

36 HOURS

MADRID

Madrid has little to prove as a premier art destination. Its central “golden triangle of art” (anchored by the Prado, the Reina Sofía and the Thyssen-Bornemisza museums) makes for a dazzling pilgrimage, and the city is bolstered by cutting-edge cultural foundations like Espacio Solo and Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary. This year, Madrid is commemorating the 50th anniversary of Pablo Picasso’s death and the 100th anniversary of Joaquín Sorolla’s with a series of exhibitions dedicated to each artist. Also, few cities have had such a flurry of hotel openings since the pandemic’s onset — including the Edition, the Four Seasons, the Mandarin Oriental and the Hard Rock. One thing that hasn’t changed is the city’s warm embrace of anyone wanting to join the fun. Since so few Madrileños are actually from Madrid, everyone is welcome.

ANDREW FERREN

Friday

3:30 P.M. | STROLL THE NEW AGORA

Hemmed in for decades by four busy boulevards, Plaza de España was a spot locals typically tried to avoid. A 70-million-euro redesign (\$75 million), completed in November 2021, has transformed the plaza by diverting traffic away or into underground tunnels. New tree-shaded promenades and playgrounds have become a magnet for locals and visitors, and pedestrian paths now link the plaza to landmarks like the nearby Royal Palace; the Parque del Oeste; and the Madrid Río, a vast park built along the Manzanares River. Also now readily accessible from the plaza: the 2,200-year-old Temple of Debod, given to Spain by the Egyptian government in 1968; the Cerralbo Museum, an ornate 19th-century nobleman’s palace; and the Sabatini Gardens, where sculptures of Spanish kings stand among the towering magnolia and cypress trees.

4:30 P.M. | TAKE A ROYAL TOUR

Madrid’s Royal Palace is sometimes skipped by visitors who feel “museumed out.” That’s a shame. The finest 18th-century artists and craftsmen came to Madrid to adorn the palace’s every surface in frescoes, silk damask and lots of gold leaf. One room is floor-to-ceiling porcelain, while another has a dining table that can be set for 120 guests. The vast armory’s shimmering suits of armor are a hit with children, as are the royal kitchens, which had holes near the bottoms of the doors so the royal cats could keep the mice at bay. Next to the palace, an extraordinary new Royal Collections Gallery will bring together 600 rarely seen masterpieces when it opens this summer. Avoid lines by buying tickets (€12) online.

8 P.M. | TAP YOUR HEELS

Several of Madrid’s historic flamenco tablaos (traditional venues with smaller stages) sadly didn’t survive the Covid era. One that did is Corral de la Morería, just south of the Royal Palace. Inside, there’s an eight-seat, Michelin-starred restaurant led by the Basque chef David García, where diners enjoy nine courses before taking V.I.P. seats for the flamenco performance in the tavernlike main room (€135, dinner and show). If you can’t land a restaurant reservation, the main room offers simpler fare two hours before showtime (about €95, dinner and show). The 70-minute performances in this intimate setting often feature top dancers like Jesús Carmona, who can fill an auditorium in New York or London.

Saturday

10 A.M. | GRAB BREAKFAST

The canary-yellow-tiled Golda, in the trendy Salesas neighborhood, draws an in-the-know crowd with its mostly healthy Middle Eastern-accented breakfast fare, like toast with hummus, roasted tomato, feta and sumac (€6.50) and a densely marbled chocolate-pistachio babka (€6). After breakfast, it’s worth popping down the street into the stunning grand Baroque church of Santa Bárbara, built in the 1750s by one of Spain’s most cultivated queens, Bárbara de Braganza. Anyone traveling with young children may prefer breakfast at Frida, a few blocks away, which has outdoor seating overlooking a small playground and whose menu includes kiddie favorites like pancakes (€9).

