

# Magnificent Madrid

The old and the new sit comfortably side-by-side in Spain's capital city, with architecture and cultural traditions from the past co-existing with a modern and vibrant social scene. BETHAN NORRIS reports.

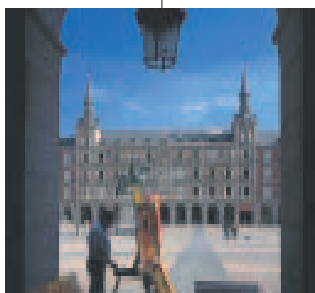
Eating and drinking is a passion for Madrid people," says Carmen Martín Acebes from the Spanish language programme at the Universidad Carlos III. "There are thousands of bars, taverns, pubs and restaurants to spend a good pleasant evening having tapas and wine and chatting to friends."

Madrid is a popular destination for language travel students for a number of reasons, not least of which is the city's vibrant nightlife that is often the most memorable part of a student's stay, according to Juan Manuel Sampere, Director of Estudio Sampere. "Madrid offers the best nightlife in Spain and Southern Europe," he asserts.

While the city has its fair share of bars and nightclubs that stay open all night, there are also a large number of open squares and plazas that are popular places to gather until the small hours of morning. Madrid's streets are often full of people making the most of the warm temperatures to have a drink or a meal in the open air. Popular areas with students include Plaza Mayor, Paseo de la Castellana and Malasaña, while the bullfighter taverns in the Calle de la Victoria and Espoz y Mina offer a unique insight into Madrid's busy nightlife.



**Palacio Real**  
The official residence of the King of Spain, Palacio Real was reconstructed on the site of the old palace, which was destroyed by fire in 1734. It is built of stone and brick so that no fire can destroy it

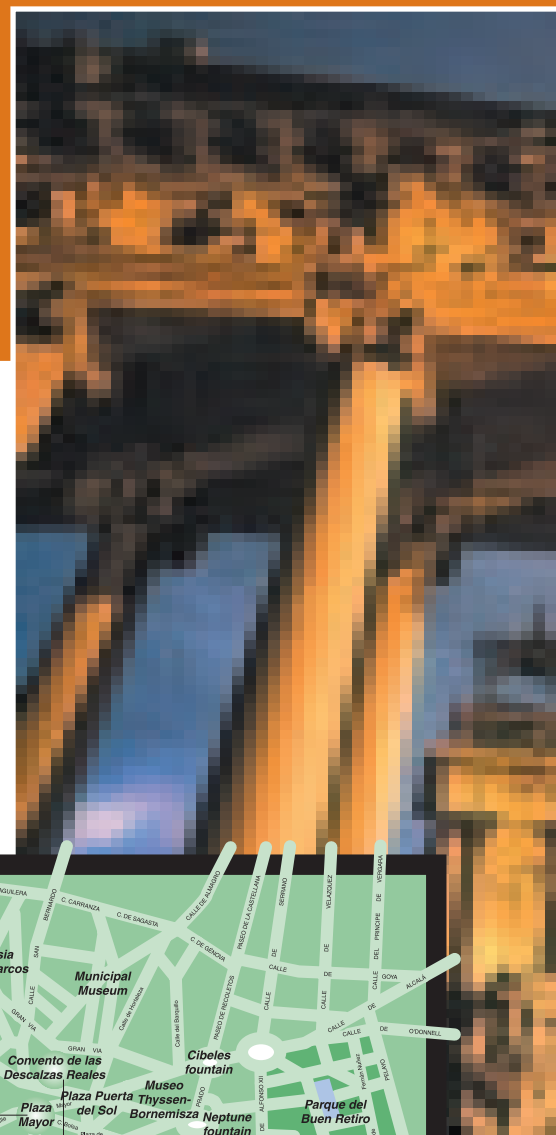


**Plaza Mayor**  
Around the outside of Plaza Mayor, there are bars and restaurants in converted wine cellars. In the Middle Ages, the square was surrounded by merchants' houses where goods would be sold

According to Ester Parra, from Carpe Madrid, a "mixture of traditional and modern atmospheres" can be found in the area of old Madrid during the day and night, where the city's thoroughly modern nightlife scene rubs shoulders with evidence of

its ancient past. The Torre de los Lujanes in the Plaza de la Villa dates from the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, while the Moorish architectural style depicted in the tower of the San Nicholas de los Servitas church – the oldest church in Madrid – serves as a reminder of the city's previous Arab occupation.

Robin Gravina, from OISE Madrid, says that the Islamic medieval parts of Madrid are some of the more unknown areas of the city, and he is keen to point out that students studying at the school are encouraged to explore these and other hidden attractions. "[We offer students] guided walking and art tours of the little known sites [of Madrid]," he says.



