

# *The gem of* EXTREMADURA

Little known Trujillo in south-west Spain just a couple of hours from Madrid, is a magical town where you can eat and live like a Conquistador.

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Photographs: Kelly McHugh and Trujillo Villas Espana



**A**riving in Trujillo just as the sun sets is the perfect welcome to this charming and historic hilltop town. You can spot it glistening in the distance, rising up from the rugged plains of Extremadura with its 10th century Moorish castle sitting proudly at the top. It's not long before I'm taking on the twists and curves of Trujillo's narrow, steep cobbled lanes, passing buildings constructed of attractive mellow stone.

Trujillo has a story to tell. It is a town rich in heritage, told through the beauty of its many churches, castles and palaces which were once

home to Trujillo's illustrious Conquistadors. Its many restaurants offer gastronomic yet traditional delights from vegetable-topped gazpacho to the region's finest sweet but slightly bitter white asparagus.

For a town packed with the best examples of Renaissance architecture, columned arcades and one of the biggest plazas in Spain, Trujillo is not especially busy with tourists. The pace of life is delightfully slow. Locals sit in the bars and cafés and a handful of visitors wander around the landmarks that have been sitting there almost exactly as the Conquistadors left them.

### **A taste of authentic Spain**

Trujillo's atmospheric streets can make even the well travelled feel like they've arrived in Spain's most undiscovered town. Just a five-minute stroll down the cobbled lanes and narrow streets and you're in the town's original main square, the Plaza Mayor. It's an impressive sight, lined with noble houses, stone colonnades and beautiful loggias built by Trujillo's South American explorers when they returned from their conquest expeditions in the 16th century.





VIEWS OF TRUJILLO: A charming hilltop town of narrow, steep cobbled lanes, grand buildings and fiestas galore.



At 10pm, bathed in a welcoming, warm glow of subdued lighting, the plaza is buzzing with families enjoying alfresco dining. I head over to Corral Del Rey, a restaurant tucked into a secluded corner of the main square. Extremadura is one of Spain's most important wine regions and here you can try Yllera and Protos reds, perfect for washing down the local steak prepared on the charrill.

For just €20, I'm treated to a traditional three-course feast. The extensive menu includes tomato and melon gazpachos, salted grilled white asparagus, pork tenderloin with green pepper sauce, melt-in-your-mouth fillet steak medallions and veal cooked over oak charcoal, giving off an aromatic smoke that flavours the steak perfectly.

Those with a sweet tooth will have difficulty pondering the dessert choices of refreshing lemon sorbet laced with cava, cherry-flavoured

custard pudding topped with toasted coconut, fig brandy chocolates with ice cream, and fresh seasonal fruits. The chef thanks me for my custom with shots of sweet *licor de bellota*, a nutty liquor made locally from holm oak acorns, which proves a satisfying conclusion to a mouth-watering meal.

#### Trujillo's South American explorers

I set off early in the crisp morning air with my guide, Marco, on a three-hour tour to learn about Trujillo's magical past. The town's most famous native was Francisco de Pizarro, the illegitimate son of a Spanish captain, who travelled to South America in what became one of the most dramatic episodes in the history of the New World.

I had heard the same story being told by a Peruvian guide earlier this year in Cusco, a

town much resembling Trujillo. Visualising the Conquistador with his army of 150 men as they travelled the Pacific coast of South America and conquered the Incan empire sent my imagination into overdrive. It really was the other half of the story, only less brutal. Thousands of natives were killed including the Inca King Atahualpa, and hoards of gold, silver and other treasures were brought back to Spain, which became the greatest, richest and most powerful country in the world at the time.

Pizarro was just one of many 16th century Conquistadors of the Americas to be born out of Trujillo. Francisco de Orellana, who was the first European to explore the Amazon, also played his part in Trujillo's age of great splendour, making it one of Extremadura's most important historic and cultural towns.

## Perfectly preserved

A morning spent treading the cobblestone paths of Trujillo's history reveals a town passed through the hands of many rulers. The varied architecture tells a story of a town once inhabited by Celts, Romans, Moors and Christians who all left their mark. An early Roman fortress made way for the foundations of a Moorish castle built in the 10th century which saw further development in the 13th century by Christian rulers. The castle sits at the highest point of Trujillo, its preserved square towers typical of Arabic architecture rising dominant, giving impressive views of the town below.

Looking down on the low-pitched terracotta rooftops, you can see Trujillo's impressive churches including the beautiful Romanesque Santa Maria La Mayor, built in the 13th century after the Christian conquest of the city. Inside, the exquisite Gothic altarpiece painted by Fernando Gallego in 1480 is considered to be one of the most outstanding altars in Extremadura. The church was once the final resting place of the rich and notable, including King John II of Aragon whose funeral was held there in 1479. Renaissance influences also feature as a result of considerable restoration during the 16th century.

In the Plaza Mayor, Pizarro's equestrian statue stands proudly in front of one of the last churches to be built in Trujillo, the Iglesia de San Martin. Majestic palaces

built by wealthy Spaniards in Trujillo's heyday surround the church, including the house of Pizarro's brother, the Marquis of the Conquest, adorned with intricate stonework depicting the conquest of Peru.

Villa Piedras Albas, which was built in 1530, stands out with its three segmented Florentine-style arches offering a prime view of the square below. The villa features grand interiors and turrets that lead out to a spacious open-air courtyard complete with lemon trees and a private swimming pool, giving you an oasis of calm securely enclosed by the tall garden walls. Villa Piedras Albas is just one of the unique historic holiday properties available to rent from Trujillo Villas Espana. Catering for groups of all sizes, most of the other properties are located close to the castle at the summit of Trujillo, having been fully restored and elegantly furnished by local artisans.

## Tasty tapas

The tour finished at the Plaza Mayor where a number of fine eateries open out to the square, creating an irresistible aroma. Tapas fits the bill perfectly with small plates ranging from marinated pork to creamy *ibores* cheese, a local delicacy favoured for its smooth texture. This is just one of the cheeses that was given protected designation of origin (PDO) for its quality and uniqueness at the National Spanish Cheese Festival, which is hosted in Trujillo every year in May. For cheese lovers it's a perfect time to be in Trujillo, with thousands of cheeses to try during the five-day event taking place in the historic Plaza Mayor. Fluffy buffalo mozzarella, rich flavoured *manchego*, smoked *idiazabal*, blue *valdeon* and *queso de Murcia al vino* famed for being washed with red wine during the maturing process.



## Where to eat

### Corral Del Rey, Plaza Mayor

[www.corraldelreytrujillo.com](http://www.corraldelreytrujillo.com)

Three-course set menu including one glass of wine for £25 per person.



## *Getting there*

Fly from the UK to Madrid or Seville in around two hours with BA, easyJet, BMI and Ryanair.

Renting a car is the most straightforward way to arrive, both airports being around a 2.5-hour drive away. You can also take the Avanza bus from Madrid city centre, which takes around three hours.

A sunset to savour.

Far reaching views of the unspoilt countryside.



## *Staying there*

Trujillo Villas España currently offers six properties for groups of between two and 14. Villa Martires and the Garden Cottage (complete with swimming pool and tennis court), the Artist's Studio and Villa Moritos are all located at the top of the town, close to many of Trujillo's historic sights. Villa Piedras Albas and the Townhouse are on the Plaza Mayor.

Prices for a one-week stay start at £495 and include one traditional evening meal. [www.trujillovillasespana.com](http://www.trujillovillasespana.com)

Also on the tapas menu was something I'd not eaten before, *migas*. This traditional Spanish dish was eaten by peasants for hundreds of years for its simple ingredients. Crumbled day-old bread fried in pig fat and flavoured with chorizo and smoked paprika, a spice produced locally from the fiery red *chilli pimentón*. A staple in any Spanish kitchen, smoked paprika is available in the local shops in small tin tubs and is the perfect gift for your foodie friends back home.

The tastiest and perhaps most unique local dish is *pata negra*, a rare Iberico cured ham produced from acorn-fed Iberian black pigs that live primarily in the south-west of Spain. The free-range pigs live like royalty, roaming freely in specially maintained oak forests and bulking up on their favourite food, the acorn (*bellota*). It is a very high quality Iberico ham, lightly marbled with healthy fat as a result of the curing process that only occurs in acorn-fed pigs. The pigs feast on up to 20 pounds of acorns every day before reaching the desired weight for slaughter. The hams are then salted and hung to cure for up to four years with as much as 40 per cent of the ham's fat melting away, giving it a creamy texture and rich, nutty flavour. This is followed with a shot of *licor de bellota*, all pretty impressive for a little nut most of us dismiss as squirrel food!

### **Fiesta forever**

Trujillo has its fair share of festivals throughout the year, including La Salve Fiesta, also known as Trujillo Liberation Day, which celebrates Christian victory. Taking place at the very end of August or beginning of September, the festival kicks off during the day with a parade of colourful, costumed giants making its way through the town and into the main square where children play in the water

fountain. By evening, 10,000 people are gathered in Plaza Mayor in darkness to sing a hymn called the *Salve* (salvation) with just a spotlight shining on the statue of Trujillo's patron saint, the Virgin of the Victoria. I was lucky to watch this magical spectacle from the loggia of Villa Piedras Albas, offering the finest view of the festival and the fireworks that followed shortly afterwards from the castle above. The perfect ending to the perfect weekend in magical Trujillo.

## *What to do*

Trujillo sightseeing tours can be arranged through Trujillo Villas Espana. Day trips include the Monfragüe National Park, one of the most important protected spaces in Extremadura, offering an extraordinary landscape of woods, meadows and ponds, and an ideal spot for bird watching.

Nearby Cáceres is a beautiful ancient World Heritage city that has changed very little since the 16th century. [www.turismoextremadura.com](http://www.turismoextremadura.com)