

# VILLA FRANCA DEL BIERZO AND ITS PARADOR

## VILLA FRANCA OF PLEINARY INDULGENCES

*“Pilgrim, walker or traveler, only your staff will show you the way. You will find shelter along all roads, but the guide and the Apostle are within you.”*

Anonymous, 13th century

The present-day traveler will find a rather surprising, yet not entirely new, claim: “*El Bierzo, province of Leon,*” an ancient, but not forgotten, assertion.

The claim dates from the times of absolutism, and the Liberal Triennium (1820-1823). By decision of the legislative assembly, Villafranca was named the capital of the province of El Bierzo. This position was only transitory, as shortly afterwards, with the restoration of Fernando VI, the waters of provincial divisions were once again brought to flow along their previous beds.

They continue to flow along the same routes today, the eternal privilege and bane of these valleys. For El Bierzo has almost always been a land for all, yet no man’s land. In any case, the region is much coveted. It is rather hidden away due to its geography, and to the will of its inhabitants. However, these people still strive to be as open as the Castilians and as hospitable as the Galicians, with success.

The inhabitants are resolutely set on, or perhaps condemned to, being a large exception. These bountiful valleys are encircled and embraced on all sides by mountains: the “*Piedrafitas*” of ancient Celtic traditions and the hazardous “*Ponferradas*” of coal mines sunken to devilish depths. The steep “*Corullones*” are vigilant witnesses to strong artistic and craft traditions, as well as miners of the coveted and bellicose wolfram. In post-war Spain, the unique strength and virtues of this mineral were sought after for use in building Nazi tanks and canons during the Second World War.

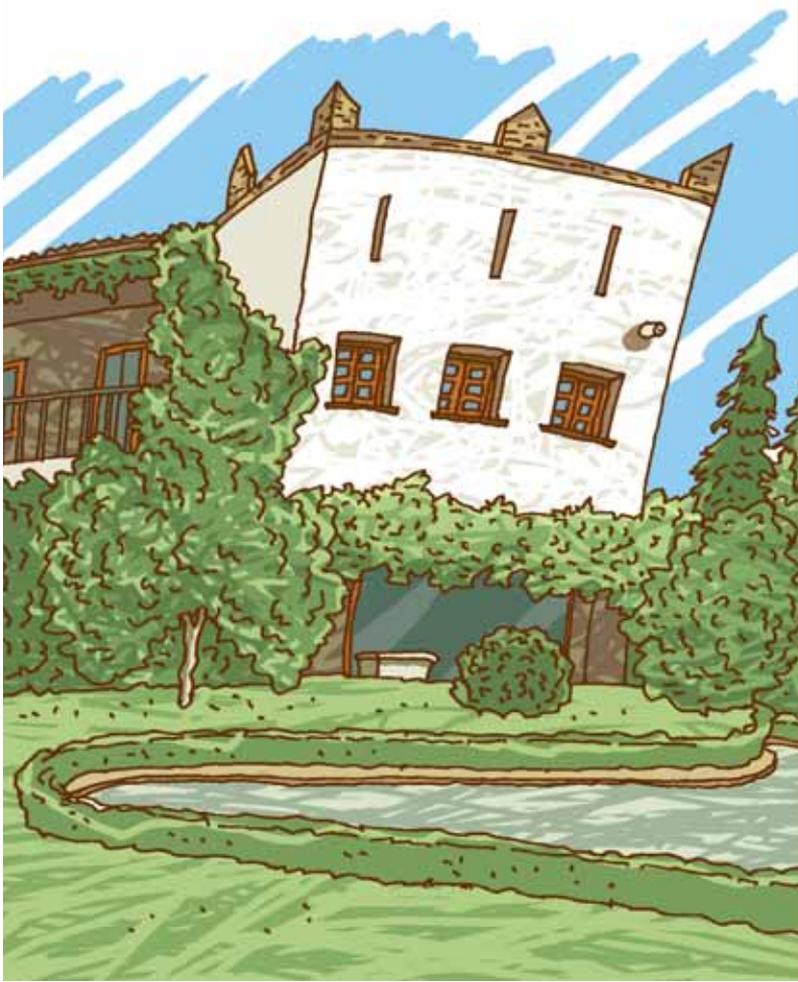
Thus it seems that the Romans were not so crazy when the exceptional climate and extraordinary mineral wealth of these lands led them to invest so much effort and so many legionaries.

