

A guided walk through Madrid

On this walk we're going to cut right across Madrid from west to east. That's pretty much the same direction as the two great arteries of the city, Gran Via or the Calle Mayor - but while we cross them, we're going to spend as little time as possible on them. Instead, we'll seek out some of the city's most characteristic streets and squares.

The royal palace and Arab Mayrit

We'll start at the Royal Palace, on Calle Mayo/Calle de Bailen. The palace is a classical, eighteenth century building but its history goes back much further than that. This was the site of the original Alcazar fortress, back in the days when Madrid was still under Arab rule. The main mosque was close to the fortress, as at Cordoba - though at Cordoba, the mosque's still there.

Madrid only became the capital in 1561, when Philip II relocated from Toledo. He must have carried out a fair amount of work to bring the Alcazar up to scratch, as well as building the Escorial as a second royal palace, in the mountains to the north-west of Madrid. If you've seen the Alcazar of Toledo, then you can imagine something like that here in the days of Philip II - a square castle-like building with a turret at each corner. But that palace burned down in 1738 - and this is what we got instead.

The views to the west, over the valley of the Manzanares river, are lovely. You can see why this was a good strategic site for the fortress - the ground falls steeply away. And if you go into the gardens to the south of the palace, you can see the remains of the original walls of Arab Madrid - Mayrit.



From here, take Calle Mayor. This street is said to have been driven through the city by Philip II to take him from the palace to church at San Jeronimo el Real. Quite soon you'll see two fine seventeenth century palaces - a bit later than Philip's day, but displaying the same classical style as buildings that he commissioned.

The Palacio de Abrantes, on the left at number 86, was built in the 1650s to a design by architect Juan Maza for the prince Don Juan de Valencia. (It's only belonged to the Abrantes family since 1842.) What you see today is a nineteenth century remodelling of the original. The Palacio de Uceda, at number 79 on the right hand side of the road, is earlier, around 1611. The simplicity of the design is somewhat moderated by the pretty pink of the walls. It's now the headquarters building of the Spanish army.

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Plaza de la Villa and its luxurious jails

Next on the right, we'll come to the Plaza de la Villa, one of the finest square of old Madrid. Here is the old town hall - typical of Castile, with its twin towers at each end of the façade. Juan Gomez de la Mora designed it in 1629 but building work didn't start till the 1640s - and it wasn't finished till nearly the end of the century. It has twin doors - but with very different purposes; the one on the right led to the town hall, but the one on the left led to the town jail.

At the bottom of the square is the Casa de Cisneros, a Renaissance mansion dating from 1537, in the Plateresque style. In fact what you're looking at here is the back of the house - the front is on Calle Sacramento. Here, where the square is today, were the stables and kitchens of the Cisneros house.



There's an interesting historical connection here. Antonio Perez was secretary to Philip II - but attempted what amounts pretty much to a palace coup. He escaped from this house, disguised as a woman, and fled to France after being accused of high treason in 1579. If you know Verdi's opera Don Carlos you'll know one of Perez's co-conspirators - Princess Eboli. Perez was lucky to escape - Eboli spent the rest of her life imprisoned.

The Casa de los Lujanes, opposite the town hall, is one of the oldest houses in Madrid and a rare remaining tower house. The tower is the oldest part and you can see the continuing influence of Madrid's Arab past in the horseshoe arched door. Note the street sign - 'codo' means 'elbow' in Spanish and as you'll see if you wander down the alley, it's an accurate description of the tight bend.

The rest of the house was built in 1494 by Alvaro de Lujan. We know that king Francois I of France was held prisoner here after the battle of Pavia, 1520. However, it may have been a stopgap measure - probably just for a few days while apartments were made ready for him in the Alcazar.

The Moorish quarter

From here, take the Calle del Cordon towards the Plaza de la Paja. This was the site of the main market in Moorish times and continued to be a Muslim area after the reconquest, but there's nothing left from that period.

