

# WALL STREET JOURNAL

## Should You Go to Madrid or Barcelona? Spain's Capital Is Finally Winning Over Luxury Tourists

Long overshadowed by Barcelona, Madrid is finally flaunting its own wealth of attractions, from prodigious art and architecture to revived hoods and game-changing new hotels

By

*Christian L. Wright* / Photography by Davit Ruiz for The Wall Street Journal

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A FEW MONTHS AGO, I made my first trip back to Madrid in 25 years. I've lost track of how many times I've been to Spain since then—Barcelona and the Costa Brava, Bilbao and the Basque Country, high up in the Picos de Europa, down south in Seville—but Madrid always lingered in the back of my mind, like an old flame. Suddenly, I'd started hearing from my Spanish friends and expats who live there that this once sober town—more of a buttoned-up business hub than a romantic holiday spot—was really opening up. I had to see for myself. My friend Gabriella Ranelli, who's lived in San Sebastian since the first Bush administration and runs a food-tour company there, agreed to meet me. In late fall, the sky was Velasquez blue, as the natives say, and the sun was still strong.

Madrid can be a tough nut to crack. It has so much of what you'd expect of a major European capital—layer upon layer of history, important art collections, majestic tree-lined boulevards, an efficient metro system, plenty of Michelin stars—and yet it's been overlooked as a proper destination for American travelers. It gets a fraction of the annual visitors that the big three, London, Paris, and Rome, do. And within its own national borders, the inland city gets overshadowed by its sexy Catalan sister Barcelona and the culinary juggernaut that is the Basque country. Slowly, though, Madrid—with a population of over 3 million people in the city itself, making it the European Union's third largest city—is emerging from the shadows.

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According to Virtuoso, the global network of travel agencies, Spain is one of the top 10 international destinations for this summer, and while Barcelona still inspires more demand, Madrid's numbers are steadily growing. Once upon a time, Americans really only used Madrid as a stopover, maybe spending one night en

route to somewhere else—with a broadly recognizable skyline, iconic bridge, flying buttress or other totem easily conjured in the collective imagination. Madrid is funny that way. "It's more of a pastiche," said Hayden Salter, an architect from California who moved to the city 28 years ago to work for Pritzker Prize winner Rafael Moneo. "There's a variety and unpredictability to it. It's home to a lot of different people from different places. To me, it seems a little bit like L.A., while Barcelona is San Francisco."



The rivalry is similar, too. One night over Sherry in a dark narrow bar on Calle Echegaray that prohibits photos, Gabriella and I got talking to some Madrileños, who politely described the two as complementary cities. But where the Catalans are proudly Catalan, Madrid is more of a melting pot. “No one here is from here,” said one of our new friends, who was born in Madrid. She explained to us that to be a *gato*—the Spanish word for cat and what locals call a Madrid native—your father and grandfather must have been born here. “Even I am not a cat,” she said.

Virginia Irurita, founder of the Madrid-based travel company Made for Spain and Portugal, says that more of her American clients consider the city a destination in itself in recent years. “We usually had to convince clients to include two or three nights in Madrid,” said Ms. Irurita. “Then they’d email to say Madrid was the big surprise. Now we have guests coming for a week.”

Among the surprises: Madrid is still one of Europe’s more affordable capitals. A glass of wine, a vermouth and two sardine tapas at Bodega de la Ardosa, an excellent wood-paneled bar, might cost \$16. “Madrid is growing up,” said Raquel Saez, an art-project manager and guide. “We have improved the streets. The traditional architecture and the antique flavor is there. But we have, as we say, cleaned the fence.”

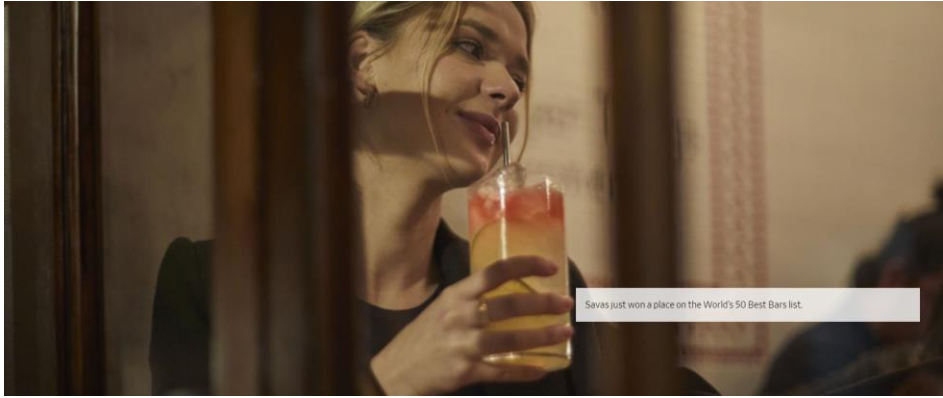
These days, building facades—ranging from baroque to modernist—have been scoured to a blindingly pristine condition, and in spring the many parks and gardens explode with almond trees, magnolias, wild cherry trees and bougainvillea. The leafy green Paseo del Prado, dating to 1540 and considered the first tree-lined avenue in a European capital, and the adjoining Buen Retiro park, 350 verdant acres opened to the public in the 18th century by King Charles III, have recently been added to Unesco’s World Heritage list. (They joined Egypt’s Pyramids and the Grand Canyon as places of “outstanding universal value to humanity,” according to the criteria.)

