



5  
sensational  
spanish  
cities

By Renee Werbin

1 **Barcelona**

Situated on the glistening Mediterranean Sea, Barcelona is a glorious place to begin your conquest of Spain. This sleek city offers a vast array of modern and historic hotels; your choice will depend on desired location and budget. The five-star Le Meridien Hotel, situated on bustling Ramblas Street, is sure to please every traveler. If your budget requires a bit more savings, consider the four-star Hotel 1898. My favorite is the contemporary W Hotel, located waterfront. Check in, take the elevator up, and you'll be greeted with the most magnificent vision of the sea — and the enchantment continues when you unlock the door to your room. With white décor and wall-to-wall sofas it's enticing and hip, everything you expect a W Hotel to be. The W dining options are scrumptious: dine casually in the Wave or upstairs at Bravo by Carles Abellan, the hotel's signature restaurant where you can enjoy a meat, seafood or chicken entree beautifully prepared. Atop the hotel, on the 26th floor, you'll find the swinging nightclub Eclipse, and as a hotel guest, you are assured a spot inside. As night descends, the lines for the elevator to the top grow long; it appears native Barcelonans love the W Hotel as much as I do.

Spain is known for its gastronomy and Barcelona has a shining star in the incredible Restaurant Via Veneto. A Barcelona original, this landmark was Salvador Dali's favorite and now I'm proud to say it's mine. Resplendent with Old World elegance and refined service, Via Veneto offers sensationally prepared signature cuisine. Tantalizing choices include: sea bass in a salt crust with black rice and razor shells from Delta Del Ebro, partridge roasted and boned with trinxat (potato and cabbage puree) and a renowned roasted duck. The duck is deboned tableside, and the bones are then artfully placed

*A view of Barcelona from the W Hotel. Barcelona has several beaches just 10 minutes from the center of the city.*



## >publisher's choice: spain

Left to right from top: For a truly innovative meal in an exquisite setting, try the gorgeous La Terraza del Casino in Madrid; The Giralda Tower, constructed by the Moors between 1184 and 1197, is Seville's most recognized monument; The Wet Deck at the W Hotel in Barcelona with a view of the Mediterranean; Parc Güell in Barcelona was designed by renowned architect Antonio Gaudi and is one of Barcelona's most famous landmarks.



into a magnificent silver presse, turning them into a delectable sauce. This culinary gem is under the incredible care of father and son owners José and Pedro Monje. Favored by local politicians and celebrities, Via Veneto sports several private salons where one can dine incognito. Upstairs you'll find a private kitchen and library, and if you ask, you can see a book of Dali's paintings signed by Dali himself.

### 2 Seville

Charming Seville lies in the South of Spain and is a wonderful spot to linger for a few days while touring the areas nearby. Sporting the terrific five-star Alcazar Palace Hotel, Seville sites include one of the largest cathedrals in Europe and a must-see Jewish quarter that reminds us of the vibrant community that lived peacefully in Seville prior to the Spanish Inquisition — when all Jews were expelled or forced to convert.

Shopping is plentiful, with a wealth of designer shops and abundant cafes. Be sure to book a table at the quaint and colorful Restaurante Don Juan de Alemanes directly across from the Cathedral. It's one of the best places in Seville to savor either lunch or dinner, and the décor is just delightful. The tapas plates are outstanding and unique. I bet you've never had tiramisu with anchovies, but Restaurant Don Juan has created delicious tapas using both of those items. Meats are of the highest quality and the desserts are the best in all of Seville. When in Spain, dine like the Spaniards do, and you will find yourself in love with Restaurant Don Juan de Alemanes.

### 3 Cordoba

A mere 42 minutes on the AVE speed train from Seville lies Cordoba, a charming city with a splendid cathedral and one of only three remaining ancient synagogues in the country. Start your tour in the Jewish Quarter at the statue of Moses Maimonides. Known in his time as Moses the Rambam, this ancient philosopher was brilliant and his texts are ardently studied by today's scholars. Continue to the small remaining synagogue. Once thriving in the 1200s, the synagogue was converted into a church after the Inquisition but luckily, the building stands to tell the tale.

