

TRAVEL TALES

WHERE SPAIN SLOWS DOWN

A JOURNEY THROUGH EXTREMADURA.

By Kalpana Sunder

I have a birds eye view of Trujillo's honey-colored ramparts, the air scented with wild thyme from my vantage view point. Huge storks wheel around the bell towers, building large nests. Below, cafes slowly start opening their shutters in the pale morning light, with the bronze figure of adventurer Pizarro casting its long shadow across the cobblestones.

Beyond the walls is the wide Dehesa, or wooded pastureland, meandering toward Portugal, dotted with cork oaks and black pigs. I am in the Spanish region of Extremadura, bordering Portugal, a vast and unspoiled land steeped in heritage, gastronomy, and natural beauty.

I begin my journey in Jarandilla de la Vera, staying at a fortress-like Parador de Jarandilla. Paradors are former castles, palaces, and monasteries across Spain that have been transformed into atmospheric luxury hotels. This former castle, once the refuge of Emperor Charles V, wraps around a courtyard filled with palms and the soft echo of trickling fountains. With patterned tiles, a





MONASTERIO DE GUADALUPE (PATRIMONIO MUNDIAL)
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cozy lounge hung with chandeliers, books, and local ceramics, staying here feels like literally stepping into history.

From Jarandilla, we drove to the Yuste Monastery, tucked in a valley lined with cherry trees, where Emperor Charles V retired after abdicating his throne and spent his final years in contemplation and prayer. The monastery, destroyed by the French army and later restored, now rests in the midst of tranquil gardens.

From here, the road climbs toward the mountains until the towers of Guadalupe appear, clustered around the Real Monasterio de Santa María. Pilgrims have journeyed here for centuries, from peasants to kings and explorers. It was here that Christopher Columbus came to offer thanks after returning from the Americas in 1492. The first Indigenous people brought to Europe were taken here and baptized within these walls. My home for the night is again a Parador with a garden-framed patio, soaring arches, latticework, and portraits of monks set inside glowing niches.

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MÉRIDA (PATRIMONIO MUNDIAL)
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TRUJILLO 2 © EXTREMADURA TOURIST BOARD



PALACIO DE MIRABEL, PLASENCIA
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We take a guided tour of the monastery, where cloisters bloom with orange trees and fountains trickle along tiled corridors. The basilica glows with gilded retablos, while the Virgin of Guadalupe, dark and iconic, watches over the faithful. Inside the museum, we feast on treasured works by masters such as El Greco and Goya, as well as an ivory Christ attributed to Michelangelo.

Robes embroidered by local monks shimmer behind glass, and the 14th-century sacristy houses exquisite works by Spanish painter Francisco de Zurbarán. The old chapter room preserves handwritten choir books, illuminated with intricate art and large enough to be read by an entire choir. Outside, the village hums with life, with open-air cafes buzzing with conversation, children chasing each other across the plaza and shops selling local copper wares.

Our next stop is Trujillo, the birthplace of conquistadors, who were famous men who went out to the New World and came back with immense riches. Men like Francisco Pizarro, who conquered Peru, Francisco de Orellana, founder of Guayaquil, Ecuador, and the first European to explore the Amazon, were born in this town. From there, I journey outward, toward tiny villages and Renaissance towns. Leaving Trujillo, we follow a winding road that cuts through the region's lush heart.

I enjoy a visual feast at Romangordo, a small village known for its painted façades, which is our next stop. Local artists have transformed doors, shutters, and walls into vivid murals that tell stories of regional life, from women weaving to shepherds guiding flocks, and traditional occupations like olive-oil pressing preserved for posterity in confident brushstrokes.

Perhaps the greatest surprise of the entire region, for me, is Mérida, the ancient capital of Roman Lusitania. I check into my Hotel Ilunion Merida Palace, set inside an old palace with



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coloured tiles and fountains in the lobby, and head straight out to explore the city’s extraordinary Roman legacy. From the Temple of Diana in the heart of the center, with stocky pillars, hemmed in by cafes and shops, to the ancient amphitheatre where gladiators once battled, Mérida’s monuments feel astonishingly intact. The stone seating rises in elegant tiers, echoing with imagined roars from two millennia ago.

Nearby stands the ancient Roman theatre with tiered seating, its columns reaching skyward. Our local guide explains that summer concerts are still held here, blending modern applause with ancient acoustics. At the National Museum of Roman Art, housed in a stunning building of brick and stone arches designed by Spanish architect Rafael Moneo, I am captivated by old Roman mosaics unearthed from local homes, marble busts from the first century, and coins, glass, and artifacts that illuminated daily life in ancient Lusitania. I then enjoy a flamenco lesson at a local studio, learning a few steps of this passionate art form. Later, standing on the Roman bridge stretching across the Guadiana River, I watch joggers weaving between its arches.

As dusk settles, I sit on a terrace with a glass of local wine, watching swallows dart between battlements. Our final stop on the Extremadura trail is Cáceres, a city sculpted from golden stone. The weather turns rough and uncooperative, but armed with umbrellas, we walk through the old town, a maze of medieval towers and Renaissance palacios, where I feel like I have stepped onto the set of a historical drama.

From the Plaza Mayor, I climb toward the Arco de la Estrella and slip into the UNESCO-listed heart of the city. Every corner reveals a layer of history: Moorish walls, Jewish quarters, palatial mansions built on the fortunes of New World expeditions. In the quiet courtyard of the Palacio de Carvajal, I rest beneath a fig tree and listen to the city sounds.

On the final day, as we drive back toward Madrid, through fields humming with cicadas and clouds drifting low over the hills, I reflect on Extremadura’s quiet power. This is a region that invites you to slow down and pay attention. From wandering through palace-lined streets untroubled by crowds to sharing meals where every ingredient tells a story of land and legacy, Extremadura has cast its spell on me.



MÉRIDA (ROMAN BRIDGE AND LUSITANIA BRIDGE) ©EXTREMADURA TOURIST BOARD