A look at the history and food of Aragón, Spain

Between the Spanish metropolises of Madrid and Barcelona, forgotten from Michelin-guided itineraries focused solely on the Basque Country, and otherwise seen as a pass-thru city, lies Zaragoza, the capital of Aragón. If you've seen *The Tudors*, maybe you remember Henry's first wife: the pious Catherine of Aragón, played by Irish actress Maria Doyle Kennedy. Perhaps that is all you've ever heard of Aragón, a region whose middle and southern depths were once described by a friend as "a nuclear wasteland."



View of Zaragoza from one of the towers of the Cathedral-Basilica of Our Lady of the Pillar

And yet, Aragón’s southern capital, Teruel, is famous for its

cured ham, effortlessly produced in the dry, windy climate of Aragón. The “Lovers of Teruel” were supposedly Shakespeare’s inspiration for Romeo and Juliet, even. And there’s certainly no love lost by Spaniards for Aragón’s northern territory, cities like Huesca and Jaca, lush and green and gateways to the Pyrenees and affordable skiing.



Teruel (image source)

For tourists or non-Spaniards unfamiliar with the Pyrenees valley, knowing little to nothing about the once-mighty kingdom of Aragón is not surprising. Similarly, feeling overlooked or forgotten is not a foreign sensation to the Aragonese, beset on every side by regions more famous for various reasons: Cataluña, Castilla y León, Navarra, Valencia, and, of course, Madrid. And yet, Aragón was once, arguably, one of the most important and powerful regions in Spain.

History of Aragón, Spain



Aragoń, Spain | ©Jrpvaldi / Wikimedia Commons

In 1469, in the capital city of Valladolid (Castile and León), Ferdinand II of Aragón and Isabella I of Castile were married. Seventeen and eighteen, respectively, these two monarchs were known as the "Catholic Monarchs" (los Reyes Católicos) and, one falsified papal bull later, Isabella and Ferdinand went on to rule an Iberian peninsula many historians credit as being unified under their influence.

Americans, Barcelona tour guides, and other history buffs may also recognize them as being the monarchs that Christopher Columbus sought financial support from in his mission to colonize the Indies, originally, and whose trips and conquests would end up for the benefit of the Spanish crown. Or rather,

the Castilian crown, since it was Isabella who had provided the money, not Ferdinand and his Aragonese court.

The imbalance in the power of their kingdoms, Castile and León richer and more powerful, was heightened by the fact that both Castile and Aragón retained their respective autonomy despite Isabella and Ferdinand's marriage. So to amend an earlier, arguable statement, perhaps it is better said that Aragón was a *part* of the most powerful and important union in Spain.

Cuisine of Aragón, Spain



Zaragoza



Aragón’s supporting role in the unification of Spain during the Middle Ages and relative present-day anonymity among the

Iberian regions notwithstanding, Aragón has maintained a proud culinary tradition.

