

From Galicia to Andalucía – through Western Spain

It is easy to spend a lot of time doing not a lot on the Costa del Sol and that is what I have been doing – time for a trip away. There are still quite a few areas of Spain I haven't explored and I have some ideas for journeys through them. The plan for this trip was to travel from North to South through Western Spain avoiding Madrid - which can be tricky as most rail journeys lead to the capital. Hot weather is unlikely to be a problem in the first week of March – when I check the weather I have just missed some serious winter weather in Galicia. I find a cheap flight to Santiago de Compostela which determines the starting point. The plan is to avoid places I've been before, which rules out Santiago itself, Zamora, Salamanca and Cáceres (though I can confirm that all of these are worth a visit). As usual I will travel by train and bus and hope to enjoy the journeys and the places I stop, and have a few beers along the way. A couple of likely towns are ruled out because I don't do early starts to catch a bus or train anymore, and I settle on a six-day route that takes in overnights in Lugo, León, Ciudad Rodrigo, Trujillo and Mérida. On the map below journeys by bus are in green and by rail in red.



Galicia

The trip starts with a Vueling flight from **Málaga** to **Santiago de Compostela**. A nearly full flight and I don't have a window seat – on this occasion it would have been worth paying for a specific seat as it is a clear day and a new route to me. There are about ten air-bridges at Santiago, yet we are the only plane in the whole airport. The departure screens suggest that it is busier later in the day.

Having visited Santiago de Compostela twice before I looked for somewhere else in Galicia and came up with Lugo. **Lugo** is the capital of the Galician province of the same name and has about 100,000 inhabitants. It was the Roman settlement of Lucus Augusti, and the main attraction today are the Roman walls, a UNESCO World Heritage site. According to Wikipedia, Lugo is the 'only city in the world to be surrounded by completely intact Roman Walls', so worth a visit.



It may be a clear day but it was also cold - it was only 7°C outside so I hung around the terminal until the bus was due. Lugo is 90 kilometres from the airport, about 1hr 45mins on the bus. We drive through wooded hills on the old national road – an *autovía* is being built. This was a stopping bus, so we passed through the towns and villages en route. Towns such as Arzúa, Melide, Palas de Rei, Guntín are all built on hilltop sites and the housing is typically Galician - blocks of flats with glazed-in *Galician hórreo*

balconies and corrugated iron gables. The street signs are in Galego, so there are plenty of 'x's in the names. Every village and town has a *pulperia* or two, specialising in serving octopus. The agricultural areas have tiny farms and fields. Many of the rural houses have small rectangular barns or granaries (*hórreos*) on pillars raised off the ground. They are smaller and more rectangular than those I've seen in Cantabria or Wallis (Switzerland) but presumably have the same purpose, to keep grain dry and free from mice and rats¹. Even some new houses had built modern concrete or brick versions. The road was largely empty of traffic, even on the short sections of *autovía* that we used.

At Santiago airport there were a few pilgrims with their wooden staffs, having completed their pilgrimage on the **Camino de Santiago** (Way of St James). We regularly pass the scallop signs indicating one of the routes, all of which lead to the shrine of St James in Santiago de Compostela. The shrine was a major pilgrimage destination in the Middle Ages, matched only by Rome and Jerusalem. After several centuries when there were few pilgrims, due to war or epidemics, the routes were designated UNESCO a World Heritage Route in 1987 and have since been promoted as a major tourist attraction. The main route from the French border passes through Galicia to the south of Lugo, via the towns of Melide and Arzúa, and it is easy to see the tourist infrastructure which the route has created, bringing jobs to a remote area of Spain².

Lugo

The city sits on top of a steep hill above the Rio Miño and its tributaries. To reach the bus station we gain height by going round the streets of Lugo in what seems like circles. In common with many places the bus station is a particularly grotty introduction to the town. When I get my bearings it seems we are in the Praza de Constitución just outside the city walls. It is possible to walk the complete circuit along the top of the Roman walls – more than 2km - and they are impressive. There is a main road encircling them (which makes photography without being run over difficult, but at least it means the centre of town is largely traffic free) and I walk the long way round them to get gain an idea of the layout of Lugo. Within the walls the old town is a mixture of medieval and eighteenth century buildings, some well looked after, others in serious disrepair. There's some regeneration going on close the walls but still a significant number of derelict buildings. To reach my

¹ Wikipedia confirms this and, though mainly concentrated in Northern Spain and Portugal there are examples from other parts of Europe (including Switzerland where they are known as *raccards*). The staddle stones on top of the pillars are what prevents the vermin reaching the grain.

² This route passes through León and Ponferrada (see day 2), and pilgrims form a significant proportion of tourists to these places. A subsidiary route known as the *Via de la Plata*, commences in Sevilla and basically covers my journey in reverse...so scallop signs are a regular feature by the roadside throughout my trip.



hotel I walk to the Praza Maior via the Rúa Nova (which seems to be where the restaurants and bars congregate, and there is time for a quick beer) and the cathedral.

Arriving in Spanish towns and cities in mid to late afternoon after a day's travelling gives one the impression that everything is shut – there is hardly a soul around. This happened every day on the trip. The temptation is to think that the economy of the town is suffering badly and it has been semi-abandoned. It is true that there are many empty shops and derelict buildings in the old centres, due to the recent move outwards to modern suburban flats and the construction of out of town shopping centres. However, go out about six and everywhere is packed, the shops, the streets are busy and it is clear that you have exaggerated the problem.

And this is what I did in Lugo, after checking into the hotel (where I was given a suite with not just one but two balconies). My purpose, apart from a general wander round was to find a basic food shop for some odds and ends for my journey. I eventually managed to find a small supermarket in amongst the vast numbers of shoe shops. Why are there so many? Then it was time for a few drinks and *pinchos*. Even on a Monday night the bars were

fairly busy. Some nice *tapas*, including *empanada* and popcorn (separately) in Cerveceria Lua, which had a selection of craft beers in bottles - I tried a Portuguese red ale and some Santa Cristo APA, brewed in Galicia at Ourense. I tried a few other places and enjoyed myself - helped by the fact that most people spoke pretty clear Spanish and it was much easier to follow some of the conversations than it is in Andalucía.

