

TRAVEL DIARY

RIBADAVIA, MONFORTE DE LEMOS, TUI AND LEÓN

Nani Arenas



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Nani Arenas

Nani Arenas is a journalist specializing in travel and tourism. Graduated from UCM in Political Science and Sociology and from UAM in Journalism. She currently works as a freelance journalist and consultant for various tourism brands and destinations. The focus of her current work is design of promotion and innovation strategies, and the design of techniques for creating and disseminating content and storytelling, with particular attention to the digital world and social media. In addition to teaching tourism, marketing, and communication courses, she collaborates with universities, business schools, and various organizations. Previously, she was managing director of the Tourism Consortium of A Coruña. And until July 2015, tourism advisor for the Provincial Council of A Coruña in charge of tourism product creation for the province.

As a regular contributor to specialized media (El Pas, Viajar, Altar, El Mundo, Traveler...), between 2006 and 2011, she created and coordinated La Voz de Galicia's tourist supplements. Additionally, she worked as a documentary scriptwriter for Canal Viajar. In Spanish-speaking countries, Lavajeraempedernida.com is one of the most influential travel blog.

Nani Arenas

There are places in northwestern Spain that remind us of the Iberian Peninsula's Jewish past. In many towns and cities, in fact, traces of this past are still well preserved.

As we make our way through the narrow streets of the so-called "Jewish quarters" (neighborhoods where those who practiced this religion lived), symbols, engravings, details, and decorations invite us on a journey through time.

This is the goal of our trip through a number of towns full of history, legends, and anecdotes, to dive into the richness of a legacy that wins you over the more you learn about it. Our one-week cultural journey will take us to Ribadavia, Monforte de Lemos, and Tui, three Galician Jewish Heritage Cities, as well as León.



DAY 1: RIBADAVIA, OUR STARTING POINT IN THE PROVINCE OF OURENSE

We begin our journey in Galicia and make our first stop in Ribadavia, in the province of Ourense. It is one of the Jewish Heritage Cities where you can best appreciate the footprint of Jewish culture. Our trip here makes it clear that we are in a special place, one that is rich, fertile, and green. Ribadavia is situated strategically on the banks of the Avia River, and is famous for the Ribeiro wine that is produced nearby.

They tell the story of when times were good in Ribadavia, and there was a community of more than 1,500 Jews (though historians claim there were less). They arrived to these lands between the 12th and 13th centuries and originally stayed for the wealth offered by a place with infinite possibilities. They also stayed, importantly, because they and their culture were well-received by Galician society. A situation that unfortunately came to end in 1495, when the Inquisition began persecuting Jews in Ribadavia and across Galicia.

With these events in mind, our walk through Ribadavia's old Jewish quarter is even more interesting. It has maintained its labyrinth-like design that us travelers enjoy so much. The web of narrow streets and alleyways have a medieval air, full of adornments that remind us of where we are, Stars of David on facades, menorahs, Hebrew letters, and

thousands-of-year-old customs that have lived on here, despite the passing of time.

But be aware, if you read about Ribadavia in guidebooks or blogs, you will see that many recommend a visit to the Tahona de Doña Herminia. Unfortunately, the establishment has already closed its doors as its founder has retired. In Ribadavia, Doña Herminia is certainly missed. She transformed the art of making Jewish pastries into a way of life.

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Hopefully, this bit of text serves as a small tribute to her tireless work. Years of baking Jewish sweets, every day, with her own hands. Doña Herminia got up at 3 AM every morning to make sure things were ready. Now, there is no one to take the reins. Fortunately though, there are other pastry shops that offer similar fare. Be sure to try them!





With a sweet taste in our mouths we carry on walking around the Plaza de Magdalena. The audio tour provided by the Tourism Office tells us that it was here that the synagogue once stood. The virtual guide also tells us that the main corridor of the old rambling of Jewish streets can be found on Calle Merelles de Caula, which starts in the lovely Plaza Mayor, the best starting point for our walk.

If I had to choose one street in Ribadavia, it might be Porta Nova de Arriba and its lower half Porta Nova de Abaixo, which meet at the Porta Nova, a gateway that still has the distinct appearance of being a battlement. It is a reminder to all

those who see it that this was once the mandatory entrance to the *aljama*.

