

# Zaragoza and Tarragona



## Málaga to Zaragoza

Ted and I set off on the afternoon high-speed train from Málaga to Zaragoza. I'm in Turista Plus which means you get a seat in a first class coach, but not the service. I've done the journey before and it is familiar. There's a good view of the castle at Almodóvar near Córdoba – I keep meaning to go there but haven't managed it yet. After Córdoba we climb through the Sierra Morena, reaching a height of 800 metres. Along the route there are a series of ghost emergency stations in the middle of nowhere – one of which, Villanueva de Córdoba has now been given an occasional regular service. The industrial town of Puertollano, surrounded by an oil refinery, petrochemical works and opencast coal mine, looks as dirt poor as ever. A broad gauge railway line parallels us to Ciudad Real past half-built developments abandoned when the economic crisis hit, and the deserted, hardly ever used airport is still rotting away. North of Ciudad Real the high-speed AVE (*Alta Velocidad España*) line follows the route of the old railway line

to Madrid, abandoned in 1988. A junction brings in the line from Toledo and we pass the main workshops for the line at La Sagra, before reaching the suburbs of Madrid.

Just before the city – the modern suburb of Getafe is nearby - a link to the AVE line to Valencia peels off, followed by the junction for the line to Zaragoza and Barcelona. Much of the landscape round Madrid is an unattractive mix of scrubland and industrial units, criss-crossed by motorways, railways and lines of electricity pylons. After a while we pass Guadalajara-Yebes station and the adjoining ghost town of Ciudad Valdeluz, another casualty when the Spanish construction bubble burst in 2008 - it looks as though it now has a few more inhabitants than when I last passed by in 2015<sup>1</sup>. The countryside becomes more attractive as we head through the hills near Calatayud just as darkness falls, then we cross a plain and roll into Zaragoza-Delicias station. The 800km journey has taken four hours and from time to time the train has hit 300 km per hour.

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<sup>1</sup> The spec-built new town of Ciudad Valdeluz began construction just before the 2008 recession hit, the idea being that cheaper (than Madrid) apartments with a fast train link to the city would be attractive. The aim was a population of 30,000 – by 2016 the population reached 2,469, with minimal facilities, many half-built estates and large areas laid out for development which has never arrived. There are good photographs at [www.desertedplaces.blogspot.com](http://www.desertedplaces.blogspot.com).

## Zaragoza

Zaragoza today is a substantial city with a population of 661,000. It sits on the plain of the River Ebro, with the old city on the south side. While a village existed beforehand, it became a substantial Roman settlement (the name Zaragoza derives from its Roman name Caesaraugusta), reflected in the street layout and the remains of the Roman walls. Subsequently it was under Moorish control, then became the capital of the Kingdom of Aragón, and it is now the capital of the Aragón region. Close to the river, the spectacular Plaza del Pilar includes the Roman walls, the Basilica de Nuestra Señora del Pilar, the town hall, La Lonja (an old currency exchange), La Seo (the old cathedral) and an impressive modern fountain, the Fuente de la Hispanidad. The main building from the Moorish period, slightly out of the city centre, and which I didn't have time to visit, is the Moorish palace, la Aljafería, where the Aragonese government now meets. Behind the Plaza del Pilar is the older part of town, lively with bars, nightlife and shops. Slightly further inland, around the Plaza de España and Plaza de Aragón is the newer city centre with the substantial commercial buildings from the late 19th and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

On arrival I catch a bus into town and check in to my hotel, the NH Ciudad de Zaragoza, close to the Roman Walls. The room rate was affordable and I had upgraded to a room with a view. And what a view - over the walls to the Plaza de Pilar and the spires of the Basilica. I'm staying for three nights and on the first I get my bearings by walking round the old city and have a few beers and tapas along the way. It is Halloween and every bar has a jar of sweets for any kids that turn up in costume - it seems like an excuse for the parents to go bar-hopping. Even the hotel reception has a jar for passing kids who drop in. It is building up to being a busy night - lots of places are holding Halloween parties, it is a holiday the following day, and the assorted witches, devils and skeletons are making the most of it. When I opened the curtains the following morning there were still a few groups in Halloween drag wandering unsteadily homewards - looked like they had had a good time.



