

SAMAR AHSAN PRESENTS

SPAIN



FIELD NOTES

I've been to Spain four times – you could say I'm obsessed. My father took us on a journey of Moorish Spain when I was 12. We visited my sister during her time abroad in Alcalá de Henares. I spent a month studying abroad in a Barcelona suburb. Most recently, I went with eight friends, two of them Madrileños, to do a tour over the holidays.

Each of these experiences varied drastically in food, weather, architecture, and language. If Andalucía is flaming red, then Catalunya is a bold blue, and Madrid sits in the middle as a white flag between the two. And that's just three regions – there's 17 autonomies in Spain, each unique.

I was curious to see how the travel kingmakers describe Spain. Rick Steves, per usual, is trite: "Spain is a mix of old and new, modern and traditional." Lonely Planet uses the words "passionate" and "sophisticated," which I can tell they chose exactingly. I agree with the former – Spain is imbued with a passion built over centuries of conquering and reconquering; of expansion, incursion, and dictatorship. Sophistication, I believe they have still yet to master. As do we all.

In this guide, I'll split out two classic trips. Starting from Madrid, and then going north to Barcelona or South to Sevilla. Both are absolutely worthwhile.

EMPEZAR EN MADRID

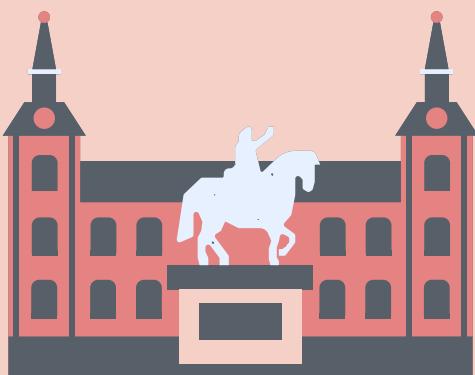
I love a well-designed city. Madrid is like the grandfather of cities – wide, imposing, yet deeply charming. The plazas are grand, the architecture is ornate, and even the street signs are crafted from artisanal tiles.

On my most recent trip (2024) I stayed between the neighborhoods of Lavapiés and Barrio de La Latina. Apparently 'latinear,' or to head out for a midday stroll, derives its name from this cute neighborhood. If you care to be exposed to the underground counter-cultural scene, stay in Malasaña. Though I found staying in La Latina while going here at night was a great balance.

DAY ONE

We've got two days to kill in Madrid. One note: Madrid is *not* a touristy city, but it is very livable and a great place to adjust to the Spanish lifestyle.

First things first – get a pastry and café con leche at a bakery. Since you're probably jet-lagged, it's best to start off with a day in the park. Head to Parque Retiro, either by walking or taking Madrid's fantabulous public transportation, and laze. Read a book while you wait for your timed entry to Museo del Prado. I don't care if you're not into art – one jaunt through the basement exhibit of Goya's Black Paintings will leave you simultaneously haunted and delighted.



After a day at the park, you need some tapitas. Enter, 100 Montaditos. One hundred menu items, each one 1-3 euros. While you're not getting premium quality, you are getting a solid deal at a beloved Spanish institution.

Go back to your accommodations to relax before setting out for a yummy, historic dinner that will knock your ass out. I'm referring to Botín, the world's official oldest continuously operating restaurant. Take that, The Bear.

DAY TWO

Now that we've gotten a good night sleep, it's time to get your steps in. A walking tour around Madrid will help you accomplish this task. There are many free tours that cover heavy-hitters like the Royal Palace, Teatro Real, Plaza Mayor, and my personal favorite, [Mercado de San Miguel](#). There is jamón hanging off every Michelin-starred stall. It's a must.

Take the afternoon off – after all, we must abide by the Spanish law of siesta. No, for real, everything will close between 2-5pm. And so should your eyes.

When you awaken, head to Malasaña, or as I call it, the Brooklyn of Madrid. I made this trash joke a few times throughout my night there, only to stumble upon a bar actually named "[Madklyn](#)." Anyway, start with a good restaurant ([GATO](#), or [La Fragua de Sebín](#)) before heading to cooler bars like [La Vía Láctea](#). Bum a cigarette from a stranger, then head home.

TRAIN

MADRID → BARCELONA
2h52m through [Iryo](#)



NORTH TO BARCELONA

I am one of those hoity-toities that 'studied abroad in BarTHElona,' but only for a month in 2018 (just after the Catalan separatist movement failed). I chose Barcelona because, at the ripe age of 19, I believed it had everything – beaches, mountains, history, unique architecture, and crazy clubbing. However, its well-rounded hype has created a problem for itself, dubbed as *parquetematización*, or the theme-parkification of the city. In this section, I'll highlight the activities I feel are worth the hype. No short-term rentals – stick to hotels or hostels in or near *l'Eixample*.



