



SPAIN'S NEW REIGN

BY MEREDITH STANTON

Madrid has *duende*—soul—in spades. Make the scene and you'll discover an evolving, eccentric epicenter for the arts that embraces its roots while making room for the latest revolution.

“Madrileños are very metropolitan now,” I’m told on more than one occasion during my recent trip to Madrid. “We like musicals.” Walk along Calle Gran Vía, the city’s unofficial theater district, and the blaring billboards underscore this point to an extreme. The first Spanish productions of *The Producers* and *Mamma Mia!* performed sold-out shows here last spring and summer (even extending their runs due to their popularity), and *Jesus Christ Superstar* takes the stage in September.

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Clockwise from top: The Prado's expansion, the Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and the Palacio Real.

ing and cultivating well-known painters, artisans and writers for centuries.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Madrid's museums, dedicated to displaying the works that reflect the country's history. If you're looking for the best of Madrid, head to the **Paseo del Prado**, a wide, tree-lined boulevard extending from the Estación de Atocha to the Plaza de Cibeles, an 18th-century fountain dedicated to Cybele, the Greco-Roman goddess of nature. It is here that you will discover three of Spain's best-regarded repositories for the visual arts.

El Museo del Prado (Paseo del Prado; +34-91-330-28-00; museoprado.mcu.es) is the city's largest and arguably best-known museum. Designed in 1785 and opened officially as a museum in 1819, it's also one of the oldest homages to art in the city. It houses revolutionary works from Goya and Velázquez, including his notorious *Las Meninas*. But even here, things are changing: This October, the museum will unveil its first expansion in 200 years. The \$202.6 million addi-

Is this really the same town that saw the rise of 17th-century masters Diego Velázquez and Francisco de Goya? The stomping grounds of American novelist Ernest Hemingway, who first arrived here in 1923 and visited the city every year thereafter? The backdrop for Pablo Picasso's formative training?

And what of more modern masters, such as filmmaker Pedro Almodovar—he of *Volver* and *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* fame? I didn't travel here to find the results of artistic globalization; I was looking for the *real* Madrid. I set off to discover it, with the goal of happening upon more than just Broadway and billboards in this bustling town of 3 million.



History on Display

Thanks to a succession of divergent rulers throughout history and a near 40-year fling with fascism, the city has always been a melting pot of clashing cultures and ideas, the new and the old, into one eccentric mix of Spanish—and just about everything else.

Take the architecture. In the **Banca de España** square alone, travelers will see Baroque and Bourbon coupled alongside Art Deco and Art Nouveau. Stately Roman fountains and Parisianesque boulevards sit side-by-side with retro storefronts and steel-and-glass office buildings.

Perhaps this dynamic, combustible confluence is what makes Madrid such a magnet for the artistically inclined, attract-

tion will increase the museum's space by 50 percent, adding an additional 15,000 square feet of temporary exhibition space. Catch the first exhibition devoted to Flemish painter Joachim Patinir there this fall.

The **Thyssen-Bornemisza** (Paseo del Prado 8; +34-91-369-01-51; www.museo-thyssen.org) is one of Spain's few privately assembled art collections, and exhibits a full range of artists from Titian to Edward Hopper. Like the Prado, the Thyssen underwent a massive renovation in 2004 and now has space for 250 more paintings. Among the gems here are Picasso's *Harlequin with a Mirror* and Degas' *Swaying Dancer*, as well as an extensive exhibition of Van Gogh, on view until Sept. 16.



The third, **Centro de Arte Reina Sofía** (Calle Santa Isabel 52; +34-91-774-10-00; www.museoreinasofia.es), holds Madrid's contemporary art collection. Housed in an 18th-century hospital building, the Reina Sofía got a total makeover from French architect Jean Nouvel in 2005 and now features exterior glass elevators and a spruced-up interior. It also holds arguably the most famous work of the 20th century, Picasso's antiwar masterpiece, *Guernica*. Picasso had vowed the painting would not return to Spain until after fascist dictator General Francisco Franco's death and the fall of his regime. In 1981, his dream came true when *Guernica* proudly took its place in Madrid.