Las Medulas, the most important gold mines in the Roman empire, are today an awe-inspiring phantasmagorical landscape. It is still possible to see how the gold was extracted: numerous galleries were drilled into the mountains, allowing torrents of water collected on the top to flow through. Below, the avalanche of stones, clay and gold was filtered through a framework of heather branches.

It is said that for three centuries many thousands of free men, slaves and legionaries worked to obtain the gold, 230,000 kilos according to some, 1,000,000 according to others. This gold would be the most prized financial fuel of the empire.

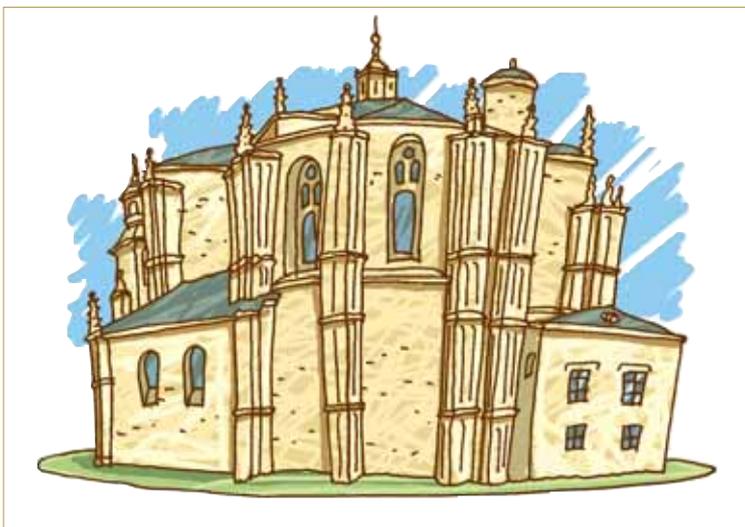
From the end of the 11th century, the region began to see great activity in other than economic spheres. The efforts and grace of Bishop Osmundo of Astorga brought about the building of a reinforced iron bridge to open up the road for pilgrims traveling to Santiago de Compostela.

About a century later, the Knights Templar would establish themselves here, with Fernando II donating the town to these armed knights. The castle



still rises today as they left it, and would be the last Templar redoubt in Spain.

With the passing of the years, and the decrease of fervent pilgrims, Ponferrada gradually exchanged its devout nature for more prosaic activities, becoming the powerful nucleus for trade and commerce in El Bierzo. Little by little, the Templar city would become the site for fairs and markets, a mining center and a focal point for industry and industrialization.



This is not to say that religion did not remain important. Miracles still were known to take place, such as the one that occurred in the 16th century in the outskirts of town *“in connection with the theft of a valuable monstrance which the fearful criminal then hid amongst the brambles. Afterwards, hunters were not able to shoot down any of the numerous doves which fluttered around Then one fine day a pious miller discovered the sacred receptacle. The sacrilegious thief having been found and his hands cut off, he was then executed and dragged through the town. The miracle was celebrated with processions and masses said by the Bishop of Astorga.”*

It is well known that it was the Route of Saint James which did the most and best to bring the region of El Bierzo, among others, into the

annals of history, art and various cultures.

From the lands of La Margateria (in the Astorga area), the pilgrimage route heads into the mountains, climbing through Foncebadón to reach Ponferrada, a safe refuge and resting place for pilgrims to get their strength back and cure the wounds of body and soul.

It was also the place to get supplies: maps of the route showing places for medical attention, food and shoes, and even bridges with rivers of drinkable water. Another town, known in Roman times as

Villa-Franca, provided a last opportunity before undertaking the difficult mountain paths that would lead to the lands of Lugo, over the fearsome peaks of the Piedrafita Mountains.

