So much to do and see, yet so little time. Our trip to Madrid was an eye-opener. It not only developed my cultural knowledge of central Spain; from Spanish politics and its remarkable history, to typical Spanish traditions; but also helped my linguistic skills with a great deal of oral and aural practise of Castilian.

The Palacio Real – crammed with priceless objets d’art, the Plaza Mayor – with its plethora of cafes, restaurants and quaint market shops, the Centro de Arte Reina Sofia – that holds the great Pablo Picasso’s Guernica, Museo del Prado – housing one of the world’s finest art collections, the Parque de El Retiro – the city’s wonderful green lung; to name but a few places that we visited on our short stay in Madrid.

To give a blow-by-blow account of everything that we did would not only result in an extremely long essay, but would also be a very unfair thing to subject to you! So I shall instead detail a few of the highlights of our stay.

Before we had even arrived, we were planning where we wanted to go and what we wanted to see and do. Even the scorching weather – with temperatures searing up to about 35°C on arrival, did not hinder us one bit.

A whole afternoon was spent at the famous Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, taking in the artistic delights. The museum, set in a converted hospital, is thematic and chronological; displaying works from the 1900s, through to the more modern. I was able to see the great masters of the interwar period: Juan Gris, Joan Miró, Salvador Dalí and of course, Pablo Picasso. This alone made the trip worthwhile for me. Seeing Dalí’s The Great Masturbator (in my opinion, the leading exponent of Surrealism) and of course Picasso’s Guernica were, simply, incredible. To be in the same room as
Guernica, I instantly felt a part of Spanish history. In April 1937, at the height of the Spanish Civil War, German bombers carpet bombed and devastated the Basque town of Guernica in support of General Franco’s regime. The attack, almost unprecedented, on a defenceless civilian population caused international outrage. This was Picasso’s response; to indict war, with all its senselessness and barbarity, in terms of his highly individual language of symbols. Standing there, I was in awe.

But I must move on as there is so much more to say. The Palacio Real made for another worthwhile afternoon and an insight into Spanish politics. More than half of the rooms were open to the public, and all were sumptuously decorated with silk wall hangings, frescoes and gilded stucco; each and every one priceless. Within, I saw some of the treasures of Spain: Antonio Stradivari’s violins (a personal favourite as I am a violinist), Goya’s quartet of portraits depicting Charles IV and his wife Maria Luisa; the grandeur and power of the Spanish Monarchy, now so publicly displayed, was evident throughout.

Moving on, I cannot miss out the metro station: Puerta del Sol; the busy intersection that is translated as “The Gateway of the Sun”. It is an elliptical square, radiating ten streets. It was the first to have electric lighting, trams and, in 1919, Madrid’s first underground station. Coming out of this metro station for the first time really hit home the fact that I was in Madrid. Sensing the history of the area I was in, I once again found myself awestruck. For most madrileños (those from Madrid), this is the heart of the city. And I, by the end of our stay, felt like a true madrileño as well, loving the heart of this great city.

An afternoon (one that, in fact, led well into the evening and the following morning) of sangria and tapas - talking to waiters and other madrileños for the most part – was another day well-spent. Although to some not as commendable on paper, say, compared to a day spent in the Palacio Real, I definitely feel this was an invaluable experience. Where and how else does one truly practise the
language of Spain, if not in the typical bars and restaurants of the capital, where the people are friendly and willing to help? It was the perfect opportunity: practising with the locals and improving accent, pronunciation and perception, and in the best way possible.

Indeed, such chance encounters for conversation were not hard to find. On the Estanque (lake) in the Parque de El Retiro, Sophie was taught – in Spanish – to row. Another time, trying and failing to take a photo of ourselves with the Metropolis - one of Madrid’s signature buildings - in the background (a task, I must add, not to be taken lightly; it’s a difficult thing to do!), a kind woman came to our rescue. A conversation about why we were here and our thoughts on Spain followed. Another encounter was lunch in a local bar – that turned out to be a 3 hour long, five course and two bottles of wine, affair – revolving around the waiters. On our very first night, we went to a bar where, half way through the inebriating proceedings of the night, the entire bar stood up and danced – quite wildly – to the Spanish national anthem. The patriotism of the Spanish nation was interesting to see. It is episodes like these that stand for the reason why we went to Madrid in the first place. One doesn’t learn or is taught such interesting facts as those we witnessed in class. You need to be there. Another time, struggling with the ticket booth in the Gran Via metro station, a kind Spaniard came rushing over to help. Our struggle (eventually overcome with the help of this woman) led to a long conversation about why we were here, questions about our university study, plans for the future, life in Madrid compared to life in London. As more and more was spoken, it seemed our confidence in speaking Spanish had soared by the end of our trip.

So, in just a week long visit, museums were visited, palaces were admired, much good wine and food was consumed, and many conversations with the madrileños were had. A memorable and unique experience that has definitely added to my academic study of the Spanish language.

Thank you for making it possible.

Tara Balfour