

# Historic Spain

## October 2025



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## Thursday, 23 Oct 25 Cambridge to Madrid

Actually our journey today is to Alcala de Henares. We won't see Madrid, except for its airport, until tomorrow.

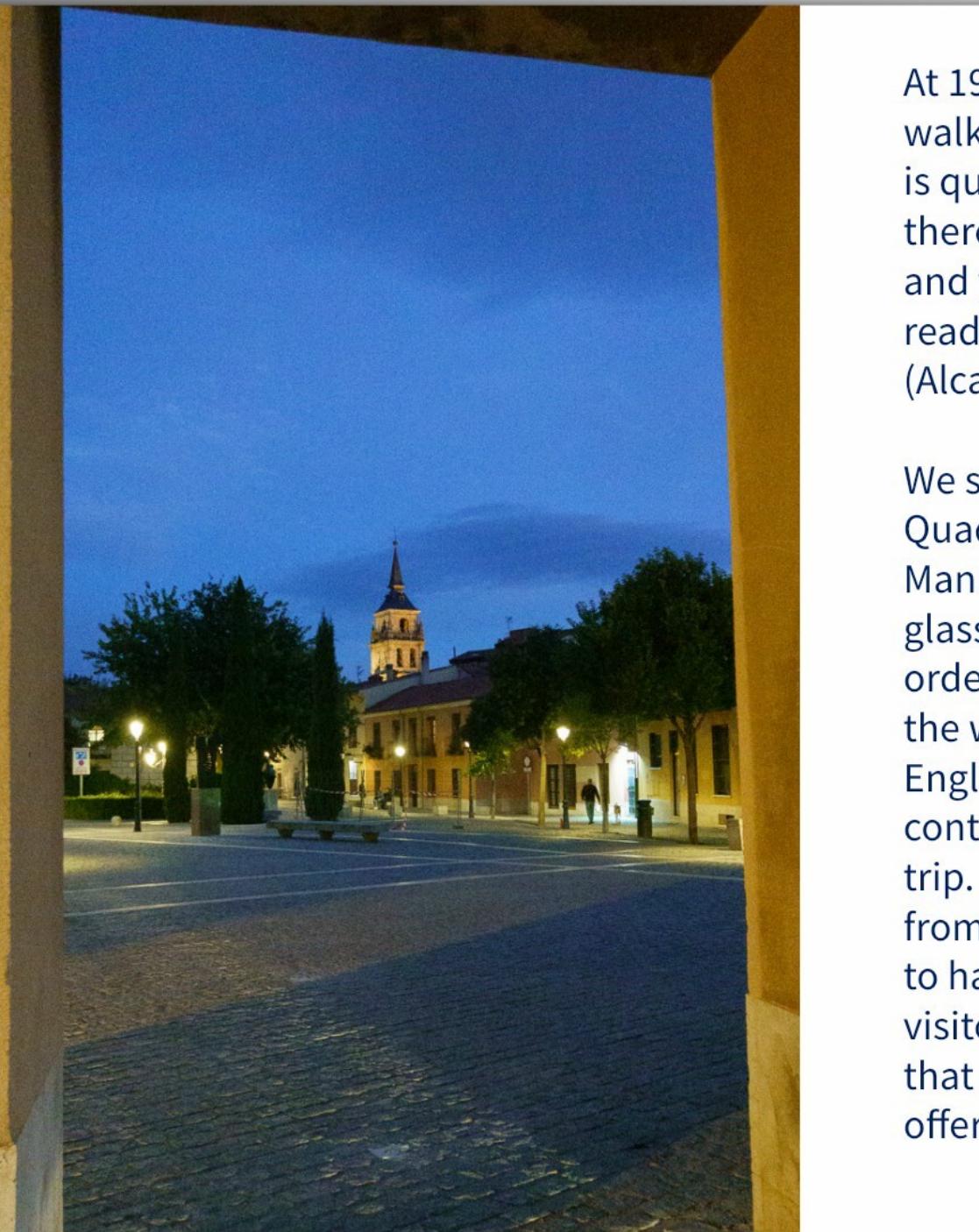
We're picked up by Ozgur and it's an incident free drive to Heathrow.

Check in's 'easy' once we work out how to master the self baggage labeling machines, security passes off without a hitch and we take refuge in the Pilots Lounge for coffee and pastries. We stock up with sushi at Itsu for lunch and we're on our way. We land at the 'new' Madrid airport where there's lots of walking, a train to take you to arrivals and a large impressive interior.

Our guide is Manuel who speaks perfect English and he musters us, 16 from a total group of 20, and gets us on the bus for our hotel. It seems that we're to have a different bus every day and some days we will even change driver en route.

Our hotel, the PCM Forum, is modern and soulless but fine. The air con makes no noise; and I worry that it doesn't work. Later I find that at 20 the room's too cold, at 22 too hot. 21 is just right.