*Two views of the Plaza del Pilar and the Basilica from my hotel room, and (previous page) a view of the Basilica from the riverside.*

## In search of the yellow brick road

When I planned this trip I was intending visit Jaca, in the Pyrenees, but the railway line is closed for a couple of weeks for engineering works (yes – it happens here too). It looks as though the replacement bus service manages to avoid all the scenic stretches, so I leave Jaca for the future.

Which gives me a full day to explore Zaragoza. In 2015 I passed through for a few hours and noticed a tram heading to 'Mago de Oz' (Wizard of Oz)<sup>2</sup>. So, plan B is to go in search of the yellow brick road.

There's a tram stop directly outside the hotel so off I go. I buy my ticket from the machine and I notice that the fare is much cheaper if I have a card. The machine will only top them up, not sell them. I ask a woman at the stop where I can buy one and I get ten minutes of instruction of where to go, how much they cost and how to use them. It is a public holiday – *día de todos los Santos* (All Saints Day) - and the tram only runs every 15 minutes in the morning. I'm pleased how much I understand, though I realise she is speaking very clearly at half-speed. Basically, her answer is try the newspaper kiosks or an *estanco* (tobacconist), but she doesn't think any will be open on a holiday.

We speed through the city centre, then along Via Iberica – presumably the route of a Roman road south from the city. I've looked at the map and I'm not surprised that Mago de Oz tram terminus is not at the end of the rainbow, but in a large and expanding new housing area on the edge of the city, Valdespertera. The blocks of apartments are fairly monotonous and there are large areas still to be built on. However, there are a fair number of shops, cafes, community facilities and a school – it is not just a desert with windows – plus the frequent tram service, and it looks like a popular place to live. The best features of Valdespertera are the street names – as well as Calle Mago de Oz (Wizard of Oz Street) there are Singing in the Rain Street, An American in Paris Street, Schindler's List Street, Seven Samurai Street and Mary Poppins Square and many others. There is no yellow brick road, but there are some red and grey brick streets, and plenty of yellow brick apartments. Today – 1 November - in Andalucía the women will have headed to the cemetery with a picnic to commune with their grannies (while the men head for the bars and a few drinks). Here, the holiday looks like an excuse for a long lie-in and there are only a few dog walkers around, looking at the mad tourist taking pictures of street signs. By noon, Ted is getting bored and thirsty and I'm ready to head back to the city. The place has livened up and the tram is packed with people heading into town for a wander and some lunch. Seems like a good idea, though on the way I spotted an open *estanco* and picked up a *tarjeta bus*, to give me cheap fares for the rest of the visit.



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<sup>2</sup> See Railway Buffery 1 on page 10 for more details of the tramway, and for our previous brief visit see [JOURNEYS SPAIN Cuenca, Alicante and Zaragoza](#)





At the end of the yellow brick road

There are a few basic bars close to the central market and I pop in to one for a quick *caña*. The market is closed today but I have a look round before I leave town and it is busy. I take some time to look round the Plaza del Pilar, cross the Puente de Piedra, the old stone bridge across the Ebro, then back to walk round the outside of La Seo, the cathedral with Moorish-style architecture, and the surrounding streets of the old city. The guidebooks cover this area in depth – read them if you would like the details.

