

The Best of Spain

by Fernando Gayesky



The Best Places to Drink

- **El Casco** (Zaragoza): With a name that literally translates to “the helmet,” you may not know what to expect when diving deep into Zaragoza’s core, El Casco, in search of a sweet night out. Which is exactly why El Casco appeals to so many Spanish youth, near and far—it’s unpredictable nature and “anything goes” aura make it a recipe for fun and, well, trouble of the best kind. See p. 311.
- **Es Jaç** (Palma de Mallorca): Fashion *wunderkind* Miguel Adrover’s joint is an interior designer’s wet dream, minus the pretentiousness. Get there early to be able to check it out empty and stay late chilling with the owner and his crew of demented friends, who, if they like you, will point you to the coolest spots in town. See p. 472.
- **Zurriola Marítimo** (San Sebastián): If you’re in San Sebastián and have exhausted all of your options in Parte Vieja (or rather they’ve shut down for the night), Zurriola will never leave you aching for a late-night cocktail, as its doors don’t shut until 7am and open again soon thereafter. See p. 268.
- **Malasaña neighborhood** (Madrid): Madrid’s Malasaña neighborhood has branded itself a permanent iconic place in Spanish history. During the '80s, it was the stomping grounds for cutting-edge artists and musicians during La Movida Madrileña. Today, punks, freaks, and hipsters continue to unite over drinks and rock 'n' roll. Kids party *botellón* style in Plaza Dos de Mayo before meeting for drinks at legendary joints like La Vía Láctea. You can’t go wrong; there are more decent bars than hours in a Spanish night out. See p. 81.
- **Medussa** (Cádiz): We don’t look for much when we want to drink with friends. We only ask that there’s some good tunes, a decent crowd of people, and a trio of eunuchs to pour the beer into our mouths. Surprisingly, we can never find the last but the first two are more than taken care of in Medussa. It’s quite possible that the student-favored bar has the best rotation of alternative and '80s rock coming out of its woofers and tweeters—with a focus on musical heroes such as Morrissey, David Bowie, Dinosaur Jr., and Sonic Youth on a nightly basis. See p. 587.
- **Tents at Devesa Park** (Girona): The college crowd that composes most of

2 • The Best of Spain

the noise-making population of Girona and its surrounds has a standing date every summer weekend at the Devesa Park, where trendy city bars and summer-only ventures put up their tents to create a massive outdoor drinking spectacular. Add music, perfect weather, and tons of young people bouncing (and stumbling) around and you've got yourself a perfect summer party. See p. 396.

- **Bora Bora** (Ibiza): There's a fine line to determine whether a bar with loud music and a gazillion people dancing is just a bar or actually a club in disguise.

Bora-Bora walks the line with grace, albeit while staggering at every step. A quintessential Ibiza experience, whether it is pre- or post-club (another distinction that tends to get blurry in this 24-hour party town). See p. 497.

- **Beach Chiringuitos** (Barcelona): Since

Catalans decided to turn their faces back to the sea, the simple, wooden decked huts, aka *chiringuitos*, have become a local institution at the beaches as representative as the albino Gorilla Snowflake (RIP). Whether you choose the tourist infested ones on Barceloneta or the electronic music dens of Marbella beach, you can't spend a summer in Barcelona without the taste of a margarita by the sea shore. See p. 368.

Jerez de la Frontera: Jerez isn't exactly a college town. The majority of the people who come to refine their alcoholic palate with sips of sherry seem to be esteemed members of the AARP. There's nothing wrong with old people, but it's not that fun to get drunk with someone who takes Metamucil with their Miller Lite. However, with age comes wisdom and, when it comes to drinking, few places can compete with a town where the main tourist activity is taking tasting tours of distilleries. See p. 589.

- **Plaza de la Merced** (Malaga): This is

where it's at. If you don't believe us, ask Picasso. Well, if he was alive he'd definitely vouch for the square's importance in Malaga's nightlife. Every Friday and Saturday night in the summer and spring brings hundreds of bag toting locals ready to guzzle their makeshift cocktails and beer. Guests staying at Picasso's Corner Hostel have the added advantage of having their beds a few minutes away from the chaos, so their walk of shame is a nice, short hop, skip, and a stumble away. To see just how prolific the *botellón* in Plaza de la Merced can be, stop by early the next morning before the street cleaners get there. See p. 595.

