





PERFECT MADRID

At the heart of Madrid lies the city's oldest and most emblematic barrio: Los Austrias. Today, though, it feels more like London's Shoreditch or New York's East Village

Words by TARA STEVENS *Photographs by* JODY LEVITUS



1. Check in with Mario

Wedged between La Latina, Sol and Malasaña you'll find the **Room Mate Mario**: smack bang in the middle of this charming little barrio of cobbled streets, stately plazas and richly decorated townhouses. The hotel itself is more jeans and T-shirts than diamonds and pearls, but then Room Mate's philosophy of providing cheap, modern accommodation all comes down to one thing: location, location, location. The bedrooms are a fair size and tick all the boxes: plump mattresses, cotton sheets, blackout drapes and a power shower. The thinking being that you aren't going to spend your time in Madrid holed up in your room. If you are, it's probably worth upgrading to a deluxe double, though not to a suite. Otherwise you'll find Mario's frills are all in the details – Wi-Fi throughout, a generous breakfast buffet and a civilized noon check-out – freeing up your well-earned euros for what Madrid is all about: living it up. Doubles from \$110.

Calle Campomanes, 4. Tel: +34 915 488 548. www.room-matehotels.com

2. The coffee lover's pal

Turn up at the delightfully eccentric **Delic** café and bar around 11am and you'll find it abuzz with aging members of the *Tertulia de la Paja*, the local book

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club named for the adjacent square, fervently arguing their case. Rather more sedate are the artists and actors winging into the sun, their espressos topped with brandy, hoping for a reprise of the night before. Elena Guereta opened the "thinking man's café" 12 years ago and it has been a firm favorite ever since (Guereta's also credited with introducing Madrid to the mojito, cranberry and almond tarts, and all-day breakfasts). Stuff she's collected on her travels fills the little townhouse: chrome and leather stools from a diner in New York, vintage Danish lanterns, and Parisian metal school chairs. That home-from-home feeling is further enhanced by the boundless enthusiasm of resident Great Dane Pollock, who often sends the furniture flying in his eagerness to greet you. *Costanilla de San Andrés, 14 (Plaza de la Paja). Tel: +34 91 364 5450.*

3. Art for slaughter

Hop aboard the metro at Sol, get off at Legazpi, and behold the **Matadero Madrid**, self-branded not entirely inaccurately as the "new cultural symbol for the city." If nothing else, it rivals the Prado, though that's where the similarity ends. Occupying an extraordinary 150,000 square meters of old slaughterhouse it's well worth a visit for the space alone, which has been reincarnated as an arts center by the local architects Arturo Franco and José Antonio García Roldán. As well as a changing monthly lineup of contemporary photography, art and multimedia exhibitions – the more controversial the better; see the website for up-to-the-minute information in English – Matadero also doubles as a rather splendid workspace and school for Madrid's would-be Picassos. Should you wish to try a little futuristic



weeding, the Avant Garden is open to the public on Sunday afternoons.

Paseo de la Chopera, 14. Tel: 34 915 177 309. Free entry (except for dance or theater performances). www.mataderomadrid.com

4. Edible magic

Over in the city's banking district, just beyond the Plaza de Puerta del Sol, is super-chef Paco Roncero's **La Terraza de Casino**, built atop the city's most conservative clubhouse. Roncero instructed Jaime Hayon (Spain's answer to Philippe Starck) to "go for it" and ended up giving the place a nip, tuck and, yes, a facelift to match the dishes. The stuffiness is gone and in its stead a whimsical room of Alice in Wonderland-style proportions makes a fitting stage for Roncero's mad hatter's tea party. A liquid nitrogen cocktail, tart and sweet, to clear the palate, followed by plate after plate of nursery inspired dishes: deconstructed bread and butter squeezed from a tube; violet potato cigars filled with appropriately smoky romesco; peanut curry crackle; and a lozenge of perfectly cooked grouper floating in a cloud of jamón essence. If you go for lunch such mood-enhancing fare can be yours for \$80 (a snip without wine) and it's a good deal easier than getting a table at El Bulli.

Calle de Alcalá, 15. Tel: +34 915 218 700. www.casinodemadrid.com

5. Foot therapy

Emil Peñera smoothes down his butter-soft leather apron and sells me a pair of ladies two-tone dress shoes quicker than you can say Jimmy Choo. "These shoes will last you a lifetime," he assures me. Peñera has been perfecting his craft as a master shoemaker at **Carmina** for 20 years, but the company has been around a lot longer. Majorcan Matías Pujadas set up shop in 1866, but it was under the guiding hand of his great grandson, José Albadalejo Pujadas, that the company really began to shine thanks to José's obsession with making the world's finest handcrafted shoes. The converts soon followed, Peñera among them. Today, Carmina sells over a million pairs of shoes a year to customers who travel far and wide to slip on its hand-stitched pony leather "cordovans." Retailing at \$550 a pair, these babies only get better with age; softer, shinier and more flexible with ever step.

