

Traveling with Jewish Taste[®]

Spain: Serendipitous Finds

By Carol Goodman Kaufman



As in many places, Jews have had a mixed history in Spain.

The poet-philosopher Solomon ibn Gabriol, poet Yehuda Ha Levi, and rabbi-physician-philosopher Moses Maimonides all produced magnificent work during the "Golden Age of Jewish Culture." But, the "Golden Age of Spain" – beginning in 1492 – was another matter altogether for Jews.

In recent years, some Spaniards have begun searching for their Jewish roots in a country that forcibly converted, expelled, or burned at the stake their ancestors, and some towns have even erected statues or held festivals to honor historic, local Jews.

We flew to Madrid to visit our son, Avi, on "R&R" from the Army, and settled in a charming little hotel located within walking distance of many important tourist sites.

Of course, we visited the most popular attractions, including the magnificent Prado and Reina Sofia National Art Centre museums, but we also experienced some serendipitous finds.

The Retiro Gardens form the green heart of the city and are "a must see." The 350-acre park served originally as a royal residence but was given over for public use in 1868.

It contains "the Crystal Palace," formal gardens, statuary, fountains, exhibition halls, children's playgrounds, and outdoor cafes. We rented a boat on the lake for a lovely retreat from the noisy city.

King Juan Carlos decided to use his Palacio Real the day of our planned tour – but a visit to the Royal Tapestry Factory became a highlight of our time in Madrid.

Established in 1720 by King Philip V, the factory houses a collection of antique tapestries and carpets. It is also a living museum where visitors can watch craftspeople using centuries-old methods making or repairing magnificent weavings, and, in addition, it houses an academy at which new artists are trained in the art of tapestry weaving.

While Madrid itself certainly had enough to fill our time, we did make two "day trips" outside the capital – one to Toledo and one to El Escorial de San Lorenzo, a sixteenth century royal palace and monastery built by King Philip II. The palace houses an enormous art collection, as well as the crypts wherein the majority of Spanish kings lie.

Curiously, some experts believe that the origin of the palace's floor plan is that of King Solomon's temple as described by the historian Flavius Josephus. Successive porticos and courtyards, all flanked by arcades and enclosed passageways, lead to the "holy of holies."

Adding support to the theory, statues of Kings David and Solomon flank the entrance to the basilica. Given Spain's sordid Inquisition history, it's ironic that Philip thought so highly of Jewish heroes.

Another day we took the high-speed train from the beautiful Madrid-Atocha station, with its arched glass ceiling and tropical gardens, to Toledo's charming Moorish station, from which we walked to "the old city."

Suddenly, the walled city of Toledo appeared on its hilltop perch – a fairy tale illustration with its spires and Gothic buildings looking out over the Tagus River and the plains of New Castile.

Among the sites in Toledo is the Sinagoga del Tránsito and Sephardic Museum, located on Calle de Samuel Levi and named for its founder, an advisor to King Pedro I of Castile.

Legend has it that Levi imported cedars from Lebanon for the building's construction, à la Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. The fourteen century synagogue, which contains prime examples of Spanish Jewish art – complete with stucco Hebrew inscriptions – served the large Jewish population of Toledo before "the Expulsion" in 1492.



Madrid's Crystal Palace

Ubiquitous in Toledo shops is damascene ware – made by decorating black steel with gold, silver, or copper thread. We were fortunate to find an artist at work on a plate and learned that he was one of a long family line of damascene craftspeople, and, of course, we bought some as gifts.

