

Madrid Trip Checklist

The 3-day plan locals would write. 39 hand-picked places, 5 things to skip, the timing rules that save 4 hours of queues, and the rooftop bar with no sign.

By Exploriva (Avirel) · 2026 · Free to share, free to print

DAY 1 — Art day

- **Reina Sofía at opening** — 09:55 entry, Picasso's Guernica, room is empty until 10:45. €15.
- **Walk through Retiro** — Crystal Palace, rowboat lake, peacocks. Free.
- **Lunch — Casa Mortero** — Calle Zorrilla. €18 menu del día, 3 courses. Lunch only. Book a week ahead.
- **Prado — Velázquez + Goya wings only** — Skip the rest on a first visit. €15. Free 18:00–20:00 Mon–Sat.
- **Vermouth at El Imparcial (upstairs)** — €4 vermouth, balcony seating, where Madrid creatives drink. Calle del Duque de Alba.

DAY 2 — Neighborhoods

- **Coffee at La Bicicleta (Malasaña)** — Plaza San Ildefonso. Where the creative class hangs out for morning coffee.
- **Self-guided street art walk in Lavapiés** — Calle del Doctor Fourquet has the highest density of murals. Free.
- **Sunset at Templo de Debod** — Real Egyptian temple gifted to Spain in 1968. Free. Bring a beer from the corner store.
- **Tapas crawl on Cava Baja (3 stops, not 8)** — Casa Lucas → Lamiak → El Madroño. ~€30 per person, ~22:00 start.
- **Late flamenco at El Aguardiente or Cardamomo** — Real flamenco, not the tourist 'shows' near Sol. €25–35 entry.

DAY 3 — Slow Sunday

- **El Rastro flea market** — 09:00–15:00 Sunday only. Get there by 10:00. La Latina.
- **Vermouth + sardines at Bar Santurce** — After Rastro. €1 vermouth. No English menu, no concessions to outsiders.
- **Walk Madrid Río to Casa de Campo** — Free. Locals jogging, families picnicking, almost zero tourists.
- **Sunset at Cerro del Tío Pío** — Metro: Buenos Aires. Locals' best skyline view. Free. Bring a beer.

5 things to SKIP (and what to do instead)

✗ **Restaurants on Plaza Mayor** — Every single one charges 2x for worse food. Eat 4 streets in any direction.

✗ **Mercado de San Miguel during the day** — Tourist density of an airport. Visit after 21:00 only — or skip and go to Mercado de Antón Martín.

✗ **Official 'flamenco shows' near Sol** — Tourist theater. Go to El Aguardiente, Cardamomo, or Casa Patas instead.

✗ **Casa Botín for dinner** — World's oldest restaurant since 1725 — but lunch is the move. Dinner is the tourist trap.

✗ **Círculo de Bellas Artes rooftop (paid)** — €6 entry for a mediocre rooftop. Hotel Riu Plaza España's rooftop is free with a drink purchase.

9 more hand-picked Madrid hidden gems

If you have a fourth day, or just want to keep exploring after the 3-day plan:

- Casa González (Lavapiés) — Family-run wine bar pouring since 1931.
- Sala Equis (La Latina) — Old porn cinema turned courtyard bar with film screenings.
- Mercado de Antón Martín — Less famous than San Miguel, but better.
- Cementerio de la Almudena — Massive, peaceful, almost zero tourists. Free.
- Palacio de Cibeles rooftop — Free elevator to the 6th-floor terrace café.
- Mercado de Vallehermoso (Saturdays) — North of the center, no tourists at all.
- Café Comercial — Glorieta de Bilbao. One of Madrid's oldest cafés.
- Chocolatería San Ginés at 3am — Locals after a night out. Skip the daytime tourist queue.
- Casa Botín for lunch — World's oldest restaurant, but lunch only.

Timing rules

Madrid rewards good timing more than good luck. The five rules below save ~4 hours of queues across a 3-day trip.

Place	Best time
Reina Sofía	Be at the entrance 09:55 for the 10:00 opening. Empty until 10:45.
Prado	Free 18:00–20:00 Mon–Sat. Empty between 18:30 and 19:30 on weekdays.
Templo de Debod	Sunset, especially on weekends. Locals lay out picnic blankets.
Cerro del Tío Pío	Sunset, weekends. The hill fills up with locals, not tourists.
El Rastro	Sunday 10:00 sharp. By noon the cruise crowd arrives.

Practical info

Transit

Get the Multi card (€2.50, refillable) at any metro station. 10-trip pack €12.20. Skip Uber/taxi unless after 1am — Madrid metro is fast, clean, safe at every hour. From Atocha or Chamartín stations: AVE high-speed train to Toledo (33 min, ~€14 return) or Segovia (30 min).

Where to stay

Malasaña or La Latina for walkable dinners. **Príncipe de Vergara / Salamanca** for quieter and old-money. **Avoid Sol** — too touristy and loud at night. Check that the bedroom isn't street-facing — Madrid weekends are loud and old buildings have thin windows.

Money + tipping

Cash is increasingly optional — most places take card. Tipping is 5–10% only for sit-down meals. Don't tip 20% American-style — it's not expected and reads as ostentatious. Round up at bars.

Language

English works at most tourist places. The 5 phrases that change how you're treated: *una caña* (a small beer), *una croqueta* (a croquette), *la cuenta* (the bill), *gracias* (thanks), and *el menú del día por favor* (the lunch set menu).

The food rules

If a menu has photos of food, walk past. If a host stands outside trying to bring you in, walk past. If a restaurant is on or within 200m of a major monument, walk past. Real Madrid food is 4 streets from anything photogenic. Lunch (menu del día, 13:30–16:00) is the cheapest way to eat well in Spain.

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