



MADRID

It's hard to imagine that less than forty years ago Spain was a military dictatorship ruled by the ultra-conservative General Franco (and, indirectly, by the Catholic Church). The country has changed massively since then and nowhere is this change more evident than in the treatment of the country's gay & lesbian citizens. The introduction of some of the most progressive and gay-friendly legislation in Europe, including in 2005 same-sex marriage, means that Spanish gays and lesbians are among the best treated homos in Europe. They can even adopt children!

Naturally, this has given the LGBT community greater visibility and increased confidence. That new-found confidence inspired the team behind **Madrid Gay Pride** to host the massive EuroPride event two years ago. The event was a huge success bringing millions of party-loving gays to the city and they've kept coming back.

Organisers told me that the Madrid Pride party is now the biggest in Europe and it brings the city to a standstill every July. As well as the massive parade from Puerta de Alcalá to Plaza de España, events take place across the city in pubs, clubs and arenas. Partiers take to the streets and the atmosphere is electric. Think Paddy's Day, if we could control the weather (and our bladders) and get Kylie Minogue to come!

Of course, Madrid welcomes the gays all year round. And no matter what kind of gay you are, you'll find some part of Madrid that you love. It is, after all, a European capital city. It might not have the romance of Paris or the history of Rome but Madrid has a character all of its own. It also has shops,

restaurants and nightlife to rival any city in Europe – and much better weather to boot. It's easy to see why the gays love Madrid so much. And it seems the love is reciprocated.

Chueca

In fact, Madrid loves the gays so much it gave them their very own area. Okay, I know you could say the same thing about Warsaw and the Jews but it's honestly not like that – at least not now. Chueca, located to the north of Madrid's Gran Vía, used to be an area best known for hookers and junkies but, thanks to the gays, it has now become one of Madrid's most fashionable areas.



During the day, Chueca is home to loads of boutique shops and cafés, many aimed directly at the gay market, but the place truly comes alive at night. The narrow cobbled streets are filled with young people and lined with busy restaurants, bars, and clubs of every imaginable size and persuasion.

The local business association prints a free map of Chueca, which not just a good idea, it's almost essential. Get a few *cervezas* into you and all those streets begin to look the same and who knows what kind of bar you might wander into. And, boy, do they have a lot of bars. They've got drag bars, muscle bars, lesbian bars, bear bars, leather bars and sex

bars. Chueca is *most definitely* pro-choice. For example, **Liquid** (Calle de Barquillo) is a modern, trendy bar with a more gym-bunny kind of clientele. Depending on your point of view, it has a better-looking customer but it is a little more uptight as a result. If drag is your thing, try **LL Bar** (Calle de Pelayo) where, unless you speak Spanish, you won't have a clue what's going on but neither, it seems, do the drag queens. **Museo Chicote** (Gran Vía) is a legendary cocktail bar with live DJs playing electro-funk and soul while **Rick's** (Calle del Clavel) is a good late-night spot to wind up a night around Chueca. No one bar stood out to me but that's the thing about Chueca. You have a drink or two in one spot and then you move on.

Outside the Ghetto

Of course, there are plenty of gay-friendly venues and events all around the city. On a short city-break, the temptation might be to stay within the Chueca area because it's just so damned convenient. However, if you want to meet the local gays, you might have to work a little harder. Those I met told me they come out later than ever (usually after drinking at home) and venture to Chueca less and less. After all Madrid is a big city with plenty of places to go.

The easy mix between gay people and their straight friends mean that large one-nighter events like **Goa** (www.goaclub.es) take place on a regular basis so check for fliers. Aimed at a mixed party crowd, these events often take place away from the city centre so plan the evening well!

Of course, if you're only in Madrid to meet the fellas, that might sound like a lot of effort. Especially when the Spanish relaxed attitude to sex means that most gay bars have a dark room. This means

that some bars have pickpockets – and, no doubt, a touch of syphilis – so whatever you do, do it carefully.