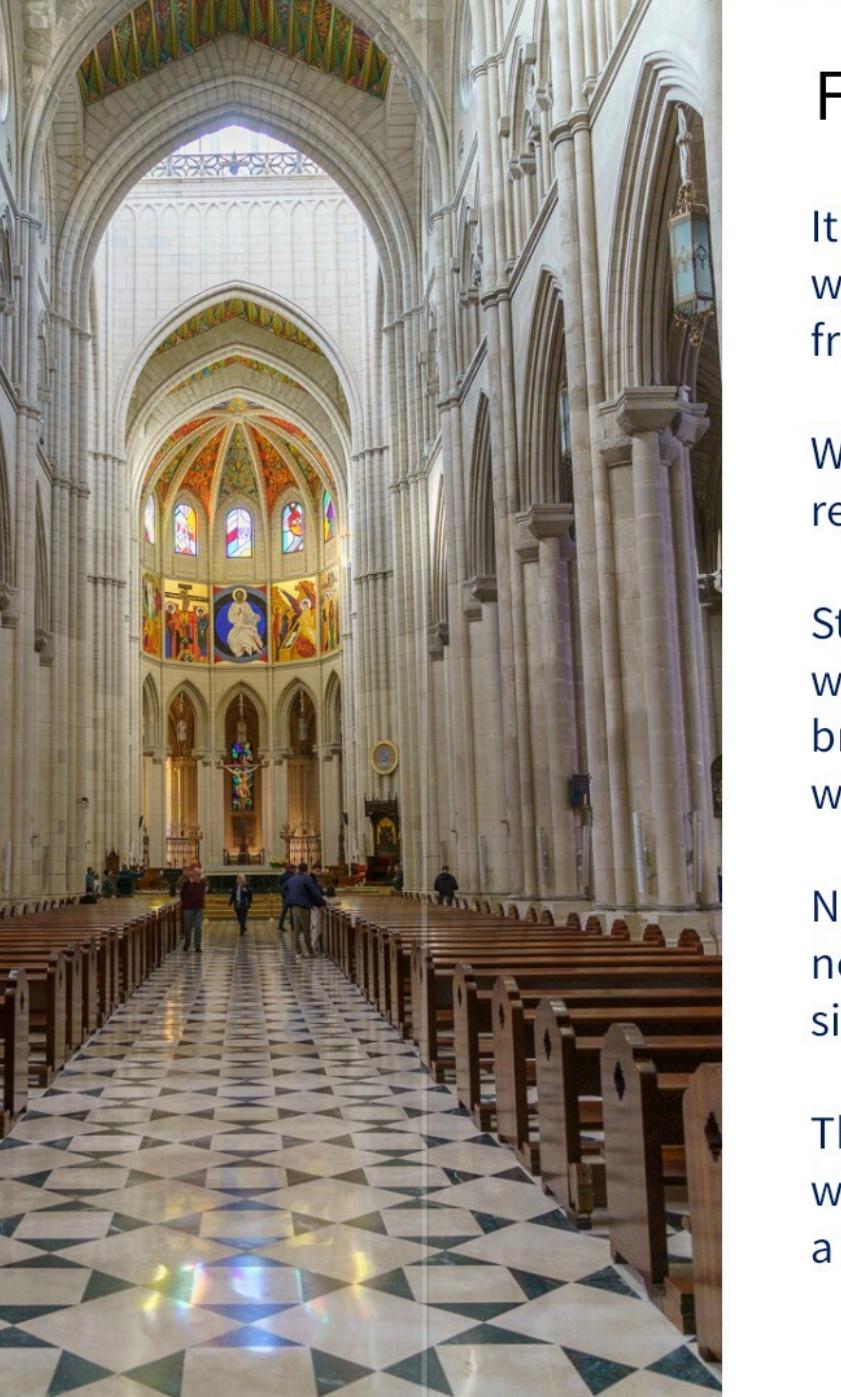
At 1930 we assemble for a walk into the old town which is quite fun. It's car free, there's lots of bars and cafes and young people getting ready to enjoy the evening (Alcalá is a university town).

We sit at a table outside Las Quadras de Rocinante where Manuel is already having a glass of vino. He helps us order and it's surprising that the waiter speaks no English. This is a feature that continues throughout our trip. Central Spain away from Madrid is not that used to handling international visitors despite the number that come for its cultural offerings.



We have ham and tomato bread, prawns in garlic oil and calamari. OK but not great. And a glass of Ribero del Duero.

The guy on the left is Don Quixote. Alcalá is proud to be the birthplace of Miguel de Cervantes who wrote the book 'The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha' said to be a founding work of Western literature.



## Friday, 24 Oct 25 Madrid

It's not an early start but we experience the consequence of Spain being on CET with it still being dark at 0745 when the alarm goes off. Breakfast is good. Plenty of fresh fruit, pastries and bread. Coffee is of the machine variety but not so bad.

We're off to see the Royal Palace this morning but before that we get a couple of religious stops.

Stop number one was unscheduled but got us into the Basilica San Francisco which is truly wonderful. Despite a dismal façade it opens up inside to reveal a breathtaking dome. Sadly photography was not allowed so you'll have to take my word for it although I did grab a shot of the altar from outside the entrance.

Number two was scheduled and pleasant if not quite as impressive. It was the new Catedral de Santa Maria, built on the old style but with modern colours and simplicity and a touch of the fascist style much beloved by Mussolini, Franco et al.

The royal place gave us a rather tedious slow walk through of stately home open with lots of fellow tourists, reminding us what over-tourism is, and accentuated by a dreadful guide.



Manuel guides us up to the Plaza Mayor where we have an alfresco lunch at Magerit. It's pleasant enough and we enjoy tomatobread, tatas aragadas and paella. I also get a Mahou beer and an espresso (café solo).

That leaves us about three hours to kill. We spend time in the Plaza Mayor where we're entertained by open air pianos. Then we walk up to the Puerta del Sol, where we see 'ground zero' the point from which all distances in Spain are measured, and continue on up to Calle de Sevilla, another piano, and across to Calle Alcalá, yet another piano. On the way back down Calle Alcalá we pop into the art deco, and recently refurbished, Art Nouveau Galería Canalejas. It really is very classy, expensive shops and a bar (negronis at EUR18) to match.

A tea break at Café Bar los Austrias then it's a bus back to the hotel where we've got an hour or so before our cultural evening at la Fábrica.

It's no better than any other with six mediocre tapas served in series. I thought the point of tapas was that they're served in parallel. However the wine is decent and there's enough of it. I also get a glass of Mahou.

However our fellow diners are reasonably entertaining and I chat to Don and Dora, Helen from Stockport and Jan who walks with sticks but doesn't hold us up. Jan has a splendid east Lancs accent.



