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## The Best of Madrid

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**M**adrid is on a roll. Never a city to let the grass grow under its feet, the Spanish capital is experiencing unprecedented change thanks to the efforts of the visionary mayor Alberto Ruiz-Gallardón—a man compared by some, however tongue in cheek, to a pharaoh. In 2005 the mayor launched a new 7-year city program aimed at transforming the capital into a world-class cosmopolitan center, with improved Metro and rail transport and the expansion of new *barrios*, or districts, especially in the north of the city where a *tren ligero* (a smaller, streamlined Talgo-shaped tram similar to those successfully operating in Bilbao) is scheduled to be in operation by spring 2007. Though the completion of all this work was originally timed to coincide with Madrid's expected nomination as venue for the 2012 Olympics, the city's disbelief at being beaten for the honor by London was quickly forgotten (maudlin introspection is not part of the feisty Madrileño temperament). In fact, many completion schedules have been brought forward to coincide with the municipal elections of May 2007.

Two new terminals at Barajas airport were inaugurated in February 2006, more than doubling the city's international traffic and making the airport the third busiest in Europe, while Chamartín railway station is being totally rebuilt to merge with a renovated Metro station and a new underground regional and long-distance bus terminal. Each of the four skyscrapers currently under construction (Torres Repsol, Espacio, Sacyr, and Cristal) will outstrip Torre Picasso in the AZCA Business Center as the highest building in town; at the same time, pedestrian and subway underpasses are being tunneled and countless streets and avenues widened, all aimed at improving road access. The roadwork may prove a bone of contention for frustrated and quietly—or not so quietly—seething Madrileño drivers who see their priority of getting to work on time thwarted by cranes, bulldozers, excavations, and scaffoldings until the job gets done. On the other hand, public transportation is being upgraded almost by the month, particularly on the much-used and excellent-value Metro (p. 70).

The cultural mix of the 5-million-plus population is also changing radically, with an influx of immigrants from South American and Eastern European countries taking over many of the service and blue-collar jobs. Many are Ecuadorians, who are busy opening cafes, shops—especially bakeries—and *locutorios* (long-distance phone-call centers). Meanwhile the Russians, Romanians, Poles, and Czechs who work on many of the building sites and in practical fields such as plumbing and carpentry have shown great versatility both in their work and in picking up Spanish. It's all a great change from the homogeneous Madrid of a few years back when foreign residents totaled barely 1%.

Ecological changes abound, too. Madrid is now officially one of the “greenest” cities in Europe, with verdant areas springing up every year thanks to an ecologically aware town hall. The Retiro, with its flowers, fountains, and boat-filled lake, and the huge Casa del Campo moorland, with its copses and bird life, are the city's twin lungs, aided

by the regular flow of pure mountain air from the Guadarramas 97km (60 miles) away. Alberto Ruiz-Gallardón's improvement plans also cover the planting of hundreds of thousands of trees in newly created green zones—intersected by walking and cycling lanes—both in and around the city. His Manzanares River development is particularly ambitious, with both river and M-30 highway running underground while the surface becomes a pedestrianized parkland that connects with the Casa del Campo. (In summer 2006 the crusading mayor also launched a battle against “light pollution” by announcing a future ban on practically all neon lights in the city center, so that Madrileños would be able to see the stars on cloudless nights.)

In a sense, the Spanish capital hasn't changed at all: It has always been an awesome blend of tradition and dynamism. At its heart is the vintage Madrid of Los Austrias, the Plaza Mayor, and the Palacio Real, still exuding centuries-old atmosphere and ringed in turn by regenerated *castizo* (traditional) districts like Chueca, Malasaña, and Lavapiés (the latter's population epitomizing the new ethnically varied Madrid). The San Isidro and Virgen de la Almudena fiestas are celebrated with their customary color and vigor. Shopping, dining, and cultural options are plentiful and remarkably varied. And the spontaneous nonstop lifestyle continues to thrive, with bars (more than 18,000 of them) opening from 5:30am onwards for coffee and *churros* and closing late (or never shutting at all if you include the after-hours bars), and weekend dawn traffic jams of cars and night buses blocking the city thoroughfares as revelers weave their way to, from, or between their favorite spots.