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There are a number of squares here that technically, and on the map, are differentiated, but all seem to form one space. And this is a fine place to hang out in the evening, with lots of cafes, and youngsters playing football. The *paseo* is a fine Spanish tradition - wandering round town in the cool of the late evening - and personally, I think this is by far the best place in Madrid to experience it; it's much more laid back than the Plaza Mayor. This area of Madrid, also, hasn't experienced the nineteenth and twentieth century redevelopment that has made its mark on more central areas like the Puerta del Sol and Gran Via - it's predominantly low rise, with many old buildings and a pleasantly confusing medieval street plan.

Here you can see the Capilla del Obispo, the only Gothic chapel in the city. In fact since it's Isabelline Gothic, built at the beginning of the sixteenth century, it shows marked Renaissance influences too. There's also the church of San Andres, almost back-to-back with the chapel. Though the current building is more recent, there was a church on this site as early as the eleventh century, and it was used as the royal chapel by Ferdinand and Isabella.

These buildings are related in a rather strange way, by a feud between the church and the illustrious Vargas family. Back in the twelfth century, a farmer called Isidore lived in this parish, working for the Vargas as a farmer or land manager. He was a saintly man - married to, but living chastely with, a woman who also became a saint, Marria Torribia. She's known as Santa Maria de la Cabeza - Saint Mary of the Head - because her head is often carried in procession. Isidore was a great friend both to the poor, and to animals - a friendly and rather sentimental saint. Not surprisingly, he quickly became the patron saint of Madrid.

He's known as San Isidro Labrador - Isidore the Labourer or Farmer. And his miracles are rather charming. For instance one of his workers complained to the head of the Vargas family that Isidore was turning up late to work. When Vargas went out to check, he saw two angels ploughing the field while Isidore prayed.

Isidore died in 1172, and his relics were kept in the parish church. However in the 1500s the Vargas family started getting a bit jealous. Surely the body of their retainer belonged to them? They got the Pope to ratify this, and in 1520 started building the Capilla del Obispo to hold the relics, which were brought here from San Andres. (The Capilla was also the Vargas family burial chapel.) It wasn't till 1622 that San Andres got the body back, in the last act of what must have been a protracted and acrimonious tug-of-war.

So to celebrate, the church built a new chapel to house the body. This is the fine baroque Capilla de San Isidro, built from 1650 to about 1700, with its impressive dome. It was designed by Jose de Villareal - an architect who worked on a lot of projects in Madrid - using rather lovely pink brick set off by stone detailing.

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Now if you want to see some of Madrid's medieval past, the next stop on the tour is your best chance. It's the church of San Pedro el Viejo with its lovely mudéjar tower of the fourteenth century, built in the same style as Moorish minarets. Compared to the mudéjar towers of Toledo, for instance, this one is much taller, thinner, and more elegant. There's a polylobed arch, typical of Arab-influenced work, near the bottom of the tower. The church, though, is a century later than the tower and, I think, less interesting.

Take Calle Cava Baja back towards the centre of the city. This is one of Madrid's most characteristic streets, with the fine tiled façades that are a local tradition, and many bars and restaurants. In La La Bayuca del Cava, there are tiles showing Goya and Velasquez paintings; the façade of La Chata - 'honey', or 'darling' after a countess who used to come to drink here - is also interesting, with advertisement for the restaurant's fine roast suckling pig and hams. (Castilian cooking is rather pig-heavy... definitely a tradition that *doesn't* date from Moorish times!)



At the top of the street, cross over the junction and take Calle de los Cuchilleros - knifemakers' street. On the right hand side you can see the high tenements that make up the back of the Plaza Mayor; go up the steps, under the high arch, and into the Plaza. This is the beating heart of Madrid. (It's also the home of the excellent and very useful Tourist Office.)

The Plaza Mayor - heart of the city

The Plaza Mayor, like the Town Hall, is typical of Castilian architecture. Spain is very much of a country of regions and Castile has a distinct culture - very different from that of, for instance, Andalusia or Catalonia. The regularity of the arcaded square is characteristic of Castile - you'll see similar squares in Salamanca and Aranjuez, for instance.