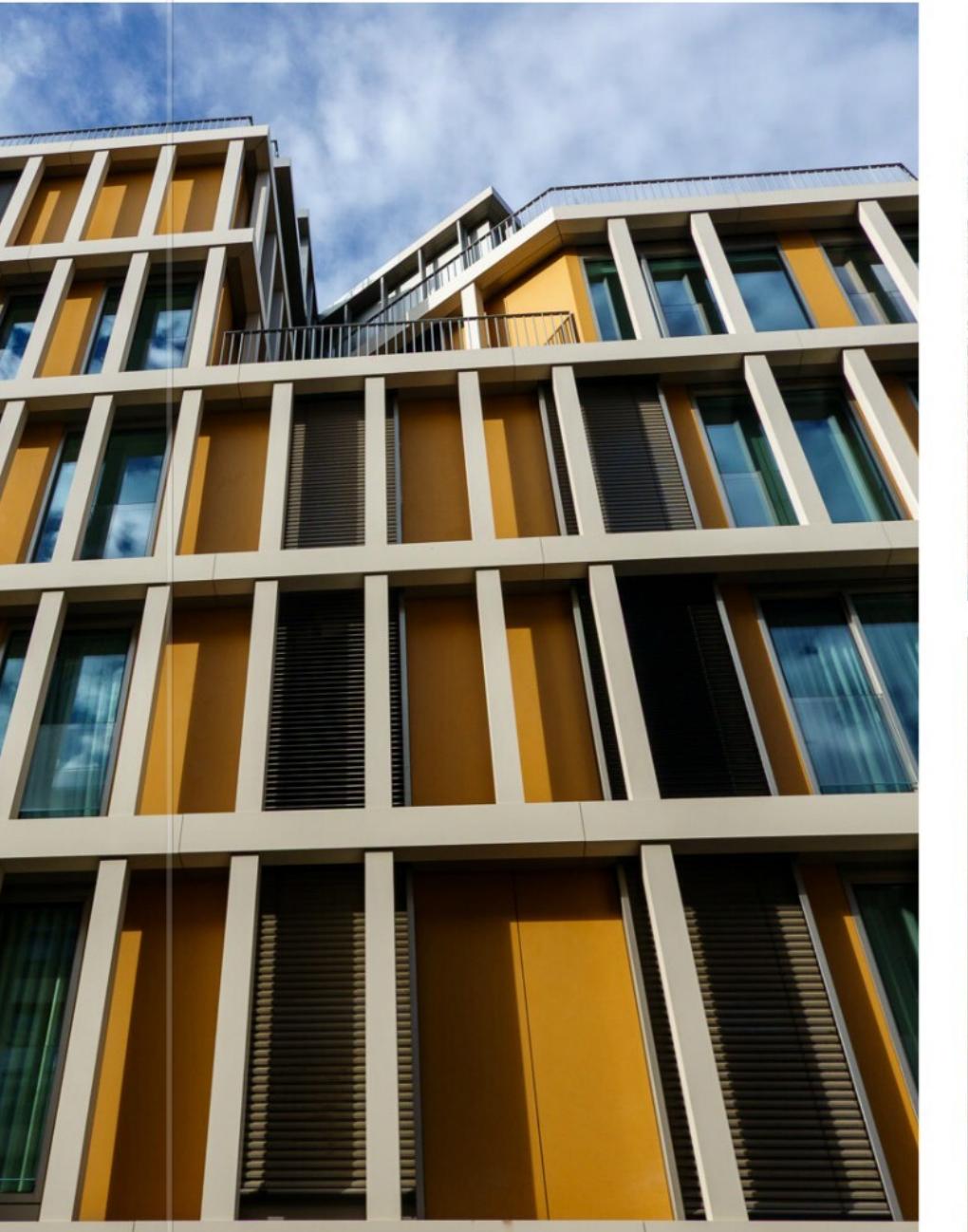
## Saturday, 25 Oct 25 Madrid

A little bit earlier today and it's still dark. However clocks go back tonight so that's some respite.

We start with a bus journey into Madrid and then we cruise along the Paseo da Prado before we're let out close to the Prado itself and where we're to meet at 1330. In the meantime we take a city tour bus which is super but rather cold on the open top deck! However it gives us a good tour round the central part of Madrid and appreciate its many buildings and its largely wide streets. It really is a handsome city.

That leaves us cold and hungry and we need to eat in advance of our Prado tour. We get an excellent brunch at the café el 17 de Moreto, I have an avocado on toast for a change, before we pay a brief visit to the Parque de la Retiro.

At 1330 we're into the Prado and first cock up of the day when we find that we have neither guide nor audio guide which makes the visit rather a random event if you come without a list of must see paintings. However we give it a good go and see recognisable pictures by Goya, Velasquez and Caravaggio. After a quick tea break we end on a high with sight of the Bosch triptychs.





We return to Alcala by train then it's a good walk back to the hotel. The train was full when we boarded so we got separated from the others. Then we get a WhatsApp 'where are you?' It seems that the others didn't manage to board and so would get a later train. We've stood for a couple of stops and get chatting to a young woman, last year of high school, who's quite beautiful. Reminds you of the influence of centuries of mixing with the Moors did to the gene pool.

I check out options for dinner and there seem to be a good steak restaurant, the Abrasador, a couple of hundred yards away. I pay a quick visit to confirm and make a 'reservation' for 2000. The bossman speaks no English but indicates that he'll remember me.

At 2000 we meet the Mannix couple. They're rather strange but we ask them to join us. He (Mike) complains about the rather modest piped music, then they say they rarely drink wine and then he says that he doesn't really enjoy food. They leave.

We have an excellent meal. I have a fillet steak and a glass of Ribero del Duero then we share a Tiramisu. The serving lady who speaks a little English tells us the boss wants us to know he owns the farm from which the meat comes 'del campo a la parrilla'!

## Sunday, 26 Oct 25 Escorial and Segovia

We benefit from the end of summer time with the clocks going back but we've still got an 0845 departure and it's still not really daylight.

We start in el Escorial where we have time for a coffee and croissant before our tour. We're at the café Alaska which doesn't do croissants but there's a bakery across the road and Eileen buys a couple which solves that problem.

Our guide is Mariano and he's super, everything that Sunday's guide was not. It helped that he had excellent subject matter viz the Monastery of St Lorenzo which was truly impressive with an amazing church (with a dome higher than the aqueduct we were to see later) and an equally impressive library.

After el Escorial we head on to Segovia where we see, sans guide, the aqueduct, the cathedral and the Disney-esque palace at the far end. All very impressive even if the cathedral was a bit like a railway station with plenty of wrought iron and a chequer tile floor. We also had time for an excellent alfresco lunch (a whole shared turbot with a glass of Ribero del Duero and an espresso) at el Bernardino.