## 1 The Most Unforgettable Madrid Experiences

- **Sitting in *Sol* or *Sombra* at the Bullfights:** A bullfight can be one of the most evocative and memorable events in Spain, and the best place by far to see one is at the country's biggest *plaza de toros* (bullring) at **Ventas** (on the eastern border of Madrid's Salamanca district close to the M-30 highway). Tickets are either *sol* (sunny side) or *sombra* (in the shade); you'll pay more to get out of the sun. Peak time for attending bullfights is during the capital's San Isidro fiestas in May, when 4 consecutive weeks of daily *corridos* feature some of the biggest names in the bullfighting world. See p. 186.
- **Seeing the Masterpieces at El Prado:** One of the world's premier art museums, on a par with the Louvre, El Prado is home to some 4,000 masterpieces, many of them acquired by Spanish kings. The wealth of Spanish art is staggering—everything from Goya's *Naked Maja* to the celebrated

*Las Meninas* (*The Maids of Honor*) by Velázquez (my favorite) and the dark vision of Goya's *Disasters of War* etchings. El Prado also boasts a number of Botticellis, Titians, and French Impressionists, but don't try to take it all in in 1 day: The museum's overall collection is simply too vast to absorb in a single visit. See p. 168.

- **Feasting on Tapas in the *Tascas*:** Tapas, those delicious bite-size portions washed down with wine, beer, or sherry, are reason enough to go to Madrid! Original favorites were cured ham or *chorizo* (spicy sausage). Today you might sample *gambas* (deep-fried shrimp), *boquerones* (anchovies marinated in vinegar), *albóndigas* (meatballs), *tortillas* (tiny omelets), or *calamares* (squid). Among the best areas for a *tapeo* (tapa “crawl”) are bustling Plaza de Santa Ana and the labyrinthine Cava Baja. See chapter 6.
- **Lounging in an Outdoor Cafe:** In summer Madrileños live it up on café

## Rising from the Ashes

As with that fateful September 2001 attack in New York City and the July 2005 bombings in London's underground, the resilient spirit of the city's inhabitants survived Madrid's own terrorist-inflicted tragedy on March 11, 2004, when Al Qaeda bombed suburban-line trains in and close to Atocha station, killing nearly 200 people. "We were all on that train" became a popular slogan. Madrid bounced back, albeit in a politically changed environment. Three days after the outrage, the PSOE Socialist Party, led by José Rodríguez Zapatero, unexpectedly won the elections and ended the 8-year government of the PP Conservative Party under Jose Maria Aznar. The PSOE introduced a radical new agenda, taking action to withdraw Spanish troops from Iraq, introduce more female politicians into Parliament, pass a law allowing homosexual marriages, and approve a controversial Estatut (statute) giving the province of Catalonia more autonomy—all of which was strenuously opposed by the opposition PP.

*terrazas* till the early hours. Prized spots are the wide tree-lined Paseo del Pintor Rosales on the western edge of the Argüelles district, overlooking the Casa del Campo, and the elegant cosmopolitan swathe of the Paseo de la Castellana, Paseo del Prado, and Paseo de Recoletos. In Lavapiés, the colorful Calle Argumosa also offers a fashionable spill of alfresco bars. See chapter 6.

- **Relaxing in a Genuine Literary Cafe:** Once upon a time the city had several distinguished old-world cafes where intellectuals, artists, and lesser mortals would gather to enjoy a leisurely chat or stimulating *tertulia* (social gathering). Today the sole survivors of these legendary 19<sup>th</sup>-century watering holes are the ornate **Gran Café de Gijón** (☎ 91-521-54-25) and the more austere **Café Comercial** (☎ 91-521-56-55), both graced with traditional columns and high windows with views of the ever-changing scenes outside. Lingering unhurriedly over a coffee in either is a real treat. See pages 142 and 208.
- **Shopping the Rastro:** Madrid's teeming flea market represents a tradition that's 500 years old. The place

really gets going from around 9am on, with shoulder-to-shoulder stalls stretching down Calle Ribera de Curtidores. Real or fake antiques, secondhand clothing, porn films, Franco-era furniture, paintings (endless copies of Velázquez), old books, religious relics, and plenty of just plain junk are for sale. These streets also contain some of the finest permanent antiques shops in Madrid.

**Warning:** Keep an eagle eye on your wallet or purse; this is a pickpocket's paradise. See p. 219.

- **Sunday Strolling in the Retiro:** Spread across 140 leafy hectares (350 acres) the statue- and tree-filled Parque de Retiro was originally designed as the gardens of Buen Retiro palace, occupied by Philip IV in the 1630s. In 1767 Charles III opened part of the gardens to the general public. On Sunday mornings before lunch vendors hawk their wares, magicians perform their acts, fortunetellers read tarot cards, and large Disney-style moving models of Tweety Bird and Bugs Bunny delight the kids. In the central lake (presided over by a 1902 monument to Alfonso XII) you can rent a boat and laze away the hours

on the glittering waters. See chapter 6.