Ham from Teruel

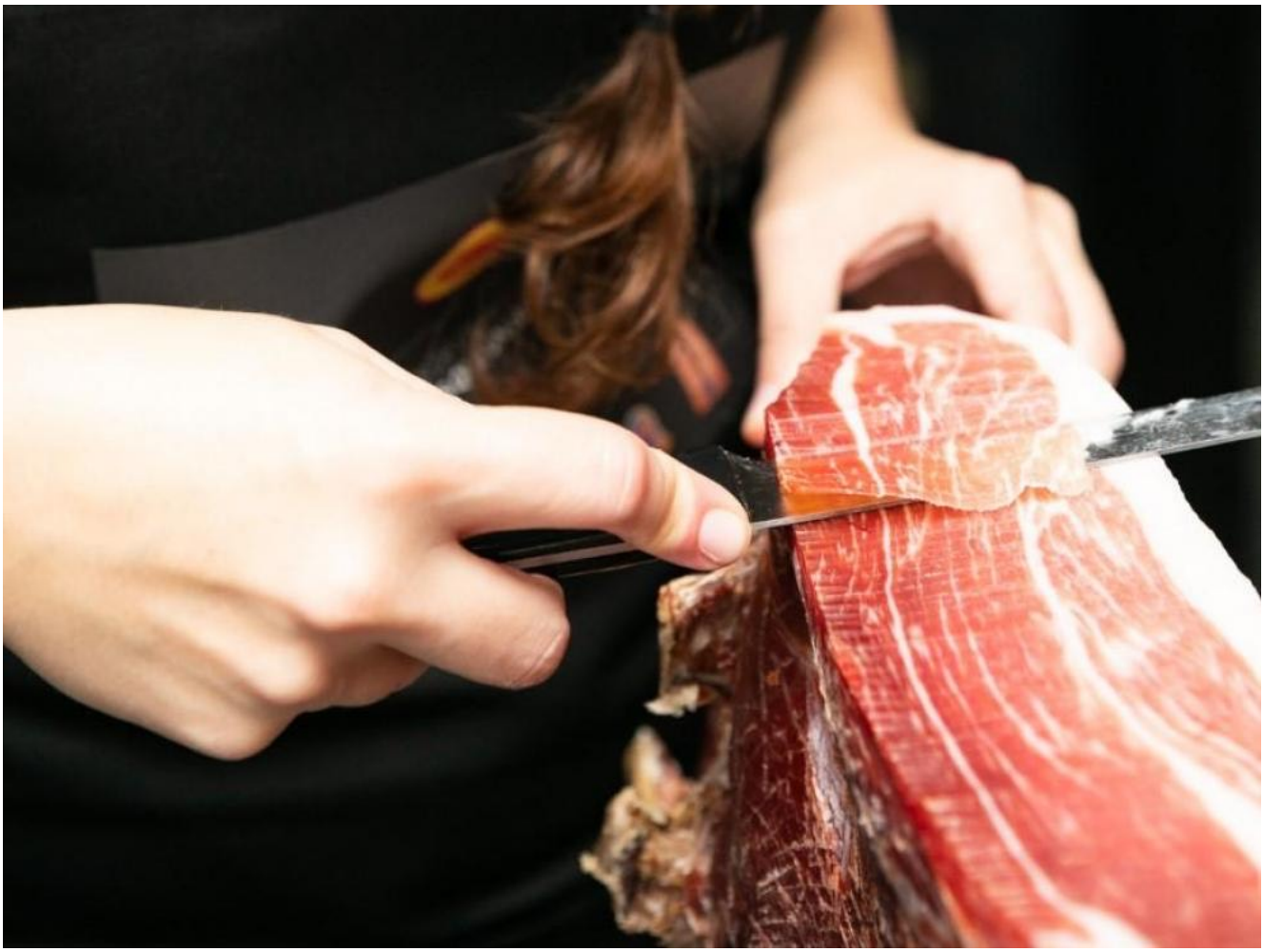


Image credit

Teruel is indeed known for its ham, dark and richly-colored with an unmistakable pork taste and, if cured long enough, jerky texture. In fact, Teruel hams were the first in Spain to be regulated by the Spanish Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAPA – *Ministerio de Agricultura, Pesca y Alimentación*), an office in Spain that ensures the regulation and controlled production of items originating from a certain region, giving them the coveted DOP seal (*denominación de origen protegida*). In the case of Teruel, for a cured ham leg to be considered a ham from Teruel, and to legally be marked with the eight-pointed star of Teruel and thus the DOP, the

pig must have been bred, raised, and then cured to certain specifications. This regulatory and strict adherence to established protocol applies to cheeses from DOP Castilla-La Mancha, wines from DOP La Rioja, and more.

Purple olives



Image credit

Aragón's purple olives are also known the peninsula over for their bitter, sharp taste. Small and round, colors ranging from dark purple to almost black, they're often sold in huge bags at supermarkets in Aragón. They're salty, dry, and, the more wrinkly the olive, the stronger the taste when it comes

to these olives (some even look like huge raisins).

Sweets



Image credit

Every Spaniard loves a good *dulce* during fiestas and the Aragonese are no exception. Popular during Pilares, Zaragoza's own festival in honor of its patron Our Lady of Pilar, are "frutas de Aragón" which, despite the word fruit in the name, are actually only fruit-flavored candies encased in chocolate. Soft and a bit like jelly bonbons, these candies are made in the traditional way by coating the candy in sugar and dipping in chocolate. Some confectioner's even use small diced orange pieces (with rind intact) for the orange ones.



Image credit

And no post-baptism party is complete in Aragón without another popular treat: trenza de Huesca. Especially the Trenza de Almudévar brand. Originating in the northern province of Huesca, this braided sweetbread is a cross between a danish and a flaky pastry, striped with cinnamon and coated in a thick sugar glaze. Its traditional flavors are cinnamon with raisin and nuts, however, orange-infused and chocolate trenzas are also popular varieties.

Roast lamb



Image credit

Another delicacy Aragón is known for is its roast lamb, called “ternasco” or “paletilla.” Walking into the big, main central market in Zaragoza, an entire section of the butchers’ aisle is dedicated solely to lamb. They have any and every cut you might want, and several organs as well. A shock to some might be the sight of piled lamb heads at the meat counter of a grocery store in Zaragoza, but this is very standard here.

The key to the lamb roast is minimal working of the meat; allowed to come to room temperature, seasoned usually only with salt, garlic, perhaps some herbs of preference, and served with a side of well-salted potatoes. Or, in true Spanish fashion, letting the ingredients speak for themselves.

Culinary traditions of Aragón

Aragonese cuisine is, like its region, not well-known but still celebrated and valued within its borders. There is a fierce pride to the restaurants in Zaragoza, serving hearty,

uncomplicated dishes that are a marker of Aragón's food culture. Disregarding the new age and high-brow experimental cuisine restaurants to focus on the traditional spots that close on Sundays right beside them, one notes the richness of dishes which, on the surface, seem quite simple.