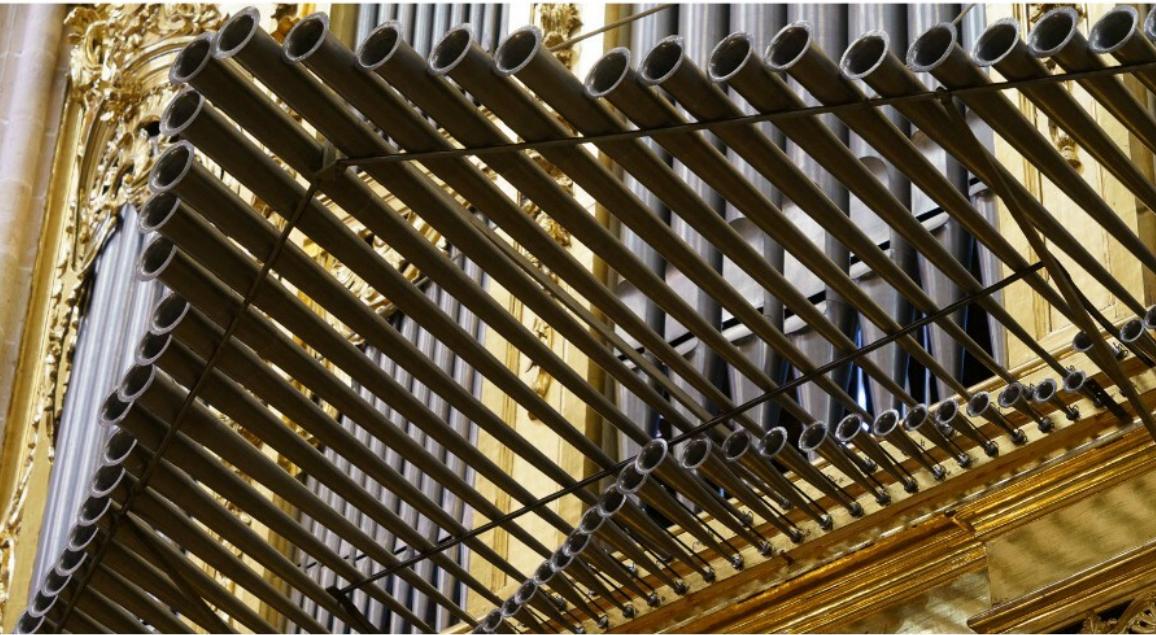
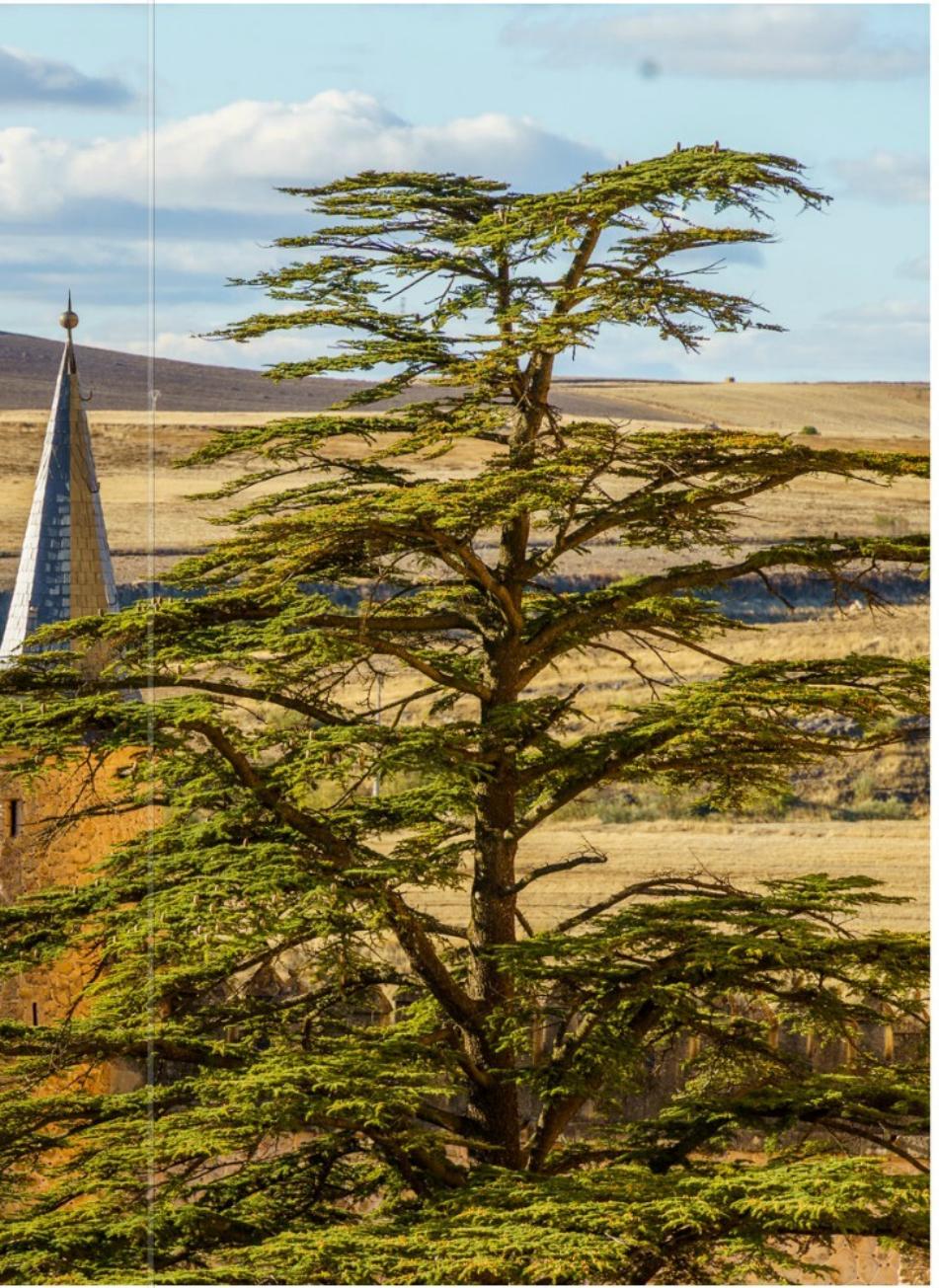


Now we're into our seemingly excellent hotel, the Palacio de Valderrabanos, which is right next to the cathedral in Avile. But it's rather cold because we're high up with a clear sky. Not quite frost but down in the single digits. Sadly its restaurant and bar are not open.