The Best Cheap Sleeps

- **Hôme Deluxe** (Valencia): The swankiest in the three-member Hôme family is by far the best value in town. The impossibly friendly staff will point you to your own private theme room, each designed by a different personality with names and decorations as varied as Colonial Alcove and Kyomei. With hostels like this one, even Nicole Ritchie could be a backpacker. See p. 434.

Posada de San Jose (Cuenca): This is more than just a place to park your stuff. It's an institution, a place for both the rich and the poor to co-exist in one awesome old building, which used to be a 17th-century choir school and one of Velázquez's summer hangouts. See p. 148.

- **Olga's Place** (San Sebastián): This backpacker's haven located just around

The Best Cheap Sleeps • 3

the corner from San Sebastián's major surfing beach has the most inviting atmosphere of anywhere along the Bay of Biscay coast. The owner, an ex-pat from Russia, makes you feel right at home, and for the most part, you'll find only English spoken here from your fellow lodgers—a rarity for this part of Spain. See p. 262.

● **Pension Bellmirall** (Girona): Okay, this is not the cheapest option in town, but for the price of the YMCA in New York you can spend the night at an authentic 14th-century medieval house in the middle of Girona's incredible Call Jueu. The stone walls are decorated with beautiful ceramics and paintings by local artists, giving a new meaning to cozy. See p. 394.

● **Albergue de Juventud Kabul**

(Barcelona): Long before the Taliban put Kabul on the map, this youth hostel was already receiving visitors from all over the world who were ready for action. If not the best place to rest, it's most definitely *the* place to party, located right in the Plaça Reial, the center of Barcelona's nightlife, where you'll find everything from fancy clubs to alternative street *botellóns*. The closest you can get to having a party in your backyard in Barcelona. See p. 348.

● **Lolo Urban House** (San Sebastián):

The chill-out vibe this Aussie hostel exudes attracts those looking for a laid-back environment with the possibility of some major partying. If you check in on the right day, you may just get in on one of the frequent pub crawls to San Sebastián's hot spots that the guys running the place initiate. Or if surfing's your bag, you can sign up for one of the ongoing surf trips the hostel offers. See p. 261.

● **Hostal Catedral** (Salamanca): This hostel is a cut above the rest with bright rooms, impeccable cleanliness, and demure hospitality that you wish you could bottle and bring back home with you. After a lot of traveling it stands out for its sunniness as well as for having more sparkle than a Mr. Clean commercial. See p. 218.

● **El Beaterio** (Tarifa): Sweet, sweet Carmen. If it weren't for her husband, Verna, we'd be writing dozens of love sonnets for the inimitable Carmen instead of writing about El Beaterio. Then again, if it weren't for her husband, El Beaterio would still be the rundown shell of a monastery that once stood there. Years of blood, sweat, and tears have turned it into a home away from home for hundreds of guests who stay there every year. Some might find the toys haphazardly tossed around the halls strange, but it just adds to the atmosphere and, unknown to the owners and their kids, they provided us hours of entertainment after boozing it up with friends. See p. 580.

● **Oasis Backpackers'** (Granada): There's too much to say about this place, so to save space we'll forgo some letters: Awsrn dnnrs, cmfy bds, frndly ppl, vry chll trrc, xclnt lndry svc, tns f thngs plnnnd nghtly, png png tbl, vry chp rts. If you'd like to buy a vowel, check out p. 565 for the full review.

● **Picasso's Corner** (Malaga): By the time this book comes out, all the repairs and renovations to Picasso's Corner might make this one of the best hostels in Spain. While the pristine bathrooms and comfy common areas might sway your opinion toward the positive, the supremely laid-back and friendly staff will knock your opinion on its ass . . . in a good way of course. See p. 600.

