasted or slow-cooked. In rural areas, dishes of goat or lamb with herbs, cheese or vegetables are especially common. Snails are also a traditional island speciality, prepared with rosemary, vinegar or tomato, depending on the recipe.

Along the coast, fish and seafood naturally have their place, although Crete should not be seen solely as a maritime destination. Its gastronomy is shaped as much by the interior as by the sea. That is why any worthwhile culinary itinerary should include markets, mountain villages, wineries, olive mills and family-run tavernas, rather than focusing only on restaurants by the harbour.

Wine is another of the island's greatest attractions. Crete has an ancient winemaking tradition and, in recent years, has placed renewed emphasis on indigenous grape varieties. Among the most notable are Vidiano, Vilana, Liatiko and Kotsifali. Many wineries offer guided tours and tastings, particularly in the areas around Heraklion and across the island's interior. For travellers, wine offers a chance to discover a less touristy, more rural Crete, deeply connected to its land.



Plant-Based Cuisine



Goat Meat





Heraklion



Chania

Crete has no need to invent a story about its gastronomy. Its appeal lies in a cuisine that is honest, straightforward and deeply rooted in the land.

The island's towns and cities are also rewarding gastronomic destinations. Heraklion, the island's capital, combines lively markets, traditional tavernas and contemporary restaurants. Chania, with its Venetian harbour and winding streets, is one of the most appealing places to enjoy local produce in a historic setting. Rethymno has a more relaxed atmosphere, with excellent tavernas serving deeply rooted Cretan cuisine. In the villages, the experience is usually simpler, but often all the more authentic.

At a time when many destinations are trying to build a gastronomic identity from scratch, Crete already has one firmly in place. Its cuisine has always been there: in the olive groves, the cheeses, the mountain herbs, the wine, the barley rusks and the dishes prepared every day. Its designation as European Region of Gastronomy 2026 invites travellers to rediscover an island that has always had a remarkable culinary story to tell.

Rethymno





Armenia

Where Humanity Learned to Cultivate the Vine

By Alejandro and Luis Paadín – alejandro@paadin.es – Photography: Manukyan Wine & Brandy Factory

HThere are places that produce great wines, and others that produce great stories. Armenia belongs to that rare category of territories where both become so deeply intertwined that they are impossible to separate. Among volcanic mountains, gorges carved by time and vineyards that have endured for millennia, this small Caucasian nation preserves some of the essential clues to one of civilisation's greatest milestones: the moment when humanity stopped merely gathering wild grapes and began cultivating the vine.

For decades, the question seemed to have a straightforward answer. It was widely assumed that the cultivated vine had originated in a single region of the Near East before gradually spreading across Europe. However, the revolution in genomics has completely transformed that view. We now know that the story was far more complex.

Analyses of thousands of *Vitis vinifera* genomes published in recent years reveal that domestication was not a single event but a parallel process that began around 11,000 years ago in two distinct regions: Western Asia and the South Caucasus. While the first centre appears to have been more closely associated with

the development of future table grapes, the second, located precisely in what is now Armenia and Georgia, gave rise to much of the genetic heritage that would ultimately underpin wine-producing viticulture.

Yet Armenia offers something that very few places in the world can claim: it preserves not only this extraordinary genetic legacy, but also some of the oldest archaeological evidence of winemaking discovered to date. In the Areni-1 cave, archaeologists uncovered presses, fermentation vats, grape seeds and remains of *Vitis vinifera* dating back more than six thousand years, placing this site among the earliest known testimonies of winemaking.

Even so, it is important to avoid an overly tempting simplification. Areni does not prove that wine was born exclusively in Armenia. What it does demonstrate is that the Caucasus was one of the first places where humanity transformed agricultural knowledge of the vine into a true wine culture. That distinction, subtle though it may seem, is fundamental.

Genetics confirms what the landscape has long suggested. Armenian grape varieties form a clearly distinct group from much of the vineyard heritage of Western and Central Europe.