Roman walls, Lugo



Lugo to León

Breakfast is included in the hotel so I fight my way through the horde of Spanish pensioners on their Social Security holiday and fill myself up. It's a cold and misty morning as I make my way down to the station. The 1110 *Alvia* train from Lugo to Madrid is hauled by hybrid locomotives which can operate either on diesel or electric power. We're away from the main lines here - despite being a sizeable provincial capital the train is quiet and the next departure to anywhere is at 1924. The first stage is to Monforte de Lemos. We quickly leave Lugo behind as the new

blocks of flats on the slopes give way to countryside. A few kilometres outside Lugo there are signs of a new section of double track line being built – the investment hopefully means that there is a plan to increase the service from the current 5 trains a day (2 of which are overnight). The mist has cleared and the countryside feels quite remote until it becomes more built up as we approach the town and railway junction of **Monforte de Lemos**³.

The connecting train to León is one of the remaining examples of a traditional long distance Spanish train (most have been replaced by the high speed AVE trains). The loco and five coaches are on route from Vigo and A Coruña to Bilbao and the French border at Irun/Hendaye. It is quiet, though the few passengers (including the only baby who sits behind me and enjoys kicking the seat-back) have been allocated seats together by the Renfe (Spanish railways) computer, as usual. The conductor checks his reservations and allows us to spread out. There's 1 daily train linking these cities, which takes 11 hours 59 minutes for the 884km from Vigo to Hendaye (you can see the publicity now – 'across the breadth of Spain in less than half-a day'). There's no buffet, but the broad Spanish gauge means it is roomy and comfortable, and the sedate speed allows a good look at the landscape. Spain has more high speed lines than any other country in Europe, giving much faster journeys, but direct routes, extensive tunnelling and high speed means that some of the traditional benefits of travelling by trains such as this have been lost.

And the landscape is interesting. For much of the journey the line follows the valley of the **Rio Sil** (a major tributary of the Rio Miño - the northern border between Portugal and Spain). The first stretch is through a gorge which has been dammed to produce hydro-electricity. The first stop is A Rúa-Petin and from there to O Barco the valley is broad and there are signs of mining and industry as well as vineyards and poplar groves⁴. Finally, we leave Galicia and enter the region of **Castilla y León**.

Just over one and a half hours from Monforte de Lemos we arrive at **Ponferrada**, the largest town en route, where the Rio Sil turns westwards from its source in the Cantabrian mountains to the north. The buildings have changed, with none of the Galician touches, and all the signs are written in standard Castellano Spanish. Though there is a castle visible from the railway line it is clear that



Ponferrada was mainly an industrial centre, with the ruins of works and mines still visible. Alongside the railway are derelict goods yards and factories, including a row of rusting steam engines. From Ponferrada there was, until recently, (it is still marked on my map), a narrow gauge line which brought coal down from the mines at the head of the Sil valley. In the middle of the former industrial grot I can see an unlikely looking skyscraper (pictured), more suited to Manhattan than a small Spanish town.⁵

³ For more detail about the railways mentioned from Lugo to León see railway buffery 1, page 17.

⁴ This area is known as Valdeorras which is also a wine denomination. Once over the border into León the wine region is the Bierzo. The industry on this stretch is slate mining and processing.

⁵ According to Wikipedia Ponferrada has about 67,000 inhabitants. It was the base of *Minero Siderúrgica de Ponferrada* (Ponferrada Mining Iron and Steel Co), founded in 1918, which became Spain's largest coal mining company. It also became a major base for electricity generation and power stations remain nearby. Since the closure of the coal industry it has attracted a university and tourism - it is on the Camino de Santiago. The skyscraper is the Torre de la Rosaleda, the highest building in the Castilla y León region. In 2012, three years after completion, it was still largely empty, leading Spanish newspaper El Pais to re-name it the Torre de la Burbuja, tower of the (property) bubble.

After Ponferrada, near Bemibre, where we see the main road it is a busier than the deserted roads of Galicia, where driving must be a pleasure. For a while there is much evidence of the former coal industry and the map has plenty of mine symbols. There is a spiral section of railway line to gain height on this stretch, to cross the Montes de León from the valley of the Rio Tremor towards Astorga. At the head of the valley the railway is well away from the road and, in an isolated area, we cross the watershed into the area which (via its tributaries the Rio Orbigo and the Rio Esla) drains into the Rio Duero. At the foot of the mountains the land flattens and we reach **Astorga**.

From there it is a straight run over the plains of León past some low hills of soft yellow stone and into the city of **León** via a new stretch of track into a remarkably small modern, functional, terminus station. It has taken 4 hours 20 minutes from Lugo – a bargain at 14.60euros.

León

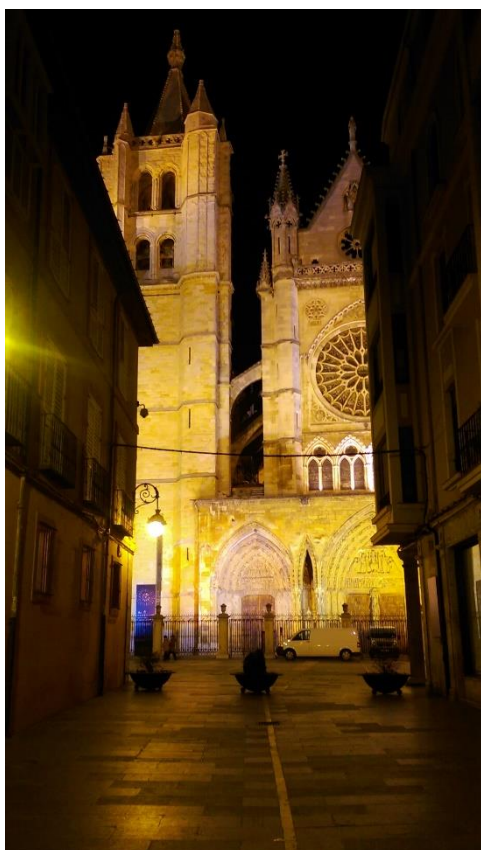


Plaza Mayor, León and the NH Hotel

I chose **León** as a convenient place to stop for a night. I would have to change from rail to bus at that point and, as a historic city and provincial capital with a population of about 130,000 and the site of a major university it promised to live up to similar Spanish cities. Also, the first teacher who tried to teach me Spanish came from León and sang its praises.