11 A.M. | GALLERY HOP, THEN SHOP

For more than a decade now, Salesas and the north end of Chueca have been a center of Madrid’s most compelling contemporary



PHOTOGRAPHS BY EMILIO PARRA DOIZTUA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



Top, Madrid’s rooftops, with bronze sculptures of a horse-drawn chariot. Center left, Corral de la Morería, a flamenco tablo just south of the Royal Palace. Center right, the Royal Palace. Above left, a five-tomato salad at La Vaquería Montañesa. Above right, Picasso’s “Guernica” at the Reina Sofía.

art galleries and innovative Spanish boutiques. Showing mostly international artists under 40, the Travesía Cuatro, Alzueta and Albarrán Bourdais galleries all feature invitingly quirky spaces that go beyond the white cube. For apparel, two standouts include Oteya for exquisitely tailored men’s clothing, including capes, with a distinctly Castilian accent (handmade sneakers, €385; bespoke suits starting at €1,800). Nearby is Ecoalf, which creates luxurious garments by upcycling old water bottles and fishing nets (raincoat, €385). Keep up your energy with treats like milhojas (layers of puff pastry and sweetened cream) from La Duquesita, which opened in 1914.

12:30 P.M. | EXPLORE MUSEUMS

Sometimes it’s nice to shift gears and enjoy some bite-size museums that don’t require a half-day to explore. Two such visual bonbons happen to be a short stroll away from each other in the pretty, tree-lined Chamberí neighborhood. Kids and adults will enjoy the Museo Geominero (free), a four-story, 1917 Beaux-Arts jewel box filled with mineral and fossil delights — including massive amethysts, heaps of fool’s gold and fossils. And no matter when you visit Madrid, it’s endless summer at Museo Sorolla (€3, free on Saturdays after 2:30 p.m.), the glamorous former home and studio of Joaquín Sorolla, one of Spain’s most celebrated painters, best known for his sun-dappled images of frolicking children and fashionable ladies enjoying the seaside. His death in 1923 is being honored with exhibitions here and at the Royal Palace this spring.

2:30 P.M. | SIT AT A SUSHI COUNTER

Spaniards rank among the world’s highest per capita consumers of fish, so it only makes sense that the cuisine of Japan, another fish-loving nation, would have a presence in Madrid. Nowhere in the city treats fish with greater reverence than Kappo, a chicly spare Japanese restaurant with just six tables handily located three blocks from the Sorolla Museum. Behind a 12-seat sushi bar, the chef Mario Payán serenely prepares nigiri after nigiri as he monitors the pacing of each diner’s 18-to-20-course omakase meal. Mr. Payán has developed a cultlike following for the simplicity of the setting and the purity of the dishes. Lunch for two, about €180. Reserve ahead.

5 P.M. | DISCOVER REGIONAL CRAFTS

Even if you aren’t venturing to see more of Spain on this trip, you can find many of the country’s best regional products, including ceramics, textiles, sweets and olive oil, in a handful of charming shops clustered in the historic city center, between the neighborhoods of La Latina and Las Letras. Two standouts are Real Fábrica, which has mohair blankets from the Rioja region (€189) and retro enamelware coffee sets (€57.50) from the Basque Country, and Cocol, which sells Majorcan alpagatas (Spanish for espadrilles) in a chic range of colors (from €47) and ceramics inspired by the traditional crockery of Talavera de la Reina in Toledo Province (platters from €69).

8 P.M. | LOUNGE IN THE LOBBY

A couple of years ago, the stylish Urso Hotel in Chueca went old school and added live piano music to its lobby cocktail bar — making it the perfect spot to graciously slide into evening mode while musing on the day’s highlights (cocktails about €10). From Urso, it’s a lovely stroll to dinner at La Vaquería Montañesa, where the restaurateur Carlos Zamora (who also owns La Carmencita and Celso y Manolo) gets the mood just right with a minimalist but cozy and candlelit ambience and a range of simple yet superb dishes with top-quality produce. Starters include crab and shrimp croquetas, a five-tomato salad, and three different artichoke preparations. Beef, lamb and fresh fish are brought daily from Cantabrian farms and ports. Dinner for two, €80.

MIDNIGHT | FIND THE SECRET BAR

Spaniards love the idea of starting the late-night fun with “la primera copa,” a post-prandial first drink in a somewhat sophisticated spot before the night evolves (or devolves). Head to the cozy, candlelit Jack’s Library, a hidden bar slinging craft cocktails (from €12) in Chueca, tucked behind what appears to be an expensive flower shop. Afterward, you can dance and perhaps spot minor celebrities at the current hot spot Lula on Gran Vía (entry €30, including one drink). If your idea of Saturday-night fun includes mirror balls and hundreds of shirtless musclemen, then the gay club Kluster should be on your agenda.

Sunday

10 A.M. | BREAK SOME EGGS

Hemingway once wrote, “Nobody goes to bed in Madrid until they have killed the night.” Whether you did, or merely left it gasping for air, you’ll want a hearty breakfast. The high-ceilinged room at the Omar, the restaurant inside the new Thompson hotel (the chain’s first property outside North America) has the air of a classic European coffeehouse with large round tables and large windows overlooking Plaza del Carmen near the Puerta del Sol. The à la carte breakfast is great, but the €40 brunch is an absolute extravaganza with a table-covering deployment of fruit, yogurt, cured meats and baked goods to which one can add eggs Benedict, the perfect tortilla Española and Moroccan flatbreads with cheese and baba ghanouj.

11 A.M. | GO BAREFOOT TO CHURCH

The austere-on-the-outside Monastery of the Royal Barefoot Nuns (€6), founded in 1559 by Juana de Austria — the daughter, sister and mother of Spanish and Portuguese kings — today sits surrounded by the shopping centers, taverns and offices of the Puerta del Sol. Still home to a handful of Clarissine nuns, an order dedicated to sacrifice and spirituality whose members live without heating or shoes, the monastery features some surprisingly beautiful worldly goods, including a suite of the Eucharist tapestries by the Flemish artist Peter Paul Rubens. Visits are by guided tour only, so advance booking is essential.

NOON | ENJOY LUNCH WITH PICASSO

This year commemorates the 50th anniversary of Pablo Picasso’s death. Cultural organizations in the two countries in which the artist lived, Spain and France, have developed a program of some 50 exhibitions and events to honor the occasion. While the Reina Sofía’s major Picasso exhibition, “Picasso 1906: The Great Transformation,” won’t open until November, one of the artist’s most celebrated masterpieces, “Guernica,” is on permanent view at the Reina with a fascinating display of drawings, paintings and photographs that document its creation. For year-round outdoor dining, El Jardín de Arzabal at the museum has a beautifully tented terrace filled with plants.

KEY STOPS

Corral de la Morería is a traditional flamenco tablo with one untraditional factor — an eight-seat Michelin-starred restaurant.

Museo Sorolla is the former home and studio of the artist Joaquín Sorolla.

Reina Sofía is Spain’s national museum of modern and contemporary art.

Ecoalf is a fashion label and a store that upcycles plastic bottles and fishing nets to make luxury garments.

WHERE TO EAT

Golda is a cheery cafe with Middle Eastern-accented breakfast fare.

Frida offers family-friendly breakfast options and outdoor seating.

The Omar is a brunch spot with the air of a classic European coffeehouse.

El Jardín de Arzabal is a restaurant in the Reina Sofía Museum with a lush, jungly terrace.

WHERE TO STAY

Rosewood Villa Magna, newly renovated, is among the city’s most luxurious addresses and near the major art museums and high-end shops of the upscale Barrio de Salamanca. Its three roaring fireplaces in the lobby and bar make it ideal for a cozy winter stay. Doubles from €850, or \$908.

CoolRooms Palacio de Atocha, in an 1850s palace in the historic city center, has some of the most spacious rooms in Madrid, not to mention top-floor suites with large decks and hot tubs. Doubles from about €250.

Bastardo, a hipster hostel in trendy Chueca, has a buzzing lobby and a variety of room options — from singles to shared rooms to family rooms that sleep six. Doubles from about €90.

For **short-term rentals**, the pretty Almagro neighborhood offers quiet streets lined with boutiques, galleries and small restaurants in walking distance of museums and attractions.