



*City life*

# MADRID

*From dancing 'til dawn at megacclubs to catching a film at a revamped cinema, the only way to really discover the Spanish capital is to stay up late*

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“**M**uchas gracias,” cries the singer. “We’re just going to take a break. Back in 15!” There are jeers of disappointment from the crowd, who have been dancing to her jazzy disco set all evening. Jokingly, she shields herself, and darts to the bar, where a freshly poured beer has her name on it. Waiters in bow ties, meanwhile, parade desserts to dolled-up diners, the room loud with conversation. The audience disperses; those remaining tap impatient feet to a playlist that fills the interlude. It’s 1am; most of this lot have work tomorrow. But at the door, people are still turning up.

“You should come on Saturday,” says waiter Constantino as he shows me to a table on the rooftop terrace for a post-dinner tippie. “It’s something else.”

Couples and groups chatter and clink glasses on low-slung loungers, a gentle breeze ruffles hair and skirts. Across the rooftops, Madrid’s Royal Palace is lit up like a colossal white wedding cake.

There’s a civilised, simmering buzz about the Ginkgo Sky Bar tonight, but if Constantino’s words are anything to go by, it’ll almost certainly boil over into full-blown excess on Saturday.

The love of a late night in this nation is hardly unknown, but the Spanish capital lives for it. Everything, from the streets to the rooftops, sparkles into life when the sun goes down; the mood lifts, the temperature dips, and only then can Madrid really be itself — whether it’s picking at late-night plates of patatas bravas or dancing until the lights come on. Daytime in this city almost feels like an inconvenience; everyone is waiting for night to fall.

“There’s somewhere to go, whenever you want,” says Luis de Paz. A native Madrilenian, he heads up Bespoke Travel Spain, which specialises in personalised itineraries in the country. “You could easily stay out from 6pm to 6am and not have to stop.” We’re walking through the nightlife hotspot of Malasaña, where customers spill from bars, and others linger over glasses of Rioja on tables outside. Across the street, twentysomethings fold giant pizza slices into their mouths as an elderly couple amble home, discussing the play they’ve just seen.

“What I love about Madrid is the people. It’s so open-minded. Whether you’re from here, elsewhere in Spain or another country, everyone’s welcome. You don’t get that atmosphere in every city.”

It’s midnight when we arrive at El Junco, a music venue on Calle de Hortaleza, where a handful of punters stand outside, blowing smoke from vapes and cigarettes into the night air. “I admit I’ve never been here this early,” says Luis with a laugh. “I usually end up here at around 3am.”

Alt-rock band The Rebels have just finished their set and are now busy signing T-shirts, CDs and body parts out back. The main room has morphed into a nightclub, and people are quickly filling the floor. “We come here because it’s chilled!” Daniel tells me (loudly) over the music. He’s the guitarist in a local band, a regular at El Junco. “You don’t have to be or do anything special. We just drink, dance and listen to the music.”

He’s right; there are no frills to this place; looking around, I realise it’s little more than a room with a small stage and big speakers. But El Junco is packed, hips swaying and heads banging to a playlist that lurches from Meatloaf remixes to the Gipsy Kings, via obscure Spanish pop songs that, especially after half a dozen bottles of Madrid’s Mahou beer, nobody really knows the words to.

### SCREENS, QUEENS & COCOA BEANS

If Europe were a party, Madrid would be the guest bulldozing through the door four hours late, armed with beers and a boom box. It’d hog the dance floor, talk to everybody, and sulk when it was time to go home. Other cities require codes, conduct and careful planning to make the most of the night. Madrid, by comparison, simply doesn’t care. It’s laid-back, largely unpretentious and merely wants to have a good time — and wants you to, too. And when the day is done and the last sunbeams stream through the arches of the Puerta de Alcalá, the metamorphosis from high-brow cultural capital to party town begins.

“We wanted to be somewhere people grab a beer and chat before going out,” says Sara Morillo. She’s walking me around Sala Equis, a cinema on the edge of the La Latina neighbourhood. This was the last of Madrid’s adult picturehouses until it closed its 2015, but it’s found new life as a retro-chic cinema. “When we opened, a lot of people called what we did gentrification. But for me, it was a question of reinventing the past.”

