

By MARIA DANIEL

The Spanish capital of Madrid lies bang in the middle of the Iberian Peninsula. This bustling city is home to Spain's luxury designers Cristóbal Balenciaga, Paco Rabanne, Loewe and others, and has more than 40 museums. To top it off, Madrid's nightlife is fabulous.

If you're dying to check it out, but don't want to spend your holiday clutching a traveller's guide or phrase book, you're not alone. Personal tours are a hot trend in Spain's sunny capital. And surprisingly, they are no longer the province of the fabulously rich.

"Holiday time is too precious to waste," says Mar Sardá, Madrid Shopping Tours director.

"You should relax, have fun and do exactly what you want. Taking a personal tour from a local means you get exactly what you want, when you want."

To check it out, I take three personal tours that cover fashion, art and nightlife.

The Golden Shopping Mile

Madrid's Salamanca district is nicknamed The Golden Shopping Mile because it has the city's chicest boutiques packed side by side in just three streets.

Just think: within a five-minute stroll you have Manolo Blahnik, Gucci, Adolfo Domínguez, Caramelo, Cartier, Bvlgari, Versace, Hermès, Dolce & Gabbana, Chanel, Giorgio Armani and Louis Vuitton. Jimmy Choo has a place here too.

My guide is Ana Ruiz de Monasterio from Madrid Shopping Tours. She has a British grandmother so her English is fluent and colloquial. I'm interested in classic Spanish designers so we start with Loewe.

Entering the shop, I discover that Ana is a well-known fashion journalist. She fills me in on who did what during the Madrid Fashion Show and what's coming up in New York, Paris and other fashion hot spots.

From Loewe, we wander downtown to Plaza Mayor to check out handmade mantillas, the silk scarves Spanish ladies wear over high combs in their hair at weddings and other formal occasions. The shop is hidden in a side street and looks non-descript from the outside. But it's a treasure house that attracts customers like the Spanish royals and Britney Spears.

In the space of three hours, we visit half a dozen designers. There is no fuss, no getting lost, no wasting time backtracking, and best of all, no problems translating. Plus I'm left with a load of notes on other must-do shopping scenes such as the Centro Comercial Plaza Norte (North square shopping centre) that lies out of the city and is a great place to find chic but lesser known (read "more affordable") designers.

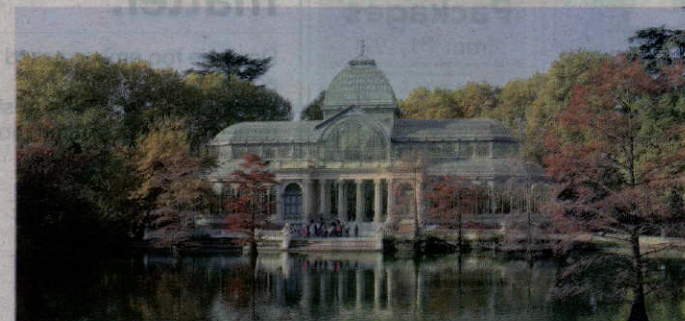
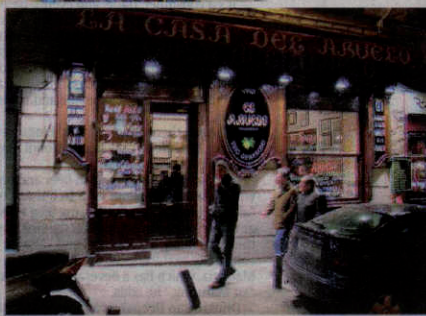
Bullfighting and other odd museums

"Guide books are wonderful but they leave so much out," says Beatriz Bunzl of Arts Exclusive, a company that specialises in cultural programmes.

"We hire art professors and art historians who can give you the sort of details that make art really come alive."

Insider's guide to Madrid

Want to explore Spain but don't want to deal with foreign languages or follow a group tour? Check out personal tours that promise the perfect vacation.



Clockwise from top: A tapa of olive and red wine — traditionally, the snack is included in the price of a drink; a melt-in-your-mouth Spanish ham called Jamón serrano; Casa de Abuelo is often crowded with seafood lovers.

I've seen the classic Prado, Reina Sofía and Thyssen museums already so Beatriz sends me off with guide Maurice Macarrón Larumbe to explore three more unusual museums. We start off at Las Ventas, a famous bull fighting ring, to see the Bull Fighting Museum.

Although it's controversial, bullfighting has been part of Spanish culture practically forever. Stone Age cave paintings of bullfights have been found in Cantabria, Spain's northernmost province. When there is no bullfight, tourists visit Las Ventas to admire the ring and the statues of famous bullfighters and bulls scattered on the pavement around it. As Maurice is a fan, he tells how these fighters shot to fame — many by being killed by their bull.

Inside the museum, we check out the fantastic display of bullfighter capes and suits, all exquisitely embroidered. The collection of bull statues, bronzes and paintings is also excellent. But the gory relics of blood-spattered clothes and mounted bull heads is not my cup of tea.

Next on our list is the Museo Del Tarje, the museum that specialises in the history of costume. We gaze at the clothes of the Infanta María, a little Spanish princess

who died in 1235, and cases of embroidered court dresses, peasant clothes, lingerie and accessories from the ages.

