

SPAIN

Great bells and spires

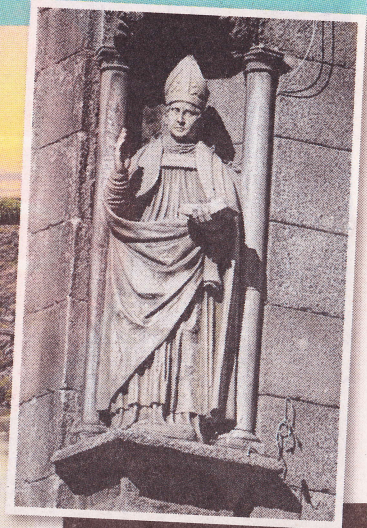
If you're an architecture and history buff, the walled city of Toledo is the place for you, writes **Briar Jensen**.

"There are some great bells But Toledo's is the greatest It has room for seven tailors And a shoemaker."

THE residents of Toledo, 70km south of Madrid, are immensely proud of their big bell, affectionately known as La Gorda, or "the fat one". Less well-known as the bell of St Eugene, it resides in the tower of Toledo's Cathedral. But I can only assume the ditty was penned before the enormous bell sustained its equally enormous crack.

Spanish Inspiration tour of southern Spain, and it's a wonderful introduction to Spanish history and architecture. Known as the city of three cultures, from a time when Jews, Muslims and Christians lived side by side, the city is a showcase of churches, mosques, synagogues and museums of varying styles – including Arabic, Romanesque, Mudejar, Gothic and Renaissance – leading to its World Heritage listing.

Mudejar were Muslims living under Christian rule on

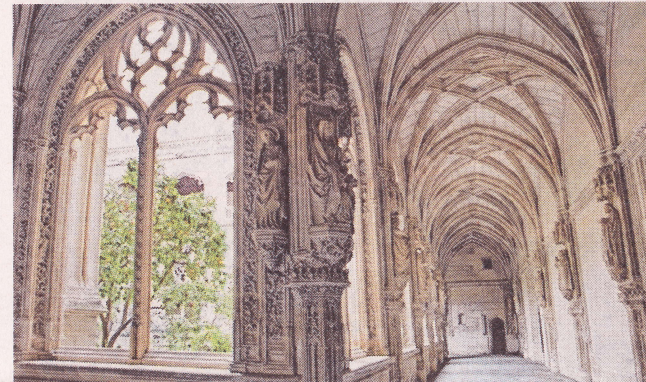


HEIGHT OF STYLE:
(clockwise from main)
Toledo towers over the Tagus River; a wall figure on Toledo Cathedral; and Gothic work in the Monasterio San Juan de los Reyes. Pictures: iStock; Briar Jensen

GO2 TOLEDO

GETTING THERE

Emirates Airways flies A380s daily from Sydney to Dubai with onward flights to Madrid. Toledo is about a one-hour drive from Madrid. emirates.com



another two years to figure out how to hoist it into position – apparently with ropes, winches and manpower.

Back on the narrow cobblestoned streets, our local guide bids us farewell. "Embrace getting lost," she

Exactly how and when the bell cracked remains a mystery. Some say it split on its first ring, which is rumoured to have been so discordant it shattered windows and caused pregnant women to give birth. As to why, one theory suggests the clapper was cast from the wrong material but perhaps the reason has been suppressed to avoid embarrassment for the city, renowned for steel production.

The cathedral bell tower and the fortress-like Alcazar, now a military museum, dominate Toledo's skyline from afar, where the walled city, built on a promontory overlooking a bend in the Tagus River, appears surrounded by a moat.

The provincial capital, roughly in the centre of the country, is the first stop on our Back-Roads Touring 10-day

the Iberian Peninsula. They were often employed as architects and builders and their designs included strong Islamic elements, which eventually become known as Mudejar style.

The synagogue of Santa Maria La Blanca is a striking example, with its aisles of octagonal pillars topped by ornate capitals and supporting horseshoe arches. Built in the 13th century, it was reconsecrated as a Christian church about 1405 and has also been used variously as barracks, stables and a warehouse.

The Monastery of San Juan de los Reyes, which was provocatively built in the middle of the Jewish quarter in the 15th century by the Catholic monarchs Isabella and

TOURING THERE

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Ferdinand, combines Mudejar and Gothic styles. The two-storey cloister, which surrounds a formal garden of sour orange trees and potted palms, is a fusion of arches, tracery, pinnacles and gargoyles.

The most architecturally diverse building is the Cathedral, the second-largest in Spain, after Seville, but often regarded as the spiritual home

of Spanish Catholicism. Built between 1226 and 1493, on the site of a previous mosque, the predominantly Gothic design features strong Moorish influences along with elements of Renaissance and Baroque.

It is a museum in itself, including the Chapter House filled with frescoes, the Treasury with its bejewelled vessel or monstrance and the Sacristy with paintings by El Greco, Bellini, Goya, Rafael and Rubens. The detail is exquisite, from elaborate grilles and tiled floors to coffered ceilings and carved choir chairs.

It's hard to appreciate the intricacies of the towering altarpiece, which took six years to construct, involving 27 artists

from around the world.

Likewise, the baroque marble sculptures of the Transparente that soar to the vaulted ceiling.

Overwhelmed by the display of religious wealth, built at a time when much of the population was impoverished, I retreat to the relative simplicity of the bell tower, where La Gorda hangs silently with its ravine-like fissure.

At 3m high and with a circumference of 9m you could probably squish eight people inside it as the verse says (literally, if they weren't underneath the crown), though it's hard to confirm its exact weight, with estimates varying from 7000kg to 17,000kg.

Built in the 18th century, it took two years to cast and

quips. After alfresco tapas of marinated anchovies, stuffed tomatoes and partridge thighs, we give our own thighs a workout on the winding streets.

There are stores dedicated to the local specialities of ceramics, marzipan and damascene (blackened metal decorated with fine gold or silver), as well as steel knives, swords and suits of armour. My husband and I settle on metal chess pieces – before we realise their weight.

Trudging back to our hotel, in the shadow of the Alcazar, weighed down by bishops, knights and kings, the metallic sound of bells reverberates in the alleyway, reminding us this is the city of steel.

The writer was a guest of Back-Roads Touring.