Gran Vía, 58. Tel: +34 91 548 7906. www.carminashoemaker.com

6. Walk like an Egyptian

Madrid's most bizarre sight is the 2,200-year-old Egyptian **Temple of Debod**. The temple, dedicated to the gods Isis and Amun, was given to Spain by the Egyptian government in 1968 as a token of gratitude for the country's help

in saving the stone temples of Abu Simbel in Nubia during the construction of the Aswan Dam. Debod was transported here piece by piece in 1972 and has stood high on this ridge ever since. Take in the views of Madrid's Royal Palace and the Almudena Cathedral before heading back to the heart of the barrio via the lush chestnut forests of the Campo del Moro, where the Moors laid siege to the city in the 12th century, or through the maze and reflecting pools of the Sabatini Gardens.

Ferraz, 1. Parque del Cuartel de la Montaña. Tel: +34 91 366 74 15. Open Tue-Fri 10am-2pm and 6pm-8pm, Sat-Sun 10am-2pm until September 30. Free entry.

7. Haciendo el vermut

A small glass of vermouth before lunch or dinner is second only to Catholicism when it comes to religious rituals in Madrid. And the place to do it is **El Yantar de Ayer**, the star stall in the recently renovated gastronomic powerhouse that is the Mercado de San Miguel. Here you'll find everyone from local matadors and TV personalities, to international food critics and somebody's granny, all gathered for a shot of the city's favorite pick-me-up. Yantar's vermouth is *de grifo* ("on tap"), a dark, almost black liquid served over



ice and a slice of orange that is faintly herbal, a little fruity, sweet yet bitter – and totally addictive. Partner it with a dish of *banderillas* (*boquerones* – marinated white anchovies – wrapped around an olive) and a handful of sweet baby peppers stuffed with goat’s cheese, and you’ll soon see the attraction. *Mercado de San Miguel. Plaza San Miguel. Tel: +34 607 147 672. www.elyantardeayer.es*

8. Let off steam

Long before the tourists there were the Moors, and with them came a penchant for steam baths and scrub downs that the Spanish had never known. Enter the **Medina Mayrit**, a luxurious hammam that lends an exotic North African flavor to the more conventional urban spa. The candlelit rooms, hand-cut Moroccan tiles and filigreed plasterwork soon transport you to another place and time. But if it’s pure R&R you’re after, spend the afternoon Sultan-style bobbing around in a series of milky hued pools strewn with rose petals, steaming away your cares in the Turkish bath before succumbing to the medina’s special *gommage* (an energetic scrub down with black olive-oil based soap), a massage and a glass of mint tea. *Calle Atocha, 14. Tel: +34 902 333 334. www.medinamayrit.com*

WHERE ELSE BUT THE JUNK CLUB WOULD YOU FIND A PILE OF NUDE BARBIE DOLLS MINDING THE BAR? OUT THERE IT MAY BE, BUT THIS CLANDESTINE RESTAURANT-CUM-BAR-CUM-JE NE SAIS QUOI MAKES OTHER PLACES SEEM JADED IN COMPARISON

9. The pulp bar

The **Junk Club** is a clandestine restaurant-cum-bar-cum-je ne sais quoi whose wacky food and quirky decor is simply too cool to miss. Where else would you find a pile of nude Barbie dolls minding the bar, or a library of books, half open, plastered to a wall? In the same place no doubt that your Calippo ice daquiri comes garnished with Jelly Babies. Where the waiter’s suits and mismatched furniture, not to mention the score, is straight off a 1950s film set, and dinner is likely to be foie gras with chocolate churros, mussels doused in Bloody Mary mix, and a Mars Attack (a Mars bar deep fried in Japanese panko flakes for a satisfying crunch). Out there it may be, but the Junk Club makes anywhere else seem jaded in comparison. *Calle Costanilla de San Andrés, 12. Tel: +34 671 541 822. www.lamusalatina.com*

10. Under the viaduct

Marula Café earned its stripes by eschewing the ear-bleeding Spanish pop and techno favored by local *discotecas* for a more sultry kind of sound. In so doing the over thirties, who it was popularly believed had long since given up the ghost, suddenly started coming out in droves. The play list of acid jazz, R&B and northern soul could have been mixed by Tarantino himself, and the crowd grooves at a similarly low-key pace, squeezed around a long glass bar filled with chunks of turquoise crystal where spiced rum shots dusted with cinnamon can be downed in peace. When it all gets a bit much, the terrace beneath the concrete viaduct that crosses the Cuesta de Bailén is the perfect moonlit chill-out spot. *Calle de Bailén 27. Tel: +34 913 661 596. www.marulacafe.com*