

Madrid: Spain

by Cheryl Pendry, PassPorter Featured Columnist

Ask people what the capital city of Spain is and I wouldn't be at all surprised if some people said Barcelona, as it seems to get so much press as THE place to head for in the country. However, the title of capital city goes to Madrid, which is sensibly located right in the center of Spain.

There's certainly plenty to commend Madrid as a destination, not least the fact that it's home to three major arts galleries. Perhaps the most famous is the Museo del Prado, which contains the world's greatest collections of Spanish paintings, including collections by both Goya and Velazquez. There are plenty of offerings from foreign collections as well, with *The Three Graces* on many people's lists to see. This was one of the last paintings by the great Flemish master Rubens. There are galleries for Italian, French, German, British, and Flemish and Dutch painting, and even a gallery for sculpture.

As if this wasn't enough, just a couple of streets away is the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, based on the collection amassed by the Baron of the same name. It showcases the history of Western art, with works on display from Van Gogh, Picasso, and Goya. For many experts, this is considered the most important private art collection in the world. A little further away, fans of 20th century art will enjoy the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, home to a number of pieces by Picasso.

Although these museums on their own may be enough to commend Madrid to many people, our pleasures are much more simple, so our first stop in the city was at the Parque del Retiro, which was once home to King Felipe IV's royal palace. Originally used just by the Royal family, the park's gates were fully opened to the public in 1869. It's one of the Madrid's most popular places to relax, and it's easy to see why. The main attraction here is the boating lake, overlooked by the impressive monument of Alfonso XII. Walking around here, I couldn't help but think of Washington DC with its collection of monuments and lakes near to some of them. It was still a warm day when we visited and the place was certainly busy, with lots of boats out on the lake and many more people sitting around the edges of the lake, just enjoying the scenery, as the trees showed their first colors of fall.

Head into the center of Madrid and it's easy to see why this park is such a retreat for local people. If you get off the Metro at the Sol station, you'll find a bustling underground shopping complex awaiting you.

Above your head, as you emerge into the daylight, it's a similar picture in the Puerta del Sol. It's most famous for the sign for Tio Pepe, a brand of sherry and I must admit, as soon as I saw it, I had the feeling that perhaps I'd been here before, it's that much of an icon. This is home to the country's biggest New Year celebration and it's also where zero marks the spot, as it has the Kilometre Zero mark, which is the center of Spain's huge road network. Roads radiate off this square, most of them pedestrian-only and lined with a variety of shops and department stores, all bustling until late into the evenings.

If Puerta del Sol is the heart of modern Madrid, then a few minutes' walk away, Plaza Mayor is the heart of the city's history. Reminding us of the grand squares of Venice, only with no water in sight here, the square was built in the early part of the 17th century and is still remarkably intact on all four sides. Our eyes, like many visitors I'm sure, went straight to the right of the square from the spot we entered, as we spotted the elaborate paintings on the Casa de la Panderia. They are extremely intricate and not something we expected to see, having seen this sort of design more in the border areas between Germany and Switzerland on one of our earlier road trips.

Public squares are a huge part of the visitor draw in Madrid. Other popular ones well worth visiting are the Plaza del Oriente, which is home to the imposing Teatro Real at one end and overlooked by the Palacio Real at the other. It's reminiscent of a fine French square, complete with marble statues along one side, which wouldn't look out of place at the famous French palace of Versailles. From here, the next major square is Plaza de Espana, which has statues of Spain's favorite author Cervantes and his most famous creation, Don Quixote, overlooking the water feature here. It's surrounded by high rise buildings, but all with their own characters. One even has trees decorating its upper levels!

Perhaps the biggest attraction in Madrid, outside of the art museums, is the Royal Palace or Palacio Real, which I'll look at in detail in a future PassPorter news article. It's an extremely lavish palace and it's just a great shame that it's no longer actually home to the Royal family, although it is still used for sumptuous state occasions.

Opposite the palace is the Catedral de la Almudena, which was a late-comer to the city's skyline, but an impressive one all the same. Unlike the vast majority of churches, this was only started in 1879 and wasn't actually finished until the late 20th century. It's almost impossible to believe, but Spain's capital city didn't get its own cathedral until 1993, when it was opened by Pope Jean Paul II. As such, it's well worth heading inside, as the interior is very different from the classic

design of churches around the world. Instead, it's a lot more understated and has a decidedly modern feel to it.

There's certainly a great deal to see and do in Madrid and our visit didn't disappoint. It's a beautiful city, with lovely squares almost around every corner and some wonderful architecture. While Barcelona may be better known and it certainly attracts the crowds, we were pleasantly surprised to find Madrid a city that wasn't inundated with visitors. It makes for a very nice change and we're certainly not ruling out a return visit back to Spain's capital city.

About The Author: Cheryl and husband Mark live in England and love to travel, particularly to America. They are in the process of visiting every Disney theme park around the world, having already been to Disneyland Resort Paris, Hong Kong Disneyland and both American Disney resorts. They are now planning for their trip to Japan in the spring to visit the Tokyo Disney Resort. [Click here to view more of Cheryl's articles!](#)

Article last updated: 10-21-2010

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