The railway and bus station are on the opposite bank of the river Bermesa from the city centre but it's not too far to walk to the modern centre, the Plaza Santo Domingo, then onwards into the *casco antiguo* (historic centre) along Calle Ancha. This pedestrianised shopping street is quiet at this time of day and leads to the cathedral. From there it is only a couple of more minutes to the Plaza Mayor. The square is impressive and my hotel is on the square itself, opposite the old town hall. Some rooms have balconies and a view looking out over the Plaza Mayor, but the cheap rooms are at the back, so I have a view of some air conditioning units. The room itself is fine, the bed is comfortable and tea and coffee are provided in the room.

It is a cool but sunny afternoon and I'm wrapped up well enough to have a couple of beers sitting outside the bar next door, watching the comings and goings. My *tapita* of peanuts is spotted within



seconds, and is attacked by the square's pigeons. Looking round there are quite a few bars on the square, and some of them look very much like late-night bars, so maybe I'm better off at the back of the hotel.

I have my usual walk around the area, having a cursory look at the main sights and taking some photos to prove that I've been in León. The Plaza Santa Maria de Camino is a lovely cobbled old square, with shady trees and an ancient small church. The back streets and the market area are quiet but atmospheric, there are plenty of shops which are permanently closed and a few abandoned buildings, but it looks as though it still has some life. By the time I reach Calle Ancha once more it is bustling with shoppers, and I wander on to have a quick look at the Basilica de San Isidro and the cathedral. I feel a bit guilty at not making the time to look inside the cathedral (the stained glass windows are meant to be particularly impressive) but I've always preferred just walking around to get the feel of a place. And there are many occasions when the choice is between the inside of a church and the inside of a beer glass, and the beer wins.

León cathedral

Much of the old town is known as the *Barrio Húmedo* (wet district) and it is full of bars. A little research comes up with the Four Lions brewpub which I try in the evening. At 8 o'clock it is already busy. It is an American style bar with excellent American Pale Ale (and several other beers) brewed on the premises, with the bonus of good quality *jamon* as the tapa. Later I try the Cerveceria Celtica which has a huge range of beers both on draft and bottled. León clearly has a large student population and it is lively on a Tuesday evening. I only have the energy to sample a couple of places but I passed by quite a few that looked worth a visit if I'm ever back in the area. I might even have a proper look inside the cathedral and basilica if I do return.

Castilla y León

The Day Three journey is from León to Ciudad Rodrigo – about 275 km. There is no rail link so it involves three buses, operated by three separate companies, changing at Zamora and Salamanca.

It is 2nd March and the Spanish *Cortes* (parliament) is making a further attempt to form a government following inconclusive elections on December 20. Pedro Sánchez, leader of PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers Party, roughly equivalent to New Labour), has been requested by the king to try to form a coalition government. Today is the first 'investiture' debate on the issue, and it lasts all day before an evening vote. Our driver to Zamora is obviously interested in politics, so for two hours the debate blares out from the coach radio as we trundle along the N630. It's good for my Spanish to listen, but without TV subtitles stating who is speaking and from which party, it is easy to get confused. There is obviously bad blood between PSOE and Podemos (We Can, a much newer party, broadly similar to Corbynite Labour) which would be an essential partner in any left-of-centre coalition, so the prospects are not good.

The N630 is the old national route south from León, now paralleled by the A66 *autovía* or motorway, and it is a good road, now with little traffic. Branded '*Ruta de la Plata*' (the silver route), because it



broadly follows the Roman 'silver route' from the mines of Northern Spain to the Mediterranean, the A630 ran from Gijon on the north coast for 803 km to Sevilla⁶. It is still there in parts, but 98% of the traffic takes the A66 *autovía*, which follows much the same route (and yes, I did see one café-bar called Ruta 66 in some out of the way village).

The first few miles are an endless strip of the industrial units, car and furniture showrooms, which blight the approach roads from many Spanish cities. The villages along the old road are deadly quiet and every so often there are abandoned service stations, truck stops, hotels and café-bars, no longer needed since the *autovía* took the traffic. The road follows the broad valley of the Rio Esla, but about a kilometre to the west is a very low ridge of soft yellow stone, every so often with a troglodyte village of cave houses built into the ridge. Local websites suggest that the caves were also used as bodegas to store wine when this was an important wine producing area. The modern

village houses along the road are plain and brick-built and the area feels neglected.

After the main intermediate town, **Benavente**, the landscape becomes a little hillier with some woodlands. Grassland with oaks begins to be seen. Just before Zamora we pass a reservoir where the Rio Esla has been dammed, and cross the line of the high speed railway under construction from Madrid to Galicia⁷.

There is only ten minutes in **Zamora** to find the *taquilla* (ticket window) for the next journey and return down to the platforms to find the bus. The bus to Salamanca is much busier – it is 1240 and the morning shopping or studying has finished. Immediately we cross the **Rio Duero**, which crosses through Portugal as the Douro on its way to the Atlantic at Porto. Once more we stick to the old road and, from time to time, the old railway line from Zamora to Plasencia can be seen. It looks as though they have just walked away from the line. The track is still in place (as are some colour light signals), and it still marked on the map, though it hasn't been used for over 30 years and vegetation is taking over the line⁸.

We pass through a village called El Cubo del Vino, which, for me, translates as 'the winebox'. The map shows many place names ending in 'del vino' but I can see no sign of growing grapes. A little research reveals that this was a major winegrowing area but many of the vineyards were wiped out by phylloxera in the nineteenth century⁹. Later we pass the large hilltop Topas prison, with a high concrete watchtower that can be seen for miles around.

⁶ I later find it suggested that 'plata' is a mistranslation of an Arabic word 'balath', meaning paved (Roman) road – but it is the 'silver' meaning which is in common use.

⁷ See railway buffery 2, page 18

⁸ See railway buffery 3, page 18

⁹ The population of El Cubo del Vino is less than half of what it was 100 years ago. There have been attempts to revive viticulture and in 2007 the Denominacion de Origin for Tierra del Vino de Zamora was secured. It



There is a little more time to change buses in **Salamanca**, so I have a beer, and a freshly made Spanish omelette baguette, which looks tremendous but is far too salty. Like all the cities of Spain, Salamanca has vastly expanded as people moved from the surrounding countryside, extended families split into several nuclear family units, people sought larger apartments away from the crowded historic city, and industry and workshops sought modern premises. On the outskirts, between the residential areas are shopping centres, industrial units and endless ring roads carrying very little traffic. The economic crisis has intervened, and there are large areas laid out for housing or industrial purposes lying empty.

