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Spain: A trip of marvels and morsels

By Kim Foley MacKinnon



Kim Foley MacKinnon

A visit to Spain isn't complete without sampling cava, the country's sparkling wine.

When you've only got one week to spend in a country you've never visited before – with no assurances you'll be back any time soon – you have to make some hard choices. Which cities should you visit? What sights can you not afford to miss? How much of your time should be scheduled and how much should be left open to wander, taking in the scene and culture?

When I knew I had a week in Spain, Madrid and Barcelona were at the top of my list. To make the most of my time, I got tickets in advance to anything I knew would have long waits, like the Museo del Prado, before I even left home. I also planned to do what I always do in most new cities: get a ticket for the hop-on, hop-off bus, one of the easiest and fastest ways to learn about a place.

MADRID

Madrid's public transit system is a breeze to use. For anyone visiting for a few days, the Madrid Tourist Ticket is the way to go. You can order and customize the card – which includes unlimited rides on the metro, bus system and light rail – at home and pick it up at the airport. The Madrid

Card, similar to CityPass in the States, gives priority access to dozens of museums and attractions as well as other discounts. The card can be pre-ordered at home and picked up at the first attraction you visit. Skipping to the front of the line that wrapped around the Prado made me happy to have it.

Once inside, like everyone else, I made a beeline to see the iconic "Las Meninas" by Diego Velazquez. You could certainly spend a day or two – or more – exploring the riches of the world-class museum, but when time is at a premium, the other must-sees include the works of Francisco de Goya and Hieronymus Bosch.

The capital city is really best explored on foot, wandering from plaza to plaza. The main hub is Plaza Mayor, where dozens of restaurants and shops draw crowds of people who snack and drink at one place and move on to the next.

But it's best not to limit yourself to just that one area. It's totally worth going through archways and alleys to find hidden gems and less touristy spots. One of my favorite memories was stumbling upon Mercado de San Miguel, where I stayed for a couple of hours, sampling wine, cheese and oysters from local vendors. As I wandered around the food market, I chatted with both locals and travelers from around the world who were doing the same.

I never sat down for a full meal in Madrid and I'm not sure anyone there does. Tapas – small plates of hot and cold appetizers – are a way of life. I spent a fantastic night with a fellow traveler just eating our way through Plaza de Santa Ana, another popular neighborhood jam-packed with bars and cafes. We usually asked the bartender/server what the house specialty was, ate, and moved on. Like a lot of visitors and locals, we ended the night with hot chocolate and churros (fried pastry sticks similar to doughnuts) at the famous Chocolateria San Gines.

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BARCELONA

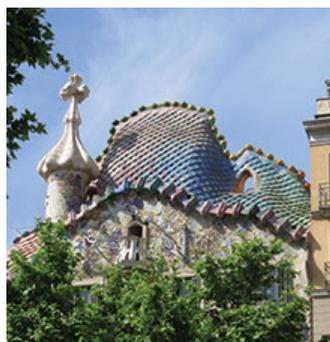
After taking the three-hour high-speed train from Madrid to Barcelona – a relaxing and scenic trip – the first stop was to check out the world-renowned La Rambla. The outdoor shopping promenade is almost always a sea of people.

After checking it out and exploring elsewhere, I found I much preferred the less-crowded adjacent neighborhoods. In the end, the Gothic Quarter, the oldest neighborhood in this very old city, was my favorite. I found myself returning again and again to explore its charms.

Barcelona also has its must-see attractions, namely the somewhat eccentric works of the architect Antoni Gaudi. His unfinished masterpiece, the Sagrada Familia Basilica, and the Casa Batllo, a home he redesigned in the early 1900s, should be on every visitor's list. They are both places you should pre-order tickets, with a fast-pass option if you can, because lines can be long and sometimes people waiting can't get in.

Gaudi's works can be hard to describe. Visiting Casa Batllo, built between 1904 and 1906 in the heart of the city, is like walking into a house that a Dr. Seuss character might inhabit. The building's facade is a tiled mosaic of glass and ceramic, with the rooftop resembling the spine of a dragon. Inside the house, which is a delight to explore, there's hardly a straight line to be found. Sagrada Familia Basilica, which Gaudi began working on in 1883 and didn't live to see even halfway finished, is still a work in progress. It's impossible to walk in and not be astonished at the scope and artistry.

Most visitors to Spain will at least taste a glass of cava, the sparkling wine of the region. To learn more about it, a visit to Codorniu Winery is a perfect daytrip from Barcelona (the winery offers bus service). A tour includes descending into the underground cellars, a history of cava, and – of course – samples. It's the perfect way to toast the end of a visit to Spain, with a promise to return.



Architectural wonders in Barcelona include the Casa Batllo.

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