**PREVIOUS PAGE:** Cocktails and neon at Salmón Gurú  
**FROM LEFT:** Gin and tonic, a staple of the Spanish bar scene; dusk falls over Plaza de Juan Pujol, Malasaña; cinemagoers at Sala Equis







FROM LEFT: Early evening at Viva Madrid; barman Diego Cabrera



### Q&A: Juan Manuel del Rey, director, Corral de la Morería flamenco theatre

#### WHAT MAKES MADRID'S NIGHTLIFE UNIQUE?

The people. The *madrileños* love their city, and they love to go out at night. The way of life here revolves around being out in the streets and sharing the moment with everyone else, whether that's with other locals or those who have come from elsewhere. There's a real happiness and openness about the people here.

#### WHAT DO YOU LIKE ABOUT GOING OUT IN MADRID?

The small side streets where you'll find bar after bar after bar. Everyone's out having a good time, and it creates a unique atmosphere that's hard to find in other world capitals. Calling in to various places in just one night really allows you to discover the personality of Madrid, its history and its people.

#### WHERE DO YOU LIKE TO GO OUT?

Madrid's one of the world's greatest gastronomic capitals, so when I go out, it's to have a good time with my friends. We all love to enjoy the city's food scene. I like going from one bar to the next — a glass of wine here, another there — at places like La Venencia or Taberna Palo Cortado before finishing up with some of the best flamenco in the world at Corral de la Morería. [corraldelamoreria.com](http://corraldelamoreria.com)

Those in the know are here early, nursing beers and tacos from the bar as a silent film plays on the big screen. It's a trendy spot: exposed walls, trailing ivy and scarlet neon, with lightboxes and raunchy vintage posters. "It's been popular with the locals," she says gladly. "And for a few euros you can catch a film, too. Not bad, eh?"

But Sara has to dash; she's going out tonight and has some errands to run beforehand. After all, the daytime can be an inconvenience in this town.

Sara is organised, but for many, nights here generally drift from one place to the next with no real plan. In Madrid, it's far more about the what — the talking, dancing, drinking — rather than the when, where or why. But Chueca, the beating heart of the city's nightlife scene, is one of the wheres. It's long been the city's gay district, but it's a broad church these days. Everyone's out tonight: clubbers, bar-hoppers, families, hen parties, stag parties, drag queens, dog walkers, young couples stealing kisses on street corners, and mystified tourists trying to take it all in. And just across busy Gran

Vía, in the Las Letras district, is one bar that embodies that eclectic Madrid spirit.

"We're a *'taberna inusual'*," says Diego Cabrera, barman and owner of Viva Madrid. "An unconventional taberna. We like to do things differently."

Diego, with his salt-and-pepper beard and thick Argentine accent, pours me a media combinación: it's sweet and smoky with vermouth, and streaked with bitters. It's one of the classic tipples on a menu that strays from the norms of old Spanish tabernas, which traditionally deal in wine and beer. However, the original charm — mirrors, painted tiles and dark wood panelling that date to 1856 — has remained, and its clientele is as varied as ever. "Viva Madrid has always been a reflection of Madrid itself," he explains. "Royalty, film directors, matadors, hookers — everyone came here. Post-Franco, this was where people could come and be themselves. And that's something we want to keep today, too."

But just around the corner is Salmón Gurú, another of Diego's bars, that's as far from a traditional taberna as you can get.



“Nobody goes to bed in Madrid until they have killed the night” // Ernest Hemingway

FROM LEFT: Service at Chocolatería San Ginés; churros and chocolate at Chocolatería San Ginés; Bodega de la Ardosa

Unassuming on the outside, inside is a trippy riot of neon pop art, animal prints and plush upholstered chairs, with rooms themed around Berlin, New York and China. “Bartenders are pharmacists,” Diego says while around him, staff serve frothing, steaming, flowery drinks in all kinds of bizarre receptacles. “We’re prescribing things to people, things that take time to develop and perfect. We shouldn’t just be churning out drink after drink.” From the list of ‘prescriptions’, I’m served a Saint-Léger: a delicious concoction of lemongrass, gin, cognac, lemon and coconut, crowned with a honey-slicked plantain crisp and wasabi peas. It puts the piña colada to claggy, saccharine shame. Until bars like Salmón Gurú, Madrid had a fairly demure cocktail scene; drinkers relied on classic old venues like Museo Chicote, a favourite with the likes of Ernest Hemingway and Grace Kelly. As for what to drink, the simple gin and tonic was the go-to. It’s long been a staple of the Spanish bar and still today, they’re the mark of a good bartender, I’m told by one local: a big, ice-filled glass of deftly paired gin, garnish and tonic that’s bigger, bolder and colder than what you or I might expect on a summer afternoon.

