

In 'land of castles,' a Spanish village is reborn from ruins

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It is a silent village of dirt lanes, stone houses, heavy wooden doors and wrought-iron balconies and street lamps. The only sounds permeating the stillness are crooning birds and, every so often, a peasant clomping by on his donkey.

But this is not just one of the countless Spanish villages of goat-track paths and a jumble of crumbling abodes.

As is typical of other villages in rugged Castile, Medinaceli dominates its surrounding domain as it has for centuries from high on a hill above windswept plains. Yet unlike elsewhere in the region, a legacy is quietly being resurrected here, and the village is no longer going unnoticed.

North and South Americans and Europeans have bought and are restoring houses that were going to ruin. Spaniards from Madrid have been refurbishing ancient homes for weekend retreats. And the writers, professors, history buffs and art lovers that now come visiting find even the government at work restoring the many historic monuments.

Among the sundry artists now living or working here are two who adopted Medinaceli as their home 17 years ago, becoming probably its first foreign residents since Moorish times as well as the driving force behind its architectural and cultural rebirth. When they stumbled upon Medinaceli while searching for an inspirational haven, it was seemingly just one of the region's many dying settlements. But before long, the entire village had been designated a national monument and a new 20th century script was written for this

once important stronghold.

Castile means "land of castles," and it is a terrain that nature seemingly created for castle-building. It is on Spain's arid, sparsely populated Meseta Plateau, where rivers twist through ravines between jutting, rock-capped pinnacles, mesas and hills. The Castilian campaign launched in 1058 by Ferdinand I to expel the Moors, which ultimately united all of Spain's kingdoms, pivoted on the scores of fortresses built atop these natural, bastion-like summits, walled cities such as Avila with its 11th century turrets and portals.

On a loop through Soria province, an untraveled backwater of today's Castile, I discovered Medinaceli hidden in a hinterland where peasants plow their fields and tend their sheep in the shadow of forgotten, crumbling castles and walls — languishing testimonials to Spain's birth. Not only the castles are languishing: With the young migrating to the cities and leaving only the old in ancient settings haunted by the spirits of those fallen in great battles, time is also running out for Soria's historic, intriguing villages.

There is Gormaz, where the few remaining villagers live below the ruins of what was once Europe's largest castle. Rello is almost deserted today, but its stone fortress, clinging to the rock face of a cliff, could be Soria's perfect movie set, with the actors just temporarily on a break. Amid ruined castle and walls, Calatañazor's several dozen old inhabitants still cook in huge, cone-shaped, Celtiberian kitchens.

Soria conceals many surprises, but, alas, only Medinaceli is certain it (See SPAIN on 11-H)



Avila typifies walled cities from which Ferdinand I waged battles that beat Moors

Castilian village reborn from ruins

SPAIN, from I-H

won't become a ghost town with a dashing but forgotten past. Medinaceli is the phoenix.

From Madrid, Medinaceli can be reached by train and then taxi, but if you want to do some exploring as well, rent a car (from \$6 to \$15 per day and 5 cents to 10 cents per mile; gas about \$2.50 per gallon) and drive 93 miles up Highway 11 (in the direction of Guadalejara). Then motor two miles up a road filled with switchbacks — 3,000 twisting feet up the mesa — and you are there.

A behemoth landmark guarding Medinaceli's entrance, a massive Roman triple-arch, the only one of its kind in Spain, crowns the approach. At the top, the panorama through the arch is awesome and sweeping: the serpentine Jalon River traversing the cultivated patchwork of the Jalon Valley, the play of the sun on golden wheat fields and miles of stark Castile. It's also a site for enjoying brilliant bronze sunsets. The arch frames the spot where the sun sinks from sight.

Passing under the arch, you enter what was Ocilis to the Celtiberians, who founded it 10 centuries before Christ; Medinacelina to the Moors, who took it from the Visigoths, who had wrested it from centuries of Roman imperium; and finally Medinaceli to the Castilians, who drove out the Moors in 1104.

Christopher Columbus came here to convince the Duke of Medinaceli (also the admiral of the Spanish fleet) to intercede with Queen Isabella to permit and finance his first voyage.

Medinaceli prospered under successive occupiers (each leaving behind an architectural legacy) until falling into decay (as did most of Castile) with the decline of Spanish power in the 19th century. And thus stood a dying Medinaceli in 1963, seemingly due to share the fate of the other villages of the province, when American painter John Sanders and his British wife, Jill, a sculptor, purchased a 700-year-old nobleman's house for \$2,000 the very first day their eyes fell upon the ancient settlement.

Their work (mostly sculpted busts and wholesome scenes reminiscent of Norman Rockwell) and enthusiasm caught up the sleepy village and revived it. Today it is one of Spain's most popular art colonies. Their

"Galleria de Arte" hosts thousands of visitors annually and their calendar is booked with commissions well into the future. The arch is now even the subject of an annual international painting contest.

Medinaceli's artistic flowering, aided by the precedent the Sanders set by restoring their own old mansion, brought aficionados of many nationalities to restore houses in keeping with past architectural schemes. And then when the government got wind of what was happening, it got into the restoration act, too, after declaring Medinaceli a national monument.

So now, Spaniards, foreigners and the Spanish government are working together in resurrecting the past.

The honeycomb of cisterns and tunnels constructed during 400 years of Moorish rule is virtually intact again, while the Moorish gate already has been partly reconstructed.

Past Medinacelians rest in peace inside the completely restored Roman fortress-turned-cemetery, and various other restorations continue, including work on the Colegiata, the 400-year-old cathedral.

Furthermore, there are still some houses and even several large palaces on the market awaiting rescue from neglect. And, like every Medinacelian abode, they come with their own Roman pillars; at some point, the crumbling Roman villas were torn down and the pillars divided up among the inhabitants.

If you just want to stay overnight, there's only one lodging up top, a government hotel (\$3.50 a night per person without private bath) next to the arch. However, down on the highway are several pensions, the one-star Hotel Duque (\$5 singles and \$9 doubles, with private bath) and the three-star Hotel Nico (\$12 singles

and \$20 doubles, with private bath). By the arch is Restaurant Meson for a scrumptious meal.

Summer weekends are probably the best time to visit Medinaceli. This is when weekenders from Madrid, curious tourists and denizens of Spain's art circles pour in to break the usual silence, and the social life hums. As Jill Sanders put it, "This is the Peyton Place of Spain . . . the crazy stories and things that go on here. This place has changed so much."

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