The **Parque del Retiro** (Calle de Alfonso XII and Calle de Alcalá) is a short walk east from the museums. There you'll find a large lake, as well as the **Palacio de Cristal**, a massive iron-and-glass structure, which often hosts temporary art shows from the Reina Sofía. Rent a paddleboat and head out on the water, or simply rest your feet on the massive colonnade.

Stepping Out

When defining art, Madrileños often refer to *duende*, which, loosely translated, means spirit, an essence or soul. The term is traditionally applied to flamenco, that historic but wild art often found in the underbelly of Madrid's gypsy neighborhoods.

Along with the influx of Broadway's biggest hits along the Gran Vía, a new wave of "modern" flamenco is taking hold in Madrid. Flashy flamenco theaters and performances are ruling the stages, and are considered very fashionable among Madrid's cosmopolitan art scene. Big-name performances from the Ballet de Nacional de España play to packed houses in Teatro Gran Vía or Teatro Alcazar and are frequented by flamenco stars such as Joaquín Cortés, Rafael Amargo and Sara Baras.

On a smaller scale, flamenco *tablaos*, or "flamenco restaurants," dot the city, and

chances are that if you're a traveler, you'll be referred to one. While these shows are nonetheless powerful, and dancers certainly entertain, the *tablaos* usually are overpriced and overdone. **Corral de la Morería** (C/Morería 17; +34-91-365-84-46; www.corraldelamoreria.com) and **Café de Chinitas** (C/Torija 7; +34-91-559-51-35; www.chinitas.com) are well known, reportedly once frequented by Picasso and Hemingway, but today they offer a carefully choreographed version of the artful dance. Dinner can be upwards of 35 euros per person, fixed price, with an additional 30 euros just to see the show. Menus arrive in five languages. When I visited, more American English could be heard throughout the restaurant than anything else.

So does *real* flamenco—the soul-stirring, foot-stomping, impromptu dance of passion—still exist in Madrid? I'd heard that to see a "real" flamenco performance is an altogether different experience. It is spontaneous, raw and more powerful than anything contrived on stage. For this, a traveler must look no further than the Lavapiés and La Latina quarters in the southern portion of the city.

While most tourists would consider these neighborhoods to be off the beaten path (especially at night, when the scene switches from a tourists' stop to locals' hotspot), they are indeed the best places to catch Spain's most famous art form. Wander into smoky local haunts such as **La Solea** (C/Cava Baja 34; +34-91-365-33-08), **Cardamomo** (C/Echegaray 15; +34-91-369-07-57; www.cardamomo.net) or **Candela** (C/Olmo 2; +34-91-467-33-82), and you're almost guaranteed to see the real thing. You might have to hang out until the wee hours of the morning, but then again, this is Madrid, where restaurants don't even open their doors until many Americans are already getting ready for bed. Nothing truly exciting happens here until the day is a distant memory, and morning beckons

WHERE TO EAT

BREAKFAST Head to **Chocolateria San Ginés** (Pzo. San Ginés 5; +34-91-365-65-46) and order *churros* (batter sticks) and a bubbling mug of chocolate for dipping them in, a Madrid staple. While it's not the healthiest way to start the morning, it may be the tastiest. Tucked away on a tiny side street, but near Plaza Mayor, the location is the perfect place to begin a classic Madrilenian day.

LUNCH If you're heading north, don't miss **El Pabellón de El Espejo** (Paseo de Recoletos 31; +34-91-308-23-47; www.restauranteespejo.com), the sister restaurant of the more traditional eatery El Espejo, located across the street. Sit in the terrace garden and enjoy a glass of the house wine for 2 euros or head into the glass and iron pavilion, which resembles an upscale train car complete with a marble bar and crystal chandeliers. Either way, you'll want to order the gazpacho, a fresh, cold tomato soup with a large selection of vegetables to add to it.

DINNER Steer clear of the tourist hubs along Plaza Mayor and look for **Restaurante El Senador** (Plaza de la Marina Española 2, +34-91-541-22-21; www.restaurantesenador.com) for a truly authentic Spanish meal. The wait staff knows very little English, but that doesn't matter when it comes to savoring the *tapas* here. Order *gambas al ajillo* (garlic shrimp), *verduras de temporada a la parrilla* (grilled vegetables) or *jamón de guiñuelo bellota* (three types of cured ham, cut from the leg). After dinner, stroll along Calle de Bailén and see the **Palacio Real**, the impressive Royal Palace, lit up.



