

NEIGHBOURHOODS

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NEIGHBOURHOODS

Madrid may stake a strong claim to being Europe's most dynamic city, but it doesn't have the immediate cachet of Rome, Paris or even that other city up the road, Barcelona. Its architecture is beautiful, but there's no Colosseum, no Eiffel Tower, no Gaudí-inspired zaniness to photograph and then tell your friends back home, 'this is Madrid'. As such, many first-time visitors wonder what there is to see in the Spanish capital. The answer is wonderful sights in abundance, so many in fact that few travellers leave disappointed with their menu of high culture and high-volume excitement.

For a start, Madrid has three of the finest art galleries in the world and if ever there was a golden mile of fine art, it has to be the combined charms of the Museo del Prado, Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza. Masterpieces overflow from these three museums into dozens of other museums and galleries across the city.

Exploring deeper into the city, the combination of stunning architecture and feel-good living has never been easier to access than in the beautiful plazas where *terrazas* (cafés with outdoor tables) provide a front-row seat for Madrid's fine cityscape and endlessly energetic street life. This is a city, in the words of Benito Pérez Galdós, one of Spain's most-loved literary figures of the early 20th century, 'where going for a stroll counts as an occupation', and we challenge you to find a more spectacular and agreeable setting for your coffee than the Plaza Mayor, Plaza de Santa Ana or Plaza de Oriente. Throw in some outstanding city parks (the Parque del Buen Retiro in particular) and areas such as Chueca, Malasaña, Lavapiés and Salamanca, which each have their own alluring personalities, and you'll quickly end up wishing, like Ernest Hemingway, that you never had to leave.

Madrid is divided up into *distritos* (districts) and these are subdivided into *barrios* (neighbourhoods), the official names of which are largely ignored by madrileños. Indeed the word *barrio* has a very strong feel of local identity about it. Madrileños have their own city map in their heads and, since they know best, we follow them.

Los Austrias, Sol and Centro make up the bustling, compact and medieval heart of Madrid, where the former village of Mayrit came to life. This area now yields an impossibly rich heritage of palaces, churches and grand squares. La Latina and Lavapiés, two of Madrid's oldest inner-city *barrios*, are immediately south and southeast of the centre, and have plenty to see and even more to experience. East of here takes in Huertas and Atocha, with the former the home to a labyrinth of more vibrant nightlife than seems possible, but also with its fair share of cultural sights that are well worth tracking down. Down the hill, Atocha is a gateway to the grand boulevard of the Paseo del Prado, a haven of culture boasting the city's finest museums. Part of the same *barrio*, the glorious Parque del Buen Retiro is a refuge of green parkland and gardens, and serves as an entry point to the exclusive *barrio* of Salamanca. West of Salamanca, across the Paseo de los Recoletos, are two of modern Madrid's coolest *barrios*, Malasaña and Chueca, which have been transformed from gritty, working-class dives into cultural focal points. Neighbouring Chamberí and Argüelles, away to the north, have few sights to talk about but offer an ambience that is rapidly making them the *barrios* of choice for discerning madrileños. The outer *distritos* of Madrid offer some parks and children's attractions.

See the Transport chapter, [p250](#), for details of how to get around Madrid.

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