



Aragón: Hidden Spain

Teruel, Zaragoza, Sos

7–15 May 2025 (ML 692)

9 days • £2,960

Lecturer: Dr Zahira Bomford

One of the least-visited regions of Spain, and yet one of the richest in history, architecture and landscapes.

As diverse a tour as we offer with Paleolithic and Neolithic cave painting and Roman remains.

Continue through Moorish palaces, Spain's finest examples of Mudéjar architecture, Romanesque castles and churches.

Goya is well represented; we visit his birthplace and see his *Horrors of War*.

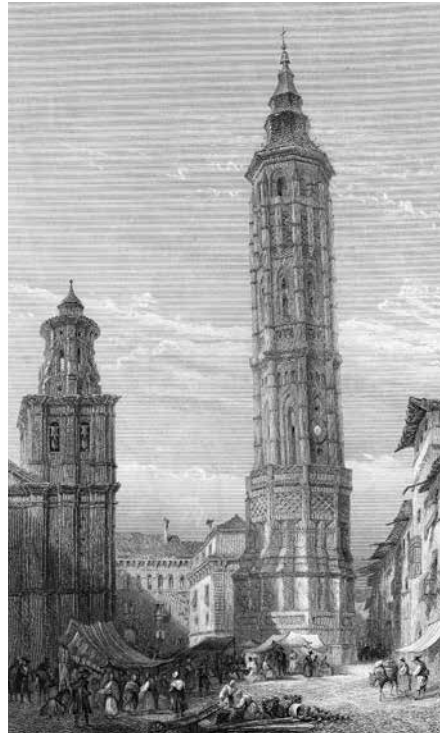
Other themes include military history: El Cid, Peninsular War, Civil War.

You cannot know Spain unless you know Aragón, that former kingdom rich in fine landscape, history and architecture, including Arab works and the Arab-Christian style known as Mudéjar, here at its most extravagant and surprising.

It is the swiftly-flowing River Aragón, running down from the High Pyrenees, which gave its name to one of the most dynamic mini-kingdoms of early medieval Europe. Soon Aragón advanced to meet the Moorish occupiers of the Ebro basin and wrested Zaragoza (Roman Caesar Augusta) from them.

From there, it was on to smaller Teruel and the rugged sierras which flank it, to establish, in the end, a shield-shaped territory. With Catalunya, Aragón came to rule Sicily, southern Italy and most of Greece, truly a power in the Mediterranean. Later, in the fifteenth century, it became a partner for Castile in forging the identity for what we know today as Spain. But since then it has been side-lined in the political structure, enabling it, through misfortune, to retain and still convey a sense of its early origins.

The landscape is as dramatic as the history. The peaks and summer pastures of the highest Pyrenees fall almost entirely within Aragón. Dropping south, the Ebro valley is like a winding oasis between deeply eroded, dry clay banks. South again lies steppe country, sometimes desert-like, turning finally to a territory of cliff and gorge. Here Neolithic man left paintings in rock shelters.



Zaragoza, La Torre Nueva, 19th-century engraving.

The architectural legacy is outstanding. The early stonemasons and architects of Aragón, in tandem with French craftsmen on the Pilgrims' Way to Santiago, produced some of the most charming Romanesque buildings in Spain, marked by particularly engaging stone carving. The castle of Loarre is arguably Spain's finest Romanesque military construction. This is matched in beauty and surprise-value by the Arabesques and interlocking arches of the (Arab) Aljafería Palace in Zaragoza. The four Mudéjar towers of Teruel are among the wonders of Spain.

Military history gives us El Cid Campeador. Though touted as a Christian hero, he worked for years as a mercenary general for the Moorish rulers of Zaragoza. During the Peninsular War – known in Spain as the War of Independence – Zaragoza endured two exceptionally bitter sieges. During the civil war of 1936–39, Belchite, close to Zaragoza, was furiously contested – and left in ruins as a warning for the future. The three-month battle for Teruel, fought in sub-zero temperatures from December 1937, was one of the most cruel of defeats for the Spanish Republic.

Add to all of this four different wine regions, each with its own *denominación de origen*;

pottery still made in the Arabic tradition; intriguing country towns; and robust, big-city Zaragoza, studded with major monuments.

Itinerary

Day 1. Fly at c. 10.00am (Air Europa) from London Gatwick to Madrid. Drive to Teruel arriving at the hotel at c. 6.30pm. First of two nights in Teruel.

Day 2: Teruel. A full day of visits in Teruel, including the mausoleum of the famous Lovers of Teruel who perished for love of one another, and the fine Provincial Museum housed in an Aragonese mansion. See also the little city's famous Mudéjar towers and the cathedral's painted ceiling.

