The town of Olite is in the centre of Navarre, and has one of the most outstanding monumental ensembles in the whole of Spain. The original town centre dates back to Roman times. It is a walled area, surrounded by 20 towers, which was constructed in the 1st century. This area is called the “Cercos de don Ceito”. From 1147 on the town grew significantly thanks to the privilege granted by King García Ramírez, and it expanded through the inner Roman wall to a larger outer area, also surrounded by a wall. Several towers and stretches of the Roman wall survive. Of the medieval walls, two defensive towers on the west side, the Torre del Chapitel or clock tower, the four gateways and the street names remain. The streets of the city have a medieval air and their names reflect the age: Rúa de la Judería, referring to the Jewish community that lived in the city, Rúa de la Talonera (tombstone), where the gambling house was located, and Rúa Villaveja. Many of the street names reflect the professions and lives of the citizens of medieval Olite. These streets are lined with Renaissance and Baroque palaces with large coats of arms and splendid wooden, brick or stone eaves. One of the most remarkable buildings is the Palacio del Marqués de Rada, which has an ashlar façade and a brick attic on which the wooden eaves rest. 

ROYAL HEADQUARTER

From the 13th century, Olite was one of the royal headquarter for the Navarrese kings, yet it was Charles III the Noble (1337 – 1425) who chose it as his preferred residency, giving it great splendour and grandiosity, as was habitual in European courts at that time. As testament to that time of glory stands the Royal Palace of Olite, declared a national monument in 1925. 

WINE CAPITAL

The winemaking sector deserves a special mention. The mild Mediterranean climate is one of the most important wine-growing areas in Europe. Since 1963, the Comarca de la Rioja Alavesa has been a reference for the production of white and red wines. Olite is a capital of wine where winemaking traditions date back to that time of glory, and there are many long-standing vineyards. With this event, the Navarrense wine industry is interested in promoting wine tourism and wine culture. The building comprises large solid walls with a series of recesses and projections. At the corners there are round towers with state roots that have replaced the original lead ones. Nowadays the entrance is through a large courtyard, the former garden with Sunville orange trees, which is next to two courtyards called “La Pajarera” and “La Morera”. Behind these is the King’s and Queen’s chambers on the ground floor. The Galería del Rey (king’s gallery) is on the first floor and the second floor communicates with a small courtyard, which today is called El Patio del Naranjo or Jardin de la Reina. The silhouette of the towers rises above the accommodation: La Torre del Homenaje, “La Torre de las Tres Coronas”, “La Torre de los Cuatro Vientos” and “La Torre del Vigía” (homage tower, three crowns tower, four winds tower and lookout tower). Olite’s royal palace was witness to the early Middle Ages, an era of splendour which put it on a par with the best European courts. According to court records the palace was luxuriously decorated with delicate plasterwork, glazed tiles, multicoloured coffered stained glass windows and domed ceilings. There were garden terraces, fountains, plants from far and wide. A few of the decorative features remain but nothing of the gardens. An example of this was the gardens with their exotic plants such as orange, lemon and grapefruit trees, and jasmine. The plants were watered by a complex system of lead pipes and a reservoir which allowed the water to be taken up to the hanging gardens in copper buckets. The palace even had its own small zoo. There was a lion house and it is known that there were also camels, African buffalo, a giraffe, squirrels, parrots and other exotic birds. For entertainment, they played pelota and a game with rackets. Jouthing tournaments were held on special occasions, such as the wedding between the Prince of Viana and Agnes of Cleves. A 15th-century German traveller wrote about the grandeur and luxury of the building “I am sure that no king could have a more beautiful palace or castle... it cannot be put into words, or even imagined, how magnificent or lavish that palace is”. After Navarre was annexed to Castile in 1512 the palace was left empty. It suffered even more deterioration after a fire in 1813, but the architects Javier and José Yáñez started work in 1817 to restore it to its present state. 

The old palace

The oldest part of this castle palace is the Palacio Viejo (old palace) located in the Plaza de los Teobaldos. Nowadays it is a state-owned hotel called “Parador”. It formed part of a fortress on the Roman site and was used by the Navarrese monarchs as a palace. Only the exterior halls and walls at the corners survive. Outstanding features of the façade include two Gothic windows, two escutcheons of the Erevux dynasty, the Renaissance main door and the tower, which is referred to as “La Torre de la Atalaya (lookout tower)” or “La Torre de la Giguela” (lookout’s tower). Between the old palace and the church of, Santa María lie the ruins of the building used undertaken in 1399 by Queen Leonor, the wife of Carlos III el Noble. 

Church of Santa Maria

Next to the palace is the Santa Maria church, a 13th century Gothic building. The entrance is one of the most important Navarrese Gothic sculpture ensembles. It was finished around 1300 and was clearly influenced by the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris. Formed with sculpted archivolt and a central tympanum supported on ambits, it has a very elaborate lintel. The entrance is framed on both sides by some arched doors holding sculptures of the apostles. A recent restoration brought out a large part of the façade’s original polychrome, making it exceptional beauty, as not many Gothic engravings have preserved their original colours. The atrium was added in around 1432, and has an entrance arch flanked by two sculptures: Doña Blanca de Navarra and the Virgin with the Child, which rest on corbels with the coat of arms of Doña Blanca and Juan II of Aragon, attributed to the work of the master sculptor Jehan de Loms. The understated interior is home to the noteworthy main altarpiece, which is from the Renaissance period with influences from Italian, Flemish and German painting. It was placed there in 1528, a little before the death of the craftsman who made it – Pedro de Aponte from Aragon. The altarpiece is presided by a Gothic sculpture of the Virgin with the Child, and contains 28 oil painted panels representing passages of the life of Christ and the Virgin Mary. There is also a preserved image of the Christ of the Good Death. This is a mid-14th century Gothic sculpture that allegedly comes from the lost Santa María la Real de San Lázaro. His head is tilted to one side over his body, and his ribs have been highlighted. The folds on the long loincloth are outstanding. 

A Tour of the city

1. Royal Palace of Olite

Olite wines have well-deserved prestige. The area produces whites and reds as well as young, vintage and grand reserve wines, and it is also well known for its muscatels, all with the Designation of Origin. 

2. Chapitel Tower – Plaza de Carlos III

The Olite Classical Theatre Festival is celebrated on a Sunday in the first half of September. With this event, the Navarrese Brotherhood of Wine marks the start of the annual grape campaign. Brotherhoood of Wine marks the start of the annual grape campaign.