Cycling in Madrid: A Beginner’s Guide

Madrid was, for quite some time, a cyclist’s nightmare. While other cities around Spain and Europe were busy laying down networks of bike lanes for the growing number of urban cyclists, Madrileños dug in their heels and dismissed their city as an unbikeable exception—too many hills, they said, too many cars, and nobody’s accustomed to those two-wheeled bastards in this kind of traffic.

But over the past two years, the culture has started to change. The ayuntamiento spearheaded a series of projects designed to embrace commuter cyclists, encouraging them to take to the streets that were once considered unnavigable death traps by the locals. The crown jewel of their push was BiciMad, the public bike-share program modeled on similar ones in Paris, London and New York, which was unveiled last Spring in a shaky but ultimately successful launch. This was accompanied by a network of shared-use bike lanes slapped together throughout the city center, distinguished by a speed limit of 30 kilometers per hour and bike symbol painted on the asphalt, serving as both a safety measure and awareness campaign for honk-happy drivers not used to sharing the streets.

A recently-painted street last Fall, heading South through Malasaña. Priority bike lanes were part of the Ayuntamiento’s push to make Madrid a bike-friendly city.

While not without its problems, the program has played a fundamental role in legitimizing and normalizing cycling in the capital. It’s now safe to say that Madrid is a bike-friendly city. The cycling infrastructure is growing by the month, the mindset of the public has changed, and there now seems to be broad support for this healthy, fun, and sustainable means of transport.

I would also argue that there’s a more subtle benefit to cycling here. Riding through the narrow streets of the central barrios offers a deeper sense of the layout of this city, a richer understanding of the space and distance that get warped behind car windows and destroyed in the tunnels of the metro. It’s as if there were a rhythm behind the chaos of Madrid and cycling sets it all to the proper RPM, revealing a song too slow to be heard walking and too muddled at anything faster.

I hope you hear it too.

Every time I see an adult on a bicycle, I no longer despair for the future of the human race.” – H. G. Wells

1. Learning (or re-learning) to ride a bike

Bici-Critica, a once-a-month protest to reclaim the streets for all types of alternative transport, features bikes and riders of all types.

Maybe you haven't ridden a bike in a couple years. Maybe you haven't done much of anything in years, and your physical activity has dwindled down to drunken dancing and raising toasts. That's no problem at all. You can learn to mount a bike again in no time, I promise. As they say, it's just like riding a bike: your motor memory is still intact, all you have to do is reactivate it. I'd suggest renting a bike or taking out a BiciMad and going for a lazy spin in a calm area, like Retiro or the Madrid Rio. You'll fall back into the groove of things almost immediately, and then it's simply a matter of building up your confidence.

As for those who have never learned to ride a bike, there's a **bike program run at the Matadero**, the community and art space that can do no wrong. This program teaches adults of all ages to balance and ride using a safe, practical method. Even if you end up throwing your practice bike in the river in a fit of rage, you still get to hang out at the Matadero. There's nothing to lose. I ask that you consider this clichéd but ever pertinent proverb: "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago; the second best time is now." Cycling is the sports equivalent of literacy, something most of us take for granted but which some just didn't learn in their youth. If you've never managed to get your feet off the ground and wobble into a steady balance on two wheels, that's fine. I've never eaten poutine. Let's not let these become deathbed regrets.

2. Choosing a type of bike

The type of bike you ride is a matter of lifestyle and personal preference, but keep the following in mind:

Madrid has hills. Calle Segovia, which climbs from the river into La Latina, is the perfect example of the plateaued nature of this city, but it's far from the one. These "cuestas" pretty much rule out anything as heavy as a cruiser (though

you do see some people rocking them, whom we all salute.) This could also make a Fixie a bit less appealing to some, though they are by no means uncommon here. My neighborhood is awash in them with more showing up every week, proving once again that, along with Edison bulbs and burritos, Madrid catches on to transatlantic trends a decade after they explode.

A trail weaving through Casa de Campo, just outside the city center. These types of trails are only really accessible on mountain bike.

Madrid has dirt trails. Some of the best biking available in Madrid is around Casa de Campo and the foothills outside the city. There are beautiful, secluded routes that weave through those shrubby Spanish oak trees, but the rocks and dirt pretty much limit them to mountain bikes. It's worth considering how important this is to you, and to balance it with drawbacks that might come with a mountain bike. If you have the money or space to afford more than one type, make this one of them.