The Best Beaches

- **Ses Illetes** (Formentera): On the paradisiacal island of Formentera every stretch of sand is the best beach you've ever seen, but if someone had a gun to my head, I'd say Ses Illetes is the chosen one. Impossibly clear water, the finest white sand, and no man-made structures whatsoever to get in the way of your perfect tan. And if that's not enough you can cross over to the next beach and take a mud bath in the same place where Paz Vega took hers in *Sex and Lucia*. See p. 512.
- **Playa de la Concha** (San Sebastián): One of San Sebastián's three main beaches, La Concha is by far the most spacious and, likewise, most populated. Regardless, it's the ideal spot for catching some rays or trying to meet some beachside babes. Girls beware:
- **Platja de Formentor** (Mallorca): The beach at Cabo Formentor is a narrow strip of sand in a bay surrounded by lush mountains of a dark green that merges into the clear green water. The clientele is a little on the posh side, but mingling is not mandatory. See p. 481.
- **Cabo de Gata Park** (Andalucia): If you do have time to head east for a little extra R&R, Cabo de Gata should be your first destination. The natural reserve not only has some of the most beautiful flora and fauna in southern Spain, but it also has some of the most secluded and breathtaking beaches in the entire country. See p. 568.

The Best Ways to Blow Your Money

- **Hotel de Londres y de Inglaterra** (San Sebastián): If you're straying from the smelly, cramped hostel scene and forking out a hefty sum doesn't faze you, this four-star located right smack on San Sebastián's most happening beach is your place of choice. The sea-side views are spectacular, as is the service and basically every other aspect imaginable about Hotel de Londres y de Inglaterra, which remains one of the country's most popular choices for accommodation. See p. 264.
- **Gran Hotel Domine Bilbao** (Bilbao): A chef d'oeuvre in itself with its Art Deco furnishings and mishmash of sculptures and paintings, Gran Hotel is located at the most fashionable address with a front-row seat to the Guggenheim. Hands down Bilbao's grandest lodging establishment, the decor of the rooms and overall glamour of the five-star hotel fit right in with the city's revamped contemporary ambience. See p. 279.
- **Hotel Alfonso XIII** (Sevilla): When you collect your first million as some hot-shot CEO, be sure to book a room here to see what all the fuss is about. In the meantime you, the cash-strapped backpacker that you are, can wander in and pretend to be one of the spoiled guests staying in the legendary hotel. Everything, from the light fixtures to the zipper on the bellhop's fly, is gilded and each are worth more than all your possessions combined. See p. 535.
- **Etxanobe** (Bilbao): The top floor of the Congressional Palace makes for Bilbao's tastiest and most elegant dining experience. Throw on your fanciest attire and sample some of the Basque Country's finest cuisine. See p. 280.

The Best Places to Party ⚜ 5

• **El Bulli** (Costa Brava): You may have to shorten your trip by a day or two, but how many people can say they ate at the world's best restaurant? Star chef Ferrán Adrià's joint gets booked a year in advance, but you may be able to get a last minute spot to try the multi-course tasting menu consisting of the most

innovative experiments in taste, smell, and texture, all produced after months of research at Adrià's Barcelona kitchen lab. The restaurant itself lies in a beautiful cove about 2 hours north of Barcelona (though for the price tag you'd think it would be, transportation is not included). See p. 406.

The Best Spanish Oddities

• **Gypsy Weddings** (Mérida): Even Greek weddings have nothing on Spanish gypsy ones. If you're lucky enough to see this sight—and if it's summer you will—you'll see why gypsies have that extra bounce in their step. Clapping, stomping, chanting, singing . . . you'll wish you were a gypsy. Large families gather around a bejeweled bride who is inevitably wearing a tall Spanish comb in her hair. The other women are usually in neon-colored dresses while men are often caught in whacked out tuxes and alligator shoes. Festivities shout, music blares, and I'll be damned if there's a booty not shaking.

• **Witchcraft Museum** (Segovia): We thought the mummified finger in Avila was weird but we hadn't yet seen the witchcraft museum in Segovia. This private collection exhibits some of the scariest dead stuff you've never imagined. And it's not all hoopla. In the

torture dungeon, you can see how so-called witches were intimidated or (gulp) burned during the Inquisition. Admittedly, it was the most disturbing historical account I'd seen thus far, one that made me shriek out loud. Make sure you're firmly planted in your religious beliefs—and your lunch—before you dare to visit. See p. 237.