I check Lonely Planet:

*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.*

We have dinner at el Tostado in the Parador just a short walk away in a simple but formal restaurant in the courtyard. The menu is standard and the servers have little English but it all works. We share a table with Rev Rachel, Megan, Eileen and the rather strange Mannixes (Anne and Mike). Mike is some sort of warfare buff.



## Monday, 27 Oct 25. Avila

The luxury of a later start! It's to be a leisurely day after a very full Sunday. All we've got is a walking day of the city at 1000.

Our hotel, the Palacio Valderabanos, is an old building tastefully modernised. Rooms are pleasant, the beds hard and breakfast does what it needs with some fresh fruit, decent enough coffee and fresh croissants. We sit with Hamish and Jane from Stockport.

Our tour today is led by Elizabeth who's not bad. She takes us to the Convento de Santa Teresa, where we get to see one of her fingers (Teresa's that is not Elizabeth's), the Plaza Mayor, there's a Plaza Mayor in every Spanish city it's just more or less mayor depending on where you are, the Basilica de San Vincente and to the Catedral de Avila (where we start and finish).

With such a late start we don't get our coffee until 1130 when it's coffee and excellent croissants at the Hostal Puerta del Alcazar Restorante where we're joined by Eileen and Claire, who's had five children and is very skinny and looks very old.



We drift around looking for a café for lunch and end up in the Plaza Mayor where we find that every tapas menu in Avila is dominated by parts of pig you don't normally eat. But a glass of Ribero del Duero makes amends. We're joined by Jan, the stick lady, and Kathryn who both emerge as passionate anti-Brexit and deeply disappointed by Keir Starmer.

We witness the Avila city council putting up its Xmas tree. Seems a little early but there's evidence of Xmas lights in most places. Maybe they're just all purpose festive lights.

More time to faff and we climb the walls where we benefit again with a senior discount.

At 1730 Manuel's organised a walk, about 20 minutes, to see the city at sunset. It's a good 20 minutes and it's a lot of up and down but eventually we get to the Mirador de los 4 Postes and it's worth the effort. The city glows red in the setting sun and even when the sun's gone down it's a good sight with softer light than we've had all day.

Then back at the hotel at 1900 all the decent restaurants seem to be closed and those that are open don't do so until 2030 and then seem to specialise in big steaks. This is meat country!



Meanwhile others on our WhatsApp group are not having difficulty in finding somewhere to eat.

We get advice from Victor at the front desk. Sadly his recommendation is closed for renovation. We wander around and see nothing to our liking but finally chance upon Raices at the same time as Jane and Hamish (from Stockport) and give it a go. It was just fine, the usual story of not speaking English but willing to be flexible with dishes. I had tuna tataki, another sad glass of Mahou but a nice glass of Ribero del Duero.

## Tuesday, 28 Oct 25 Salamanca

Another day, another attractive Spanish city and today it's the university city of Salamanca.

It's only an hour drive but we're still required to be ready at 0850 to leave. We head out across extensive fields of recently harvested cereals.

We have another guided tour which gives us orientation, takes us through the historical university and leaves us at the Plaza Mayor which would seem to be one of the best in Spain but its impact today is reduced by the presence of the stalls of a book fair.

Our guide tells us that Salamanca is one of the great historical universities of Europe along with Coimbra, Padua and Bologna, Paris, Heidelberg and Oxford and Cambridge. It's evidenced by the presence of lots of young people about.

We have lunch at Los Escudos and at last I get a local beer: an 18/70 and it's excellent (and 6%).



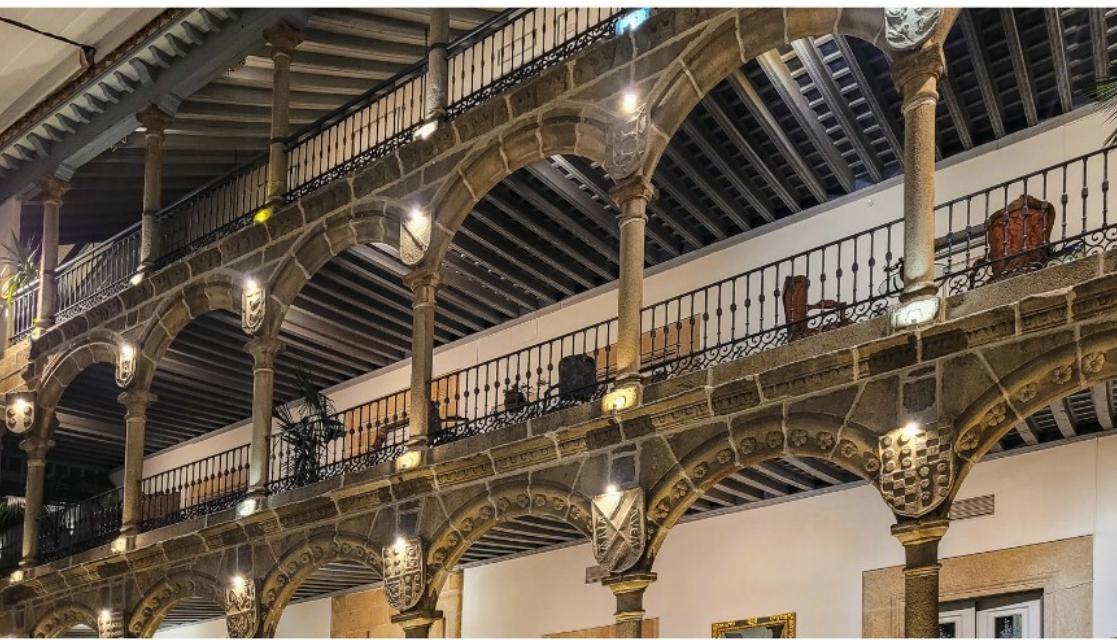
After lunch we visit the twin cathedrals and then the Art Nouveau museum at Casa Lys. This is exceptional.

Then it's a drive back and before we get to Avila we stop at the 4 Postes but there's no sun to give us the dramatic evening light of yesterday.

I must confess that this holiday is proving a challenge. Hotels are great, program is good but intensive (lots of steps every day) and fellow travellers are largely OK but I could do with going home tomorrow!

