

Walk Through Spain and Portugal 1/26—3/22/2026

Results of Week 1 1/26—2/1/2026

During this week we collectively walked 167.5 miles and had 9 participants. Sources for photos are given in smaller front near the image. You can click on images to increase their size for a better view. The green line — on map of Spain and Portugal indicates places we visited each week. A magenta line — on the entire map is our proposed route for our 8 week walk map with major cities marked with magenta dots. PAT is free software. Copyright © 2010, 2013 by Ian Macky. **Note: This document is copyrighted by K. Scharer, 2026, except where other copyrights are noted.**

SPAIN AND PORTUGAL MAP



Spain is approximately 441 miles long and its northern border is about 600 miles wide with a total land area of 195,000 square miles. Portugal is significantly smaller with length of 350 miles, a width of 135 miles and a total land area of 35,700 square miles. We will encounter a variety of climates and geographies during this pilgrimage, from snowy mountains at the northern border of Spain and France to sunny Mediterranean coastal areas in the southern part of Spain.

We flew into the capital city of Madrid and explored this city first. The city was founded around 852-



886 by Arabs who occupied the area. The Arab emir, Muhammad I of Cordoba, built a fortress in a strategic spot on the Manzanares River in an effort to protect Toledo. It took until the late 1400's before all of the Muslims were finally expelled from Spain the reign of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella. Toledo and Madrid took turns as the capital of Spain until the end of the 1500's before Madrid was selected as the permanent capital of Spain. NPolyanskaya, CC BY-SA 4.0, via

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The Cathedral of Saint Mary, the Royal of La Almudena is the cathedral in Madrid, shown left, was our first stop. It was begun in 1883 but took over a century to complete. Pope John Paul II consecrated the cathedral in 1993. It stands opposite the Royal Palace. Much of its appearance was designed to



complement the construction found in the Palace. Fotografías - archimadrid.es, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons

When Madrid was designated the permanent the capital of Spain, the seat of the Catholic Church remained in Toledo because the new capital had no cathedral. Discussions about building a cathedral in Madrid dedicated to the Virgin of Almudena were begun in the 16th century. But somehow, despite Spain's building many cities in the new world, their focus was on developing their empire rather than on construction of a cathedral for their new capital city.

When Pope Leo XIII granted permission in 1885 for Madrid to become a bishopric, the plans for the church were developed for a Gothic Revival cathedral. Construction did not go smoothly, however. The Spanish Civil war interrupted construction and the chosen site remained empty until 1950. At that time, the plans were altered again to replicate the white and grey façade of the Royal Palace. You can see the Royal Palace directly behind the Pope in the picture above.

After attending Mass at the Cathedral, we went to see the Royal Palace of Madrid (Palacio Real de Madrid). As has happened in other places we visited since we began these virtual pilgrimages, the Royal Palace is now a museum and is still sometimes used for state ceremonies. In 1934 a fire occurred in the palace and some of the famous artworks were incinerated but some were saved. For example, Las Menias by Diego Velasquez was saved when someone threw the painting out of a window. Las Menias is now in the Prado Museum which we will visit later.

King Alfonso XIII (5/1886—2/1941) was the last Royal who lived in the Royal Palace. Although he was born after the death of his father and was proclaimed king upon his birth, he did not actively assume full royal duties until he was 16 years old. In his early years, his mother served as regent. However, when the Second Spanish Republic formed in April of 1931, he effectively lost his royal title and the power he had as king. Alfonso XII then went to Rome and lived there until his death in 1941. He was buried in a Spanish national church in Rome.



After a tour of the Palace, we headed to Saint Jerome the Royal (in Spanish San Jerónimo el Real) church. This church was built in the early 16th-century but has been remodeled multiple times. The church is the last remnant of a Hieronymite monastery and was adjacent to a royal palace known as Buen Retiro. This former palace is now part of the Prado Museum. Because it was close to a royal palace, it was often used for investitures of various royals. Part of the reason St. Jerome's was used for the royal investitures was because the cathedral was not built until 1993.

