7 Reasons Alcalá de Henares is worth more than a day trip from Madrid

I recently organized a weekend **getaway for WABAS, a writers' group** that I form a part of, and we decided to hold it in the beautiful city of Alcalá de Henares. As a Madrid resident, I've met a lot of people from Alcalá over the years, and even gone there for the day on more than one occasion. However, it wasn't until staying there for a full two nights that I truly got to know the city.

Being only 35 kilometers from Madrid – and a quick 40-minute local train ride away – many of those who live in the area take for granted that we have this jewel in our backyard. Alcalá is often thought of as a commuter city more than a tourist destination.

It's home to nearly 200,000 inhabitants (making it about the same size as Granada!), many of whom commute into Madrid every day on the many trains and buses that go into the big city. However, Alcalá is certainly an important city in its own right – one with a LOT to see and do and that's on par with other historical cities in central Spain.

I thought I'd share some of the reasons I think it's totally worth staying in Alcalá de Henares for a night or two.

1. Breathe in the history

From the hotel, to the meeting rooms, to the streets and restaurants – every place I stepped into during my weekend in Alcalá was filled with historic charm. I stayed at the **Evenia Alcalá Boutique,** a three-star hotel housed in a 16th-century building with a charming courtyard located near the city's Cathedral.

The pedestrian **Calle Mayor** is a main street of shops and restaurants that connects the Cathedral to the city's main **Plaza de Cervantes**. Its cobble stones and wood-framed buildings take you back in time. It is on this street that **the birth house of Miguel de Cervantes** can be found, right next to the medieval hospital where his father used to work.

And of course, you have the **Archiepiscopal Palace of Alcalá de Henares**, which is famed for being the place where Christopher Columbus first met with Monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella. For our writers' meeting, the city of Alcalá was gracious enough to loan us a meeting room in the Casa de la Entrevista, which is a medieval monastery that has been converted into an exhibition space. I could feel the history literally everywhere we went.

It makes sense for a city that was completely rebuilt and planned as a university city in the 15th century. Many of the buildings from that era are still in use today. While Alcalá's University of Complutense was moved to Madrid in 1836, today it is a university town once again. The **University of Alcalá** opened there in 1977 and brought many of the original university's buildings back to academic use. The original university was named after the Roman city of Complutum that was the original city built on the site in the 1st century BC.

To learn more about the region's ancient history, be sure to visit the **Archeological Museum of the Madrid Region,** also located in Alcalá.

2. Enjoy free tapas with your drinks

The tradition of receiving a **complimentary tapa** (small plate) with your drink order may have died out in much of Spain – but not in Alcalá! Several places in Alcalá still take part in this fabulous tradition. **Indalo** is by far the most famous place in town to go for a tapa. You order a drink and then you can choose a generous tapa from the menu, all for 2.50 euros, if my memory serves me right.

We also visited **La Posada Magistral** which gives you a surprise tapa with each drink (they also have a very economical set menu, even on weekends, that they serve in their upstairs dining room). Other bars, such as **La Taberna de Rusty**, charge separately for the tapas, but at very modest prices.

3. Party all night long

By staying overnight in Alcalá I was able to discover how bustling the place is after dark! I didn't expect for there to be so much happening at night; but I guess thanks to its large population – which includes students of the University of Alcalá – there are a ton of options.

The most emblematic of Alcalá's night spots is **The Green Irish Pub**. But, don't be fooled, this isn't your typical Irish bar – it's a proper nightclub. There's a little something for everyone at The Green Tavern and it attracts a diverse crowd. The first floor features rock music and a pub-like atmosphere, but with a massive dance floor, and the second floor is more of a traditional club scene with latin pop and dance music.

In case you get late-night munchies, you don't even have to leave the party complex: in between the two different zones there is a stand selling hot dogs and other snacks.

Meanwhile, the youngsters flock to **Bar TDK**. Here you'll find cheap mixed drinks at 4 euros (and even a bit cheaper if you show a valid student ID!), as well as pool tables, dart boards and foosball, that will keep you entertained all night long.

If you're looking for a more upscale evening, you can check out the **Hanoi House**. Here you'll find a more mature crowd, and a bit pricier cocktails in a large club fitted with Vietnamese-themed decor. It's definitely worth visiting in summer for its fantastic outdoor bar and terrace that offer nice views.

Like many cities in Spain, on any weekend night you can find lots of party people traversing the streets. You can make lots of new friends without even entering a club! I only went out one night in Alcalá so I didn't get to try everywhere, but other places that looked interesting were **La Champa 2.0 Karaoke Bar** and **Mi Niña Lola**. I'll have to stay another night soon to try them out!

4. Experience fine dining without breaking the bank

While researching different possibilities for lunch and dinner in Alcalá, I came across several excellent options, it was difficult to choose. We ended up having lunch at **El Hemisferio Loft** and it was an amazing choice. The service and the quality of the food were excellent. But make sure to book ahead – the place gets packed!