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The Plaza Mayor was commissioned from Juan de Herrera, as part of Philip II's works to make Madrid a Renaissance capital. However construction didn't begin until 1617 under Juan Gomez de Mora, whose work we've already seen at the town hall. And what you see today dates mainly from the late eighteenth century, when Juan de Villanueva carried out a rebuilding after a fire. None the less, the arcaded square springs directly from Renaissance ideas of town planning - replacing the odd-angled, spontaneous spaces of the medieval city, like the Plaza de la Paja that we saw earlier.

The focus of the square is the Casa de la Panaderia with its frescoed façade and two tiny turrets. Again, the two little towers are a Castilian cliché, though these are surely the least functional and most elegant you'll ever find - quite different from the powerful heavy towers of the town hall. This is actually a little earlier than the rest of the square - it was put up in 1590 by Antonio Sillero, as the headquarter of the bakers' guild, so Gomez de Mora had to make a few changes to incorporate it into his work. Opposite the Casa de la Panaderia is the Casa de la Carniceria - the Butchers' guildhouse; even though the medieval market was replaced by this formal square, it continued to be central to the commercial life of the city.



Nowadays, the Plaza Mayor is surrounded by bars and restaurants; it's a good place for lunch, but it really comes to life at night. If you want to experience Madrileño fast food at its best, though, go through one of the the arches on the left hand side of the square to find the Casa Rua in Calle Ciudad Rodrigo. Here, you can get 'bocadillos', filled rolls, for a couple of euros. Everybody seems to go for the ones filled with fried calamari rings. They're good, but the ones I really love are filled with roasted, then fried green peppers, and 'panceta' (lardy bacon). Wash your roll down with a glass of slightly acid, refreshing Spanish cider.

From the Plaza Mayor, take calle de la Bolsa and then Calle de la Paz to reach the Puerta del Sol - 'gate of the sun'. This is the official centre of Spain; 'kilometre zero' for Spanish road maps is measured from outside the Casa de Correos on the south side,

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and the clock here sets the official time for the country. Here you can also see, on the north side, the bear and strawberry tree that is the symbol and coat of arms of Madrid. It's a pun in Spanish - 'madroño' is the Spanish word for strawberry tree.

This is nineteenth century Madrid at its best - though the fine Casa de Correos dates from the 1760s when Charles III commissioned Ventura Rodriguez to design it for him. It's now the seat of the city government. Its pink brick and white stone give it a certain lightness many buildings would envy, while the classical detailing is typical of Charles III's Madrid - a very different place from either the medieval city of zigzag alleyways, or the rather severe Renaissance style of Philip II's city.

From here, take Carrera de San Jeronimo, then Calle Victoria on the left. Here you'll see more of the fantastic tiled façades you first encountered in Calle Cava Baja - peacocks, fountains, scenes of Madrid life.

Thespian delights

Calle Victoria leads to Plaza Santa Ana, where the façade of the Taberna Villa Rosa is decorated with scenes of Andalusian landscape. Originally, these tiles were an Andalusian tradition, very much a characteristic of the south of Spain, but they seem to have become popular in Madrid at the end of the nineteenth century and have become a characteristic of the city.



In the square you'll see a statue of Lorca, probably Spain's best known modern poet and playwright. This is the original theatreland of Madrid - there's been a theatre here since the Corral del Principe, in the sixteenth century, premiered the plays of Lope de Vega at the same time that the London Globe was showing Shakespeare, Marlowe and Jonson. If from here you take Calle Principe back towards the Carrera San Jeronimo, you'll find the Teatro Español with its neoclassical façade. While its history goes all the way back to the Corral del Principe, what you see today is the work of Juan de Villanueva - again, as in the Plaza Mayor, restoring an emblematic building after a major fire.