Madrid has long-distance rides outside the city. There are some great bike routes that spread out from the center which might be more difficult without a traditional geared setup. Again, this is personal preference. I'm partial to my classic road bike with the suicide shifters and a good derailleur (price, flexibility, quality) though again, you have options. Fixies are sexy, good in the city, and their riders are avid defenders of the intimate handling they provide, but they might prove more difficult on these longer stretches.

Madrid has thieves. If you want to get a nice bike, or nice bike parts, be prepared to buy the security measures for them. Your Brooks saddle won't last a week if not properly secured. It's best to buy mid-range or lower if you plan on leaving your bike intact on the street, and if not you should have a plan to secure your things. It's not uncommon to see cyclists taking off their seats and carrying them into bars and shops with them.

Madrid has a bike-share program: If you only see yourself using your bike from time to time and mostly in the center, this could be your best option. Joining the program is covered in another post, but be aware of their many drawbacks, from understocked stations to the limited range across the city.

3. Buying a bike

Once you know what you're looking for, you should decided if you'd like to buy a new or used bike, though realistically a used one is your best option. It just makes more sense in this theft-heavy city, particularly for the low-paid, transient English teachers that read this blog. I wouldn't pay more than 400 euros for one, though it's possible to pay much less. My early '90s Peugeot, for example, is in perfect shape and cost around 200 euros. You can go even cheaper.

The most common sources for used bikes are these Spanish equivalents to Craigslist:

1. **segundamano**
2. **milanuncios**

Mountain bikes are a good option in Madrid. This photo was taken in El Pardo on a Sunday ride, while I struggled behind the dirt trail on my road bike.

When searching online, pay attention to the style of bike you want and the rough frame size that fits you, which can be easily **calculated here**. It's probably best to search with the bike type (tipo), frame size (talla), and possibly the brand (marca) as the main keywords. For example, search: "Bici carretera, talla 60." Here's some useful vocabulary when searching for a bike:

size – *talla*
brand – *marca*
type – *tipo de bici*
Fixed gear – *piñon fijo / fixie*
Road bike – *Bici carretera*
Racing bike – *Bici carrera*
Mountain bike – *Bici de montaña*

Be sure to ask about any potential problems or peculiarities the bike may have. It's best to go out and check the bike yourself, ride around a bit, and talk to the owner. It's not nearly as intimidating as it might sound. Be sure to haggle.

If you're looking to buy new, there are bike shops all over this city, so you have some options. This guide probably isn't your best resource, but I guess I'd recommend a few places in the center, like FixedLand (bikes as low as 400 euros), Bicis Noviciados, and La Calmera, but there are also some specialty shops with fancier bikes and bigger price tags peppered throughout Madrid. Do some research and look around.

4. Notes on Law, Safety, and

General Advice

• **Buy a lock:** This is so important that it could be a category by itself. If you plan on locking your bike up on the street at any point, a solid U-lock or something equally strong is your only safe option. Securing your frame with a cable lock is like putting “do not eat” on your tupperware chicken salad in the office fridge. It’s also smart to lock up your wheels with a cable and to unclip your lights. People will steal anything they can.
• **Helmets:** They’re not required by law yet but they’re a damn good idea.

Things to never leave your house without: U-lock, helmet,

cable lock, rear light, front light and bike tool.

• **Lights:** You are required to have a red back light and a white front light after dark according to Spanish law. It's also just smart. when I first started riding my bike through Madrid, I was given advice by a seasoned professional to wear *"más luces que un puticlub*." You might also consider a reflective vest if you are doing longer commutes in poorly-lit areas (they're cheap, most shops have them), though as far as I've researched they aren't required by law.

• **Bells:** Bells are actually required by law according to most sources I've come across, but they're a good idea regardless. Shouting doesn't seem to disperse pedestrians, but bells have a way of parting crowds like the Red Sea.

• **Hand signals:** Learn "right turn," "left turn" and "stop." These are particularly useful in heavier traffic or if a car is riding your ass.

Wine and biking can be a dangerous mix without moderation. Cuidate.

- **Cars, cabs and scooters:** Drivers have gotten much better in

the past couple of years, but there will always be jerks on the road. Don't let them intimidate you and know that you have the right to occupy the entire right lane of a road if you so choose. Let them bitch.

