

Salamanca: the brains in Spain

Michael Kerr passes himself off as a student in the university city of Salamanca - and manages to avoid the Inquisition.

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The bookseller put our purchases - some in Spanish, some in English - in a bag. Then he dropped in a leaflet with his price list for dictionaries, grammars and primers. We were in town for the weekend, but he had assumed that my wife and I were language students and might become regulars.

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He had probably assumed, too, that we were American, for American language students are everywhere in Salamanca: dawdling over Cokes in the Plaza Mayor, sunning themselves on stone benches in front of the two cathedrals, chatting to Mom in Boston via laptop and Skype from the cafeteria in the halls of residence. This city north-west of Madrid is a popular place in which to learn Spanish, thanks to the purity of its diction, the longevity of its nightlife and the fact that, as Mom heard, "it's a really neat place".

I hope Mom goes on believing that after the release early next year of *Vantage Point*, a Hollywood thriller for which Salamanca provides the setting. The trailer opens with the Plaza Mayor, the city's arcaded outdoor living room, being readied for a spectacle. Snipers scan the balconies, CIA agents talk sideways into mouthpieces. A television reporter begins, "Here in Salamanca, Spain, President Ashton has been working with leaders of five continents to form a new groundbreaking alliance..."

The fictional US president, played by William Hurt, has time to declare, "Today we make history..." and then he is shot. So begins a couple of hours of shootings, bombings, arrests and car chases in which the "City of Thought", as the tourist board bills it, becomes an altogether more dangerous place to be.

The tourist board slogan is an expression of history rather than of modern-day reality. Between the 13th and the

16th centuries, Salamanca's university was one of the most important in the world, the brains behind imperial Spain. It made huge contributions to the development of international law, and was an obvious place for Columbus to seek support for his voyages of exploration.

For a while it was powerful enough to resist the demands of the Inquisition, but by the 18th century clericalism and suspicion of "Protestant" thinking had strangled it. Mathematics and medicine were wiped from the curriculum, and its teachers took to debating what language the angels spoke.

But if the city, academically, is a shell of what it was, it's a glorious shell. Packed tight on a hill above the River Tormés, it blazes gold in the evening sun. Villamayor sandstone, rich in nitrous oxide, has formed its churches and colleges, its palaces and plazas. That stone is so soft it can be carved as readily as silver. Hence the word plateresque - from platero, silversmith - used to describe the ornamental carving that adorns the façades of so many buildings.

Here are coats of arms, skulls, flora, fauna and, in one cheeky contemporary touch by restorers at a door of the "new" cathedral (finished in 1733), an astronaut. In the daytime, you goggle at the detail; in the evening, you stand back and marvel at how the sandstone, raked by the hard Castilian sun, seems not so much to be reflecting light as to be lit from within.

A similar effect is achieved, with a touch more technology, in the cloister of the university's Lower Schools (where prospective students were prepared for entry). Here in a blacked-out room is El Cielo (The Heavens), a fragment of a 15th-century painting that used to cover the vault of the university library. The painting, attributed to Fernando Gallego, has representations in blue and yellow of the sun, the moon, the star signs and some constellations. In the interests of preservation, the air is as cold as a supermarket chiller cabinet. Sacred music plays. And the painting, illuminated softly from below, takes on an otherworldly glow.

Salamanca is given to tricks of the light, man-made and natural. In St Stephen's Monastery, where tourists mingle in the sacristy with monks straightening their robes for Mass, you can crane your neck to admire the gothic vaulting - or you can see it distorted in the angled mirrors placed at intervals around the floor of the cloisters. The sun plays tricks, too.

The builders were busy near the Plaza Mayor during our stay. A yellow crane rose behind it. In the low evening sun it was transformed into some giant, nodding bird - an exotic relative of the white cranes that inhabit the city's rooftops, and whose huge nests seem as though they might be as much to blame as subsidence for the tipsy appearance of its towers.

Visitors can have a crane's eye view of the city on a tour of the two cathedrals, the older Romanesque, the newer Gothic, gazing down from walkways both indoors and out. We arrived in the older cathedral at the same time as a party of wedding guests. There was no ushering; they milled about, hugging and kissing, in the aisle, and hardly had time to take their seats before the bride arrived. If she was enjoying the day, she certainly didn't show it: she had the tight lips of a woman obeying a shotgun.

It was a day for weddings. We saw two happier brides later, one posing for pictures on a roundabout planted with three olive trees below St Stephen's; the other, still in her white dress, swigging beer from a bottle with friends outside a bar on the edge of the Plaza Mayor.

We spent a lot of time in and around the Plaza Mayor: stopping there on our first evening for garlic prawns at one of its bars, Cervantes; returning in the morning when it was quiet enough to hear our own footfalls; then being swept there again in the evening paseo, among the pensioned couples in their shiny shoes, the hen parties in matching afro wigs, and the freshers from the university in dressing gowns and pyjamas.

