

Madrid
September 26-29, 2013

Sept 26-27

We took off on a Thursday, at a very civilized hour from a day filled with warmth and sunshine. The kind of day you just don't want to leave San Diego. The flight was to DFW where after a brief lay-over, we boarded our flight to Madrid.

We settled into our business class seats, took off our shoes (my kids would say that is the sign that we are on vacation), got comfortable and took off right on time. After a decent meal and one movie, we changed into PJs and went to sleep (nothing like flat beds with down comforters to ensure some sleep – oh yes, and a sleeping pill).

About 5 hours later we woke up for breakfast and our descent into Madrid. Being one of the first off the plane meant no lines at passport control and before we knew it, we were out in the street grabbing a taxi to the hotel.

We landed at about noon so we had the whole day ahead of us. The Intercontinental Hotel was conveniently located so that we could walk where ever we wanted (and those of you that know us well, know we love to walk in cities). So we unpacked, grabbed our hats and headed off to see the sights.



Figure 1 Calle Alcalá

Andy and I had both been to Madrid both (both together and separately). So we didn't feel we needed to do all the tourist things. We headed down Calle Soreno, one of the more elegant streets, towards Plaza de la Independencia. This is where the Puerta de Alcalá (Alcalá Gate) was built for King Carlo III by the famous Fancesco Sabatini. It is considered one of the most iconic landmarks of Madrid.

The next plaza we reached was the Plaza de Cibeles, a square with a neoclassical complex of marble sculptures with fountains. The foundtain of Cibeles depicts the goddess Cibeles (Cybele) who was the goddess of fertility. She is sitting on a chariot pulled by two lions. We are partial to lions (Ari...).



Figure 2 Cibeles



Figure 3 Puerta del Sol

We continued on our way towards Old Madrid. We love old towns, walking around the narrow streets, filled with shops and cafes. And this was no exception. We next walked by the Puerta del Sol, thought by some to be the very center of Madrid. It is filled with people and with buskers – mostly the type that stand like statues, but these were so much more creative than the ones you usually see. There were men standing in mid-air. There were men sitting in mid-air. There were soldiers totally tilted as if about to shoot. I really have no idea how they did that. I also did not take a picture as I am not in the habit of paying for pictures.

We continued walking down Calle Mayor, the main street of Madrid during the middle ages, then filled with silversmiths and coppers who sold their wares to the rich merchants traveling through.

We made our way to the Mercado de San Miguel – our destination. We thought it was a market filled with vegetables, fruit, fish and other delicious items. Well, it once was. But today it is stall after stall of tapas. It is a beautiful Beaux Arts building with glass walls and many entrances (which a gypsy begging outside of each one). But inside it was full of people holding little plates filled with delicacies and wine glasses filled with, well, wine. You could walk around and buy one tapa here and one tapa there. I had two different types of herring on bread, bread with cheese and jam, bread with cheese and cucumbers. Andy had paella. And then we both had frozen yogurt for dessert (which started with a taste they offered and then us buying some). My favorite kind of lunch.



Figure 4 Tapas



After our wonderful tapas, we meandered back to the Plaza Mayor. This plaza is the central plaza of Madrid. This plaza is famous for many things. It is famous for the café's that fill the plaza. It is famous for being ringed by old and traditional shops. It is famous for its nine archway entrances. It is famous for markets and bullfights over the years, for the 237 balconies overlooking it. And it is famous for public executions, and during the Inquisition, the "autos de fe." Many of our ancestors (not mine personally, but still...) perished during in this way during this time.

We then headed down a different street which took us straight to the Prado. We were told the best time to go to the museum would be between 2-5, while everyone was taking their siestas. And how true that was. We walked right in, bought our tickets, got our audioguides and meandered through the museum with no crowds in sight. We saw all the great masters. And once again I found my favorite statue, whose picture I use in my sleep in the Bible talk. (Curious? I am giving the talk again on Dec 3 to the Dept of Judaic Studies at UCSD).