• **Paulino/Flamenco Bar** (Tossa de Mar): This bar provides one of the wildest experiences on the Costa Brava. Red lights and velvet, dead animals gracing the walls, and a mix of Spanish kitsch and American pulp that wouldn't be possible anywhere else in the world. The live act involves a flamenco guitar player, a generously proportioned female singer with a voice like Louis Armstrong's, and a team of waiters and locals straight out of a John Waters movie. See p. 411.

The Best Places to Party

• **Fallas** (Valencia): Valencia is known as Spain's party capital, so it should come as no surprise that they hold the biggest and maddest town party. Four days of incessant noise (Armageddon-worthy firecrackers go off every 6 hr.), drinking, and dancing should take care of the needs of your inner party animal for a while. Picture a Thanksgiving Day

Parade, meets pyromaniac Fourth of July, meets St. Patrick's Day, and you'll have an inkling of what the last day of Fallas is like. Did we mention it's 4 days long? See p. 441.

• **San Fermín** (Pamplona): If nonstop partying for 7 consecutive days sounds good, well, San Fermínes might be a bit of a disappointment—it has 8. Spain's

6 • The Best of Spain

eminent Running of the Bulls is no doubt one of the country's most revered annual festivals and with good reason. The city is one chaotic mass of drinking, dancing, and having an all-around good time. See p. 295.

- **Gay Pride** (Madrid): That's right, the most Catholic country in the world legalized gay marriage. But countries like ours aren't exactly following suit. During Gay Pride week in Madrid, hordes of horny international gays and lesbians come dressed in rainbow fatigues to fight discrimination, inequality, and dreariness, and to celebrate with glitter and gold in the world-renowned neighborhood of Chueca. There are no rules to the game of love during this fiesta; who cares whether he/she is the same sex as you, if you both like it! *La bella vida!* See p. 118.
- **La Mercé** (Barcelona): Barcelona celebrates its patron saint with a week of cultural events and general partying. The bars put up street vending tables with cheap deals and the streets get packed with people watching the many free concerts throughout the old city until 1:30am, when the party moves on to the Forum, where more bands and DJs keep everybody happy until the sun comes up. During the day museums are free, not that you'll ever make it to see that side of the sun. See p. 377.
- **La Latina** (Madrid): This neighborhood is more popular on Sunday afternoons than any other spot in the country, and in Spain that's saying something. Everyone and their grandma—no, really,

we're being literal here—arrives in droves for tapas and drinking along La Latina's narrow bar-lined streets leading to the Plaza Mayor. More popular than the bars, however, is parking it in Plaza de la Paja (ironically outside San Pedro church) with a 40 liter of beer and a sparked spliff. Look, I'm just being an observational journalist here. See p. 81.

- **Primavera Sound** (Barcelona): Growing every year to become one of the most important music festivals in Europe, Primavera Sound is not as popular as Sonar but the musical offer is more varied. The location is unbeatable; the six stages sprawl across the Forum, under the giant solar panes overlooking the beaches, down the hill, next to the saltwater pools, or by the giant Ferris wheel. The acts keep getting better and better, and recent features have included The Yeah Yeah Yeahs, Mogwai, Lou Reed, and Flaming Lips. See p. 377.
- **Carnaval** (Sitges): Catalunya's biggest gay party takes place in Sitges, where everybody dresses up (or undresses) to the full extent of their flamboyant fantasies. Colorful floats, lots of sequins, boas, and crazy club paraphernalia take over the whole city converting it into, well, a huge club with a beach included. Although Carnaval is mostly a showcase for pretty boys and strong girls, everybody, gay and straight, is welcome to let go of their inhibitions and go ahead with some exhibitions while the music keeps playing on and on. See p. 424.

The Best Clubs

- **Space** (Ibiza): We can pretty much affirm without fear of being wrong or hyperbolic that this is the best party you'll find in the world on a Sunday at

8am. Space is the mecca for club-goers and if you haven't been there yet you can't claim to be a true one. Only the best DJs in the world work their magic

at the turntables for thousands of overexcited party animals to go crazy to the tune of electronic music at its very loudest. See p. 500.

