



# See a different side to Spain

Exploring fascinating civil war history leads to some extraordinarily beautiful places

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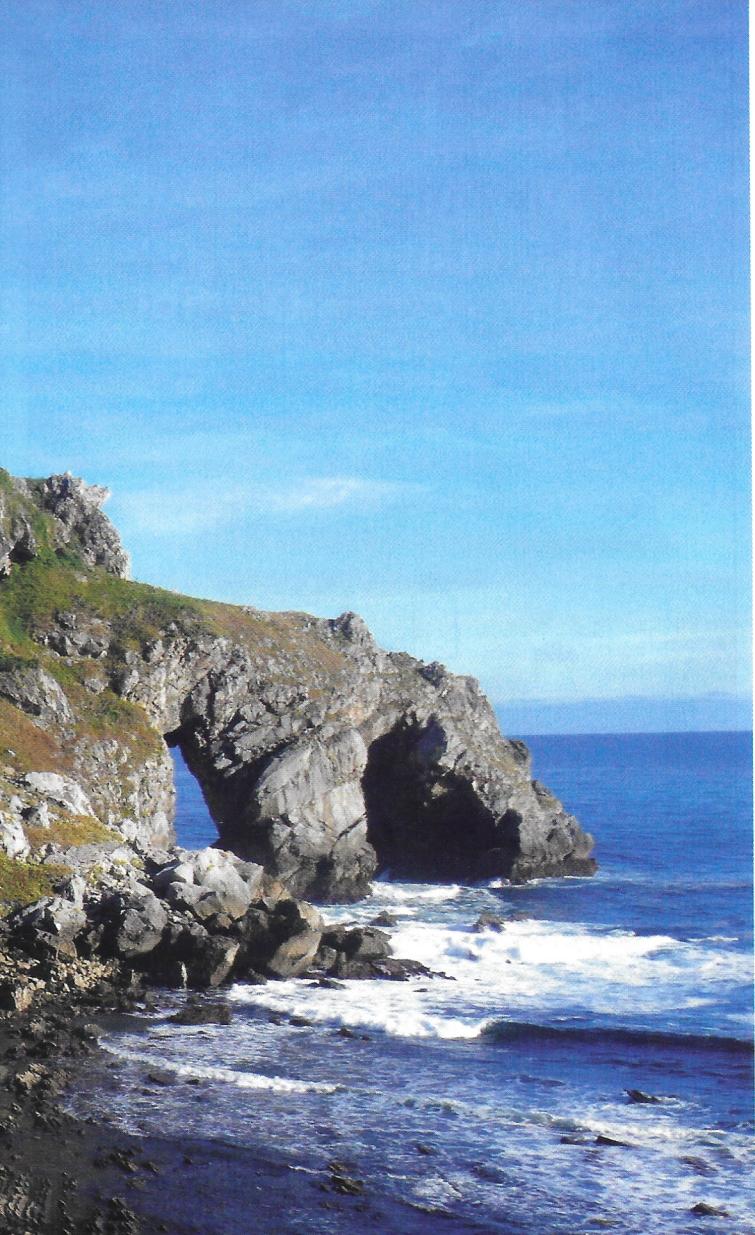
**O**n previous Spanish trips we have stumbled upon snippets of Spain's past, from the Neolithic to the Imperial. Planning our latest jaunt, I wanted to delve into more recent history – the 1930s Spanish Civil War – and maybe explore a battle site or military memorial and learn how the conflict impacted on the people.

This is the dark age of Spanish history, when Nationalist generals led the army in a coup against the democratically elected Republican government; history that was

distorted during dictatorship and buried after Franco's death in 1975 in the 'Pact of Forgetting'. To get under the skin of this exceptional country, a rough plan of a tour around inland northern and central Spain began to take shape.

