

LEÓN

AND ITS PARADOR



LEÓN. AN INFINITE CROSSROADS

“León has a charm which I can detect but which I cannot perhaps express. It is like an ancient fallen capital, unspoiled, and retaining the majesty of a kingdom that has ceased to exist.”

Frances Elliot. Diary Of A Gentlewoman In Spain. 1882

Leon, where bells still ring and, more importantly, where they are still heard. Leon, with its face to the mountains and its back to the plateau. The town was one of the main points on the Roman road from Italy to Hispania, where the Astorga-Tarragona and Astorga-Bordeaux roads meet, a point of reference along the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela, and a strategic spot along the Ruta de la Plata: a place of infinite crossroads and infinite life. The stone that commemorates the founding of the town on 10 June of the year 68 is preserved in the San Isidoro Museum. The cathedral, the highest point in Leon, sits at 838 meters above sea level. Located next to the river, the train station is the lowest point, at 823 meters. The central mountains to the north can be seen from the town and the gentle slopes of the Candamia lie to the east. The Trobajo del Camino hills lie to the west and to the south is the plateau, the cultivated plain and rivers lined with black poplars.

“Leon had 24 kings before Castile even had laws.”

The town was originally Roman, founded with the creation of the VII Legion on a 20-hectare rectangle of land where the Bernesga and Torio rivers meet. This military encampment was subsequently fortified. These beginnings have now been brought into question by the discovery of a 19-meter double curved wall under present-day Cascalería street - which could be part of a circular building - and dwellings, all of which would confirm that there was a settlement here prior to Roman times. We will know in good time.

There is little information on the town for the centuries following the military settlement. Seals and signs of the VII Legion disappear at the end of the 3rd century. The town was repeatedly conquered by the Goths and other peoples.

Records are more reliable after the Arab invasion. Leon was recovered by King Alfonso I of Asturias. Due to its frontier location, it again became a military town. It experienced wars, resettlements, and counter-attacks and was even deserted by its populace in the mid-9th century, before Ordoño II finally made it his capital and installed his court here. The town's political, social, and religious development coincided with the disappearance of Almanzor.

Tradesmen settled here to serve travelers along the pilgrimage route to Santiago. The Romanesque church of San Isidoro was consecrated and the body of the famous bishop brought here from Seville to rest. Alfonso VII was crowned Emperor and in 1188, Alfonso IX held the first democratic parliament in Europe here. The assembly was made up of representatives of the church, the nobility, and the so-called omes buenos (lit. good men), who represented the ordinary citizens.

Fernando III was crowned king of both Leon and Castile here in 1230. Construction began on the cathedral, set on top of the old Roman baths that had been converted into a royal palace. Over the following centuries, the town

wall was extended and with it the town. The town's great families – the Guzmans and the Quiñons – set up residence: palaces were built; a town council set up; the houses adorned with coats of arms; churches, convents, and monasteries remodeled; and the knights of Santiago started the building of San Marcos.

SAN MARCOS: SO INDIVIDUAL, YET SO DIVERSE

“Nothing can compare with the arabesques and other decoration on the façade of San Marcos.”

Samuel Edward Cook Widdington,
Captain In The English Navy. 1829,
Sketches In Spain



The population outgrew the medieval town walls and the town expanded outwards towards the train station – the railroad arrived in November 1863. This brought unionism to the town of León, a time of progress. Even Gaudí left his mark here at the beginning of the 20th century with his Casa de Botines.

The building which today houses the Parador de Turismo, established in 1964; the church consecrated in 1541; and the Museum of León, opened in 1869; owe their existence to a donation made by Doña Sancha in the 12th century for the construction of a church and hospital. Her aim was to “provide accommodation for the paupers of Christ” as they made their pilgrimage along the Route of St. James. These were humble lodgings, located outside the walls of the city along the banks of the Bernesga.

The medieval building was demolished at the end of the 16th century when the Catholic King Fernando asked Pedro de Larrea to design a new monastery. The work was completed by Juan de Orozco. Martín de Villareal and Juan de Badajoz, “el Mozo”, also worked on the project, along with the sculptors Juan de Juni and Juan de Angers. The Order of Santiago (Saint James) made this the center of their activities in the kingdom of León. Work would continue until well into the 18th century.

San Marcos is one of the most impressive examples of the Spanish Renaissance. The plateresque façade is made up of a long stretch of wall in two sections set on a high base. Cresting and torch holders decorate the top. It is framed by the church on one side, and a palace-style tower on the west side, set on a wide plinth decorated with the Cross of Santiago and a lion.

