

# Landlocked Madrid Celebrates the Sea



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Spain's capital may not be on the coast, but a maritime vibe can be felt everywhere.

By ANDREW FERREN

More than 450 years ago, King Philip II of Spain decreed Madrid — a somewhat sleepy mountain town in the middle of the Iberian Peninsula — the capital of his empire. Many historians consider it an odd decision for a ruler whose maritime empire extended across three oceans and five continents and was connected by the largest navy the world had ever seen. Not only is Madrid 220 miles from the nearest Spanish port in Valencia on the Mediterranean, but it's also 2,000 feet above sea level. A bustling, seafaring city like Cádiz would have been a more obvious choice.

And given today's tourism-driven economy in a country that visitors associate with sunshine and beaches, Madrid's lack of a seacoast might seem an even greater handicap than it was for Philip. But the city's role as the center of a once-vast maritime realm has eternally linked it with the sea in myriad ways.

Museums, food, massive anchors and beaches: Here's a guide to Madrid's seaworthy treasures.

## Neptune and Friends

Let's start with the god of the seas. In the heart of the city, on the Paseo del Prado — steps from City Hall and Madrid's great art museums, like the Prado and the Thyssen-Bornemisza — stands a towering, rather hunky 1780s statue of Neptune wielding his trident in a tiered circular fountain. He appears to be arriving in town on a chariot made of shells, pulled from the frothy depths by sea horses and dolphins. It's a beloved local monument and the de facto gathering spot for one of Madrid's two soccer teams (Atlético de Madrid) after big wins.

Neptune is far from the only seafarer in the city. Parks and plazas are littered with monuments and mementos of famous navigators, admirals, captains, sea battles and an astonishing number of massive anchors. Tritons and dolphins abound in fountains in Retiro Park and in the grand Plaza de la República Argentina, where life-size bronze dolphins leap, leading locals to refer to it as the plaza of the dolphins.

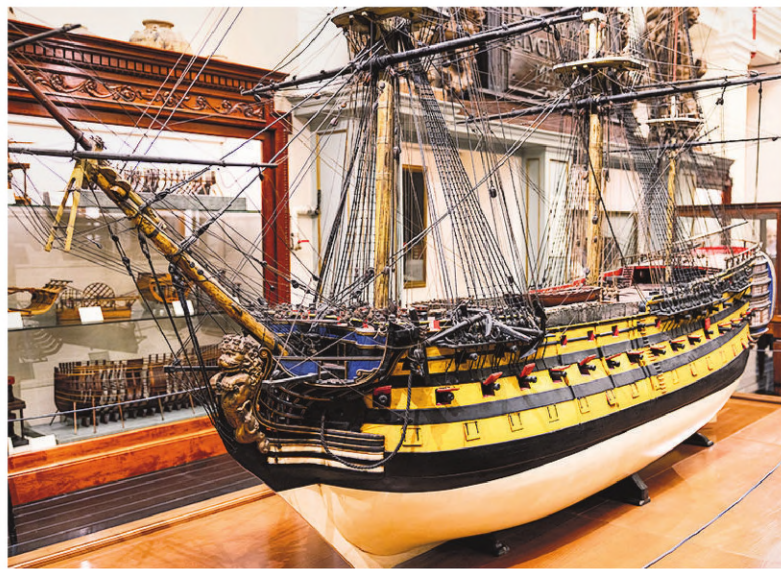
Street names include Calle del Almirante (Admiral Street) and Calle del Barco (Boat Street), as well as ones honoring explorers such as Nuñez de Balboa and Juan Sebastián de Elcano, and naval heroes like Álvaro de Bazán and Blas de Lezo. Both a street and a plaza bear the name De la Marina Española, and they're nowhere near each other. There's even an altar in the shape of a boat in the parish church Nuestra Señora del Carmen y San Luis.

## Odes to a Famous Explorer

Then, of course, there's Christopher Columbus (Cristóbal Colón in Spanish), who was in the employ of Spain's queen Isabel of Castile in 1492 when he accidentally bumped into the Americas. Plaza de Colón is among the city's busiest public spaces. A statue of the man himself stands atop a gothic-style pedestal in the center of a swirling 20 lanes of traffic on the Paseo de la Castellana, Madrid's grandest thoroughfare.

The neighboring plaza hosts several naval monuments but none are more imposing than the "Monument to the Discovery of America," four hulking Brutalist cast-concrete forms designed by Joaquín Vaquero Turcios and engraved with figures and phrases from officers, sailors and others related to the voyage, which face Calle Serrano. You may love them or hate them, but you can't miss them.

