

# Waiting to be discovered

## A world's fair will shine a spotlight on an often-overlooked city in Spain

BY KATHY RODEGHIER  
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**W**hen thinking of Spain, many travelers can name places such as the Alhambra and cities such as Barcelona, but few make it all the way to the end of the alphabet and say Zaragoza.

Spain's fifth-largest city, with nearly a quarter of a million inhabitants, remains overlooked. That likely will change this summer as it plays host to World Expo 2008.

"We are going to be placed on the map of the world for three months," says Expo spokesman Marcos Ferrer. The world's fair is expected to draw 6.5 million visitors to exhibits sponsored by more than 100 countries. In anticipation of the influx, new hotels are going up, roadways being improved and the banks of the Ebro River spruced up to resemble the Seine.

Being off the radar of mass tourism has its advantages. It means this provincial capital has retained its authenticity, and improvements made for Expo seem likely to enhance rather

than damage its character.

Part of the once powerful kingdom of Aragon, ruled by King Ferdinand who sent Columbus to America, Zaragoza boasts 2,000 years of history, dating back to its founding by the Romans. Painter Francisco Goya began his career here and art lovers come not only to admire his work, but the city's unusual Moorish mudejar architecture.

### Senora del Pilar

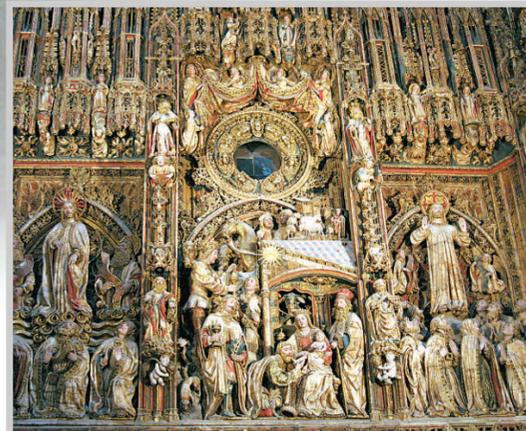
Zaragoza may be unknown to most Americans, but it is famous throughout the Hispanic world as a pilgrimage center. The focus of attention is a 5-foot pillar of jasper and silver upon which the Virgin Mary is believed to have stood to speak to St. James in A.D. 40.

The Basilica of Our Lady of the Pillar enshrines this pedestal, and the faithful go there today to pray as they touch or kiss the stone. Pilgrims purchase ribbons in the sacristy and rub them on the pillar as they ask for blessings. These same ribbons can be seen around Zaragoza tied to baby strollers and around the rear-view mirrors of automobiles.

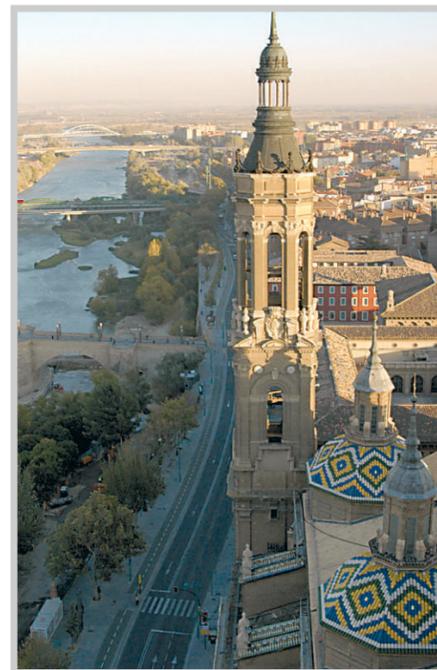
Reverence for Our Lady of the Pillar extends not only across Spain, but also to Latin America and all Spanish-speaking countries. Visitors from around the globe come to worship, especially around the saint's feast day, Oct. 12. Zaragoza's largest annual event, the Festival of Our Lady of the Pillar lasts about a week and last year drew more than 400,000 people. Pilgrims line up for hours to lay blankets of flowers before the pillar.

For visitors who are not religious, the basilica holds importance for its art and architecture. Construction on the baroque structure began around 1680 and lasted 200 years. A climb to the top of one of its towers affords a bird's-eye view of its cupolas covered in a pattern of blue, white and yellow tiles.

Inside, a dozen columns surround the nave where a central altarpiece carved in alabaster mixes Gothic and Renaissance styles. Holes in a chapel ceiling show where three bombs fell on the basilica during the Spanish Civil War. None



Religious robes adorn a pillar upon which the Virgin Mary is believed to have stood, left. An altarpiece in Le Seo is made of alabaster and wood, above.



PHOTOS BY KATHY RODEGHIER/  
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The Basilica of Our Lady of the Pillar stretches along the Ebro River.



Children dress up in Roman costume at the ruins of the Roman Theater.

### Zaragoza, Spain

**GO:** To discover an overlooked city in Spain, see a world's fair and witness a religious ritual

**NO:** If you have no interest in history, religion, architecture or water as a sustainable resource

### If you go



**Getting there:** Iberia Airlines flies nonstop between O'Hare and Madrid, where you can board a connecting flight to Zaragoza or take the train. The high-speed AVE train reaches Zaragoza in about 90 minutes (<http://horarios.renfe.es/hir/ingles.html>).

