

As the capital city of Spain, Madrid is officially the country's financial center, as well as its arts and cultural hub. Many argue that Madrid is the most cultural city in Spain (a challenging title to obtain), as it combines all the historical influences the country has seen over millennia, including Roman, Muslim, and Christian.

King Phillip III established the city as the capital in the 16th century, but not for typical reasons. Unlike many other European capitals, Madrid doesn't have a significant river, valuable natural resources, or a strategic geographical location. Instead, the city's appeal came from its independence, as it wasn't at the mercy of any influences outside the royal family. Today, you'll find an eclectic mix of cultures, gastronomy, art, and energy where you can join local Madrileños prowling the "City of Cats" day and night.

You can easily visit the city's main sites in one day, including Retiro Park, Prado Museum, the Royal Palace, Plaza Mayor, Puerta del Sol, and more. Below you'll find a suggestion for a day out in Madrid. Of course, you can use it as a general guideline and tailor it to your interests and/or split it up over the 2 days you are in the city center at Madrid Aloft. Enjoy delicious food, mingle with the locals, and learn about the city's (and country's) history.

8:00 am: Enjoy a Local Breakfast (If not included in your Marriott rate)

Madrileños prefer a light breakfast later in the morning, so join them around 8:00 am for a traditional bite. You'll find many cafés in the city center offering international breakfasts. Still, sleepy residents prefer bars with metal wraparound counters so they can stand at the bar with a café con leche, tostada (toasted bread with grated tomatoes and olive oil), and orange juice. Wipe your hands and mouth with a napkin, toss it on the floor, and drop your change on the counter, all in local style. Other typical breakfast delights in Madrid include churros con chocolate, a slice of Spanish omelet (pincho de tortilla), and sweet pastries.

9:00 am: Explore Retiro Park

With a full belly, it's time to walk in the city's most famous park, El Retiro. Start at the Puerta de Alcalá, a gorgeous city gate built in 1778 by the Italian architect Sabatini (25 min walk, 9 min taxi from Aloft). Set on the Plaza de la Independencia (Independence Square), the entrance welcomes three of the city's most famous streets: Alcalá Street, Madrid's longest road; Alfonso XII Street, which leads to Atocha train station; and Serrano Street, Madrid's most glamorous avenue. Spend a few minutes admiring each side of the gate, looking for sculptures of the four children representing the cardinal virtues: fortitude, justice, temperance, and prudence.

Next, enter Retiro Park through one of its main gates and enjoy the immediate reprieve. Madrid is a big and bustling city, yet Retiro feels like a secret oasis. Walk to the Retiro pond, where you can rent a boat. Don't miss the Crystal Palace's art exhibitions and the Parterre Gardens.

10:30 am: Grab a Snack

Because lunch is a later event in Spain, you'll want to grab a quick snack to tide you over. Plenty of kiosks in Retiro Park sell simple snacks, which works in a pinch but consider strolling to one of the surrounding neighborhoods. A bakery or coffee house is the perfect spot to continue your gastronomy exploration of Madrid. The following recommendations can help get you started:

-Sucre Salón de Té. Head to this beautiful café for its eclectic atmosphere and assortment of sweet and savory pastries.

-Moulin Chocolat. You'll usually find a line out of this café, but it's worth any wait—it's famous for grab-and-go French pastries and ice cream.

-Salutteria. For something more savory, consider the beautiful café full of character, charm, and easy meals like Italian sandwiches, focaccia, and salads.

-Hotel Wellington. As one of the best luxury hotels in Madrid, you might think this is just a fancy eatery. The hotel's kitchen is known for its picnic baskets, so you can arrange one ahead of time and pick it up before you go to the park if you wish.

11:00 am: Enjoy Madrid's museums, some of the best in Europe

Madrid is a city of museums, so you can choose from numerous themes and interests. A popular choice is the **Prado Museum**, one of the most famous in the world. If you're a history and art buff, it's a site not to miss and where you'll learn about Spanish culture and art. Don't miss masterpieces like "Las Meninas" by Diego Velázquez, "La maja desnuda" by Francisco Goya, "The Three Graces" by Peter Paul Rubens, and "The Garden of Earthly Delights Triptych" by Hieronymus Bosch.

Though there are over 40 museums in the city, here is a couple of options for you to consider:

Reina Sofia Museum. This museum is an excellent pick for families and houses two exhibits in Retiro Park: the beautiful Crystal Palace and Velázquez Palace. Both are free to enter, and it's nice to pair your visit with the park. The museum focuses on Spanish and international art of the 20th century, presenting international modern and contemporary art. Many choose the museum for its vast collections by some renowned Spanish painters like Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí, and Joan Miró.

Official Tour Bernabéu. If you're a Madrid soccer team fan, this is the museum for you. Visiting the stadium requires a guided tour, which allows you to see behind the scenes and learn about the history and stories of Real Madrid. Learn about the football club's history while visiting the trophy hall, locker room, press room, and the tunnel leading to the pitch. You can also snap photos of the field and stands and peruse the museum.

1:00 pm: Start Your Lunchtime "Tapear"

It's easy to walk and hop from one tapas bar to the next in Madrid

A tapear is simply a tapas walk, where you'll stop at numerous bars to enjoy several small bites, a beloved Spanish pastime. **One of the best streets in Madrid for a tapear is Calle de La Cruz (Cross Street).** Enjoy different tapas bars for lunch, being sure to stop at Casa Toni. Another tapas street in Madrid close to your hotel: Calle de las Huertas (right around the corner from Calle de La Cruz).

3:00 pm: Explore the Old Town

Since you're in the city's Old Town, it's time to enjoy some of the sites. Though Madrid is a large city of over three million residents, its historic center is relatively compact, allowing easy exploration. You can also take yourself on a stroll through the city. If you choose to peruse the cobbled streets on your own, there are a few places you can't miss.

After lunch, walk to your street Gran Vía, where you will see two of Madrid's most famous buildings: the Metropolis and the Capitol Building at Plaza de Callao. Continue to Puerta del Sol and look up. Sitting at the top of the Casa de Correos building is the famous clock where people gather on New Year's Eve to participate in a unique tradition. Revelers will quickly eat 12 grapes during the last 12 chimes from the clock at midnight.

Next, walk toward the Royal Palace via Plaza Mayor. Along the way, you'll pass Madrid's oldest food market, Mercado de San Miguel. Stop here to try tapas or grab a drink, then continue to the palace.

6:00 pm: Drinks at Sunset

After you visit the Royal Palace, stop for a drink at the Sabatini Gardens, where you can enjoy a beautiful sunset through the gardens and Madrid's river, the Manzanares. Other options include rooftop terraces, of which the city has plenty. The most popular rooftop is undoubtedly at **Círculo de Bellas Artes**. Still, the bar atop **The Principal Madrid Hotel** (one of the best luxury hotels in Madrid) is another good option.

8:00 pm: Enjoy Dinner in Your Neighborhood

Of course, plenty of other neighborhoods offer delicious bites, but, some for an affordable price near you are **Chueca** (10 minute walk) or **Malasaña** (7 minute walk).

10:30 pm: Nightcap

You might be ready to hit the sack at this point, but for Madrileños, the night is young. Join the locals and savor the final hours of the city's energy by enjoying a nightcap. If you didn't visit one of Madrid's famed rooftop bars earlier, now's the time. Or, for something more casual, head back to the Literary Quarter (13 minute walk) and snuggle into a tapas bar or sip vermouth at the authentic **La Venencia** (13 minute walk or 9 minute taxi).