

# 10 reasons why I consider Zaragoza to be “the great unknown”



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When Spain is mentioned, you hear a lot about the glamour of cities such as Barcelona or Madrid, but others like Zaragoza remain unfairly overlooked. Therefore, I have to confess that my expectations about leaving Edinburgh to live and work in Zaragoza were not particularly high before the start of my internship. However, now that my experience is over and I'm about to leave the city, I'm feeling rather overwhelmed by the idea of leaving all of the things that have made me so happy here throughout the past three months. Here are 10 reasons why I now think that Zaragoza is a hidden gem with the potential to offer a truly once-in-a-lifetime experience:

## 1. A clean, safe, perfectly-sized city

One thing about Zaragoza, the capital of the Aragon region in Spain, which caught my attention right from the beginning of my stay there, is how functional, clean and safe the city feels. Bike lanes, regular bus lines and the urban tramway make it very easy to get around Zaragoza, even when returning home after a night out. Also, I could see the streets being cleaned on my (really early) walk to work every morning, which gives you the impression that Zaragoza is always spotless! I also personally believe that Zaragoza is ideal to wander around on foot due to its perfect size. On top of that, most of the social life can be found within “el casco” (the city center) so you can easily flit through different bars, pubs and restaurants to get around and search for your favourite tapas!

## 2. High quality of life at an accessible price

One of the main advantages of living in Zaragoza compared to living in other cities such as Madrid or Barcelona lies in the fact that Zaragoza offers a high standard of living at a more affordable cost. The average monthly rate for a whole flat is around 560 €/month, and obviously, the price varies depending on how many people you live with. Also, the University plays quite an important role in the city, so chances are that you will end up sharing a flat with students or recent graduates. But it all depends on what you are looking for!

## 3. International, open and tolerant atmosphere

Throughout its history, Zaragoza has traditionally welcomed people from very different cultural backgrounds. Nowadays, walking through the central *Plaza del Pilar* is enough to fully appreciate that multiculturalism is still at the core of the city, as you will be able to hear the traditional *maño* (local)

accent mingling with accents from all over the world just in that square. But tolerance in Zaragoza is not only limited to the beauty of the melting pot of cultures found on its streets; it goes far beyond that. Various cultural awareness associations have been making their presence felt in the city for many years, for example by organising informative workshops, and promoting of acceptance and respect of minorities and marginalised groups such as the LGTB+ community, immigrants, and the homeless population.

#### 4. Zaragoza is a dynamic city offering a broad range of cultural activities

No matter what your interests may be, Zaragoza offers a wide range of cultural activities, with something to suit everyone. Throughout my three-month internship period in Zaragoza, I have seen posters for concerts of all kinds of music genres ranging from classical Spanish guitar to indie, photography exhibitions, magic shows and workshops as well as theatre, ballet and dance performances. I have always felt that the city's vibrant cultural landscape made it very easy to make the most of the Zaragoza experience. Faced with such a varied range of things to do, I just had to choose. For example, I will never forget my weekly Flamenco dance classes!

#### 5. Beautifully preserved architecture

During my stay in Zaragoza I was lucky enough to live very close to the historic quarter, so I just loved going for little walks there after work. Just by walking down the streets of Zaragoza you can tell that its architecture is a reflection of more than 2000 years of history. I found it very interesting that within less than a mile of each other you can find a Moorish palace (La Aljafería) and a Roman Catholic baroque temple (Basílica de Nuestra Señora del Pilar) as well as temples, towers and other architectural wonders built by Romans, Muslims, Jews and Christians throughout the history of Zaragoza. Truly inspiring!

#### 6. Juepincho nights!

Every Thursday evening, the bars in the Magdalena district of Zaragoza offer a *caña* (glass of beer) and a *pincho* (small-sized portion of some food, also called '*tapa*') at a lower price than usual. This promotion, called Juepincho ("*Jueves*", which means "Thursday" + "*pincho*") is immensely popular and leads to bars being absolutely packed out with people enjoying the cheap food and drink. In order to make the most of the experience, my colleagues and I went to one bar and ordered the Juepincho special, then moved on to other bars offering the promotion until we were full. Definitely a great, easy way to get out there and mingle!

#### 7. Mouthwatering Spanish and Aragonese cuisine

Speaking of *pinchos*, it would be a crime not to mention Spanish cuisine in general. Of course, everyone talks about it, but honestly, being in Spain and grabbing a bite of an authentic Mediterranean dish is a heavenly experience that really lives up to the hype. The choice is endless: tortilla, *bravas* potatoes, ham croquettes, *cochinillo* (suckling pig), garlic shrimp... And the Aragonese specialties are also worth trying: *longaniza* (Spanish sausage similar to chorizo), *ternasco asado* (roast

lamb meat) or *frutas de Aragón* (a confit of fruit covered in chocolate). In short, Zaragoza may well be the perfect destination for foodies!

## 8. Long hikes in the Aragonese Pyrenees at the weekends

Having lived in Scotland over the last few years I thought Spain might struggle to match the splendour and immense natural beauty of the Scottish Highlands. However I was very wrong! My first sight of the Aragonese Pyrenees, with their craggy mountain tops piercing bright blue skies, their lush valleys and thundering rivers, truly took my breath away. The closer you get the wilder they are and there is a huge variety of flora and fauna. On my various trips I have been lucky to catch glimpses of wild goats, Griffon vultures and the notoriously shy marmots. Hiking trails lace throughout the mountain ranges and there are plenty of mountaineering groups based in Zaragoza. This, along with the fact that the Pyrenees are a mere hour and a half away, means that it's easy to escape the city for a long day (or a weekend with a stay in a *refugio*) in the mountains. There are also a whole range of mountain activities on offer including climbing, canyoning, trekking, zip-lining. In winter you can lace up your ski boots and take to the snowy slopes...the Aragonese Pyrenees definitely offer adventure throughout the seasons.

## 9. Strategic location in Spain to travel around

Zaragoza also enjoys an ideal geographical location. The Ebro river, which flows through the city's centre, served as one of the main waterways of the Iberian peninsula in ages past, bringing trade and vitality to Zaragoza. Nowadays, Zaragoza is even better connected to the rest of the country and beyond, with an international airport, access to the high-speed AVE train network, and a range of regular bus routes to neighbouring towns and cities. And thanks to Zaragoza's handy location – right in the centre of the region of Aragon, close to the Pyrenees and the French border, as well as being the midpoint on the route between the bustling cultural hotspots of Madrid and Barcelona – a trip to somewhere a little further afield will only take the blink of an eye, making Zaragoza the perfect home base for a little adventuring.

## 10. Friendly inhabitants!

When all's said and done, objectivity can only get you so far – there could be dozens of points in Zaragoza's favour, but all of that would count for nothing if the general atmosphere in the city was unpleasant. Luckily, that's not the case! In fact, you'd be hard-pressed not to feel comfortable in Zaragoza, right from the start of your stay; a sense of warmth and welcome permeates the city, whose inhabitants are almost universally kind, friendly, and always up for a chat! Zaragoza just has that special "something", that indefinable quality that can put anyone at ease in seconds – that feeling of a home away from home.