It is 2pm and the lunchtime crowds are filling the cafes and restaurants around the Plaza del Pilar and the Plaza de España (where there is a *gastromercado* selling many types of food). I decide to focus on the basic old bars, the sort of place where a bloke and his teddy bear would pop in for a drink and a tapa. The focus for tapas-hopping activity is a few narrow lanes around C/Estebanes and C/Cuatro Agosto, known locally as *El Tubo*, where there are lots of little bars, trying to outdo one another with their tapas. And the food is good. In Donde Siempre<sup>3</sup> I had some *Morcilla* (black pudding) *de Burgos* with onions and tomato chutney on bread. Bodegas Almau<sup>4</sup> specialise in *anchoa* (anchovy) based tapas and had excellent wines. At some point I had a *bocadillo de calamari* sandwich. Some places were too full to squeeze in. After a few I settled in the Plaza del Pilar with a beer, before the shade reached the outside tables. The ONCE lottery sellers are provided with mobility scooters and sheltered from the weather by a covering plastered with ads – from most angles you can't see the inhabitant – you can watch one roll across the square looking as though it is totally self-propelled.

After a siesta it was time for a repeat. Most bars in the Tubo don't reopen in the evening until 7 or 8. However Hoppy<sup>5</sup>, which specialises in beer, opens at 6 – there are 15 taps for draught beer and I had a local IPA. In the course of the evening I visited La Pilara<sup>6</sup> which has excellent and interesting tapas, a strange bar where the draught beer was, unfathomably, Stella, Donde Siempre once more and a bar which advertised the best *torreznos* in town. Over much of Spain you can get variations on what are basically superior pork scratchings - sometimes cold, sometimes hot. They range from *chicharrones* in the South (in Sevilla I've eaten some mixed with whole cloves of garlic) to *torreznos*, which are fatty and meaty fried belly pork. Lovely. I can't find the bar on Google Maps but I'm sure it is close to Hoppy.

<sup>3</sup> C/Cinegio 3, [www.tabernadondesiempre.com](http://www.tabernadondesiempre.com)

<sup>4</sup> C/Estébanes 10

<sup>5</sup> C/Méndez Núñez 36, [www.hoppy.es](http://www.hoppy.es), scores 98% on [www.ratebeer.com](http://www.ratebeer.com).

<sup>6</sup> C/Cuatro de Agosto 14.

## Towards the Pyrenees

The following day was set aside for a day out by train towards the Pyrenees. The first stretch was by high speed AVE train along the Ebro plain from Zaragoza to Lleida, from Aragón to Catalunya. My visit coincided with the fallout from the Catalan declaration of independence and a few days after the Spanish government took over the Generalitat de Catalunya. As a rule I don't like flag-waving, and Spain normally seems fairly sensible in that respect – in Andalucía there are usually three flags outside official buildings, those of Andalucía, Spain and European Union, which suggests some awareness of belonging to more than one tribe. Today the signs are not good – In Zaragoza many apartment balconies are draped in the Spanish flag, with a few Aragonese flags, and 45 minutes later in Lleida the flags are all Catalan or simply say *si* (in the referendum). The train journey is not the best – there is the usual area of deserted farmland, occasional factories, motorways and industrial units around Zaragoza, the landscape is scrubland, not helped by a dull and misty morning, a long dry summer and any crops having been harvested. For some reason no one in my coach seemed to be able to sit in their seats for more than a few minutes at a time before going to the loo, reorganising their briefcase, putting on/taking off jackets and coats or going to the vestibules to take phone calls. Bah. When I reach Lleida, the station has been rebuilt for AVE trains but the exit is through the old station and it's a long hike to get out – the signs at the entrance say to allow 7 minutes to get to your train.

After some breakfast I find the train to La Pobla de Segur and things improve. The modern two coach diesel is operated by Ferrocarrils de la Generalitat de Catalunya (FGC – Catalan Railways)<sup>7</sup>. The incoming train is fairly busy with folk coming into town for the day but my train is quiet. In my coach there's a Gambian guy, a local woman with her bike, a railway security person and his bike – he's heading for work - and me. The woman doesn't get much peace – the Gambian guy makes conversation about families, the security guard talks about bikes but I'm guessing he's hitting on her. When the conductor comes along she knows him, she reckons the same thing and takes the piss



out of him. She knows I'm foreign when I buy my ticket and asks where I'm from. We end up all having a conversation in a mixture of Spanish, Catalan, French and English. The conductor is trying to learn a few English words to help tourists, so she now speaks with a Scottish accent. The security guard stops the train when he realises the Gambian man has got off at the wrong stop so he can re-board.