• **Pedestrians:** These are worse than cabs and scooters combined when it comes to bike awareness, so be very careful when they're roaming about. They cross the street by sound instead of sight in Madrid, so if they don't hear you coming, they won't even look up before stepping out in front of you. And, inevitably, it will be your fault.

• **Priority Bike lanes:** Frequently the priority bike lanes (30km with a bike logo) just end in the middle of nowhere, or suddenly jump over to a different lane with no warning, or let you out into a four-lane roundabout. Some cars pretty much ignore them. When you're in them you have the right of way, but if it's possible and safe, hang to the right so cars can pass with more room. You don't have to, but it's polite.

• **Streets without designated bike lanes:** It's best to stick to the far right lane (without going into the taxi-bus lane) and to occupy the entire lane so that cars don't try to split the lane with you. Occasionally they'll honk, but you have every right to be there. If you're feeling polite you can pull further right and let them pass, but this is not an obligation.

• **Bus-Taxi lanes:** It currently is not permitted to use these lanes on a bike.

• **One-way streets:** Try to ride with traffic at all times, or else dismount and walk your bike. This city has some very inconvenient one-way streets to discourage cars from going through the center, and unfortunately the rest of us get caught in the mess. The police have started to fine cyclists going the wrong way recently, so be very careful, particularly in on Corredera Baja right next the Plaza San Ildefonso (right

in front of La Bicicleta). It's a trap!

• **Traffic lights:** If you have time and feel safe, you should weave to the front of the cars for both a better position when the light turns green and for visibility reasons. (Be careful though—watch out for pedestrians and cab doors that might swing open.) This move is perfectly legal and sometimes there is even a designated space for bikes and scooters in front of the traffic. Aside from this, remember that you're considered "un vehículo más" on your bike, which means you have to obey all the same traffic laws as a car. The fine is 200 euros if you get caught running a light, 120 euros for running a stop sign.

• **Sidewalks and pedestrian areas:** It's illegal to ride on the sidewalks, so do it sparingly or not at all. I've heard rumors of a law excepting sidewalks wider than five meters, but enbicipormadrid.com offered a reward for anyone who could find the law and as far as I know, nothing turned up. Do not ride down Montera, the mall-like part of Fuencarral, or any other pedestrian walkway unless you are going very slowly or walking your bike. It's illegal and you can get ticketed (though I've never seen cops care too much here.) Usually there's a good parallel route, try to find that.

• **Roundabouts:** Unlike the rest of this city's bike and car infrastructure, I find these dangerous and try to avoid them at all costs. Some are five lanes wide and nobody seems to follow the rules. If you feel unsafe approaching a roundabout, abandon ship and walk your bike on the sidewalk. Remember, be a cyclist or a pedestrian, but try not to be both; it confuses drivers.

This new bike lane, cutting through Casa de Campo, is part of a growing push by the ayuntamiento to normalize cycling in the city and expand the existing infrastructure.

- **headphones:** Illegal while riding, even in one ear. (91 euro fine)

- **Cell phones:** Illegal while riding. (91 euro fine)

- **Cabs and car doors.** Watch out for these. If you want to ride to the front of cars waiting at a red light (which most do), ride slowly and carefully between the cars, and make sure they see you. If not, just hang back and wait for the light to change. Both are legal. Use your judgement.

- **Rain:** Rain makes this city slick. Very slick. Cobblestones, smooth white paint, big metal grates, pretty much everything is out to hurt you in the rain. For example, I fell this last weekend after a street cleaner hosed down the plaza to a squeaky-clean perfection, and my tire slipped out like socks on a linolium floor.

- **Drinking and riding:** Drinking and riding is a dangerous game. Know your limits and try not to do it at all. If you get caught weaving around drunkenly, you can get charged up to 500 euros.

- **Choosing a route:** Some bigger avenues have priority bike lanes but they're not always the fastest or safest route. Usually there's a parallel road that's calm and just as fast. Learn your routes.

