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I love visiting places where I feel not only in the present but in the past. That is the excitement and drama of Madrid.

History -- centuries past and the last one -- is told in the art and architecture of Spain's stunning capital. The historic memories of the privileged royals, the opposition to Franco, the triumph of democracy, and now the demonstrations of today's political protesters show a vibrant country whose people connect to and live their historical roots.

So much of it can be experienced in the historic central plazas, the Puerta del Sol and the Plaza Mayor, and in the spectacular palaces, religious houses and museums. Here's how we saw the best of it in just a few days, visiting the famous sights but also meandering around neighborhoods. A highlight was an evening tapas tour that mixed piquant history with wine, chorizos and other good-to-eat-and-drink Spanish delicacies.



The center of the city, the Puerta del Sol (gateway to the sun) is at Spain's kilometer zero, and everything radiates from there to the city and nation. The symbol of Madrid, a bear climbing a Madroño tree, is a striking, surprising statue and also a popular meeting place.

But when I visited, there was another presence in this historic plaza, the Indignados, the mostly young "indignant" activists protesting government austerity policies that (as elsewhere in the West), seem to many of the young and the poor designed to have them pay for the mistakes and profits of the rich and powerful. At booths set up in the square, the Indignados invited Madrileños and visitors to meetings to discuss the crisis.



The Puerta del Sol may be the current political center, but when we walked a few minutes to the historic center, the Plaza Mayor (the "grand square"), we were taken back to a time when there weren't common challengers to political power, just the kings and queens and royals along with their ecclesiastical retinues. The royals inhabited the grand buildings now occupied by the government tourism office as well as by restaurants and shops. The bottoms of the buildings are stone, then, on the three stories above you see white shuttered windows and red painted stone blocks, black wrought iron balconies and at the top a gray mansard roof. In the center is the bronze statue of Philip III on horseback.

We would come back to it numerous times. Sitting at one of the cafétables was a great place for people watching and relaxing with a caña (a glass of wine.)



On one morning, we met our guide Rosa and followed her through the narrow streets surrounding the Plaza Mayor. A high point was a visit to the Casa de la Villa, the 17th-century pink stone building that houses the old town hall. It has a gorgeous reception room with a marble stained-glass ceiling, a huge crystal chandelier, tapestries, and statues. But most riveting for me was the simple plaque commemorating the deaths of people who worked in the city hall during the 1936-39 Civil War. They would have been loyalists, republicans, opposed to the fascist attackers led by Francisco Franco. The plaque was approved in 1978, just three years after Franco's death, and it was dedicated in 1980.

Less bitter-sweet than the plaque, and sweeter in its own way was the Convent of Corpus Cristi which is inhabited by cloistered nuns. The only contact they have with outside visitors like us is commercial. They make and sell cakes and cookies!

The huge brown carved door of the convent's stone building has a sign directing visitors to ring a bell. Rosa did it and then said over the intercom that we wanted to buy "dulces" (sweets). We were buzzed in and followed her through some small connecting rooms to a space where an opening in the wall revealed a large dark brown wooden turntable.

Next to it was posted a list of sweets: almond cakes, orange cookies, light and fluffy "sequillos," shortbread and more. Quite modern in their marketing, the nuns advertise that some items are made without sugar. Rosa called to the sister and asked what was for sale that day. From behind the turntable came a disembodied voice. You'll probably not visit another shop like this one!

But life wasn't always cushy for the aristocracy, especially if you were a woman who didn't like the family's arranged marriage plans. The Monasterio de las Descalzas (the barefoot ones) was founded in 1559 by Joan of Austria. Her daughter lived there, escaping a marriage to Felipe II, and it became a hideaway for other women who found more freedom in its confines than in forced marriages. They were known as the "Barefoot Royals." The building is filled with treasures of liturgical art, many of them brought by these women as their "dowries." It became a museum in 1960. There are some dramatic paintings, including ones by Titian and Breughel. I liked best a work at the top of the grand staircase that shows the young princess made famous by Velasquez's "Las Meninas" in a family portrait where instead of being the center of attention she is posed modestly with her parents, including her father Felipe IV.

Nuns still live in a separate section in the convent, but though you can't see them, you may be lucky as we were to hear the bell-clear voice of a cloistered sister behind a locked door practicing a religious song for the service.



I love palaces, and on another morning we headed to the west of the historic center to visit an 18th century Royal Palace that is as grand as most. Like others of the period, it was lived in, and gives you a sense of what life for the royals was like, for Philip V who built it and those who followed. Interesting how whatever European palace you visit, the royals seemed to have had similar tastes – or the same architects and decorators. They favored Chinese ("chinoiserie") for example. And lots of gilt and hanging chandeliers. And they liked covering every inch of wall and ceiling with sumptuous historical and religious tapestries and paintings



Some of the royals' portraits are in the world class Prado, known best for great 16th, 17th and 18th-century art. We stopped in almost as a traveler's duty. But I must admit that, aside from viewing "Las Meninas", I was more entranced by another museum an easy walk south of the Prado past the Botanical Gardens. Whatever city I visit, I head for the modern art museum. It tells you not only about the talent and style of the country's recent and contemporary painters, but about the issues that have absorbed and engaged them. That is nowhere as true as in a country that has suffered repression. Such a trove of important art is the Reina Sofia Museum, named after the queen in this parliamentary monarchy.