After half an hour or so we reach Balaguer, the main town en route, and from there on is only me and the woman in the coach. She settles down with her laptop and I look at the scenery. The mist has cleared and the landscape becomes more and more dramatic as we head into the foothills of the Pyrenees. From Sant Llorenç de Montgai we follow a series of lakes (they are now reservoirs and, like everywhere in Spain this year, they are low) and gorges. The line hugs

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<sup>7</sup> See Railway buffery 2 on page 11.



the side of mountains when it is not tunnelling through them. The final few kilometres into La Pobla is on a high plateau.

I walk into town from the station along the main road. Just before the bridge into town it splits – one road is signposted France, the other Andorra. On the bridge someone has painted a huge ‘Democracy for Catalunya’ slogan along the whole of one lane – it looks like they’ve used a white-lining machine. The centre of town is slightly spoiled by the traffic thundering through, but I have time for a wander round the quaint back streets and lanes. Bar Boavi in the main street is quiet but friendly. The busiest place, doing a thriving trade in lunch *menus del dia*, is Bar-

Restaurante Miraltren (look at the train). Since it is 100metres past the buffers at the end of the line you would be well drunk before you saw a train and, even if it were by the line, you might have to spend a few hours waiting. I managed a couple of beers before it was time to go. I seemed to be the only tourist in town that day, and I enjoyed La Pobla, but left with the feeling that more could be done to persuade people to stop rather than drive through.

The train journey back to Lleida is just as good – there are perfect reflections of the mountains in the lakes. Though it is a Thursday in November the weather is fine, this is the only train of the day which allows a day out from Barcelona or Zaragoza, I’m the only non-local on the train. At Lleida, I have time to walk into the centre and around the old town. I climb up towards the cathedral, make my way round and find that much of the oldest part of town is a slum. Throughout the town there is a noticeably high black population - I can’t see why Lleida would be particularly attractive and when I check I can’t find any specific reason. The main street is pleasant enough but there seems to be a shortage of basic bars – I may be looking in the wrong place.

I’m just about to give up and head back to the station when I spot a sign pointing down a lane to La Birreria. It is about 6 o’clock, it’s open and it serves a good selection of beers. Saved.<sup>8</sup> Over a bottle of local porter Ted, me and the barman watch eight of the Catalan leaders being remanded in custody by a judge in Madrid. We have a chat and agree that the Spanish government is handling this badly (not a surprise to anyone who has watched the Rajoy *Partido Popular* government). There are photos of Scotland on the wall, and a good range of whiskies behind the bar. I help the barman identify some of the locations – he has never been to Scotland. Most are obvious, but there is one of a castle which I don’t recognise immediately (i.e it is not Edinburgh or Stirling). After a search on Google Images it turns out to be Urquhart Castle on Loch Ness – and the barman gets the spelling and pronunciation right - eventually .

I doze on the train back to Zaragoza and spend a final hour or two in El Tubo, for more beer and tapas – I recollect beef in a barbeque sauce with fresh strawberries, and an octopus salad – before reaching the hotel and a good nights sleep.

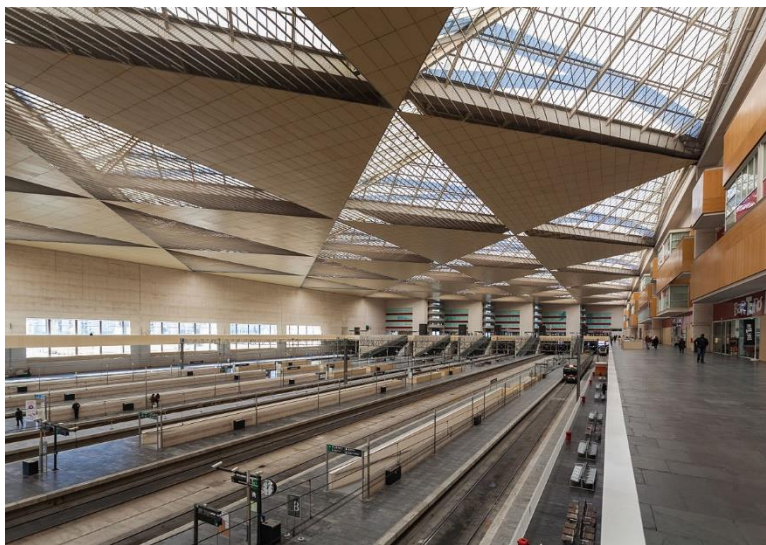
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<sup>8</sup> When I checked in January 2018, Google Maps says it is permanently closed. I hope not.