The El Pilar bus takes the old road, through the middle of nowhere. It is more or less a straight road for the 80 km to Ciudad Rodrigo (and a further 30 km to the Portuguese border) and the old road is sandwiched between the *autovía* and the railway. There are only a couple of small villages along the road, one of which glories in the name of Sancti-Spíritus¹⁰. I pass the third scrapyard of the day - they seem to take great pride in advertising their presence - with scrapped cars piled high. One had a rusting plane and a helicopter on plinths. The remainder of the immense plain is typical *dehesa* countryside of grassland and oaks and for the next couple of days this will be the predominant type of landscape.

The railway line carries one train a day between the Franco-Spanish border and Lisbon calling at Ciudad Rodrigo at 0206 westbound and 0359 eastbound, so the choice to use the bus for this part of the journey was made for me. The train also carries coaches to and from Madrid and, apart from a local line between Porto and Galicia, it is the only remaining train between Spain and Portugal. It's about 1530 when the bus pulls into Ciudad Rodrigo and, as usual for this time of day, the bus station and town are deserted.

Ciudad Rodrigo

Ciudad Rodrigo, on a fortified hilltop site guarding a bridge over the Rio Agueda, close to the Spanish-Portuguese border, is another town where the walls have survived complete. These walls were built in the 12th and 17th centuries along with a substantial castle. The town was the site of sieges by the French in 1810 and the British in 1812. Today Ciudad Rodrigo is a town of 17,000 people and the centre for the local area.

The town has expanded beyond the walls but the old town is still the focus of most life, and even within the old town there has been more recent building. There has been little pressure on building land here so the outer defences – ramparts, cannon emplacements and the site of the moat – are intact, leaving a clear gap between the old and newer towns (pictured below). Once again, my hotel, the Hospedería Audiencia Real is situated on the Plaza Mayor. At ground level all that can be seen is a door next to a bar, but upstairs it is a lovely small hotel. The friendly owner gives you your key to the outside door and instructions on using the heating system, and the next door bar can be used for evening meals or breakfast.

covers a wide area and www.tierradelvino.net indicates that there are 6 wineries producing the D.O. wine, though none are located very close to the N630 road.

¹⁰ As an example of Spanish rural depopulation as people flocked to the cities, the population of Sancti-Spíritus was 2420 in 1950. It is now 879. This decline is quite typical of the villages I researched on Wikipedia following the trip.



Ciudad Rodrigo

I walked around the streets of the old town and then round the walls. The Plaza Mayor is an impressive collection of buildings and is surrounded by streets of renaissance and baroque mansions and palaces. As well as the cathedral there are several other churches, whilst the castle has been converted into a *parador* hotel. The town was quiet but I was told that it is busy with tourists in summer. For some reason I could not see any stork's nests in Ciudad Rodrigo – there are plenty in Salamanca, I saw some along the roadside from the bus and there are plenty of suitable towers for them to nest on.

There are a couple of café-bars next to the hotel and others on the square and in the surrounding streets so I had a wander round. Tonight's tapas included excellent stuffed peppers. On every bar television the investiture debate was coming to a conclusion and in the vote Pedro Sánchez was unsuccessful...so there will be another debate and vote in two days' time on Friday.



Plaza Mayor, Ciudad Rodrigo

On to Extremadura

Another day and an early start to catch the 0830 bus back to Salamanca – it is a long way, and three buses to Trujillo. It is cold and clear and to set me up for the day I have a coffee and a *tostada de tomate* in the café-bar An-Mai on the Plaza Mayor (yesterday's debate is being discussed endlessly by talking heads on the television – aargghh).

From **Salamanca**, the next stretch to **Cáceres** is my longest coach journey. I meant to buy a ticket when I passed through yesterday but a beer and tortilla sandwich were more pressing. I was concerned that the coach might be full and it was 2½ hours until the next one. However, I manage to buy a ticket and the coach is fairly quiet. It is travelling from Valladolid to Sevilla, a nine-hour journey, and I'm on board for the three-hour 200 kilometre stretch to Cáceres.

This one is an express (and very comfortable) and we bowl along the A66 *autovía*. The hills become more substantial and eventually, looming above **Béjar**, the northern face of the Sierra de Candelario is covered in snow. We call in at Béjar, an ugly town in a fine situation guarding the pass, and it is just past here that we cross from Castilla y León into the region of **Extremadura** - the land beyond the Duero.

Shortly after the regional border we leave the *autovía* and zigzag down the old main road into **Baños de Montemayor**. This bus stops only at the principal towns, but this is a place I've never heard of and, according to wikipedia.es it has a population of 774. The name gives it away - it is a resort based around thermal baths, one dating from Roman times. The town has plenty of hotels and *hostals* – presumably tourists are attracted to the spas, the equable climate and fresh air in the mountains. At this time of year there is not a soul in the streets or the tiny bus station.

Onward to **Plasencia** we pass through scrubby hills. Plasencia has endless apartment suburbs climbing the hills and we take a convoluted route through them to a bus station on the far edge of town.



The final stretch is along empty motorways through vast bare countryside. We cross the main Madrid – Lisbon railway line (though there are no passenger trains across the border these days). Alongside the motorway is construction work on the new high speed railway line which will reduce the isolation of Extremadura¹¹. Apart from the transport corridor and the occasional cow or sheep the countryside is empty. Even when we cross the **Rio Tajo** (the Tagus in Portugal, running past Lisbon to the sea) there is no sign of cultivation alongside the river, only an impressive new rail bridge under construction nearby (pictured).

I change buses at **Cáceres**, where we have a tour of the ring road on both inward and outward journeys, and see nothing of the town itself. The bus and train stations are close to each other on the edge of town, so I trace my route for tomorrow, when I have only a short time to change. I'm not visiting the city this time but I can recommend it from a previous visit – the historic city centre is fascinating and the town is lively, helped by a large student population. I eventually locate the

¹¹ See railway buffery 4, page 19.

taquilla for Trujillo – it turns out that it is the first stop on the 5 hour 10 minutes stopping bus route to Madrid (there are express journeys), and after a short break off we go.