BEST ACTIVITIES

There truly is an endless array of activities to experience in Barcelona, but I have a few hot takes. Namely, [Park Güell](#) is a tourist trap. So is [La Rambla](#). But I understand doing anything once. Here's what I think is truly worth it.

To See:

[La Sagrada Família](#): Hands-down the most interesting architecture (and architect) in the world, and I'm sure most would agree. Must see.

[Montjuic](#): Catch a cab to the top and walk through the castle, the Olympic Park, the Miró museum, and finally, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya.

[Barceloneta Beach](#): I'm a sucker for a beach, and this one is no slouch. Enjoy Mediterranean water and lots of interesting human behavior.

[Gothic Quarter](#): A great way to see this area is with a [walking tour](#), but also very fun to simply meander. Enjoy the flea market on Thursdays.



To Eat & Drink:

[Bar Cañete](#): Well-regarded tapas place that I spent a pretty penny at. Favorites were the razor clams and unbelievable squid sandwich.

[Can Paixano](#): A friend gave me this rec – a traditional hole-in-the-wall bar serving Cava, Spain's take on champagne.

DAY TRIPS

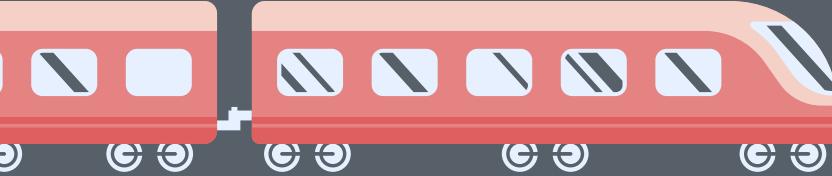
To add some spice to your Catalonian vacay, head to the following places for a spectacular day trip:

Tarragona (30m by train)

Tarragona gives *historic chic*, with spectacular Roman ruins plus sparkling Mediterranean sunsets and vibes. I need to go back, as I was horrifically hungover on my visit (curse you, Razzmatazz).

Montserrat (1h 5m by train)

Montserrat features the coolest limestone rock formations (aptly named ‘serrated mountain’). Ride the funicular, visit the monastery, see the first Black Madonna, and don’t crash a wedding.



TRAIN

MADRID → SEVILLA
2h41m through [Iryo](#)

SOUTH TO SEVILLA

The path of the Moors is not for the faint of heart. Through Toledo, Córdoba, Málaga, Granada, and Sevilla, one must journey to gain an understanding of the conquering Muslim faction that ruled Spain for centuries. You could do all that, or you could just take a train to Sevilla and do a couple of day trips. Unfortunately I did not plan the trips I’ve done to Sevilla, so my advice is sparse. But if I could give you just a little, it would be to NOT pick the oranges from the trees and eat them. They are sour bastards; quite unforgiving. Oh, and be careful during Three Kings’ Day – they throw the candy quite viciously.

WHERE TO STAY

I stayed in an adorable [Airbnb](#) next to the Church of El Salvador, and I cannot recommend the location more. However, given the current legality of Airbnbs in Spain at the moment, the owners are sticklers for the rules, and it might give you more peace of mind to stay at a hotel. If you want true luxe, try Hotel Alfonso XIII.

BEST ACTIVITIES

Las Setas: I was mindblown by this fun sculptural attraction in the heart of Sevilla’s Old Town. The name means ‘the mushrooms’ and rings true. There’s a light show at night!

Flamenco: We went to this flamenco show right under Las Setas. I’m a novice, so not sure if it was top-tier, but to me, they cooked. Fire flames. No notes.

El Parque de María Luisa: Really lovely area for a photoshoot or horse-drawn carriage ride.

Plaza de Toros de Sevilla: The largest and most important arena for bullfighting in Spain. Bullfights still happen there, but it’s also a year-round museum.

Notice, I left out the Real Alcázar, derived from the Arabic ‘al-qasr.’ That’s because when we went, everyone told us to visit the better one – the Alhambra in Granada. I remember being more impressed with La Mezquita (‘the mosque’) in Córdoba as a 12-year old, but to each their own. Each city can be a day trip from Sevilla, and worth it if you’re interested in Moorish history and architecture. I’ve also heard great things about Cádiz.