After a false start we end up for dinner back at the Restaurante la Tostada where the service is once again slick despite the lack of English language skills. Juni and I share both a mixed salad and fillet medallions despite the waiter insisting the dish wasn't big enough to share. It was and it was delicious. We also had a super desert. I had my usual beer and a glass of Protos Ribera del Duero. We shared our table with Hamish and Jane.

I spotted a couple at the bar drinking what looked like Grappa. They proved to be German and were delighted that I could speak German to them (!). They told me it was a Ruavieja Licor de Hierbas and good to settle the stomach. So I had one of those as well. Don was just leaving another table and saw me, joined our table and ordered one too so we ended the evening on a high note



## Wednesday, 29 Oct 25 Toledo

Today's the day the rains come. Well we've done OK so far. We're off to Toledo and its another early start but enough time for breakfast.

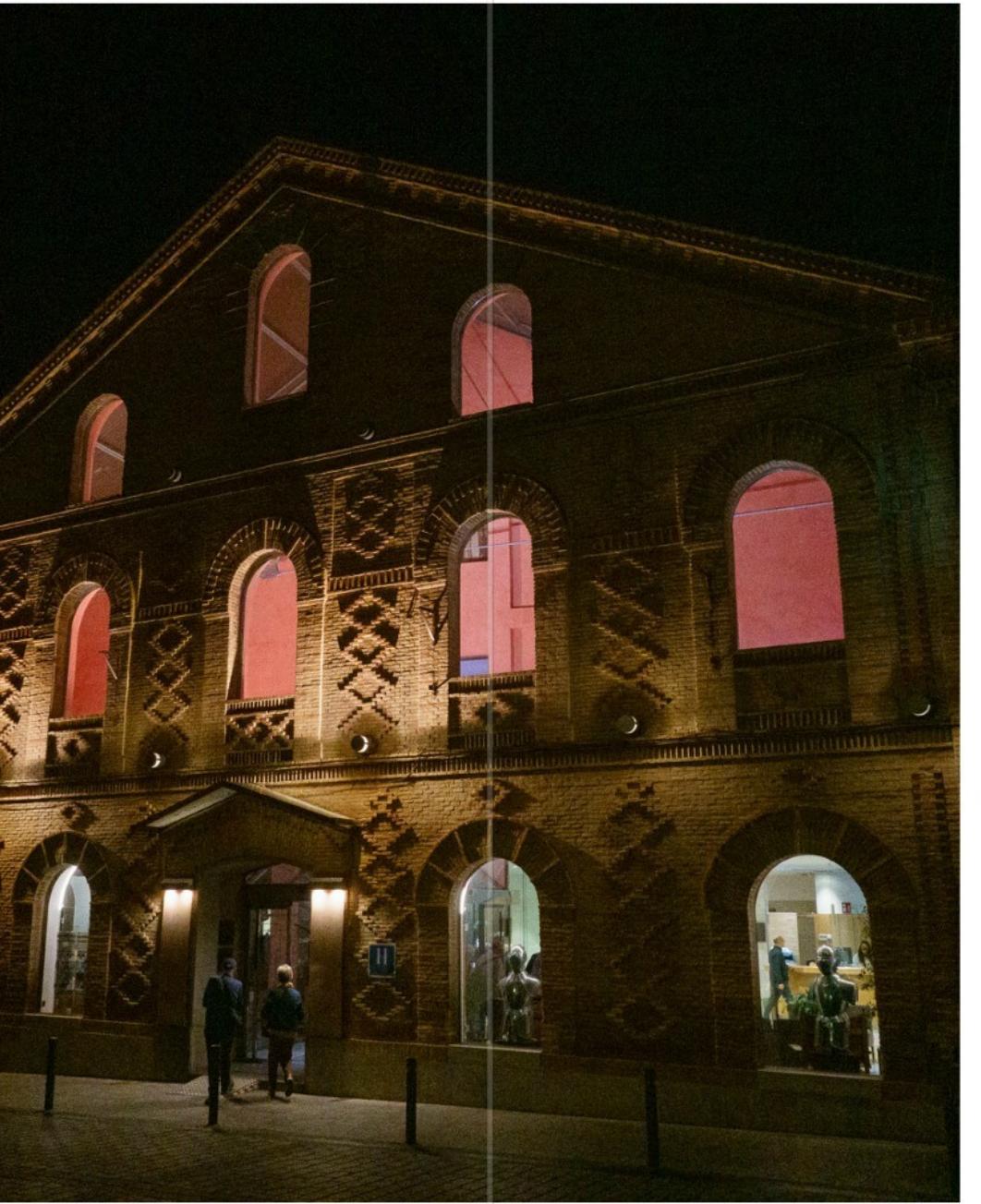
It's a two hour journey and part of it takes us up from the plains, where we now seem to be in cattle country, and into the trees which are generally elegant before we then descend into olive tree territory.

We stop for a coffee and to visit the toilet about 20 minutes out of Toledo, seems a bit pointless really, and we have coffee at a very busy soulless corner bar, the Meson Atalanta, in a modern commercial district (Torrijos). No point asking for croissants!

It begins to rain as we approach Toledo but we're able to stop at a viewing point and see the city high above the Tagus River. It's a pretty miserable sight but no doubt Photoshop will make it look better!

We're met by our guide, Fernando, who's the best of the week. We get to see Jewish stables, Moorish architecture and el Greque's The Burial of the Count of Orgaz which he does a super job of explaining to us. He also does a good job of providing an overview of Spanish history from the Romans and Visigoths through the Moors to the present day.





As with all tours we end at the Plaza Mayor but it's not too pretty in the rain. Fernando points us to an adjacent street where local restaurants serve Menus del Dias. We get three courses for EUR18 including wine and coffee at the Santa Fe. We share a table with Clare.

We wander back via the cathedral, EUR8 for Seniors but you have to prove your age, which is the second largest (highest?) in Spain after Seville. It's dark inside, lacks a dome and doesn't have a simple clear view of its length. Doesn't impress me but then perhaps I'm sated.

It stops raining and although it's not a simple route back to the hotel we manage it without difficulty.

Dinner was much as expected. Rubbish.

