Be there or be square: 8 of Spain’s best plazas

Bullfights, sangria, paella… So many of the things that, to the uninitiated, epitomise Spain’s culture are actually outdated, tourist traps, or limited to just one of the country’s regions.

But there’s one Spanish heavyweight that fully deserves to be celebrated alongside *tortilla de patatas*, *siestas*, and Rosalía on the list of the best things ever to emerge from the Iberian Peninsula. A cultural icon with adoring fans all over the country, from the hills of Asturias to sunny southern seaside towns, and in every metropolis and pueblo in between. I’m talking, of course, about the Spanish *plaza*.

Some squares slip under the radar of anyone who doesn’t know to seek them out. Some are the perfect place for a protest; some are best suited for locals and blow-ins alike to meet for a beer, a gossip, and a people-watching session. Others have become tourist attractions in their own right, be it thanks to their historical significance or just because they make for an awesome photo op.

Whatever you’re after on your next day trip or weekend away, here’s a list of eight of Spain’s best plazas you should make sure not to miss.

1. Plaza Mayor, Almagro

Green and gorgeous, this recently-restored medieval plaza is one of the country's favourites – and provided a beautiful backdrop for post-class coffees or *cañas* back when I worked in a nearby school.

Thanks to its flowers and fountains, Almagro's Plaza Mayor regularly features on lists of Spain's top ten most beautiful squares, and I monitor its progress like a proud *manchego* mother, rejoicing when it moves up a spot and sulking when it's relegated.

Make sure to try the local delicacy of pickled *berenjenas* at any one of the tapas bars dotted around the plaza – they were slightly too green and bitter for my liking, but they're a regional favourite and *sobre gustos no hay nada escrito,* so you might enjoy them.

What's more, Almagro is home to the annual Festival

Internacional de Teatro Clásico, and tucked away next to the square’s shops and restaurants is the entrance to the *corral de comedias*, a 17th-century playhouse and hidden gem of a tourist attraction which is more than worth the €3 entrance fee.

2. Plaza Dos de Mayo, Madrid

It’s no surprise that Spain’s capital has a square for every taste – Plaza de España (gone but not forgotten), colourful Chueca, floral Plaza de la Villa, Santa Ana for the literature

lovers, and Plaza Mayor if you're a fan of Baroque architecture and, eh, multi-coloured goats.

But a particular stand-out is Dos de Mayo, just ten minutes' walk from Sol.

This plaza is a crucial one for history lovers: it marks a key date in the Comunidad de Madrid's calendar, when the people of Madrid rebelled against occupying French troops on 2nd May 1808.

Annual street parties marking the uprising liven up the already-bustling barrio of Malasaña, but this square is worth a visit at any time of the year – it boasts playparks for the *peques*, a weekly vintage and craft market, and plenty of places to stop for a snack or drink (Pizzería Maravillas is a stand-out).

3. Plaza Mayor, Ciudad Real

Source: Image by © Rob Cousins/robertharding/Corbis

The small city of Ciudad Real is often overshadowed by its province's more picturesque pueblos, but I maintain that my former hometown's central square is still worth a visit, if only for its *Reloj Carrillón* – a huge clock from which life-size figurines of Cervantes, Don Quijote and Sancho Panza emerge to the sound of bells chiming at regular intervals throughout the day and night.

This manchego capital isn't known for being the most Instagrammable of towns, but it has a plaza that pays artistic homage to the stars of its regions, friendly locals, and more tapas bars than you could shake a stick at. What more do you need, really?

4. Plaza del Taller, Santiago de Compostela

Source

Whether you've trekked part of the epic Camino de Santiago or are just up north on a pilgrimage for Galician *pulpo* (guilty), this isn't a square to be missed. Plaza del Taller – or, to use its *gallego* name, Praza do Obradoiro – is a spot in the rainy, atmospheric Galician capital.

Located to the west of Santiago's enchanting casco viejo, this square marks the end of the road for pilgrims who've walked St James' Way, and it provides peak people-watching opportunities – I'd challenge anyone to watch pilgrims rejoicing at the completion of their journey without getting emotional. For travellers holy or secular, the plaza's architecture, sheer size, and its magical (and traffic-free) atmosphere are definitely worth a trip next *puente*.

This square is also home to the beautiful, baroque Catedral de Santiago de Compostela, where hikers participate in the post-walk ritual of the *abrazo al Apóstol Santiago* – a tradition that was temporarily outlawed in 2009 after an influenza outbreak. Maybe stick to a quick high-five if you're a germaphobe.

5. Plaza de Cervantes, Alcalá de Henares

Cons of Alcalá’s most famous public space: the storks (if, like me, you’re a wimp who’s scared of birds). Pros: literally everything else.