Take "migas," for example. Though translated to breadcrumbs, this dish is actually the fluffy inside of bread, crust removed, that's broken up and pan-fried in olive oil with chopped onions, garlic, red pepper, sausage, and many other ingredients according to taste. It requires no fancy cookware, radical ingredients, or incredible skill to make, and yet it remains flavorsome and capable of vast interpretation. Something as simple as varying the bread used can produce a wide variety of results, from especially crispy to more tender, to say nothing of the type of olive oil and accompanying sauté ingredients.



Plate of “migas” at the popular La Miguería restaurant in Zaragoza’s tapas bar district known as “El Tubo”



The plate of “migas” after being mashed up

Migas are all over Spain, and there is much contention over which region, exactly, is the originator, but green grapes, blood sausage, and a fried egg (for good measure) are decidedly Aragonese toppings to it.

Perhaps, if not blood sausage for your migas, you’d like “longaniza,” Aragón’s proprietary sausage. Unlike many Spanish sausages, longaniza is not made with pimentón (sweet paprika) but heavy on the pepper and, depending on the Aragonese producer, even hints of nutmeg or parsley make it in the mix. You might want this longaniza fried and topping not migas but “huevos rotos”, an uncomplicated and incredibly satisfying dish of thinly-sliced, fried potatoes with fried eggs whose

yolks have been broken. Equally common is eating huevos rotos with cured ham… from Teruel, if you're a real maña/o.

Aragón has a lengthier list of traditional dishes, but the markers of simplicity and heartiness pervade it. Overlooked and sorely underrated, Aragón and its three provinces have been able to preserve and cherish their culinary histories without great external influences that uniquely shape other culinary traditions. The largest changes to Aragonese cuisine comes from the cooks of the meal themselves, who on one day might decide to fry up migas with hojiblanco olive oil instead of arbequina, or flavor a candy with fig and chili pepper instead of cherry.

By Alegra N. Padrón

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- **¡Ostras! Spanish Food Phrases for Aspiring Natives**

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!

Summertime and the livin is easy in Los Caños, Cádiz

So, for those of you who are up to speed with my slightly sporadic Naked Madrid musings (here's looking at you Mum and Dad), you may have noticed that my insta handle is @littlemissmadrid, so I'm asking you to forgive me in advance for this post; I'm going somewhat off piste.

Having recently celebrated living in this ferociously fun and frenetic city for a decade, I do consider myself to be an adopted Madrileña. But even us city folk need to escape the bright lights from time to time, and as summer sadly begins to draws to a close (I am not a jeans and jumper gal), I headed south to seek out the dregs of summer and to have some fun in the sun.



With my AVE ticket purchased to Malaga (seriously, Spain’s high-speed train is undoubtedly one of the greatest inventions known to man, up there with Netflix and hair serum I reckon), the train takes a paltry 2 hours 20 and you’re down on the coast before you can say sundowner. However, Málaga was merely where I alighted before heading to the hidden gem that is Los Caños de Meca for the weekend.



Now having been living on Spanish soil for a while, I’ve started to twig that all the best places are reached by car.

In spite of this, it’s in all motorists’ interests that I remain firmly off the road, so with a willing (and driving) partner in crime, we set off towards Los Caños armed with swimwear and SPF. The beach itself is a beauty – turquoise tides and golden sand prevail.

As we’ve just edged into September, it had also lost the patchwork quilt effect that comes with swarms of tourists, and it now had an all together more sedate vibe which I was all in for; less tourists equals less time spent queuing at the bar for those all-important beach beers.



Before having road tripped to Los Caños, Tarifa well and truly had my heart in the seaside stakes – but now it’s getting too close to call. Having travelled to the Caribbean coast of Columbia back in July, Los Caños de Meca has more than a touch of the quirky cool that can be found there. There’s a stretch of bougainvillea lined road called Avenida Trafalgar that hosts a number of surf shack-type bars – where folks spill out

onto the street as easily as the drinks flow.

My hands-down favourite beach bar is cocooned in the Mercado de Artesania and called **La Perlita**. It's hard to describe just how picture perfect it is – but I'll give it a go. Imagine your ideal back garden, by the sea and the dreamiest piña colada/carrot cake combo and yeah, you're about halfway there.



Pic from @streetfoodcadiz

Now I love a food truck as much as the fellow millennial, but this one can't be beat. The cocktails are fantastic, the food fresh (we had falafel, prawn dumplings, veggie noodles and a veggie burger – yes, I'm aware that gluttony is one of the seven sins) but with prices that definitely don't match

Madrid, it was nigh on impossible not to over order. The menu is what I’d call healthy hipster and the nice touch is that’s everything’s recyclable. As we all try to slide into sustainable socialising, La Perlita is ahead of the curve, with their food being served in paper bags and the gently lulling reggae tunes that swayed in the background added to my food coma.