Salamanca is not short of collections and galleries (including one in a former prison), and its Museum of Art Nouveau and Art Deco, which is as much an exhibit as the work it contains, is worth a couple of hours of anyone's time. But the greatest pleasure to be had in the city is to stroll and enjoy the light on that sandstone and - security being casual - occasionally find yourself somewhere you're not sure you're allowed to be.

Having spent a happy half hour mesmerised by the sun sliding down the walls of the cloisters at the Hall of

Residence of Fonseca College - commissioned by Archbishop Fonseca in 1525 - we were just about to leave when we saw a student go through a heavy oak door with a sign saying "Cafeteria". We followed.

Behind the door was a dimly lit room, maybe 90 feet by 30, with a stone fireplace at the far end. Life-sized pictures of aristocrats hung on one wall, smaller portraits of clergymen on another. In deep leather sofas and armchairs, lamps at their sides, a few American students sat tapping and talking over their laptops. It was like a gentleman's club with none of the stiffness.

We bought a couple of beers from the bar tucked away at the end of the room and, feeling privileged, sat down to flick through newspapers whose front pages were stamped with the arms of the Colegio Arzobispo Fonseca.

A quarter of an hour later, a university official, black-suited, black hair shiny with oil, came bustling in with a party of visitors. We assumed we would be turfed out. Instead, he wished us a good evening and settled his visitors at a table in front of the fireplace for drinks. Or all but one of them. She was at the other end of the room, sweeping her video camera over the fireplace, the ceiling, the paintings and us - two typical students in Salamanca.

ESSENTIALS

Michael Kerr flew from Heathrow to Madrid with Iberia (0870 609 0500, www.iberiaairlines.co.uk (<http://www.iberiaairlines.co.uk>); returns from £97.40) and travelled on to Salamanca by bus with Auto Res (www.auto-res.com (<http://www.auto-res.com>); express returns £20). Note that bus tickets bought online can only be used at the time and date stamped on them, so it's safest to allow for a delayed arrival in Madrid and buy them on the day.

He stayed a few minutes' walk from the old city at the Hotel Rector (0034 923 218482, www.hotelrector.com (<http://www.hotelrector.com>); doubles from £89 in December/January, room only), a restful 13-room hotel with exceptionally friendly staff. The Rector serves breakfast only, but Salamanca has plenty of good eating places.

Try Momo (c/ San Pablo, 13) and Cervantes on the Plaza Mayor for tapas and La Hoja 21 (c/ San Pablo, 21; 0034 923 264028) for dinner.

La Hoja 21 has a wonderful menú de degustación including dishes such as onion and apple terrine, parcels of cheese and prawns, crab crepes and beef in a creamy sauce; about €90 for two with a bottle of wine and coffee.

Guidebook choice: the Rough Guide to Spain (£14.99) has a few pages on Salamanca.

FLIGHT WATCH

In a report last month on improving the experience of passengers at Heathrow, the Transport Secretary, Ruth Kelly, said: "It is not simply the flight that matters. It's the journey to the airport, the time spent in the queue at check-in, security or immigration, and any delays spent on the aircraft waiting for a slot to take off." We share that view, and in this new series will be reporting on our writers' experiences both on the ground and in the air.

Airline and cabin Iberia, economy outward flight IB3163

London Heathrow to Madrid, 10.55

On the ground With hand baggage only, I arrived at Heathrow's Terminal 2 at 8.30am, checked in and was through security by 9am - faster than expected. Long queues at eating places in departures. Five minutes after the flight was due to leave, Iberia announced that boarding would begin in 20 minutes. Boarded at 11.38am, but didn't take off until nearly an hour and a half after scheduled time. Apology for delay cited "technical issues".

In the air Service consisted of sandwiches and drinks, for which Iberia charges extra. All passengers in economy - as well as those in business - were offered free (Spanish) newspapers.

Return flight IB3166

Madrid to London Heathrow, 16.30

On the ground Checked in and was through security in three minutes. Amazingly - but not reassuringly - swift. Terminal 4 at Barajas is more spacious, pleasant and less crowded than Heathrow.

In the air Bang on time - but where were the free newspapers?

Telegraph travel rating

In the air: 2/5

On the ground: 3/5

- **In pictures: Salamanca's sandstone architecture** ([javascript:newWindow\('/core/Slideshow/slideshowContentFrameFragXL.jhtml?xml=/travel/slideshow/salamanca/pixsalamanca.xml&site=', 'Slideshow', 'height=570,width=750,resizable'\)](javascript:newWindow('/core/Slideshow/slideshowContentFrameFragXL.jhtml?xml=/travel/slideshow/salamanca/pixsalamanca.xml&site=', 'Slideshow', 'height=570,width=750,resizable')))
- **Michael Kerr blogs at www.kerraway.com** (<http://www.kerraway.com>) .

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