Diego Delso, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons, above left

St. Isidore's Collegiate Church (Spanish: Real Basílica Colegiata de San Isidro was built in Baroque style Catholic church. This was our next stop. Fernando, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons, right. St. Isidore's is named after and holds the relics of Saint Isidore(he is the patron saint of Madrid), and the remains of his wife, Santa María de la Cabeza. St. Isidore's served as a minor basilica for centuries and was functioned as the pro-cathedral but because the patron saint was a laborer (a farmer) the basilica was not considered



suitable for use for royal investitures or other royal ceremonies. St. Isidore's was built on the site of the 16th century parish church of Saints Peter and Paul. The Holy Roman Empress, Maria of Austria, bequeathed her fortune to the Society of Jesus with instructions that her money was to be used to build a new church on the site. Work on the church started in 1620 and was finished in 1664. It was originally dedicated to St. Francis Xavier but after the Jesuits were expelled by Rome, St. Isidore's became a collegiate church in 1767. It was rededicated to St. Isidore in 1769 when the Saint's relics along with those of his wife, St. Mary of the Head, were transferred to the church. When Madrid was elevated to a Roman Catholic Archdiocese, St. Isidore's was also elevated to a pro-cathedral and held that rank until the present cathedral was finished.

The church was partly burned in 1936, at the start of the Spanish Civil War, resulting in the collapse of the dome as well as the destruction of many pieces of art including the Rodríguez high altar. Once the civil war was over, the painstaking process of restoration began and took over twenty years. Workers were diligent in replicating the original features of the church such as the original high altar.

Our next stop was at the Iglesia de San Manuel y San Benito, Madrid with its beautiful white marble altar shown right.



Luis García, CC BY-SA 3.0 >, via Wikimedia Commons, outside view; Benjamín Núñez González, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons, marble altar, right

The Iglesia de San Manuel y San Benito was built between 1902 and 1910. In the cupola is a depiction of the four Apostles, one of the highlights of the



interior. It was intended as a residence and church for the Augustinian Fathers. The land for the church was donated by a Catalan businessman named Manuel Caviggioli Manau and his wife Benita Maurici Gaurán. The patron Saints for the church were selected to honor the couple. The tombs of the couple are in the side chapel shown above on either side of the white marble altar. This space is known as the Epistle Chapse.

The style of the church is Neo-Byzantine. The plan of the church is a centralized Greek cross. The dome is supported by pendentives, curved, triangular segments of a sphere with the top removed and with arches between the supports that allow a circular dome to be placed over a square room by smoothly transferring the dome's weight to the four supporting piers.

Another church we visited was the Royal Basilica of Saint Francis the Great (In Spanish: Basílica de San Francisco el Grande).



Ank Kumar, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons , left

The Royal Basilica of Saint Francis the Great known in Spanish as Real Basílica de San Francisco el Grande sits Madrid's center quite near the Royal Palace. The fresco on top of the Basilica of San Francisco is shown left. Leon Fishman, CC BY 2.0, via Wikimedia Commons



The main façade faces the Plaza of San Francisco. The church is part of the convent of Jesús y María of the Franciscan Order. You can see the difference in the buildings on either side of the church in the picture left. The original convent was built in the 1200's. The newer

church and convent were built in the 1700's in neoclassic style. The interior has lovely painted designs as seen in the picture below of the pulpit.



Jl FilpoC, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons , Pulpit in the church

The dome of the Royal Basilica of Saint Francis the Great is 108 feet in diameter and 190 feet high. Its shape is similar to that of the Pantheon in Rome; it is more circular in shape than the typical domes built in the 1700's. This dome is believed to be the fourth biggest dome in Europe following the Pantheon, St. Peter's Basilica, and the Florence Duomo. Pope John the XXIII elevated the church to the status of minor basilica in 1963. The Ministry of

Culture designated the church as a national monument in 1980.

There are, of course, many other beautiful churches in Madrid but the ones noted above are seen



as the most important ones by the city's citizens. So, after exploring these sights, we went on to enjoy some other aspects of Madrid. We started in the Plaza Mayor, seen left, which is in the center of Madrid and within walking distance of most of the other places we wanted to see.