This square pays homage Alcalá’s most famous son: the writer Miguel de Cervantes, who was born in the university city in 1547. The city’s central plaza hosts regular literary and cultural events in his honour, such as the annual Mercado Cervantino.

Plaza de Cervantes also bridges two of the city’s most significant streets: the newly pedestrianized Calle de Libreros, and the Calle Mayor. On the latter street, which is the former hub of the medieval Jewish Quarter, you can find the Museo Casa Natal de Cervantes and the city’s most photogenic bench, featuring bronze statues of Cervantes’ most famous characters.

Have a stroll through the surrounding area – don't think about leaving without taking in the university's impressive façade – and you'll understand exactly why Alcalá has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

> *Also read: 7 Reasons why Alcalá de Henares is worth more than a day trip from Madrid*

6. Plaza de España, Sevilla

Oh, this one's *gorgeous*. Constructed in 1929, the Andalusian capital's Plaza de España is practically a newborn compared with some of the old-timers on this list, but in terms of impact and beauty, it can definitely give the classics a run for their money.

This plaza's most famous feature is the breath-taking range of multicoloured tiled alcoves, which depict almost every province in Spain. Photos can't do them justice, but even the briefest of trawls through Google Images will show you exactly why the good people of TripAdvisor voted it the world's *segundo lugar más spectacular del mundo*.

Film buffs (not me) might recognise this square from movies like Lawrence of Arabia and the Star Wars franchise, while Instagram lovers will be more familiar with its pretty canals, where you can row your boat for just €6. The Plaza de España is also located in the Parque de María Luisa – a beautiful spot to seek out the shade during the infamously hot Sevillian summers.

7. Plaza Mayor, Salamanca

Golden hour enthusiasts, this one's for you. Salamanca is known far and wide as one of the most gorgeous places in Spain, and its main plaza is no exception. Built between 1729 and 1755, the sandstone square still shines – and if you ever want to hear several hundred people simultaneously say 'Ahhhhh!', make sure you're standing in the centre when its buildings get illuminated at dusk.

The plaza is adorned with medallions bearing big names from Spain’s history. In fact, until it was removed in 2017 under the Historical Memory Law, you could even spot Franco’s defaced, paint-splattered face lurking beneath a plastic bag in the corner.

Salamanca’s Plaza Mayor also has plenty of bars and restaurants where you can sample the city’s distinctly un-spicy, but delicious, take on patatas bravas after you’ve finished frogspotting at the nearby Universidad de Salamanca.

Speaking of which, try to time your trip for December, when the legendary Nochevieja Universitaria sees the Plaza Mayor packed with thousands of students downing their drink and midnight grapes before heading home to their pueblos for Christmas. Or, if you prefer hot drinks to alcoholic ones, walk south from the plaza for ten minutes to the café of the Casa Lis art deco museum, where you’ll find the world’s tastiest cup of hot chocolate and the only glass ceiling that’s not for smashing.

8. Esta Es Una Plaza, Madrid

This urban oasis is a bit different – and for that reason, it might be my favourite plaza ever. **Esta Es Una Plaza** is a neighbourhood initiative designed to tackle the lack of green space available in the busy Madrid barrio of Lavapiés, and has gone from strength to strength since its creation in 2008, thanks to the group of dedicated volunteers who work hard on maintenance and upkeep.

According to its website, the community-run public space focuses heavily on community building and promoting cohesion between social groups, regardless of nationality or religion, and over time the plaza has transformed into a cultural hub which promotes ecology, self-sufficiency, literacy, culture and sports.

It mightn’t represent the same flashy, tourist fodder as some of the more high-profile squares on our list, and it’s unlikely you’ll see it be flogged on a postcard any time soon.

But if plazas are meant to promote harmony, facilitate socializing, and provide an insight into the beating heart of its local community, then Esta Es Una Plaza is definitely a dark horse.

By Emer O'Toole (IG: @_emerotoole)

Would you add any other of Spain's best plazas to this list? Let us know!

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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!*

Cervantes Festival in Alcalá de Henares: Mercado

Cervantino 2014

El Mercado Cervantino is an annual medieval fair in **Alcalá de Henares**, the home of Cervantes himself. Ever year, this small city dresses up in medieval decorations and garments, and the streets are filled with markets, street performances, artisan workshops and much more! Festival activities run from 11am to 2am, and take place in and around Calle Mayor. Only a half hour from the center of Madrid by **Cercanías**, here's a link on **how to get to Alcalá**.

Also check out this post by Gee, Cassandra: "**A Medieval Fair to Make Cervantes Proud**"

Enjoy!

Alcalá de Henares

What to see:

In Miguel de Cervantes' hometown, you'll find one of the oldest university campuses in Spain – Universidad de Alcalá – which was founded in the 15th century. The city still boasts some of the magnificent buildings from that time.