Driving off the Bilbao ferry in sunshine, we headed for the Basque coast. After a night on the busy aire by Bakio's surfing beach, we joined hundreds of others walking to the dramatic craggy Gaztelugatxe islet, a *Game of Thrones*

ABOVE The Basque islet of Gaztelugatxe



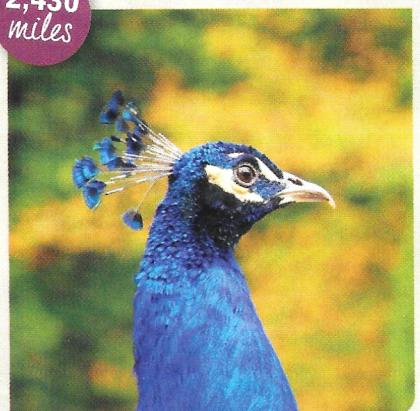
## THE JOURNEY

We travelled from Salford via the Portsmouth-Bilbao ferry and drove around northern and central Spain in a clockwise direction. We spent 28 days exploring the Civil War theme in autumn

## THE COSTS

Fuel Average 34mpg.....	£388
Ferry.....	£895
Site fees (£389.80).....	£349.28
Entrance fees Two adults: Javier Castle, Corbera d'Ebre's 115 Days exhibition and old town, Torre de El Salvador, Teruel Cathedral, art museum in Madrid, museum in Morata de Tajuña, Sephardic Museum, Cristo de la Luz, Santo Tomé, Valle de los Caídos and Museum of Human Evolution in Burgos (£103.20).....	£95.20
Public transport Two adults: two return rail trips Aranjuez-Madrid (£32.40).....	£29.89
<b>Total costs.....</b>	<b>£1,753.81</b>

2,430 miles



location. Crossing a narrow bridge, we climbed the winding walled steps to the charming nautical-themed church for spectacular coastal views.

The Civil War began in July 1936 and General Franco claimed victory in Madrid on 1 April 1939. By 1937, with easier victories accomplished, the Nationalists grew frustrated with slow progress in the Basque country and planned an attack to break morale. We drove a short distance inland to Guernica, which saw an atrocious

aerial bombing on 26 April 1937 and was the inspiration for Picasso's iconic painting.

I didn't know what to expect but, on a warm Saturday afternoon, the cafés were busy and the vibe relaxed. From the tiled reproduction of Picasso's *Guernica* we walked to the Assembly House, which welcomes visitors. Outside is the oak tree, symbolising Basque liberty and traditions. Adjoining the circular parliament room is a space with an enormous and vibrant stained glass roof that took my breath away. ▶

**ABOVE TOP** Stained-glass ceiling at the Assembly House, Guernica

**ABOVE BOTTOM** Peacocks wander around the royal gardens of Aranjuez

## INFORMATION

Madrid's historical tours  
[rutasconhistoria.es](http://rutasconhistoria.es)

Battle of the Ebro  
[batallaebre.org](http://batallaebre.org)

What the Spanish Civil War  
 was all about  
[spanish-civil-war.org](http://spanish-civil-war.org)

Battle of Jarama Museum  
 and more  
[morataturismo.es](http://morataturismo.es)

Valley of the Fallen  
[valledelescaidos.es](http://valledelescaidos.es)

Aragón culture and nature  
[turismodearagon.com](http://turismodearagon.com)

Cradle of Dinosaurs  
[turismo.teruel.es](http://turismo.teruel.es)

Gastronomy and history,  
[turismo.toledo.es](http://turismo.toledo.es)

The George Orwell Route  
[turismomonegros.com](http://turismomonegros.com)

*"From a **high** point, surrounded by **fragrant** shrubs,  
 we had **stunning** views of craggy mountains"*

Encouraged by the resurgence of Guernica, we left the verdant northern coast and drove through the arid landscapes of Navarre and Aragón, camping among almond and fig trees at Mendigorría and visiting the sleepy walled town of Artajona and the impressive Castillo de Javier.

In the charming town of Aínsa we strolled through the café-lined square and cobbled streets, searching out the local testicle-shaped door furniture. Walking to a medieval abbey we watched a lammergeier soaring low over a deep ravine and, along the Entremon Gorge, we spotted golden eagles. Thoughts of war were far away.

While Franco's Nationalist forces included the well-trained Army of Africa, the Republican Army recruited 60,000 enthusiastic overseas volunteers for the International Brigades. George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway were among these.

In the Monegros Desert near Alcubierre, a sparsely populated, semi-desert landscape, is the Ruta Orwell. Our 'van bounced along a gravel track for around a mile to a restored 1937 trench on Monte Irazo, where the two sides faced each other across a narrow valley. With the place to ourselves, I imagined life in these trenches.

