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Mad for Madrid

Text and photos by Dr Martin Chio, Editorial Board Member

PREVIOUSLY, I never really did enjoy travelling too often; as a junior doctor, time was a factor, and leave was spent preparing for exams or just *nah*-ing. Perhaps it was also the unfamiliarity, being satisfied with status quo, and of course I detest packing. All this changed while I was on the Health Manpower Development Plan (HMDP) programme in London in 2012; in the nine months I was there I made nine trips. The seed of wanderlust had been planted and thus a new love developed.

My recent vacation in Spain had multi-level significance: I had travelled to Madrid with medical school buddies during my pre-clinical years; visited Barcelona with my sister during Easter break during HMDP; and this time, the trip was to celebrate a significant birthday. We decided on October to enjoy the cooler weather, and the off-peak tourist season also meant less pricey accommodation on Booking.com. The flight to Madrid was uneventful and we arrived at the modern cantilevered Adolfo Suarez Madrid-Barajas airport on a cool Friday morning. Our apartment was situated



just off Gran Vía, the famous shopping boulevard, and our host even presented us with a bottle of red wine!

I like to spend the initial part of a trip to a city walking around to get a feel of its vibe, and spent the afternoon doing so. Madrid is an easy capital city to navigate; we were able to get to most of the attractions on foot. The Puerta del Sol square was crowded with tourists but the refreshing breeze and warm sunshine put me in a great mood for the holiday. We then proceeded to the Plaza Mayor, and I took quite a fair bit of time admiring the architecture and the wall embellishments and paintings.

We had asked the landlord to recommend a decent dinner venue which opened earlyish (remember the Spaniards adore siestas), and so La Gloria de Montera it was. We feasted on *jamon*, bruschetta, aubergines, asparagus, very tasty octopus and beef – the freshness and quality was superb! After dinner, we sauntered around a bit, enjoying the chilly air and the floodlit buildings, before calling it a night – we needed to rest for museum-hopping the next day.

The next morning, thinking we were early, we strolled and chatted on the way to the Museo Nacional del Prado. We had bought a Paseo del Arte pass and recce-ed the area the day before, but were not expecting such a long queue on arrival.

Thankfully it cleared within 15 minutes, and we were able to view Spanish and other European masterpieces from as early as the 12th century. I was particularly taken by Hieronymus Bosch's 16th-century triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Unfortunately, the Prado is very sticky about even non-

flash photography, so no souvenir photos here. However, it has an excellent online gallery, so I saved the JPEG of the triptych for remembrance.

As the weather was good, we decided to hike the 2.2 kilometres to the northern suburb of Salamanca to Sergi Arola for lunch. Having broken into a sweat after the brisk pace, the bar below the restaurant was ideal to cool down in with a glass of cava. This two-Michelin-starred gem on the Calle de Zurbano was the best meal we had in Madrid, with a tasting menu of veal sweetbread, prawns, anchovies, cod, quail and lamb cheek. The meal lasted for over three hours, and was very pleasant, perhaps except for the fussy eater kid at the next table who looked younger than five. We rolled ourselves back to the apartment, and finally understood the need to build in siestas into a day.

The next morning, we realised that our usual breakfast place below the apartment was closed. As with any trip, a shut door leads to an opportunity to discover an open one nearby. We ventured up the block and discovered a busy eatery frequented by locals, and had churros for breakfast.

As I remembered from my trip as a medical student, I had preferred the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza to the Prado, and made a return visit to the former. This collection, started by the eponymous barons (the current one is married to a Miss Spain), spans eight centuries. I stood and admired Rubens' full-figured Venus and cherubic Cupid, and also took some time to get my head around Dali's *Dream Caused by the Flight of a Bee around a Pomegranate a Second before Waking Up*. Soon it was lunchtime and I was indeed tempted by the myriad of bottled food at the aptly named Delica Thyssen, but resisted and left for the Westin Palace Madrid. We could not have picked a better place for Sunday brunch! The sunlight streaming through the stained glass domed roof of La Rotonda



restaurant bathed the room in a warm inviting glow; the rest of the glow was provided by tasty tapas and cava. Payment by Visa – €20 (\$32), ambience – priceless.

To aid digestion, we leisurely took the cobblestone side roads towards the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia. Along the way, the street art and spray-painted garage doors provided us with a glimpse into the creativity of Madrid's residents. I am kind of glad we left this museum to the last, though I have grown to appreciate modern art, some of the exhibits still left me going, "Huh?" I was able to better appreciate Calder's *Carmen* and Miro's *Moonbird* in the central garden while seated on a shaded bench (browsing Facebook).

To refuel and seek respite from the heat (yes... people were in tank tops and shorts while I remained sun-protected with long sleeves and cargoes), we returned to the Green Tea Sushi Bar at the Westin Palace and revelled in another cava. Like in many other European cities, the alcohol tends to be cheaper than water. We chatted with the Filipino bartender and managed to score free iced cocktails: #win. Recharged and refreshed, we followed tradition and siesta-ed. Hankering for paella on awaking, the ever resourceful Eyewitness Travel Guide suggested La Paella de la Reina, where we supped on delectable white asparagus and Valenciana paella. After dinner, we explored the colourful Chueca barrio with its lively bars and clubs thumping the latest hits.

Having had enough of the large city, we took a day trip to Toledo via railway the next morning. The Madrid Puerta de Atocha was bustling with people coming into the city for work, while the train to Toledo carried mainly tourists like us. A convenient 30-minute train ride south of Madrid, this fortress city towers above the Tagus river. We arrived just after 9 am, and were welcomed by the rising sun illuminating the Neo-Mudejar facade of the train station on a crisp morning.

We hopped onto a blue shuttle bus which dropped us at the town square next to the Alcazar. Knowing what queues can be like, we made a beeline for the Museo de Santa Cruz (which was originally a hospital) for an exhibition entitled "El Greco: arte y oficio". Domenikos Theotokopoulos, who moved to Toledo in the 1570s, was a prominent member of the Spanish Renaissance and his oeuvre is regarded as precursors to Expressionism and Cubism. I was indeed glad to fill the huge gaps in my knowledge of his work by this excellently curated multimedia display of his paintings.

The sun was out and the weather was too good to stay

indoors, so we wound our way through the winding cobble streets towards the 13th-century High Gothic Catedral Primada Santa Maria (Toledo Cathedral). With the help of an audio guide, we wandered around the awe-inspiring chapels, chapter house, sacristy and treasury. After all that, hunger started to overcome us, so we decided to try our luck at the one-starred Restaurant Adolfo and amazingly managed to secure a table! We savoured a tasty meal of prawns, beans, fish, suckling pig and finished with a hazelnut cake.

After that hearty meal, we felt kind of guilty and decided to spend the remaining afternoon following the Eyewitness guidebook walking tour of the rest of the town. We made a quick pitstop at the Iglesia de Santo Tome to view one of El Greco's most famous works: *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz*. 'Twas a pity we missed going to the Alcazar, so we'll have to save that for another trip. The return rail journey across the Spanish plains saw fellow tourists dozing off after extensive walking around the citadel town.

Thus ended part one of the Spanish sojourn... Barcelona next! ■



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Martin finds travel and food photography (taken with a Canon S95) a pleasurable distraction.

Photos

1. Dome of Westin Palace Madrid
2. Ministry of Agriculture, Madrid
3. Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*
4. Octopus
5. Tapas at Westin Palace Madrid
6. Facade of the Prado
7. Museo de Santa Cruz, Toledo
8. Toledo Cathedral
9. The symbol of Madrid: *The Bear and the Strawberry Tree*
10. Rubens' *Venus and Cupid*