

How to plan your own trip through Spain's ancient monasteries

The book, *A Room with a Pew*, mainly tells the story of a journey that *we* took through Spain staying only in ancient monasteries. However, we hope you will turn it around and see it also as an indication of the kinds of experiences *you* would enjoy if you were to make a similar trip of your own.

If you like the idea of traveling through Spain and staying in ancient monasteries, then here's a step-by-step guide you can use to plan your own trip.

Choose your route

First, pick a route. Spain has so many monasteries that no matter where you go, you're sure to find ones you can stay in. So start with your journey, rather than with the monasteries themselves. We planned our route so we could travel from Christian Spain to Muslim Spain. (In our case we went from Barcelona in north-east Spain to Malaga on Spain's southern Mediterranean coast.) We wanted to see some of the legacies of the Muslim conquest that survive in the buildings, food and customs of Spain. We also thought these Muslim bequests would contrast well with the Christian monasteries we planned to stay in and use as bases. The monasteries we chose allowed us to do this. They also allowed us to visit some of Spain's most spectacular cities – Barcelona, Zaragoza, Pamplona, Segovia, Avila, Toledo, Cordoba, Seville, Granada and Malaga – while letting us explore many of the smaller towns and villages that most visitors ignore.

Set criteria

Second, decide on the kinds of monasteries you want to stay in. Again, there are enough to choose from, so you can take your pick. In addition to giving us access to the cities listed above, we selected our monasteries on the basis of three main criteria. First, the monastery had to house a functioning religious community with at least a skeleton crew of monks or nuns on site (it could not be a tourist mecca or an upscale hotel-parador that had lost its religious function). Second, it had to offer us the chance to mingle with this religious community (since part of the appeal of monasteries is that they allow you to get to know how the residents live). And third, the monastery had to accommodate both men and women (although not necessarily in the same room or in the same part of the building).

Identify the monasteries

Begin with the Internet. It's by far the best source for finding monasteries you might want to stay in. We used the website, www.guiasmonasterios.com, which lists many of the monasteries in Spain (there is no website that lists all of the monasteries). This site is divided by region, so click on the regions you're planning to visit. The lists of monasteries that then appear will be in Spanish so you might want to have a Spanish-English dictionary to hand. But if you're looking for monasteries with accommodation you can stay in (rather than ones you can just visit), you need only search the listings for the words 'hospederia', 'hospedaje' and 'residencia' – the three interchangeable words that describe a monastic lodging – or for the word 'habitaciones', which means 'rooms'. We found two of the monasteries we visited on the www.guiasmonasterios.com web site: El Real Monasterio de Santo Tomas in Avila and El Monasterio de la Santa Maria de las Escalonias near Cordoba.

Another website we found useful is www.top-tour-of-Spain.com, which, surprisingly, given its package-tour-sounding name, has about twenty worthwhile monastic listings. We discovered the cloistered Reial Monestir de Santa Maria de Vallbona and the more open (with restaurant and bar) Monasterio de la Virgen de Monlora on this site. To see the monasteries the site lists, click on 'Site Map', scroll down to 'Travel' and click on that, then scroll down until you find the subheading 'Hotel Information for Spain'. Under this subheading, you will see another sub-subheading called 'Monastery Hotels in Spain' (a bit of a misnomer), which will yield the listings.

You can also get in touch with the Spanish General Office of Tourism. As far as we know, it has no on-line information about still-occupied monasteries you can stay in, but it has compiled a list of about 75 monasteries that accept paying guests – including those that only admit people on spiritual retreat or undertaking religious studies. To obtain this list, email the office at infosmile@tourspain.es.

As an alternative, you can, of course, simply search online for suitable monasteries by inputting the word 'monasteries' (or 'monasterios') along with the town or region you would like to visit – e.g., 'monasteries in Leon Spain' – but this approach is hit-and-miss and as likely as not will yield monasteries that are now paradors or ones you can visit but cannot stay in.

Refine your search

Once you've identified the monasteries you might want to stay in, you should go to their individual websites. A surprising number are online, with sophisticated sites, easily searched for, that will give you all the information you need.