It is estimated that at the height of the pilgrimage fever, each year between 200,000 and 500,000 pilgrims would pass through these sacred and remote locations. Pilgrims were attracted by the sublime warmth of the road, although not all were guided by the light of the Apostle. It was something like a heterogeneous procession of real saints, sinner-saints, dealers in relics, mountebanks of all kinds, and adventurers. However, one and all left behind ways and customs, arts and handicrafts, a sage mixture of cultures which are still extremely easy to observe.

## BREATHE DEEP IN THE HEART OF EL BIERZO

One of the most marvelous things for a visitor to do is to greet the dawn in the southern part of town, close to the road, at the castle, the first palace of the Marquises of Villafranca. It is still not unusual to hear the notes of the world-famous music which the Halfers composed from some of its partially restored towers.

Those pilgrims who managed to reach this point –perhaps ill or wounded– were able to receive the same indulgence as they would have been given before the tomb of the Apostle himself in Santiago de Compostela. The excellent Romanesque Door of Pardon is still standing.

The city was born and christened at the beginning of the 11th century, sponsored by French monks of the order of Cluny. They chose these secluded valleys because they stood out as a *“place of fantasy,”* fertilized by the generous Valcarce and Burbia Rivers. Between the two, they erected their favorite monastery with the holy and generous vocation of attending to the *“many grave”* needs of the bodies and souls of pilgrims



coming from France, and who sought to continue. It would soon be a charitable and almost obligatory stopping place for rest and recuperation for the ailing and devout pilgrim.

That early settlement was soon illuminated by the light and splendor of the Apostle. With the category and prebends of an *“Estate,”* it passed through the hands of noble and feudal families: the La Cerdas, counts of Medinaceli, around the 14th century; the Enriquez family, dukes of Benavente, around the same time; the Counts of Trastamara, at the beginning of the 15th century; the Castro Osorios, counts of Lemos; and until only recently, the Álvarez de Toledo family. These would be the first and perhaps definitive splendors of the illustrious town.

Together with the immortal indulgences, these streets were invaded by a multitude of merchants, servants, and speculators of varying morals. Convents and monasteries, churches and palaces were constructed in some hurry, but with excellent results. The population increased rapidly. During

the 17th and 18th centuries, Villafranca would be the model and envy of the most far-off lands because of its political and economic power, and above all, for its artistic and cultural riches and religious powers.

In the mid-18th century the townspeople were tended by some 40 clergymen, including the abbot and canons of the collegiate church, and around 100 monks and nuns from different congregations. It may be enough to recall that in the mid-19th century, the town already had a Latin school, a public school and four private educational centers.

The Church of Santiago presides over this miraculous and miracle-working town from on high. The temple and shrine make up a sacred place of humble magnitude, but inestimable riches. Some are religious, others lie in unforgettable traditions. The entire modest area is an invaluable jewel of Romanesque handiwork.

The church was erected at the beginning of the 12th century, with the arrival of the first caravans of pilgrims. It boasts a simple, yet exceptional, semicircular exterior apse, with three windows letting just the right amount of light into the presbytery.

There are two doors. The main entrance has three rounded arches in a most lovely simple Romanesque style. There is another side door which overlooks the steep crags of the nearby Piedrafita Mountains. It is here that the long-suffering pilgrim will find the eternal Door of Pardon, the work of fervent stonemasons who sought to create an admirable arch carved with curious figures. It is one of the most-valued Romanesque works in Castile-Leon. Travelers both pious and impious will undoubtedly find the visit an exceptional pleasure.

The Church of San Francisco displays a singular Gothic style. It was born as a sacrosanct monastery and unique see ruling over much of this territory, founded and nearly built by the Saint of Assisi. It is without a doubt an amazing temple with undeniable merits, and can rightly be proud of having shared its walls with the holy founder himself.

The temple is somewhat of a hybrid of Romanesque grandparents and Gothic parents. Medieval chronicles insist that it would be Doña Urraca herself who would support and protect this magnificent temple, which receives the visitor with a high gable set atop a Romanesque façade decorated with four semicircular arches. In the 15th century, by the whim and royal desire of King Enrique IV, the temple was rebuilt, adding towers, cloister, and convent.

