

Land of the conquerors

Enchanting Trujillo was Spain's best-kept secret but now an exquisite collection of luxury rental villas allows you to uncover its hidden charms



Vast blue skies, sunburnt plains, gourmet food and a treasure trove of historical sites – the landlocked region of Extremadura offers myriad delights for discerning travellers.

At the heart of this unspoilt land lies the enticing town of Trujillo – a two-and-a-half-hour drive south-west of Madrid. Here, Trujillo Villas Espana has restored and refurbished a collection of seven old buildings – some dating back to the 12th century – and turned them into luxurious rental villas with bags of character. Five are situated at

the summit of a granite hill on which this walled town stands – near a 13th-century castle on the site of an Arab fortress – while two are located in the centre of Trujillo. Ranging from a grand mansion to a stylish cottage and chic artists' studio, they each provide an attractive base for exploring a fascinating, increasingly fashionable region.

We loved the spacious, three-bedroom Garden Cottage, which oozed tasteful comfort and promised peace and privacy. It sits on a private estate alongside the magnificent Villa Martires,

where an elegant, wood-panelled sitting room, a beautiful dining room lined with portraits and beamed hallway with hand-carved staircase are among the standout features – up to 10 guests can be accommodated when both properties are rented.

A nearby building houses a wonderful Moroccan-style loggia, summer sitting room and kitchen. Alongside is a secluded, Roman-style pool where you can take a leisurely dip – especially welcome when the mercury soars in midsummer. The pool is surrounded by tranquil, terraced gardens that afford 180-degree vistas of the sweeping plains below – a spectacular landscape dotted with holm oaks, olive groves and other shimmering hilltop towns.

GENEROUS LOCALS

After admiring our spacious master bedroom – complete with high-quality linens, rolltop bath and a wall-length bookcase lined with art, travel and history titles – we gathered for drinks on the terrace of the main villa and watched a glorious sunset before ambling down steep cobbled lanes into the Plaza Mayor – Trujillo's dazzling main square.

Surrounded by lively bars, restaurants and artisan food shops selling local produce such as sheep's milk cheese, pimenton (smoked paprika) and black honey, the square is dominated by an imposing bronze statue of Francisco Pizarro – conqueror of the Incas – sitting astride his horse with sword drawn. A more emblematic monument would be hard to find. After all, Extremadura is the cradle of the *conquistadors* – Spanish conquerors of the Americas.

Pizarro was Trujillo's most famous (or infamous) son who in the 16th century brought back plundered riches to the poverty-stricken region to fund the wealth of historical buildings that survive pretty much intact. Today, though, the town presents a gentler face and locals love to guide visitors around their captivating town.

A relaxed alfresco dinner at El Corral del Rey reflected the hearty yet delicious fare for which the region is renowned. Our group tucked into mouth-watering *pata negra* ham, asparagus with sea salt, bull's tail stew, delicious lamb chops and succulent beef fillet, paired with robust reds. Scrumptious

Making a splash: the Garden Cottage's secluded swimming pool. Left: the walled, hilltop town of Trujillo



Relaxed vibe: the Moroccan-style loggia alongside the pool and, top, sunset over the stylish Artists' Studio



Comfortable retreat: guests can unwind in the elegant, wood-panelled sitting room of Villa Martires

desserts, including a refreshing lemon sorbet laced with cava, followed before we sipped *licor de bellota* – an amber-coloured acorn liqueur – and watched the town gear up for a fiesta.

LATIN SPIRIT

Early the next day we teamed up with our enthusiastic guide from nearby Cáceres for a tour of Trujillo, taking in the crenelated castle, and numerous ochre-coloured mansions, churches, chapels, convents and towers built in Baroque, Renaissance and Gothic styles.

Meanwhile, back in the Plaza Mayor, La Salve – also known as Trujillo Liberation Day – was

under way. As restaurants swung into action, the square suddenly filled with hundreds of excited children who darted around catching sweets tossed into the air by a lively parade of tall, colourfully costumed figures known as *gigantes y cabezudos* (giants and big heads) – a common sight at Spain's multitude of vibrant festivals.

After a delightful feast back at Villa Martires – the in-house lunch menu consisting of creamy tortilla, sausages in sherry, red-pepper salad, gazpacho and manchego cheese with honey and quince, followed by *tocinillos del cielo*, or bite-sized, crème caramel-style puds – we rejoined

the fiesta and eagerly took our places on the Florentine-arched loggia of Villa Piedras Albas, a 16th-century *palacio* occupying a prime position on the square. The seven-bedroom mansion features sumptuous interiors, quirky hidden spaces, a walled rose garden and swimming pool with pavilion, making it the most impressive of the company's villas.

La Salve (or the salvation) marks the Christian victory over Trujillo's Moorish occupiers. Each year in celebration, a statue of the town's patron saint, the Virgin of Victory, is carried in a procession from the castle to the Iglesia de San Martín. Seemingly, the entire town had gathered as the elaborately decorated icon was paraded. As a band struck up a tune, the crowd sang in unison the La Salve hymn in honour. A dramatic fireworks display followed and the corks quickly popped. As ever in Spain, a devout religious festival had turned into a giant party.

You'll find it hard to leave the calm of your villa, but any Trujillo itinerary should also include a visit to the "nuns with buns" – an enclosed Franciscan order selling biscuits and cakes

via a turntable at the Santa Clara Convent. You can speak to them, but they're forbidden to see you or reply. It's a quirky experience.

Hispanophiles will tell you that the true essence of Spain lies inland, and Trujillo is about as authentic as it gets. Whether you're seeking a romantic getaway, a group holiday with lashings of luxury, or even a business trip with a difference, Trujillo Villas Espana – which this year is also running creative cookery, art and yoga courses – offers a classy yet relaxed base for discovering its hidden gems.

Robert Sly



FACT FILE

Getting there BA/Iberia flies to Madrid up to 14 times a day from Heathrow and London City airports. Other airlines that fly to the Spanish capital include easyJet, Air Europa and Ryanair. Or book through WEXAS at www.iod.com/travel (020 7838 5989). Hire a car with Hertz from Madrid airport (www.hertz.co.uk).

Accommodation Properties range from the Artists' Studio for two (or three) to the seven-bedroom Villa Piedras Albas. In late spring, the weekly rate for the Garden Cottage (sleeping six) is £2,145.01. www.trujillovillaspana.com



Tasteful: the Garden Cottage's master bedroom – you won't be short of reading material around the pool