After we clear the modern university buildings on the edge of town there's no site of habitation until **Trujillo**. The first sight of the town is the castle and several churches on a hilltop. We arrive in Trujillo, drive straight through, and it looks as though we are about to head off towards Madrid – I would have been worried if there weren't other passengers obviously planning to get off – when we pull into a spanking new bus station on the far side of town. Ten platforms, one bus, and a café with a decent bottle of beer and the best wifi for several days. And it is much, much warmer than in Ciudad Rodrigo this morning.

Trujillo

From the bus station I make my way back into the modern town at the foot of the hill, then uphill to the historic centre around the Plaza Mayor. The square is extremely impressive with fine old buildings from the town's richest period in the sixteenth century. Above the square several churches, towers and the castle add to the view. I sit and have a beer outside a café (it is definitely warmer) and watch not a lot happen, though there is a caravan in the middle of the square, which looks decidedly out of place, with an exhibition of new technology, which attracts the occasional curious local.



Plaza Mayor, Trujillo

Most of the wealth of Trujillo was generated by the plunder of Latin America. The equestrian statue in the square is of local boy Francisco Pizarro, who led the conquest of the Inca empire (the statue was sculpted by an American in the 1920s). The largest mansion in the square is the Pizarro family home built with the proceeds. This area of Spain produced many of the *conquistadores* – they left here for the Americas, despite Extremadura being far from the sea. Maybe they were attracted to the adventure due to being raised in border country where violence was a way of life. Or, more likely because Extremadura was a poor area and people heard stories of the endless wealth to be had in Latin America. Nevertheless, it explains the riches in the towns of this area, which otherwise is poor quality agricultural land with no mineral resources. My hotel is in one of the palaces a little bit from

the square. I can see storks nesting on a nearby tower and hear only the sound of birds when I open the window.

Later in the day I walk up to the Moorish castle and battlements. It now stands at the edge of town, and beyond the final buildings. I return downhill via the hilltop church of Santa Maria Mayor and take in the views over the surrounding countryside.

At night Trujillo is quiet. There are only a few tourists around in early March, though I imagine it is busy at summer weekends. It is a small town so not many locals to fill the cafes on the Plaza Mayor. The square is tremendously atmospheric at night with sensitive lighting and floodlighting adding to the scene. The gas heaters are lit outside the bars and I have a beer with a *tapa* of pork scratchings. Later, I have one of the most bizarre pizzas of my life. On a cheap shop-bought pizza base are mountains of a tasty mixture of chicken, goats cheese and caramelised onion. Then its inside for a final beer as the night is cold, and back to the hotel.



Trujillo to Mérida

I have time for a further walk round Trujillo in the morning. It is clear that, although most of the shops and banks are in the newer part of town along the main road from Cáceres, the Plaza Mayor and surrounding streets are still important. For breakfast it is another *tostada de tomate* in the bus station cafe then the bus to **Cáceres**.

From now on it is back to train travel. It's shortly after noon on a Friday, and in the bus and train stations it's clear that students are starting to move on their weekend trips home. However, the train to Mérida is not too busy – the journey is one hour on a three coach Madrid-Badajoz regional train which has already taken over 4 hours from Madrid. If and when the new Extremadura high speed line is completed it will make a huge difference.¹²

¹² See railway buffery 4, page 19.



The existing line is built cheaply with sharp curves, and towards Mérida there is a long stretch of jointed track in poor condition. The earth is red, there are some olive groves but most of the land is typical *dehesa* grassland with oaks, cattle and sheep. On one stretch we rattle along past black pigs snuffling on the ground for acorns and there are stork's nests on the remaining telegraph poles along the line.

Extremadura region contains two provinces and during the journey we cross the border between Cáceres and Badajoz provinces, before arriving in **Mérida**, the capital of the Extremadura region.

Mérida

It is still only 1310 when I arrive in **Mérida** so there is time for a walk round before checking in. Mérida does not have the sixteenth century grandeur of the *conquistador* towns of Trujillo and Cáceres, but it is a pleasant small town, much more southern in appearance than the other towns I've visited. Today it is the capital of Extremadura and has about 60,000 inhabitants. The reason for visiting is that it was the Roman city of Emerita Augusta, capital of the Roman province of Lusitania (which covered Extremadura and most of modern-day Portugal). It is described as having more Roman remains than any other city in Spain and, as a consequence, it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



It would take several days to fully explore all the Roman sites so I take in only a few. Close to the station are the remains of a Roman aqueduct (with storks nesting on top of each remaining column). From there I walk down to the wide and shallow **Rio Guadiana** (which rises near Ciudad Real in central Spain and reaches the Atlantic as the border between Portugal's Algarve and Spain). From the modern Lusitania Bridge, itself an impressive structure, there are good views of the Roman bridge, sixty arches long. I return by the Roman bridge, which still forms a main pedestrian route between the two sides of town. Beside the bridge is a Moorish Alcazar, built on the site of a Roman fortress. Nearby, the main square, Plaza de España is a relatively plain affair but it is pleasant, there is space to relax, and I have a beer from a kiosk before finding my hotel.

Then it's off to the main Roman sites – the amphitheatre and theatre. Today is quiet and there are only about ten of us exploring the large site, though the coach park nearby suggests it is popular during the season. The amphitheatre could hold 15,000 spectators for gladiatorial fights and other events. The theatre is an elaborate affair with two tiers of colonnades, and it is still used in the summer for

performances. Near the exit is a row of Roman reproduction shops – Zambrano's shop has the largest collection of Roman tat imaginable and I buy Ted a Roman column as a souvenir of the trip. Also nearby is the *Museo Nacional de Arte Romano*, meant to be very impressive, but it was time for food and drink in the row of decent tapas bars across the road and I'll leave it to the next visit.