They preserve unique lineages, local kinship relationships and genetic alleles that are rare in other wine-growing regions. At a time when the global wine industry is seeking answers to climate change, drought, disease and the loss of biodiversity, Armenia should be seen not only as an ancient land, but also as a vital reservoir for the future.

The First Christian Nation

But to understand the true place of wine in Armenia, it is not enough to speak of vineyards. One must also speak of faith. Armenia was the first country in the world to officially adopt Christianity as its state religion, in the year 301. From that moment on, wine became inseparably woven into its spiritual identity. In Christian liturgy, wine is far more than a simple drink: it symbolises the blood of Christ and lies at the very heart of the Eucharistic rite. Every religious celebration preserves a gesture that unites agriculture, memory, sacrifice and transcendence.

This relationship did not emerge in isolation. The Bible is permeated by the presence of wine. Noah plants a vineyard after the Flood; Melchizedek offers bread and wine; the Psalms celebrate the wine that gladdens the human heart; at Cana, Christ turns water into wine; and at the Last Supper, wine becomes the symbol of the new covenant.

Vineyards at the Foot of Mount Ararat



Noravank Monastery

turns water into wine; and at the Last Supper, wine becomes the symbol of the new covenant. Few beverages have accumulated such a wealth of symbolic meaning.

In Armenia, this biblical legacy also takes on a unique geographical resonance. Mount Ararat, visible as an almost mythical presence in the Armenian imagination, is linked to the story of Noah and the first vineyard planted after the Flood. Beyond its religious significance, the image is a powerful one: humanity reborn, a land brought back into cultivation and the vine becoming a symbol of continuity.

Armenian wine, therefore, cannot be understood merely as an agricultural product or a gastronomic phenomenon. It is also ritual, memory and a spiritual language. Before it was bottled, and even before it became a commodity, wine was an offering. Perhaps that is why, in Armenia, it still retains a depth that is difficult to find in regions where viticulture is explained solely in terms of commerce or technique.

The Soviet Era

La historia, sin embargo, no siempre fue favorable para el vino armenio. Tras la incorporación de Armenia a la Unión Soviética en 1922, la viticultura quedó subordinada a las necesidades de una economía completamente planificada desde Moscú. El modelo soviético entendía la Unión como un gran sistema de especialización territorial en el que cada república debía concentrarse en aquellas producciones que resultasen más eficientes para el conjunto. Ucrania se consolidó como el granero de la Unión; Asia Central asumió buena parte de la producción de algodón; Georgia orientó su enorme potencial hacia la elaboración de vinos de consumo masivo; y Armenia encontró su principal papel en la destilación de aguardientes vínicos, especialmente el célebre brandy armenio.

ARMENIA

The decision was no coincidence. The continental climate, abundant sunshine and outstanding quality of its grapes provided exceptional raw material for distillation. For decades, names such as Ararat earned enormous prestige throughout the Soviet Union and beyond. Armenian brandy became one of the country's most iconic products.

But that success came at a cost. The production of quality wines was pushed into the background. Many traditional grape varieties ceased to be cultivated, others survived only in small family vineyards, and much of the expertise associated with winemaking gradually disappeared. The priority was no longer to express the character of a region or preserve an ancient viticultural heritage, but to supply a production system designed to meet the needs of a centrally planned economy.

Armenia's independence in 1991 marked the beginning of a profound transformation. Freed from central planning, its wine industry embarked on a slow process of reconstruction that continues today. In little more than three decades, around 180 wineries have emerged, the vast majority family-owned. Numerous indigenous grape varieties have been revived, wines are once again being made in karas—the traditional buried clay vessels similar to Georgia's qvevri—and historic wine regions such as Vayots Dzor, Armavir and Aragatsotn have regained the prominence they enjoyed for centuries.

