

# Cervantes country

FROM TRAVEL 1

No book — with the exception of the Bible — has been more widely read nor oft translated than Cervantes' masterpiece. In 2002, the Norwegian Nobel Institute asked 100 distinguished writers from 54 countries to choose the greatest work of fiction of all time. *Don Quixote* polled 50 per cent more votes than any other book, including the works of Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and Cervantes' contemporary, Shakespeare.

As part of this year's 400-year anniversary celebrations, Spain's tourism authorities have resurrected *Don Quixote* once again, in the process offering those drawn to Spain a more sophisticated antidote to the traditional diet of *sol y playa* (sun and beach) and making the novel accessible to a wider audience. Routes following in Don Quixote's footsteps have been mapped, famous footballers and bullfighters have been reading the epic aloud, somewhat incongruously on national television, and an abundance of special children's editions have been printed as part of the year-long homage.

Spend any time in La Mancha and it quickly becomes apparent that the errant knight — or to give him his full title, *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* — could not have arisen from any but this land across which he ranged. Indeed, few figures in the history of storytelling have been so

irretrievably tied to a landscape as Don Quixote, a figure who looms as wonderfully large over the meseta as he does over the world of literature.

Perhaps most tellingly of all, throughout the book La Mancha and its inhabitants are rendered with such authenticity that the people of the land have adopted Don Quixote as their own.

Until recently, every inn across La Mancha possessed a treasured, leather-bound copy of *Don Quixote*. At night, as travellers from all social strata gathered around a meal of manchego cheese, wine and *migas* (the shepherd's staple of breadcrumbs with grapes), the book was pressed into the hands of those few travellers who could read so that they could regale an eager audience with picaresque tales to help pass the long La Mancha nights.

It was on just such a night that one Seor Quijano, obsessed by tall tales of chivalry, announced that he should thereafter be known as Don Quixote. Thus armed with a title and a lance, the self-appointed knight set out on a quest to right the wrongs of the world and to rescue the oppressed from distress.

On his picaresque journey astride his faithful if faltering and bony old nag Rocinante, Don Quixote was accompanied by the long-suffering Sancho Panza with whom he bickered as would an old married couple. Together they dreamt into existence a parallel La Mancha world in



Clockwise from above: Campo de la Criptana; 16th century Plaza Mayor, Almagro; View down gorge of Rio Huécar towards hilltop old town of Cuenca.



which the ingenious gentleman mistakes flocks of sheep for armies, horse troughs for baptismal fonts and roadside inns for enchanted castles.

The village where Don Quixote commenced his journey was never meant to be found - the novel begins with the words: "In a village in La Mancha whose name I cannot recall, there lived long ago a country gentleman." But mysteries rarely last forever.

Following a two-year quest in which 10 Spanish academics painstakingly followed the clues left by Cervantes, the starting point of Don Quixote's trail was recently identified, some 225 kilometres south of Madrid, as Villanueva de los Infantes, home to 5839 inhabitants and a pretty town square with its buildings in shades of ochre. From the heavy wooden balconies around the square's perimeter, old men and women survey with bemusement their village's newfound fame.

Most journeys in Spain begin in just such a town square, partaking of local specialties - the understated flavours of *atascaburras* (a mash of cod, potatoes, garlic, olive oil and eggs) would be a fine choice - a wine and consulting a map in order to plan your next leisurely move.

If it's not in Villanueva de los Infantes, then there are few finer places to plot your pursuit of Don Quixote than in Almagro, a one-time medieval capital of the region. Its exceptional, elongated Plaza Mayor (main square) is a testament to the fact that La Mancha has always been a crossroads for travellers, its intimate architecture a legacy of a 16th-century German family who once were bankers to Spain's Carlos I. The cobblestones, white-washed

house-fronts and monumental stone facades of the surrounding tangle of streets yield easily to the plaza's porticos and enclosed balconies of dark green wood. One of Spain's most unusual town squares, Almagro's Plaza Mayor is, on a summer's evening, everything that the lonely plains of La Mancha are not.

Fronting onto the plaza is the Corral de Comedias, a 17th-century open-air theatre surrounded on three sides by wooden balconies and the sort of place where Cervantes himself would have felt at home. Every July it springs to life for the International Festival of Classical Theatre, during which professional actors strut their stuff upon the stage while street performers mingle mischievously with visitors all across the town centre.

But for all Cervantes' longing for the limelight and his knight's abundant eccentricities, Don Quixote was not a man capable of withstanding such frivolities for long. He was more drawn to places like Consuegra, an hour's drive — or three days atop Rocinante — north of Almagro.