Ever-jealous tongues say that such a magnanimous and costly enterprise was the fruit of outstanding debts owed to the Counts of Lemos and the Marquises of Villafranca. However you look at it, San Francisco is one of the proudest pieces of religious architecture in El Bierzo.

The Collegiate Church, built atop the remains of the Monastery of Santa María de Cluny, and planned and built by Gil de Hontañón, is just one of the many more churches, monasteries, and convents to see.

There is also a hospice built by the Order of Cluny for the rest and recovery of pilgrims. It is estimated that around the 15th century, more than one hundred craftsmen and artists had set up shop in the area,

with shoemakers, weavers, carpenters, and blacksmiths.

Today Agua Street, along which the pilgrimage route still passes, offers distinguished houses –including those of the poet and novelist Gil Carrasco and the Álvarez de Toledo family– and palaces, such as that of Torquemada.

To one side is Corullón, an exceptional viewpoint over the valleys of El Bierzo, refuge of monks and hermits, castle and hiding place of Romanesque jewels which the traveler should be sure not to miss.

Further on along the pilgrimage route, Pereje, Trabadelo, and Ambasmestas lead up to Piedrafita Pass in the heart of the Ancares Mountains, another good stopping place for the pilgrim. From then on the road to the saint's sepulcher traverses the lands of Galicia, amongst ancient Celtic dwellings.

This is a land of local and foreign cultures, crossed by neighboring invaders century upon century. The most remote origins of the settlement are Celtic, and from these proud beginnings a marvelous symbiosis of Celt, Visigoth, and Roman invaders was created, with a little dash of Arab. What these inhabitants successfully left in this region –in addition to slaves and roads– would be a repertoire of ways and customs, norms and laws for behavior.

Still standing today is one of the first Mozarabic works of the peninsula: the Church of Peñalba de Santiago, an incomparable work. The world-renown Castle of the Knights Templar is still filled with vitality, and is now carefully maintained by the musical Halfter family. Ancestral homes abound, such as that of the Álvarez de Toledo family, with its own private chapel on the grounds.

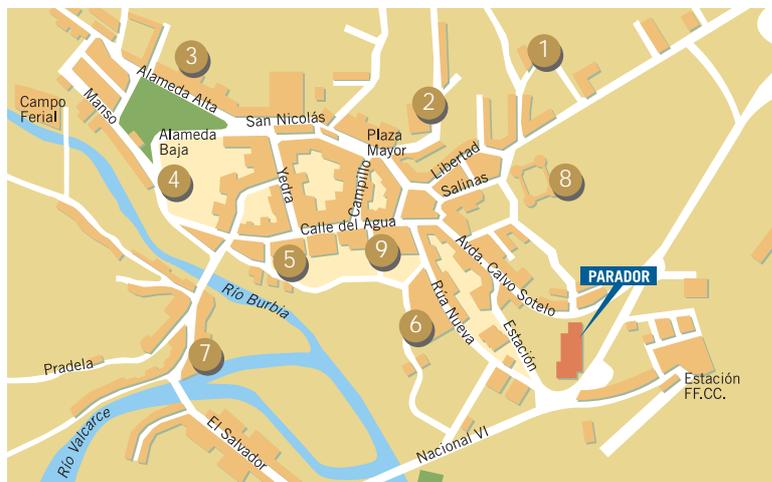
The town's civil and religious heritage extends even further, into the world of business. Decades ago important figures in the canning industry, such as the Ledo family, set up factories here. The Ledo building's chimney is an indelible reminder of splendors lost for reasons long-forgotten. There are histories of *"the wolfram rush"* –which took place not far from here– in which temporary mining claims were worked around the end of the Civil War. There was also a cement factory, with the framework still standing.

