

Madrid

Madrid is a city that bursts with energy and vitality, and its exuberant population and thriving nightlife scene make for a memorable language travel experience. ANNA ZACHARIASSEN reports.

Situated in the heart of the Iberian Peninsula, Spain's capital city, Madrid, is a bustling metropolis and home to over five million people. Madrid's status as an international business centre, combined with its reputation for culture and art, means that it attracts a wide variety of international visitors. "[Students] like Madrid because it is a cosmopolitan capital," says Sara Ledda at Instituto Hernan Cortes. "They are amazed by the streets, museums and monuments." Carmen Cuevas, at Enforex Centro de Estudios, adds, "Students are keen to [explore] the variety of cultural activities the city has to offer."

The influence of Madrid's high-spirited local inhabitants, who are known as *Madrileños*, is evident in every aspect of city life, from the frenzied atmosphere of the Rastro flea market to the seemingly inexhaustible energy of revellers at the hundreds of discos and *tascas*. "Most students like to go out at night with their [host] families, but some enjoy exploring the nightlife independently," says Gemma Dominguez, Marketing Director at Anglojet Cultural Travel. "Palacio de Gaviria in Calle Arenal is very popular among students because they are able to meet people from other parts of the world." Music styles in the city's clubs are varied and many places, particularly in the Chueca, Malasaña and Huertas areas, stay open until dawn.

During the day, Madrid's streets are teeming with people and traffic. The Puerta del Sol is the

official centre of both Madrid and Spain, and a slab of stone, known as Kilometre Zero, marks the spot where six of Spain's national routes begin and three of the city's 10 metro (underground train) lines converge.

"The metro makes it very easy for students to travel around Madrid," says Angel Genanaz at Idiomas Plus. During the day, trains run every three to five minutes and each of the 11 metro lines has its own specific number and colour.

Immediately north of Puerta del Sol are the popular pedestrianised shopping areas of Calle de Preciados and Calle del Carmen. Madrid also boasts plenty of bars, cafés and restaurants, which cater for a variety of tastes, from French and Moroccan cuisine to traditional Spanish food, including

chocolate con churros (sticks of dough dipped in hot chocolate mousse) and, of course, tapas.

Originally served free in bars as an accompaniment to alcohol, the word "tapas" is now used to describe any hot or cold dish served in small por-



El Rastro
This huge flea market, held on Sunday mornings in an old working-class area of Madrid, is popular with locals and visitors. Stalls sell anything from retro clothes and antiques to car parts

tions, and can include seafood, tortilla and cold meats. The Spanish even have a word – *tapear* – which means to move from one bar to another sampling different varieties of tapas. "Students like eating *paella* and *tortilla*," says Cuevas. "They also enjoy trying other Spanish specialities such as *Jamón Ibérico* (cured ham)." Plaza Santa Ana, east of Puerta del Sol, boasts more than 200 tapas bars and is a popular student hangout.

The Parque del Buen Retiro (Retiro Park), in the centre of Madrid, provides a welcome oasis amid the hustle and bustle of the city. Originally the grounds of a royal retreat, the park has been public property for



Agent viewpoint

"We have been sending students to Madrid for three years. They choose to study there because it is the capital of Spain and it has lots of interesting architecture. Many of them also say the people in Madrid speak the best Spanish. In their spare time, students like to visit some of the many museums and churches in the city. Polish students find it very easy to meet local [Spanish] people because they have the same temperament."

Magdalena Piescewicz, Centrum Olimpia, Poland

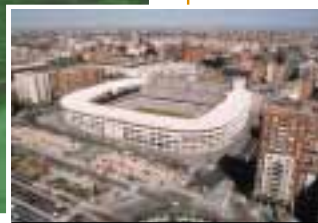
"Students [in Madrid] like the nightlife, the public transport system, the museums and the cultural activities, although they do not like the large amount of traffic in some areas of the city. Outside the classroom, they like to explore the city and often attend rock and flamenco concerts. Public transport in Madrid is very inexpensive compared to other European cities, as is entertainment such as the cinema and theatre. I would recommend Madrid as a study destination for students aged 18 years and older."

José Hellburg, SI-Language Travel, Sweden

"We send more than 200 students a year to Madrid. They are mainly between the ages of 19 and 22 years old. Tapas dishes are very popular and some parts of Madrid, such as Sol or Plaza Mayor, get very busy in the evening. Most of the pubs and bars [in Madrid] are free [to enter] and there is never a long queue to get in. As for nightlife, the clubs start getting active at around 12am and many of them don't shut until 6.30am."

Maureen McDermott-Meyer, IES Study Abroad, USA

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Casa de Cisneros in Plaza de la Villa (main picture)

more than 100 years and includes a boating lake, fortune-telling booths and travelling art exhibitions. "Our school is [situated] just one block from Retiro Park and students [often] eat their lunch there," says Juan Manuel Sampere at Escuela Internacional Sampere. Some of Madrid's other parks include Jardines de las Vistillas, with its peaceful terrace bar and spectacular views of the Casa de Campo, and Parque Juan Carlos I, Madrid's newest park complete with olive trees and an artificial river.

The Museo del Prado is one of Europe's finest art galleries and a pride of Madrid. Since it was opened in 1819, the museum has acquired over 3,000 paintings by some of Spain's finest artists, including Goya, Valázquez and Bosch. "Our students al-

ways take some time to visit the Prado Museum," says Dominguez.

Madrid has many other impressive art galleries including Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza and the Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, which are situated close to the Prado. The multi-functional Círculo de Bellas Artes, on Calle Marqués de Casa Riera, is both a cultural and social centre complete with its own

theatre, concert hall and four exhibition spaces.

Plaza Mayor, a beautiful 17th-century square adjacent to Calle Mayor, has remained almost perfectly preserved since it was first used as an arena for bull fights and coronations. Today, the plaza still hosts several public events, such as out-

door theatre and musical performances in the summer and a Christmas market in the winter.

There are also lots of festivals, which are important to *Madridileños*,

according to Sampere. "May is a great month in Madrid. Festivities [include] festivals, music and bull fights," he says.

Madrid is also known for its footballing passion, and it is home two football teams, Real Madrid and Atlético Madrid. According to Genanaz at Idiomas Plus, football is one of the reasons many students choose to study Spanish in Madrid. "Real Madrid is a real [draw] for students," he says. Swimming is another popular sport in Madrid and the city has a large number of indoor and outdoor pools.

All in all, Madrid offers language travel students a varied and exciting range of experiences, as Ledda sums up: "It is a city where [students] can enjoy the climate as well as art, literature, music and cuisine." □



Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza
Situated in the old Palacio de Villahermosa, close to the Prado, the Thyssen-Bornemisza art gallery has paintings spanning every major art movement from the 14th to the 20th century