● **Pachá** (Ibiza): Although the brand has turned into an international club factory with branches all over the world, we'll still be loving Pachá Ibiza for a really long time. The club that started it all is fancier and less freaky than the others around here, but the music, lights, and fun level are hard to beat, no matter where else you go. See p. 500.

● **Granada 10** (Granada): If it weren't for the pretentiousness or the absurd covers, the clubs in Marbella would easily compete for this title. But the best everyman's (and everywoman's) dance

spot is nestled just north of Granada's busy Gran Via. By day, it acts as a normal theater, but later in the evening it becomes one of the most popular discotecas in town. You might think of wussing out after an exhausting day exploring the Alhambra, but even the weakest of sightseers get a mighty second wind from Granada 10's excellent DJs and music. See p. 567.

● **Cova d'en Xoroi** (Menorca): Menorca is the sleepiest of the Balearics and of course, it's got nothing on Ibiza, but this club's location makes it an obliged stopover for any self-respecting club-goer. A huge cave on a majestic cliff is the setting for the wildest parties the island has to offer. See p. 518.

The Best Tapas & Other Cheap Eats

● **El Tubo** (Zaragoza): Tapas bars aren't scant in Zaragoza's dining district located in the heart of the city center. All early evening activity begins here, primarily on the main tapas drag of Calle Estébanes, a mecca for all lovers of Aragonese delights. See p. 314.

● **Santa María** (Barcelona): If you are adventurous and run away from tradition you'll love this tapas bar with a modern twist by an alumni of master chef Ferrán Adriá. Here you can get a taste of the *nueva cocina* without spending the next 3 days' worth of your hotel budget. See p. 356.

● **Cervecería Morito** (Burgos): Burgos lays claims to the best tapas bar: Cervecería Morito, where old people dine with the new just because it's so damn good. Sure, there are a lot of good tapas bars in Spain, so competition is steep. But you've got to take into account more than the outer crisp of a *croqueta*. We've done a lot of research on this subject, in particular, and the

elements that matter most are 1) quality, 2) price, 3) service, 4) menu, and 5) atmosphere. Morito scores 10 in every regard. That's our story, and we're eating a tapa to it. See p. 210.

● **Barrio Húmedo** (León): The whole barrio. As in, the best place to go without a map or your *MTV Spain* and trust that you'll still be able to find good eats. In this neighborhood you can bump into a dish of *morcilla* (blood sausage), *croquetas*, or *patatas bravas* blindfolded. It's all locally grown and produced to boot. See p. 199.

● **Bar El Rinconcillo** (Seville): Despite some of the most miserly bartenders, you'll find some top-notch tapas to go along with your glasses of Cruzcampo. El Rinconcillo has seniority over all others here, bragging on its storefront that its staff has been growling at Seville's denizens since 1670. See p. 536.

● **Fonda Pepe** (Formentera): This ultra authentic local restaurant serves some of the best seafood available in the

8 * The Best of Spain

island at very decent prices. Expect paper tablecloths, loud families, and young people jumbled together with local workers relaxing after a long day. Spain at its damn best! See p. 510.

- **La Castañeda** (Granada): La Castañeda is one of the all-time favorites of Granada's locals. Authenticity is never in question since they fulfill all the requirements of our Genuine Tapas Checklist. Hams hanging from the

ceiling? Check . . . I didn't say it was a long checklist. See p. 565.

- **Bonanza** (Sitges): You've come all the way to Spain so you have to try the paella. But paella doesn't come cheap *and* good—except at Bonanza, where after a little strenuous walk uphill you can enjoy a delicious seafood paella that won't go off like a round of bullets in your stomach when you get the check. Yeehah! See p. 422.

The Best Shopping Finds

- **El Rastro** (Madrid): As if we even had to tell you, duh! The world's biggest treasure hunt takes place every Sunday between the La Latina and Lavapiés 'hoods, where it's possible to dig up everything from antique coffee grinders to old engagements rings. Greater than the goods are the people. Historically it's been a gypsy market, where the ruffians come to make a pretty penny churning tunes out of old street organs or selling their family collectibles. Over the years, however, other nationalities joined the party making it the Ellis Island of flea markets and the world's largest as well. See p. 133.