No trip to Los Caños is complete without a trip to the infamous beachside mecca, La Jaima. Birthplace (I imagine) to

thousands of insta stories, it’s so idyllic even the most hardwired stresshead would struggle not to be lulled into a zen-like state here – the views can’t be done justice on an iPhone (and god knows, I tried) but as the golden hour kicked in and the *café del mar* type tunes ramped up, I was positively horizontal on my beanbag and felt about a million miles away from the chaos and crowds of a city. The bar boasts live music and quite possibly the friendliest staff I’ve ever met – although who wouldn’t be beaming from ear to ear if you got to call the beach your ‘office’.



Feeling satiated having spent the day bar hopping and getting bronzed, we decided that we should try to find a place stay.

Word of warning: it's not easy. Los Caños is clearly not one for mass tourism, as we painfully discovered.

Spontaneity doesn't always pay off so what I will say is book ahead. Clearly we weren't the only ones hoping to sizzle our way into September so, sadly, there was no room, quite literally at the Inn(s) for this Mary and Joesph, but I did spot Hotel Guadalupe, a gorgeous looking boutique hotel on the aforementioned Avenida Trafalgar. Seriously, I can sniff out a decent-looking hotel like a bloodhound. Sadly, I just don't seem to have the foresight to book them.

So whilst I didn't get get to stumble back to a beachfront abode, I did get to enjoy a pretty perfect day that filled my cup right up and should keep me feeling warm and fuzzy into autumn (or maybe that was just my slightly sunburnt nose). Either way, cities are great and all, but sometimes your bod just craves some Vitamin Sea and ultimately the heart wants what the heart wants. In this case it was a delicious dose of daiquiris and downtime.

Los Caños de Meca, Cádiz

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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!*

La Neomudéjar, a spooky, avant-garde arts center near

Atocha

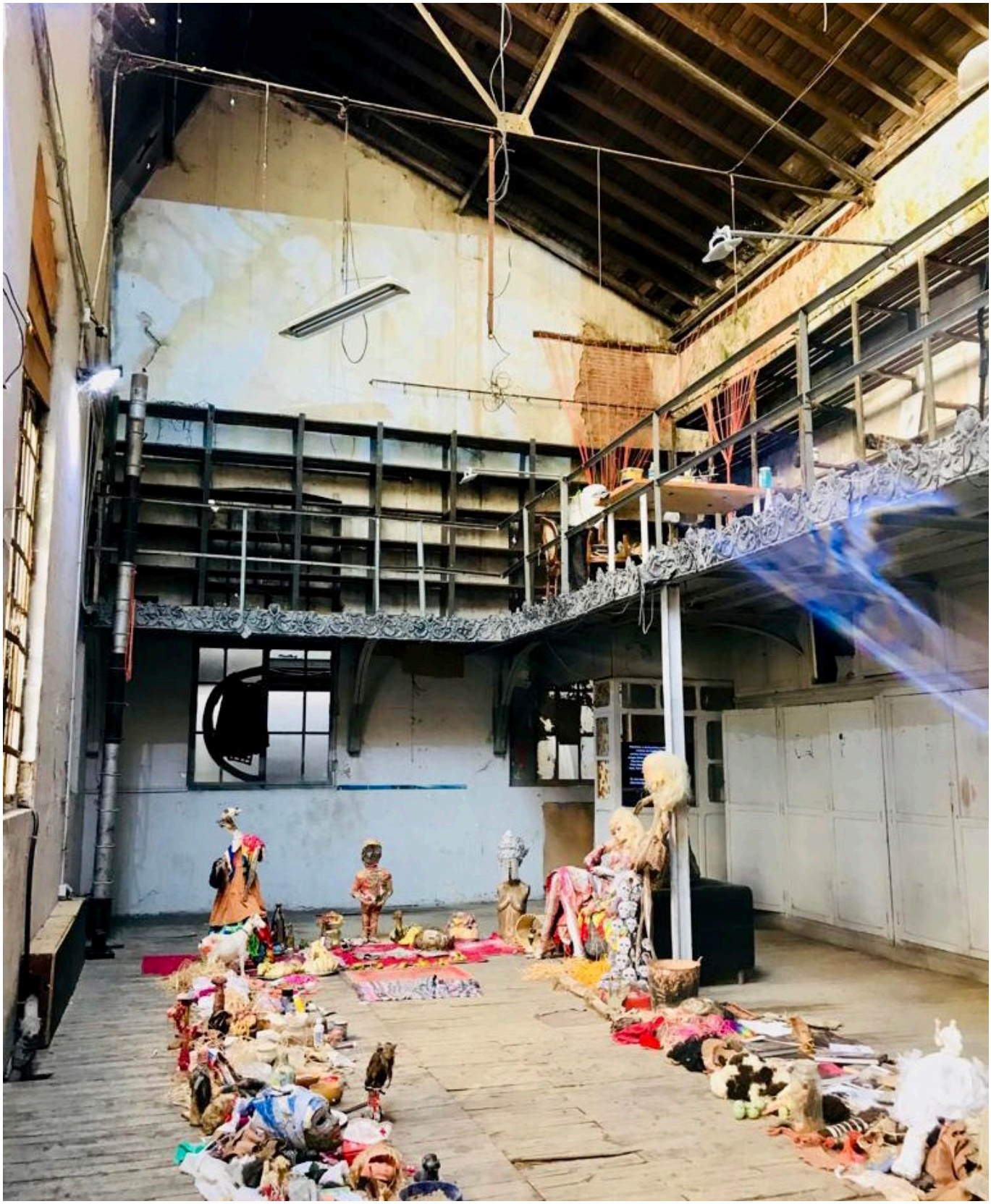
If you're into experimental art and transformed industrial buildings, then this is the place for you. **La Neomudéjar** is a rather eerie **museum**, located behind Atocha train station. It occupies a massive building that was the former offices of Spanish railway company Adif, and was converted into an international arts center and residency five years ago.