At this point in the walk, perhaps with our itch for Jewish culture already scratched, we have the luck of finding that Ribadavia is the home of Galicia's Jewish Information Center, a good place to find evidence of the Jewish heritage here.

To visit the information center, you must enter through the Castillo de los Condes de Ribadavia, where they also have an audio tour that highlights a route through the ruins of this monumental 15th-century Baroque castle, a symbol of the power held by the Sarmiento family, lords of Ribadavia.

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Of course the best way to end the visit is taking a seat in Plaza Mayor and enjoying a local wine (a fresh Ribeiro) and a good octopus dinner. It's curious: Ourense, the only Galician province without a coast, claims to be the best place to eat pulpo a feira, with its cooked potatoes and paprika. This is a legend that I can attest to being true.

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DAY 2: MONFORTE DE LEMOS, IN LUGO

Near Ribadavia we find another enclave with an interesting Jewish past. Just 50 kilometers to the north, in the neighboring province of Lugo, we find Monforte de Lemos. A highway that at times runs along the Sil River joins both places. There are scenic viewpoints along the way, where travelers can stop to enjoy the beautiful landscape. If you make the journey by car, my advice is to go slow and take in the beauty.

When we arrive, a sign tells us that we have come to a very special place. The monumental Colegio de la Compañía, with its Herrerian style, and having been called by historians the “Galician Escorial,” has an imposing look sitting high above visitors. But luckily, there are guided tours that take you through some of the most important rooms, like the magnificent staircase (made of only one piece and measuring over three meters wide), the courtyards, the cloisters, and the church.

After being drawn in by the altarpiece, it is time to take a stroll around the most medieval part of Monforte de Lemos. In order to get to the oldest neighborhood we have to go through a lively shopping street, across the Cabe River (where the more adventurous travelers can try their hand at water sports like kayak-

ing, paddle surf, etc.), and past Plaza de España to finally reach Puerta de la Zapatería, in the heart of the old Jewish quarter. From here, we continue upwards on the other steep street that also shares its name with a trade: Calle de la Pescadería (Fish Market Street), which runs parallel to the old city wall.



The fantastic main altarpiece is worth mentioning. It's dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and is carved out of walnut. Among the curious scenes it depicts, the most notable is the circumcision of Baby Jesus.





Jesuit College.



Falagueira Street.

We carry on walking past monumental facades, some of which are abandoned. Others are being reformed, like the Gaibor house, formerly the property of a wealthy Jewish family that still has on its doors symbols that remind us of the beliefs of its first inhabitants.

Our walk continues down Calle Falagueria. It is interesting to note that in Galician, this name makes use of the word *fala*, today synonymous with din, racket, bustle, etc., in reference to people talking and the ambience that existed here during the good times. Once one of the most important streets in Monforte de Lemos, this is where the synagogue was located, but there is nothing left of it today. The old town hall building was once here, but nothing remains

of those glorious years. Today, solitude accompanies the visitor during a large part of the tour.

We carry on until we summit the majestic tower, visible from almost any angle and another of the icons of Monforte de Lemos. It is the fortress on the mount known as San Vicente, and it is here that the town gets its name: *monte* (mount) *forte*

(fortress), which combine to Monforte.

Inside the tower there is currently a small museum dedicated to the history of the city and the area. But the most surprising thing is finding symbols that once again remind us of the Jewish past of the whole place, for example, the Stars of David chiseled into the stone.

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Our walk to the tower keep is hard, and deserves a reward. Aside from the panoramic views of Monforte and the surrounding area, just next to the tower are the Palacio Condal, a palace, and the Monasterio de San Vicente, a monastery. The structures have been converted into a hotel, one of Spain's Paradores, where visitors can spend the night, have a bite to eat, or simply take a seat and enjoy the peace that the precious cloister has to offer.

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DAY 3: TUI, JEWISH FOOTPRINTS AT THE MIÑO RIVER

We remain in Galicia and make our way to the province of Pontevedra to visit the third of the Jewish Heritage Cities on our trip, Tui, located on the banks of the Miño River. Both legendary and famous as a port of entry, it has cobblestoned streets and stone houses that speak of the city's inhabitants, among them, a Jewish community with a wonderful legacy.

