

Short break

Secretly sensational

The magical, medieval Spanish city of Cáceres is right on his doorstep, but Paul Richardson has just discovered its fizzing modern art and trailblazing food scene. Photographs by Monica Gumm



Cáceres Old Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, in Extremadura, Spain

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STRANGE AND UNREASONABLE as it sounds, Cáceres, the capital city of the Spanish region of Extremadura in which I live, and no more than 90 minutes from my front door, is a place I have largely overlooked.

The city's origins lie in the Roman encampment of Norba Caesarina, one of many such staging posts throughout the vast province of Lusitania. It was a backwater until the century after Columbus's discovery of the New World, when many of its people left to seek their fortune, found it in the Americas, and returned as wealthy men. The towered palaces, churches and convents of Old Town Cáceres are partly the legacy of that spectacular boom. Thereafter, however, it embarked on a slow decline. At most, Cáceres was a way station on a whistle-stop tour around western Spain that might also take in Valladolid, Salamanca and the Roman remains at Mérida.

Then in 2010, something happened. Or rather, two things happened, closely connected

to one another. José Polo and Toño Pérez, the owners of Atrio restaurant, for more than two decades regarded as Extremadura's finest, reopened in a new locale in the heart of the Old Town, complementing their two-Michelin-star establishment with a chic little 14-room hotel. Mansilla and Tuñón, Spain's most sought-after architectural double act of the 21st century, were the men behind the new Atrio, and they were also responsible for Cáceres's other great novelty: the Centro de Artes Visuales Fundación Helga de Alvear, a contemporary-art museum housing the superb haul amassed by Alvear, a German collector (it opened on calle Pizarro in June 2010).

Cáceres is really two cities in one. Down below lies the busy, traffic-ridden, frankly charmless modern city, while above it on a promontory, guarded by medieval walls and watchtowers, stands the silent and slightly mysterious *casco viejo*. Crossing from one into the other is a thrill in itself: you arrive at a bollard, press a button on the



From left: the rooftop at Atrio Restaurante Hotel; Atrio's Ibérico pork with squid and coconut curry; colourful Cabeza de Ratón clothes shop

entryphone and you're in, rattling up through cobbled streets in which yours might very well be the only car.

Despite its weight of history, this urban nucleus is as thinly populated as a tiny rural village: Cáceres as a whole may have a population of 100,000, but the Old Town is home to just 380 lucky people. Commercial enterprises are few and far between up here, unless you count the odd antique shop, the odd bar and the Old Town's various convents, which sell their delicious egg-yolk-and-almond sweetmeats through a revolving contraption that allows the nuns to remain unseen. There is the Parador de Cáceres, newly reopened after a protracted restoration programme, and a clutch of restaurants, including the Torre de Sande (a Cáceres classic, wonderful for a summer dinner in its walled garden). And then ➤

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Right, shabby-chic shopping at La Ecléctica. Below, in the kitchen at Laminerva



➤ there's the Atrio Restaurante Hotel, sitting pretty on the Plaza de San Mateo, where a fabulous corner suite overlooking the square was to be my base camp.

The bathrooms here are all black granite and mirrors; the bedrooms have white-painted oak panels, high-end Scandinavian furniture and modern artworks (my room had an original Warhol drawing). The views from the windows are framed visions of the Old Town in all its stern grandeur. Mansilla and Tuñón's luminous, linear take on the

rough-hewn stone of the original building, placing white concrete and glass alongside granite and wood, makes for an incontestably gorgeous place in which to eat, drink and relax.

Out in the square at twilight, the quiet and solitude were dizzy-making. From the tower of San

I love the Old Town's snail-shell aspect, its steep stairways, tiny gardens and cunning passageways

Mateo came the sound of storks clattering their beaks.

I roamed the Old Town in a state of heightened curiosity, discovering things I'd neither seen before – a sudden view, a hidden patio, a Moorish window in a Renaissance façade. Embarrassingly, I'm not sure I even knew that Cáceres had a cathedral; but there it was, a Romanesque monster like a great stone barn. From the steps behind the town hall, I could look down onto the long, white rectangle of the Plaza Mayor and the open countryside beyond the city limits, the distant white splash of a village on a hill.

I love the Old Town's introverted, snail-shell aspect, its steep stairways and cunning passageways, its tiny gardens with olive trees and oleanders tucked under the mighty walls of towers and battlements. The architecture is severe, almost spartan, a litany in stone with little in the way of adornment or colour, but resonant with history. The Ovando Palace bears the name of Nicolás de Ovando, first governor of Hispaniola, from 1502 to 1509. In the 17th-century palace of Toledo-Moetzuma, built by the grandson of the Mexican princess Tecuixpo Ixtlaxochitl, daughter of Moetzuma himself, Aztec-inspired murals adorn the walls. A plaque on the exterior wall of Palacio de los Gólfines de Arriba claims it was here that Francisco Franco proclaimed himself supreme number-one honcho, aka Generalísimo, in 1936. Few of these mansions can be visited, although many are now municipal buildings where you can peer ➤



ROCKS AND AN ART PLACE

A visit to Museo Vostell, which is a few miles outside Cáceres near the village of Malpartida, makes a perfect short excursion from the city. This was where Wolf Vostell, a German artist and member of the Fluxus Movement, pitched up in 1976, captivated by the weird granitic forms of the landscape known as

Los Barruecos (now a Natural Monument). Vostell bought an old wool-washing mill on a lake and turned it into his artistic headquarters, filling it with wacky installations incorporating old cars, televisions and other objets trouvés. A look around the museum, with a walk among the bizarrely shaped boulders of the

landscape, is worth the 20-minute drive, especially at sunset when the landscape takes on a truly phantasmagorical aspect. *Centro de Los Barruecos, Malpartida de Cáceres* (00 34 927 010812; www.museovostell.org). Open Tues-Sun, 10.30am-1.30pm and 5pm-8pm. Entrance fee €2.50

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➤ into cool courtyards with granite columns and whitewashed vaults.

