

48 HOURS ZARAGOZA

Helen Hokin finds this historic city in Aragon, once the residence of kings, brimming with excitement as Expo 2008 approaches

Why go? Since it was announced the city would play host to Expo 2008, Zaragoza has had more scrubbing, buffing, primping and polishing than a bride-to-be. As well as the refurbishment of existing monuments spanning Zaragoza's history, from the ancient Romans through Moorish occupation and the Renaissance, there are a number of exciting new buildings shooting up in time for kick-off on June 14. A beautiful pedestrian bridge designed by British-born architect Zaha Hadid will link the city on the south bank of the river Ebro with the site of the Expo, spread over 25 hectares on the north-west bank. The Expo's theme of water is the inspiration behind a new teardrop-shaped tower by Spanish architect Enrique de Teresa Trilla. Having been for many years piggy-in-the-middle to dynamic Barcelona in the east and the capital Madrid to the west, hosting the Expo has breathed new life into the city, put it firmly back on the map, and given its citizens a renewed sense of civic pride.

What to do Sprawling the length of Plaza del Pilar, one of Europe's longest squares, the Basílica de Nuestra Señora del Pilar (00 34 976 29 95 64) is the city's main crowd-puller. This multi-coloured, multi-domed Baroque cathedral remains a favourite destination of Christian pilgrims today. Inside, a statue of the Virgin sits atop a pink marble pillar to which pilgrims pay homage with a kiss. The 16th-century main altarpiece by Damian Forment and frescoes by Goya are worth a peek. Sitting majestically at the east end of the plaza, the city's second cathedral, La Seo (00 34 976 29 12 31), has gloriously preserved Mudéjar brick and tile work on the outside and Gothic altars and Flemish tapestries within. Follow the narrow cobbled streets south-east of the square to view the remains of a first-century BC Roman theatre (00 34 976 20 50 88), one of the largest built during Roman Hispania, while a 15-minute walk south-west of the plaza brings you to the Aljafería (00 34 976 28 96 83), an awe-inspiring Spanish-Muslim palace built in the 11th century. With its beautiful garden arcades, golden room and oratory, it's little wonder Catholic monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella made it their home in 1492. Inside, the Minstrels' Tower provided the setting for Verdi's opera *Il Trovatore*. Goya aficionados should head for the Camón Aznar Museum (00 34 976 39 73 28) where the painter's etchings are on display in the Gran Sala de Goya, and the Museum

of Zaragoza in Plaza de Los Sitios, where a room is devoted to his work. The wide-open boulevard of Paseo Independencia runs south of the city centre and is best for big-brand shopping, while the narrow streets around Calle Alfonso I offer interesting one-off buys.

Where to stay? The Catalonia Zaragoza Plaza (00 34 976 20 58 58) combines early 20th-century architecture in its public spaces with contemporary clean lines and subdued tones in its bedrooms. Five-star all the way, the Palafox (00 34 976 23 77 00) has an open-air pool and massages on demand. A recent addition to the burgeoning hotel scene, the Zentro (00 34 976 70 33 00) has a lively downstairs bar, calm, quiet rooms and a great central location.

Where to eat and drink Aragon's traditional cuisine has evolved around lamb and pork, usually roasted or slow-cooked as stew. Aragonia Paradis (00 34 976 79 42 43) is a showcase for the region's finest produce: milk-fed Aragon lamb slow-roasted for 24 hours and sweet roast onions are followed by aromatic peaches from Calenda, poached in red wine and paired with soft goat's cheese and spice bread. At La Ontina (00 34 976 21 45 75) chef Ramón Sánchez carefully balances tastes and textures: sweet borage tempura topped with soft and salty anchovy is a fine example. Head to El Cachirulo (00 34 976 46 01 46) for rustic classics: wafer-thin slices of ham from Teruel, potato croquettes and roast suckling pig. Plaza Santa Marta is crammed with tapas bars: Tragantua (00 34 976 29 91 74) is good for fish and seafood, while Marpy (00 34 976 39 26 13) serves montaditos – bread topped with cheese, chorizo, blood sausage, smoked red pepper, tuna and so on. At the Central Market (00 34 976 44 11 92) pick up fresh fruit and cheese or gawp at hanging goats, pigs and lamb. Watch a baker fry your churros to order at La Fama (00 34 976 39 37 54) ready for dipping into hot chocolate. Fantoba (00 34 976 29 85 24) is a 150-year-old cake shop with an interior as sumptuous as the cakes on display.

Time running out? Make a dash for El Corte Inglés on Paseo Independencia. Its upmarket basement supermarket is a great last-minute pit-stop for regional food and wine gifts.

Trip tip For 17 euros, a 48-hour Zaragoza Card gets you into monuments, hotels and restaurants at discounted prices. Available from local tourist offices or by phone (00 34 913 60 47 72).

Travel information

Temperature is on average 19°C in February and March. The city is one hour ahead of GMT and a two-hour flight from London Stansted.

Resources

Spanish Tourist Office (020 7486 8077; tourspain.co.uk) has plenty of information to help you plan your trip, including maps.

Expo Zaragoza 2008 (00 34 902 30 20 08; expozaragoza2008.es) has all the details and dates for events at Expo.

Further reading

Zaragoza Pop Out Map (Compass Maps, £2.99). This detailed

pocket-size fold-out map is indispensable, containing a street index and highlighting historic sites, shopping and markets.

The Medieval Crown of Aragon: A short history by T N Bisson (Clarendon, £25) explains the turbulent history of Catalonia and Aragon, illuminating the cultural developments that produced the region's striking Mudéjar and Renaissance architecture.

Did you know?

Expo 2008 runs all summer, from June 14 until September 14. During that time there will be 3,500 shows from over 100 participating countries, including a daily performance from Cirque du Soleil. □