The Plaza Mayor, (above) Picasso's *Guernica*.

The Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, (right) along Calle de Alcalá.



METRO; ROBIN MACDOUGAL/GETTY IMAGES

like a flamenco dancer inspiring an audience to clap its collective hands.

Street Life

Once you've had ample time to sleep the night off, hoof it to **Puerta del Sol** and nearby **Plaza Mayor**. While these squares practically are on top of one another, they also are entirely different, accurately representing Madrid's intersection between the progressive and the past.

Bustling **Puerta del Sol** closely resembles New York's Times Square. The square marks the country's "zero kilometer," from which all distances in Spain are measured. A massive Tio Pepe (a legendary Spanish sherry) sign stands on one end of the square and is a trademark symbol of this "Gateway of the Sun." Here, the streets are packed with hipsters and foreigners, darting in and out of retail hotspots like Topshop and the massive department store El Corte Inglés. With its bookstore, travel agency, supermarket, and sporting goods and electronics sections, El Corte Inglés encompasses a whole city block on both sides, making other stores here, such as Zara, seem an afterthought.

A few blocks over is **Plaza Mayor** (Calle Mayor and Calle de Atocha), which was constructed in 1619 and forms a near-perfect square in the middle of town. Balconies and large windows overlook the theaterlike cobblestoned square, once the site of bullfights, executions and trials of the Inquisition. Today, it takes on a much calmer atmosphere as street vendors, artists and peddling musicians set up shop here. Dozens of cafés line the outer edges and offer cheap but decent pitchers of sangria.

As I sat there sipping my own cold glass of sangria, I watched local kids chasing one another, listened to the sounds of a distant roaming band and caught glimpses of residents on balconies above.

I also realized that to be a *Madrideno* is to be fiercely individualistic, even eccentric, and inherently artistic—embracing the traditional and the contemporary with equal measure. Broadway, bullfighting, modern flamenco ... it can all be found on the city's *gran vías* and cobblestone side streets.

Because in Madrid, anything goes. 🎯



WHERE TO STAY

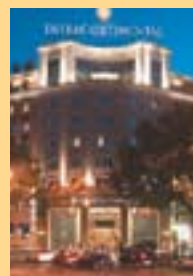
Realizing, in 1912, that Madrid was a cosmopolitan city severely lacking a luxury hotel, King Alfonso XIII commissioned the Palace Hotel, now the **Westin Palace Madrid** (Plaza de las Cortes 7; +34-91-360-80-00; www.westinpalacemadrid.com; doubles from 289 euros). With 417 spacious guest rooms and three restaurants, it's still considered one of the most sought-after and deluxe hotels in the city. The hotel sits on the historic Plaza de las Cortes and is a short walk to all the major museums and sites. After a long day of sightseeing, head to the famous Palace Bar, reportedly once frequented by Ernest Hemingway, or grab a bite to eat in La Rotonda, under the hotel's colorful antique glass dome.



The **Room Mate Mario Hotel** (C/Campomanes 4; +34-91-548-85-48; www.room-matehotels.com; doubles from 85 euros) has become a staple among travelers looking for an inexpensive yet hip place to bunk in the capital city. Rooms come equipped with free Wi-Fi and LCD flat screens. A complimentary breakfast buffet is served every morning in the hotel's retro-style dining room. The 54-room hotspot offers a central location near Madrid's Opera and Royal Palace, and is close to the bustling Gran Vía with its numerous restaurants, theaters and shops.



Located in Madrid's financial and business district, the 307-room **Intercontinental Madrid** (Paseo de la Castellana 49; +34-91-700-73-00; www.madridhotels.intercontinental.com; doubles from 199 euros) offers a garden terrace and a full business center. Remodeled in 2002, the rooms are tastefully decorated with dark woods, and marble bathrooms come with large soaking tubs. Enjoy dinner in El Café, which serves contemporary Mediterranean cuisine. Then head to the spa, featuring stone massage, ayurvedic massage, Thai massage and a hot marble bed.



GETTING THERE

Nonstop flights to Madrid, Spain, are available on Iberia Airlines from Washington Dulles International Airport.