First we get another of Manuel's 20 minute walks: it proceeds at a leisurely pace to take us to the other side of the Plaza Mayor. We're eating at el Gallo and it's long tables populated by tour groups eating mediocre standard fare accompanied by 11% local wine. As one of our numbers said 'it's a bit thin'. I ordered a decent bottle but then had to pay for a soft drink for Juni. It also looked like they kept a check on how much wine was to be drunk.

# Thursday, 30 Oct 25 Toledo to Cambridge

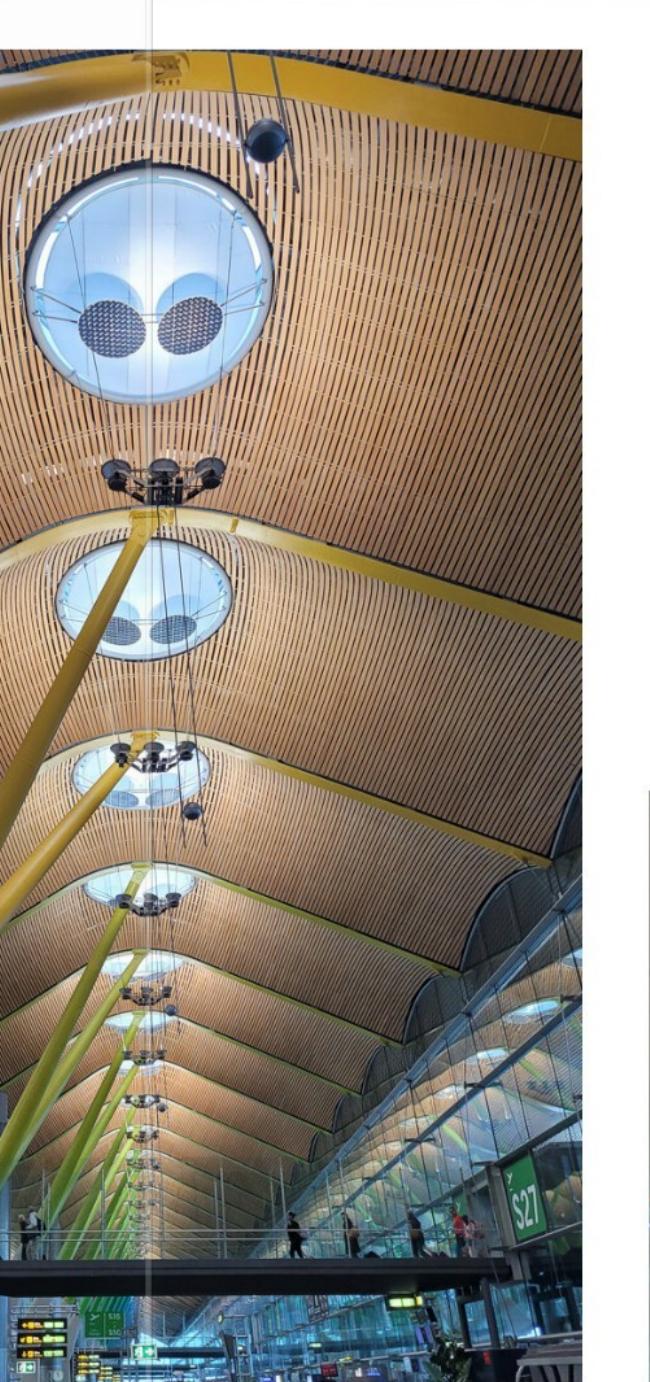
Via Madrid and London Heathrow of course.

It's a rational start so it's a very acceptable buffet breakfast at 0730. It's machine coffee again but today it's Nespresso pouches.

The trip to the airport is uneventful but tedious. Gone is the sunshine and rural landscapes of the last few days, today it's mist with a touch of pollution, motorways and distribution centres and lots of industrial units.

We're to leave from Terminal 4 and it's still vast (we arrived here) but leaving is a whole new board game. Check in and security are OK but then we have the crush of a train to the S gates followed by passport control where we experience the Brexit benefit of being processed along with everyone else outside the EU, the EEA and Switzerland. Thank you Boris Johnson et al. Fortunately the gates are swamped and airport people open up other gates seemingly at random. We benefit from one of those acts of kindness!

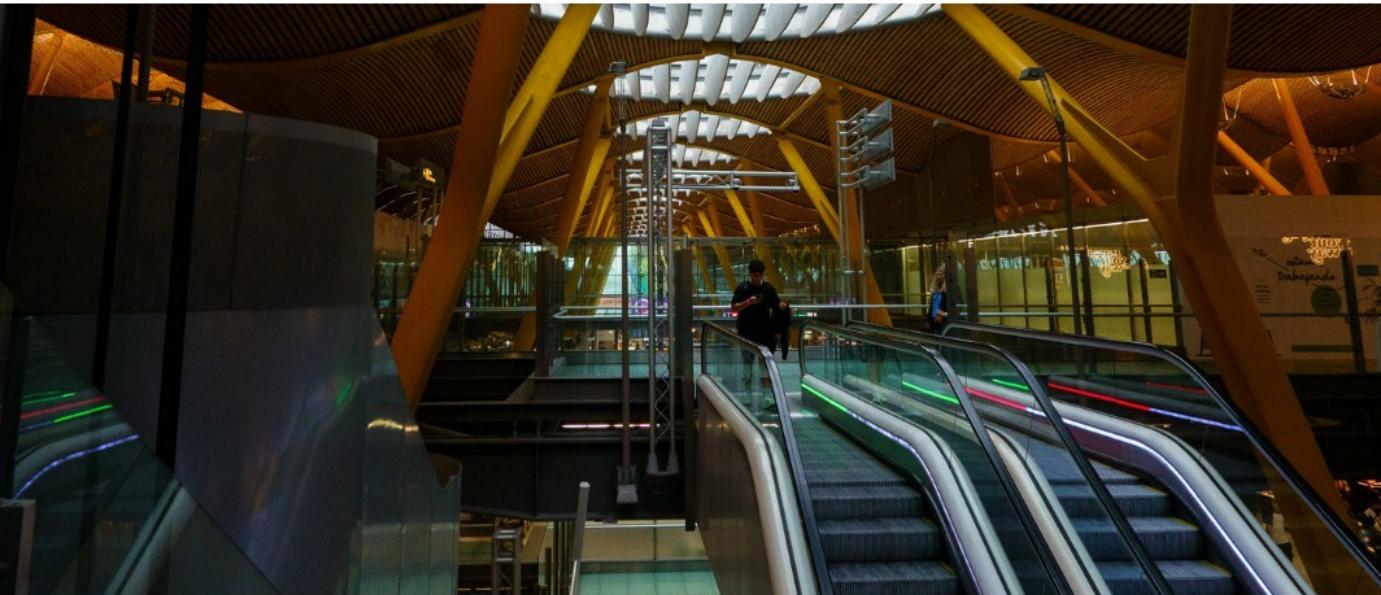
Finally it's a last coffee, but EUR2 is behind us and we're back into 'EUR3 and 4 for a coffee land'. And at 1220 I'm sat at gate S26 waiting to board along with eight others from our party.



