

Madrid is Perfect

as the Holiday Season Begins

Story and Photos by Nicole Pensiero

An aerial shot of Madrid's Puerta del Sol shows where thousands gather on New Year's Eve to usher in the New Year and eat 12 lucky grapes to the 12 chimes of the clock tower. Photo by Álvaro López © Madrid Destino



The Tio Pepe sign at the Puerta del Sol is a famous landmark in Madrid, and adds a touch of kitsch to this classy city. Photo by Álvaro López© Madrid Destino



Many would say that the sun-drenched country of Spain is best enjoyed in the warm weather. But a trip to Madrid at the start of the holiday season delighted us with some of the country's lesser known charms – and we enjoyed them all without the sweltering heat and massive crowds.

Our trip was 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, countless cultural attractions, and famously low prices -- seemed a natural fit. After some debate, we opted for the capital city of Madrid.

From its big city vibes and world-class museums to great dining and fantastic shopping, this is a city that has it all. Plus, it's pretty darn inexpensive and extremely welcoming – the common slogan shared by locals (known as *madrileños*) is “If you're in Madrid, you're from Madrid.”

Getting Settled In

After only a few hours in this metropolis of 3.2 million people – 6.7 million if you count the surrounding communities – we could not agree more with a feeling of being at home. With fewer international tourists than Barcelona (but still drawing 10 million visitors annually), we only met a few other Americans during our time in the Spanish capital.

And despite our limited knowledge of the Spanish language, we felt immediately at ease in this walkable, safe, and stylish city. Each day, we would set off on 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 capital of the kingdom.

We arrived in Madrid after a direct flight from Philadelphia, then hopped 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 nothing less than incredible: about \$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). In the warmer months, there's a rooftop pool to enjoy.

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.

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.

Photo by Álvaro López © Madrid Destino



The Elegance of Madrid

One of the words we often used to describe Madrid during our time there was “elegant.” With many visually stunning buildings from the early late 1890s and 1900s – including the picture-perfect Metropolis building along the Gran Vía -- 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, only a 10-minute stroll from our hotel.

This enormous esplanade took us as far back even further in time – it was begun in the 17th century by King Phillip III – that’s his bronze equestrian statue in the square’s center. Officially opened in 1620, it is today used for everything from rock

concerts to outdoor markets – there was a Christmas market being set up during our visit. (It’s quite a festive and fun place now, but during the Spanish Inquisition, the Plaza Mayor was the setting for trials and public executions). We quickly learned that it 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 a fabulous, massive green tinsel tree set up there during the

holiday season. And, speaking of holiday decorations, this is a city that truly dazzles: breathtaking colored lights are everywhere, and are especially fantastic along the massive Gran Vía.

If it’s shopping you want, head over to shop (or window shop) amid high-end stores along the beautiful Gran Vía. For more mid-range retail therapy, the nearby El Corte Inglés, offers everything from clothing to cosmetics to electronics. Madrid is highly walkable, with an inexpensive subway system and reasonably priced taxis, offering all that is best about Spain: a wealth of cultural attractions, tasty food, beautiful parks, and even flamenco.

*The Plaza Mayor is great for grabbing a bite to eat or people-watching -- often enjoyed at the same time.
Photo by Paolo Giocoso ©Madrid Destino*



Café Life - Even in the Off-Season

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 Millán. 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-popular 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 to Madrid also needs to sample the any-time-of-day treat known as Churros con Chocolate (Churros with Chocolate) -- basically fried dough that you dip in a warm cup of pudding-like chocolate. You can enjoy this delicious delicacy round-the-clock Thursday to Sunday at the famous La Chocolateria San Gines, in business since 1894. A serving for two people is less than \$6.



*At Chocolateria San Gines, visitors and locals enjoy Churros with Chocolate, available round-the-clock Wednesday through Sunday.
Photo by Álvaro López © Madrid Destino*

Pablo Picasso's most famous work -- the striking anti-war masterpiece, "Guernica" -- draws locals and tourists alike to the Reina Sofia Museum.