A key landmark in Cordoba is the ancient Roman Bridge, built in the first century A.D.; it's especially beautiful at night and is a testament to the incredible acumen of the Romans. Foodies will love Cordoba and its Michelin-star chef, Celia Jiménez of Bodegas Campos Restaurant. This dining treasure, now more than 100 years old, is comprised of five houses and takes up a whole block. Once a former convent and later bodega, Bodegas Campos has numerous dining rooms and a wonderful open patio. Chef Jiménez holds two Michelin stars and prepares traditional Spanish cuisine. *Travelgirl tips: Take time to tour the restaurant and be sure to try the tomato cream soup; the chef says it's one of the favorites, and I'm now a fan of this healthy and delicious concoction.* Other signature items include rabo de toro con cremoso de patatas (oxtail stew with creamy potatoes), paella, artichokes with boletus sauce and a wealth

of tapas and some tasty desserts. This restaurant is a mainstay in Cordoba, beloved by locals and celebrities. Be sure to check out the signed wine casks, where you will recognize many of the names, including former British Prime Minister Tony Blair. The walls are decorated in brilliant flamenco posters and photographs of bullfighters. It's a charming and delicious place to dine.

### 4 Toledo

An hour from Madrid, Toledo can be visited in an afternoon via the speed rail or with a private guide. It's the gateway to Don Quixote de La Mancha, Cervantes tale of the *Man of La Mancha* and you will be singing "To Dream The Incredible Dream" on your way into town. Stop first atop Toledo for a breathtaking view of this magical city. Its charm is evident the first time you glance at the ancient city walls. Two of the remaining historic synagogues in Spain are located in Toledo and an exceptional cathedral stands high above the hill. Legendary painter El Greco lived here. Visit the Santo Tomé Church to see his most famous painting entitled "The Burial of Count Orgaz," within which are lifelike portraits of El Greco, his wife and son.

### 5 Madrid

I love Madrid and once you've visited you will too! It's the charismatic capital of Spain; a regal city with abundant glorious buildings and numerous five-star hotels. My top choice: The Westin Palace Hotel, which celebrated its 100th birthday in 2008, and is as elegant now as it was then. Rooms are regally appointed, quiet and serene, and the location is the perfect spot to begin your exploration of the city. Sumptuous dining is enjoyed under the hotel's magnificent, hand-painted cupola ceiling. The service is superb; your every wish is their command. From a softer pillow to a private guide for the day, the concierge is anxious to assist. You will want to return again and again to this bastion of elegance in marvelous Madrid.

Sightseeing and shopping top the Madrid to-do list. Start your tour at Madrid's Royal Palace; this magnificent edifice is one of Europe's most luxurious castles. Continue to Plaza Mayor Square, noted for its architecture. The Prado Museum is a connoisseur's treat and you will spend the afternoon enjoying the elegant array of prominent art.

Madrid is known for its gastronomy and topping the list of fine restaurants is La Terraza del Casino. Open for lunch and dinner, this is Madrid's finest place to dine. Two-star Michelin Chef Paco Roncero is internationally acclaimed, and his restaurant in Madrid has the most imaginative menu in town. Regally attired diners are treated to a menu as artful as it is tasteful. Do try the tasting menu; every morsel is well worth the price. Mouthwatering dishes include edible truffled sponges, (yes, an edible sponge) and radiant mushrooms in a wine bath surrounding a poached egg. Experiencing a meal like this is a rare opportunity; it's an unforgettable event, and I recommend bringing your camera to record the affair. La Terraza del Casino is an ingenious and magical place to dine.

PHOTOS LEFT TO RIGHT FROM TOP: COURTESY: LA TERRAZA DEL CASINO; BY CARLOS KOBILSCHEK, COURTESY: STARWOOD HOTELS, COURTESY: THE TOURIST OFFICE OF SPAIN IN MIAMI



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Clockwise from top left: Several streets in Seville are so narrow they are pedestrian-only; The newly restored Westin Palace Madrid is topped by this beautiful stained glass dome under which you can enjoy sumptuous meals; One of the dining rooms at Bodegas Campos Restaurant — a foodie favorite in Cordoba; The Baths of Lady María de Padilla in Seville are rainwater tanks underneath the Patio de Crucero at the Alcazar of Seville, the oldest royal palace still in use in Europe; Toledo, a walled city, was declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1986 for its cultural and monumental heritage. It's a place of coexistence of Christian, Muslim and Jewish cultures; The hallway of the Cathedral of Cordoba has 856 columns of jasper, onyx, marble and granite.

PHOTOS, LEFT TO RIGHT FROM TOP: SUE ANNA JOE; COURTESY STARWOOD HOTELS; COURTESY BODEGAS CAMPOS RESTAURANT; WANBEIJES; SAM SANTOYO



## Spain 411

For more information visit the tourism site for Spain in the U.S: [www.spain.info](http://www.spain.info)

- > When visiting on a Sunday, check in advance to see what's open, as many tourist spots and restaurants are closed on Sundays.
- > It's best to prebook your arrival transfer. Strikes are a common occurrence, and you don't want to be stranded waiting for public transportation.
- > Book special meals well in advance; dining is an art in Spain and top restaurants are crowded.

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