TRAVEL

How to enjoy Madrid like a local during the deep sizzle of summer

The thermometer may hit the triple digits, but the Spanish capital retains its cool.

By Christopher Muther Globe Staff, Updated July 3, 2025, 8:41 a.m.



In the heat of a Madrid summer, the day begins when the sun sets. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

MADRID — It's after 1 a.m. and I'm in a very long line for gelato.

Usually, this would aggravate me. Who stands in a gelato line at 1 a.m.? But on this particular Friday night, I'm enjoying the fact that after-hours dessert is even an option. Although it's late (technically, Saturday morning for you sticklers), the night is far from over. Dinner started at 11 p.m. and stretched leisurely until 12:30. The gelato is simply the next step in an evening that will go on for another hour. Maybe two. I ordered a glistening scoop of pistachio and headed out into the night.

You'll think I have bats in my belfry for even saying this, but after spending a few days here, I've concluded that Madrid is an ideal place to visit during the hottest days of summer. When the temperature hits the triple digits daily, you adapt your schedule around the weather. The Spaniards have it down to a science, and if you come to Madrid in the summer, you can easily do the same.

The Madrid summer schedule is glorious; if you do it right, it feels like an actual vacation.

Hear me out: Madrid has a lot going for it. The common refrain among travelers is that Madrid lacks the panache of Barcelona. True, Madrid does not have an abundance of Antoni Gaudí architecture, beaches, or Las Ramblas. Want to know what else it lacks? Locals who spray visitors with squirt guns and chant, "Tourist, go home!" Madrid is welcoming to travelers.



The mural "Isabelita," by artist Fin DAC, adorns the side of the Mercado de Antón Martín. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

But don't waste your time comparing the cities. Madrid has a unique flavor. There are incredible museums, restaurants, shops, and a 350-acre park where you can escape under the trees and relax. JetBlue has a new non-stop flight between Boston and Madrid, which was my excuse for exploring the city. The seasonal route will run through Oct. 25.

Before I arrived, I was fretting over the forecast. It called for sunny weather with a daily high temperature of 95 to 100 degrees. I looked at my itinerary, the forecast, and my itinerary again. I then Googled "What are the signs of heat stroke?"

Heat or no, I was determined to conquer Madrid. On my first night, I dressed up for dinner and set out for a charming restaurant called Bipolar. The name pays homage to individuals such as Edgar Allan Poe, Virginia Woolf, Cary Grant, and Vincent van Gogh,

all of whom had had bipolar disorder. It's a gimmicky concept, but I was drawn to the menu and had my eye on the mini pork belly ciabatta.

The evening thunderstorms subsided, and I was ready for dinner. Unfortunately for me and my new pants, the sidewalks were still wet and slick. In my rush to get to dinner, I slipped and fell in a spectacularly unflattering fashion. Bam! Think giraffe on ice skates. While sitting on the muddy sidewalk, I took inventory. I was sore, my hand was scraped up, but nothing felt broken.

Two kind individuals sitting in a bar across the street witnessed my fall (ugh) and ran over to see if I was OK. They helped me to my feet and asked if I needed to go to the hospital. I assumed they were there to steal my phone or wallet. I brushed myself off as best I could, told them I was fine, and escaped to Bipolar for my mini pork belly ciabatta, which I recommend, along with the steak tartar and the lemon pie.

Don't judge. The stress of the fall made me hungry.

While walking back to my hotel, I heard familiar voices. I realized I was in front of the open-air bar where the kindly potential thieves had watched me fall.

"¿Estás bien?" one of them asked as she looked over my muddy pants.

These two caring, non-theiving locals, Sofia and Miguel, were not trying to fleece me; they were generally concerned for my well-being. While I was eating at Bipolar, they were having pre-dinner cocktails and speculating on my condition. I assured them I was OK. They bought me a glass of wine, the best medicine for whatever may be wrong. They were fascinated that I was writing a story about Madrid, and offered to share their knowledge.

The muddy, embarrassing fall was one of the best things that could have happened. Miguel and Sofia wanted to play tour guides, and I was happy to absorb their suggestions. Remember, if you fall in Spain and someone comes over to help, don't dismiss them as a thief.

King Carlos III and his horse are memorialized in the Plaza de la Puerta in Madrid. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

Some lessons I learned from my new Spanish friends: Don't start your day early in Madrid. This is not a culture of early risers. This city is where people have dinner at 10 or 11 p.m. and perhaps a cup of espresso to finish the night. They also warned me that the hottest part of the day here is not midday, it's usually around 6 p.m. During the summer, the sun rises about 7 a.m. and sets at 10 p.m. These may seem like minor details, but they're essential when planning activities and meals.

Armed with this information and many bruises from my fall, I constructed a perfect schedule. I left mornings open for leisurely exploring neighborhoods on foot. By midday, when the temperatures began to rise, I sought shelter by spending time in museums or shops. I followed that with a late lunch and then a siesta at my hotel for a few hours. In the early evening, I'd head out again — also, I took many showers.