Columbus figures prominently, too, in the Palacio de Liria, the masterpiece-filled house museum of the Duke of Alba, guard-



In Madrid, from top: the Estanque Grande (large pond), in Retiro Park, a popular recreation spot; at the Naval Museum, a model of the 18th-century Santa Ana on display; a statue of Christopher Columbus in Plaza de Colón; and bocata de calamares, a classic Madrid snack.



**Ties to the sea can be found in museums, parks and cuisine.**

ian of countless treasures, including nearly one-third of Columbus's extant correspondence. Among the most noteworthy are letters written at sea to his patron, Queen Isabel I, some with hand-drawn maps of the islands where he went ashore, considered among the earliest evocations of the so-called New World to reach Europe.

## Seaworthy Museums

But for a deep dive into Spanish maritime adventure, look no farther than the Naval Museum, which shares pride of place along the Paseo del Prado with the city's great

museums and sits next to the headquarters of the Spanish Armada, a stunning revivalist building adorned with maritime motifs.

The museum reopened in 2022 with a new entrance made of wood that creaks like a pitching ship. Among its treasures are Juan de la Cosa's 1500 map of America. It's breathtaking to stroll among the glorious skylit galleries packed with model ships — some almost big enough to board — elaborately carved ships' figureheads, hand-painted battle flags, depictions of famous naval battles, as well as countless sextants, cannons and torpedoes.

Other museums also offer salty breezes. The Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum has a vast collection of seascapes, from the frolicking 1691 "Neptune and Amphitrite," by Sebastiano Ricci, to the dramatic naval battles of Dutch masters like Willem van de Velde and Canaletto's nearly photographically detailed images of Venice.

## Palaces and Parades

Since the kings of Spain chose not to live by the sea, the sea was brought to them. Several royal palaces feature facilities for floating ships. Besides the Estanque Grande, where modern Madrileños and tourists now ply the waters in rowboats, there's the artificial lake in the Casa de Campo park adjacent to the Royal Palace. Back in the day, new naval technologies and battle plans could be tested, but one senses that these man-made bodies of water were mostly for the kings' amusement: naval war games with miniature flotillas, the pageantry of royal boat parades.

The most famous of these parades took place at the Royal Palace of Aranjuez on the Tajo River about 40 minutes south of Madrid. Elaborate barges, some made in Venice and Naples and covered with gilded sculptures and plush fabrics, would be taken out on the river for royal diversion. For a melancholy King Philip V, and later his son, Ferdinand VI, the famous Italian castrato, Farinelli, was charged with staging elaborate floating entertainments on the Tajo, often featuring Farinelli singing arias amid fireworks and as many as 60,000 candles.

Today, the royal barges — known as falúas — can be seen in a small museum in the palace's gardens, full of exotic trees brought on ships from around the empire.

While the extravagance of Farinelli's river rides are out of reach for most of us, a small tour boat, El Curiosity, leads 45-minute tours on the Tajo in Aranjuez that give a sense of royal history while passengers enjoy the languorous pace of the river's passage through this UNESCO World Heritage Site (9.99 euros, about \$11; reservations recommended).

## Tasting the Sea

Nonroyal Madrileños satisfy their love of the water with a surprising number of sailing and scuba schools. And for nautical history buffs and sailing enthusiasts, Robinson Nautical Bookstore is a local institution. The Marina Sport shop in Barrio Salamanca features everything from actual boats to backpacks made from old racing sails.

Spain has few natural lakes, but there are many reservoirs and most of those near Madrid have at least one yacht club and a few sandy beaches. The Pantano de San Juan, 33 miles west of downtown, has marinas where sailboats can be chartered, a nude beach and the occasional sea gull.

For many, however, Madrid's most relevant marine treasures are the ones that turn up on a plate. Improbably, landlocked Madrid is Spain's principal seafood exchange and ranks among the largest in the world, second only to Tokyo. Spanish expressions abound to express the extraordinary quality and diversity of seafood from all over the country. There are pulperías — octopus restaurants — from Galicia; anchovy restaurants from Cantabria; and restaurants like La Trainera, founded in 1966, that could offer a graduate program in Spanish shellfish.

For a newer version of the seafood bonanza, try Estimar, Desde 1911 or Bistronomika. Restaurant St James offers exquisite paelas in its nautical-themed dining room and terrace. Then there are local favorites like El Yate, or Milford, where the décor sails right past nautical to full-on yacht club.

Perhaps nothing underscores Madrid's improbable link to the sea than the fact that among its must-eat-in-Madrid food is a bocata de calamares, a simple sandwich of fried calamari. Everyone has their favorite, but the current reigning temples are Hermanos Vinagre and Arima.

Of course a calamari sandwich isn't exactly a souvenir, but thankfully Madrid's Rastro flea market is full of secondhand model ships, nautical paintings, naval uniforms, medals and accouterments, all revealing the city's timeless embrace of the sea.