Nemo, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons The Plaza is the most important public square in the heart of Madrid. The square (actually a rectangle 423 feet by 308 feet) was built between

1580 and 1619. One of the notable things about this square in addition to its size is its uniformity of architecture throughout the buildings facing the square. Many of the buildings are residential with a total of 237 balconies overlooking the square. Thus, the residents of those buildings have a great view of the various events held in the square. Of historical note is that the square was used for some executions



during the Inquisition.

Julian10500, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia

The statue at left sits in the square and is of King Philip III Commons Statue of Phillip III from 1616. The statue was a gift of the Medici family of Florence, Italy. Originally it sat in another site but was moved to this square in 1848 by Queen Isable II. During the time Franco was dictator, the statue was pulled down and some damage was done as happened to other royal related statutes but it was restored in the 1950's to this spot in the square.

Various events are held in the square from Christmas Markets to musical events. There are various places to eat, including one restaurant believed to be the oldest one in the world, Casa Botín (operating since 1725). Also, some of the buildings house shops on the first floor.

Then we headed to Buen Retiro Park (Parque del Buen Retiro), seen left.



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This is Madrid's most famous park. It covers 350-acres, has an artificial pond, and also houses the Palace of Velasquez, now used as an exhibition hall for the Reina Sofia Museum. This park provided us an opportunity to relax amid the beauty of the countryside in the middle of a major city.

We could not miss a visit to the Puerta de Alcala, a city gate rather than a door as the name implies. This gate is often compared to the Arc de Triomphe in Paris and the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin. Diego Delso, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

There are two famous museums in Madrid, the Museo del Prado, and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia. Since we were needing to move on but didn't want to skip these two sights, we split up and choose which we preferred to visit. The Prado is often compared to the Louvre in Paris but is not quite as grand as the Louvre. But it does contain some lovely artwork including pieces by Velasquez, Goya, El Greco, and Hieronymus Bosch. Before becoming the Prado, however, the building served as headquarters for Napoleon's troops in Madrid during the Napoleonic War.

The Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, named after Queen Sofia, features modern art by Spanish painters such as Picasso, Dali, Joan Miro, and Eduardo Chillada. There are also some works of international artists.



After our visits to the two museums, we headed out of Madrid, 28 miles northwest, to visit the famous Monastery of El Escorial and then to see the Valley of the Fallen, just a short distance away.

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International The Royal Site of San Lorenzo de El Escorial is the largest Renaissance construction anywhere in the world. King Philip II ordered the construction. It took 21 years to build and was finished in 1584. It is one of the historical royal palaces of the king of Spain. It was not only a residence for the king but also a monastery, a basilica and pantheon. The Royal Pantheon of El Escorial has served as the burial site for most of the

Spanish kings since the 1700's. El Escorial has a library, a museum, a university, and a hospital. In addition, a royal hunting lodge and monastic retreat, about 3 miles away, is considered part of the site known as La Granjilla de La Fresneda.

Part of the historical significance of the complex is the duality of housing both the royalty of Spain and the Catholic dominance of Spain together in the site. The monastery was established by Hieronymite monks but is now run by the Order of Saint Augustine monks. The site was meant to serve as a monument to Spain's role as a center of the Christian world. El Escorial became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in November of 1984. ©K. Scharer, 1973, image of cross.



The cross (left) at the Valley of the Fallen is huge (500 feet tall) and marks the exact center of Spain and commemorates the fallen on both sides during the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s. It is both a war memorial and a church which is built into the mountainside beneath Cross. The monument's creation was ordered by Spanish dictator Francisco Franco, and despite its intended purpose, many still see it as a symbol of the despot's abuse of power. There is a courtyard in front of the cross with wide arc of porticoes spread out at the base of the mountain. In addition, there are many angel statues. the church holds Franco's crypt as well. The bodies of about 38,000 people who died during the civil war were laid to rest within the valley. After exploring El Escorial and the Valley

of the Fallen, we headed southeast to Valencia. But we ended the week about 40 miles before Valencia. We will get to Valencia next week!

Thank you for participating.

Your Tour Director,

Kathy Scharer