In Spain, we have the expression that wishes the recipient not be given a Sambenito, and Tui is the origin of this popular saying (Qué no te cuelguen un sambenito!): they claim to have the only sambenitos left in Europe. So, what were they? Tunics (from sacos benditos, or holy bags) that heretics were supposed to wear for their entire lives! By order of the Holy Inquisition they later bore the sinner's name and penance required. Then, they were hung in visible places to announce to the neighbors the error of the person's ways; some stayed up for years, even centuries, so that the family would remain humble for generations.

The trip is worth it just to gaze upon these *sambenitos* in Tui's cathedral, where four are on display, or in the diocese museum, where they show the other 10.

Along with the *sambenitos*, the cathedral also has on display intricate silver chalices, which begs the question, were these the works of Jewish silversmiths? A close inspection of the pieces leads me to believe that they were.

The monumental Catedral de Santa María de Tui is also reason enough to make the escape. What is such a grand cathedral doing in such an out-of-the-way place?

On the one hand, the Tui diocese, which includes a part of northern Portugal, once had a powerful reach. On the other hand, it is located along the Portuguese Way of the Camino, and as such, pilgrims on their way to Santiago de Compostela pass by.

Thus, it was necessary to build a high-standing church, one of means, to provide evidence of the power of the local clergy. It also serves as a defensive fortress and look-out tower where locals could monitor the Miño River and keep an eye on their Portuguese neighbors. It is for this reason that it was built on top of an old fort, which still remains.

Of Roman origin, it still has some original 11th-century stonework. But what stands out most is its clearly Gothic style, evident in the doorway, the first of its kind made in Spain, and certainly the envy of Galicia's Castilian and French neighbors.



The 14 sambenitos in Tui are not only valuable artistic treasures, but valuable historical documents that confirm the presence of the Jewish community here. As you can see in the fabric, the condemned were Jews. False converts to Christianity who carried on with their own rituals in secret.





Be sure to see the irregular, twisted arches and the majestic organ pipes that still play music; there is also the cloister, a great example of Galician ogival art and where we can find a strange detail. Right as you go through the doorway, there is a menorah (the seven-armed Jewish candelabrum) carved into the stone, and next to it there are some words in Hebrew!

But this isn't the only sign of Jewish culture that is carved into the stones here. On the street Camiño Entre Fornos, there are crosses sculpted into some of the facades, a custom practiced by some to hide the Jewish origins of the building's inhabitants. On this street, that runs parallel to the city wall and really shows you that Tui was built on the rocks, we find some of the oldest houses in the town. Among them, one was the chapter jail, where clergy members of Jewish origin were locked up.

Nearby, a blue sign indicates another place of interest on our journey to discover local traces of Jewish heritage. It's the house of the

butcher Peru el Judío (literally, Peru the Jew), the only such meat-selling establishment to have been documented in Galicia. His house was right there, up the stairway that is Tripariá, the street where offal (*tripa*) was once discarded. Today, it is one of the most picturesque parts of Tui.

At this point of my journey, it's clear that there were Jewish inhabitants spread all around the community, coexisting side-by-side with local families. Although there are areas where their presence is more noticeable, for example, where the synagogue used to be, at the foot of the city wall. Today, it is the location of the Sarmiento Celaya mansion. It seems that there was once a Mikveh next to the Puerta da Pía, the main gateway into Tui. This special place for ritualistic Jewish bathing was, according to historians, removed in the 18th century to prevent the spread of disease.

A bit further on from the synagogue, on Calle de las Monjas, we visit the Casa de los Capellanes. A blue sign on the door directs our at-

tention to the upper corbels, which are dedicated to the priests Moisés and Aaron. The decoration confirms that this could have been a home inhabited by Jews. The same is true of the Casa del Mercader Salomón, on the nearby Rúa Castañón (previously called Rúa Canicouba), the layout of which is very typical of Jewish homes.

Jewish sweets

The courtyard in the Salomón house has views of the Convento de las Clarisas, where there are still cloistered nuns living today. Be sure to try the sweets that they sell.