- **Mercado de la Ribera** (Bilbao): This multi-tiered permanent establishment located right on the river that dissects Bilbao has everything you could want in terms of food, flora, and fauna. Fresh fish, meat, and vegetables are always on hand, as are flowers, herbs, and anything else under the sun. See p. 283.

- **Toledo**: Nowhere in the world can you find shopping like in Toledo, where stores sell more steel swords and medieval-style rings than coffee mugs or refrigerator magnets. Toledo's specialty is collapsible daggers cut in an authentic Toledan style that sell for less than 10€, depending on where you

shop. If you've always been dying to own a chain mail suit, here's your golden opportunity—but lots of luck shipping it home. Most important for nerds is the *Lord of the Rings* paraphernalia such as sterling-silver jewelry. See p. 146.

- **Holalá** (Madrid): Get the Urban Outfitters look for real at this well-stocked vintage store strategically located amidst other fashionable shopping in Chueca. The clothes are hand-picked from around the globe, lending the whole place an internationally funky vibe that beats your frumpy local thrift store hands down any day. There are also locations in Barcelona and Ibiza. See p. 131.

- **La Condonería** (Girona): This sexy little shop gives love a good name. Condoms? Latex wear? Bondage gear? Vibrators? Erotic games? Party toys? Whether you like it hot or mild, La Condonería serves up a wide selection of sex-play goodies to suit your style. See p. 399.

- **Librería Beta** (Sevilla): You know that Barnes & Noble by your apartment, the one with the parking lot the size of three football fields, and the multi-storyed front of glass windows you look out when you ride up the escalator? Yeah,

The Best Must-See Sights • 9

well this is nothing like that. The only commonality is that Librería Beta is a bookstore. It is also housed in the old Teatro Imperial, meaning if you ask an employee where to find a book, be it fiction, theater, or otherwise, you may be directed to center stage, the mezzanine, the orchestra, or up the balcony to the nosebleed seats. See p. 548.

- **Mala Musica** (Jerez de la Frontera): In this octogenarian sherry town comes the improbably awesome Mala Musica, where you will find the best of most types of music, especially indie, rock, electronica, and jazz. Check out Mala for

hard-to-find or older releases as well. We think their new motto should be "So bad we're good." Or wait, is it "So good we're bad"? Suffice to say, they're our new favorite paradox. See p. 593.

- **Mercat de Sant Josep** (La Boquería; Barcelona): Barcelona's modernista food market is a feast for all senses. Browse through the stalls with every possible kind of fruit, nut, or candy you can imagine. Check out the local fish and seafood in all its edible splendor and finish up by having the most amazing lunch at one of the jam-packed kiosks. See p. 363.

The Best Live Music

- **La Cruzada** (Mérida): Mérida's like a mini-Rome with the number of ruins and Roman secrets it holds. We discovered one at La Cruzada, where every Friday night you can hear live rock or blues sung to a young, hip audience (that means no white beards). The joint books decent international and local groups that are undoubtedly just passing through—but thank Zeus for that! See p. 183.

- **Palau de la Música Catalana** (Barcelona): Okay, this is not the place to go see rock 'n' roll or electronic music, but if there's anything that sounds remotely interesting playing while you are in Barcelona, you should not miss the opportunity to catch a show at this marvel of modernista architecture. Arrive early, because you'll spend at least 20 minutes tripping

outside at the ornate balconies with more weird shapes and small statues than cheese factor in a Dan Brown novel; once inside, if the concert is not what you were hoping for, you can spend the rest of your time in your own psychedelic world. See p. 375.

- **El Eshavira** (Granada): Don't bother going to Sacromonte. The hike up there and the shady venues aren't worth the trouble. The best flamenco is in the heart of the city, and many head to El Eshavira for some of the best performances in the region. If your clapping and shouts are drawing some odd stares from the rest of the audience, you might find yourself in the middle of one of El Eshavira's "off-nights." It doubles as a great jazz haunt and the trumpet players don't react all that well to yelps of "Aya!" and foot stomping. See p. 567.