The Reina Sofia is the home of Picasso's famous stark white and shades of gray and black "Guernica," his cry of horror at the bombing of that Spanish town by the forces of the fascist Franco. But "Guernica" is surrounded by a trove of less well known artistic commentary on both sides of the political conflict.

"En España Amanece -- Arriba España " (In Spain it is dawning -- Arise Spain) made by the fascist Spanish Falange shows silhouettes of three men saluting the Falange symbol.

But I preferred the poster of a woman with the caption: "Shedding her outer layer of superstition and misery from the

immemorial slave, there emerged the woman capable of active participation in the making of the future."



And then of course came the result of the war: death. By opponents of Franco, see Francis Picabia's "The Spanish Revolution," done 1936-7 and showing two skeletons, the revolution hijacked by death. And Gutiérrez Solana's "Heads and Masks."

Other works show soldiers shooting and civilians fleeing in the Spanish countryside. Or El Generalísimo – the grand general – Franco's preferred title as a death head with a pointed helmet and a swastika, with the dictator's military, businessman, and bishop henchmen. "No pasarán" (the famous slogan "They shall not pass") made in July 1936 shows the image of a farmer carrying an implement which turns into a soldier carrying a bayonet. Don't miss this museum.



After the emotional power of the art exhibits, just steps away is delicious relaxation in the grand El Retiro park. Along the pathways, we noticed friends and couples sitting in quiet corners, chatting, enjoying the solitude. Walking on, we came to the lake and found an outdoor café table from where we could see people boating, some pulling the oars themselves, others on a small passenger craft. At one end was the imposing white 1922 statue of Alfonso XII above a long colonnade.

Art of course often appeals to a political taste. But there is another national cultural treasure that can't help but please everyone, the food of Spain and the moveable feast that is the popular pastime of visiting tapas bars. Saving the best till last, a highlight of our visit was the evening tapas tour run by Adventurous Appetites.

Tapas are a wonderful tradition in Spain, and also quite necessary in a country where urban residents routinely have dinner at 10pm. They stave off hunger and also enjoy company at tapas bars which offer small bites along with drinks. The word comes from tapar, to cover. A bar patron had to be given a plate with something on it covering the glass of wine. The "something" became tapas.

I can't think of a better way to experience that tradition than with the tour run by Adventurous Appetites, which takes congenial groups on walking visits to select tapas bars in the heart of the old Madrid.



We met in the evening at the bear and tree statue in the Puerta del Sol. We were a small group, just ten including guide Danny, half Spanish, half Irish, with a lilting Irish accent. There were two Israelis and the rest Americans. We stopped at a half dozen or more tapas bars, passing through the Santa Ana neighborhood famous for the fare. Danny ordered and explained the particular drink or food for which each place was known.

The Labra on Calle Tetún 12, for example, with its brown paneled walls, is known for vermouth made with red wine and herbs and German vermouth, a spicy wormwood, invented in Turin, Italy, a favorite aperitif in Madrid. We also had crayfish croquettes and cod. We learned to order a caña, a small glass that at 1.5 liters doesn't have time to go flat. Achato is even smaller.

At Taberna los Angeles, there was a hole in the wine bottle's cork, and we were shown how to lift it very high and let the liquid pour into a glass set in a wooden holder a few feet below. That created bubbles. We nibbled on chorizo (sausage), mussels, French fries with blue cheese, and more.



Elsewhere, we tasted and learned about Spanish sherry, fino and manzanilla, and about olives marinated in rosemary, thyme, and dill. Also about the good combination of olives and manchego cheese. At Terra Mundi, we had a delectable feast of grilled zucchini, eggplant and octopus.



Danny nourished our minds as well. We stopped in the Plaza Mayor and at the Congress building to learn some pertinent political history. As we meandered through the neighborhoods, we heard about the history of the Moors and the Jews and the expulsions of both groups in 1492. We passed a mosque that had been turned into a church. Then we heard about the attempted post-Franco military coup in 1981 and the role of King Juan Carlos in squelching it. "Nobody slept," said Danny. "We thought it was civil war." Again.

## IF YOU GO

Getting into town:

From the airport take the yellow "Airport Express" bus from T1, 2 and 4 terminals. Departs every 15 minutes during the day, covering its 13 miles in about 40 minutes. An express line with only three stops: at O'Donnell where it crosses with Doctor Esquerdo and connects with the number 6 Metro line and at Cibeles and Atocha. Buy tickets on the bus for 2 Euros (\$2.78). Taxi - 30 Euros.