The main façade of the church is in two sections, and a large curved decoration breaks the horizontal line. The cloister has a homogeneous and harmonious appearance despite having been built in three stages – during the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries. The church, called Reyes Católicos after the Catholic Monarchs, is late Spanish Gothic in style, and sits between two unfinished towers.

The most interesting features of the complex are two niches, one

in each tower. There is a plaque in the right-hand one showing the date of the church's completion: 3 June 1541.

The museum has three galleries, two of which were the old sacristy and are the most important parts of the building. They display the workmanship of their author, master Juan de Badajoz the Younger.

Throughout its long history, San Marcos has received innumerable “visitors.” Francisco de Quevedo was imprisoned here by the Duke of Olivares. For almost four years he was “held prisoner, sick from three wounds that, due to the cold and the damp from the nearby river, have turned cancerous. As no surgeon is available, not without pity have they watched me cauterize the wounds with my own hands. I have been kept alive and warmly clothed thanks to charity. Those around me have been horrified by my works.” Quevedo started writing the last chapters of *The Life of Saint Paul*, *The Perseverance and Patience of Saint Job*, and *Divine Providence* in his cell.

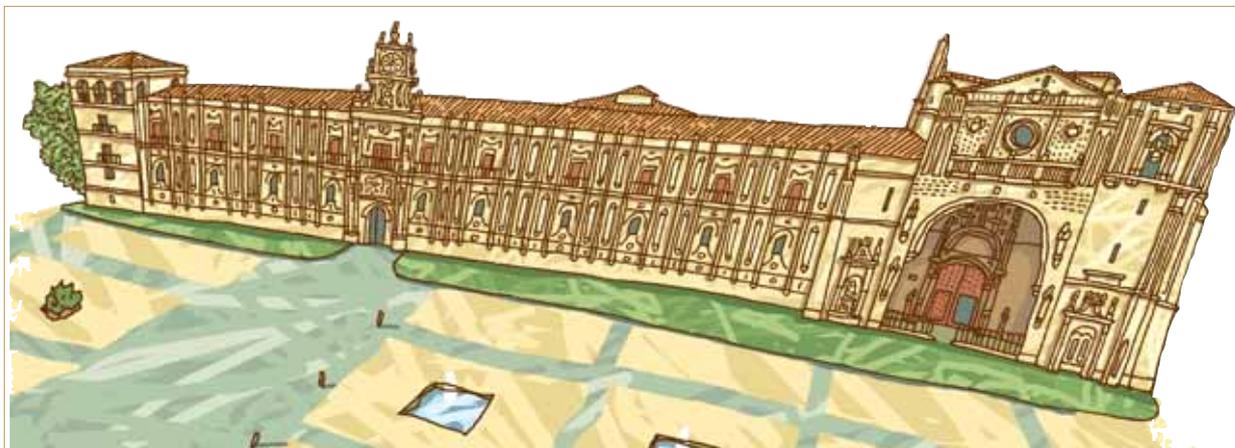
The period following closure of the monastery in 1836 was filled with ups and downs for San Marcos, lasting until the Parador was opened in 1964.

During that time San Marcos was put to many different uses. On March 4, 1843 it was valued by Santiago Palomares and Perfecto Sánchez Iváñez at “nine hundred and eighty-five thousand, seven hundred reales.” It has been a secondary school, “mission and religious correction center,” veterinary school, Jesuit mission, prison hospital, stud farm, study center for the Escolapian Fathers, offices of the staff of the Army's Seventh Division, military prison, and cavalry barracks. For one hundred and fifty years, there was an ongoing struggle amongst councils, dioceses, the Ministry of War, the tax authorities, and the Ministry of Education. It even came to the extreme of demanding “that the building be totally demolished.” With town councils like that of 1875, long live local elections!

Numerous works of art and decorative elements grace the interior of the Parador de Turismo. These include paintings from the Flemish school, wooden carvings, furniture recovered from churches and ruined mansions, tapestries, sideboards, and period furnishings, as well as works by

contemporary artists such as Lucio Muñoz, Vela Zanetti, Redondela, Álvaro Delgado, Ochoa, Macarrón, and Vaquero Turcios. During one of his visits to the Parador, Severo Ochoa commented on how lucky three works of his friend Goñi had been. To this the Parador's manager replied:

"Don Severo, we have not three, but thirty."



A WALK THROUGH HISTORY

1. **Gothic Cathedral**, built on the site of the Roman baths, Royal Palace, and earlier Romanesque cathedral.
2. **San Isidoro**, Museum and Pantheon.
3. **Old Town Hall**, classical-baroque.
4. **Palace of the Guzman family**, now council offices.
5. **Casa Botines**, by Gaudí.
6. **Nuestra Señora del Mercado**, 12th-century Romanesque church.
7. **Conceptionist Convent**.
8. **Palace of the Counts of Luna**.
9. **San Salvador del Palat del Rey**.
10. **San Marcelo**, 16th-century church.
11. **Plaza Mayor**, the main square, site of street markets and a Sunday flea market.