The Best Must-See Sights

- **Palacio de la Aljafería** (Zaragoza): Zaragoza's Islamic palace is one of the city's most visited sites. The dramatic archways and intricate detail work are

truly eye-catching, and the moat and park surrounding the castle are good spots for a leisurely day of lounging. See p. 314.

10 • The Best of Spain

- **Parc Güell** (Barcelona): Gaudi's crazy genius is at its best at this trip of a park overlooking the city. Get lost in the freaky structures and gardens until you don't know which way is up. Best of all? It's free. See p. 380.
- **Guggenheim** (Bilbao): Bilbao's architectural rejuvenation is largely due to the creation of this glass and titanium monster that towers over the River Nervión. One of a series of modern arts museums, the Guggenheim—besides looking cool—also houses an eclectic bunch of temporary and permanent displays. See p. 282.
- **Museo Chillida-Leku** (San Sebastián): This museum may throw you for a loop, as it appears to be more of a playground than anything else. Set among the lush green hills of outer San Sebastián, the outdoor park displays an entire collection of giant sculptures by the famed Spanish artist Eduardo Chillida. See p. 270.
- **Basílica de Nuestra Señora del Pilar** (Zaragoza): The city's sprawling and most recognized church is home to some impressive frescoes by Francisco Goya and other well-known Spanish painters. Take a quick ride up one of the towers for a view over all of Zaragoza. See p. 313.
- **Ciudad de las Artes y de las Ciencias** (Valencia): Valencian star architect Santiago Calatrava designed this amazing complex that is putting Valencia on the map as a true European capital. You can spend a couple of days just visiting this center composed of an aquarium, opera house, botanical garden, science museum, and IMAX theater; but even without visiting each and every exhibit, the general fishlike structure of the complex is worth a picture or two. See p. 441.
- **Catedral de León** (León): Century-old stained glass isn't exactly a girl's best friend, but it does the trick. León's cathedral has more glass than stone. And more than Gothic it's French, which means a whole new ballpark for cathedral design that's different from any other Castilian cathedral built during the same era. You have to hand it to the architects; they didn't have computers, machines, glasscutters, or any of the strong compounds we use today. The cathedral was built with sheer genius and, one can only guess, a few cuts and scrapes along the way. See p. 201.
- **Museo de Arte Abstracto Español** (Cuenca): Leaving out the most obvious (Madrid's El Prado) in this category, the contemporary art museum in Cuenca is hailed as one of the best modern art museums in Spain and not just for its Spanish Abstract collection. The museum occupies Las Casas Colgadas, houses built over a death-defying river gorge that would give even Michael Jordan vertigo. The sights outside each of its large bay windows are just as abstract as the paintings themselves. It's been said that cubism has its roots in Cuenca's abrupt rocky mountains, which artists were inspired by when they started the movement. Whether that's true or not doesn't matter; the influence of Cuenca's vistas is clear as the river below. See p. 151.
- **Segovia:** A good view takes two perspectives into account: the inward and the outward. The best positioned city is Segovia. Built on a large lookout rock, the city's vantage point enjoys wide, rolling Castilian planes backed by the surreal scenery of the Sierra de Guadarrama Mountains. From the opposite direction, looking into the city, the best view is from Iglesia de la Vera

Cruz, an ancient structure outside the city walls. Segovia's Walt Disney-esque castle surrounded by a tall Roman wall pierces the sky with its pawn-shaped towers straight out of a fairy tale. See p. 232.

- **Trujillo:** You've heard of "Minnesota nice." But chances are you haven't heard of a village in Extremadura called Trujillo, famous for spawning a dozen or so (probably not so nice) conquistadors. Well familiarize yourself because Trujillo's inhabitants would lay their lives down for you—or at the very least a plate of hot food. In all my travels, I've never been given a more personal welcome: tours, useful tips—hell, the town key! Okay that's stretching it, but I'm sure they'd produce something out of their pockets if I'd asked. See p. 169.
- **The Ravine (Ronda):** Other than severe beautyphobia, there's no reason you should miss the geologic sight in Ronda. Bandoleros used the ravine and the

surrounding hills to escape capture, but I'm pretty convinced that the criminals just had extremely high aesthetic standards. After you catch sight of the unique bridge and canyon, you'll understand why. See p. 570.