In 1937 and 1938 the fighting was punctuated by long battles across northern and central Spain. In Corbera d'Ebre the wonderful museum detailed the 115-day Ebro Battle. I studied interactive maps that showed how the frontline shifted daily and learnt that, after the war, local people risked their lives searching the hills for scrap metal to sell. I found the display of armaments reused as vases and candelabras poignant, practical and even fun.

Corbera d'Ebre's ruined old town has been left as a symbol of tragedy and loss. Walking along the streets taking in the terrible beauty of houses repeatedly bombed, I heard the whispers of ghosts of former residents. Coming face to face with the impact of war was sobering.

The aire in El Masroig, alongside the winery, was our base and we popped in to buy a few bottles of its red. That night the rain ricocheted off the 'van in a heavy storm; we were glad to be on hardstanding!

The Ebro Battle was fought in the lovely hills and gorges of the Terra Alta and the 12km (7½ miles) Vall Closa hiking trail from El Pinell de Brai was an excellent opportunity to walk in Republican soldiers' footsteps. Passing regular information ►

**BELOW** The Entremon Gorge has a precipitous path alongside it





boards in English, we discovered rudimentary aerial bombing shelters scraped from the cliffs, a woodland memorial to dead comrades, trenches and a cave that was used to plan tactics.

From the high point, surrounded by fragrant shrubs, we had stunning views of craggy mountains. Returning steeply down a ridge, the attractive village came into sight in a landscape of vines and olive trees.

I found scars from the bloody fighting through the winter of 1937-38 in Teruel – bullet holes that mark the frontage of the Museo Provincial.

Teruel in Aragón is packed with eye-catching Mudéjar buildings. Fusing Christian-Islamic brickwork and glazed tiles, the three medieval towers are magnificent. The cathedral has a vibrant thirteenth century Mudéjar wooden ceiling mixing Gothic figures with Islamic designs.

Driving out of Teruel we stopped at Los Pozos de Caudé, incongruously positioned by the N-234 among industrial buildings, to visit one of the most moving memorials I have seen. In 1938 Nationalist soldiers executed Republicans here, their lives remembered today by a collection of monuments, plaques and fresh flowers.

It is estimated half-a-million soldiers and civilians were killed in the Spanish Civil War. Many still remain unidentified in mass graves. At Teruel a local shepherd noted the shots he heard; he counted 1,005.

### US AND OUR 'VAN



*Carol Kubicki...*

and her husband, Anthony, use their Devon Tempest to pursue their hobbies of walking and cycling while exploring the historical and natural environments



2015 Devon Tempest on a Renault Master MWB. This is our second Devon Conversions 'van. At 5.3m we think it's enormous and, with a washroom, also luxurious

Although the history is fascinating, hiking in the hills around gorgeous Albarracín provided a welcome break. After a few days and with snow forecast (it was late October) we tore ourselves away, driving along winding river gorges full of autumn colour and across prairie-like fields. In the village of Buendía we stopped at the reservoir to visit las Caras sculpture trail, where large faces are carved in the rocks.

Aranjuez's welcoming campsite on the banks of the Rio Tagus was a perfect choice. It is a pleasant 15-minute stroll from the lively town and well-kept royal gardens, which are modelled on Versailles.

We stopped by the river to watch young children racing in rowing boats, cheered on by their schoolmates. In the gardens, infants were collecting conkers, red squirrels scurried among fallen leaves on the avenues of plane trees and peacocks preened in the Chinese Garden.

We took the train to Madrid twice from here. First was the Museo Reina Sofía, a hop away from Atocha Station and packed with twentieth century works. We were here to see Picasso's wall-sized painting, *Guernica*. The painting is a bold anti-war statement, rather than a depiction of the town. After hours in windowless rooms studying *Guernica* and other fascinating works and films we joined the queue outside the Chocolatería San Ginés for thick Spanish hot chocolate and churros oozing calories.