TABLE, TABLECLOTH, AND A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

I never fail to come across good and nourishing food.

Sancho Dixit

Lancho was right, because in Leon the difficulty lies in choosing among the many varieties of cooking without taking your eye off the Parador's menu.

Meat, fish, and vegetables. Food in abundance for the most discerning palate. Beef and lamb. Cod and conger-eel. Frogs' legs and trout. **Beans and Sautéed Mixed Vegetables, Botillo Sausage, Maragato-style Chickpea Stew, Chanfaina Stew, Ajo Arriero, Puff Pastry, Filloa Crêpes, Custard, and San Marcos Cake.**

The chef and your waiter can suggest one of the day's specials. This could be anything from **Trout Soup with Pastry to Stewed Tongue Stuffed with Leonese Chanfaina Stew; or Steak San Marcos-Style, baked in pastry with sweet and sour figs; Spicy Sweetbreads; Bañeza Beans with Chorizo Sausage; or Riaño-Style Sautéed Lamb and Mixed Vegetables.**

There are **Farmhouse Cheeses,** made with goats' and sheep's milk; **Venison Chops in a Prieto Picudo Grape Sauce; Minced Meat and Stews** of all kinds. The hearty bits of the **Maragato Stew** are eaten first, followed by a soup made from the broth. Up to eight types of meat can go

ALONG ROUTES OF ARTS, HANDICRAFTS, AND NATURE

Leon's geographic position makes it the gateway to the north and northwest of the Iberian Peninsula. Galicia and the Principality of Asturias are but a stone's throw away. But Leon itself is rich enough in art, culture, history, and nature to allow us to discover the best of its traditions with an average travel time

into this stew (bacon, pig's ear, chicken, salt-cured beef, morcilla blood sausage, beef and chorizo sausage),

together with eggs, breadcrumbs, garlic, and parsley. Garden produce is also added: cabbage, potatoes, and chickpeas. Noodles or bread are added to the soup. Dessert follows – either **Natillas** (creamy custard) or **Roscón Bun. San Marcos Cake** is served at the Parador, sometimes with a chocolate sauce. We also offer **Vanilla Ice Cream** topped with hot chocolate and **Apple-Filled Filloa Crêpes.**

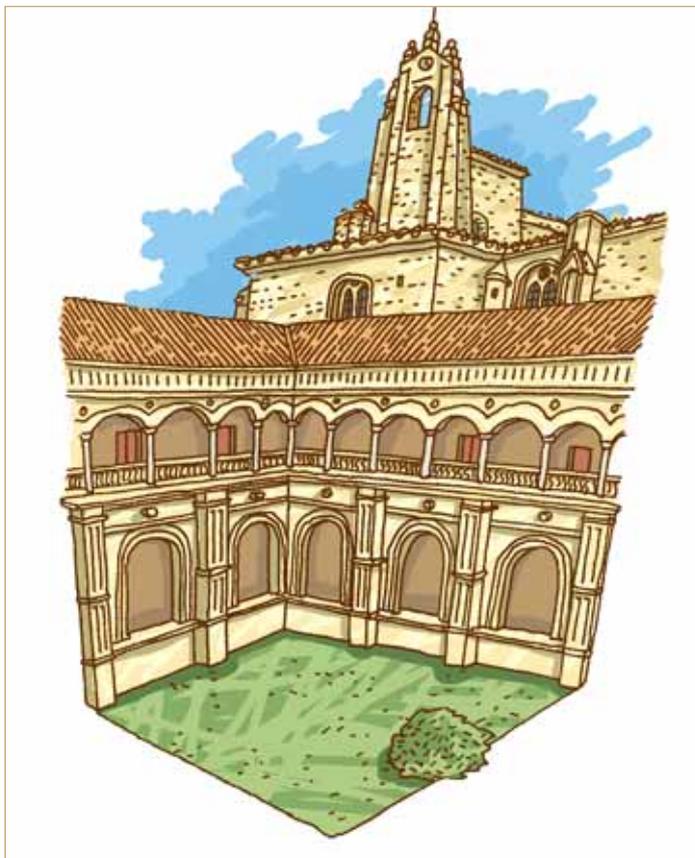
To accompany your meal there is wine from **El Bierzo** or **Valdevimbre-Los Oteros. Mencía, Prieto, Picudo, and Garnacha** go well with the first course, followed by fresh, light, and fruity yet sharp rosés. To finish, enjoy a dry, natural **Orujo**, a spirit made following traditional methods and flavored with herbs or fruit.



