

PORTRAIT OF A CITY

Goya learned to paint in pretty Zaragoza —and it's every bit as inspiring today

BENEATH the altar of one of Madrid's finest churches lies the body of Francisco de Goya. Floating above him are the angels and archangels he painted more than 200 years ago and it's a beautiful thought that here, in San Antonio de la Florida, the artist and his creation are forever united in celestial harmony.

At least it would be, were Goya not missing his head. Legend has it that it was removed for medical research. A student prankster later filled his skull with chickpeas and water, whereupon it exploded.

Such indignity. When the great man died in 1828, he was feted throughout Europe, seen as a worthy successor to that other Spanish titan, Diego Velazquez.

That fame is the reason the National Gallery in London is devoting its autumn blockbuster to Goya: The Portraits, which opens today.

It'll be the first show in Britain to concentrate on his portraiture, with many artworks seen here for the first time. Masterpieces such as his Duchess Of Alba (1797) — pictured inset and on loan to London until January 10 — and Duke Of Wellington (1812-14) will come as a shock to those who only know Goya for his later, brutal works such as the Disasters Of War series.

At the height of his powers Goya was struck by a near-fatal illness that rendered him profoundly deaf. Afterwards his art became rather preoccupied with mortality and madness. So if that late work is Goya: Apocalypse Now, then this earlier period is Goya:

High Society.

But better than jostling with the crowds at the National Gallery is to take yourself off to Goya's home town of Zaragoza, the capital of the north-eastern Aragon region. Apprenticed to a local painter, aged 13, Goya spent his early years here before seeking fame as a court painter in Madrid.

Zaragoza, half-way between the capital and Barcelona, lies in the middle of a desert plain. For Goya, born to a humble craftsman in a hamlet nearby, the sight of its

church towers and Moorish palaces looming out of the arid land, must have been alluring.

Today, this delightful city makes a perfect weekend break.

It's remarkably good value.

Booking ourselves into a swanky hotel, the Palafox, in the centre of the old town, we enjoyed a five-star break at three-star prices.

After a break-fast of tortilla and churros, those addictive Spanish doughnuts, we were delighted to find that the hotel had a gym and rooftop pool to work it all off.

Although Zaragoza is Spain's fifth largest city, with an ancient history, it remains largely off the tourist trail for most Brits. But Spaniards

know better. This really is secret Spain. Wander around the old town and you'll find Roman ruins,

renaissance palaces and Moorish architecture side by side. And, after Santiago de Compostela, Zaragoza is Spain's second most popular pilgrimage.

Legend has it that St James was preaching in the area in AD40 when the Virgin Mary appeared to him on top of a pillar and urged him to build a chapel on the banks of the river Ebro. Today, the baroque Basilica of Our Lady of the Pillar, dating from the 17th century, houses that sacred jasper pillar. Indeed, so many of the faithful visit each year to kiss it that the jasper has nearly worn away.

The young Goya was chosen to decorate the ceiling of the church's choir stalls and one of its domes. An honour, but one that nearly ended in disgrace.

When the painter presented his

sketches for approval by the church governors, he was told one of his females was showing too much breast. Could he cover up? Goya acquiesced and crisis was averted.

It's hardly arduous to appreciate this Spanish genius in his home town. There are no queues in the



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galleries, nor throngs in the arch-bishop's palace. And there is always somewhere to recover from museum fatigue. Zaragozans rightly pride themselves on their gastronomy.

'People come all the way from Madrid to eat our tapas,' they told us. My advice would be to explore the El Tubo area around Calle Martires and Estebanes. Look out for the local sausage, longaniza, and suckling lamb. How restoring it was to fall upon a glass of local carinena wine and jamon de teruel (ham).

On one tapas crawl, we found it difficult to spend more than £15 each. Returning to our hotel, we crossed the main square, the Plaza del Pilar. There was Goya himself, cast in bronze. What a fine figure. What a magnificent head.

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TRAVEL FACTS

RYANAIR (0843 658 0899, ryanair.com) flies to Zaragoza from £35 return. Doubles at the Hotel Palafox (03497 6237 700, palafoxhoteles.com) from £75. Also see zaragozaturismo.es and spain.info. Goya: The Portraits at the National Gallery (020 7747 2885, nationalgallery.org.uk) runs until January 10, 2016.



LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

FANCY eating like a local? Then order the pig's ear or pig's brain Spanish omelettes, two of around 30 porcine dishes on the menu at Zaragoza's Tortilla Museum

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Picture: ALAMY

High art: The Basilica of Our Lady of The Pillar in Zaragoza. Inset: The Duchess of Alba by Goya