## TOP TIPS

The Montaña Segura website is in Spanish but click on the 'folletos' tab and you can download maps with walking routes in different areas across Aragón

 [montanasegura.com](http://montanasegura.com)

Aranjuez could be a good campsite for anyone with mobility issues. Site roads are surfaced and pitches are hard earth. English is spoken and there are accessible sanitary facilities. The footbridge over the river to The Royal Gardens and Palace has ramps. The gardens are level, but not all paths are surfaced. A tourist train visits the main sites and runs most of the year

 [arantour.com](http://arantour.com) Reception can arrange a taxi to the rail station; there are taxis waiting on your return

**LEFT CLOCKWISE** Albarracín claims to be Spain's prettiest town; Inside the museum in Corbera d'Ebre; The Royal Palace in Aranjuez surrounded by elegant gardens

A few days later we walked between Madrid's plazas, each with its own character: the imposing Plaza Mayor, the stately Plaza de Oriente facing the royal palace and cathedral and pretty Plaza de Gabriel Miró. Plaza de Isabel II is quieter and more relaxed and here, opposite the Royal Theatre, we found a cosy bar for delicious Spanish vermouth that came with enough nibbles to make lunch unnecessary.

Reaching the handsome buildings of Madrid's Gran Vía (nicknamed Howitzer Alley during the conflict) I looked up at the 90m-high 1930s Telefónica Building, used by Republican soldiers to monitor Nationalist positions and a prime target for bombing.

The prominent memorial near Morata de Tajuña of two clasped hands remembers Republicans who fought and died over the control of the Madrid-Valencia road in the 1937 Battle of Jarama. On the tracks here we found remains of trenches and spotted olive trees with bullet holes. In the museum in Morata de Tajuña, battlefield debris and photographs are displayed.

Moving to Toledo, perched above the Tagus, I found the labyrinthine cobbled streets disorientating, only grasping the city's layout after we had climbed to the Mirador del Valle for the city-wide views across the river. The Alcázar sits on top of the walled city, a restored fortress that was

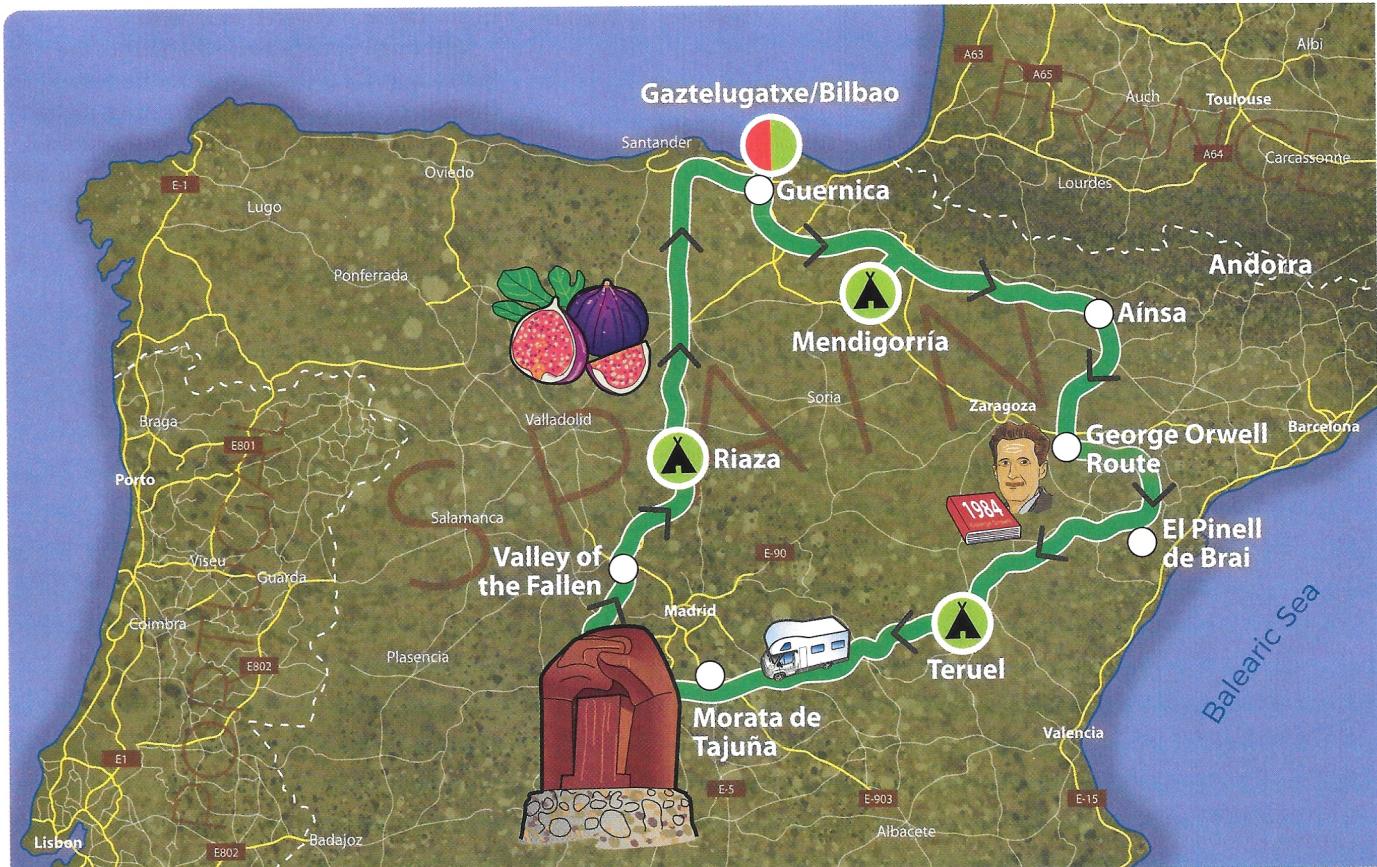
all but destroyed during the Civil War.

