

TRAVEL

A SPONTANEOUS GETAWAY

It's easy to feel at home in Madrid

Here are some suggestions for a visit to this magnificent European capital.

Nicole Pensiero For South Jersey Times

It was a trip planned on a whim: two friends ready for a little getaway somewhere (anywhere!) in Europe before winter's chill fully took hold. Spain — with its mild temperatures, many attractions and low prices — seemed a natural fit. After some debate, we opted for the capital city of Madrid. From its big city vibes and many museums to great dining and fantastic shopping, this is a city that has it all. Plus, it is quite inexpensive, not too touristy, and very welcoming — the common slogan shared by locals (known as madrileños) is “If you're in Madrid, you're from Madrid.” After only a few hours in this metropolis of 3.2 million people — 6.7 million if you count the surrounding communities — that statement felt very true. It's easy to feel at home here.

WELCOME TO MADRID

With fewer international tourists than Barcelona (but still drawing nearly 10 million visitors annually), we only met a few other Americans during our time in Madrid. And despite our very limited knowledge of the Spanish language, we felt immediately at ease in this walkable, safe and stylish city. Each day, we would set off by foot to explore, rarely taking a taxi or the metro. We even had time to enjoy a full day in nearby Toledo, a magnificent medieval city that had once been the country's capital.

We arrived in Madrid after an easy six-hour flight from Philadelphia, hopping in a cab for a set price of 30 euros (about \$32) for a quick drive to our centrally located hotel, the Porcel Ganivet. The price for our twin room was incredible: less than \$775 for five nights, with an included (and fantastic) buffet breakfast. Our room was clean and quiet, and we were happy to discover we could even open the window to get fresh air. (Even in mid-November, the temperatures in Spain were mild: in the mid- to upper 60s).

I'd visited Madrid before, but it had been years — and every previous trip was as part of a tour, meaning very limited free time. But this was different: We were on our own, with the luxury of time to get to know this enchanting city. We opted to get oriented with an 80-minute panoramic ride via Big Bus Madrid. A tour guide pointed out some famous landmarks, providing a worthwhile way to get the big picture of Madrid's size and scope. Adult tickets were €21 (about \$23).

EXPLORING BY FOOT

One of the words we often used to describe Madrid during our time there was “elegant.” With many visually stunning buildings from the early 1900s, there's a certain step-back-in-time vibe to this city. We fully experienced that sense of history on day one, as we strolled to the Plaza Mayor. This enormous esplanade in the city center was begun in the 17th century by King Phillip III — that's his bronze equestrian statue in the square's center. It was officially opened in 1620 and is today used for everything from rock concerts to outdoor markets. (During the Span-

ish Inquisition, this was the place for trials and public executions). We quickly learned that the Plaza Mayor is the ideal spot to enjoy sangria at an outdoor café, or people-watch — or both.

A 10-minute stroll from there leads to another Madrid landmark, the Puerta del Sol, considered the symbolic center of the entire country. A clock sits atop the plaza's main building, and every New Year's Eve, thousands of revelers gather here for the tradition of eating 12 grapes just before the clock strikes midnight. There's also a famous character in the square — the Bear by the Madroño tree sculpture — that represents Madrid's coat of arms. And let's not forget the other famous landmark at the Puerta del Sol: the Tio Pepe neon sign that adds a memorable touch to this classy city. If it's shopping you want, check out the array of high-end stores along the beautiful Gran Via. For more mid-range retail therapy, the nearby El Corte Ingles offers everything from clothing to cosmetics to electronics.

Highly walkable, with an inexpensive subway system and reasonably priced taxis, Madrid offers all that is best about Spain: a wealth of cultural attractions, tasty food, beautiful parks, and even flamenco.