- **Picnicking in the Casa del Campo:** On a hot summer's day enjoy an alfresco repast in the shade of a fragrant pine in the heart of Madrid's largest park and look back at the shimmering city skyline. Afterward go boating on the lake or take the kids to the zoo or Parque de Atracciones. You can get here by *teleférico* chair lift or by Metro to **Lago**. See p. 187.
- **Nursing a Drink at Chicote** (☎ 91-532-67-37): The 1930s interior at Madrid's most famous bar looks the same as it did during the Spanish Civil War. Shells might have been flying along the Gran Vía, but the international press corps covering the war drank on. Postwar regulars included writers, artists, and film stars like Frank Sinatra and Ava Gardner. Today it's one of the smart, sophisticated spots to rendezvous in Madrid. See p. 238.
- **Experiencing the *Movida*:** Very roughly translated as the "shift," or the "movement," *movida* characterizes post-Franco life in the capital after Madrileños threw off the yoke of dictatorship and repression, giddily drinking, dancing, and generally having a ball à la Almodóvar. To get the feel of this still inexhaustible phenomena, head for the highly liberated

nocturnal (and after-hours) fun zones of Chueca, Huertas, and Malasaña, and sample the big clubs around Calle Arenal like **Palacio Gaviria** (☎ 91-256-60-69). See p. 235.

- **Wandering around the Monasterio de las Descalzas Reales:** A haven of unexpected peace in the bustling heart of Madrid, barely a stone's throw from the Gran Vía, this charming former medieval palace was converted into a monastery in the 16th century by Philip II's sister Juana. Ornate frescoes, Flemish tapestries, and paintings by the likes of Titian and Zurbarán fill its chapel-lined interior. Only 20 visitors are allowed in at a time, so be prepared to wait. See p. 181.
- **Exploring the Real Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial** (49 km/30 miles from Madrid): Philip II, who commissioned this monastery in the 1530s, envisioned it as a spiritual fortress against the distractions of the secular world. Today it remains the best living example of religious devotion in Renaissance Spain. Within its huge granite walls—more awesome than beautiful—are the tombs of Spanish kings and a priceless repository of ancient books, tapestries, and masterpieces by Goya, Velázquez, and other artistic giants. See p. 256.

## 2 The Best Splurge Hotels

- **Hesperia Madrid** (☎ 91-210-88-00): It's a member of "The Leading Hotels of the World"—and you'll see why as soon as you check in to this Catalan-owned gem with its ultra-smart fittings, sophisticated amenities, and hint-of-Far-East decor. Add to this the hotel's Michelin-rated Santceloni restaurant (see "The Most Unforgettable Dining Experiences," below), and you have one of the most highly regarded lodgings in Madrid. See p. 104.
- **Park Hyatt Villa Magna** (☎ 800/223-1234 from the USA or Canada or ☎ 91-587-12-34 from Spain): A recognized "in" place favored by movie stars and high-ranking politicians, the Villa Magna enjoys a prestigious reputation almost unique in the city. It's also got a full-service business center stocked with access to

translators, word processors, even a well-informed technology concierge. Behind its elegant garden setting is a classically styled hotel boasting top facilities and the highest standards of service. See p. 104.

- **The Ritz** (☎ 800/225-5843 from the USA or Canada or 91-701-67-67 from Spain): In spite of an increasing number of impressive rivals, the Belle Epoque Ritz remains a world apart.

Now approaching its 100th anniversary, this granddaddy of Madrid's luxury hotels has seen monarchs and dictators come and go. Backed by gardens in the loveliest part of the Paseo del Prado, the hotel has an incomparable setting and superb decor matched only by the inimitable service and attention to detail. Ah, but be prepared to pay accordingly. See p. 104.

### 3 The Best Moderately Priced Hotels

- Built in 1966 and still going strong, the reasonably priced **Fiesta Gran Hotel Colón** (☎ 91-573-59-00) lies west of Retiro Park in a relatively safe area of Madrid that's easily connected to the center by subway. It's nicely maintained and kept up-to-date, offering well-designed bedrooms with comfortably traditional furnishings. See p. 107.
- Ideally located in a popular tiny square close to the Plaza Mayor, the

19th-century **Hostal Persal** (☎ 91-369-46-43) offers good-value family-size rooms as well as fine meals. See p. 92.