Rather than a renaissance, it might be more accurate to speak of a reunion. Armenia is not creating a new wine culture; it is rediscovering one of the oldest in the world. The country's extraordinary genetic wealth cannot be understood without the landscape in which it has evolved over thousands of years. Few nations contain such geographical diversity within such a small area. Armenian vineyards stretch from around 400 to



Traditional Armenian Karas

nearly 1,800 metres above sea level, one of the widest altitude ranges for vine cultivation anywhere in Eurasia. Added to this is a remarkable diversity of volcanic, limestone, clay and sandy soils, the result of intense geological activity that has shaped the landscape over millions of years.

The volcanic soils found in regions such as Vayots Dzor and Aragatsotn provide excellent drainage and mineral richness. Elsewhere, limestone formations force the vines to drive their roots deep into the ground, while the sandy and clay-loam soils of Armavir and Ararat offer very different conditions for viticulture. Sobre esta diversidad actúa un clima continental, con inviernos rigurosos, veranos cálidos y secos, escasas precipitaciones y una acusada amplitud térmica entre el día y la noche. Estas diferencias

Karas Ageing Cellar at Voskevaz Winery



ralentizan la maduración, favorecen el desarrollo aromático de la uva y ayudan a conservar una acidez poco habitual en estas latitudes.

Among Armenia's wine-producing regions, Vayots Dzor holds a special place. Situated in the south of the country, its vineyards rise above 1,200 metres, with some reaching elevations close to 1,800 metres. These extreme conditions naturally limit yields, extend the growing season and produce grapes of remarkable concentration while preserving freshness thanks to the altitude. It is within this same landscape that the Areni-1 cave is located, regarded as the oldest known winery discovered to date. The relationship between this region and the vine stretches back at least six thousand years.

Vayots Dzor also preserves one of the Caucasus's most valuable viticultural heritages, with old vines and numerous vineyards planted on their own roots, ungrafted, having survived the phylloxera epidemic that transformed European viticulture in the nineteenth century. Historic grape varieties such as Areni and Voskehat thrive here, expressing with remarkable precision the distinctive character of this mountainous landscape.

It is hardly surprising that many of Armenia's most ambitious wines are produced here. Vayots Dzor brings together history, altitude, ancient soils and a rich viticultural memory: a region where the vine preserves one of the oldest chapters in the history of human agriculture.



Noravank Monastery

Old Bridge Winery Vineyards in Vayots Dzor



Where the Paadíns Eat

Old Bridge Winery

Levonyan 16, Yeghegnadzor
www.oldbridgewinery.com

On the outskirts of Yeghegnadzor, in the heart of Vayots Dzor, Old Bridge Winery was one of the first boutique wineries to emerge following Armenia's independence. Specialising in the indigenous Areni and Voskehat grape varieties, it offers guided tours as well as a restaurant focused on locally sourced produce. Its proximity to the Areni-1 cave and Noravank Monastery makes it an essential stop for anyone wishing to discover the revival of Armenian winemaking.



Voskevaz Winery

19 b., 8 st., Voskevaz 0220, Aragatsotn, Armenia
www.voskevaz.am

Founded in 1932 and extensively renovated from 2004 onwards, Voskevaz Winery is one of the estates that best embodies the balance between tradition and innovation in Armenia. Located in the Aragatsotn region, it produces wines from indigenous grape varieties such as Voskehat, Areni and Kangun, while also reviving the use of traditional karas—large clay vessels that have been used since antiquity for the fermentation and ageing of wine. A visit includes a tour of its historic cellars, the country's largest working collection of karas, and concludes with a guided tasting accompanied by local cheeses and lavash. The estate, dominated by a distinctive medieval-inspired building beside the remains of a fifth-century church, makes Voskevaz one of Armenia's finest wine tourism experiences.

MOV Restaurant

12 Pushkin St., Yerevan, Armenia
www.movrestaurant.com

Housed in a historic nineteenth-century building in the heart of Yerevan, MOV has become one of the finest representatives of Armenia's new culinary scene. Its menu reinterprets traditional recipes with a contemporary presentation, placing particular emphasis on tolma, one of the country's defining gastronomic icons, alongside an outstanding selection of wines and traditional fruit brandies made from local produce. A highly recommended visit for anyone wishing to understand how Armenian cuisine is reinterpreting its culinary heritage while remaining true to its identity.