Throughout the area, visitors will not be able to avoid coming across many pleasant traces of both past and present. We will list but a few. The many which remain will be found by the pilgrim with little effort. A local saying has it that *"if one doesn't find a valuable stone, one comes across a Galician, which is in any case the same in the end."*



## VILLAFRANCA OF THE WAY OF SAINT JAMES

1. **Church of Santiago.** Simple 12th-century Romanesque temple. The Door of Pardon, on the north side, is much venerated and admired.
2. **Church of San Francisco.** Romanesque-Gothic. Its founding is attributed to Saint Francis Assisi.
3. **Convent of the Divina Pastora.** Former Hospital de Santiago.
4. **Collegiate Church of Santa María.** Founded by the monks of Cluny in the 12th century to take in French pilgrims.
5. **Cloistered Convent of San José.** On Agua Street. Belongs to the Augustinian-Recollects Sisters.
6. **Convent of the Anunciada.** 17th-century Renaissance. Door with a lovely arch and Tuscan pilasters.
7. **Cloistered Convent of the Concepción.** Founded by the second Marquis of Villafranca. Sacked by the French during the Spanish War of Independence.
8. **The Castle.** Built on the orders of the Marquis of Villafranca at the end of the 15th century.
9. **Calle del Agua.** Area with monumental civil architecture.



## SAVORY AND ABUNDANT DELICACIES OF EL BIERZO

The fertility of these mountains, rivers, and valleys cannot help but supply the region's tables with natural and flavorful dishes. Large and small game abound, and there is no lack of fish, although all of this is somewhat "underground," "a hobby more than anything," as they say. There are abundant fruits, vegetables, and legumes. "The sea awaits beyond the mountains. And even the wine is ours."

The region's recipe book is filled with additional condiments which have been left by centuries of pilgrims from all cultures and lands. There were those who passed through from France, Catalonia, Navarre, Palencia, and Leon, and those who came to stay: Romans, Moors, Jews, Asturians, and the neighbors from the nearby Maragatería region.

The result is a short but ample list of products and dishes. The curious visitor will already have deduced that the virtues of the table are more its natural qualities than divine wonders. They are the privilege of these valleys, obtained with godly and humble hands from the protective rocks, which these patient inhabitants have always bravely been able to tame, carving out narrow, vertiginous terraces in the rugged hard stone.

As if by the miracle of divine fingers, and the hands of sinners and

humans, the land produces incomparable potatoes, and abundant chestnuts. Walnut trees overwhelm the landscape, as do exquisite early fruits and vegetables and the rye necessary for local dishes and those of Galicia and Leon.

Such variety gives free reign to an excellent selection of dishes such as **Botillo**, a very unusual type of sausage made of bladder stuffed with pork bones with some meat still on, well seasoned with just the right amount of spicy paprika, then smoke-cured.

This hotel has always boasted, and rightly so, of being a flag bearer – although not the only one – of these modest and proud tables. As a result its food is coveted by locals, strangers, and pilgrims of all types.

The menu is always just varied enough, although with some changes inevitably being imposed by the seasons. The following dishes are generally available at the hotel:

–**Beans from La Bañeza**, stewed with a variety of ingredients.

–Special dishes made from the **Thighs of local Cockerels**, frequently served with a secret egg, almond, and saffron sauces.

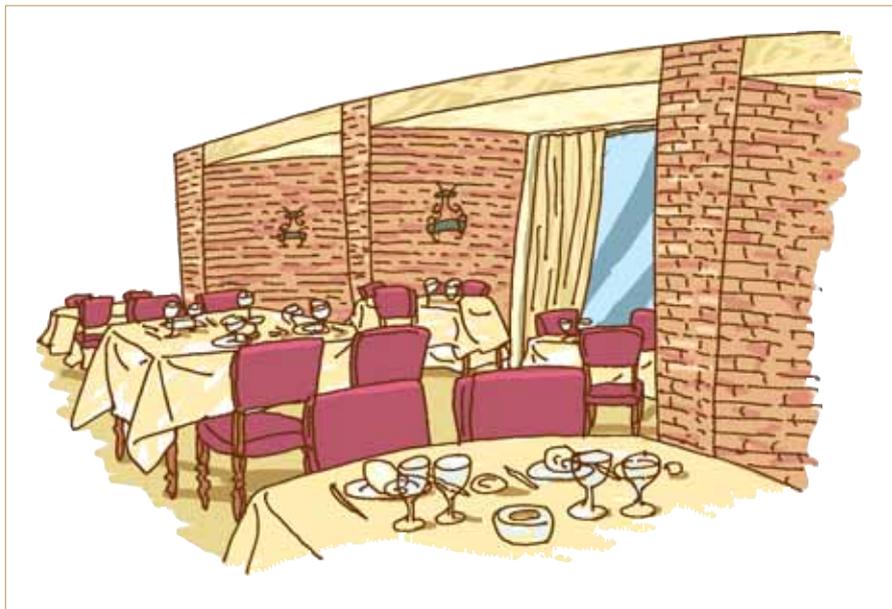
–From time to time, surprising **Fried Fish** selections, such as **Hake with Figs** and other sweet ingredients, or **Fillet of Bass with Almonds in Cider, and Shrimp**.