- If the prospect of bedding down in a peaceful setting within easy reach of the center tickles your fancy, then the **Residencia El Viso** (☎ 91-564-03-70) is for you. It has comfortable rooms, a friendly atmosphere, and a leafy patio where you can enjoy home-cooked meals. See p. 113.

### 4 The Most Unforgettable Dining Experiences

- The **Sobrino de Botín** (☎ 91-366-30-26) may be touristy these days, but the setting and atmosphere of the city's oldest restaurant (some say the oldest eatery in the world) more than compensate. Rafters, beams, and nooks abound, and the effective service is accompanied by some first-rate Castilian specialties, such as *lechón* (suckling pig). See p. 127.
- **Zalacaín** (☎ 91-561-48-40): This is definitely money-is-no-object time, but with unsurpassable Basque and French cuisine like this, you can let yourself go for once. Still one of the very best gourmet rendezvous in Madrid, it's holding out well against the fashionable tsunamis of Catalan nouvelle cuisine. See p. 152.

- **La Broche** (☎ 91-399-34-37): For those who favor tradition-shattering Catalan delights, the dining room of the Hotel Occidental Miguel Angel (p. 110) provides some of the most imaginative offerings in the city, with chef Sergi Arola emulating the culinary style of his much-vaunted mentor Ferran Adrià. See p. 158.
- **Santceloni** (☎ 91-210-88-40): A stylish repository of fine Mediterranean cuisine located in the immaculate Hesperia Madrid hotel (p. 104), this elite locale is for many the tops in town. Chef Santi Santamaría conjures up inspired Catalan dishes such as fennel-based John Dory. See p. 152.

## 5 The Best Things to Do For Free

- **Enjoy the Weekend Cultural Treats:** Saturday afternoons and Sunday mornings are free at the Museos Naval, de America, Arqueológico Nacional, and Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía. The tiny Casa Museo de Lope de Vega is free on Saturdays, and Sunday morning—only treats include the famed El Prado and Museos Sorolla, Casa de la Moneda, and Nacional de Artes Decorativas. See chapter 7.
- **Don't Forget Weekday Freebies:** Some of the private museums (such as Lazaro Galdiano and Cerralbo) are free on Wednesdays (Cerralbo is also free on Sun), while the Museo San Isidro in Plaza San Andrés gives you a gratis daily rundown on the city's history. Attractions that are permanently free include the Bolsa (Stock Exchange), Museo Municipal, Casa de America, private Fundación art exhibitions such as La Caixa and Juan March, and the Conde Duque cultural center. See chapter 7.
- **Take an Ecclesiastical Trip Back in Time:** We're particularly fond of Madrid's two oldest churches, hidden in the heart of the Austrias district. They're both tiny, giving you an idea of what Madrid must have been like with a population of just around 10,000. **San Nicolás de los Servitas** (full title: San Nicolás de Bari de los Servitas) was named after an Italian saint, and its 12th-century Arabic *torre* rises above a narrow lane just behind the Calle Mayor. Nearby **San Pedro el Leal** (also known as San Pedro el Viejo) has the best-preserved 14th-century Mudéjar brick tower in the capital. No charge for either, of course—though you may care to leave something in the collection box to help toward the preservation of these two gems. See chapter 7.
- **Stroll in the Parks:** Madrid's best central *parques* are particularly rewarding to explore, especially the **Retiro**, with its rose garden, fountains, statues (including the **Angel Caído**, or Fallen Angel, depicting Lucifer), central lake, **Casa de Vacas**, and 19th-century **Palacios de Cristal** and **Velazquez** cultural showrooms. Below the Palacio Real, the **Campo del Moro** has a verdant neatness more associated with northern Europe, while on the edge of Argüelles the **Parque del Oeste's** marked nature trails wend their way down past an international selection of trees and plants to the River Manzanares (where you can view the **Ermita de San Antonio de la Florida's** Goyan frescoes). See chapter 7.
- **See Madrid's "Little Egypt":** On the ridge overlooking the Casa de Campo, you can visit the **Templo de Debod**, a unique slice of Egypt in Spain. It's the real McCoy, shipped stone by stone from the banks of the Nile. See chapter 7.
- **Be a Politician for a Day (or Morning, Anyway):** Visit the **Congreso de los Diputados** on Saturday mornings and imagine yourself changing the direction of the Spanish nation. No need to book: Just turn up at 10am (except during the summer recess). See chapter 8.

## 6 The Best Stuff to Bring Home

- **Leather:** Leather has long been one of Spain's most highly valued products, and best buys range from stylish belts and handbags to handmade shoes and fine jackets. Check out top shops like Loewe in the Gran Vía and

Farrutz in Calle Serrano. Or rummage through Sunday's Rastro flea market for a secondhand bargain. See chapter 9.