On the weekend, you're able to choose from different set menus for lunch or for dinner, which are an excellent value. Our group chose el "Menu de temporada" which included an amuse bouche, a starter, a main dish, a dessert and a coffee for 25 euros. I ordered a seafood rice dish as the starter, and sea bass with mashed potatoes as the main and both were excellent. On weekdays a similar set menu goes for only 15 euros.

We also enjoyed dining at **El Tempranillo**, which was right by our hotel and has a fantastic wine selection. We had a light

dinner of croquetas, as well as a plate of meats and cheeses. They also had a nice selection of entrees, for a more formal sit-down dinner. The owner, Inma, is very friendly and an excellent sommelier, who makes you feel at home in a cute and cozy atmosphere.

Other restaurants that came highly recommended were **Lucrecia** and **Martilota**. I definitely plan to check them out the next time I'm in town.

5. Take part in Alcalá's many cultural events

When I was trying to choose which weekend to go to Alcalá, I was hard-pressed to find a weekend where there wasn't some kind of special event happening. I chose the only weekend of the season that was relatively calm (sandwiched between the

Alcalá Film Festival, and the **Don Juan performance**, when hotel prices were higher). Even so, we still caught celebrations for the **20th Anniversary of Alcalá being named a UNESCO World Heritage site** (which took place on December 2, 1998), as well as a pre-Christmas parade.

If you're planning a trip to Alcalá, make sure to check **the city's cultural calendar** and find out what may be going on at that time. Among the most well-known events is the city's **Mercado Cervantino**, or **Medieval fair**, where the Calle Mayor is filled with old-fashioned stands and people dressed in period attire. Definitely worth checking out if your timing lines up.

6. See (and hear) storks!

Ok, so you can see them whether or not you stay the night in Alcalá, but **I can't write an article about Alcalá without mentioning the storks**. Alcalá de Henares is said to be home to

around 90 pairs of migrating white storks – although each year they are said to stay longer. The best time to see them is between mid-October and the beginning of August, when you'll hear them snapping their beaks like castanets throughout the city. They love this place, thanks to the many steeples that are perfect for building their nests.

You can spot the large birds circling over the city and perched atop buildings. The the city's tourism office has even created a special **"Storks Route" touristic itinerary** that features the birds' most notable nesting spots atop already impressive historical buildings and around the beautiful Plaza de Cervantes.

7. Indulge in sweet treats

If you like Spanish sweets, **Alcalá is one of the best places**

to try them! A must-visit is the **Convent of the Clarisas of San Diego** where the cloistered nuns sell candied almonds from behind a small door without showing their faces. In addition to candied nuts, convents across the city sell homemade marzipan, similar to nearby Toledo.

Another typical sweet from Alcalá is a flaky puff pastry called ***costrada***. It has a sweet cream filling and is covered in soft meringue that is finally topped with crushed sugared almonds. *Costrada* is said to have originated from the famous **Pastelería Salinas** in La Plaza de Cervantes. You can find it in their window display, as well as those in several other bakeries across town – where it's usually just as delicious!

And, you can't leave Alcalá without trying a ***Rosquilla de Alcalá***, a round puff pastry glazed in sugary egg yolk. Try one at **Pastelería Lupe**. It's a level up from a glazed doughnut, that is sure to leave you in a sugar coma.

How to get to Alcalá de Henares from Madrid

Alcalá de Henares is super easy to get to. Here are the different options:

- **By train**

Take a Cercanias commuter train (Line 2 or Line 7) from Atocha Station to the Alcalá de Henares train station. During rush hour, trains depart every 5-10 minutes, and the journey lasts about 40 minutes.

- **By bus**

There is also a bus that leaves from Avenida de America bus station. It is line 223 run by Continental Auto, Line 223, and tickets are sold near the bus stop. The bus ride takes about one hour.

- **From the airport**

If you are coming from the Adolfo Suárez Madrid–Barajas Airport, I recommend going by taxi. While it's more expensive, it's worth the time savings. It's only about a 25-minute drive from Barajas to Alcalá. There is no direct public transportation line from the airport to Alcalá. You'd have to first go into the city of Madrid, and then take the aforementioned bus or train, which would take over an hour and a half.

- **By car**

Of course, if you have access to a car, Alcalá is just a short drive away.

As you can see, Alcalá is no sleepy commuter town. While it's an easy day trip; there's also enough to see and do to make it worth spending a night or two. I hope my experience helps you get the most out of your time in Alcalá de Henares.

Looking for more places to visit near Madrid? Check out our list of Madrid's 10 beautiful surrounding towns.

*Thank you Russ Pearce from **anythingbutpaella.com** for many of these lovely photos!*