

## León

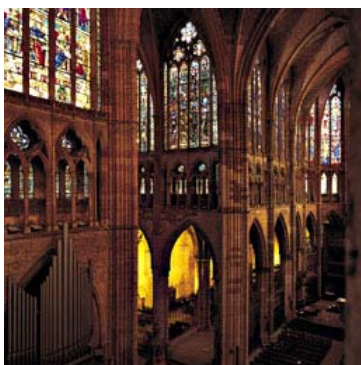
The *Pulchra Leonina*, the "Sistine Chapel" of the Spanish Romanesque and the former Hospital of San Marcos are the two key points in this ancient Roman camp. The passing of time has changed León into the capital of the kingdom in the Middle Ages, a historic enclave on the Pilgrim's Road to Santiago de Compostela and into a town that suits its inhabitants.

Known in Roman times as Legio VII Gemina Pia Felix, today it preserves an interesting Romanesque, Gothic and Renaissance legacy, fruit of its splendour during the Middle Ages. The **Plaza Mayor** is at the heart of this town which is situated on the River Bernesga. In this Baroque ensemble, the Town Hall is popularly known as the 'Balcony of the Town', as its galleries allow the dignitaries to contemplate the civic activities taking place.

### Through the 'Wet'

The district of San Martín begins next to the town hall, around the square and church of the same name. This area is full of small palaces and large houses such as the Casa de las Carnicerías and the **Conde Luna Palace**. The institution that distributed the mead in the town is a 17th-century building that currently houses and exhibition hall. The palace has preserved its 14th-century main front, in the Gothic style with Arab influences, and a dressed large tower. The church of San Salvador de Palat del Rey is also worth a visit, it dates from the 10th century and is the oldest in the town.

Numerous bars and restaurants are situated along these streets where we can taste the best of the region's gastronomy, and find out why it is known as **El Húmedo** (the wet district). We can take up our tour again in the Guzmanes Palace and the Casa de los Botines. The main façade of the palace, seat of the Provincial Administration, dates from the 16th century, and its balconies with railings and the lateral main front are remarkable. The Casa de los Botines is a work by the architect Antonio **Gaudí**, who inaugurated the modernist style in the town. León has more examples of this artistic trend in the plaza de Santo Domingo.



From here, we can enter the area surrounded by walls of Roman origin, and which contains two of the town's jewels: the **Cathedral** and the Basilica of San Isidoro. The "Pulchra Leonina", one of Spain's most amazing Gothic temples, was built on the site of ancient Roman baths and a Romanesque church. At the front, we can see its main front, one of the most important series of Gothic sculptures, a polychromatic rose window and two towers, unusual in that they are free-standing and not attached to the main façade. But it is the 1,800 square metres of stained-glass windows that attracts the visitors attention. On the inside, we should have a good look at the choir, the Romanesque tombs in the transept and the chapels in the ambulatory. A visit to the **Cathedral Museum**, one of the most comprehensive of its kind, will teach us about the cloister and a Plateresque staircase, as well as important paintings and sculptures.

One of Europe's most important monuments is the **Basilica of San Isidoro**. Its thick walls jealously guard what is known as the "Sixtine Chapel" of the Spanish Romanesque. Here there are 12th-century frescos decorating the subterranean crypt of the **Royal Pantheon** and still preserve their original colour. There are scenes from the Old and New Testaments, floral motifs and a calendar of agricultural tasks. But the exceptional preservation and quality of the paintings mustn't prevent us marvelling at the architectural elements. The sculptures on the main fronts and capitals are a genuine Bible in images. The museum is situated in the museum's cloisters, which preserve an archive of codex, incunabula and a Visigothic Bible, among other works. Its prestigious collection of Medieval art is enriched with the Ark of San Isidoro, the Ivory chest or the Chalice of Doña Urraca.

Wandering along the streets, we discover churches belonging to all eras and styles. San Marcelo preserves a reredos partly created by **Gregorio Fernández**, one of the most relevant sculptors of the Spanish Baroque. For its part, a temple that reminds the splendour of the Pilgrim's Road to Santiago de Compostela on its way through León is that of the Virgen del Camino, an image that is much venerated in the town.

## Pilgrim's Road to Santiago de Compostela



Another building linked to the Pilgrim's Road to Santiago de Compostela, part of the World's Heritage, is the **Hostal de San Marcos**. The pilgrim's hospital and hostel is one of the earliest examples of the Plateresque style, and was also the Casa Mayor of the Order of Santiago. It currently houses the town's **Parador de Turismo**, on the bank of the River Bernesga. An exceptional place for spending a night while staying in the town and sitting at a table which is well stocked with local specialities. 'Maragato' stew, frog's legs, veal 'mollejas' and meats from the mountain region are just a few of the suggestions. Pulses, products deriving from the slaughter of pigs and pieces of fish are watered with wines from the El Bierzo Denomination of Origin. Rice pudding or Astorga pastries (made from sugar, flour and eggs) are the icing on the cake of any gastronomic experience.

The province of León also offers us important appointments with the history, art and nature of the region. The **River Esla** will guide us through villages and monuments that appear on its banks, such as San Miguel de Escalada, a 10th-century Mozarab-style monastery. The extreme northeast of León is dominated by the **Picos de Europa Nature Reserve**. Mountain villages such as Caín or Posada de Valdeón appear between valleys, mountains and beech forests. Cares gorge and the defile of Beyos are just a couple of the most amazing landscapes waiting to be discovered at the heart of the Cantabrian Mountain Range. On the other hand, the central mountains of León are home to the **San Isidro winter resort**, in a spot which is hollowed out by hundreds of caves, including the remarkable Valporquero. Stalactites, Stalagmites, lakes and waterfalls have formed in its galleries.

Astorga, a town of Roman origin, is the point of entrance to the region of **Maragatería**. Among its many villages, Castrillo de los Polvazares is a National



Monument. The Pilgrim's Road to Santiago de Compostela crosses León through the region of **El Bierzo**, specifically through Villafranca del Bierzo, Cacabelos or Carracedo, whose monastery of Santa María is a National Monument. Nearby, we find the clayey mountains of **Las Medulas**, old Roman gold mines, which have been declared a **World Heritage Site**. All that is left now is to travel to Ponferrada and the Valley of the Silence. One of the villages in the valley, Peñalba de Santiago, is a National Historic-Artistic Site. The church of Santiago, a 10th-century Mozarab temple, rises up among slate and quartzite houses.

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