Here are some suggestions for a visit to this magnificent European capital:

FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD

Madrid is known for its countless outdoor cafes and restaurants. We ate outside for nearly every meal and discovered our “go-to” place in our hotel's own neighborhood of La Latina (known for its many tapas bars, serving small plates of appetizers). After savoring delicious chicken kabobs with fresh peppers and onions our first night, we were sold on the bar/restaurant Cerveceria San Millan. A few days later, we returned for an authentic, freshly made paella. We also spent a fun couple of hours at a bar called Ataca Paca, just around the corner from our hotel. It was a hole-in-the-wall kind of place, with mostly locals relaxing in the late afternoon. But the food was glorious: anything you could want, from Madrid's ever-pop-

ular ham croquettes to Iberian ham or Tortilla Española (a Spanish omelet). As for beverages, the sangria you'll enjoy in Madrid is the real thing — this flavorful wine punch originated in Spain and Portugal. Any first-time visitor also needs to sample the any-time-of-day treat known as churros con chocolate (churros with chocolate), which is basically fried dough that you dip in a warm cup of pudding-like chocolate. You can enjoy this delicacy round-the-clock Thursday to Sunday at the famed Chocolateria San Gines, in business since 1894. A serving for two people is less than \$6.

GET CULTURED

The “Golden Triangle” of art comprises three world-class museums within walking distance of each other: The Prado, the Thyssen-Bornemisza and the Reina Sofia museum. The Prado is the most famous and houses works by Goya, El Greco and Velázquez. But the city's one most famous piece of art lives at the Reina Sofia. That massive painting is Pablo Picasso's masterpiece, “Guernica,” painted during the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) in the wake of the devastating bombing of the Basque city of Guernica. This stunning, black-and-white oil painting stands more than 11 feet tall and 26 feet wide. Filled with symbolism and stark images of pain and loss, it is regarded by many art critics as the most powerful anti-war painting in history. We were able to view it during one of the many free times offered throughout the week at the museum.

EXPLORE RETIRO PARK

Nature abounds at Parque del Buen Retiro, Madrid's most famous park, once reserved for Spanish royalty and aristocracy. “El Retiro” is adorned with ornate fountains, statues of Spanish writers and heroes, and open-air cafes. La Rosaleda rose garden has more than 4,000 roses in full bloom in May and June. The park's grounds have several landmarks, including the “Fallen Angel” statue (one of the only public statues of Lucifer in the world) and the city's oldest tree, which dates to 1386. You can also rent a rowboat at the

park; there were many out on the water during our November mid-week visit.

EXPERIENCE FLAMENCO

While southern Spain is the birthplace of flamenco, Madrid offers many live performances featuring the Spanish dance. You can watch the frenetic spectacle in big, touristy rooms like Teatro Flamenco, or smaller venues like Flamenco Torres Bermejas, where we went. Opened in 1960, this club was beautifully decorated and lit. The performers included two women and one male dancer, a singer and a guitarist. The performers' passion was evident and spectators often called out “Olé!” in approval during the 50-minute show.

ENJOY A SIDE TRIP

We booked a full-day excursion to nearby Toledo (about an hour's drive from Madrid) via getyourguide.com. For only \$25 per person, we were transported by bus to and from this ancient city, enjoyed a brief walking tour, then had four hours on our own to explore. We did some window shopping, some real shopping — Toledo is known for its magnificent gold inlaid jewelry — and visited Santo Tomé Church to see the dramatic 1586 El Greco painting “The Burial of the Count of Orgaz.” Known as the “City of Three Cultures” — Muslims, Jews and Christians lived peacefully together here for centuries — Toledo was also the capital of the Spanish kingdom until 1560. Its historic quarter, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, still has its original medieval layout, making it a fascinating (albeit somewhat confusing) place to explore. Another popular side trip from Madrid is to Segovia, known for its famous Roman aqueduct.

We couldn't see and do it all during our five-day adventure, but we got a great taste of all that Madrid offers, and we'll be back someday to explore more.

For more information about Madrid, visit: esmadrid.com/en

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An aerial shot of Madrid's Plaza Mayor shows its Christmas Market and holiday tree — along with the accompanying crowds. The market is in place until the end of December. Photos by Álvaro López, Madrid Destino



The Puerta del Sol, which translates to “Gate of the Sun,” the physical center of Madrid.



At Chocolateria San Gines, visitors and locals enjoy churros with chocolate.