



# REIN IN SPAIN

VALENCIA AND MADRID MARRY MODERN AND CLASSIC SPAIN



BY LISA SHAMES

What surprises me most when I visit Spain isn’t the incredible food (*jamón* makes me very happy I’m no longer a vegetarian), the friendly natives (ask for directions and don’t be surprised if the person takes you by the arm and walks you there), the music (you *have* heard of flamenco, right?) or even how darn cool it is (two words: Javier Bardem). No, what makes me really stop and think is that it wasn’t all that long ago—1975, to be exact—that Spain was still under the rule of a cruel dictator (see last year’s powerful film *Pan’s Labyrinth* for some insight into Franco’s regime). Since then, Spain has quickly made up for lost time with a booming economy, a cultural awakening and huge social reforms, including the legalization of gay marriage and adoption. (The fact that Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero withdrew Spanish troops from Iraq the day after he was elected is the icing on the *tarta*.) Here’s what else you need to know before visiting Valencia and Madrid.

## VALENCIA

Known primarily for its namesake orange, as the birthplace of *paella*, and its annual Las Fallas festival, Valencia has taken great strides in the last few years to embrace the future. And it shows. But don’t worry: This western Mediterranean city hasn’t forgotten its historically rich past, either (it isn’t home to the Holy Grail for nothing).

**Stay:** Splurge and be like Mike—Jordan, that is—and get a room at the five-star Westin ([westin.com/valencia](http://westin.com/valencia)). This 135-room, three-story hotel—a fave of Valencia’s soccer team, as well as the b-ball legend—occupies what once was a factory circa 1909, but you would never know it with its lush garden courtyard, Art Deco-designed rooms and modern décor. A deluxe hostel may sound like an oxymoron, but Rooms Deluxe ([roomsdeluxe.com](http://roomsdeluxe.com)) manages to pull it off with 28 themed rooms—a Buddhist temple suite, perhaps?—decorated by different artists.

**Eat:** Not only is La Lola ([lalolarestaureante.com](http://lalolarestaureante.com)) a super-hip restaurant in a central location that also happens to serve great food (think creative Mediterranean dishes), but after midnight it morphs into a club complete with local DJs. You may think you’ve had *paella* before, but unless you were in Valencia—they grow the rice here, after all—it wasn’t the real deal. Get yours at Tapelia ([tapelia.com](http://tapelia.com)).

**Do:** It’s kind of hard to miss the all-white City of Arts and Sciences ([cac.es](http://cac.es)), considering it occupies nearly four million square feet and includes an opera house, a planetarium, a marine park and a science museum. Its futuristic architecture alone—partially designed by hometown boy wonder Santiago Calatrava (he’s also the designer of the Milwaukee Art Museum and Chicago’s yet-to-be-built Spire)—is worth checking out. It might seem silly to go all the way to Spain to visit a zoo, but the recently opened Bioparc ([bioparcvalencia.es](http://bioparcvalencia.es)) implements a zoo-immersion concept—look ma, no cages!—that recreates the 4,000 animals’ natural habitats with various species coexisting in the same space.

**Insider’s Tips:** Take a break from sightseeing and stroll the River Turia, an old riverbed that has been turned into a sunken park filled with walking paths, ponds, cafes and fountains. With some 700 stalls, the Central Market is a food-lover’s paradise—the 1928 building it’s housed in, with its vaulted cast-iron frame, glass dome ceiling and Spanish ceramics, is yummy, too—as well as one of Europe’s



oldest markets. Try not to gawk at the beautiful legs of cured pork.

## MADRID

Everybody visiting Spain always talks about Barcelona, but Madrid deserves just as much attention. From Chueca, with its hip restaurants, artists and cool gay bars to neighboring grungy-in-a-good-way Malasaña to La Latina and its abundance of great tapas spots, the Spanish capital has it going on. And don’t even think about hitting the bars before midnight. There’s a reason the locals are called *gatos* (cats).

**Stay:** De Las Letras Hotel and Restaurante ([hoteldelasletras.com](http://hoteldelasletras.com)), DL to those in the know, located right in the heart of Madrid on Gran Vía, reminds me why I love Spain so much: It manages to beautifully combine the old (a restored 1917 building with its original glazed tiles) and the new (bright red walls, mod furniture) with a nod to the arts (walls are inscribed with quotes by famous writers and poets). And with its modern design, free in-room Internet and hydro-massage showers, the Petit Palace Puerta del Sol ([hthotels.com](http://hthotels.com)) sure doesn’t feel like a budget hotel.

**Eat:** Couldn’t score a reservation at uber-chef Ferran Adrià’s restaurant El Bulli? You’re not the only one. Console yourself at Fast Good ([fast-good.com](http://fast-good.com)). This multi-starred chef’s take on fast food? A hamburger topped with olive tapenade and French fries cooked in Spanish olive oil. Think of the street Cava Baja near Plaza Mayor as one-stop eating for some of the

best tapas in Madrid. Follow the crowds as you wander from restaurant to restaurant until you say, “*No más*.” Before you hit the bars in Chueca, stop by the bi-level Bazaar ([restaurantbazaar.com](http://restaurantbazaar.com)) for easy-on-the-wallet, creative Mediterranean food.

**Do:** The Prado Museum ([museodelprado.es](http://museodelprado.es)) may be almost 200 years old, but it’s ready for its close-up with a recent \$210 million expansion that almost doubles its size. Or, if you like your museums more intimate, check out the Museum Sorolla ([museosorolla.mcu.es](http://museosorolla.mcu.es)), which features works of painter Joaquín Sorolla, famous for his landscapes and portraits that capture Spain on a canvas, displayed in the artist’s last home. Make like the Madrileños and head to El Retiro on Sunday. Once the royal garden, this sprawling park features a museum, a lake, a beautiful iron-and-glass building (Crystal Palace) and plenty of groping couples (must be all that fresh air).

**Insider’s Tips:** There are two things to know before going to El Rastro, the Sunday-only flea market that takes over the streets of the Lavapiés district and is full of lots of stuff you’ll want and even more that you won’t: Get there early and keep your money in your front pocket. If you learn only one word in Spanish, make sure it’s *rebajas* (sale). In Spain, stores have sales only twice a year—in January-February and July-August—which may sound harsh until you realize that the discounts, often 50 percent off and more, are the real deal.