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There's Something About Madrid by [Roger Starkey](#)

'There's just something about it.' That uninformative and unimaginative statement is how I had been explaining my love affair with Madrid for more than a year and a half. A more descriptive testimonial was needed if I ever hoped to make friends and family understand why Spain's capital city was one of my favorite places.

Formulating that testimonial was my objective as I sat at an outdoor café in the Parque de Buen Retiro one Sunday afternoon in April. Because I had been unsuccessfully attempting to construct a proper descriptive sentence for so long, I decided to enlist the help of a fellow expatriot in the endeavor.

Couples in rowboats, taking advantage of the pleasant day, drifted lazily on the lake in front of us. To our left, the steps to the massive Alfonso XIII mausoleum were lined with people basking in the sun and admiring the swans in the lake. Our first cañas (small beers) and plate of complimentary olives were nearly finished and we still hadn't started work on the project.

We had been to one of our favorite bars the previous night and that subject had been dominating the conversation. The evening in the bar had ended in the usual fashion. Closing time arrived and the owner locked the door and closed the blinds of the incredibly small establishment. The fifteen or so remaining patrons went nowhere. Soon after ensuring everyone had a drink, the owner had produced a guitar and was playing a classic Spanish song while his lovely young wife sang. Everyone clapped and danced to the beat. After a few songs, one of our friends was handed the guitar and he pleased the crowd with another Spanish favorite. The singing, dancing and clapping went on for over an hour before it was time to leave for a disco. The sun, as it so often did, tucked us into our beds at the end of the night.

Finally getting around to the subject, we started at the most obvious point, The Prado Museum. Usually regarded as the second best art museum in Europe, behind only the Louvre in Paris, the Prado is one of the defining characteristics of Madrid. However, I prefer the more diverse collection of the Thyssen-Bornemisza. My friend, citing the collection that includes Dalís and Picassos, argued that the Reina Sofia, the expansive modern art museum, was the best of the three.

That Madrid boasts a triumvirate of excellent museums we were able to agree upon. We also agreed that those museums aren't what make it so special. Deciding that a change of venue might provide more inspiration, we moved to an outdoor café closer to the city center.

With the Palacio Real dominating the landscape to our right, the enormous Casa de Campo sprawled out down the hill below us and the Sierra de Navacerrada mountains perched in the distance, we continued the quest for the definitive description of Madrid's charm. Maybe it was the beautiful gates to the city, my friend speculated. The Puerta de Toledo and Puerta de Alcalá don't have the historical significance of the Arc de Triumph but they are every bit as spectacular. The gates, I agreed, are a part of the luster. We were making progress.

A couple of additional cañas, with the customary accompanying tapas, had wetted our appetites for one of Madrid's most famous meals, a bocadillo de calamares (a breaded, fried squid sandwich). The best bocadillo de calamares are served at one of several tapas restaurants just off the Plaza Mayor, or next stop.

We took the long way to Plaza Mayor so that we could walk through the beautiful, statue lined gardens in front of the Palacio Real. The park benches were full of young and old alike. I wondered if the Madrileños (the people who live in Madrid) are ever in their homes. The streets are bustling with people of all ages around the clock. It's not even uncommon to find an elderly couple going for a walk, hand-in-hand, very late in the evening.

With our fried squid sandwiches in hand, we took a seat on the cobblestone pavement of the Plaza Mayor. Looking beyond the statue of Phillip III, who ordered the construction of the square in 1619, I admired the murals on the west wall. As I did, I nearly cast a vote for the Plaza Mayor as one of the things that make Madrid great. However, catching myself before putting voice to my thoughts, I realized that most every city in Spain has a Plaza Mayor. They may not all be as spectacular as the one in Madrid, but they are all integral parts their town.

'How about the Rastro?' my friend interrupted my thoughts. I agreed that the massive Sunday afternoon event was something unique that all tourists should see, but I wasn't comfortable having my favorite city known as the home of the greatest flea market in Europe. He laughed and said that he wasn't voting for it as a great Madrid attraction, he just wanted to know if I was interested in going.

I counter-offered that we should go to the La Latina neighborhood to see if we could find one of the impromptu parties that tend to materialize each Sunday in one of the many squares. He agreed but suggested that we again take the long way, this time walking through Puerta del Sol. On a Sunday afternoon in Madrid, walking from once place to another via the most direct route is not only rare, it is highly discouraged.

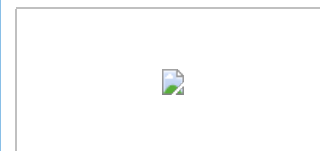
We left Plaza Mayor and snaked our way through the tiny, attractive streets of the surrounding neighborhood until we had arrived at Puerta del Sol. Sol, as it's known, is the exact center of Spain and home to the many political demonstrations that occur in Madrid. We continued through Sol under the watchful eye of the Tío Pepe billboard, which soars high above the square, and ducked down one of the busy side streets.

The streets to the east of Sol are not only a haven for tourists, they are also home to many of the tapas bars and nightspots frequented by the locals. The road on which we were walking is where my favorite pension in Madrid is located. I have never stayed there, I just love their sign that proudly, and simply, states, 'Speaking English.' It doesn't say 'Spelling English,' so maybe they can be forgiven the transgression.

The search for an outdoor party in La Latina didn't last long. No sooner had we arrived in the neighborhood than we were drawn to a square full of people in full party form. Some of the local gypsy musicians must have been in the area when the party had formed because they were now in the center of the festivities playing song after song while the revelers danced and sang.

The party started to dissipate, probably not coincidentally, at about the same time the Real Madrid football (soccer) match was about to begin.

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There's Something About Madrid

Real Madrid football is a Madrileño religion and watching a Real Madrid match is a religious experience.

Bars filled to bursting with twenty-somethings shouting at big screen televisions are not the norm here. The Madrileños usually go to a cervceria (a small bar serving tapas) in their neighborhood for the matches. There, all but the oldest of men will stand watching the small television placed high in the back corner. The few seats in the bar are saved for the older men who are still able to move their arms just as well as the younger men when watching the matches and their typical Spanish enthusiasm takes over. During the matches, the normally very talkative locals maintain almost complete silence towards each other, saving their vocal exercises for the television. When the game is complete, the men shake hands with their friends, say goodbye to the bartenders and go home.

When the game was over that night, we decided to go for a walk through La Latina. La Latina is home to the majority of Madrid's gypsy population. Although they are no longer traveling gypsies, they still maintain a culture distinct from that of the Spaniards. Part of their culture is for the single women to put on their best clothes each Sunday evening and walk around the neighborhood with other single women. The single men also wear their Sunday best but, rather than taking part in the procession, they stake out a spot and remain there with their friends for the duration of the evening. During this courting ritual, the men and women never actually speak to each other; they only take mental notes for future use.

We strode slowly through the neighborhood taking care not to stare too long at any of the bevy of attractive ladies that were walking past. The gypsy people do not usually have relationships with non-gypsies and our staring at the young ladies would have been highly offensive to the men.

As we walked along, enjoying the atmosphere and the novelty of it all, another wonderful Madrid day drawing to a close, my friend turned to me and asked if I had thought of a sentence to explain my love for the city. 'Well,' I said as I shrugged my shoulders, 'there's just something about it.'

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