Anyone who has tried these stews and soups knows their excellence well. The King and Queen of Spain stayed here for the first time in 1970, when they were still the Crown Prince and Princess. In Reception they recall that Don Juan Carlos is probably the fastest man to have climbed the steps. His late father, the Count of Barcelona, also visited in 1967 and 1988.

Other royal visitors include the Prince of Japan; and representing the arts and letters, "no end of Nobel-prize winners who have come to collect their *Principe de Asturias awards*," presidents of American republics have come, perhaps in search of their roots; along with many well-known singers and entertainers.

With the river as our headboard, the croaking of frogs our alarm clock and the passing of the centuries an everyday occurrence, San Marcos takes us in.



of 45 minutes. Every 5 October, there is a traditional procession to the **Virgin del Camino**, 6 kilometers away, where the patron saint of the Kingdom of Leon awaits this annual visit to her shrine.

But Leon is more than anything its rivers: the **Bernesga** and **Torio** to the north, **Porma** and **Esla** to the east, and **Orbigo** to the west. The banks are lined not just with scenery but with history. Oaks, broom, heath,

brambles, and hawthorn cover the hills. Black poplars, willows, sloe, hazels, white stonecrop, and dogwood line the valleys. Plants such as snapdragons, viper's bugloss, water mint, and horsetail fill the rocky areas.

The villages boast pottery and textiles. There are containers for almost anything: water, wine, milk, butter, and cured meats; recipients for cooking or for serving; artistic pieces, such as the trick jug or the priest's drinking jug; and toys. These handicrafts for yesterday and today can be found in **Jiménez de Jamuz**, 3 kilometers from **La Bañeza** on the banks of the Jamuz River and just 60 minutes from Leon. The best woolen and linen textiles are to be found in **Val de San Lorenzo**, near **Astorga**, with its Roman archaeological remains, just 45 kilometers from Leon.

Below is a summary of the most popular trips from the Parador de San Marcos:

■ The Route of the Lands of Leon

An 89-kilometer round trip, to the southeast. Pilgrims' hospital in **Puente Villarente**, church at **Villarmún**, 10th-century **Monastery of San Miguel de Escalada**, **Rueda del Almirante**, the **Monastery of Gradefes** (the best example of Cistercian Gothic), **Mansilla de las Mulas** (medieval town along the pilgrimage route of Saint James), **Monastery of Sandoval**, ruins of **Lancia** and **Puente Villarente**.

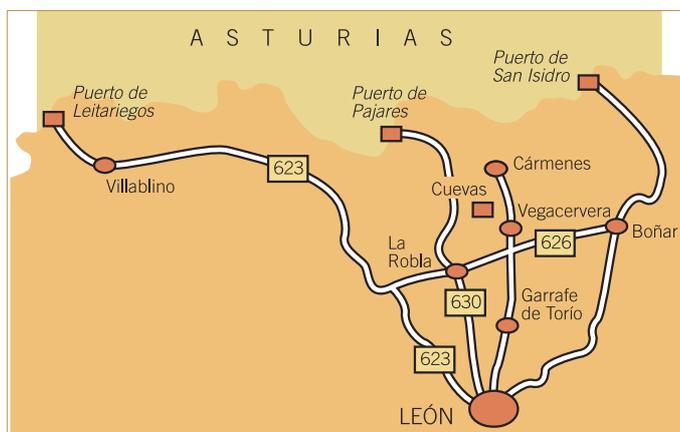
■ Route of the Valporquero Caves

43 kilometers north of Leon up the **River Torio**. The long, narrow **Vegacervera Ravine**, a gorge cut through the limestone by the river. The



Valporquero Cave system has three entrances. One is open to the public in spring and summer and has 1,300-meter route. The **Sima de las Perlas** entrance is for experienced cavers and the third, **La Covona**, is the natural outlet for the water that runs through the system.

For those interested in winter sports, there are two ski resorts in the area. **San Isidro**, at 2,100 meters, is 87 kilometers from Leon on the N-621 road. At 1,700 meters, **Leitariegos** lies to the northeast in the heart of the Cantabrian mountain range, 120 kilometers from the capital by freeway. Between them, they have over 30 ski runs open during the ski season.



Using the Parador de San Marcos as a base, you can take unhurried excursions to the **Picos de Europa** mountains, and the regions of **Babia**, **La Maragatería**, **Ancares**, **El Bierzo**, as well as the **Las Médulas** archeological area.



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León

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