By train, you'll arrive at the Atocha station near the Reina Sofia museum in the southeast corner of the historic center. If you're traveling around Spain or elsewhere in Europe, best choice is a Eurail pass from Rail Europe. We used it in Spain to travel between Madrid and Toledo and Madrid and Barcelona on high-speed trains that beat driving or going by plane. If you know your times of travel, you can make your Spain reservations while in the U.S. via the internet and print them at home, and so avoid standing in lines at Spanish rail stations. By the way, when you go to the station to buy a reservation, you don't have to bring your Eurail pass and passport.

Guidebooks:

Top 10 Madrid by DK Eyewitness Travel is invaluable for the visitor who has limited time and wants experts to point out the most important sights, with details about fees and hours and what you should see in each place. Also key points in history, major personalities, food, best restaurants and tapas bars. And where to stay and shop. Along with excellent maps of the historic center and even a laminated pull-out folding map with street index, subway diagram and restaurants and tapas bars by neighborhood.

Very good if you are traveling around the country are the Spain guides by DK Eyewitness Travel and by Michelin.

Tourist office: Centro de Información Turística, Plaza Mayor, 27.

Metro passes: Tourist Travel Pass 3 days for 13 Euros can be purchased at all stations of the Metro network, at the Centro de Atención al Viajero (Passenger Assistance Centre) at both airport stations (line 8), at Tourist Offices; also on sale at some tobacconists and newspaper stands. Single rides are 1 Euro. You can buy a pass good for 10 trips that can be used by more than one person.

City-tour bus: It's a good way to get a sense of the city. Take the 1 ½-hour historic tour, and if you have time take the

one-hour modern one. Leaves every 20 minutes. Get off and on where you want.

The Historic Madrid route runs through the city centre. The bus crosses La Cibeles fountain, Gran Vía, Plaza de España, the Temple of Debod, the Royal Palace, the Teatro Real opera house, the Catedral de la Almudena, Puerta de Toledo, Calle Mayor, Puerta del Sol, Calle de Alcalá, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, the Botanical Gardens, Museo Nacional del Prado, the arch at Puerta de Alcalá, the Museo Arqueológico Nacional and Plaza de Colón.

The Modern Madrid route makes its way up the Paseo del Prado from the fountain of Neptune, followed by Paseo de Recoletos and Paseo de la Castellana. It passes the National Natural Science Museum, AZCA, Palacio de Congresos y Exposiciones and the Bernabéu Stadium. The bus then goes down Calle Serrano up to the National Archaeological Museum, Puerta de Alcalá, Plaza de Cibeles, Calle Alcalá and Carrera de San Jerónimo.

The Madrid Card: Entrance into many venues without fees and priority entrance into the Royal Palace and the big museums. It means you don't stand on long lines. Available for 24, 48, 72 or 120 hours. 34 (0)902 088 908.

Casa de la Villa/ Town Hall: Free guided tours in Spanish and English on Mondays from 5 to 6pm. Plaza de la Villa 4, 5. Tel: 34 (0)91480236. Register in person, with your passport, at the Tourist Office in the Plaza Mayor. Groups are limited to 30 people, but the tour is not widely known so you shouldn't have trouble getting tickets.

Convent of Corpus Cristi: The "sweets" convent, Plazuela del Conde de Miranda, 3. 9:30am to 1pm and 4pm to 6pm. Tel: 34 (0)91 548 37 01.

Royal Palace: Summer hours are from 9am, and you can book a guided tour or rent an audio guide.

Monasterio de las Descalzas (the barefoot nuns): Plaza de las Descalzas 3. It is visited only by tour (45 minutes to an hour), and you must reserve the same day; only 20 places. English tours are given depending on the demand. Arrive at 10:30am, when tickets are distributed for the rest of morning. Sunday come at 11am. Or arrive at 3pm (except Fridays and Sundays) to get tickets for the afternoon tours.

Prado Museum: Paseo del Prado, Mon to Sat 10am to 9pm, Sun to 2:30pm.

Reina Sofia National Art Museum: Santa Isabel 52. Madrid 28012. Daily 10am to 9pm, Sunday to 2:30pm. Free Sat after 2pm.

El Retiro, 18 gates at all sides of the park. Open April to Sept 6am to midnight; Oct to March 6am to 11pm.

Tapas Tour: Adventurous Appetites Ltd - The tour, limited to ten people, costs 50 Euros per person and includes drinks and tapas at the first bar. Then you pay 20 Euros for the "kitty" to buy food and drink at the other places. The tour leaves at 8pm from the bear statue in the Puerta del Sol and runs till midnight. Tel: 34 (0)639 331 073.

<http://www.wavejourney.com/TaleMadrid.html>