## Zaragoza to Tarragona

In the morning I check out, have a *tostada con tomate* in a local café and head to the station for the journey to Tarragona. I've opted to go by the regional train which takes four hours, compared to the AVE which takes just over an hour to reach a station in the fields outside Tarragona. A look at the map suggests that the regional route<sup>9</sup> will be more interesting, and the timing is right for me, through the middle of the day. Catching the train is tricky - it leaves Zaragoza Delicias (pictured below) from the suburban platforms which have ticket gates, but I have a paper ticket printed at home. One gate states it will open without a magnetic strip ticket. It doesn't, and there is no member of staff anywhere, though I manage to sneak through behind one of the few other passengers. When he checks my ticket the conductor obviously thinks I'm a bit strange for taking the slow train. There are only three trains a day by this route, though it is electrified throughout, as it was the main line between Madrid and Barcelona until the AVE line opened in 2003.



The route roughly follows the River Ebro, the second longest river in the Iberian Peninsula (after the Tajo or Tagus), which irrigates much of Spain's farmland and provides water to a large area. It is clear how dry this summer has been as the water level is low, and some of the tributaries are dry.

After picking up a few passengers at the other Zaragoza stations, Portillo and Goya, we follow the Ebro, past a large paper mill, Fuentes de Ebro, where we cross

the AVE line, Quinto, in the middle of fertile farmland interspersed with bare red hummocks, to La Zaida, with its chemical works. From there we head up a dry side valley (the map shows the Rio Aguas Vivas) on to a high dry plain and La Puebla de Híjar, a deserted looking town in the middle of the wasteland. Samper has a large church and a branch line heads off to a power station. There is another power station near Escatrón. We pause at the closed station of Chiprana to allow a coal train to pass. After 90 minutes we call at Caspe, the main town en route – there's a ruined church by the railway line on the edge of town and the old town is on a hill top.

Beyond Caspe the countryside gradually becomes greener with more trees and the first olives I've seen for several days. At Nonaspe the Rio Matarraña is very low and dry in places. We cross it three times, on the third occasion straight into a tunnel through a ridge. We emerge close to the confluence of the Matarraña and the Ebro, dammed just downstream to provide hydroelectricity. At this point we cross from Aragón into Catalunya and the Ebro becomes the Ebre. Another long tunnel takes us to Riba-Roja d'Ebre, where a second coal train passes heading inland. At Flix there is a large chemical works, much of which is derelict. The area was the scene of fierce battles during the Spanish Civil War for control of the bridges across the Ebre, and more recently of serious pollution of the reservoir from the chemical works. The countryside keeps getting greener. A huge cooling tower rises beside the nuclear power station at Ascó, then we pass through a gorge. I visit the loo and

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<sup>9</sup> For more detail see railway buffery 3 on page 11.

discover there is no light in the toilet – at exactly then we enter a long tunnel and I’m aiming in the dark.