History aside, I'd say that Alcalá de Henares is most known for its generous and free tapas. So after you visit the University and walk through the town to see its monuments and *plazas*, you should rest at one of the bars close to Plaza Miguel de Cervantes and enjoy a cold beer that is sure to come with a nicely-sized tapa. The most famous tapas bar in Alcalá is El Índalo, but there are many others. This cute town is

perfect for a relaxing day trip!

Here’s a great post: **7 reasons Alcalá is worth more than a day trip from Madrid**

How to get there:

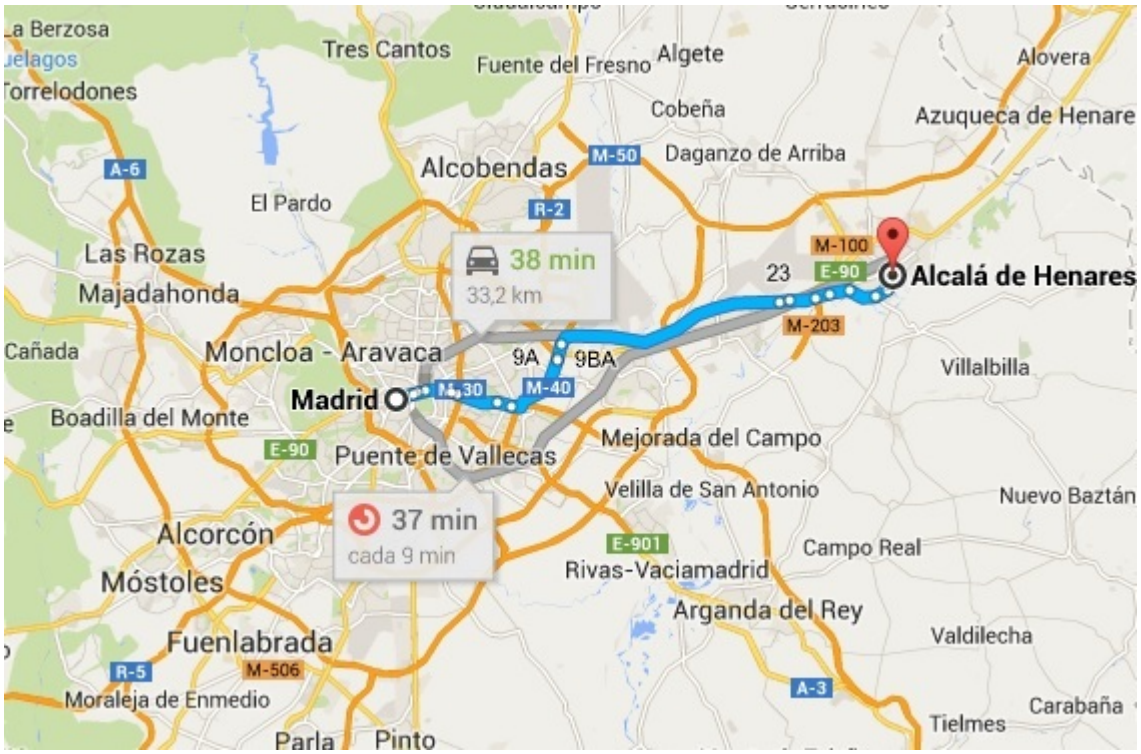
- **By Train (Cercanias)**

  Depart from: Atocha train station
  Schedule:
  Departure (Madrid-Alcala de Henares horarios y precios (RENFE))
  Return (Alcala de Henares – Madrid horarios y precios (RENFE))
  Duration: approx. 35 min
  Price: 2,50€ (round trip approx. 5€).

- **By bus**

  Depart from: Avenida de america: Buses 223, 225, 227
  Schedule:
  Departure (Madrid-Alcala de Henares horarios y precios (ALSA))
  Return (Alcala de Henares – Madrid horarios y precios (ALSA))
  Duration: approx. 40 min
  Price: 3,60€ (round trip 7,20€)

Where to find it on a map:


La Berzosa
Torrelodones
Tres Cantos
Fuente del Fresno
Algete
Alovera
Cobeña
Azuqueca de Henare
Alcobendas
M-50
Daganzo de Arriba
A-6
El Pardo
R-2
Las Rozas
38 min
33,2 km
M-100
23
E-90
Alcalá de Henares
Majadahonda
M-203
Cañada
Moncloa - Aravaca
9A
9BA
Villalbilla
Madrid
M-30
M-40
Boadilla del Monte
Mejorada del Campo
E-90
Puente de Vallecas
Velilla de San Antonio
Nuevo Baztán
Alcorcón
37 min
cada 9 min
E-901
Campo Real
Móstoles
Rivas-Vaciamadrid
Arganda del Rey
Fuenlabrada
Valdilecha
R-5
M-506
A-3
Moraleja de Enmedio
Carabaña
Tielmes
Parla
Pinto