

El Escorial or the Royal Site of San Lorenzo de El Escorial is a historical residence of the King of Spain, in the town of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, about 28 miles northwest of the Spanish capital, Madrid. It is one of the Spanish royal sites and functions as a monastery, basilica, royal palace, pantheon, library, museum, university, school and hospital. The building's cornerstone was laid on April 23, 1563. In 1574, the Basilica begins, which will be finished in 1582, at the same time that the Library begins. September 13, 1584: the last stone is laid. El Escorial comprises two architectural complexes of great historical and cultural significance: the royal monastery itself and *La Granjilla de La Fresneda*, a royal hunting lodge and monastic retreat. These sites have a dual nature; that is to say, during the 16th and 17th centuries, they were places in which the power of the Spanish monarchy *and* the ecclesiastical predominance of the Roman Catholic religion in Spain found a common architectural manifestation.

El Escorial was, at one time, a monastery and a Spanish royal palace, although Philip II is the only monarch who ever lived in the main building. Established with a community of Hieronymite monks, it has become a monastery of the Order of Saint Augustine. It was also a boarding school. Philip II of Spain (who reigned 1556–1598) engaged the Spanish architect Juan Bautista de Toledo to be his collaborator in the building of the complex at El Escorial. Toledo had spent the greater part of his career in Rome, where he had worked on St. Peter's Basilica, and in Naples, where he had served the king's viceroy, whose recommendation brought him to the king's attention. Philip appointed him architect-royal in 1559, and together they designed El Escorial as a monument to Spain's role as a center of the Christian world.

Under the royal chapel of the Basilica is the Royal Pantheon. El Escorial has been the burial site for most of the Spanish kings of the last five centuries. The first thing one finds upon arriving to El Escorial is the main façade. This has three doors: the middle one leads to the Courtyard of the Kings and the side ones lead to a school and the other to a monastery. On the façade there is a niche where the image of a saint has been placed. The courtyard is an enclosure that owes its name to the statues of the Kings of Judah that adorn the façade of the Basilica, located at the back, from which one can access from the courtyard. This spectacular basilica has a floor in the shape of a Greek cross and an enormous cupola inspired by St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The most highly decorated part of the Church is the area surrounding the high altar. Behind the altar is a three-tiered altar screen, made of red granite and jasper, ninety-one feet tall, adorned with gilded bronze statuary by Leone Leoni, and three sets of religious paintings commissioned by Philip II. To either side are gilded life-size bronzes of the kneeling family groups of Charles and Philip. In a shallow niche at the center of the lowest level is the tabernacle, a repository for the physical elements of the communion ceremony, a so-called "House of the Sacrament", made of jasper and bronze. It was built between 1579 and 1586. On November 2, 1984, UNESCO declared The Royal Seat of San Lorenzo of El Escorial a World Heritage Site. It is a popular tourist attraction, more than 500,000 visitors come to El Escorial every year.

*“Beauty is the great need of man; it is the root from which springs the trunk of our peace and the fruits of our hope. Beauty is also revealing of God because, like Him, beautiful work is pure gratuitousness and it invites freedom”.* Pope Benedict XVI