Manukyan Wine & Brandy Factory

10/1 Karmir Banakayinneri St., Balahovit 2213, Armenia
www.manukyan.wine

Located just 15 kilometres from Yerevan, Manukyan Wine & Brandy Factory is one of Armenia's most modern wineries. Opened in 2015, it combines the production of wines and brandies with a carefully developed wine tourism programme. The visit takes guests through the production facilities and ageing cellars before concluding with a guided tasting of its wines and spirits. The estate also offers dedicated spaces for events, tastings and private experiences, making it one of the country's most dynamic wine tourism destinations. Produced mainly from the indigenous Areni and Voskehat grape varieties, its wines reflect the Manukyan family's commitment to reviving Armenia's viticultural heritage through a contemporary vision.



Karas Wines

Arevadasht Community, provincia de Armavir
www.karaswines.com

Founded by the Eurnekian family in 2004 in the Ararat Valley, Karas Wines was one of the wineries that led the revival of Armenian viticulture following the country's independence. Its more than 400 hectares of vineyards combine indigenous varieties such as Areni and Kangun with international grapes, producing some of Armenia's most internationally acclaimed wines. The name Karas refers to the traditional Armenian clay vessels that have been used to make wine for more than six thousand years, symbolising the connection between ancient viticulture and contemporary winemaking.

Armenia Wine Company

Sasunik, Aragatsotn, Armenia
www.armeniawine.am

Located in the Aragatsotn wine region, Armenia Wine is one of the largest and most modern wineries in the Caucasus, as well as one of the driving forces behind the revival of Armenian wine. Opened in 2008, it combines state-of-the-art technology with the revival of indigenous grape varieties and features a comprehensive visitor centre with the Museum of Wine History, the Nazani restaurant, tasting rooms, vineyards and a dedicated brandy production facility. A visit provides an excellent introduction to Armenian viticulture, offering a clear understanding of the evolution of wine from its earliest origins to the present day within a single wine tourism destination.





Añana Salt Valley

A landscape of salt and history

Text and photography: Jose A. Muñoz



In western Álava, little more than half an hour from Vitoria-Gasteiz, the Añana Salt Valley preserves one of those landscapes that are hard to imagine until you see them. There is no sea, yet everything revolves around salt. In a hollow surrounded by hills, thousands of white evaporation ponds spread across wooden, stone and clay terraces, creating a striking landscape shaped by human hands and a natural salt spring that has flowed for thousands of years.

Añana's story is one of a patient partnership between water, sun, wind and human skill. The salt comes from ancient seas trapped underground millions of years ago. As water filters through these salt deposits, it becomes highly concentrated before emerging at the surface. From there begins a process that appears simple but reflects centuries of knowledge: guiding the brine through wooden channels, spreading it across the salt pans and allowing the sun and wind to complete the work.

For centuries, salt was a strategic resource. It preserved food, cured hides, paid wages and supported the valley's economy. Añana became one of inland Spain's most important salt-producing centres. Its value lay not only in the salt itself, but in the entire system behind it: springs, channels, wells, terraces, storehouses and a community whose life revolved around production.

Today, the Salt Valley is a restored cultural landscape. After decades of partial abandonment, an ambitious conservation project has brought it back to life without turning it into a museum piece. The terraces have been rebuilt, the salt pans restored and traditional salt-making continues using centuries-old methods. Visitors can walk the wooden platforms, watch the brine flow through the channels, understand how the salt pans work and even experience the effects of the mineral-rich water in specially prepared foot and hand baths. Añana salt is prized for its purity and its entirely natural production. It is harvested through solar evaporation and remains deeply connected to its landscape. Fleur de sel, mineral salt and flavoured varieties all share the same origin: naturally salty spring water and a craft that still depends on the weather.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Añana is that it is far more than a historic site. Salt is still produced, restoration continues and the valley still demonstrates how such a humble resource shaped an entire community for centuries. Between the brilliant white salt, the dark timber structures and the silence of the surrounding hills, the landscape offers a quiet reminder of the value of time, craftsmanship and the places that survive because people choose to care for them.