We call at Mora la Nova, a substantial town where the train becomes busier. It has been a railway town, there are plenty of disused sidings. At this point we leave the Ebre and head through the hills, across several valleys on the way to Reus and Tarragona. We pass a small reservoir, so low that derelict houses usually below the water line are exposed. There are vines, olive and walnut trees, wooded hills and pleasant old villages. After another long tunnel to Les Borges del Camp we catch the first glimpse of the sea and the coast in the distance. At Reus the train is packed – schools and colleges have just finished for the week. From there it is only 20 minutes into Tarragona, across the new high speed line heading for Valencia, and into the station which is in the middle of being rebuilt, and the crowds are channelled along narrow platforms and out of the station. It’s been an enjoyable journey and the countryside has been interesting – inevitably the railway line has been a focus for industrial development in places, but there were many pleasant stretches.

## Tarragona

It’s a bit of a way to my hotel, Google Maps on a mobile isn’t really up to it and there is no city map in the station. I find one outside and make my way through the city. The modern centre of Tarragona reminds me of Glasgow – built on a grid plan that pays very little attention to the hills. The hotel is situated on a main roundabout, above the bus station – fortunately there is very little noise in the room.



*Plaça de la Font, Tarragona.*

Tarragona has a long and complex history involving the Iberians, Romans, Vandals, Visigoths, Moors, Aragonese and Catalans. Today it is a city of 131,000 with a major university and a large port and chemical industry complex to the south. It was a major Roman settlement – Tarraco<sup>10</sup> (my hotel is situated on Plaça Imperial Tàrraco – for some reason I can’t get Imperial Tobacco out of my head). In the early evening I take a walk around the old town. There are plenty of Roman remains in and around the old town – walls, amphitheatre, forum, towers, circus – the full works (and an impressive aqueduct outside town that I didn’t manage to reach). The town hall and the cathedral are also in

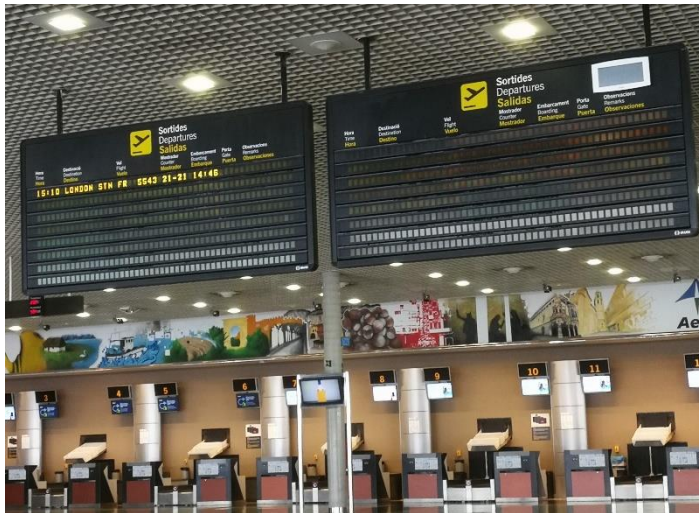
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<sup>10</sup> I can’t see the connection, but for some reason Tarragona is twinned with Stafford.



the old town. The narrow streets are busy with locals and I get the impression that the character of the area is beginning to change. There are a few souvenir shops on Carrer Major leading to the cathedral, but it is not overrun by tourists. There are ordinary corner shops, butchers, bakers and so on plus some basic bars. However, there are also plenty of New Age and craft shops, and some trendy bars and restaurants – I guess a younger crowd is moving into the area and gentrifying it. In front of the town hall there is a large square, the Plaça de la Font, full of restaurants and bars. As usual I have a couple of beers – in one the owner is manically cleaning and polishing - you can see your reflection in the serviette dispensers. Back in the modern town I wander round the area by the central market. In a nearby street – Carrer Lleida - there are queues waiting outside each bar for seats, and the food that's coming out looks good. Then it is back to the hotel for an early night.

## ...and home



Saturday, and it is time to head home. The morning is dull with some heavy showers so there isn't much to do before making my way to the bus station and to Reus airport. It's a pity, as I would have liked to see more of Tarragona. The bus departure bays are on two levels, but there are no signs to tell you which platforms are downstairs, or indeed that there is a downstairs. There is an artwork consisting of lots of small clocks, all showing different, wrong times. It is not too difficult to find the bus for Reus via the airport, and no-one apart from me gets off the

bus at the airport stop. I arrive early for my flight and discover that the 1510 Ryanair departure to Stansted is the only remaining departure of the day (I check and the only other departures that day were two morning Ryanair flights to Dublin and Eindhoven). However, the landside café is open, I have a coffee then a beer and a sandwich and watch not a lot happen. People drift in gradually and when the flight departs it is full.