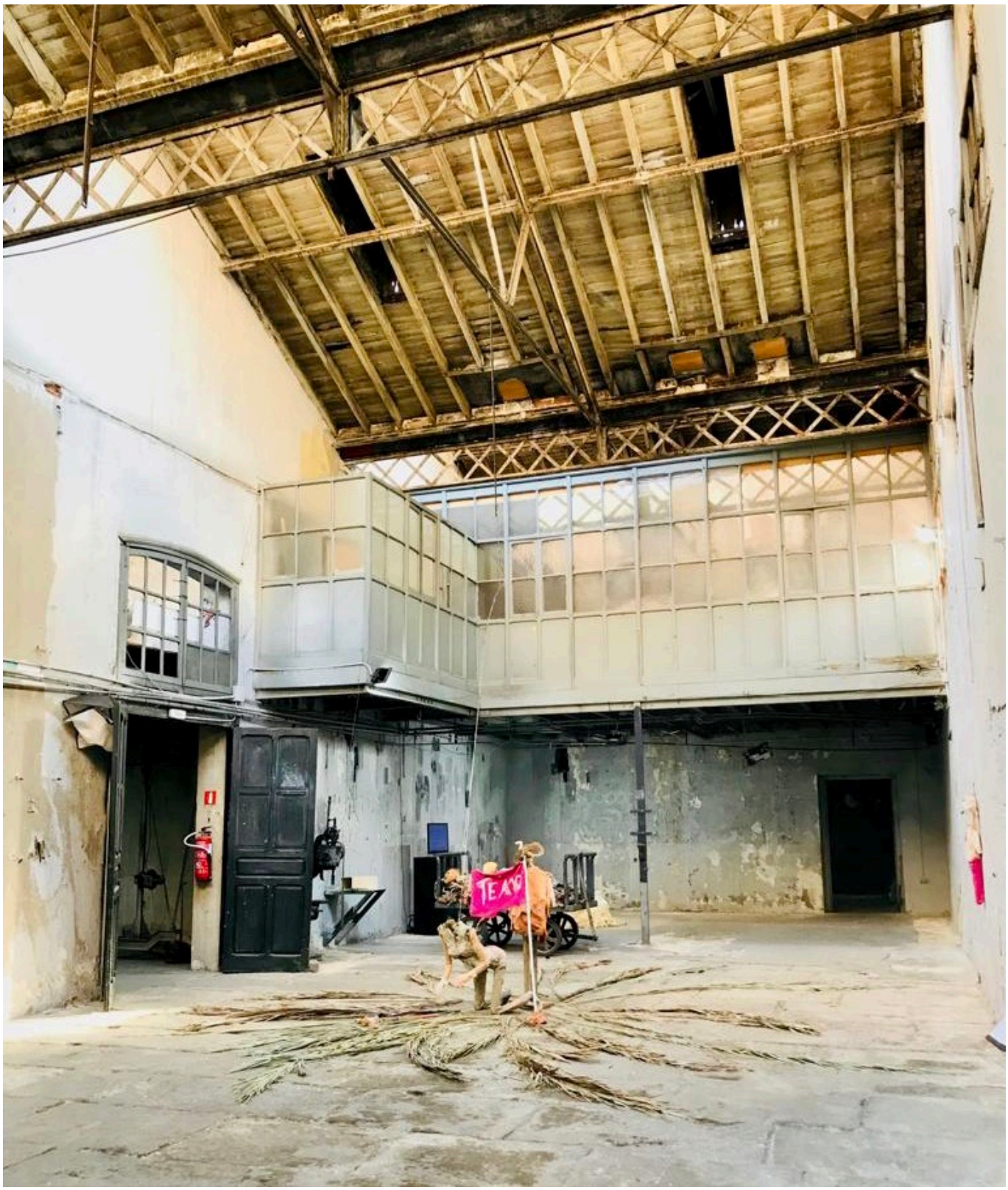
A renovation was clearly not top priority upon its reopening, as it feels like a completely abandoned old factory, taken over by bold artists. You might even think you're in the wrong place as you enter through the unassuming gate located on a side street, just a few blocks away from Atocha.