GRAN RESERVA

BRÍÑAS - LA RIOJA



View of the restaurant dining room

Text: Rosario Alonso

Photography: Rest. Gran Reserva

View from the restaurant terrace



There are places where the table begins long before the kitchen. It starts with the light over the vineyards, the slow course of the River Ebro and the unhurried way in which La Rioja welcomes summer. In Briñas, at Palacio Tondón, Autograph Collection, chef Jesús Terradillos presents a seasonal menu with a clear purpose: lighter dishes without sacrificing depth, a celebration of seasonal produce and a fresh interpretation of Riojan cuisine.

The menu arrives as La Rioja slips into its summer rhythm. Wine finds a different conversation with food, and Gran Reserva follows that rhythm perfectly. Rather than breaking with tradition, the new menu refines it for the warmer months. Freshness, memory and technique come together naturally in a cuisine designed to be enjoyed at leisure, in a setting where the landscape is part of the experience.

The opening dishes set the tone. Familiar favourites include Iberian ham with toasted bread and vine tomatoes, a board of artisan cheeses with quince paste, and León cecina served with river pollen and tomato bread. Simple, generous dishes designed to begin both the meal and the conversation.

Alongside them, seasonal ingredients take centre stage. A green salad with Rincón de Soto pears and foie gras showcases one of La Rioja's finest local products with quiet confidence. Equally appealing is the Riojan tomato salad with tuna belly, piparras and a honey-soy dressing. More adventurous is the black cherry gazpacho with fresh curd cheese, pickled beetroot and prawns infused in orange oil, a dish that captures the colours, freshness and acidity of summer.

The menu also gives local ingredients a contemporary interpretation. Beef carpaccio with Los Cameros PDO goat's cheese speaks of the region through simplicity. Cauliflower with La Rioja honey, served over red cabbage salad with a touch of spice, balances sweetness and gentle heat. Smoked Ebro eel Russian salad with carasatu bread offers a more unexpected tribute to the river.

The main courses strike an elegant balance between land and sea, remaining firmly rooted in seasonal produce. From the sea come grilled croaker with roasted celery, capers and beurre meunière; confit cod on a traditional Riojan vegetable stew; and line-caught hake with cauliflower toffee and a rich Riojan-style red fumet. Each dish is refined while remaining unmistakably regional.

The meat dishes reflect a kitchen where fire and wine still play a leading role. Chargrilled beef fillet is served with baby potatoes and a Rioja Reserva vermouth sauce. Slow-roasted lamb terrine with sweet potato purée and pistachios brings warmth and depth. Farm pork with green apple purée and orange gastrique adds freshness and acidity. For those who enjoy sharing, the dry-aged national beef rib steak with fried Guernica peppers and hand-cut chips remains an essential choice.

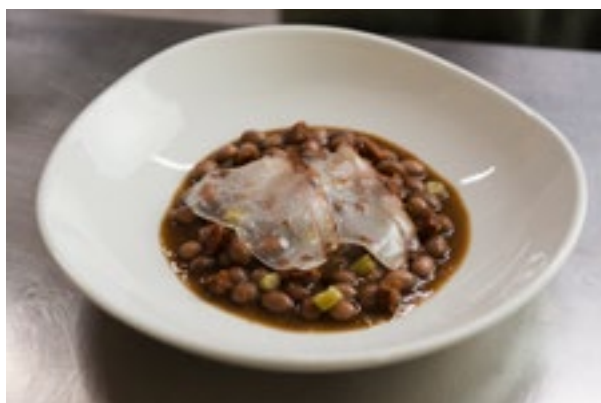
Desserts continue the same story rather than changing direction. Goat's cheesecake made with Los Cameros PDO cheese and a nut crumble celebrates local dairy traditions. Roasted peach with fresh cheese cream, La Rioja honey and Idiazábal ice cream provides a fresh and elegant finish, while the chocolate tartlet with red plum jam rounds off the meal with timeless simplicity. At Gran Reserva, wine is never an afterthought. Rioja DOCa sits at the heart of the cellar, with a selection chosen to complement every dish and remind guests that gastronomy here cannot be separated from the surrounding vineyards. In Briñas, beside the River Ebro, summer is served with seasonal produce, contemporary Riojan cooking, wines that speak of the land, attentive yet discreet service, and a table that quietly looks out across the landscape.