**Where to stay:** New hotels are still opening prior to Expo. One with an established reputation is the five-star Hotel Palafox, (011) (34) 976-237700, [www.palafoxhoteles.com](http://www.palafoxhoteles.com). For a great location at a two-star price, the Hotel Las Torres overlooks Plaza del Pilar (011) (34) 976-394250, [www.hotel-lastorres.com](http://www.hotel-lastorres.com).

**Where to eat:** You won't go hungry in this city known for tapas, Iberian ham and pastries that are works of art.

Tabernilla la Copla, Espoz y Mina, 21, (011) (34) 976 392-202

Taberna Azoque, calle Azoque, 32, (011) (34) 976 214-821

Antiguo Tabernillas, Inocencio Jimenez, 3-5, (011) (34) 976 211-719, [www.antiguoTabernillas.com](http://www.antiguoTabernillas.com)

Casa Teo, Espoz y Mina, 24, (011) (34) 976 392-119  
La Jamonería, Bruno Solano, 16, (011) (34) 976 566-268, [www.elcortadordejamon.com](http://www.elcortadordejamon.com)

Pastelería Fantoba, Don Jaime, 12, (011) (34) 976 298-524, [www.fantoba.com](http://www.fantoba.com)

Tolosana bakery and coffee shop, Avendid Goya, 3  
**Zaragoza Card:** Good for entry to monuments and museums, unlimited access to the daytime tourist bus, use of public transport and discounts at hotels, restaurants and rental car agencies. Purchase at Zaragoza tourist offices or online at [www.zaragozacard.com](http://www.zaragozacard.com).

**Expo:** Opens June 14 and closes Sept. 14, [www.zaragozaexpo2008.es](http://www.zaragozaexpo2008.es). Tickets for adults are about \$50 for one day or about \$100 for three days, with discounts when purchased before opening day.

— Kathy Rodeghier

### NEED TO KNOW

Tourist Office of Spain, 845 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, IL 60611, (312) 642-1992, [www.spain.info](http://www.spain.info); Zaragoza Turismo, [www.zaragozaturismo.es](http://www.zaragozaturismo.es)

See more photos at [dailyherald.com/multimedia](http://dailyherald.com/multimedia)

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Aljaferia, top, was the palace of the Moors and is now the location of the parliament of Aragon. A busy square in downtown Zaragoza, above, has billboards promoting the upcoming World Expo.



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A look at the terms and conditions on JetBlue's Web site suggests JetBlue isn't responsible for refunding the hotel portion of your vacation. "JetBlue is acting solely as an intermediary between travel suppliers and consumers to facilitate the negotiation, booking of and payment for vacation package accommodations and services to be provided by travel suppliers directly to consumers," it says. "Unused package components may not be exchanged, transferred or refunded."

That also means that Worldwide Travel Exchange is well within its rights to keep your money. Technically, you were what's called a "no show" and aren't entitled to anything.

But wait. JetBlue, from whose site you bought the hotel, canceled your flight after its operational meltdown last Valentine's Day. Shouldn't it do more than just pass you off to one of its partners?

Yes. But while we're dealing with hypothetical questions, here's another one: Why did it have to come to this in the first place?

Next time you're stuck — and I hope there isn't a next time — remember to review all of your options. JetBlue's contract of carriage, which is the legal agreement between you and the airline, entitles you to an immediate refund when a flight is canceled. (Some airlines also will fly you to your destination on another carrier.) You might have found another way to reach San Juan.

Here are two other ideas. Consider working with a travel agent, who could have probably saved your vacation. I know some agents who can do what ordinary mortals can't, including finding a way out of New York after an ice storm. And think about travel insurance next time. A good policy would have covered you and prevented the headache you endured.

I contacted JetBlue on your behalf. In addition to a refund and \$900 in travel coupons, the airline agreed to issue credits in the amount of \$310, which covers the first prepaid night of your hotel stay.

• *Christopher Elliott is the ombudsman for National Geographic Traveler magazine. E-mail him at celliot@ngs.org or troubleshot your trip through his Web site at www.csr.elliott.org.*

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exploded, miraculously, some believe, and two of the bombs are on display.

The basilica displays frescoes by Goya — not his best work. Painted after returning to his hometown from studies in Italy, they are little more than copies of frescoes he had seen there.

## Notable native son

Goya was born in 1746 and attended school in Zaragoza until age 13 when he became a painter's apprentice. His career was unremarkable until he began studying with his wife's brothers, all artists, and moved to Madrid. He gained favor as a court painter with portraits that not only showed his royal subjects' physical characteristics, but their personalities.

His portrait of Queen Maria Luisa hangs in the Museum of Zaragoza. Though she was a notoriously ugly woman, Goya was impressed by her wisdom and they became friends. The queen reportedly confided in him: "If you can't be beautiful, you have to be smart." Goya's portrait of the regent reflects her wit and spirit in the glint of her eyes.