But keep walking down the little stairway and through the

unadorned outdoor area with plastic tables and ashtrays, and **you'll find the main door to a unique addition to Madrid's thriving arts scene, featuring art exhibits, performances, residencies and more.**



In the entrance, you'll find a gift shop with art books and other materials. Through there you'll start off in the main room where your gaze will immediately begin to scan the entire space from floor to ceiling… Both the exhibited art and the building itself are worth marvelling at.



Tiptoe around the items scattered across the floor as you look at paintings and displays with rather surprising written phrases, scenes, and messages. Continue entering through dark rooms, stained walls, and creepy corridors that lead you to dynamic art installations, film screenings and exhibits from international artists. **The current exhibit is called Dollhouse by Dutch artist Fardou Keuning, featuring life-size dolls.**



In addition to the contemporary exhibits on display, you'll also see clear remnants of the building's former life as a railway company.



One last tip: this is a great place to take a photo for your instagram story and scare your friends.



La Neomudéjar

- **Website** & **Facebook**
- **Address:** Calle Antonio Nebrija
- **Metro:** Menendéz Pelayo / Atocha Renfe
- **Entrance fee:** €5
- **Hours:** Wednesday-Sunday, 11am-3pm/5pm-9pm

You may also like:

- **Madrid museums: the obvious and not-so-obvious (and how to get in for free!)**

Loveliness at Lateral

When I first moved to Madrid I walked that well trodden path like so many ex-pats had done before me; the month long TEFL course. I rocked up with my Spanish phrase book, some SPF 20 and the overwhelming desire to live abroad. With no set plan (well, with no actual plan at all having quit my job in PR back in London) I quickly got into the groove of my new TEFL timetable; which essentially meant a 3pm finish. As soon as my 'working' day was done, I would wile away afternoons in Plaza Santa Ana.



Plaza Santa Ana

Now I don’t spend too much time around that neck of the woods these days, but back then I was literally intoxicated by that square. The beautiful balconies, the long sunny days (I arrived in August) and I even found charm in the guys who play the accordion and then hustle for your change. The large majority of those afternoons were spent on the terraza of **restaurante Lateral**.

Seriously, the limited savings that I arrived with dwindled at lightning speed thanks to my newfound obsession with their ***croquetas de jamón*** and ***tinto de verano***. It became a spot that I still think of fondly, as it kind of represents those heady first months when everything was an adventure and my sole preoccupation was how many hours could I spend tanning that day and where was I going out that night.



So **Lateral** and I have enjoyed an enduring partnership and now that I live on the other side of Gran Via I thought I'd mix

things up and visit one of their other outposts on Calle Fuencarral. I'd heard on the grape vine that it had undergone a recent renovation (and I can't just rely on Pinterest for interiors inspo) so it seemed like a win win.



So onto the décor, it is in a nutshell delightful. But obviously we're talking about a restaurant here, so I can't not mention the food. Lateral is all about the tapas – so you can literally try a little bit of everything in perfectly bite sized portions.

In addition, if you have **visiting guests** or you're just a first timer to the city, you'll love that Lateral puts a modern spin on Spanish classics. You can find all the well-known favourites such as ***tortilla de patata*** and ***albondigas*** (meatballs); alongside more inventive small plates such as delicious **duck ravioli** and a melt-in-the-mouth **carpaccio**.



Food wise Lateral is what I would describe as a safe bet. Yes it might not be the most inventive cuisine, but what they offer up always hits the spot. It also doesn't hurt that it's super reasonably priced for a city centre find, and **they serve food all day**.

My friend and I were also pleased as punch to discover that they boast a **happy hour on drinks** – ideal if you enjoy a lunch that's more liquid than most and I can attest that the service is always friendly and fast. Whilst the terraza isn't quite as pleasing on the eye as the Plaza Santa Ana locale, the phrase "it's what's on the inside that counts" that rings true here.



Inside it’s an oasis within the city, filled with plenty of plants and enough greenery to make you feel like you’re embracing nature, in spite of being mere moments from the hustle and bustle of one of Madrid’s main shopping streets. If spontaneity is your thing (let’s face it, we’re not talking about a country when peeps really plan ahead), restaurante Lateral is the kind of place that you can pitch up at, eat well and feel as though you’ve sampled a little bit of Spain’s finest.

Restaurante Lateral:

- **Website** & **Facebook** & **Instagram**
- **Address:** Calle Fuencarral, 43
- **Phone:** 915316877

Navare Bar – The Secret's Out

You always feel quite smug when you stumble across somewhere that feels yet to be discovered. I was mooching around Chamberi on my way to an appointment, when I mindlessly spotted **Navare Bar** – and it piqued my interest.



Inside there were groups of friends chatting animatedly, enjoying a late afternoon merienda. But upon closer look, there was also a downright delicious evening menu. I papped the name of the restaurant on my phone and made a mental note to return with a friend in tow.



