Madrid Report

This report corresponds to a trip I made to Madrid from Wednesday 2nd of September 2009 to Monday 7th of September 2009 courtesy of a grant from the expedition fund at Queen Mary, University of London. The aim of the trip for Tara (a fellow student whom I traveled with) and myself was to practice Spanish at every opportunity and to see as much madrileño culture as possible. I think we achieved this in abundance, as this report will now explain.

We arrived late in the afternoon and after navigating ourselves around the airport, we took the metro to Tirso de Molina, which was the stop nearest to our hostel. Thankfully, the Spanish Metro has air-conditioning, which made the journey a lot more bearable with thirty-degree heat and baggage. In the evening we familiarized ourselves with the centre of the city by walking down el Paseo de Prado and to Plaza Angel. It became apparent that the centre of Madrid is much smaller than London. This meant that a lot of places were reachable on foot, which resulted in us seeing a lot more of the city as we would have missed things on the metro since it goes under ground. We spent the rest of the evening in a cervecería where we ordered tortilla española, arroz con chorizo y jamón Serrano. All of these are dishes used Spanish ingredients and the evening was spent chatting with the waiters and locals. It became particularly eventful when the Spanish national anthem started playing and every Spanish person stood up and started singing and dancing!

We woke up early in order to see as much as possible before the heat became too intense. On a walk through the city we saw and visited; Biblioteca Nacional, Real Jardín Botanico, Banque de España, Plaza de Cibeles y Parque de el Retiro. The park is the largest in central Madrid and is filled with sculptures such as El Angel Caído and the monument to King Alfonso XII. In front on this monument is el Estanque where we hired a boat and rowed around the lake. The park is beautiful and provides much needed shade in the summer for people escaping the sun for a siesta. After returning home, I have seen pictures of the
park in snow and would love to return in the winter and see it again. We visited the park on a number of occasions throughout our trip to Madrid and it was obvious that the park is the “heart” of Madrid.

From research before departing the U.K., we knew that we wanted to visit *la Reina Sofía* so on Friday morning we joined the lengthy queues and finally got to see some artwork. The museum is dedicated to art from the twentieth century and boasts a large collection of Dalí and Picasso. Arguably the most famous piece housed there is Picasso’s Guernica. As a student of Spanish language and culture, it was fascinating to see this painting in real life as it is something which has been constantly referred to throughout my education. It will continue to be a beneficial experience for my studies as I am taking a module in Art and Revolution next semester. Since the painting depicts a scene from the Spanish Civil war, it will undoubtedly be of value towards my work. This visit also gave me an insight into the films of Luis Buñuel. I was captivated by his work which was screened in the gallery, one film which has really stuck in my mind is *un chien andalou*, which was a collaboration between Buñuel and Dalí. There are modules offered within the School of Language, Linguistics and Film, which explore his work and I hope to pursue these interests further.

We spent the afternoon in *El Prado* which houses art from a much earlier period, twelfth to nineteenth century. We saw works from the likes of Rafael, Goya and El Greco. It was interesting to compare and contrast the differences in artistic technique from the classical work in *El Prado* to the modern work in *la Reina Sofía*.

In the evening we ate some more traditional tapas including *patatas bravas, croquetas, manchego y chorizo*.

Another early start to make the most of reduced rates at *El Palacio Real*. It’s a very grand palace, the largest in Europe, with spectacular views over Madrid from the courtyard. It is possible to see quite a lot of rooms inside the palace as it is used for official events and business and the royal family do not reside there. The palace is full of artefacts, which have been presented to the
family. For me, one of the most beautiful pieces was the set of four string instruments given to the Prince of Asturias with intricate engraving on each. In the evening we went to watch the Bolshoi Ballet perform. This provided us with two exciting opportunities; one to see the premier Russian Ballet company and secondly to see inside El Teatro Real. The national theatre was first opened in 1850, but had to close in 1925 as the construction of the metro had damaged it. After being rebuilt, it reopened in 1966 and really is an architectural masterpiece.

The evening was finished off with some traditional salsa and flamenco dancing.

On our final full day in Madrid we headed to el Rastro which is a large Spanish market. We had a typically Spanish breakfast of churros y chocolate and then bartered with the store holders to get the best deal for our souvenirs and gifts. We then spent a leisurely evening in Plaza Mayor, eating paella and drinking Sangria.

This visit was of the upmost help to my studies. It refreshed my language skills before I started my second year, introduced me to key aspects of Spanish culture and gave me confidence in speaking the language. Most of all it showed me what a beautiful and friendly city Madrid is, so much so I have put elected to attend university there as part of the Erasmus scheme for my year abroad.

Sophie Boden

M108192@qmul.ac.uk