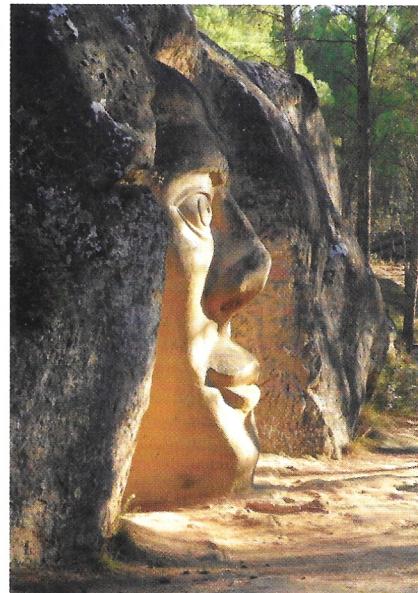
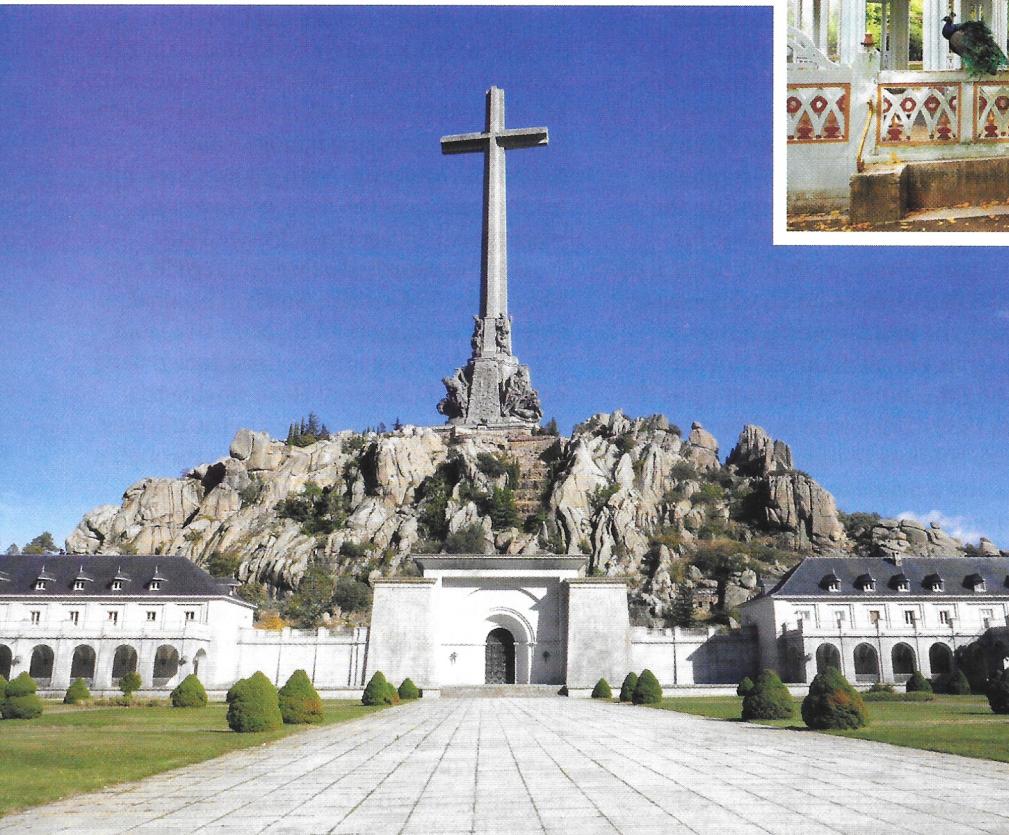
Toledo felt austere and formal, but it has a history of diversity and religious tolerance. Of all its sites, the most memorable was the fourteenth century synagogue and Sephardic Museum. Nothing prepared me for the beauty of the intricate lace-like plasterwork in the Great Prayer Hall.