Making your booking

It's not a good idea to turn up at a monastery unless you have a reservation. You might find that the hospederia is filled with a group on retreat – or (just as likely) that the resident monks or nuns have decided to shut their lodgings down for a while. Most monasteries have a system of some kind that allows you to book, but each monastery's requirements are different. If a monastery has a web site, it will usually accept an email booking. When we tried to reserve this way, we always received a response – but not necessarily right away.

If you prefer to book by phone, try to call between 10.00 a.m. and noon (Spanish time) – that's after the daily religious service of Terce and before the service called Sextae, when you're more likely to catch someone in between their prayers. Expect to wait for many rings before the phone is answered. Monasteries do not employ receptionists. Also, they're big places. A monk or nun may have a long walk to get to the phone and won't want to be rushed, especially if he/she is 75 years old. When the phone is answered, you might have to shout.

That said, some of the monks and nuns we met – especially those charged specifically with administering a hospederia – walked around with a cell phone in hand, so were always instantly contactable (and helpful). If you reserve by phone, you might still be asked to send a confirming email. You might also be asked for a credit-card number, but most likely you'll just be told 'we look forward to seeing you when you arrive'.

The language issue

If you plan to reserve by phone, you will need a passing acquaintance with Spanish, since you cannot rely on the person who answers your call being fluent in English. Fortunately, the Spanish people (unlike, say, the French) are not offended if you butcher their language, so you can barrel

ahead without being ridiculed or rude. The ‘Making a Hotel Reservation’ section in any Spanish phrase book will tell you the words you need to use.

If you’re writing an email, you can always compose it in English and then use a service like Bing Translator (at www.bingtranslator.com) to turn it into Spanish. The response you receive from the monastery can also be translated this way if it doesn’t immediately make sense to you. Key words to look for are libre, meaning there’s a room free; completo, meaning ‘nope, we’re full’; habitacion, meaning ‘a room’; doble, meaning ‘double’; con bano, meaning ‘bathroom ensuite’; and tarifa, meaning ‘price’.

Regardless of how you make your booking, the rate will be quoted to you in Euros. Sometimes breakfast will be included; but more often not. Sometimes there’s no charge at all for the room – as we found at El Monasterio de la Virgen de Monlora – but you will then most likely be asked to make a donation. The amount you give is entirely up to you.

What to expect when you arrive

Expect to get lost. A lot of Spanish monasteries were built in hard-to-reach places that are not served by public transport, so if you’re staying in one of those, you will need a car and a map or GPS. In cities, the monasteries should be easier to find, but in fact they are not. They are usually close to the center of a town that grew up around them over the course of many centuries – which means they’re probably surrounded by a rat run of streets that are narrow, one-way, and deliberately confusing. On the plus side, the monastery itself is bound to be large and so hard to disguise. But don’t expect the locals to know where it is. There’s not much interaction between even the most prominent of monasteries and the city or town that surrounds it.

What to wear

It’s probably a good idea to leave the Gucci handbag and Jimmy Choo shoes at home, since they’re likely to be out of place in an establishment that embraces poverty. Modest and respectful attire is best. Long pants, not shorts. And nothing revealing or tight. If you have to accessorize, do so with a flashlight or torch – handy for lighting your way to those pre-dawn services and for finding the route back to your room.

Instead of style, think about warmth. Even in summer, the rooms, corridors and chapels can be cold; and at other times of the year they can be downright freezing. There may be heating, but to economize, many monasteries turn it off until the resident monks or nuns are ready for bed – and even then, it is only turned on long enough to take the chill off the cells. You won’t need woolly pajamas, but you will need a fleece.

Checking in

This can take time. Most monasteries do not have a reception desk or anything equivalent. Instead, somewhere near the entrance, either on the wall outside or just beyond the main doors, there will be a bell you can press (it might be marked ‘porteria’), and after several minutes – as many as five or ten – a monk or nun will arrive to greet you. Of course, if you turn up at the monastery when the residents are at prayer, you can ring the bell as much as you like and still get no response. So it’s a good idea to have a general idea of the times of the Divine Offices or the Liturgy of the Hours and plan your arrival accordingly.