While there’s no doubt he can make a killer G&T, it’s Diego’s more inventive concoctions that have helped put Madrid onto the mixology map. However, the city wasn’t his first home after moving to Spain. “I used to tend bars in Barcelona before moving here,” he says. I wonder if he prefers coastal or capital city. “Oh, I couldn’t choose,” he laughs. “But I do love Madrid.” Whatever libation guides you through a night here, all roads lead to one place. Just off busy Puerta del Sol is Chocolatería San Ginés, an all-night sanctuary for the tired and hungry since 1894. Inside, photos of famous patrons deck the green-and-white walls as teacups are lined up along the bar like soldiers, ready to be filled with melted chocolate and whisked off with a plate of churros. “*Hombre*, we see all kinds of people in here,” a waitress tells me. “Tourists in the day, *madrileños* [Madrilenians] at night. When you’re not ready to go home, then you come here for churros.” Almost on cue, the waitress rushes to greet a friend who’s wandered in; the latter’s face is streaked with tears. After hugs and kisses, she’s ushered to a table and served a mound of churros and a mug of chocolate. And just like that, her world is a better place.

INSIDER TIPS

Vermouth is the city’s tippie of choice. It’s served nearly everywhere, but rustic Stop Madrid, in Malasaña, and Taberna de Ángel Sierra in Chueca are true local institutions well worth seeking out. [stopmadrid.es](#) [tabernadeangelsierra.es](#)

Don’t forget to switch to local time to make the most of the night. As a rule of thumb, locals generally don’t head out to eat until 10pm, finishing up around midnight. From there, it’s drinks until around 2.30am, after which many make their way to the clubs, which largely close at 6am.

If clubbing’s your thing, check out Madrid Lux, where you’ll find night-by-night event listings and details of how to book onto VIP guest lists. [madridlux.com/en](#)



Madrid's top 8 AFTER-DARK SPOTS

TEATRO KAPITAL FOR ALL-NIGHTERS

Welcome to Madrid’s high temple of hedonism: a seven-floor megaclub that’s the bass-pumping, strobe-lit heart of the city’s club scene. Each floor blasts out a different genre of music, from R&B and salsa to house and the latest hits, with a more chilled-out vibe on the sixth floor. There’s a packed calendar of events and guest DJs, too, all of which keep partygoers on their feet ‘til dawn. [teatrokapital.com](#)

BODEGA DE LA ARDOSA FOR A STEP BACK IN TIME

Old, elaborate and lit with turquoise neon lettering, the timeworn facade of this bar alone is enough to whisk you away to the Madrid of yore. Since 1892, La Ardosa has been serving Malasaña’s revellers and reprobates in a wood-panelled bar that’s so full of memorabilia, bottles, hand-written chalkboards and sepia photographs that you’ll hardly know where to look. Be prepared to get cosy — the bar heaves with people nearly every night. [laardosa.es](#)

LA ESCALERA DE JACOB FOR LATE-NIGHT LAUGHS

Located in the scruffy, multicultural barrio of Lavapiés, this modest little theatre stages local performing arts at its best. A fixture on the cultural scene for a decade, it has a diverse calendar of shows, including plays, stand-up, improv, magic and even family-friendly performances. *¿No hablas español?* There are also shows in English each month — check the website for dates. [laescaleradejacob.es](#)

CÍRCULO DE LAS BELLAS ARTES FOR DRINKS WITH A VIEW

There’s a reason people queue for a tippie at this rooftop terrace — the vistas here are some of the best in town. Set 180ft above Calle de Alcalá with Madrid’s grand belle epoque skyline as a backdrop, there are few finer places to sip a cocktail at sundown. If you can’t face the queue (or the selfie set), try the nearby Terraza de Cibeles, which has great views of the Cibeles Fountain and Calle de Alcalá bustling below. [palaciodecibeles.com](#) [circulobellasartes.com/azotea](#)







