

# "Hostal de San Marcos" Parador \*\*\*\*\*G.L. de León

Leon's Parador, the "Hostal de San Marcos", is set in a former hospital for pilgrims on the Road to Santiago de Compostela, World Heritage. This gem of Spanish Plateresque is situated on the bank of the river Bernesga, and has become a Luxury hotel, where guests can enjoy Renaissance rooms and lounges. Choosing a room with views of the cloister is one of the best ways of discovering Leon's art and history.

The Jacobean pilgrimage route, the destination of which was the holy city of Santiago de Compostela, left an extensive network of hospitals and paths along the way during the Middle Ages. It was the infanta of Castile and Leon, Doña Sancha, who founded **San Marcos Hospital** in the 12th century to provide a refuge for the pilgrims who passed through Leon. Subsequently, the building became the Casa Mayor of the Order of St.James, a military and hospital order whose aim was to fight off Moslem invasions and protect the pilgrims. However, we would have to wait until the 16th century before work on the present building began. Artists of the calibre of Juan de Juni or Pedro de Ibarra .

## Plateresque Art



The façade of San Marcos is one of the finest examples of Spanish Plateresque, where we can appreciate the perfect integration of the medallions and statues alluding to emperor Carlos I, with Jacobean motifs. Among this profuse ornamentation balconies are dotted with wrought iron railings. This **monumental façade** unfolds between a four storey tower and a church that backs onto it. The choir, sacristy, cloister and chapter house (one of the Parador's rooms) possess starred vaults, altarpieces with rich high reliefs and ogive galleries. Whereas, the hospital has another cloister than onto which several of the rooms look, and where we can admire Renaissance and Baroque elements, while we relax in the armchairs which have been provided here.

After the sale of the ecclesiastical properties in the 19th century, the ensemble went on to be used as a college, hospital, prison and barracks, until in 1965 the Parador was set up here. Since the church forms part of Hostal San Marcos, guests can visit it at their leisure. The same goes for the **Leon Museum**, which is located in the church cloister and where we can discover one of the gems of the collection, "Cristo de Carrizo", a 12th century ivory crucifix.

This **Five Star Luxury** parador has combined the historic structure of the building with all 21st century creature comforts and latest features. Thus, guests will be able to rest in a bed with a canopy, walk under the pointed arches of the cloister, and admire the Mudejar coffered ceilings that adorn the Parador. Castilian decoration, made up of cabinets, chests and rugs, transport us to another era.

Besides the hotel's **400 beds**, divided up between single and double rooms and those with a lounge, Hostel de San Marcos offers several function rooms with a

strong historic flavour and conference rooms fitted out with all the necessary technical equipment.

## Maragato stew

Medieval stone walls, decorated with tapestries and other antiques, provide the backdrop for us to enjoy the **chef's recommendations**. Leon regional cuisine is well represented here in splendid dishes, such as maragato stew, frog's legs, conger eel with potatoes and clams, and 'cecina' (cured and smoked ham). Here, the different courses of the 'cocido' (stew), i.e. pork products, chickpeas and soup, taken in this order, unlike other places in Spain. For dessert, the inevitable chestnut pudding or San Marcos tart (tipsy sponge, truffle and egg yolk).

The Parador stands on the banks of Puente del Apóstol, where the **Pilgrim's Road to Santiago de Compostela** left the city and crossed the river Bernesga. In the era it was constructed, this spot was in the outskirts of Leon, but in reality the historic quarter is only a stone's throw away. What was the old VII Roman Legion and capital of the unified Kingdom of Castile and Leon during the Middle Ages, preserves emblematic Romanesque, Gothic and Renaissance constructions. Thus, we can admire the frescoes that adorn the walls of the royal pantheon in **San Isidro Basilica**, which have been called the "Sistine Chapel" of the Romanesque period. Equally impressive are the 1,800 square metres of stained-glass windows in **Santa María de Regla Cathedral**. It is one of the most stunning Gothic temples in Spain, that was erected according to the canons of the 12th century French churches. On our tour we should also stop off at Plaza Mayor, Plaza de San Martín, Palacio de los Guzmanes and Casa de Botines.

The wealth of landscape and culture in Leon invites us to journey through some of the most interesting places in the province. We can feel like pilgrims and continue along the road to Santiago, passing through **Astorga, Ponferrada and Villafranca del Bierzo**. Romanesque and Gothic temples, Templar castles, buildings designed by Antonio Gaudí and Jacobean museums are just some of the places of interest on this route. In this district of Bierzo, the Hills of Leon offer us great spots in which to practise low impact environment sports, we will come across two other places not to be missed. We are talking about the Roman ironworks of Compludo and the landscape of **Las Médulas, World Heritage**. It is an unusual landscape eroded by the hand of man, since former Roman gold mines could be found there.

In Leon you can also find part of the **Picos de Europa National Park**, situated in one of Spain's most important mountain ranges. Excursions through the Valdeón Valley and the Cares Route immerse visitors in mountainous landscapes of exceptional beauty. Another top nature area is the **Ancares Leonese National Reserve**, where deer, wolves, bears and capercaillie live among oak and beech trees.

Golfing enthusiasts have two courses available to them only a few kilometres from the city of Leon.