Mérida, Teatro Romano

By evening it has turned cloudy with some slight drizzle, but it is a Friday night and the streets are busy. I see from a Facebook post that it reached 29°C on the Costa del Sol today but it didn't manage to rise above 13°C in Mérida. In the middle of the Plaza de España there are four bar kiosks, one on each corner, so I follow the example of the locals and give each of them a try in turn. In three of them the *tapita* is olives and I'm all olived out by the end. There are no toilets in the kiosks, and I can't see any public ones on the square, so it becomes necessary to find somewhere indoors. The evening finishes in a bar close to the hotel. Inevitably, the second investiture debate and vote is on the television and, equally inevitably Sánchez still does not manage to get a majority – he manages to get one more vote than on Wednesday, from a Canarian deputy. So there is a two-month break for negotiations before the next attempt to form a Government (or to call new elections).

Through Andalucía

A couple of *café solos* on the way to the station to catch the 0908 to Sevilla set me up for the day, I'm thankful that it is Saturday – the train leaves at 0754 during the week. The train takes 3.5 hours for the 240km journey.

Outside Mérida something odd strikes me about the landscape and I realise it is the first ploughed fields I've seen in a few days. Then the olive groves appear and a major olive pressing cooperative at Villafranca de los Barros. The olive trees are being pruned following the harvest in the winter, and fires have been lit to burn the cuttings. There are also a few vineyards. The Tierra de Barros is described as the most fertile and prosperous agricultural area in Extremadura. The red earth looks rich, and some the village houses look as though they have been built from the red clay. The village houses look Andalusian, with their internal patios obscured by the external walls.

The major town en route is **Zafra**, which we reach after 50 minutes on well-maintained track – there are only three trains a day but the time and price should be competitive with the coaches. Beyond Zafra station the line to Huelva (three trains a week, and therefore one of the obscure journeys I intend to do) heads off to the south. The route looks scenic from the map - and it would give me a chance to explore Zafra, which seems like a pleasant town. A freight line heads west to Jerez de los Caballeros - it appears that it is still in use and the map shows a couple of factories and a power station on the line.

Zafra is at the centre of a giant olive nursery, with acre upon acre of seedlings growing. We climb gently and olives give way to *dehesa* grassland and oaks with grazing sheep and then to rocky scrubland. Much of the land is used for hunting and I see, not only the usual '*coto privado de caza*' signs (private hunting land reserved for authorised hunters), but also the less common '*coto social de caza*' signs.

At **Llerena**, a small town where the size of the church suggests it has been a place of some importance, the other two passengers in my coach disembark and I'm alone for the rest of the journey. The stationmaster flags us off – one train in each direction call at Llerena each day, but he has to sell the tickets and work the local points and level crossing, so it's a busy job. The countryside is becoming mountainous and the line climbs. We pass a Moorish castle on the hill, and the map shows a Roman theatre nearby, so it is clear that this route has been important, linking Mérida with Sevilla and Cordoba. **Fuente de Arco** looks abandoned, but two people alight and into waiting cars – the village of 709 people, is behind a hill¹³.



We are now on the most remote stretch of the journey as we cross the **Sierra de Morena**, and the watershed between the Guadiano and Guadalquivir river basins. We are about 750m above sea level. Shortly after Fuente de Arco we leave Extremadura and cross into **Andalucía** and the province of Sevilla. The countryside is stunning – we are in the *Parque Natural de la Sierra Norte de Sevilla*, part of the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve '*Las Dehesas de la Sierra Morena*'. The mountains are

largely wooded and in the *dehesa* there are sheep, cows and black pigs grazing amongst the trees. The first stop in Andalucía is at the isolated village of Guadalcanal, which gave its name to an island in the Solomon Islands in 1568 (a local lad was on the expedition). Subsequently the island was the site of the first major Allied offensive against the Japanese in 1942-43.

We reach **Cazalla y Constantina**, a station in the middle of nowhere – the two villages are 8 and 12 kilometres away respectively. It is branded as a *Cercanías* (suburban train) station. I check and two suburban trains make it up here from each day from Sevilla, keeping the stationmaster busy. I discover later that the area, which had iron ore reserves (now exhausted) has Scottish connections¹⁴. As we reach Pedroso, about 50km into Andalucía the *dehesa* begins to give way to olive groves, almond trees (in flower) and more intensive agriculture as we reach the plains.

At the foot of the Sierra Morena we are in the valley of the **Rio Guadalquivir**, the important river which links both Cordoba and Sevilla with the sea. We call at Villanueva del Rio y Minas - by now there are five suburban trains a day into Sevilla. The town comes as quite a shock - it was a coal mining and cement making town and the signs of this are everywhere. There is an old steam engine rusting in a siding (pictured below), the mine chimney and headgear still stand, and the town looks as though it has not recovered from the closure of the mines in 1972.

¹³ The population is down from a high of 2652 in 1950. The figures show that 13 of them live by the station, but there is no sign of any of them.

¹⁴ See railway buffery 5, page 19.



We cross the river, pass through the agricultural town of Tocina and join the old main line from Madrid via Cordoba to Sevilla at Los Rosales. It still does not look suburban, but after a further twenty minutes along the flat valley, with fruit trees and signs of increasing urbanisation, we arrive in **Sevilla Santa Justa**.

The railway line is underused - There is only one daily train a day that travels the whole route from Mérida to Sevilla. From Zafra to Cazalla y Constantina, the most scenic stretch of the route, it is the only service. The railway cannot compete with express coaches along the more direct *autovía* (the fastest of the 8 services each day from Mérida to Sevilla takes two hours). However, though there are some slow stretches with 60 or 70 km/h restrictions due to poorly maintained track or risk of landslip, the majority of the line is in good condition, at least as good as a rural UK line. On the most scenic stretch of the line I estimate there was no more than fifteen passengers on the train. A day return trip is possible from Zafra, but not from the major tourist centre of Sevilla. It seems a waste of its potential that the route is so poorly marketed and managed and may be at risk of closure¹⁵.

Its only 20 minutes until my next train departs and we are off to Málaga. This train is quite busy and all the stations we call at have passengers waiting. I've travelled by train from Sevilla to Málaga many times so I doze for part of the journey. On the train there are people speaking English and I realise that it's the first I've heard since the flight to Santiago. Coming after a few days further north it is striking just how Moroccan the small towns look. I realise that I have never stopped in Marchena or Osuna, both of which look as they could be interesting with glimpses of the historic areas from the train.

The Andalucian Government started to build a new high speed line from Sevilla to Granada, and there are plenty of signs of its route. The track-bed is complete but sits there without track and unused – work was stopped during the economic crisis and has not restarted¹⁶.