–The best local **Veal**, a sage hybrid of the cows of Leon and Galicia, frequently served **with Sweet and Sour Figs** and other secret delights, perhaps **Fried Custard**, or **Crushed Chestnuts in Milk with a touch of Cinnamon**.

–**Soft Goat's Milk Cheese** with quince paste, **Cheese from the Ambasmestas** region, and **Cream Custard with Cinnamon**.

And there are desserts which are impossible to find in other areas. Villafranca has always enjoyed the reputation of being queen of the sweets: preserves, crème caramel, cherries...

Should the pilgrim become restless and wish to stray from the Parador, a devout stay may be broken up by a few venial strolls through the area, which will undoubtedly result in pleasant surprises.



## THE SECRET RECIPE

### ■ BOTILLO SAUSAGE

**“Botillo”** is the name in Spanish for what is known in this region as **“Botelo.”** It is a sausage made almost exclusively in this area. It is made from a type of pork bones with some meat still on, and other leftovers from slaughtering time, carefully flavored with paprika and spices, to the taste of the preparer. This is all stuffed into a bladder, preferably the bladder of the same animal.

The sausages are cured and smoked over a low wood fire for three or four months. The rest is very simple. When it has cured, the botelo is cooked with potatoes and cabbage. It should be served very hot with enough salt and paprika.

## PATHS TREAD BY HOLY PILGRIMS

*“... Traveler, there is no path to follow;  
you make the path as you go...”*

Antonio Machado

**A**ntonio Machado's statement is a wise, yet simple truth.

Some thousand years ago, what we today count as half of the Christian era, the pilgrimage routes to Santiago were born. Pilgrims came in search of grace and miracles at the sepulcher of the Holy Apostle, traveling torturous roads, experiencing endless hardships and miraculous encounters. Many routes came into existence, some along the northern coast and others through less hospitable valleys.

Villafranca and its surroundings came into being almost solely, and somewhat inevitably, through the efforts and virtues of each and every one of these holy pilgrimages. However, the pilgrimage route would also end up serving other economic interests through the activities of storekeepers and the numerous other valuable and necessary trades

serving the legions of devout visitors. In short, virtually from the beginning, the pilgrimage route would become as profitable as it was pious, with there being no doubt about its plenary indulgences.

Tourists, travelers, walkers, and pilgrims can enjoy any of the different routes we will be proposing through the magic and mysterious El Bierzo region, or of any of their own finding. All are rewarding. As always, should you have any questions, please ask at the Parador for all the information you need.

### ■ Pongerrada. Capital of El Bierzo

The town is inevitably of Roman origin. However, as its own distinguishing marks still demonstrate, this would be not long be a Roman citadel. It was soon conquered (in the 5th century) by the Visigothic King

Theodoric, fervent sower of holy beliefs and hermitlike customs. This was the time of the *Tebaida Berciana*, when the many monasteries dotting the landscape of El Bierzo gave it a pious and isolated religious life.

At the end of the 11th century, the Iron Bridge, eternal baptismal font of the city, having been erected, the first marvels of the pilgrimage route began to appear. These were the fruits of activities deriving from the passing of pilgrims, with significant income from services, and a large group of rogues, traders, and other dealers in the necessities for feeding the devout pilgrims. This would in some way be the dawn of new and very modern urban environment. Cities would be created by design, rather than the whims and chances of time, as had been customary. A type of urban planning was coming into being.

