

From Times Online

June 26, 2008

Salamanca, my kind of town

Devika Bhat goes in search of frogs and hedonism in this spectacular Spanish sandstone city



Two backpackers resting in Plaza Mayor, Salamanca

Devika Bhat

Salamanca was the setting for the film *Vantage Point*, in which the US President is gunned down at a global peace summit, hosted in the city.

If the gorgeous surroundings depicted in the film triggered an urge to book the first flight to Spain, a word of caution before you pack your bags - most of the action was actually shot in Mexico City.

There are still plenty of reasons - none to do with a lacklustre Hollywood movie - to spend some time in this Renaissance city 140 miles from Madrid.

Not least of these is its architecture. The old centre is dominated by buildings made of ancient sandstone, which have given Salamanca the name La Ciudad Dorada, or The Golden City, and earned it the designation of a Unesco World Heritage Site.

But this is not a place stuck forlornly in the past - the winding streets and historic landscape play host to a lively plethora of bars, clubs, restaurants and cafes where you can happily while away the hours in between absorbing the visual feast of the city's landmarks.

At the heart of these are the Plaza Mayor, widely considered Spain's finest main square, and the university - founded in the thirteenth-century and still attracting thousands of students from across the world.

Considering its importance, it seemed apt to visit the university first and given its academic reputation I was glad to have a task of suitable gravitas to pursue once there - frog spotting.

Forget about revelling in the history of one of Europe's oldest institutes of learning - the obligatory activity for visitors is to search for the little frog sculpted into the beautifully ornate entrance facade. Those who locate it without help, so the saying goes, will be guaranteed good luck.

If such a task seems too tourist faddish, the building's interior holds much of interest, including the chance to marvel at extremely uncomfortable-looking benches on which Renaissance-era students would studied and a beautiful library housing almost 3,000 ancient manuscripts.

Feeling inspired by my tour of Spain's most famous seat of learning, I decided to visit the city's two main cathedrals, handily named Catedral Nueva and Catedral Vieja (new and old).

The dome of the New Cathedral, built during the 16th-19th centuries, dominates Salamanca's skyline and both also boast painstakingly detailed facades. A tour is well worth the small entrance fee (3 Euros), describing the construction of the New Cathedral and enabling visitors to climb to platforms that offer

impressive, if dizzying, views across the city.

Such a heavy injection of culture requires sustenance, for which there are a host of options, not least the typically Spanish menu del dia which includes three or four courses plus wine and bread for the bargain price of 10-12 Euros.

There are several small cafes in Plaza Mayor, where the spectacle of the city's sandstone architecture is shown in all its glory, particularly at night when the buildings are illuminated.

Even by day, you could do a lot worse than sit at one of the outdoor tables with a beer and some tapas as you watch locals, students and tourists going about their business.

We stopped at the unfortunately named Cafe Novelty, where we enjoyed crab croquettes and the ubiquitous tortilla in the sunshine. Although coming here will leave your purse a touch lighter than going to one of the cafes further away, it is well worth paying the extra few Euros for the pleasure of sitting in this breathtakingly beautiful spot.

Even in the tourist trap of the Plaza Mayor, the friendliness of the locals was noticeable. But nowhere more was this more evident than at our hotel, located just outside the old centre near the Roman Bridge.

Formerly an aristocrat's home, the Hotel Rector was built with Art Deco in mind and has just 13 rooms. Ours was clean, spacious and the marble bathroom was pleasantly luxurious.

The small dining room put on an impressive spread for breakfast that belied its size; we feasted on fresh and dried fruit, cereals, various breads, cheeses and meats, and fresh orange juice. Best of all were the (whisper it) English-speaking staff, who greeted us warmly and offered tips on the sights and sounds of the city.

It was on the hotel's recommendation that we hit a series of bars on the other side of the city, starting with the Posada des las Almas, where dozens of students could be found chatting earnestly while nursing bottles of Sol.

It was a cosy and chilled atmosphere, if a little too self-consciously trendy, so we moved on in search of something better and a bite to eat. Another bar, Tio Vivo, did not disappoint with its bizarre decor (carousel horses, trumpets and flying bicycles) and the chance to drink very strong Mojitos by candlelight.

For a Monday night, it was busier than you might expect even for Spain - Salamanca's hip young things can clearly hold their own when it comes to partying on a school night.

When it comes to dining, as with elsewhere in the country, the best bet is to go on a tapas crawl, hopping from bar to bar and seeing what culinary delights each has to offer. A staple of the Castile region is pork, as is suckling pig (Cochinillo) or goat (cabrito) but vegetarians too are well-catered for, with several restaurants offering meat-free options and indeed, a handful of vegetarian-only restaurants.