Goya disliked painting hands on his subjects, probably because he wasn't very good at it, so he charged twice as much for each hand as for painting a face. Small wonder that several of the noblemen depicted in the museum's Goya collection stand with their hands behind their backs.

In Plaza del Pilar, the heart of Zaragoza, a statue of Goya overlooks passersby at one end. Behind it stands a much older work of art, the cathedral La Seo.

## Artistic melting pot

The cathedral began as a mosque built by the Moors, who resided in Zaragoza around the end of the first millennium, and in 1119 it was consecrated as a Christian church. An exterior wall shows the intricate geometric patterns characteristic of mudejar art, Moorish works created after the Christian kings came into power. Builders used poor materials, such as brick, because the Moors believed only God could create something that would last forever. Inside, La Seo contains a



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**An alabaster cube marks the street-level entrance to the excavation of the Roman forum. The city was founded by Rome and called Caesaraugusta.**

mix of medieval, Renaissance and baroque architecture, including a massive alabaster high altar. An adjacent museum displays a collection of tapestries used to line the nave during coronations.

The Moors ruled Zaragoza from their palace, Aljaferia. Its oldest section, the tower, dates from 1045, predating Spain's other famous Moorish monuments, including the Alhambra in Granada. Dubbed the "Troubadour Tower," it served as the setting for Verdi's opera "Il Trovatore."

A small mosque lays steps from the patio of Santa Isabella, where orange trees and fountains represent the food and flowing water of the Muslim vision of paradise.

During the Christian era, the palace was enlarged for Aragon's rulers, Ferdinand and Isabella, whose throne room contains a ceiling of mudejar design, with pine cones representing fertility and dragons symbolizing the kingdom of Aragon. From 1485, the palace was the court of the Inquisition. A prison on the third floor bears graffiti cut into the plaster by prisoners, who were incarcerated here as late as the 19th century. Today the palace is the seat of the parliament of Aragon.

## Roman roots

Zaragoza's first government was shaped in Rome. In 14 B.C., the Roman Empire stretched to the banks of the Ebro River where Romans founded a trade center they called Caesaraugusta.

Remnants of this city lie beneath a modern alabaster cube in Plaza del Pilar that marks the entrance to the Forum Museum. Excavations

below the street of Zaragoza reveal stalls of the market in the Roman forum, as well as evidence of water pipes and a sewage system.

The ruins of one of the largest theaters in Roman Hispania were discovered in Zaragoza's Old Town when workers began digging on the site to construct an apartment building in 1972. Archaeologists took over and spent 30 years excavating the theater. From the first to the third century, plays were acted out on stage, and if a death scene was required a slave often was killed on the spot for the amusement of 6,000 spectators.

## World's fair

Nothing so realistic is planned for performances being staged for Expo, which will run from June 14 through Sept. 14. A daily parade by Cirque du Soleil will pass through the Expo site and at night musical performances will be held at the Ebro River Amphitheatre. Expo Nights will take on the spirit of a nightly Spanish fiesta from 10 p.m. until 3 a.m. More than 3,400 performances are planned for the fair's three-month run, including street theater, classic theater, cabaret, classical music, pop and flamenco.

Daytime exhibits in pavilions will address the serious theme of Expo 2008: "Water and Sustainable Development." More than 100 countries have signed on to host pavilions devoted to the importance and preservation of water as a natural resource. Though the U.S. will participate in scientific discussions related to this theme, it and

the United Kingdom will not build pavilions. Pundits have scoffed that this lack of support is payback for Spain's withdrawal of its troops from Iraq.

Among the most distinctive pavilions planned for Expo is one sponsored by the local region of Aragon. It is shaped like a basket holding the traditional "fruits of Aragon," brightly wrapped fruit candies.

Exhibits in the Extreme Water plaza will enable visitors to witness the effects of a tsunami and hurricane. A Digital Water Pavilion, designed at MIT, will have liquid curtains for walls that will display images and open when they sense someone approaching.

A Water Park next to the Expo site will be permanent green space with play areas for children, bars and restaurants, a thermal spa and horseback riding center. It will be a lasting legacy of Expo along with three distinct structures that will remain after the close of the fair.

The Water Tower, a huge glass building in the shape of a drop of water, will contain the "Water for Life" exhibit, a sculpture titled "Splash" and an adjacent white-water canal where visitors can participate in water-related sports. The River Aquarium will house the "Waterscapes" exhibit. The largest river aquarium in the world, it will boast more than 300 species of animal life from rivers such as the Nile, Mekong and Amazon. The Bridge Pavilion, designed by Zaha Hadid, the first woman to win the Pritzker Architecture prize, will serve as an entrance to Expo as well as a showcase for the "Water, a Unique Resource" exhibit. This curvy pedestrian bridge over the Ebro River will contain two levels and accommodate 10,000 visitors per hour during the fair.

As with the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, these three structures are expected to illicit raves from art and architecture critics and spark new development in Zaragoza long after Expo closes. They will stand as the latest chapter in a city with a Roman prologue and a plot rich with Moorish and Renaissance themes.

• *Information for this article was gathered on a research trip sponsored by the Tourist Office of Spain.*