The Museo de Cáceres is one of those small, provincial museums whose modest collection makes its handful of real gems, including a touching portrait of Christ by El Greco, sparkle even more brightly. I would gladly have taken home the delightfully naive pre-Roman sculpture of a boar, and a quartzite plaque from the third millennium BC, scratched with a geometric design that seemed strikingly, puzzlingly modern.

So much for antiquities. Cáceres is also finally waking up to the possibilities of contemporary culture. The Womad festival, held every year for the past 20, is a free feast of world music which, for a few days in May, fills the Old Town's solemn squares with a burst of noise and colour. And other, bolder initiatives are now coming to the fore. Helga de Alvear could have picked anywhere in the world to show off her 2,500-strong collection of contemporary art, but she bravely chose a Spanish city with no record as a cultural hub. The Centro de Artes Visuales Fundación Helga de Alvear is a radiantly all-white art space in the international manner, elegantly shoehorned into an early-20th-century stone mansion and reeking of modern-art cool. It might not be a big deal in, say, Bilbao, but the arrival of such blue-chip art names as Jenny Holzer, Anish Kapoor, Joseph Beuys, Dan Flavin, and Donald Judd has been a great leap forward for Cáceres.

The fun places to eat are the new-wave *taperías* (a designation apparently unique to the city) such as La Cacharrería and Laminerva. And the people there were unusually friendly and solicitous, recommending the wonderfully gooey sheep's cheese Torta del Casar (like a cross between a ripe Camembert and a fondue, begging to be scooped out of its shell), and filling me in on the fine new wines now being made in Extremadura.

The economy of the province of Cáceres is still largely agricultural; it is known for its cheeses, hams and olive oils. Montánchez ham,



Tapas chefs at La Cacharrería

It's no exaggeration to say that the restaurant Atrio has made a quantum difference to the ambitions of the city

made from the Ibérico pig, is the doyen of local charcuterie. *Pimentón de la Vera*, a paprika-like spice made of ground, dried peppers, is a major ingredient of *patatera* sausage (the others are pork, garlic and potato). *Caldereta de cordero*, a rich lamb stew, is Extremadura's signature dish; and *migas*, rustic fried breadcrumbs with pancetta, garlic and red pepper, are the most popular morning snack. Grilled cuts of Ibérico pork are all the rage at top-end restaurants such as Oquendo, Torre de Sande and the ageless El Figón de Eustaquio.

In terms of eating out in Cáceres, however, there is only one name that matters. The Atrio is greater than ever in its architecturally distinguished incarnation. It's no exaggeration to say that Atrio Restaurante Hotel has made a quantum difference to the life and ambitions of the city. Toño Pérez's nine-course *degustación* menu is full of creativity in the modern Spanish style, but is less about El Bulli-ish pyrotechnics and more about the heartfelt quest for something purely delicious in dishes such as Ibérico pork with grilled foie gras and a purée of eye-poppingly green watercress.

'We believe this new project is important to Cáceres,' Pérez said. 'It may be only a small thing, but it shows the direction this city, and region, might be starting to take.'

WHERE TO STAY

Atrio Restaurante Hotel

This statement in exquisite luxury aims at perfection and comes remarkably close. Plaza de San Mateo 1 (00 34 927 242928; www.restauranteatrio.com). Doubles from €260

Hotel Albarragena

An 18th-century townhouse retaining much of its original furniture. Calle Pizarro 10 (00 34 927 220657; www.albarragena.com). Doubles from €60

WHERE TO EAT

Atrio

The restaurant has won a third Michelin star since relocating. About €110 for two

El Figón de Eustaquio

Specialises in traditional

extremeño cooking. Plaza de San Juan 12-14 (00 34 927 244362; www.elfigondeeustaquio.com).

About €60 for two

Restaurante Oquendo

This smart venue serves the best seafood in town. Calle Obispo Segura Sáez 2 (00 34 927 211132; www.restauranteoquendo.com).

About €90 for two

Torre de Sande

A classic Old Town restaurant. Calle de los Condes 3 (00 34 927 211147; www.torredesande.com). About €95 for two

La Cacharrería

Creative tapas in a *palacio*. Calle Orellana 1 (00 34 615 212750)

Laminerva

The best tapas in the main square. Plaza Mayor (00 34 927 261052; www.laminervacaceres.com)

WHERE TO SHOP

La Ecléctica

An aptly named shop selling a mix of antiques and textiles. Plaza Mayor 20 (00 34 927 212568; www.laectlectica.es)

Cabeza de Ratón

A good place to pick up cool clothing and art. Calle Sergio Sánchez 6 (00 34 34 927 772657; www.cabezaderaton.es)