Bobadilla, where lines from Málaga, Algeciras, Sevilla, Madrid and Granada meet, has lost much of its role as the Crewe Junction of Andalucía since the Madrid – Málaga high speed line was opened and much of the traffic now calls at the nearby Antequera-Santa Ana. Between Bobadilla and Málaga the railway had to find a route through the mountains. After the longest tunnels there are a series of short tunnels between which there are spectacular views of the **El Chorro** gorge, and the Caminito del Rey, the walking route along the sheer side of the gorge. Unused for many years the path has

¹⁵ See railway buffery 5, page 19.

¹⁶ See railway buffery 6, page 19.

been repaired and reopened and people wave to the train from the path. This stretch of line makes it well worthwhile to take this route rather than the faster high speed trains between Sevilla and Málaga – it also gives a view of the impressive viaduct on the new line near Alora.

We arrive at **Málaga Maria Zambrano** and the final stretch of my journey is a suburban *cercanías* train to Benalmádena- Arroyo de la Miel and home. The journey has taken from Monday morning to Saturday afternoon and I work out I've travelled just over 1200 kilometres from Santiago de Compostela airport at a cost of 127.19 euros in train and bus fares. More important than those statistics, there are none of the journeys and none of the towns that I've visited which I wouldn't recommend. Like most of my trips I've treated it as a *recce*, to find places that I would happily go back to and get to know better (nothing to do with intimations of mortality and trying to cram as much in as possible before I reach my dotage) and everywhere I visited falls into that category.

Railway buffery

1 Lugo to León

The railway between León and Lugo opened between 1878 and 1883 as part of the first link between the rest of Spain and Lugo. By 1913 the fastest train of the day took 8½ hours between the two cities. Today the Lugo – Monforte de Lemos section is part of the route from A Coruña and Ferrol to Madrid. From Monforte it continues to Ourense where it joins the lines from Santiago de Compostela and Vigo. The Monforte de Lemos – León section is part of a route that links Galicia with the Basque Country and Catalonia.

The timetable from Lugo changed in February 2016, following the opening of a further stretch of LAV (*Linea de Alta Velocidad*) high speed line from Olmedo to Zamora. The difference LAV lines make is illustrated by the fact that the *Alvia* train from Lugo to Madrid takes 6 hours 44 minutes for the journey. The 368 kilometres from Lugo to Zamora takes 5 hours 1 minute (average speed 73.4 km/hr) and the 256 kilometres from Zamora to Madrid takes 1 hour 38 minutes (average speed 157 km/hr).

The construction work taking place on the line between Monforte and Lugo is a much reduced scheme to make the line compatible with high speed trains once the LAV line from Madrid reaches Ourense in 2018, by improving the slowest stretches of the route.

The narrow gauge line from **Villablino** at the head of the Sil valley (pictured) ran for 64km to Ponferrada, where it met the Monforte – León main line. The line and its branches were built primarily to exploit the coal reserves of the valley and bring the coal to Ponferrada, where it was



washed and/or transferred to the main line for onward distribution. More recently, the line was used to take coal to major power stations in the valley. There was a passenger service on the line until 1980 – when it ceased it was the last steam worked line in Western Europe carrying three classes of passengers. Coal traffic ceased more recently and much of the line is still in place. There is talk of re-opening part of the route as a tourist heritage line, or converting the track-bed into a footpath.

The current **León** station opened in 2011 as a provisional station, replacing the Estación del Norte. This has replaced a through station with a terminus station where through trains have to reverse. The current restricted layout has caused problems - a few services have been cancelled and others take up to half an hour longer. The high speed line from Madrid reached León in September 2015, with the conversion of two of the four platforms to standard gauge and the installation of a gauge changer outside the station for trains between Madrid and Asturias. The plan is to build a new station underground, serving both the traditional lines and the standard gauge LAV. Construction of the new line is underway between León and Oviedo, much of it in tunnel under the mountains and it is due to open in 2018. However, there is no sign of work on the new León station, and the site of the old station and the lines to the north remain a huge gap site.

2 Madrid – Galicia High Speed Line (LAV)

The high speed line between Zamora and Ourense is planned to open in 2018, completing the LAV link between Madrid and Galicia. The section from Madrid is already open, reaching Zamora in early 2016, and trains currently use a gauge changer to continue on the existing line towards Galicia. From Ourense the line to Santiago de Compostela, A Coruna and Vigo is also already open.

3 Astorga -Zamora – Salamanca – Plascencia line

The Astorga – Zamora – Salamanca – Plascencia line was opened in 1896 as a link between the regions of western Spain. In its latter years, despite re-signalling, the poor quality of the track and lack of investment in maintenance led to speeds declining. Many sections had speed restrictions of 50 km/hr or less, and the line could not compete with road traffic. The line has been out of use since 1985. Campaigns to reopen the line have been unsuccessful and lifting of the track began in 2013, with the aim of converting some of the route into a '*via verde*' long distance foot and cycle path.



The name '*Ruta de la Plata*' was also used for the railway and for the through trains, pictured above, which used the line to travel between Sevilla to Asturias. In its final year of operation the daily 'fast' train from Sevilla to Gijon via this route took 15½ hours. From Salamanca to Cáceres (less than three hours by coach today) the fast train took four hours and the stopping train took more than 6 hours.

4 Madrid – Extremadura – Lisbon

The daytime train from Madrid to Lisbon, which took about 9 hours for the journey ceased to run around the turn of the century. The overnight train via Extremadura was cancelled in 2012, leaving no trains to Portugal via this route. The current coach time between the two capitals is over 9 hours.

A high speed line (LAV) between Madrid and Lisbon was planned jointly by Spain and Portugal with the aim of reducing the time between the two capitals to 2 hours 45 minutes, which would make centre to centre journeys competitive with air travel. Work on the route began in Spain in 2008. However, the Portuguese government cancelled their high speed programme in 2012. The high speed line is now planned to run from Madrid to Badajoz, near the Portuguese border, via Cáceres and Mérida. Work is proceeding slowly and completion is planned for 2020. Though there is some doubt whether it will be high speed over the entire route, it will lead to a substantial drop in journey times between Madrid and Extremadura.