Fast forward a week and I found myself to be one of the locals enjoying this new neighbourhood hotspot. **Navare Bar** is somewhat impossible to be shoehorned into any set category. You want you breakfast? They serve it. A leisurely lunch with colleagues? You've got it. Dinner with your nearest and dearest. They offer it. It's basically your one-stop shop for all your culinary needs.



Now to be all things to all people is no mean feat. However, after meeting (and chatting with the owner) it’s clear that the vision for Navare Bar is to be a local place for local people; somewhere that no matter the time of day, you can grab a coffee or indeed a copa with friends.

I was a fan of this concept from the get go. Coming from the UK, I’m used to eating when I want – whether or not that ties in with siesta culture is of little importance. If I’m hungry I want options that will keep my renowned (within my social circle) ‘hanger’ at bay. It also didn’t hurt that the décor was a delight and the plates satiated my fetish for all things chintzy when it came to crockery.



So the food. In a nutshell it was lip smackingly good. After a full-on week at work I was in need of all the treats. We split **prawn croquetas** (you get eight, I could've quite easily refused to share). This was swiftly followed by **grilled vegetables** that conjured up the feeling of summer barbecues (and made me feel slightly virtuous after the deep fried delight that was the first tapa).

But **the jewel in the crown was undoubtedly the solomillo** that came with crushed new potatoes and some kind of sauce that I could've quite happily guzzled as though it were a G&T. To surmise, the food is heavenly and I left eager to return for breakfast, lunch **AND** dinner.

I have no doubt that Navare bar will be a success. The passion of the owner coupled with the zest for life that the local peeps possess, makes it an inevitable recipe for success.

Info

- **Facebook & Instagram**
- **Address:** Calle de Rafael Calvo, 29
- **Metro:** Iglesia & Rubén Darío
- **Phone:** 910 26 87 57

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5 Authentic Madrid Bars Loved by Locals

If you came to Madrid for some homemade *croquetas* or high

quality *jamón ibérico*, you want to make sure that you're going to the best places. In Madrid, like any other major European city, it can be difficult to distinguish the local favorites from the tourist traps. But this doesn't necessarily mean that you have to venture off the beaten path to find traditional Spanish delicacies.

To save you the trouble, here's a list of some of the most authentic bars that can easily be found in the center of the city. So get ready to discover Madrid, one *tapa* at a time.

1) El Madroño



This restaurant screams authenticity with its interior and exterior tile decorations that depict Madrid's history and culture. When walking in, the first thing that will catch your eye is the homemade pastries and cakes that you'll be

anticipating throughout your meal. Once seated, it’s no surprise if a free *tapa* is brought to your table before even ordering.

El Madroño is the perfect place to order a glass of *vermut* paired with the *delicias de bacalao con mermelada de madroño*. These cod bites are fried to golden perfection and served with a side of madroño jam, the fruit from Madrid.



Delicias de bacalao con mermelada de madroño

- **Address:** Calle Latoneros, 3
- **Metro:** La Latina
- **Phone:** +34 913 64 56 29

2) Bar la Campana



If you're looking for the perfect *bocadillo de calamares*, look no further because La Campana is hands down the best place. Right next to Plaza Mayor, this bar is always crowded with locals, no matter what time of day it is. My personal favorite is a calamari sandwich paired with *una cerveza con limón*, otherwise known as beer with a splash of lemon. And if you're feeling extra hungry, you can't go wrong with an order of *patatas bravas* or *patatas alioli*.



Bocadillos de calamares con patatas bravas y patatas alioli

- **Address:** Calle Botoneras, 6
- **Metro:** Sol
- **Phone:** +34 913 64 29 84

3) Casa Toni



Found on Calle de la Cruz, this small restaurant definitely stands out against the others, with its worn out awning and window where you can see the chef hard at work. The first thing that you'll notice while walking into Casa Toni is the chef grilling up portions of *pimientos* and *oreja* to a charred perfection. In my opinion, this place has the best *sepia* ever. This grilled cuttlefish topped with fresh herbs and served with a side of mayo should be enjoyed with a Madrid white wine.



Sepia con vino Madrileño

- **Address:** Calle de la Cruz, 14
- **Metro:** Sol
- **Phone:** +34 915 32 25 80

4) Casa González



This half-bar half-artisan store located off of Calle Huertas is the perfect place to enjoy a light round of tapas, and maybe take a few of the goods home with you. Casa González is a cheese lover's dream with its delicious *raclette tosta* and variety of other European cheeses to choose from. My personal favorite take-home item is the *queso de arzúa*, which is a fresh cheese from the north of Spain. After enjoying a nice glass of wine and a tapa or two, don't be afraid to bring home a bag full of artisan goodies with you.



- [Web]
- **Address:** Calle del León, 12
- **Metro:** Antón Martín, Sol
- **Phone:** +34 914 29 56 18

5) Bodegas Ricla



About a 5-minute walk from Plaza Mayor is where you can find an old-fashioned bar decorated with bottles of wine that definitely gives a classic tavern feel. You can even take one of those bottles home with you! Just ask anyone behind the counter and they will be happy to help. Besides the amazing Spanish wines, Bodegas Ricla has a pretty good *vermut de grifo* (vermouth on tap) that goes perfectly with a side of *albóndigas,* otherwise known as meatballs.