The sun returned as we left Toledo and headed for El Escorial, north of Madrid, on a splendid winding road through tree-clad hills. We got to see the Renaissance palace complex at El Escorial close-up due to a navigation error. We pulled in the mirrors and held our breath as we drove through a narrow archway and around the palace.

By February 1939 Catalonia had fallen. The Nationalist army took Madrid on 28 March and, four days later, claimed victory. In 1941 building began on Franco's controversial memorial to those who died in the war, the Valle de los Caídos (Valley of the Fallen). This monumental complex did little to heal the wounds of the conflict.

The 260-metre-long basilica carved out of the hill by forced labour is more Bond-villain lair than church and even has stormtrooper-like statues guarding the mausoleum. Some 40,000 soldiers are buried here (mostly Nationalists) but there is no list of their names on display, only those of Franco and Primo de Rivera, the founder ▶





of the fascist Falange party.

Bodies were moved to this impersonal mausoleum, often without notifying relatives. I was glad to leave.

Strolling from our campsite to the pretty town of Riaza that evening, we noticed names carved on the church tower. At the top was Primo de Rivera; some churches retain a list of Nationalists who died in the war; his name always heads the roll.

After a few sunny days in the relaxed and interesting city of Burgos we continued north, finding two fascist memorials on our route to Bilbao. Both the remote concrete

**LEFT CLOCKWISE** The 150m high cross on top of the hill at Valle de los Caídos; Pretty Chinese Garden in the Jardín del Príncipe in Aranjuez; At Ruta de las Caras sculpture trail near to Buendía

memorial to General Sagardía Ramos (today remembered for executing many civilians) and the pyramidal Italian Cemetery (built by Republican prisoners for Italian soldiers who died fighting for Franco) were neglected and covered in graffiti.

Although Spain's past still haunts the landscape, it's easy to avoid reminders of the horror of the war. I felt learning, rather than forgetting and avoiding, had rewards. The search took us to different and beautiful parts of Spain. I only scratched the surface, but my admiration for this captivating country has new significance. **mmm**

## WE STAYED AT

**Parking Bakio**, 48130 Bakio

1 All year £ Free

**Campsite El Molino**, 31150 Mendigorría

0034 948 340604

[campingelmolino.com](http://campingelmolino.com)

1 February – 15 December

£ Two adults, pitch and elec: From €26 (£24.45)

**Camping Peña Montañesa**, 22360 Labuerda-Aínsa, Huesca 0034 974 500032

[penamontañesa.com](http://penamontañesa.com) 1 All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €20 (£17.92)

**El Masroig Camperstop**, 43736 El Masroig, Catalonia 1 All year £ Free

**Camping Ciudad de Alharracín**, 44100 Alharracín 0034 978 710197

[campingalharracin.com](http://campingalharracin.com)

1 March – 8 December

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €21.15 (£18.95)

**Camping International Aranjuez**, 28300 Aranjuez 0034 918 911395

[campingaranjuez.com](http://campingaranjuez.com) 1 All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €25 (£22.40)

**Camping El Greco**, 45004 Toledo

0034 925 220090

[campingelgreco.es](http://campingelgreco.es) 1 All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €25.45 (£22.80)

**Camping El Escorial**, 28280 El Escorial

0034 918 902412

[campingelescorial.com](http://campingelescorial.com) 1 All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €20 (£17.92)

**Camping Riaza**, 40500 Riaza, Segovia

0034 921 550580 [camping-riaza.com](http://camping-riaza.com)

1 All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: €30 (£26.88)

**Camping Fuentes Blancas**, 09193 Burgos

0034 947 486016

[campingburgos.com](http://campingburgos.com) 1 All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From €20 (£17.92)