MORE MUST-SEE ATTRACTIONS

Casa de las Conchas (House of Shells): now home to a library, this intriguing 16th century building has carvings of 300 scallop shells sculpted on to its walls. It was originally the palace of Rodrigo Maldonado, a knight of the Santiago Order - of which the shell is the emblem. Entrance free.

Museo de Salamanca: a former palace, this terrific little museum in the grounds of the university has fascinating sections on local archaeology and ethnology, with exhibits dating from the 14th century. Entrance fee: €1.20 Reduced: €0.60 (groups of 15 or more) Free: retirees, students and ICOM (International Council of Museums) members, with ID.

Casa Lis/Museo Art Nouveau Art Decó - has 19 collections of Art Nouveau and Art Deco dating from the end of the 19th century, including glass and porcelain figures, furniture, jewels and toys. With its stained-glass windows, the building itself offers more of a reason to visit than the exhibits inside, although the vast doll collection is suitably compelling and eerie. There are also works by painters from Salamanca. Entrance fee: €3. Reduced: €2 (over 65s, retirees, students with ID, and groups of over 10 people). Free: children under 14.

EATING

Salamanca offers plenty of choice for the discerning foodie, from light bites and local snacks to four-course gourmet meals. The local staple of the Castile region is cured pork, which can be bought from specialist

shops in the city centre, unmissable thanks to the vast hunks of meat hanging from their ceilings. Most restaurants offer a menu del dia, which provides four courses for as little as 10 Euros, with many places including wine and bread in the price.

El Grille Azul - Located a short walk away from the bustle of the city centre, this homely restaurant offers wholesome and delicious vegetarian fare and terrific service.

El Bardo - The four-course Menu del Dia is excellent value, with generous portions, bread and wine all for 12 euros. The Gazpacho in particular was delicious.

Don Quijote Cafe - Great stop for a quick and inexpensive lunch, offering a range of tapas, from creamed spinach and bread to grilled vegetables and fish. Located yards from the university, it is popular with students.

Chez Victor - The only Michelin-starred restaurant in the city. Chef Victoriano Salvador trained in France and touches of French cuisine are clear in the changing menu. Deserts are said to be divine.

Convent of Santa Maria de Dunas - sells delicious little almond biscuits, known as amarguillos, which are made on the premises by nuns and melt in the mouth. Great for gifts and snacking on the go.

DRINKING

Given its large student population and the general Spanish attitude that the night is yet young at 11pm, it is hardly surprising that Salamanca has a host of bars and clubs. Students tend to reserve their energies for the weekend, so it is good to head out on Monday to Friday if you want to avoid the crowds. Many bars have special offers on drinks on Thursdays.

Posada des las Almas - Good selection of cocktails and plenty of seating room, but the achingly trendy atmosphere and indifferent attitude from the bar staff may not be to all tastes. Plaza de San Boal, 7

Restaurante Donmaur - located in Plaza Mayor, this is the perfect setting to enjoy a couple of beers as the sun sets over the square. Service is friendly and enthusiastic despite its tourist-drawing location. Plaza Mayor

Tin Tin - bang in the centre of town, this bar is an ode to the comic book character as is reflected in its decor. Isla de la Rúa, 3

Camelot - Popular bar and club that attracts large crowds of often international students. Music tends to be on the cheesy side but who needs the latest bands in order to dance your socks off until 4am? Bordadores, 3

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Rector - Beautiful and charming boutique hotel, with 13 well-equipped double rooms, located a short walk from the Plaza Mayor. Serves breakfast and has an underground car park for guests using a car. Prices, for a double or double superior room, range from 140 to 170 Euros. Paso Rector Separable, 10; Tel. 0034 923 21 40 08; Website: www.hotel rector.com

[Contact our advertising team](#) for advertising and sponsorship in Times Online, The Times and The Sunday Times, or place your advertisement.

Times Online Services: [Dating](#) | [Jobs](#) | [Property Search](#) | [Used Cars](#) | [Holidays](#) | [Births, Marriages, Deaths](#) | [Subscriptions](#) | [E-paper](#)

News International associated websites: [Globrix Property Search](#) | [Milkround](#)

Copyright 2009 Times Newspapers Ltd.

This service is provided on Times Newspapers' [standard Terms and Conditions](#). Please read our [Privacy Policy](#). To inquire about a licence to reproduce material from Times Online, The Times or The Sunday Times, click [here](#). This website is published by a member of the News International Group. News International Limited, 1 Virginia St, London E98 1XY, is the holding company for the News International group and is registered in England No 81701. VAT number GB 243 8054 69.