Near here in Calle del Principe is a bar, El Parnasillo or 'Little Parnassus', with a tiled façade showing nineteenth century Spanish writers - if you've ever wanted a crash course in Spanish romanticism, this is it. A rather different aspect of Spanish culture awaits you in Plaza Canalejas, as you emerge back on to the line of the Carrera San Jeronimo - the Violetas sweet shop. This is a precious little place, where you can buy candied fruits or the 'violetas', violet flavoured candies which are typical of Madrid.

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From here, it's quite a long walk to Plaza del Rey to see the House of the Seven Chimneys, another remnant of Renaissance Madrid. This, like the Casa de la Panaderia, is the work of Antonio Sillero; it dates from the 1570s. But the little building with the chimneys which gives the whole complex its name dates from a little bit later - it was added by architect Andrea de Lurano.

There are plenty of legends about this house. Some say there are seven chimneys to symbolise the seven deadly sins; some say that Philip II's mistress lived here, and later haunted the house. This is all speculation - but the real historical truth is just as interesting, because this is where Charles I of England stayed in 1623. Both Charles and the Earl of Buckingham were in disguise, calling themselves Thomas and John Smith, attempting to arrange a marriage with the Infanta Maria, Philip IV's daughter. He was unsuccessful - and returned to England without a wife.

Track back to Calle Alcalá and you'll find the church of San Jose, a pretty pink brick church by Pedro de Ribera, who built it in 1730 to replace an earlier building. It's a typical work of Madrileño baroque.

Also on Calle Alcalá is the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. This is the oldest art gallery in a city full of fine galleries. The Academy itself was started in 1744, but its constitution was given it a few years later, making it into practically a university for artists and architects. Over the course of the eighteenth century the Academy was responsible for establishing the neoclassical style in Spain. This building is the third home to the Academy; it was originally the Palacio Goyeneche, built in 1724 by the baroque architect Jose Benito Churriguera.

And now for something completely different - the Circulo de Bellas Artes, at the junction of Calle Alcalá and the Gran Vía. This mudéjar influenced building is the work of Antonio Palacios, an architect who worked in an eclectic art deco or art nouveau tradition. Like other architects such as Villanueva and Gomez de Mora, he left his mark on Madrid - other buildings by Palacios include the Telecoms building in Plaza de Cibeles and many of the early metro stations. There's a superb cafe here so you can combine a visit to Palacios' sumptuous interior with a refreshment break.



Head back south again, down Calle Marques de Cubas to Carrera San Jeronimo. Here is the nineteenth century Congress building (Congreso de los Diputados), the lower house of the Spanish parliament, guarded by lions. But if you take Calle del Prado, then turn

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left on to Calle San Agustin and left again on to Calle Cervantes, you can walk back four centuries into the Renaissance and the house of playwright Lope de Vega. This gives you a real feel for sixteenth century Madrid - it's a middle class house, not a palace. Lope's not as well known to English speaking readers as his contemporary Cervantes, who also lived nearby, but he is the true father of Spanish theatre - a worthy contemporary of Shakespeare.

Cervantes, author of *Don Quixote*, is buried in the Convento de las Trinitarias - the address of which, displaying a neat sense of balance, is Calle Lope de Vega 18. Both Lope de Vega and Cervantes had daughters who took the veil here, so the convent is intimately associated with their lives - though the buildings that you'll see today date from the baroque period, and the generation after Cervantes and Lope.

The Prado

From here, you can easily find your way back towards the Prado. The whole area here was the 'Prado', meaning 'meadow' - it was only in the 1760s that Charles III decided to create a monument urban space here with fine new neo-classical buildings. Despite the horrendous traffic, there's still enough greenery to recall the pastoral origins of the area. And this is the art centre of Madrid, with the fine collections in the Prado and the Reina Sofia modern art museum.

From the royal palace to the Prado, we've followed the royal axis through Madrid, and tasted every age of the city from the Arabs to Art Nouveau. And yet we've hardly scratched the surface of this fascinating and vibrant metropolis.

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