And then to complete the airport experience we get a bus from gate S23 to our plane, an Airbus A320, and finally I'm sat in seat 24E on BA461 bound for London Heathrow. We get off promptly and should be in London by 1400 UK time.

We arrive early at Heathrow and Sherzad texts us that he's on his way! We only have to wait a couple of minutes and we're away! He says she's just back from a trip back to Iraq to see his mother. He says that life's pretty much normal there now.

We're home By 1700. House is chilly but the heating is on and the WiFi works. All good.



Time to reflect, 5 highlights:

- **Coffee and wine at sensible prices:** we got coffee for EUR2 or less and decent glasses of Ribero del Duero for EUR3-4. It would be nice to enjoy the same in the UK

- **Coffee and a croissant in el Escorial:** we were early for our entry to the monastery so that for once we had time for a decent coffee which we enjoyed at Alaska. Unfortunately there were no croissants but Eileen procured a couple from a neighbouring establishment to complete the experience.

- **Good food and good humour at la Tostado in Avril:** we were perhaps surprised how little English was spoken in the shops and restaurants but it didn't seem to matter. Staff did their best to communicate and understand and this was certainly true at la Tostada where we dined twice. Service there was also very prompt and our food the second time was excellent

- **Our guide Fernando in Toledo:** with the exception of the one at the Grand Palace our guides were pretty good. Fernando who also had to deal with the rain in Toledo was excellent. He deconstructed el Greque's The Burial of the Count of Orgaz for us and gave us a clear overview of Spanish history from pre-Roman to the present day.

- **Art nouveau in Madrid and Salamanca:** we chanced upon the opulently upmarket Art Nouveau arcade round the back of the Four Seasons where I'd have happily paid EUR18 for a Negroni just for the ambiance (photo on the right). And then there was the Art Nouveau Museum at Casa Lys in Salamanca.

Plus of course three excellent hotels.



Sadly our guide, Manuel, was a disappointment. Of course he said he was a tour manager and not a guide but he seemed to do little to help us to enjoy the holiday by way of recommendations of what to do or where to eat. Accordingly we'd over graded his 'tip' from EUR50 to 40 although technically if he was a manager as he claimed he should not have got anything. Interestingly none of the local guides displayed any interest in collecting tips when they left us. And because we had so many drivers there were no tips to be given there either.

## **The itinerary from Jules Verne**

**Day 1 - Fly to Madrid and travel to Alcalá de Henares:** Fly from your chosen airport to Madrid, and transfer to Alcalá de Henares, for a three-night stay at the 4-star PCM Forum Alcalá. Just 30km from the capital, this charming place is known for its centuries old university in the 16th-century old town, and for its feast of tapas bars.

**Day 2 - Explore the landmarks of Madrid:** A walking tour in Madrid begins with a visit to the Royal Palace. Continue to the historic centre of the city to see the popular Plaza de Santa Ana, a lively hub of eateries; the nearby Puerta del Sol, a semicircular centre-point, where all is overseen by its famous clock; Teatro Real and the stylised symmetry of the Plaza Mayor, the city's ceremonial grand square. Enjoy dining like a local this evening in a Tapas restaurant.

**Day 3 - Enjoy a panoramic city tour and spend the afternoon at leisure:** A panoramic Madrid tour passes the Paseo de Castellana, from the modern business area to the iconic Plaza de Colón and Las Ventas Bullring, the largest in Spain; culminating with entrance to the Prado Museum, renowned worldwide for its Flemish and Italian art, and for its unrivalled collection of Spanish

**Day 4 - Visit El Escorial before continuing to Ávila:** Travel to El Escorial to visit the palace/monastery complex, built in the 16th century by King Felipe II, liberally adorned with fountains and sculptures. Continue to UNESCO Segovia, its history on view in medieval walls, Romanesque churches, a Gothic cathedral, the hilltop Alcázar fortress and, the symbol of the city, the stunning Roman Aqueduct. Travel to Ávila for three nights at the 4-star Palacio de Valderrabanos Hotel.

**Day 5 - Enjoy a tour through Ávila with the afternoon at leisure:** Enjoy a walking tour of Ávila; it's 1,700m city walls are strolling grounds with stunning views, surrounding cobbled streets, intriguing churches, and an air of tranquillity. Afternoon at leisure.

**Day 6 - Travel to Salamanca for a guided tour of its landmarks:** Travel to the UNESCO World Heritage City of Salamanca for a guided tour of the medieval old town including entrance to the oldest university in Spain, and passing by the 15th-century Casa de las Conchas ('house of shells') and the 16th-17th century Gothic 'New Cathedral', with free time to explore the area around the majestic Plaza Mayor and to perhaps explore the Casa Lis Art Deco Museum. Return to Ávila.

**Day 7 - Enjoy a walking tour of Toledo:** Travel to UNESCO Toledo, the birthplace of El Greco, crammed onto a hill above a gorge, and semi moated by the Rio Tajo; for overnight at the 4-star Hotel San Juan de los Reyes. Enjoy a walking tour of Toledo, known as 'the city of three cultures'. In the Middle Ages, Toledo became an icon of religious tolerance, where followers of the three main religions coexisted peacefully and, within the walled Roman, Arab, Spanish-imperial town, mosques, synagogues, and churches jostled for space with palaces and fortresses.