5 Mérida – Zafra – Sevilla.

The line from Zafra to Sevilla was eventually completed in 1885, opening up links between the Extremadura network and the port at Sevilla and assisting with the exploitation of the mineral resources of the Sierra Morena. By 1913 the fastest of the three daily trains between Mérida and Sevilla took 9 hours. The through service on the route was cut to one daily train in recent years.

Fuente del Arco was a junction station with a metre gauge line, which reached Peñarroyo by 1895 and Puertollano by 1924. It was built mainly for freight – there are iron and coal deposits along the route. The line carried passengers from 1902 until its closure in 1970. In 1913 the fastest of the three daily trains took 3 hours to travel the 43 miles to Peñarroyo.



Near **Cazalla y Constantina** station (pictured) was a junction with a standard gauge freight line from the iron ore and mineral workings at nearby Cerro de Hierro. The mines and the line were owned by William Baird Mining, a coal and iron ore company originally based in Coatbridge, Lanarkshire. The mines closed in 1985 and the railway route is now a walking and cycle path. Following nationalisation of their UK coal and

steel interests William Baird diversified into textiles, including the purchase in 1981 of the raincoat manufacturers Dannimac. Sources: www.minasdesierramorena.es and www.gracesguide.co.uk

6 Sevilla – Granada High Speed Line (LAV)

The Andalusian Government planned a high speed rail route crossing Andalucía from Huelva via Sevilla, Antequera, and Granada to Almería. It currently seems unlikely that the entire route will be built in the near future, if ever. Construction work was begun on the Sevilla – Antequera section and much of the track-bed is complete. Work on this section was cancelled when the economic crisis struck Spain and the Junta de Andalucía will only release further funding once the economic situation has improved. Funded by central government, part of the section between Antequera and Granada is under construction by and may open in 2016. This will give Granada improved links with

Madrid, which currently takes almost 4 hours compared to 2½ hours between Madrid and Sevilla or Málaga respectively.

Other information about the trip

Hotels

I used the following hotels:

Lugo: Hotel Méndez Nuñez ****

León: NH Collection León Plaza Mayor ****

Ciudad Rodrigo: Hospederia Audiencia Real **

Trujillo: NH Trujillo Palacio de Santa Marta ****

Mérida: Hotel Rambla Emerita **

All were good value for money (Ciudad Rodrigo was excellent for the price) even as a single traveller, much cheaper than comparable accommodation in the UK. I used the NH website www.nh-hotels.com and booking.com for the others. I booked room only – there is always a cafe-bar nearby for breakfast, except for Lugo where an (excellent) breakfast was included in the price. All were very central, but with quiet rooms. León, Ciudad Rodrigo and Trujillo were in historic buildings. All of them had free wifi – useful as the internet signal was poor on some stretches. All of the towns except Lugo have parador hotels, all of them in historic buildings, which would be an excellent, albeit more expensive alternative.

Information and sources

To plan the trip and identify which places I wished to see I used the Rough Guide to Spain to help choose. A couple of options were dropped due to inconvenient or non-existent train or bus connections.

Both for planning purposes and during the journey I used Michelin 1:400,000 regional **maps** of Spain. They are good at indicating scenic routes, and rail lines as well as roads are clearly mapped (and they are cheap). The relevant maps are numbers 571 (Galicia), 575 (Castilla y Leon), 576 (Extremadura) and 578 (Andalucía). The Michelin Motoring Atlas of Spain and Portugal uses the same mapping. Google maps was useful for arriving in the towns, as train and bus stations can be well away from the modern or historic town centres (and the hotels).

For **post-trip research** and **fact-checking** Wikipedia and the Spanish language counterpart Wikipedia.es were the starting point. Local council websites (usually *municipio* or *ayuntamiento* de the place name) were also useful. Even the tiniest municipalities (and there are plenty of them) are likely to have a website. For the railway buffery section additional sources of information were the wiki site www.ferropedia.es, www.spanishrailway.com (in Spanish despite the English name), and the reprint of Bradshaw's Continental Railway Guide 1913 (the one that Michael Portillo used while traipsing around Europe). Any mistakes in translation from Spanish sites are mine.

Travelling by train and bus

Most trains in Spain can be reserved in advance, though reservations are generally available up to the time of departure. Most longer bus routes can also be reserved online or at ticket offices in advance. Provided Friday and Sunday afternoons (and Spanish holiday periods) are avoided, turning up and going is not a problem.



Almost all **train services** are operated by RENFE, and times are available on www.renfe.com. For booking in advance the Man in Seat 61 www.seat61.com includes a guide in its Spain section on setting up an account to buy tickets in advance. There are cheap advance tickets for longer journeys available online.

Bus services are operated by a multiplicity of companies and I have yet to find a reliable source of information on which company operates which route. The various national and comparison sites don't seem to be aware of most of the smaller companies. Company websites (if they have them) are of varying quality, from the OK to the dire. At bus stations each company has its own ticket window (*taquilla*) which needs to be located. A wave of takeovers in recent years hasn't helped as online information and local people may know the company by its former name. Services between main towns are pretty good, and comfortable coaches are used. Long distance coaches (on this trip from Salamanca to Cáceres) may have wifi and entertainment systems.

The companies used on this trip and their websites are:

- * Santiago de Compostela – Airport – Lugo: Empresa Freire www.empresafreire.com
- * León – Zamora: Empresa Vivas www.autocaresvivas.es
- * Zamora – Salamanca: Zamora Salamanca www.zamorasalamanca.es
The two companies above jointly operate a couple of through journeys each day León - Salamanca, but most journeys connect at Zamora where you have to change bus and buy a new ticket.
- * Salamanca – Ciudad Rodrigo: El Pilar Autocares www.elpilar-arribesbus.com
- * Salamanca – Cáceres; Alsa www.alsa.es This was formerly Enatcar, which has become part of the Alsa group.
- * Cáceres – Trujillo: Avanzabus www.avanzabus.es This was formerly Auto-Res, which has become part of the Avanza group. A company called Mirat operate a couple of buses a day on this route, but the avanzabus timetable is convenient.

Alsa and Avanzabus are the two biggest bus companies in Spain and a good place to start researching. On bus company websites look under '*horarios*' for the timetable.



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Ruta de la Plata railcars (page 18): www.afzamorana.es

Cazalla y Constantina station (page 19): www.sevilla.abc.es

RENFE train (page 21): www.rondatoday.com