- **Alhambra (Granada):** If you thought Donald Trump or Richard Branson went a little overboard with their self indulgences, you've clearly never met a sultan before. Back in the day, these rulers wouldn't think twice about ordering hundreds of servants to build them a new wing to their palace. With the Alhambra, however, a sequence of sultans ended up creating one of the most fantastic sites in the world—all thanks to their greed. The site is a sprawling showcase of their power, with awesome structures overlooking the rest of Granada below. These sultans had a softer side as well and had the impressive Generalife built to give them a green summer escape. See p. 568.

The Best Ways to Get Your Blood Pumping

- **Skydiving in the Pyrenees:** Sure, it may put a slight strain on the wallet, and, sure, plummeting more than 3,300m (11,000 ft.) may seem like a risky way to spend an otherwise languid Saturday afternoon. But if you've ever even entertained ideas of hurling yourself out of a six-seater plane to possibly meet your demise (only kidding), you really can't go wrong doing it in the awe-inspiring Pyrenees. See p. 327.
- **Hitchhiking in Camino de Santiago:** We've had our share of bumps along the road but one in particular involves a sold-out bus and an old couple from Burgos. Technically it was hitchhiking, but I like to say it was socializing in a roadside diner. Little did I know it was nothing out of the ordinary. Pilgrims

make this route all the time. Ain't no thang, ma'ma. While the chance of hailing a psycho killer still exists, there are more mom and pop types who'll get you to where you need to be in one piece—and buy you a coffee along the way. Folks are just more trusting in Spain, and that's the way the cookie crumbles. See p. 247.

- **Kite-Surfing in Tarifa:** You might look like a newborn calf that's trying its damnedest to stand up, but who cares? Kite-surfing (check out the inordinate number of schools in town to get lessons) gives riders a huge rush as they let the whipping winds of Tarifa tow them over the choppy waves of the Strait of Gibraltar. If that's not enough to convince you, you should know that Tarifa

12 • The Best of Spain

is *the* best place for kite-surfing on the planet. Why pass it up if you're already there? See p. 576.

- **Diving in Illes Medes** (Costa Brava): If you think you've seen it all on earth, try looking below sea level. This seven-islet archipelago is rumored to be the best diving spot in Spain and maybe even the Mediterranean. One thousand three

hundred fifty different marine life species say you won't get bored swimming through the multicolored reefs, caves, and underwater rock formations. Your newfound paradise is less than 2 hours away from Barcelona, right across from the Costa Brava resort of L'Estartit. See p. 412.

The Best College Towns

- **Cadiz:** Let's give the Erasmus program a hearty "Hells yeah!" Sure, if it didn't exist, Cadiz would nevertheless have a decent college crowd partying hard every weekend. But the city wouldn't have the international flavor that makes mingling that much more fun in the city's bars and clubs. So remember to count your blessings as you're chatting up the undergrad from Montana or the cutie from Peru. See p. 582.
- **Alicante:** This was just another old German tourist haven in the Costa Blanca until the university started gaining respect and, with it, students. Hmm, wide fine-sand beaches, excellent weather, and a neighborhood with more bars than restaurants . . . sounds perfect for Erasmus students! Since the giant European study-abroad organization landed in Alicante, the city has blossomed into a meeting point for Europe's spring breakers year-round. Bars like Havana welcome students from every

corner of the Old Continent and, more increasingly, non-E.U. students too. And if you happen to come in the middle of the summer and can't seem to find anyone, take the quick hop to Benidorm, Ibiza's clubbing branch on the mainland, where thousands of youngsters spend their parents' hard-earned money. See p. 443.

- **Girona:** Unlike the previous two, Girona caters more to local students, which is totally fine with us. The sophisticated Catalonian youth crowds the streets and bars of this enchanting medieval town that, despite housing less than 100,000 souls, breathes the more erudite air of a big city, thanks in large part to the university and its inhabitants. Thursdays are the big university night and if you're lucky enough you'll be able to witness the psychologists versus architects wet T-shirt competition—psychoanalyze the construction of that. See p. 389.