



Day Trips from Madrid

San Lorenzo de El Escorial p160

One of Spain's grandest monuments, this Unesco World Heritage-listed palace-monastery complex combines a cool mountain setting with the imposing grandeur of imperial Spain.

Toledo p161

Toledo is a beautifully sited, architecturally distinguished city with signposts to its glory days as a crossroads of civilisation.

Segovia p164

A Roman aqueduct, a castle that inspired Disney and a colour scheme of sandstone and warm terracotta make Segovia one of the most agreeable towns close to Madrid.

Ávila p165

Surrounded by the finest medieval walls in Spain, Ávila is an evocative Castilian city that's the spiritual home to the cult of Santa Teresa.

Aranjuez p167

A royal getaway down through the centuries, Aranjuez has an extraordinary palace and expansive gardens grafted onto a delightfully small-town canvas.

Chinchón p167

Home to one of the prettiest town squares in Spain, Chinchón is a world away from downtown Madrid, with fabulous food thrown in.



TOP SIGHT SAN LORENZO DE EL ESCORIAL

Home to the majestic monastery and palace complex of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, this one-time royal getaway rises up from the foothills of the mountains that shelter Madrid. The prim little town is overflowing with quaint shops, restaurants and hotels and the fresh, cool air, among other things, has been drawing city dwellers here since the complex was built on the orders of King Felipe II in the 16th century as both a royal palace and as a mausoleum for Felipe's parents, Carlos I and Isabel.

Patio de los Reyes

At the monastery's main entrance on the west side of the complex, note the statue of St Lawrence holding a symbolic gridiron, the instrument of his martyrdom (he was roasted alive on one). After passing St Lawrence, you'll enter the Patio de los Reyes (Patio of the Kings), which houses statues of the six kings of Judah.

Basílica

Directly ahead of the Patio de los Reyes lies the sombre basilica. Once inside the church proper, turn left to view Benvenuto Cellini's white Carrara marble statue of Christ crucified (1576). Nearby there's an El Greco painting, although it's a far cry from the artist's dream of decorating the whole complex.

Two Museums

As you head downstairs to the northeastern corner of the complex you pass through the Museo de Arquitectura and the Museo de Pintura. The former tells (in Spanish) the story of how the complex was built, the latter contains 16th- and 17th-century Italian, Spanish and Flemish art.

The Crypts

The route through the monastery takes you down into the 17th-century Panteón de los Reyes (Crypt of the Kings), where almost all Spain's monarchs since Carlos I are interred. Nearby is the Panteón de los Infantes (Crypt of the Princesses).

Salas Capitulares

Stairs lead up from the Patio de los Evangelistas (Patio of the Gospels) to the Salas Capitulares (Chapter Houses) in the southeastern corner of the monastery. These bright, airy rooms, whose ceilings are richly frescoed, contain a treasure chest of works by El Greco, Titian, Tintoretto, José de Ribera and Hieronymus Bosch.

Jardín del Príncipe

The Prince's Garden, which leads down to the town of El Escorial, is a lovely monumental garden and contains the Casita del Príncipe, a little neoclassical gem built in 1772 by Juan de Villanueva under Carlos III for his heir, Carlos IV.

Transport

Buses 661 and 664 leave every 15 minutes (every half-hour on weekends; €4.20) from Madrid's Moncloa Intercambiador de Autobuses station. A few dozen Renfe *cercanías* (local train network) trains make the one-hour trip (€3.40) daily from Madrid's Atocha or Chamartín stations to El Escorial.

DON'T MISS...

- ➔ Patio de los Reyes
- ➔ Basílica
- ➔ Museums
- ➔ Salas Capitulares
- ➔ Jardín del Príncipe

PRACTICALITIES

- ➔ ☎91 890 78 18
- ➔ www.patrimonio.nacional.es
- ➔ adult/concession €10/5, guide/audioguide €4/4, EU citizens free last 3 hours Wed & Thu
- ➔ 🕒10am-8pm Apr-Sep, 10am-6pm Oct-Mar, closed Mon