Formerly dodgy neighborhoods like Malasaña—from which La Movida movement and Pedro Almodóvar came—and the once druggy Chueca have been cleaned up and reinvented with stylish storefronts, sunny cafes, and a chorus of languages, including English. And thanks in part to the chef and humanitarian José Andrés, a once neglected stretch of Calle Ibiza is now bustling with lively places to eat and drink. In a two-year \$75 million rehabilitation of the Plaza de España, the central square once choked off by traffic, vehicles have been rerouted underground. A thousand trees were planted in and around the plaza. Now pedestrians can stroll or cycle amid greenery to the nearby Puerta del Sol, another main square, and to the Royal Palace.





A cranberry vodka at Savas, a new white-tiled cocktail bar in the Lavapiés neighborhood.



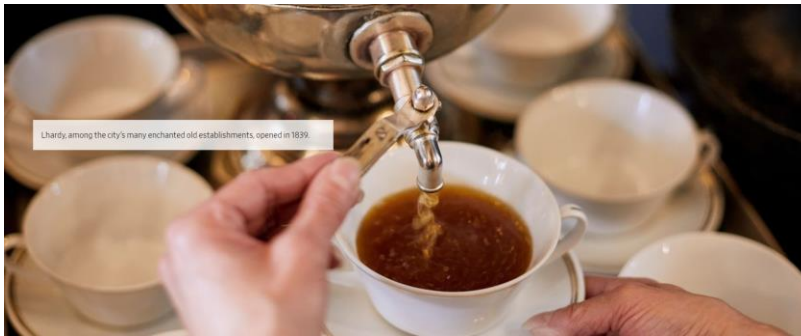
Savas just won a place on the World's 50 Best Bars list.



The Dani Rossini burger, made with Simmental beef and foie gras, at the Four Seasons rooftop restaurant, helmed by celebrated chef Dani Garcia.



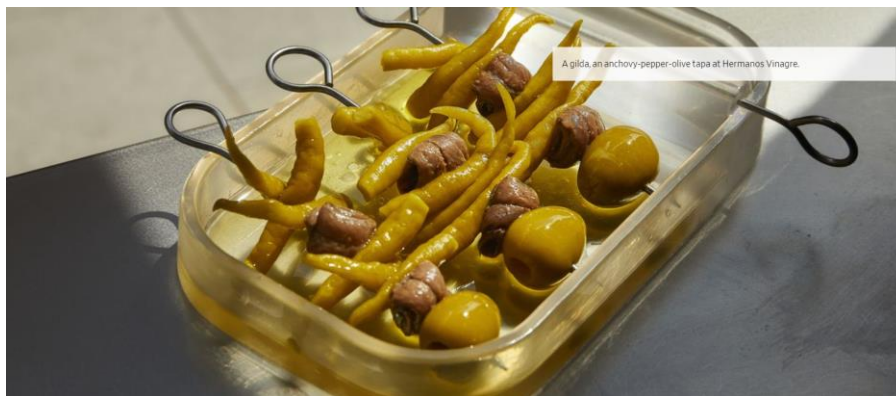
For its Madrid hotel, Four Seasons turned a collection of derelict 19th-century buildings in the city center into a new compound—that is rapidly changing the surrounding streets, near the Puerta del Sol, that were not so long ago chaotic and a little rough.



Lhardy, among the city's many enchanted old establishments, opened in 1839.



Go for Lhardy's classic beef consommé served in a big china cup.



A gilda, an anchovy-pepper-olive tapa at Hermanos Vinagre.



Hermanos Vinagre sells their wares as well as serves them, so it's possible to buy a bottle of vinegar after stopping in for a bite.