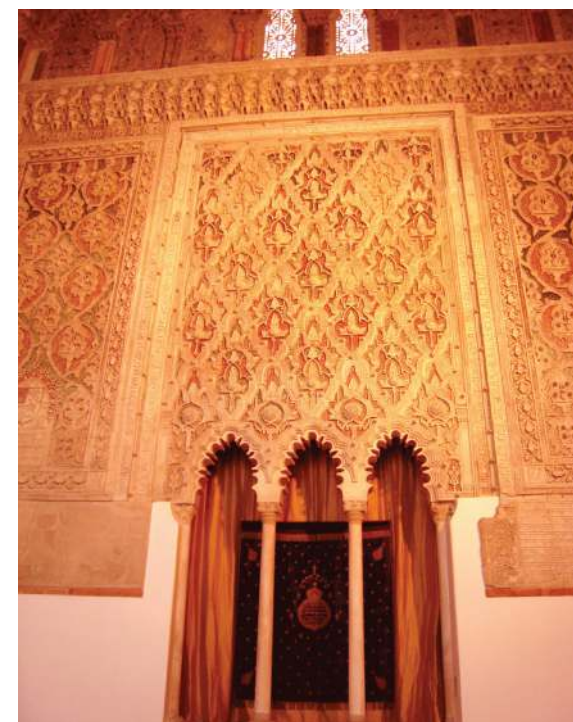
After all the touring and shopping, we needed a treat. Sweet shops line the narrow, winding streets of Toledo, but directly across from the central park one particular bakery beckoned us. There we sampled the local specialty, marzipan. My pastry was simply the most sublime confection I have ever tasted.

Nightly cars pack the narrow streets of the city in search of food and drink; however many restaurants don't open until 9:30 or 10 p.m. So, if that's too late for you, the Plaza de Santa Ana features dozens of restaurants, both indoor and open-air, that open much earlier.

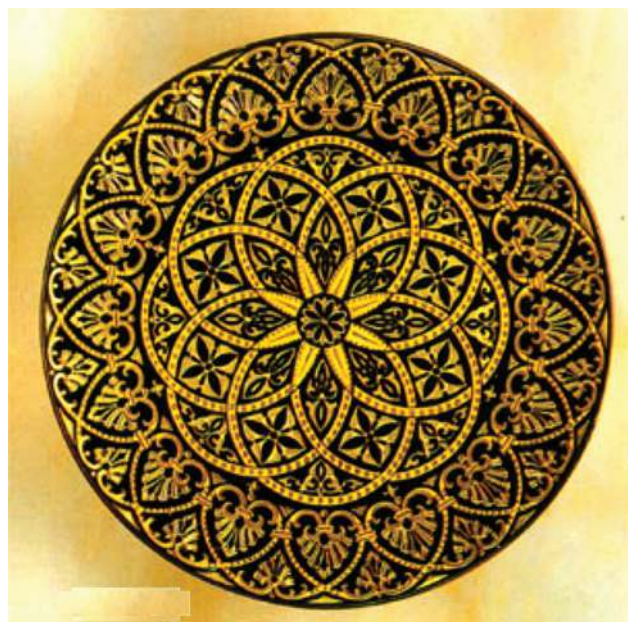
But be forewarned, dining in Spain is not designed for the kashrut keeper. Although the nation is surrounded by water, we rarely found fish on the menu – but lots of pork products!

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The East wall of the prayer hall in the Sinagoga del Tránsito



Damascene ware

Tortilla Española

The Spanish tortilla is not the flat bread of Mexican fame but rather like a cross between an omelet and a potato kugel. Spaniards like to serve it cold or at room temperature, but I prefer it hot with a nice salad.

4 large Yukon gold potatoes, sliced very thin	1/2 teaspoon pepper
2 medium onions, chopped	6 tablespoons olive oil
1 teaspoon salt	6 eggs
	1/4 cup of milk

- Coat a large, deep frying pan with cooking spray. Heat 4 tablespoons of the oil and fry the potatoes and onions on low heat until soft. Remove from the stove and drain contents through a large colander.
- Wipe out the frying pan with a clean paper towel and return to stove.
- Break the eggs into a bowl, add the salt and milk then whisk vigorously. Add the potatoes and onions to the eggs, mix thoroughly and let sit for about 15 minutes.
- Heat the remaining 2 tablespoons of oil on high heat and pour in the mixture.
- Lower heat a bit and fry until the bottom is golden brown, shaking occasionally until it has set.
- When the tortilla is set, place a large round plate (I prefer to use the pan cover) over the frying pan and flip the tortilla onto it. Slide the tortilla back into the pan and fry the other side until golden brown.
- Serves four.



Toledo, a hilltop fairy tale