Once you’ve established face-to-face contact, you can try out your Spanish and say that you have a reservation for a room. Monks and nuns are remarkably patient if you only have basic language skills – or no skills at all. After all, they’ve often been there fifty years, with no plans to

go elsewhere. Alternatively, you can simply find an appropriate sentence in a Spanish phrase book and show them that. Remember, too, that you're likely to be the only foreigner trying to check in on that day, so the monk/nun will have a pretty good idea of who you are and why you've just rung the bell.

Your room (or cell)

Most cells in monastic hospederias cost considerably less than rooms in tourist hotels. Standards sometimes reflect this. However, it's not possible to predict the standard of accommodation since it can vary so much. But in our experience, all rooms will be spotlessly clean. They'll have everything you need, but no frills. Most will have an ensuite bathroom with shower, toilet and sink. And because so many monasteries take in laundry to generate income, the sheets and towels will be freshly washed and immaculately ironed. That last luxury aside, it's best to think 'small and simple' – that way, you're less likely to feel disappointed.

Food and drink

The quality of the meals can also vary widely – from none at all to delicious home-grown produce that's served with a full-bodied home-made wine. If you're staying in a monastery that's relatively remote, it's a good idea to have your own supplies – just in case. Some bread, fruit and cheese will do, as well as, perhaps, a bottle or two of Spanish red, which never seems to go amiss. In monasteries where the meals are provided, you're expected to eat when the community does – although not necessarily in the same room or at the same table.

Some monasteries include meals in the price of the accommodation – often because there's nowhere else in the vicinity for you to eat. Most, however, allow you to elect which, if any, meals you would like. If you decide to eat in, breakfast will likely consist of bread, butter and jam; coffee or tea; and perhaps some fruit or juice. Lunch – served late at around 2.00 p.m. – is the main meal of the day, and will probably be soup; pasta or meat and potatoes; salad; fruit or yogurt; and a glass (two if you're fast) of red wine. Dinner – also served late at around 8.30 p.m. (early by Spanish standards) – is a more simple affair, often just an omelet with cured meat; salad; bread and fruit.

Don't forget to stand to say grace before you sit to eat. And in some monasteries, be prepared at the end of the meal to help with some of the clearing up.

Your fellow guests

All kinds of people find their way into monastic hospederias. That's one of their main appeals. We've met people who – like us – were curious to discover what it is like to stay in a monastery and experience cloistered life. We've also met people who had come to the monastery to reaffirm their faith – or to find it for the first time. Then, too, we've encountered people who needed a break from the pressures of modern life, and people who were trying to recover from troubled pasts and thought a spell in a monastery would set them on the right path again. These people came from all walks of life. Nearly all of them were Spanish (so far, very few tourists find their way into monasteries), but many of them spoke English as it is the lingua franca in Spain, just as it is in nearly all European countries.

Getting in and out

In all the monasteries we stayed in, we were free to come and go as we pleased – during the day, that is. Typically, we were given a key to our room or cell, along with a key to any interior door

that, if locked, would have blocked our access to our room. We were never given a key to a monastery's main door; but during the day, the main doors were never locked. It's different at night. The main doors are then typically sealed tight.

Night in a monastery usually begins at 10.00 p.m. So if you're a night owl and prone to carousing, the monastic life might not be for you. After lights out, it's almost impossible to break into a monastery, or to rouse anyone inside who might be willing to let you in.

The religion thing

You don't have to believe in God to stay in a Spanish monastery; nor do you have to pretend you do. All that's required is that you respect the people who do believe, and that you defer to the rules of the monks and nuns and to their chosen lifestyles and faith. That might mean living more quietly than you normally do. As we discovered, it's a myth that modern-day monks and nuns have taken vows of silence, but they make no unnecessary noise and they are all familiar with biblical passages like James 1:26, "Those who consider themselves religious, and yet do not keep a tight rein on their tongues, deceive themselves and their religion is worthless," and Proverbs 10:19, "Sin is not ended by multiplying words, but the prudent hold their tongues."

You also need to arrive on time for any of the services you decide to attend – but, of course, you don't need to attend any of the services unless the monastery is open only to those people who are on retreat. If that's the case, you will find out when you try to book a room. You can then decide – at the outset – if you want to stay there or not.

Finally, if you would like more information, or to discuss your plans, then please get in touch with us – authors Richard Starks and Miriam Murcutt – using the 'contact' page on our website, www.starksmurcutt.com