



Castilla y León

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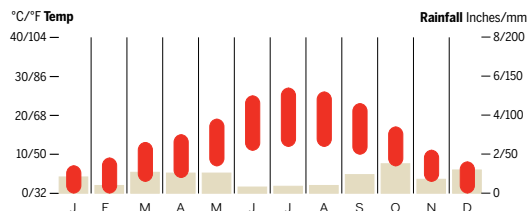
Why Go?

If you're looking for a window on the Spanish soul, head to Castilla y León. This is Spain without the stereotypes: with vast plains, spectacular mountain peaks and evocative medieval towns and villages. Experience fabled cities like Salamanca, with its lively student population, and Segovia, famed for a fairy-tale fortress that inspired Disneyland's *Sleeping Beauty* castle. The multiturreted walls of Ávila have similar magical appeal, while the lofty cathedrals of León and Burgos are among Europe's most impressive. As with most of Spain, food here is an agreeable obsession, promising the country's best *jamón* (cured ham), roast lamb and suckling pig.

The region's story is equally told through its quiet back roads, half-timbered hamlets and isolated castles. From the scenic Sierra de Francia in the southwest to Covarrubias, Calatañazor and Medinaceli in the east, this is the hidden Spain most travellers never imagined still existed.

When to Go

Leon



Mar & Apr Enjoy wild flowers in the countryside and soul-stirring Semana Santa processions.

Jun Get into holi-day mode during annual fiesta time in Burgos, Soria and Segovia.

Sep Capture the youthful buzz of Salamanca as universities return to class.

THE SOUTHWEST

Ávila

POP 58,935 / ELEV 1130M

Ávila's old city, surrounded by imposing city walls comprising eight monumental gates, 88 watchtowers and more than 2500 turrets, is one of the best-preserved medieval bastions in Spain. In winter, when an icy wind whistles in off the plains, the old city huddles behind the high stone walls as if seeking protection from the harsh Castilian climate. At night, when the walls are illuminated to magical effect, you'll wonder if you've stumbled into a fairy tale. It's a deeply religious city that for centuries has drawn pilgrims to the cult of Santa Teresa de Ávila, with its many churches, convents and high-walled palaces. As such, Ávila is the essence of Castilla and the epitome of old Spain.



Sights

★ Murallas

WALLS

(www.muralladeavila.com; adult/child under 12yr €5/free; ☉10am-8pm Apr-Oct, to 6pm Nov-Mar; 📶) Ávila's splendid 12th-century walls stretch for 2.5km atop the remains of earlier Roman and Muslim battlements and rank among the world's best-preserved medieval defensive perimeters. Two sections of the walls can be climbed – a 300m stretch that can be accessed from just inside the **Puerta del Alcázar**, and a longer (1300m) stretch from **Puerta de los Leales** that runs the length of the old city's northern perimeter. The admission price includes a multilingual audioguide.

★ Catedral del Salvador

CATHEDRAL

(☎920 21 16 41; Plaza de la Catedral; admission incl audioguide €4; ☉10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-8pm Sat, noon-6.30pm Sun) Ávila's 12th-century cathedral is both a house of worship and an ingenious fortress: its stout granite apse forms the central bulwark in the

historic city walls. The sombre, Gothic-style facade conceals a magnificent interior with an exquisite early-16th-century **altar frieze** showing the life of Jesus, plus Renaissance-era carved choir stalls and a **museum** with an El Greco painting and a splendid silver monstrance by Juan de Arfe. (Push the buttons to illuminate the altar and the choir stalls.)

Monasterio de Santo Tomás

MONASTERY, MUSEUM

(☎920220400; www.monasteriosantotomas.com; Plaza de Granada 1; €4; ☉10.30am-9pm Jul & Aug, 10.30am-2pm & 3.30-7.30pm Sep-Jun) Commissioned by the Reyes Católicos (Catholic Monarchs), Fernando and Isabel, and completed in 1492, this monastery is an exquisite example of Isabelline architecture, rich in historical resonance. Three interconnected cloisters lead to the church that contains the alabaster **tomb of Don Juan**, the monarchs' only son. There's also the impressive **Museo Oriental** (Oriental Museum), with 11 rooms of Far Eastern art, plus a more modest **Museo de Historia Natural** (Natural History Museum); both are included in the admission price.

Convento de Santa Teresa

CHURCH, MUSEUM

(☎920 21 10 30; www.teresadejesus.com; Plaza de la Santa; church & relic room free, museum €2; ☉9.30am-1.30pm & 3.30-9pm Tue-Sun) Built in 1636 around the room where the saint was born in 1515, this is the epicentre of the cult surrounding Teresa. There are three attractions in one here: the church, a relics room and a museum. Highlights include the gold-adorned **chapel** (built over the room where she was born), the baroque **altar** and the (albeit macabre) **relic** of the saint's ring finger, complete with ring. Apparently Franco kept it beside his bedside throughout his rule.

The elaborate chapel is lorded over by a baroque altar by Gregorio Fernández, which features a statue of the saint. There's also a basement museum dedicated to Santa Teresa, accessible from Calle Aizpuru.

Los Cuatro Postes

VIEWPOINT

Northwest of the city, on the road to Salamanca, Los Cuatro Postes provides the best views of Ávila's walls. It also marks the place where Santa Teresa and her brother were caught by their uncle as they tried to run away from home (they were hoping to achieve martyrdom at the hands of the Muslims). The best views are at night.

📍 VISITÁVILA CARD

If you plan on seeing all of Ávila's major sights, it may be worth buying the **Visitávila Card** (per person €13), which is valid for 48 hours and covers entrance fees to the main sights around town.