- **Address:** Calle Cuchilleros, 6
- **Metro:** La Latina, Tirso de Molina
- **Phone:** +34 913 65 20 69

Also check out: What to see in Barrio de las Letras

Veggie Nirvana at VivaBurger

in La Latina

In the foodie hotspot Plaza de la Paja, in *barrio* La Latina, lies a vegetarian oasis with an oddly beachy vibe, complete with pale teal walls, distressed white wood, and beaded curtains.



You can sit inside or at one of their lovely terrace tables in this little nook of La Latina. While there’s almost always a full house (and for good reason), the staff works like a well-oiled machine, and the owner treats everyone like family.



Everything on the menu is vegan or vegetarian—and seriously delicious. Being shamefully addicted to cheese, I was admittedly nervous to try their vegan burger of the day. But it exceeded my expectations in every way: **filling, creamy, and flavorful, it left me more than satisfied.** It comes with a salad or soup, fresh fries, and a drink (can be wine or beer too).







If you’re not feeling a veggie burger, the eatery offers an **alternative *menú del día*:** they celebrate a different country every day with a rotating international menu. Indian curry garam masala, Greek salad and musaka, Peruvian avocado ceviche, Moroccan couscous, Argentinian vegetable *parrillada* and empanadas… and about 20 others.


VIVA BURGER
eat positive
HELADOS
100% bio-veganos
VIVABURGER


VIVA
BUR
GER
eat positive



For dessert, I had a fresh mint green tea smoothie. Having a huge sweet tooth, it wasn’t what I was expecting, but it was flavorful and refreshing, especially on such a hot day. If you order dessert a la carte, instead of with the lunch special, you have lots of other options like their scrumptious carrot cake or vegan ice cream.



Amazingly, the burger for the menú is apparently a more “basic” veggie burger. If that’s basic, I can only imagine the

full menu is mind-blowing. I'll for sure be back for more.

Info

- **Facebook**
- **Website:** vivaburger.es
- **Instagram:** @viva_burger
- **Address:** Costanilla de San Andrés 16
- **Phone:** 91 366 33 49

I lucked out at Luzi Bombon

I am a country girl by birth and now a bona-fide city girl by choice. However, the downside of living in Madrid means that I now rarely see greenery on a daily basis (unless you count the succulents that I 'try' to keep alive in my humble abode). But on the flipside, being an urban dweller gives me access to some of the fanciest places to eat, with the best part being that they're often right on my doorstep.



Whilst I love a Netflix binge like most millennials, I still relish any given opportunity to don my glad rags and go out for a proper slap up dins. So dress up I did when I headed to Luzi Bombon with a suitably stylish friend in town, and wowzers did we enjoy a veritable feast from beginning to end.

Luzi Bombon isn't located in an area of Madrid that I often frequent, i.e. it's not within walking distance of my apartment. I had to treat myself to a taxi (partly due to the vertiginous heels that I was tottering about in) but it's undoubtedly central enough to appeal to both locals and out-of-towners alike.



What struck me first were the wall-to-wall photogenic diners – you won't just be salivating over the menu if the evening I visited was anything to go by. The clientele was as upscale as the perfectly mixed G&T that I was sipping on within minutes of arriving – a G'Vine in case you're interested.

It's a sexy venue; possibly the slinkiest of all the Madrid-based Grupo Tragaluz (which also runs Bar Tomate) offerings with low lighting casting an Insta-worthy filter over my dining companion. Now until recent years I'm not ashamed to admit that I had relatively simple tastes – but due to external influencers in the form of more adventurous friends,

I’m starting to pride myself of never saying never and giving anything a go. In that spirit, I sampled as much as was humanly possible whilst wearing leather and not wanting to be forklifted out of the venue.



The standout star of the show was the giant ‘fruits de mar’ platter that caused the table to groan under its sheer weight. Recommended by the waitress who clearly knew her stuff, it was a-ma-zing and has turned me into a complete crab convert. Obviously it’s not the kind of thing that I’m whipping up at home, which gave the whole meal an even greater sense of occasion. Even as a novice foodie, I have told every man and his dog about that platter and now I’m urging you to hotfoot to Luzi Bombon and do the same.

Dinner doesn’t come cheap but if you’re looking to impress, aka maybe bag a second date with the object of your affection, Luzi Bombon is a fab place to pull out all of the stops. As someone who’s rarely lured out of her barrio, Luzi Bombon is

well worth the cab ride and gym class that you'll undoubtedly need to do the following day (in order to burn off every savoured calorie). If seafood platters and pretty peeps are your jam, Luzi Bombon is the (meal) ticket for you.

Luzi Bombon

- **Facebook & Instagram: @luzibombon**
- **Address:** Paseo de la Castellana 35
- **Phone:** 917 02 27 36
- **Metro:** Rubén Darío