Here, Maurice is invaluable. There isn't much information available on the walls or in the leaflets we pick up at the entrance but Maurice is a fountain of knowledge. And he has a tonne of great anecdotes about Spain's glorious past.

We end up crossing town to the final museum, the Bernabéu stadium, home of the Real Madrid football team. Most unexpectedly, this is lots of fun. We visit the Presidential Balcony, the dressing rooms and then to the field where we look up at the thousands of seats soaring up around us just to see what it's like to be a famous footballer.

Inside, we check out walls of awards, including their nine European cups and two UEFA cups, videos of the team's best moments and racks of memorabilia.

I would never have thought of going to Ventas or Bernabéu but thanks to Maurice, it was a memorable experience.

Tapas in Old Madrid

A day in Madrid is not complete with-

out a tapas tour. A *tapa* is a snack. It can be a few grilled prawns, a meatball in tomato sauce, a fistful of olives or any of a dozen little snacks.

Nigel Hack, the founder of Madrid and Beyond, takes me to Plaza Santa Ana and Calle Huertas in Madrid's oldest quarter.

"What's your favourite food?" is Nigel's first question. "What do you like to drink?" is his second. The basics established, we set off.

You can order tapas and pay for them, but traditionally, the snack is included in the price of a drink. So the trick to a good tapas night is to know what pubs serve what snacks. Nigel quickly proves himself a master.

Chatting about Madrid, travel and other stuff like old friends, we eat olives with Spanish sherry; Jamón Serrano, a local ham that melts in the mouth, along with some rich red Rioja wine; prawns in garlic with a lighter white wine; and then slices of cheese and handmade chicken croquettes to soak up more red wine.

Each little pub has its own atmosphere. The Cervecería Alemana is brightly lit and sparkly. Casa de Abuelo is crowded with seafood lovers, the España Cañi earthy and

friendly, and the Casa Alberto looks like it hasn't changed much since it was founded in 1827.

The joy of the personal tour is that you can express a taste for meatballs and silence, or mussels and classic rock, and Nigel will know where to go. We don't have to look at menus, bills, or worry that we'll get lost in old Madrid's twisty lanes. It's simple, easy and immensely relaxing.

Going personal

Personal tours are what you make them. You can ask the operator to get you there and back and take care of you 24/7. Or you can make your own travel arrangements and book half-day and day tours that suit your fancy.

"When you're coming to Spain from Malaysia, the big thing to remember is jetlag," Nigel advises. "For the first few days, you will be up very early but you'll be tired at night. So plan tours where you have to be up early at the start of your trip, and leave the nightlife for when you have adjusted your body clock."

"Also, don't just follow the regular tourist route: take advantage of private tours to get a unique perspective. For example, if you love food, ask us to arrange cooking lessons from some of Spain's famous chefs. If you love wine, ask for a private tour of a winery and stay with the family. If you love to dance, we can organise flamenco classes."

For more information about Madrid, visit the Madrid Tourism Board at www.turismo-madrid.es

Getting there

All the major airlines travel to Madrid, but some stop in Amsterdam, London or the Middle East. If you go direct, flight time is about 12 hours.

BEST TIME Madrid summers are hot and dry with August temperatures typically around 40°C but very dry. Winters are cold with January about 4°C. However, Madrid is famous for its year-round blue skies. For travelling, spring and autumn are best. You might also be able to get low-season hotel and flight deals.

ART & CULTURE Madrid has more than 50 museums. Madrid's Golden Triangle of Art has the Prado Museum, the Reina Sofía and the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, all considered having among the finest collections in the world, flank three sides of the Retiro Park. When you're tired, nip into the park for a coffee or a drink and a tapa.

FOOD For fine dining, try the Terraza del Casino, Sant Coloni, Zalacain, Jockey and Arola's.

"There is Botín, the world's oldest restaurant (that is still in the same spot with an oven for their specialty, roast suckling pig, from 1725)," recommends Fay Taylor, founder of MTZ Destination Management Company.

"For off-the-beaten-path, visit Neru for Spanish cuisine or El Dominio de Antargu for designer gastronomy."

SHOPPING Apart from the Salamanca district, try Puerta del Sol and Gran Vía for boutiques and souvenirs. Also popular are the El Corte Inglés outlets on Serrano and Nuevos Ministerios. For new and funky, Chueca and Calle Fuencarral are a must.

SAVINGS Ask the tourism board or your hotel about a Madrid Tourist Card. Once purchased, the card offers free museum entry, free bus, walking and art tours, discounts in restaurants, shops, shows and other goodies.

Related products like the Tourist Travel Pass give you unlimited use of Madrid's public transport system.

Left, from top: You'll be impressed by the museum in Estadio Bernabéu; Palacio de Cristal in Parque del Retiro; souvenirs aplenty. — ELLEN WHYTE

Personal tours

These companies specialise in personal tours for Madrid as well as other regions in Spain. English tours are easy to book, extra time is needed for Mandarin and other languages.

● Madrid Shopping Tours
www.madridshoppingtour.com

● Arts Exclusive
www.ArtsExclusiveSpain.com

● Madrid & Beyond
www.madridandbeyond.com

● MTZ Destination Management
www.mtz.es