Culture (other than syphilis) and Shopping

There's more to a good holiday than cruising men and drinking beer (or so I'm told) and Madrid has culture (other than syphilis) by the bucket load. Language barriers might rule out certain theatrical offerings but not perhaps opera at the **Teatro Real**, which you wouldn't understand a word of anyway. Art lovers would be mad to miss out a visit to the world famous **Museo del Prado** or the **Museo Reina Sofía** (home to Picasso's masterpiece *Guernica* and allegedly Spain's ugliest building).

Madrid is an easy town to get around. The metro system is great but walking is easier and certainly more interesting. The weather is always "walking weather" because apparently Madrid enjoys more cloudless days than any other European city. A visit to any of city's beautiful public parks is a perfect way to cure a hangover or work up an appetite.



I didn't go shopping much, mainly because there were better things to do, but you can expect the usual designer shops as well as all the major European department stores. The local fashion boutiques made me smile as Spanish style is pretty unique and completely unwearable in Ireland – except possibly on stage. There is an interesting flea-market at **El Rastro** (Plaza de Cascorro) but it's a bit of a tourist-trap as is the area around Plaza Mayor. ("No, señora, I actually don't want a flamenco dancer figurine for €20"). That said, I loved the **Mercado de San Miguel**, housed in a refurbished 19th century market, which has a great food hall and delicatessen. A little pricey, maybe, but it beats heading to McDonalds!

Of course, there are great historical buildings (and even, dare I say it, churches) to explore and a trip to the **Palacio Real**, or Royal Palace, is definitely worth it. In fact, this queen loves palaces so much I even took a day trip to the Royal family's former spring palace at Aranjuez, 50km outside Madrid. (Yes, they have winter, autumn and summer palaces too!)

Where to stay

There are literally hundreds of small guesthouses and hotels in the Chueca area. Most are smaller, family-run businesses and, from reports, are a bit hit and miss. Some don't even come with a private bathroom so be sure to check that out before booking.

I stayed at the **Oscar-Mate Hotel** (Plaza de Vázquez de Mella), which is part of a trendy chain of hotels. Smack bang in the middle of Cheuca, the location was fantastic with bars a mere stumble away. It's also close to the metro (on nearby Gran Vía) so getting away from Chueca was just as easy.



The rooms are modern and minimal if a little strangely designed. More downtown Tokyo than uptown Madrid, my bed was practically against the door to the room and the wall-to-wall mirrors meant I always felt someone was watching me. However, the room (and ensuite bathroom) were kept very clean. It also has a decent restaurant where the breakfast buffet was good on choice – there's nothing worse than negotiating unfamiliar cuisine after a night on the town. There is a small open-air bar on the roof with great views (and a small pool!) which definitely makes the place more interesting. It didn't seem to be open all the time but was a popular place to hit

for a cocktail at evening times, even if you're not staying there. If you're feeling a bit more *fashionista*, check out the **Hotel ME Madrid** (Plaza Santa Ana) or **Hospes** (Plaza de la Independencia). With the award-winning restaurant *Midnight Rose* on the ground floor and the disgustingly trendy *Penthouse Terrace* on the roof, Hotel ME oozes style and cool. Meanwhile, Hospes is home to the Phillipe Starck-designed *Ramses Life* restaurant and a really beautiful health and beauty spa so the emphasis there is more on chilling out.

Getting there

Volcanic ash permitting, getting the Madrid is easy and cheaper than ever. I flew with Iberia, who'll get you there and back for about €150. Airport taxis cost €30 while the shuttle bus is €12. There is a high speed rail link to Barcelona so if you planned it well you could hit that other great city too.

The people of Madrid are warm and friendly. There was none of the snootiness you'd get in Paris or New York. More importantly, the people are up for a good time and they know how to have one. I am sure Madrid can be a relaxing place to visit but for me it was a hectic party town. I came home needing another holiday but sure that I'd be visiting Madrid again.

Madrid Gay Pride takes place July 1-4 2010.