

The Madrid experience

19 of us set off from Edinburgh, in the aftermath of Storm Ophelia, to be joined by 3 more couples once we arrived in Madrid, bringing our total to 25. The Spanish weather on our arrival was warmer and calmer! The coach to the hotel took an “orientation” route which gave us a flavour of the city, and some idea of where the hotel was in relation to the city centre.



We all visited Madrid!

Our first day was rather like home, very rainy, but the rest of the week brought sunshine and pleasant temperatures. Our guide, Mauricio, met us in the hotel lobby each morning (and complimented us on our punctuality!)

Day one was “Old Madrid” - a walk shortened by heavy rain, a small church decorated with Goya frescoes, our first Royal palace (with excellent lunch facilities) and the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, an amazing private collection of art with which our guide was both familiar and informative.



The Royal Palace: what's rain for a Scot?

Day two was a trip to Toledo, the home of El Greco and once the capital of Spain. We wandered through narrow winding streets to the Cathedral, a feast of stone, glass and gilded decoration, and then on to the little church of Saint Thomas, with its superb El Greco, the Burial of the Count of Orgaz. The afternoon saw us in the Monastery of San Juan de los Reyes, built for Ferdinand and Isabella, and then a beautifully preserved and ornate synagogue.



Toledo from our mountain coffee bar

Our destination on day three was Segovia. Mauricio had picked a restaurant with a super view of the city for our morning coffee, after which we descended into the valley surrounding the city for an atmospheric view of the Alcazar, the castle. After a hair-raising taxi ride up to the castle itself, we found that although outside it looked Disneyish, inside it was full of interest - courtyards all had water cisterns beneath, the royal history of Castile was portrayed with busts round the throne room, coats of arms were explained and weapons and armour observed.

We walked through fascinating old streets to the Cathedral, a marvel of gothic architecture, and then on to our tapas lunch in a delightful old restaurant in the heart of the town. Local wine, wonderful ham, fish, pate, salad, grilled vegetables and a local dessert too!



The cathedral, Segovia

The icing on the cake was the remarkable Roman aqueduct, apparently intact, which strides across the lower part of the town as it has done for two thousand years.



The aqueduct in Segovia

In the afternoon we visited La Granja de San Ildefonso, a Royal summer palace five miles outside Segovia. A “Granja” is a grange or farm, but this one was much more, a French-style chateau with airy rooms, many with views of tiered gardens with fountains, and a wealth of decorations on walls and ceilings.

Saturday, day four, marked our visit to the world-renowned Museo del Prado. (We learned that “ Prado” means meadow!) This immense art gallery was very busy, but Mauricio, who is obviously very well acquainted with it, led us to all the most important and impressive exhibits with consummate ease. From Hieronymus Bosch’s Garden of Earthly Delights, through works by Durer, Raphael, and Titian to the amazing Las Meninas by Velazquez and several rooms of El Grecos, we finished with Goya, from the two Majas, clothed and nude, and his royal portraits, to the terrifying The Third of May and Goya’s Black period. What an artistic treat!

The afternoon was free for our own choice of sightseeing. Personally, this was a visit to the Centro de Arte Reina Sofia to see Pablo Picasso’s Guernica, and then an exploratory trip on the Madrid Metro!

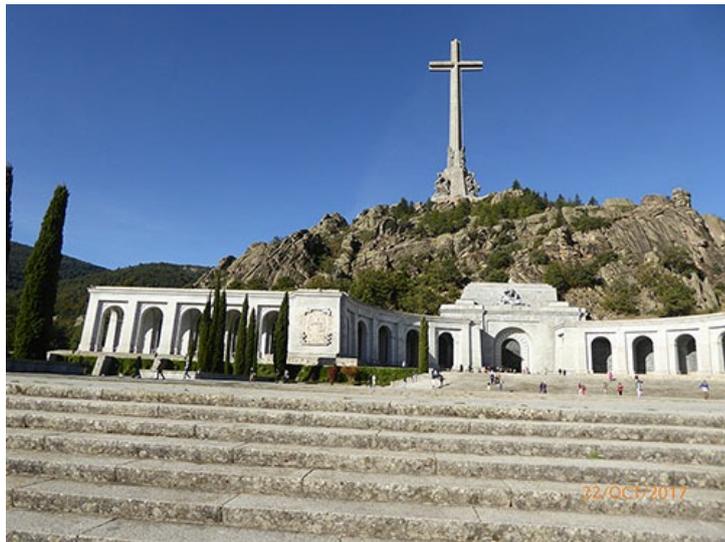


The Prado. Pictures and people

Dinner was a celebratory meal at the Posada de la Villa in the old town - a banquet of local tastes, with fabulous roast lamb in abundance. Madrid was packed with locals and tourists cramming the streets until after midnight!

On our final day, we checked out and our luggage came with us to our last two visits, the Valle de los Caidos and El Escorial. The Valley of the Fallen, commissioned by Franco as a memorial of the Civil War, was an impressive and evocative place, with an atmosphere suitable for the forty thousand war dead buried there.

El Escorial was stunning. It's church is imposing, appropriately decorated and gilded, with obvious connections with its Royal creator Philip II. (we saw the window through which Philip was said to be watching a mass when news was brought of the defeat of the Armada) We saw Philip's preferred painting of the Martyrdom of St. Maurice, and also the El Greco interpretation which he rejected, we toured the Royal apartments and descended to the royal mausoleum, with the tombs of the Spanish kings directly under the High Altar. That was only a small part of this remarkable building which is church, monastery, school, mausoleum and royal retreat, constructed in Tudor times.



The valley of the fallen

Afterwards, we bid a fond and grateful farewell to Mauricio and returned to Scotland.