The Royal Palace at Sunset, after a long bike ride through the city

• **Crossing Gran Via:** This one is oddly specific, but it took me ages to figure it out so I thought I would share: the best way to cross Gran Via from anywhere to the North is San Bernardo. Even if it seems out of the way, it'll save you time navigating through people or one-way streets going North. There is really no other way to cross that street without dismounting or riding on the sidewalk. The other direction (toward Malasaña) has many possible routes.
• **fines in Madrid:** Cops aren't everywhere and most of us have broken these rules from time to time, but these are the fines you can expect if you get caught doing any of the following:

- *Riding on the sidewalk: 60€*
- *Riding at night without lights: 60€*
- *Riding with headphones in: 91€*
- *Riding while on a cell phone: 91€*
- *Riding through a stop sign: 120€*

- *Riding the wrong way: 150€*
- *Running a red light: 200€*
- *Blowing positive when drunk: 500€*

(source: enbicipormadrid.es)

While you should take all of the above into account, it's really not as complicated as all that. Thousands of people of all types go riding through this city every day, and the numbers continue to grow. Get out there and join them!

Want to know more about cycling in Madrid? Check out these articles:

Electric city-bikes in Madrid, a city that's turning biker friendly

4 Best Biking Routs in Madrid for tourists

Where to break a sweat in Madrid

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4 Best City Biking Routes for Tourists in Madrid

There is no such thing as the best city in the world (even though New Yorkers like to claim the title). From what I can see, however, Madrid is getting pretty close. You've probably noticed that Madrid's public bike system, **BiciMad**, is fully up and running. Madrid's public bikes are **electric-powered** which is awesome because you barely break a sweat while going up the

city's many hills. This also means that you can see Madrid's most emblematic buildings, plazas, parks and river all in one day, on two wheels.

Now that cycling in Madrid has been made easy, **here are four beautiful cycling routes in the city-center!** I've attached a **google map** with each route, but you really can't get lost. Combine these routes as you wish, as they're not too long and meant to be enjoyed, so you can feel free to wander off and explore. Happy cycling!!!

If you want to know how **BiciMad** works, check out our post: "**Electric city bikes in Madrid, a city that's turning bike-friendly**"

1. Atocha – Paseo del Prado – Recoletos

This first route starts at *“Ministerio de Agricultura” or* Ministry of Agriculture building. This tour is very easy to bike because the streets are flat and wide. There is also a pretty boulevard which goes all the way up Paseo del Prado and Castellana. You will see some of the main buildings in the city like the Prado Museum, Caixa Forum and the National Library. You’ll also pass through three of the most important and well-known squares (plazas) in Madrid: Neptuno, Cibeles and Colón.

Find the route on the map:

2. Cibeles – Alcala – Retiro Park

While New York and London have, respectively, Central Park and Hyde Park, we *Madrileños* have **Retiro Park**. Maybe it’s not that famous or was never featured in a Hollywood production, but we are as proud as can be of our city’s beautiful green oasis. The route through Retiro is also really easy to bike, however, you can start it at *“Plaza de la Independencia”*, also known as Puerta de Alcalá, to make it even easier. In Retiro Park, you’ll see some of Madrid’s most stunning places such as *“Palacio de Cristal” (*main pic at the top) and *“Retiro Lake”* where you can rent a rowboat.

Find the route in the map:

3. Palacio – Casa de Campo

What I like most about this route is that you get to leave the city for a while. We first start at the Madrid's Royal Palace and take a ride around to enjoy it in all its glory from front to back. Then, we head for *"Casa de Campo",* where there are always groups of mountain-bikers going up and down the park's infinite paths. If you're not familiar with Casa de Campo, it's much bigger than Retiro, and looks more like a forest– it has a great public swimming pool and lake where people do water sports. Of course, there are bars too. As for this route's level, I wouldn't say it's easy one but it's definitely doable. It all depends on how far you go into *"Casa de Campo"* .

Find the route in the map:

4. Matadero – Madrid Rio – Principe Pio

Just a few years ago, the **Manzanares River** was surrounded by an ugly highway. Thanks to Madrid's former mayor who spent who knows how much money on its renovation, now we are enjoying *"Madrid Rio"* to the max. Starting at **Principe Pio**, you will enter Madrid Rio to bike along different paths and stumble upon fun (and free) activities like a "*tirolina*" or zip-line, playgrounds (for adults too!) and one of Madrid's urban beaches, a.k.a. sprinklers, that we love when summer comes. Then you will end up at one of my favorite spots in the city, **Matadero Madrid**, an old slaughterhouse which is now an awesome and free cultural center. Here is a link to our post on **El Matadero**.

Find the route in the map: