

Best of Spain by train

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Day trips from Madrid are easy thanks to Spain's high-speed AVE train network.

Jeanine Barone uses Madrid's excellent rail network to explore eight of the nation's most impressive sights.

When I'm battling Madrid's car-choked boulevards or rubbing shoulders with Madrilenos in congested Puerta del Sol, vineyards, mountain oases and mediaeval villages seem a distant fantasy. But, in fact, Madrid is positioned perfectly for stress-free day trips, thanks to abundant train connections and an extensive network of high-speed trains, referred to as AVE. These are eight of my favourite day-long train trips from the capital.



Cordoba

Iberian splendour ... Segovia's Roman aqueduct. *Photo: iStock*

A stroll along the city's whitewashed lanes offers a glimpse of Spain's Moorish past. The fortified Alcazar de los Reyes Cristianos is the best example of this, with its exquisite patios, gardens, gushing fountains and placid pools. The former capital of the Islamic empire in Spain, Cordoba has one of the largest mosques in the world, the Mezquita. I step through the doorway and I'm struck by the juxtaposition of King Carlos V's Christian cathedral built inside the mosque. The city's Muslims once performed their ablutions in the lovely orange tree-studded patio.

Nearby, in the narrow lanes of the old Jewish quarter, I dine at Los Marqueses, a Mediterranean restaurant that's part of the new hotel Las Casas de la Juderia, a restored palace (www.casasypalacios.com).

After a six-kilometre taxi ride, I continue my tour of the city's Moorish past at the ruins of Medina Azahara, a 10th-century city. Later I slip into the restored Medina Califal Banos Arabes for a traditional hammam massage and steam (www.hammamspain.com).

From Madrid Atocha to Cordoba Central takes 1hr 42min on an AVE train, from €54 (\$76) return.

Zaragoza

The city has undergone something of a renaissance since its moment in the limelight during Expo 2008. Its contemporary architecture is eye candy: the organic Pavilion Bridge, designed by Zaha Hadid, and the 76-metre Torre del Agua with its blue-tinged, glass-walled facade resembling a giant container of water.

The water theme is ubiquitous in Zaragoza. The city is the site of Europe's largest freshwater aquarium and in the summer it's possible to paddle on whitewater rapids or lie on a sandy riverside beach at the Water Park.

This is the city for chocoholics, thanks to a monk who brought back cacao and a chocolate recipe to the province from Mexico in the 16th century. I join a new two-hour "chocotour", where I taste chocolate in a range of textures and flavours at four notable shops. And that night I use my Tapas Card to sample bite-sized delicacies at a handful of bars.

From Madrid Atocha to Zaragoza Delicias takes 1hr 24min on an AVE train, from €47 return.

Water Park, intersection of Avenida Ranillas and Ronda del Rabal, see www.parquedelagua.com and www.acuaticazgz.es. Kayak rental at Calm Water Canal costs €12. Chocolate tour costs €12, a Tapas Card costs €12, see www.zaragoza.es/ciudad/turismo.



Avila

The mediaeval era is alive and well in Avila, which has an old quarter ringed by some of the best-preserved fortified walls in Europe. An extra section has been restored and opened, so I take a two-kilometre stroll atop the towering battlements, punctuated by dozens of watchtowers.

The city's northern walls are best seen from the glass-walled cafe in Avila's new contemporary convention centre, the Lienzo Norte Centro de Congressos, the site of year-round concerts and theatre productions (www.lienzonorte.es). But Avila has another claim to fame as the birthplace of the mystic Saint Teresa. Among the relics on display at the Convento de Santa Teresa is a portion of her finger.

From Madrid Chamartin to Avila takes 90min, from €16 return.

Segovia

Though the Romans have left their mark all over Europe, it's unusual to find such well-preserved ruins in the middle of a city. Segovia's arched Roman aqueduct is splendid, a two-tiered structure built without mortar.

The city's other signature site is the turreted Alcazar, a fantastical fortress-museum perched on a rocky promontory, said to have been one of several mediaeval castles that inspired Disney's Sleeping Beauty Castle (www.alcazardesegovia.com, entry €4). Instead of paging through guidebooks to set my itinerary, I rent an MP3 player from the tourist centre and follow one of five city walking tours (www.turismodesegovia.com). They've also got a new Bluetooth system; once I download the images and text on my mobile phone, I have access to maps, itineraries, cultural activities and more. Before leaving town, I follow in the footsteps of King Juan Carlos, who has been known to order cochinito, the roasted suckling pig that's Segovia's best-known dish.

From Madrid Chamartin to Segovia AV takes 28min, from €19 return.

Aranjuez

Aranjuez is synonymous with its opulent palace, Palacio Real de Aranjuez, used as a royal retreat. But once I set eyes on its expansive blooming gardens, it's hard to head indoors. Spain's kings and queens spent many an afternoon lounging and strolling here.

I wander past marble fountains, sculptures of Greek gods, even a dense woodland. I dine at Restaurante de la Calle, a new eatery that's all about plants - the chef, Rodrigo, consults with a botanist - though by no means strictly vegetarian. There's a stellar selection of exotic produce, such as limequats and dragon fruit, to complement every dish. The roast pigeon with figs and lemon thyme is a signature.

From Madrid Chamartin or Madrid Atocha to Aranjuez takes 35min, from €9 return.

Restaurante de la Calle, Antigua Carretera de Andalucia 85, see www.restaurantedelacalle.com and www.gastrobotanica.com.

Toledo

Toledo's centuries-old synagogues, churches and mosques are evidence of its dramatic and diverse religious history. As an introduction, there are new panoramic tour buses with audio guides. For a more intimate experience, however, I walk the cobbled lanes and hire one of the tourist centre's electric bicycles to explore sites such as the giant Cathedral of Toledo, Spain's second-largest.

Inside, I find impressive paintings by El Greco, who spent his last years in Toledo. In the well-preserved Jewish quarter, one of two surviving synagogues, Sinagoga del Transito, houses a museum with ancient Sephardic artefacts, from tombstones to circumcision instruments. But even in such a spiritual atmosphere there's plenty to entice shoppers in this town known for its handcrafts, from boxes of marzipan to mediaeval-style swords.

From Madrid Atocha to Toledo takes 30min, from €20 return.

Cathedral of Toledo, Calle Cardenal Cisneros, see www.catedralprimada.es, entry €7.

Sinagoga del Transito, Calle Samuel Levi 2, entry €2.50.

Cercedilla

Madrid is visible in the distance from hiking trails around Cercedilla. But this low-key mountain town is literally a breath of fresh (and cool) air from the city's urban chaos and Madrilenos love to come here to walk.

From the Cercedilla train station, I walk to the Fuenfria Valley education centre where I pick up trail maps. The nearby meadow is perfect for a picnic. I tackle the orange-marked Miradores loop trail, which extends 10 kilometres through the pinewoods. Miradores means viewpoint and it's an apt name. On my next visit, I'd like to try a steeper trail that follows an old Roman road. Or take the narrow-gauge train to Puerto de Cotos, a mountain pass veined with high-altitude trails in Penalara Nature Park with flower-filled meadows and glacial lakes.

From Madrid Chamartin to Cercedilla takes 1hr 10min, from €9 return.

Valdepenas

With 17 wineries (bodegas), this is one of Spain's fastest-growing wine regions. My first stop is the wine museum in a former bodega dating to 1901, full of old wine presses and oenological artefacts.

Next door is Bodegas Aruspide, a winery with a decidedly artistic sensibility. In keeping with the owners' belief that wines are works of art, the bodega shows paintings by local artists.

It has regular tours and tastings - don't miss the well-regarded chardonnay - and there are special tours, including guided wine-paired culinary events and tastings led by the winemaker.

A highlight is exploring the deep, 19th-century cave at Bodegas J.A. Megia e hijos, in which its award-winning Corcova Crianza is aged.

From Madrid Chamartin or Madrid Atocha Cercanias to Cordoba Central takes 2hr 20min, from €35 return.

Wine Museum, Princesa 39, phone +34 926 321 111, free entry.

Bodegas Aruspide, Calle Ciriaco Cruz 2, see www.aruspide.com, regular tour and tasting costs €6, specialty tour costs from €37, professional wine tasting costs €18.

Bodegas J.A. Megia e hijos, Calle Magdalena 33, see www.corcovo.com.

For details on trains, timetables and routes for Spain's railway system, see www.renfe.es. Emirates flies to Madrid for about \$1750; to Dubai (14hr), then Madrid (8hr). Lufthansa flies for about \$2290 to Singapore (Lufthansa flight number but Singapore Airlines aircraft, 7hr), then Frankfurt (13hr), then Madrid (2hr 30min). Fares are low-season return from Melbourne and Sydney including tax.