Little by little, the history of the Jews in Tui surrounds the visitor. There are references. The mind travels to a far-off, mysterious, medieval time, that still lives on. Silence is the constant companion on this walk. Those who pass through Tui will feel a calm peace. Only the occasional ringing of the bells breaks the silence, or perhaps the footsteps of a group of pilgrims following the path of painted shells and yellow arrows guiding them to the tomb of the apostle.

In the end, you can't understand Tui without its Jewish past, or without the river. Before, they said the Miño separated Spain and Portugal, but now, they say that it joins them.

When it comes to spending the night, I recommend the hotel A Torre do Xudeu, full of Jewish heritage. It is a large mansion that was once the property of the Blanco-Cicerón family. Recently it has been reformed and turned into a charming hotel. Its name comes from the tower, dating back to 1170, that still remains in the garden and confirms that there were Jews within the city walls back then. It is a great place to feel the Jewish history in this city full of legends and ancient connections.





DAYS 4 AND 5: EXPLORING LEÓN

The Jewish settlements in northwestern Spain were not limited to smaller locales. There is also evidence of Jewish heritage in bigger cities, like León, where I recommend making a longer stop: at least two days in order to be able to take in not just the essence of the Sephardic history here, but the rhythm of the modern city, too.

We get to León via the highway that comes from Tui. It's a long trip; some 400 kilometers separate them. It's just over 200 kilometers if we start from Monforte de Lemos. But it's worth it. When we begin to scratch the surface, we find many cultural similarities between Galicia and León, especially with regard to their Jewish pasts.

Once in León, I recommend starting your visit in the colorful Plaza de San Martín, in the heart of the Húmedo neighborhood, especially if you are going to start mid-morning, when locals head out for a wine and tapa. And which neighborhood has the best wines in León? Húmedo.

It is surprising to find out that this crisscrossing of narrow streets and charming plazas, with hundreds of bars, one after the other, where visitors can find

a bite to eat, is the old Jewish quarter, but there are few traces left here to remind us. However, if we keep our eyes on the ground, in addition to the shells marking the Camino de Santiago we can't miss little maps of Spain (the symbol of the Jewish Heritage Cities that mark the trails to Sepharad).

After the astounding windows, it's worth it to take a walk around the cathedral, which is full of little curiosities. In the nave, we find frescoes, documentation on the walls of the church itself that speak to the importance of the Jewish community in León.

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With our bellies full—something that is easy to do in León, where going out for tapas is almost a religion and they always give you something to snack on when you order a drink—it is time to focus on the bigger attractions in the city. There are many, and they are wonderful. The cathedral, for example, is one of the most beautiful in Spain. A true masterpiece of Gothic architecture, it radiates its own light, especially at the “witches hour,” when the sun pierces the windows and illuminates the church's famous stained glass.

There are more than 103 rose windows! Marvelous!

These alone are worth the trip.

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The Jews arrived here after fleeing from the nearby settlement in Puente Castro, which was destroyed in a battle long ago. In León's archaeological museum you can find remains from this ancient city.

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These first Jews, once in León, settled outside the city walls, next to the old Puerta Moneda, where they charged everyone who came to León a toll; this is also where the pilgrims on their way to Santiago de Compostela would pass on their pilgrimage. Today, this area (now totally integrated into the modern city) still has the name Prado de los Judíos (Meadow of the Jews).

If we continue following the remains of the city wall, on Calle de las Cercas or the parallel Calle de la Carbajalas, we cross some beautiful squares: Plaza de Santa María del Camino (one of my favorites in the city and popularly known amongst locals as the Plaza del Grano), Plaza de Riaño, and finally, the colossus Plaza Mayor, also located in the Jewish Quarter.