In his quest to rid the world of evil, Don Quixote spent much of his time tilting at windmills (*molinos de viento*) which were, in his imagination, transformed into "monstrous giants" against

whom battles must be fought in the name of honour. Throughout this vast and empty land, windmills occupy the high ground, normally two or three in a companionable cluster, scarcely threatening to even the most vivid imagination.

In Consuegra, however, the 12 squat, white sentinels with weapon-like arms that stand ranged along a ridge must have wreaked havoc upon Don Quixote's fevered mind. In such a landscape, with unbroken plains sweeping down into the depths of an indistinct horizon lost in a haze of heat, it is not at all difficult to picture Don Quixote seeing in these devilish structures, animated by every breath of wind, the guardians of the formidable castle that sits atop the summit. The fortress once belonged to the Knights of Malta, but our Manchegan knight never summoned up the courage to tackle such a large army. His odyssey moved on.

Somehow, Rocinante bore him to Campo de Criptana, a town all dressed in white and climbing up a hillside that rises up from an otherwise featureless plain. From a distance, the town's windmills must have appeared to Don Quixote as a crown of thorns, mocking him like a symbol of his own persecution at the hands of evildoers.

## Fast facts



**Getting there:** Qantas/Air France fly from Melbourne to Madrid via Singapore and Paris for around \$1950. From Madrid, there are daily buses to most villages in La Mancha and two daily trains to Madrid ([www.renfe.es](http://www.renfe.es)). For car rental consult [www.autoeurope.com](http://www.autoeurope.com).

**Staying there:** Hospedería Almagro (0011 34 926 88 20 87; Calle de Ejido de Calatrava; single/double around \$33/40) is set in a restored 15th-century convent close to the Plaza Mayor and fabulous value.

La Posada de Almagro (0011 34 926 26 12 01; [www.laposadadealmagro.com](http://www.laposadadealmagro.com); Calle de Gran Maestre 5; single/double around \$60/90) has rooms filled with character right around the corner from the Plaza Mayor and an excellent restaurant.

Parador de Almagro (0011 34 926 86 01 00; [www.parador.es](http://www.parador.es); Ronda de San Francisco 13;

single/double around \$160/200) is another renovated convent with a luxurious, old-world charm. **Almagro town website:** [www.ciudad-almagro.com](http://www.ciudad-almagro.com) **Further Reading:** *The Wit & Wisdom of Don Quixote de la Mancha*, by Harry Sieber, is an illustrated collection of Don Quixote's humorous and eccentric proverbs.

*Don Quixote & the Windmills*, by Eric Kimmel, is a lavishly illustrated take on Don Quixote for children (grades 1-5).

*Don Quixote's Delusions - Travels in Castilian Spain*, by Miranda France, takes Cervantes' work as the inspiration for exploring Spain in the 1980s. **Guidebook:** *Lonely Planet's Guide to Spain* (5th edition, published March 2005) contains extensive coverage of Castilla La Mancha (Anthony Ham wrote the Castilla La Mancha chapter, among others).

Upon entering the town, the location of the windmills suddenly becomes less obvious amid the twisting tree-lined streets and shady plazas that could be a provincial town anywhere across the meseta. On my first visit to Campo de Criptana, I asked an old woman for directions.

"The windmills? Yes, we have windmills. In fact we have the finest windmills in all of La Mancha. Did you know that Don Quixote came here? He did, you know. This is the most famous *pueblo* (village) that Don Quixote visited. Now let's see. If you turn right at the next street and keep going up you can't miss them. You really must see them." As I drove away, I could see her watching me intently lest I deviate from the path.

The windmills are indeed among the best of their kind, but this is not the only reason for locals' pride in their Don Quixote heritage. Local legend also maintains that Cervantes himself was baptised in the town's Iglesia de Santa Maria (Church of Santa Maria).

But Don Quixote was obsessed with more than just windmills. Not far away in El Toboso, he conjured up the imaginary Dulcinea to whom he swore undying love. She may never have existed, but a museum that bears her name does and is a fine way to pass a quiet afternoon. In Belmonte, also close by, one of the most beautiful castles in central Spain casts a protective eye over the village, which, like most in La Mancha, crawls up the hillside to escape the plateau. In this castle Sancho Panza ate, providing evidence perhaps that there was more to Don Quixote's sidekick than meets the eye.

At journey's end, our flawed hero would ultimately, in a rare moment of common sense that we can only regret, leave behind his utterly believable flights of fancy and abandon his quest. As he lay on his deathbed, he recanted his fantasies, asked forgiveness for his sins and left La Mancha to its desolation, little knowing that his legacy would bring alive this enchanted land in perpetuity.



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