Grilled sea bass with roasted cauliflower purée and red fish stock



Artichoke flower in truffled parmentier



Caparrones from La Rioja with chorizo and thin pork jowl



Candied pear with fresh cheese

RESTAURANTE GRAN RESERVA

Hotel Palacio Tondón, Autograph Collection
Calle Campo 2, Brinas, La Rioja, España





RUGE LAJAROSA, Mountain Club Restaurante

Text: Jose A. Muñoz - **Photography:** Ruge and Jose A. Muñoz

Matured Galician 'rubia' beef ribeye steak



RUGE, In Guadarrama, beside La Jarosa Reservoir, water, pine forests and mountain scenery slow the pace long before you reach the table. That setting is no small part of the experience. At a time when so many restaurants rely on décor, music or a city address to stand out, Rubén Iborra has chosen a different path: a restaurant shaped by its surroundings, unhurried in spirit and made for long lunches and lingering conversations.

RUGE begins a new season after a successful first year, strengthened by its inclusion in the Michelin Guide 2025 and 2026. Yet it does not feel like a restaurant built for awards. Its identity is clear: wood-fired cooking, outstanding rice dishes, carefully sourced produce and expertly matured meats. It is a kitchen built on craftsmanship, trusted suppliers and fire, with a contemporary touch that never overwhelms the ingredients.

Rubén Iborra's route to RUGE has been anything but conventional. Originally from Murcia, he trained as a food technologist before spending more than twenty years in professional kitchens. From Chirashi to Osteria Pëndola, he has always treated technique as a tool rather than a performance. Together with Jennifer Ini, he has found in RUGE the freedom to cook with complete confidence. The restaurant describes itself as a gastronomic Mountain Club, and the definition fits perfectly: fine dining, nature, private celebrations and business gatherings all come together in a setting deeply connected to the surrounding landscape.



Clams marinara with roe



A selection of exclusive wines from RUGE

This season, rice remains one of the kitchen's signatures. The classic arroz del señolet is joined by creamy duck rice with foie gras and wild mushrooms, and a Balearic-style rice with red prawns and caviar. Mediterranean influences run throughout the menu, supported by carefully prepared stocks, exceptional ingredients and dishes made for sharing.

The wood-fired grill is another defining feature, extending well beyond meat. Cod cheeks cooked al ajillo with a delicate white wine pil pil, parsley and fresh peas highlight the quality of the produce. Grilled Santa Pola red prawns with Maldon salt and lemon keep things beautifully simple. Galician carpet-shell clams, grilled and served with leek velouté, chive oil and allspice, perfectly capture RUGE's philosophy: fine ingredients, sound technique and a subtle touch of creativity.

The tasting menus reveal the restaurant's most ambitious side. French oysters with steamed red prawns, Galician sea urchin roe, Beluga caviar and lychee agua-chile; smoked eel with grilled French foie gras, caramelised coconut sugar and sea foam infused with plankton; or Kobe Ushido sirloin with shiitake mushrooms, Omakase sauce and Sichuan pepper. Dishes that look beyond Spain while never losing sight of the Sierra as their natural setting. There are also reassuring nods to local tradition: homemade Joselito ham croquettes, the classic Murcian marinera, aubergine with burratina and red pesto, and cured cod from El Barquero. Desserts

remain reassuringly classic, with apple tarte Tatin and the celebrated mille-feuille by master pastry chef Paco Torreblanca.