- **Ceramics:** Though this is not a Madrid specialty, you'll find a wide selection of ceramic vases, dishes, and jugs from nearby towns such as Toledo and Talavera de la Reina, some of whose wares have the style and finesse of fine art. You'll also find plenty of choices from areas farther afield such as Seville, Granada, and Manises in Valencia province. Visit the Antigua Casa Talavera (p. 217)

for some of the best choices. See chapters 9 and 11.

- **Porcelain:** Porcelain ornaments similar in style to the Italian Capodimonte are made by the Valencian company Lladró, and, though considered rather twee by some, are extremely popular with most visitors. Check out Lasarte in the Gran Vía. See chapter 9.
- **Capes:** If your taste runs to the slightly eccentric, now's your chance to buy a genuine Spanish cape (*capa*) and surprise your friends as you arrive at the theater in style! The place to find them is Capas Seseña (p. 216). See chapter 9.

## 7 The Best Unique Inns

- **La Taberna de Antonio Sánchez** (☎ 91-539-78-26): You can't get more traditional than this much-copied 200-year-old original, a vintage example of Old Madrid complete with zinc counter, carved wooden bar top, barrels, honest wines, and a genial bartender. Formerly patronized by painters and playwrights, this small cavelike locale has also had long associations with the bullfight world. (The bull's head on the wall is not there just for decoration.) See p. 165.
- **Casa Pedro** (☎ 91-734-02-01): Perhaps because of its location up in the northern suburbs, few people realize this atmospheric eating spot—the second oldest in all Madrid—even

exists. Yet it's barely half an hour away by Metro, and the unique experience of dining on fine Castilian fare in a rambling 19th-century house guarantees that any trip here is well worth it. See p. 167.

- **Casa Alberto** (☎ 91-429-93-56): Another genuine oldie, this charismatic tavern has been around since 1827. The dark maroon exterior and tunnel-like interior with its zinc bar top, bullfight pictures, and engravings on the walls create the ideal ambience to enjoy a tasty tapa or three. The restaurant at the rear provides more substantial versions of the traditional seafood and Castilian meat dishes available. See p. 136.

## 8 The Best Museums

- **El Prado:** The spectacular Prado is no mere museum, but a fully formed travel experience. It's worth a journey to Spain just to see it. See p. 168.
- **Museo Lázaro Galdiano:** This rare collection demonstrates the evolution of enamel and ivory crafts from the Byzantine era to 19th-century Limoges. Of almost equal importance are displays of superb medieval gold and

silver work along with Italian Renaissance jewelry. Reopened in 2003 after 18 months of renovations, the museum also contains galleries with rare paintings, everything from Flemish primitives to works by Spanish masters of the golden age, including El Greco, Murillo, and Zurbarán. The museum also has paintings from Goya's "Black Period" and works by

the English and Italian masters Constable and Tiepolo. See p. 183.

- **Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum:** Madrid's acquisition of this treasure trove of art in the 1980s was one of the greatest coups in European art history. Amassed by a Central European collector beginning around 1920, and formerly displayed in Lugano, Switzerland, the 700 canvases, with works by artists ranging from El Greco to Picasso, are arranged in chronological order. The collection rivals the legendary holdings of the queen of England herself. See p. 169.
- **Museo Cerralbo:** This 19th-century mansion evokes the genuine aura of a sumptuous restoration residence. Formerly owned by the 17th marquis of Argüelles, it houses one of the most personal collections in Madrid. Works by Zurbarán and El Greco, especially the latter's *Ecstasy of St. Francis of Assisi*, are among its highlights, and the upper floor contains a

unique collection of Western and Oriental armor and weapons. See p. 182.

- **Museo Sorolla:** Visit the great Valencian artist's own house in the residential heart of the Spanish capital. Built in 1910 and bequeathed as a museum by his wife after his death, its trademark works are luminous Levante coast beach scenes, with women in white dresses backed by an azure Mediterranean sea. The museum was reopened in 2002 after a spell of tasteful refurbishment. See the artist's eccentrically furnished studio complete with a Turkish sofa on which he took his siesta. See p. 184.
- **Reina Sofia:** Spain's number-one modern art exhibition. Regulars on show include Dalí, Tàpies, and Klein, and an ever-interesting series of temporary exhibits ranges from the anarchic to mainstream. The outside glass-walled elevator is popular with kids. See p. 172.