I picked a centrally located hotel and double-checked that it had AC. My hotel, Hotel NH Collection Madrid Suecia was under $200 a night and had the bonus of a rooftop bar with beautiful city views, plus a dark and cool speakeasy where I could escape when I felt I was roasting on the sidewalk. Many people carry around folding paper fans, which I thought were only used by drag queens and dramatic flamenco dancers. It turns out they're rather effective.

Once I had the routine, the rest was easy. I knew I needed to visit the Prado Museum — and also knew it would be the busiest of the museums. For fans of Goya, it's essential, but the museum is massive, so there's a bit of everything. Before I arrived, I mapped out the galleries and works I wanted to see. I recommend doing this; otherwise, you'll be walking in circles. While the crowds went for Goya, I made a beeline for one of my favorite

paintings, Hieronymus Bosch's disturbing and fantastic "The Garden of Earthly Delights," which was painted around 1500.

Art lovers beat the heat in the wonderfully air-conditioned Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

The Prado is part of Madrid's so-called Golden Triangle of Art. The other two sides of the triangle are the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and the Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum. They are within walking distance of each other, but I don't recommend attempting them all in a single day. I tackled one museum a day to absorb the art rather than sprint by it.

Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía is the city's modern art museum with a 20th-century collection of works by prominent Spanish artists such as Dali, Picasso, and Miro. Crowds gathered in front of Picasso's 1937 painting "Guernica," which is easily the most recognizable painting here. I thought the massive Miro sculpture in the courtyard was equally impressive. Of the three museums, my favorite was the Thyssen-Bornemisza, which spans all decades and styles and fills the gaps left in the other collections.

If you have more days and time for museum exploration, try the Banksy Museum, the Museum of Romanticism, or the Museum of Fashion. The hot weather was an ideal excuse to check out some of the city's less-trafficked museums. I started most days with a tortilla española at Pez Torilla. Instead of coffee, I paired it with wine, otherwise known as the breakfast beverage of champions.

Another favorite post-breakfast activity was shopping. Honestly, it's one of my favorite activities at any time of the day. This will sound a bit predictable, but I recommend checking out the department store El Corte Inglés. The flagship store has a market

devoted to Spanish foods, plus multiple restaurants. For those who enjoy a bit of retail kitsch (my hand is in the air), Le Integral in the Letras neighborhood has everything from Grace Jones pillows to vintage vinyl. This neighborhood is good for independent shops, small restaurants, and taverns.

Le Integral, a shop in Madrid's Barrio de las Letras, sells everything from records to pillows featuring singer Grace Jones. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

If you're looking for souvenirs, skip the tourist haunts and pick up a T-shirt at Dear Tee, a shop that sells tees with local designs from the Iberian Peninsula. The most crucial advice that Miguel and Sofia gave me was to skip the city's main shopping thoroughfare, Gran Via, which is like a hellish combination of Times Square and the Champs-Élysées. But if you enjoy crowds and chain stores, don't let me stop you from jumping in.

The band Air performs as part of the Noches del Botánico concert series in Madrid's Real Jardín Botánico Alfonso XIII. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

The city starts waking up once the sun sinks in the evening sky. One of my favorite bands happened to be performing in Madrid while I was there. Fortunately, for me, they were at Noches del Botánico, a series of evening outdoor shows held at the Alfonso XIII Royal Botanical Garden. But this was far more than a concert. The grounds surrounding the venue had food trucks, multiple bars, and a variety of sitting areas. I was there to see a band called Air, and their music was as magical at the venue.

Another of my favorite evening escapes was the 325-acre Retiro Park. People called it Madrid's version of Central Park, but I found Retiro to be much more of an escape. You can hide in a shady nook if you want to avoid other people. Or, if you want to be a part of the action, rent a boat at the park's man-made lake. Normally, I would have skipped the Temple of Debod, a second century B.C. Egytian Temple that was gifted to Madrid and reconstructed here in 1972. However, I was told this was the best place to watch the sunset. Every night, locals and tourists congregate here and at the nearby park as the sky goes orange, pink, and then disappears. It's worth witnessing.

Spain's capital may not have a proper beach, but the large, man-made lake in Retiro Park is a popular spot to sunbathe or rent a boat. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

Before dinner each night, I'd meet Miguel and Sofia to talk about the places where I'd been (inevitably, they told me I missed about a dozen places that I should have seen), and then we'd talk about the plan for the night. These daily briefings were held at both small taverns and sprawling rooftop bars. On the last night of my trip, we met at the top of the Círculo de Bellas Artes de Madrid, my favorite of all the rooftop bars.

"You can't leave tomorrow," Sofia told me when I reminded her that my flight was the next day. "You've barely scratched the surface."

The roof deck at Círculo de Bellas Artes in Madrid is filled on a warm June night. CHRISTOPHER MUTHER/GLOBE STAFF

She was right. I had barely scratched the surface. But a good vacation should always leave you wanting more. And I left wanting to experience more of Madrid. Next time, hopefully, I'll experience it without slipping and falling on a muddy sidewalk.

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