The list of suppliers says much about the restaurant's ambitions. Joselito, Serpeska, Garcimar, El Barquero, Frutas Eloy and Discarlux provide the foundations of the menu, complemented by the house wines produced in collaboration with Juan Gil.

Dining at RUGE feels like a genuine escape, though never a distant one. Madrid is close, yet La Jara instantly changes the pace. The Sierra, the fresh mountain air, the surrounding pine forests and the calm waters of the reservoir create a setting that feels both secluded and remarkably accessible. It is the sort of place where lunch naturally becomes a day out. More than simply a restaurant, RUGE offers an experience that begins long before the first course and often ends with an unhurried coffee while looking out across the landscape.

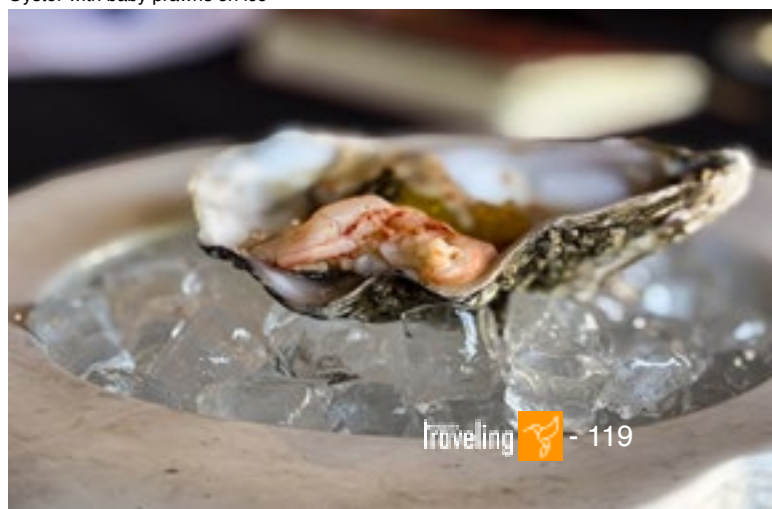
RUGE
LAJAROSA



Rubén Iborra and his 'Señoret' rice



Oyster with baby prawns on ice





Origine

RISTORANTE

Text: Rosario Alonso - **Photography:** Jose A. Muñoz



There are plenty of Italian restaurants in Madrid that trade on nostalgia, and plenty more that simply repeat a familiar formula. Origine, Salvatore Romano's new restaurant in Chamberí, takes a different path. Its roots are unmistakably Italian, yet it refuses to be confined to a postcard version of Italy. Instead, it speaks of memory, fine ingredients and a life built in Spain. After more than twenty years in Madrid and the success of Totò e Peppino, Romano has finally brought to life an idea he had carried for years: cooking from his origins while embracing the country that became his home.

At 36 Rafael Calvo Street, in the heart of Chamberí, Origine sits in one of those neighbourhoods where local life still matters. The restaurant is built around three simple ideas: flavour, tradition and origin. Familiar words perhaps, but here they become something real. Italian recipes meet Spanish produce, local suppliers and a distinctly Mediterranean outlook. Spain is not an added touch but part of the restaurant's identity.

The clearest example is the padellino, a style of pizza from Turin still rarely seen in Spain. At Origine it has become the restaurant's signature. It does not try to imitate Neapolitan pizza or compete with it. Instead, it follows its own style: a light, airy dough, slow fermentation, a soft crumb and a delicate, slightly moist texture. Designed for sharing, it arrives topped with first-class ingredients, from seasonal vegetables to Iberian ham and anchovies. Simple in appearance, but technically impressive.

The rest of the menu respects Italian tradition while allowing it to evolve. The Carboibérica brings together Rome and Madrid in a carbonara of spaghetti, green zabaglione, aged Mahón cheese, Arbizu chistorra and acorn-fed pork belly. The agnolotti del plin, filled with slow-cooked beef, are finished with roasted sweet pumpkin, smoked duck ham, beef glaze and Asturian Gamoneu cheese. Rather than fusion for its own sake, Romano looks for the natural meeting point between two culinary traditions rich in character.