Students studying Spanish at the Universidad Carlos III are also encouraged to explore all the different elements Madrid has to offer. "[We organise] visits to the main museums, outings to markets and cultural centres, visits to theatres, concert houses and flamenco shows, even to see Real Madrid [football team]," says Acebes. "Students go with their teachers to get a feeling of the streets, the people and the features of the city."

Art lovers will find much to occupy themselves in Madrid as the city boasts a wide variety of art museums. The famous Museo del Prado, established in 1819 as the Royal Museum of Painting and Sculpture by King Ferdinand VII, holds an impressive collection of works by Spanish painters such as Velazquez, El Greco, Goya and Zurbarán,



## Agent viewpoint

"The main reason for our students taking a language course in Madrid is probably the dynamic cultural atmosphere that animates the city. There is something for everyone to see and experience. Students like to visit all the lovely plazas of Madrid, having a coffee looking at the exciting people walking by. They often visit museums, restaurants, tapas bars and coffee shops at the plazas. They have a picnic in Retiro Park, they go to discos and to the cinema to watch a Spanish movie. They also like walking around and experiencing the architecture and atmosphere."

**Christina Langley, Si-Language Travel, Sweden**

"[Students choose to study in Madrid] for its cosmopolitan flavour, its excitement as a city and for its nightlife. Madrid is open 24-hours-a-day. [It also has] easy connections to the rest of Spain and [students like the] chance to see Real Madrid. Madrid is for the most part a safe city and [students like] the upbeat Madrileños [local inhabitants] and how pleasant the Madrileños are to them. [I would recommend Madrid] primarily for college students and those professional people who want to learn Spanish in an authentic environment. I would not recommend it to high school students."

**Dorothy Rudy, Spanish Works, USA**

"Madrid is a cosmopolitan city in the centre of Spain so it is very easy to travel around at the moment with cheap flights. Students like the night life in Madrid but dislike the busy city traffic. They go to flamenco dancing classes and visit museums and parks in their spare time, such as the Parque Retiro. The local people are generally interested in foreign people, especially at night after a few drinks so it is easy for students to meet them. I would recommend the city to all students."

**Jose Mendez, Cactus Language, UK**

*Madrid's architecture makes a mesmerising impression on visitors (main picture)*

PHOTOGRAPHS: SPANISH NATIONAL TOURIST OFFICE

while the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia displays the works of contemporary artists such as Picasso.

The city of Madrid was originally made up of lots of separate villages – the city itself is still known as *La villa* [the village] to its inhabitants – and many of the local village traditions have survived to be amalgamated into large celebrations enjoyed by locals and tourists alike.

Acebes claims that these traditional feasts and ancient customs can help foreign students to learn about and understand Spain. "Ceremonies such as taking the family pets and other animals to the Saint Antón church for religious blessing recall the life and culture of ancient times," she says. "[Other feasts include] the feast of Saint Antonio in

June, when young people go to a picnic near San Antonio church – where the famous Goya frescoes can be seen – and single girls pray to the Saint for a husband."

While many festivals in Madrid have religious overtones, music, dancing and eating feature heavily on the agenda. "May and October have long-haul festivals with music, theatre, fiestas and so on," says

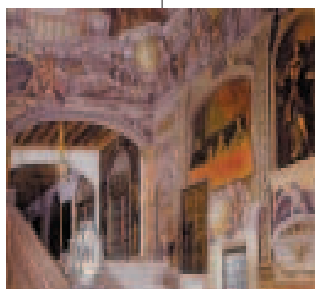
Sampere. Gravina lists some of the specific festivals and fiestas that students enjoy. "[There is] the autumn theatre and dance festival, summer music, San Isidro fiestas and Paloma fiestas in August," he says.

One of the most spectacular festivals of Madrid's year is the Fiesta de San Isidro to honour the city's patron saint. Held in May, the fiesta features

concerts, public performances and bullfighting, while in August, people dress in regional costumes and perform local dances at the Verbena de la Paloma.

While students may find it difficult to fit in all the activities that Madrid has to offer, the city is well placed for them to explore some of Spain's other attractions. "[Madrid has the] best communications with the rest of Spain since we have a radial system," says Sampere. "Toledo, Segovia, Avila, Salamanca are within 200 kilometres. Seville, Valencia around three hours by train [and the] Guadarrama mountains are 60 kilometres from Madrid."

Acebes confirms that the surrounding area of Madrid can offer much to students who love nature and outdoor activities. "The many mountains, rivers and forests of the province offer the possibility of hiking, walking, hunting and fishing," she says. "[Also], at a short distance from Madrid, there are several reservoirs where water sports can be practised." □



**Convento de las Descalzas Reales**

Founded in 1564, this convent has housed royal and aristocratic nuns over the centuries. The 16th-century Baroque building boasts fine art and religious artefacts