Day 3: Albarracín, Zaragoza. Albarracín is a gorge-ringed hill town founded by Arabs and long ruled by its Christian reconquerors. The defensive wall high on the 'landward' side, medieval streets and narrow site make it a remarkable spot. Close by lies a tract of well-wooded country above red sandstone cliffs. Here Palaeolithic and Neolithic communities painted animals and humans in rock shelters. Walk to see some of the most revealing paintings, mostly in woods, but also visiting a magnificent cliff top with wide views. Continue to Zaragoza, capital of Aragón. First of three nights in Zaragoza.

Day 4: Zaragoza. Visit the medieval/Renaissance cathedral with Mudéjar work and La Lonja, the fine Gothic/Renaissance exchange. The Basilica of El Pilar is the 18th-century site of modern pilgrimage built around the pillar on which the Virgin Mary appeared to St James. Ceiling paintings include works by Goya. See also the Fine Arts Museum in the newer part of town.

Day 5: Belchite, Fuendetodos, Zaragoza. Belchite was the site of fierce fighting in 1937 which left the town completely ruined. In open and semi-desert country, the visit is an eerie experience. At Fuendetodos, in equally bleak country, Goya's birthplace has been well-restored. The Museum of Etching contains the *Caprichos*, *Disparates*, and *Horrors of War*. Return to Zaragoza and visit the Aljafería, an Arab palace incorporating brilliant additions by Ferdinand and Isabella.

Day 6: Huesca, Loarre. Huesca, second 'capital' of infant Aragón, has a cathedral with a dramatic altarpiece. Follow the river Gállego as

Aragón: Hidden Spain
continued

it flows past the extraordinary rock formations of Riglos de los Mallos. Emerge from the sierras to encounter the Castle of Loarre, arguably the finest Romanesque military building in Spain. Drive to the picturesque town of Sos for three nights.

Day 7: Sos del Rey Católico, Leyre. In remote hill country, Sos del Rey Católico is one of the chief sites of the medieval kingdom: Ferdinand of Aragón was born here in 1452 and the town retains much of its medieval atmosphere. The monastery of San Salvador de Leyre maintains Gregorian offices in a fascinating church with a good crypt and western portal.

Day 8: San Juan de la Peña, Santa Cruz de la Serós, Jaca. The monastery of San Juan de la Peña, dramatically sited under a bulging rock face, is the burial place of the kings and queens of early Aragón and key to understanding Aragón's religious sentiment and history. See the magnificently carved mini-cloister. The 11th-cent. church at Santa Cruz de la Serós is a fine example of Aragonese Romanesque. Continue to the cathedral of Jaca with fine stone carvings.

Day 9. Drive north out of Aragón to Bilbao (143 miles) to take the afternoon flight arriving at London Gatwick at c. 3.00pm (Vueling).

Lecturer

Dr Zahira Bomford. Independent art historian and art conservator, former Senior Conservator of Paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. She completed her PhD at the Courtauld, where she has also lectured, in addition to Rice University, Houston, UCL and the V&A. She has worked in conservation at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Prado and the National Trust and has published extensively on Spanish art. In 2022 she was recognised by the College Art Association in America with a Lifetime Achievement award and also published a book with the Getty Conservation Institute on Franz Kline.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £2,960 or £2,760 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £3,230 or £3,030 without flights.

Included: flights (economy class) with Air Europa (Boeing 737) and Vueling (Airbus A320); private coach; accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 2 lunches and 5 dinners with wine or beer, soft drinks, water and tea or coffee; all admissions; all tips for waiters, drivers and guides; all taxes; the services of the lecturer, tour manager and local guides.

Accommodation. Gran Hotel Botánicos, Teruel (granhotelbotanicos.com): modern and centrally located 4-star hotel with well-equipped rooms. **Hotel Catalonia el Pilar, Zaragoza** (hoteles-catalonia.com): modern 4-star hotel in an attractive turn-of-the-century building in the historic centre. **Parador de Sos del Rey Católico, Sos** (parador.es): 4-star parador with views of surrounding countryside. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? The tour involves a lot of walking in town centres, where coach access is restricted, and standing in museums and churches. Uneven ground and irregular paving are standard. The tour is not suitable for anyone who has difficulties with everyday walking and stair-climbing, as fitness and sure-footedness are essential. The optional, more strenuous walk on day 3 requires you to be a practised country walker, used to some up and down. It should not be undertaken by anyone who is not sure-footed or who has difficulty with gradients. Some days involve a lot of driving – average distance by coach per day: 80 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.