Sunset over the boating lake  
at Parque del Buen Retiro

## CANDELA

### FOR FIRST-CLASS FLAMENCO

Andalucía may claim the origins of flamenco, but Madrid is where you'll find many of the country's best *tablaos* (flamenco venues). This spot, hidden away in Lavapiés, could be straight out of a Sevillian backstreet with its tiles and whitewashed walls, and the mesmerising marriage of dance, song and guitar has drawn some of Spain's biggest names in flamenco as both performers and spectators. Open until 6am on weekends, it can get pretty cramped in this underground bar, but this is flamenco at its sweaty, soul-stirring best. [flamencocandela.com](http://flamencocandela.com)

## LA LATINA

### FOR TAPAS

While tourists flood the Mercado de San Miguel food hall, the barrio of La Latina is refreshingly low-key. Madrilenians love to come here, drifting along Calle de la Cava Baja, calling for tapas and *cañas* (small beers) along the way. The street is full of bars, where the real joy is drifting from one to the next, allowing the night to guide you. Decide for yourself as to which one does the best tortilla, but if you're spoilt for choice, Taberna La Concha, La Perejila and nearby Cafe Pavón are good places to start.

## PARQUE DEL BUEN RETIRO

### FOR A STROLL AT SUNSET

If you've already discovered the charms of Madrid's green heart in the day, don't forget to come by again at dusk, as it's open until late throughout the year (midnight in summer, 10pm in winter). Watch the sun set over the boating lake before taking a stroll — even at this hour, you'll still find the city out in force: families in the playgrounds, lovebirds on a moonlit walk and commuters taking a leafy detour home. In true Madrid style, there's even a restaurant-cum-club here — Florida Retiro — for a real party in the park. [floridaretiro.com](http://floridaretiro.com)

## TEATRO DE LA ZARZUELA

### FOR SOMETHING SPANISH

Zarzuela — Spain's unique art of theatre, dance and music combined — has its spiritual home in Madrid. Completed in 1856, this theatre was the first in the country devoted to the performance art and is rather grand, but zarzuela itself is a light-hearted mix of opera and musical theatre, with a dash of pantomime that pokes fun at everyday life. The slightly bonkers storylines might be tricky to follow, but the atmosphere is electric and performances here are top-notch. [teatrodelazarzuela.mcu.es](http://teatrodelazarzuela.mcu.es) 🇪🇸

## ESSENTIALS



### Getting there & around

Various airlines fly direct to Madrid including British Airways from Heathrow, Gatwick and Dublin; Iberia from Heathrow, Gatwick and Birmingham; EasyJet from Gatwick, Luton, Bristol, Edinburgh and Liverpool; and Ryanair from Stansted, Manchester, Birmingham and Dublin. [ba.com](http://ba.com) [iberia.com](http://iberia.com) [easyjet.com](http://easyjet.com) [ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)  
Average flight time: 2h10min.  
The city centre is generally easy to cover on foot, but single fares on the 14-line metro system start at €1.50 (£1.30). [metromadrid.es](http://metromadrid.es)

### When to go

Spring and autumn are ideal at around 20C. Winters are bright but chilly (3-4C). Summers, though, can get extremely hot with highs of 40C-plus.

### Places mentioned

Ginkgo Sky Bar.  
[ginkgoskybarmadrid.com](http://ginkgoskybarmadrid.com)  
El Junco. [eljunco.com](http://eljunco.com)  
Sala Equis. [salaquis.es](http://salaquis.es)  
Viva Madrid.  
[facebook.com/vivamadridtaberna](http://facebook.com/vivamadridtaberna)  
Salmón Gurú. [salmonguru.es](http://salmonguru.es)  
Chocolatería San Ginés.  
[chocolateriasangines.com](http://chocolateriasangines.com)

### More info

Madrid Tourism. [esmadrid.com](http://esmadrid.com)  
Bespoke Travel Spain.  
[bespoketravelspainandportugal.com](http://bespoketravelspainandportugal.com)

### Where to stay

VP Plaza España Design (home to the Ginkgo Sky Bar) has doubles from €196 (£169), room only. [plazaespana-hotel.com](http://plazaespana-hotel.com)  
Located in Chueca, 7 Islas Hotel offers doubles from €120 (£103), room only. [7islashotel.com](http://7islashotel.com)

### How to do it

BRITISH AIRWAYS HOLIDAYS has return economy flights and two nights' accommodation, B&B, from £129 per person. [britishairways.com](http://britishairways.com)