Get Cultured

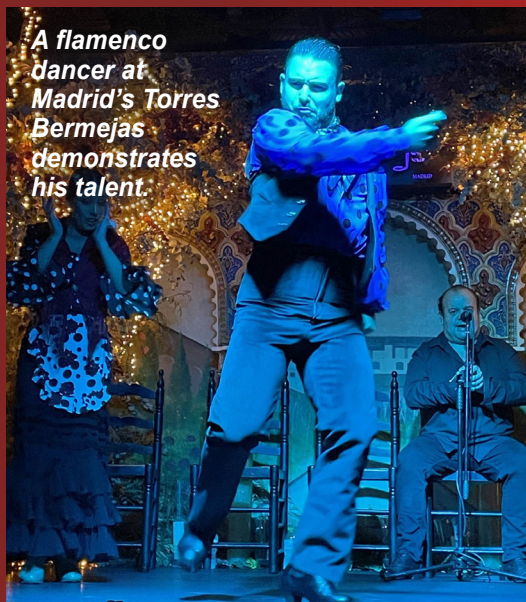
The city's "Golden Triangle" of art comprises three world-class museums within walking distance of each other: The Prado, the Thyssen-Bornemisza, and the Reina Sofia museum. The Prado is the most famous and houses works by Goya, El Greco, and Velázquez. But the city's most famous piece of art lives at 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, *Guernica* 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.

From there, we took a stroll to the famous Parque del Buen Retiro, once reserved for Spanish royalty and aristocracy. "El Retiro" is adorned with

ornate fountains, statues of Spanish writers and heroes, and open-air cafes. Warm weather visitors might catch La Rosaleda rose garden, with its 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 back to 1386. You can also rent a rowboat at the park; there were many people on the water during our mid-November visit.



A flamenco dancer at Madrid's Torres Bermejas demonstrates his talent.



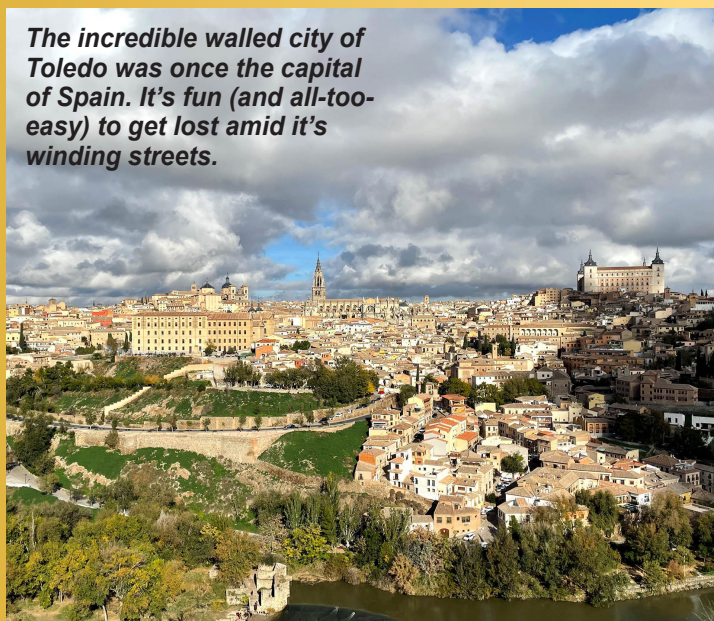
Flamenco performers -- which include three dancers, a singer and a guitarist -- take their bows at Madrid's Torres Bermejas flamenco show.

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 with colorful lighting and an abundance of ambiance. 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

The incredible walled city of Toledo was once the capital of Spain. It's fun (and all-too-easy) to get lost amid it's winding streets.



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 peaceably 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 winding medieval layout, making it a fascinating (albeit confusing) place to explore – we made our way back to the bus by luck and a photo I'd taken of a nearby store I could look up on Google Maps! 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