The city's hospitality landscape is quickly transforming too. In rapid succession, Four Seasons, [Mandarin Oriental](#) and Rosewood have all opened hotels, bringing a level of luxury to the Spanish capital that didn't exist before. "They change the whole dynamic and the tourist's expectations," said Sophie Perret, senior director at HVS, the global consulting firm that focuses on the hospitality industry. Gabriella and I had one of our best meals at Dani Brasserie, on the rooftop of the Four Seasons. While I burst open what seemed to be a little tomato and "nitro-gazpacho" came spilling out, a skinny woman who could have been plucked from an Almodóvar scene, in a tight black ponytail, huge sunglasses and leather shorts, devoured the five-star hamburger.



We also dined on paella in the lovely garden restaurant at the Mandarin Oriental Ritz, a Belle Époque palace near the botanical gardens, which was renovated to the tune of \$121 million, under scrutiny of preservation authorities. And at Rosewood Villa Magna, a 1972 landmark in the tony residential district of Salamanca, we tucked into Flor Y Nata, the hotel's all-day cafe that serves "green detox" juice, espresso and cava. "Madrid people love hotel bars," said Gabriella, with whom I discovered the gin and tonic when we were 15.

Together, we can still be like a couple of schoolgirls, keen to discover the world out there. And so we ramble around. In Madrid de los Austrias, we stopped for tapas at Mercado de San Miguel, the cast-iron-and-glass-covered market that was renovated in 2018. As we headed outside again, we were stopped in our tracks by King Felipe VI's black Rolls Royce, followed by his motorcade of vintage Cadillacs, flying down the Calle Major. "You can't come anticipating what you're going to see," said Mr. Salter, the architect. "That's what makes it a pleasure."



## The Lowdown

*Where to sleep, eat and view art in Madrid*

**Staying There:** Madrid is in the throes of a hotel boom, led by the [Four Seasons](#), [Mandarin Oriental Ritz](#), and the [Rosewood Villa Magna](#), which has raised the quality of deluxe rooms in the city, with rates to match—starting at about \$650 a night.

Rosewood hired the Spanish architect Ramón de Arana to revamp the former hotel overlooking the wide vibrant boulevard, Paseo de la Castellana. The renovated Ritz, so tied up in the history of the city, has a new spa, a champagne bar, celebrated chef Quique Dacosta overseeing the dining rooms and suites fit for heads of state and football wives. The roof at the famed Palm Court has been opened up and now a soaring skylight pours sunshine onto the drawing room. For more modestly priced accommodations, there's [a two-bedroom flat](#) near the Royal Palace (from about \$130) and posh digs in a renovated 17th-century Spanish Renaissance building on the Gran Vía ([The Principal Madrid](#), from about \$400).

**Eating and Drinking There:** The hotel boom has brought more Michelin stars to town, including one at the Mandarin Oriental Ritz for chef Quique Dacosta's haute cuisine at [Deessa](#). But don't miss out on enchanted old establishments, too, like [Lhardy](#), which opened in 1839 and serves classic beef consomé in a big china cup, and [Casa Alberto](#), with its weathered zinc bar and a dainty version of the rocoto de calamares, a fried calamari and mayonnaise sandwich, a Madrid classic. You can also find sleek new restaurants like [La Raquetista](#), where the beautiful people squeeze in for torreznos, crunchy bites of pork belly.

Some places sell their wares as well as serve them, like [Hermanos Vinagre](#), where it's possible to buy a bottle of vinegar after having a "gilda," an anchovy-pepper-olive tapa. [Lavinia](#) is a two-floor wine emporium in Salamanca that has sidewalk tables. [Savas](#), a white-tiled cocktail bar opened by a Lithuanian couple in the Lavapies neighborhood, just won a place on the World's 50 Best Bars list. It's tiny. Get there early.

**Sightseeing There:** The Prado, the Reina Sofia, and the Thyssen-Bornemisza museums get all the attention, but there are little gems all over town. Consider the [Sorolla Museum](#), in the 1911 house where the Spanish painter—known for his landscapes—lived and worked. And the [Juan March Foundation](#), in a curved 1970s building with exhibits focused on modern and contemporary art and lovely grounds that are a good example of the city's many hidden gardens and terraces.



## The Case for Barcelona

*5 things the Catalan capital has that Madrid doesn't*

1. Antoni Gaudí, the architect whose trippy, iconic designs are Barcelona's international calling card.
2. Beaches. About 2½ miles of sandy Mediterranean coast lie very close to the throb of the streets.
3. Pa amb tomà-quet, aka toasted bread with grated fresh tomato that is nowhere better.
4. Its own language Catalan was the official language of Aragon, and in the late 20th century, as Catalonia achieved greater autonomy, Catalan was revived as the principal language of politics, education and public life in the region.
5. Michelin stars Barcelona's restaurants have racked up 29 to Madrid's 26