Neapolitan dome oven



Il bosco; Fusillone with tomato, Gamoneu and portobello mushrooms



Small frying pans: a childhood memory – Photo below: fried parmigiana



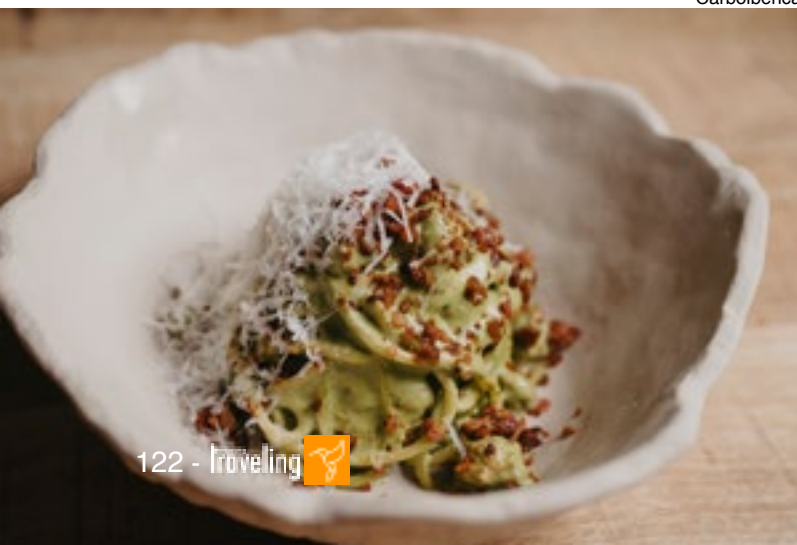
ORIGINE (Madrid)



Final touches at the table: "This isn't vitello tonnato"



It's not veal with tuna sauce
Carboibérica



Even dessert tells a personal story. Pruébalo tú!!! ("You Try It!") combines a cocoa padellino with white chocolate and Canary Island banana mousse, salted toffee, chocolate popping candy and fresh mint. The chef created it because, owing to an allergy, he could never taste it himself. The name adds a welcome touch of humour and reminds diners that good cooking does not always need to take itself too seriously.

The dining room reflects the same philosophy. Divided between a gastrobar and restaurant, Origine seats around 150 guests and includes a dedicated pizza counter as well as a flexible private dining area. Designed by Salvatore Romano and his partners, the interior is clean and unmistakably Mediterranean, with subtle references to Spain's landscapes. It is a space intended to complement the food rather than compete with it, equally suited to breakfast, lunch, after-work drinks or an unhurried dinner.

Service is another point on which Romano is determined to stand apart. He believes in old-school hospitality: attentive, intuitive and personal without ever becoming formal. Rocío, the restaurant manager, embodies that philosophy perfectly, while Carmine Babusso, Romano's long-time collaborator, plays a key role in shaping this new chapter.

The wine list follows the same logic. Around ninety per cent of the labels come from Spain, complemented by a carefully chosen selection of Italian wines. It makes perfect sense. Origine never turns its back on Italy, but neither does it hide the fact that its cooking now belongs just as much to Madrid.

More than simply another Italian restaurant, Origine feels like the natural outcome of one chef's journey: an Italian who built his life in Spain and now cooks with both countries in equal measure. At a time when restaurant concepts often feel interchangeable, that blend of heritage, craftsmanship and local produce is its greatest strength.

Origine
RISTORANTE



A woman wearing a wide-brimmed hat and a poncho with a black and white geometric pattern is walking away from the camera down a dirt path. The path is flanked by rows of blooming lavender plants. In the background, a small, rustic stone house with a tiled roof sits on a slight rise. The scene is bathed in the warm, golden light of late afternoon or early morning.

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