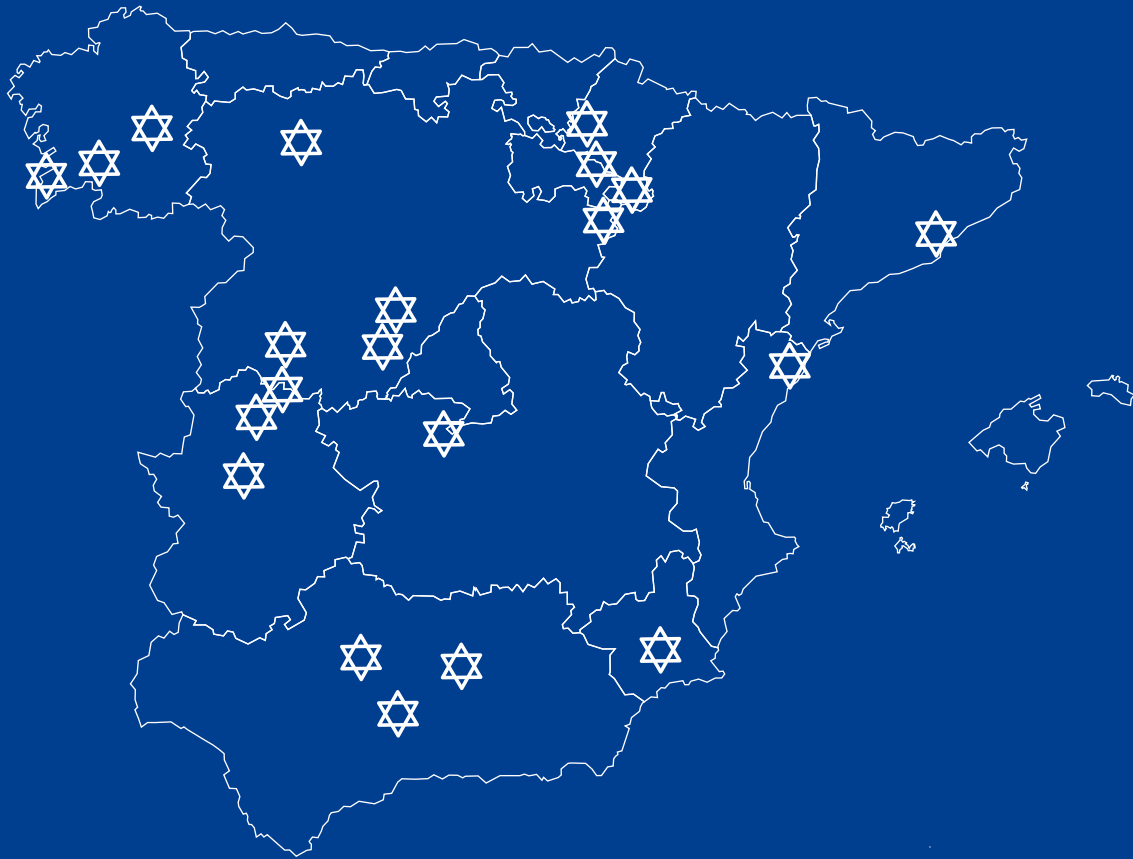
But León hides more attractions that travelers can't miss, and thus, it's a place I recommend spending at least a couple of days. It's impossible to leave this Castilian capital without visiting the Real Colegiata de San Isidoro, a church with incredibly well-preserved roman frescoes. They also have on display the chalice of Doña Urraca, a piece that I am told was based on the actual Holy Grail.

It is impossible not to be won over by the enjoyable environment on the always lively Calle Ancha. The facades of the palatial buildings are impressive, especially at Casa de Botines, designed by famous Spanish architect Antonio Gaudí.

Another must-see takes us to the other side of the city, the also spectacular Convento de San Marcos, once a hospital for pilgrims and now another of Spain's Paradores. The second such hotel we have come across on our route through the Jewish Heritage Cities of northwestern Spain. It underwent a complete renovation and is now a fantastic hotel, one of the best and most emblematic of the Paradores. I certainly recommend visitors stop and have a rest here.

For lovers of modern art, there is one last attraction. Very near the Hostal San Marcos is the MUSAC (the Contemporary Art Museum of Castilla y León). It gives us a curious way to end our journey through northwestern Spain following the footprints of our Jewish ancestors. Its colorful facade was inspired by the stained glass in the cathedral!





**ÁVILA · BARCELONA · BÉJAR · CÁCERES · CALAHORRA · CÓRDOBA
· ESTELLA-LIZARRA · HERVÁS · JAÉN · LEÓN · LORCA · LUCENA ·
MONFORTE DE LEMOS · PLASENCIA · RIBADAVIA · SAGUNTO · SEGOVIA
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