We arrive in Stansted early due to a tailwind and the usual padded timetables – it's a new route to me but there are thick clouds virtually all the way and I see nothing. On arrival all the signs are monolingual and at the station all the ads are for the Stansted Express – it is quite tricky to see that there are trains to elsewhere. I pay a small fortune then have 58 minutes to wait for the hourly train to Leicester<sup>11</sup> (don't ask – the reason I'm staying in Leicester on my way home to Durham is complicated....but I do find a couple of decent pubs via the Good Beer Guide app). That's when I discover there's no landside bar at Stansted, so it has less facilities than tiny Reus airport. After stocking up in the M&S Food I'm a prisoner in Costa Coffee until it is time to return to the station – there's only so long one can take over a double espresso and a flapjack. It is freezing cold, the departure platform is in the open air and the train doors are locked until a few minutes before departure. And it is dark already at 1700. Welcome to Britain.

<sup>11</sup> For comparison:-

Train from Zaragoza to Tarragona, 257km, 4 hours journey time (64km/hr), €14.30 with a railcard, comfortable electric train but showing its age, no food.

Train from Stansted Airport to Leicester, 197km, 2 hours 20 minutes journey time (84km/hr), £35.85, cramped but modern diesel train with a drinks trolley.

## Practicalities:

### Zaragoza

**Hotel:** I stayed at the NH Ciudad de Zaragoza, Av. César Augusto 125, [www.nh-hotels.com](http://www.nh-hotels.com). It is a new four-star hotel, excellently situated by the Roman walls. If you can, upgrade to a room with a view over the walls to the Plaza del Pilar and the Basilica. The Plaza del Pilar - Murallas tram stop is directly outside. From Zaragoza Delicias station take bus 34 to Av. César Augusto 27, then walk down the street towards the river, past the central market. With luggage it is worthwhile getting a taxi.

**Getting Around.** Single bus fares (from the driver) and tram fares (from machines at the stops) are €1.35, no transfers allowed. With a *tarjeta BUS* the fare drops to €0.74, with free transfers for an hour. Validate tickets in the machines on entering the tram or bus. The *tarjeta* costs €7 - €2 for the card loaded with €5 worth of fares. It can be obtained and topped up from most tobacconists and newspaper kiosks, and can be topped up on the machines at tram stops. More details of city transport at [www.tranviasdezaragoza.es/en](http://www.tranviasdezaragoza.es/en) (trams) and [www.zaragoza.avanzagrupo.com](http://www.zaragoza.avanzagrupo.com) (buses).

### Tarragona

**Hotel:** I stayed at the modern four-star SB Ciutat de Tarragona, Plaça de la Imperial Tàrraco 5, reserved via booking.com. It was quite expensive, I wasn't terribly impressed and the reception staff were a bit supercilious. However, there is not much accommodation in the city centre. The hotel is directly above the bus station. It is 15-20 minute uphill walk from the railway station, and worth a taxi if you have luggage. There is plenty of accommodation at nearby resorts on the Costa Daurada, such as Salou, from where Tarragona would be an easy day trip.



## Train, tram (and power station) buffery:

### 1 Zaragoza tramway

The original Zaragoza tram network was closed by 1976. Line 1 of the new Tranvía de Zaragoza tramway opened in stages between 2011 and 2013, and there are plans to expand. For operation in the historic city centre the trams have a supercapacitor storing braking energy (no I don't understand either) for overhead-wire-free operation. The new line has led to a major reduction in traffic congestion. There is an article setting out the benefits the line has brought - 'Zaragoza: the perfect advert for modern LRT' (light rapid transit), by the General Manager of the system, in Tramways and Urban Transit, January 2018.