After many hours of wandering around, we started to hit the wall. So we stopped at the Café Prado for some coffee and a rest. Then it was back to the paintings. We finally headed out at about 5:30 and began our journey back to the hotel. On the way we stopped in an outdoor café, in the middle of the strolling streets of

Madrid. This is one major difference since the last time I was here. Back then you could not find a restaurant serving food before 9:00pm. Now you can get fed much earlier. At the ungodly hour of 6:00pm, we were able to get a bite to eat.

We finally made it back to the hotel after wandering the streets for about 7 hours and fell into bed. Were we tired? Well, we slept until almost noon the next day!

Sept 28

We thought about going to shul, but we seemed to have slept through it. We got up leisurely, grabbed our hats and headed out the door. But when we got to the front entrance, low and behold it was raining. How wonderful that good hotels have umbrellas to hand out. So we grabbed one and off we went. We headed down Calle Serano again looking for a café for breakfast (although it was 1:00pm by then). We found one just as it started raining and managed to sit out the rain with our cappuccino and sandwiches (actually, I had a cup – literally a cup – of gazpacho and a potato torta).



I had downloaded walking tours of Madrid onto my phone so we chose the Royal Palace tour and again hit the road. We took our same path, toward the Old Town but this time veered off to the Via Gran, a street full of shops, but more like Broadway than Fifth Ave. Our first stop was the Plaza Espana known for its statue of Cervantes overlooking two bronze statues of don Quixote and Sancho Panza on their horses.



From there we continued to the Sabatini Gardens (sadly the Palace and Cathedral and the Plaza de Oriente, with statue of Philip IV and surrounded by statues of all the queens of Spain.

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Our last destination was the Plaza de la Villa on Calle Mayor. This is a small Medieval square surrounded by the old Town Hall, and other beautiful, old buildings.

During all this time, the sun would come out, and then it would pour, and then the sun would come out and then it would pour.



Figure 5 Retiro Park

So we headed back, walking through the Retiro Park, past the lake with the Monument of King Alfonso XII covered by a semicircular colonnade. We made our way to the three most elegant streets in Madrid (Calle Serrano, Calle Velázquez and Calle Ortega y Gasset), filled with boutiques, designer shops, and cafés. This was no Fifth Avenue in size – the streets were narrow and filled with trees – but the storefronts were as elegant as anywhere.

We found a café and again were able to have an early dinner – with wine and olives and the best soup I have ever tasted. Almond and garlic over figs and watermelon. Yummy.

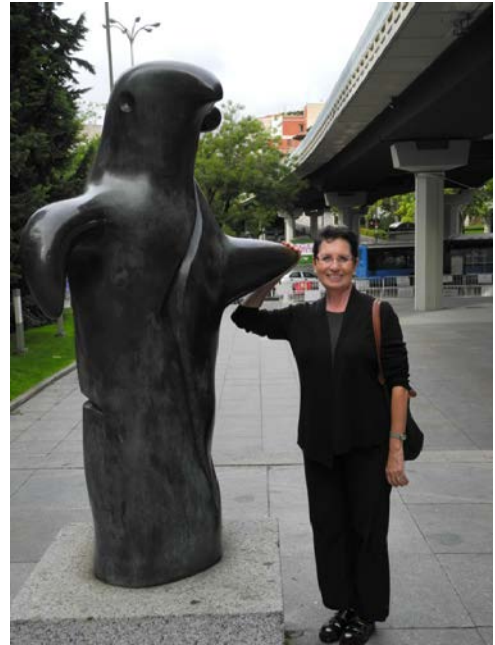


And as we headed out, the sky opened and the rain came down in sheets. By the time we got back to the hotel we were soaked through and through – down to our shoes. It was another early night – jet lag!

Sept 29

Today is Sunday so everything is closed. We did find an open local café near the hotel, filled with locals where we could get coffee and a bite to eat. Olives again of course!

We took a walk around the hotel area this time. I had read about this area under the overpass that was filled with art, the Museo de Escultura al Aire Libre de la Catellana. This is an open air exhibit of 17 abstract sculptures which are intentionally placed underneath an overpass.



What a creative use of space!



We then headed to the airport for our flight to Valencia. And that is where I now sit writing this. So more in the next few days as our trip continues to Valencia and my meetings.