To a certain extent, the Knights Templar, wise devout fighters and champions of Ponferrada, would be the primary leaders and regents from the end of the 12th century. Ever since that time, the city has been known by the noble name of City of the Templars. For the legendary and legitimate order, the **Castle at Ponferrada** would be their place of final refuge and power in medieval Spain.

It was not long before a relatively prosperous and specialized bourgeoisie appeared between the 13th and 15th centuries, with significant trade, craft, and agricultural activity, and advances in farming and ranching. On this group fell the frequently asphyxiating heat of the impassive and impossible demands of upstart noble courtiers who were both avaricious and artful in seeking control of the “*rich and powerful estate of Ponferrada.*” Ambitions and conspiracies continued to bring the bourgeoisie into conflict with nobles driven only by a desire for infinite power and wealth.

Soon afterwards, with the arrival of the 16th century, the city's past splendors burnt out. The Santiago pilgrims lost their cardinal virtues and faith was weakened, largely due to the trading in miracles which was so frequent along the route. Hope broke down in the face of evil ways, fashions and manners among the self-satisfied ecclesiastic and monastic class. Charity became a good to be traded for money and prebends along much of the road. Faith was devalued, and so business petered out.

There is enough left to be able to reconstruct the town's past with a little imagination: the **Clock Tower** on the city walls; the **Renaissance Basilica of Nuestra Señora de las Encinas**, patron saint of El Bierzo; the late-17th-century baroque **City Hall**; and the **Church of San Andrés**, from the same period. Many of the streets in the old quarter are well worth a stroll.

#### ■ Las Médulas

Just at the entrance to Ponferrada a road leads off towards the enchanting and enchanted **Carracedo Lake**. The lake is said to have been born of the infinite tears of a siren known as Ondina Caricia, when her burning love for the Roman general Tito, ruler of El Bierzo at the time, was rejected. This mysterious and magical siren belongs exclusively to lakes and pools, and only makes her presence known at the full moon. However, she only shows herself to those who approach the water with sincere beliefs. Beside the lake are Las Médulas.

Before succumbing to the temptation to cross El Bierzo by the pilgrimage route to Villafranca and up to **Piedrafita Pass**, be patient, for it would be a shame to miss **Peñalba** and **Compludo**.

In Peñalba the entire town is a must-see due to its artistic importance. Nor should the **Valley of Silence** with the cave where Saint Genadio did his penance be missed. In Compludo visit the smithy at least. This gigantic furnace has ancient origins, and it is still possible to work out how hydraulic power was used to move the enormous bellows and mallets. A forge hammer with ratchet mechanism served to set the rhythm for molding and tempering the metal.

The majority of pilgrims would continue along the route from **Hospital de la Reina** (founded by the Catholic Monarchs at the end of the 15th century) to reach the heights of **Cacabelos**. Some ten centuries ago, this settlement was the property of King Ordoño II. It was also a stopping place and inn for pilgrims, just as it is for the present-day traveler. See the **parish church** and its Romanesque apse; the **Chapel of San Roque**, initially built in the 15th century; and the neoclassical **Sanctuary of Las Angustias**.



Along the way, try one of the wines from the town's limited harvest, accompanied by a few of the abundant and surprising variety of tapas.

Before you know it, you will have reached a broad valley in which a small village appears. Practically alpine in its beauty, it may seem almost artificial to the traveler. This is **Vileda**.

### ■ Pallozas

For centuries these areas were unbelievably isolated, a problem which has largely been resolved today with tunnels, bridges and many other profitable operations and developments.

On the most fearsome crests of the Piedadrita Mountains, a type of primitive Celtic dwelling can still be found, known as a palloza. Existing examples show that the houses were round, and built atop a sort of granite base, a stone which is plentiful in the region. Until not so many years ago – perhaps a half dozen decades – the family home, however large it may have been, was shared by beasts and work tools.



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