## 2 Lleida La Pobla line



The Lleida – La Pobla de Segur line was envisaged as part of a long line linking Andalucía with France, most of which was never built. The Lleida – Balaguer section was opened in 1924, but it was not until 1951 that the line reached La Pobla. There are 41 tunnels, 31 bridges and 17 stations on the line. The route was transferred from Renfe (Spanish Railways) to Ferrocarrils de la Generalitat de Catalunya (FGC – Catalan Railways) in 2005, and since 2016 they have operated the service on the route with two modern railcars – this is the one I

travelled on, at Lleida Pireneus station. They have modernised the line, improved services and patronage is increasing. On most summer Saturdays a tourist train – the *tren dels llacs* – operates, using classic diesel locomotives and carriages. More details at [www.trendellsllacs.cat](http://www.trendellsllacs.cat).

## 3 Zaragoza – Caspe - Tarragona line

The Zaragoza – Caspe – Tarragona line was constructed by the Compañía de los ferrocarriles de Tarragona a Barcelona y Francia to Spanish broad gauge and opened throughout in 1894. By linking with the Madrid – Zaragoza company it became part of the main line between Madrid and Barcelona. It was nationalised in 1941, and electrification was completed by the 1980s. It lost its importance to passengers with the opening of the much faster standard gauge AVE line. The line is now used by regional trains – the daily Regional Express (!) from Madrid to Barcelona, on which I travelled, on takes 9 hours 20 minutes between the two cities (the AVE takes 2 hours 30 minutes).

The line remains important for trains bringing lignite to the central térmica de Andorra in the province of Teruel. The power station, owned by Endesa, opened in 1981 and is one of Spain's largest coal-fired power stations. It has been responsible for extensive environmental pollution and acid rain, though filters now reduce the sulphur emissions. The Spanish Congress has voted to phase out coal-fired power stations<sup>12</sup>. However, the Government has since refused Iberdrola permission to close two coal power stations elsewhere in Spain in the interests of 'energy security', despite the country having an overcapacity<sup>13</sup>. The other power stations mentioned in the text are the nuclear power plant at Ascó (the largest power station in Spain with an annual output of 14.5millionMWh), and the plant at Escatron, fuelled by natural gas<sup>14</sup>. Other freight traffic on the line has been trains of salt to the chlorine factory at Flix, the closure of which was announced in October 2017<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> 'El Congreso condena al cierre a la central térmica de Andorra', El Heraldo, 25 Oct 2017, [www.heraldo.es](http://www.heraldo.es).

<sup>13</sup> 'As the lobbying gets louder coal power stations may not go quietly', The Guardian, 25 November 2017, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com) and 'Death spiral – half of Europe's coal plants are losing money', The Guardian, 8 December 2017, [www.theguardian.com](http://www.theguardian.com).

<sup>14</sup> Info from enipedia.tudelft.nl/wiki

<sup>15</sup> 'No longer the salt of the earth, (*groan*) Today's Railways Europe, February 2018.



## Sources and resources:

The main sources are Wikipedia in English [www.en.wikipedia.org](http://www.en.wikipedia.org) and Spanish [www.es.wikipedia.org](http://www.es.wikipedia.org). Any mistakes in translation are my own. These sites have their limitations, but were generally sufficient for this article. Before the trip I used The Rough Guide to Spain – a new edition is due in early 2018. Trains were researched via the European Rail Timetable, June-December 2017 edition, (available from [www.europeanrailtimetable.eu](http://www.europeanrailtimetable.eu)) and [www.renfe.com](http://www.renfe.com) and, where appropriate, advance tickets were bought at the latter. The trip took place from 31 October to 4 November 2017.

Steve Gillon, January 2018.



*Food and drink in Zaragoza*

## Photos:

All of the photos are by Steve Gillon, except the picture of Zaragoza Delicias station, which is from [www.es.wikipedia.org](http://www.es.wikipedia.org).

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