



# Florida State University

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# Spain, Medieval and Moorish, Madrid, and Roman Ruins

by  
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We visited Madrid about ten years ago and wanted to return, especially to have more time for the museums. Moreover, the first time around, we had passed on Toledo on the advice of number one and number three sons, but subsequently everyone we talked to encouraged us to put Toledo on a future itinerary. So the plan was to spend about five days in Madrid, partly focused on museums but including a day trip to Toledo and a day trip to Avila and Segovia.

We expected weather similar to Tallahassee for early March, but Madrid weather turned out to be unseasonably cool with several days of light rain. With the wind sweeping across the Spanish plain, it felt several degrees colder than the high 40's and very low 50's. And the rain in Spain was definitely falling in the plain.

Although Segovia is only about an hour from Madrid, it is at a higher elevation—and Madrid is already the highest national capital in Europe. When it rained in Madrid, it snowed in Segovia, and that happened on both of the days we had targeted for a Segovia trip. We decided to save Segovia for another time, which also gave us an extra day in Madrid.



Plaza Major: Emblem of the Hapsburg Era in Madrid

One of our outstanding memories from our previous visit to Madrid was the cleanliness of the city. There were street sweepers on every block, it seemed. Unfortunately, the street sweepers are nowhere near as ubiquitous and the city is now dirtier, probably a result of the misfortunes of the Spanish economy over the last eight years. We did note that there were still lots of police around so we never felt unsafe, even walking some back streets at night in the neighborhood of our hotel.

Entrance to Madrid's main museum, The Prado, is free after 6:00 pm on weeknights. But the first night, we discovered that everyone in Madrid has the same idea, so we waited in line for about 45 minutes, which meant we had less than an hour inside. Although the Prado has many outstanding and varied art works, it is especially noteworthy for its Spanish artists, and within that genre, especially for Velasquez and Goya. We concentrated on Goya. We also bought a Prado highlights book, which encompassed about 20 major works. We returned on two other evenings, but we queued up well before 6:00 to maximize our viewing time. After three nights, totaling perhaps 4-5 hours, we completed the highlights but failed to see the entire Goya collection.

The Reina Sofia museum, which houses mostly modern art, showcases Picasso's Guernica. The gallery in which it is housed was closed on our previous visit to Madrid, so we especially wanted to see it this time around. As it turns out, entry is free on Sunday afternoons, so again we took advantage of that opportunity. What I didn't know is that Guernica is part of a major collection of art works and other items from the Spanish Civil War, a subject in which I've developed substantial interest. That was a pleasant surprise, but it did mean that we spent almost the entire afternoon there.



**Templo de Debod, ancient Egyptian temple moved to Madrid**

Entry to the third of the major museums, the Thyssen-Bornemisza, is free on Mondays, which perfectly coincides with the other two as they are closed on Mondays. The Thyssen collection is broad in scope with nothing that particularly stood out for us, but we nevertheless enjoyed our time there. There are

many smaller museums in Madrid, none of which we have visited, but which we will on a future trip.

Our hotel, the Catalonia Atocha, was outstanding. It is a converted palacio, mostly modernized, but with traces of its former grandeur in the entry doors and the stairwells. We had reserved the deluxe suite (for less than \$200 per night), which had all the original decoration—paneled and plastered walls, ceiling frescoes, and inlaid parquet hardwood floors. We had one large room with the bed at one end and a sitting area at the other, separated by a large desk and a sofa. The only negative to the room was that it was lit only by lamps and tended to be dark.

The location could not have been better—about one-half mile from each of the museums, from the Plaza Mayor, and from Atocha Station, where our airport shuttle dropped us off. However, it is an uphill walk from Atocha Station, and hauling luggage, we definitely should have paid for a taxi.

On check-in, we were offered a breakfast promotion at ten euro per person, which we decided to accept. It was more expensive than eating elsewhere, but well worth the price for the choice, quality, and convenience. The neighborhood has no shortage of eateries—pastries, pizza, fast food, and more. So this is now our “go to” hotel for Madrid.

On our sixth morning, we picked up a car at Atocha Station and drove to Toledo, about an hour southwest. As our sons had reported, Toledo is super-touristy. The historic area is very hilly, with narrow streets and alleyways crawling up and down the hills along the River Tagus. The very Gothic cathedral is the main attraction. It is a veritable museum of El Greco paintings, and in addition there is an El Greco museum elsewhere in the city. I can't say that I am much into El Greco, but for an El Greco lover, Toledo is the place to go.

We also visited the remains of two synagogues and a mosque. Toledo was about the northern extent of the Moorish occupation of Spain, and the old city is very

Moorish. Many buildings are in the mudejar style (Spanish-Moorish architecture), and the interior of one of the synagogues is prototypical Moorish. On one side of the city are intact remains of the old city walls and gates.



**View of Toledo from  
Parador de Toledo**

We spent the night at the Parador de Toledo. The Spanish government has established a chain of hotels called paradores across the country. They are so popular that there are parador tours of Spain. Although some are relatively new and modern, many are converted old convents, hospitals, and palacios. The Parador de Toledo is not particularly old or historic, but it sits on a high hill on the opposite side of the river from the city. The view over the city is stunning, especially in the evening when the lights come up. Unfortunately, the cathedral was not lit for us as it is in many of the professional photos of Toledo taken from the same high point.



**Sinagoga de Santa Maria la Blanca,  
Toledo, Mudejar construction**

Our next stop was Merida, about two hours west of Toledo near Portugal. The land between Toledo and Merida is rolling hills with one set of low mountains. Low mountains also lie to the south, but to the north, the mountains bisecting Spain east to west had snow at the highest elevations.

Merida is the site of a Roman amphitheater, theater, temple, and a Roman bridge still in use, and also the Alcazaba, a Moorish fort. The city is quite small and compact so we were able to make the entire circuit in about 1.5 hours, although we returned the next morning to explore the sites more fully. The Roman and Arabic ruins are interspersed within the modern city, quite different from Toledo and our later stop, Caceres, where the historic area is somewhat self-contained and set apart from the modern city.



On our walks around town, I noticed quite a few empty storefronts, perhaps reflecting the effects of the Spanish recession or perhaps an indication of a general decline in the economic vitality of the city. Otherwise, I rather liked Merida. We spent the night at the Parador de Merida, housed in a converted old convent. The dining room was a bit pricey, but the veal dish I ordered was as good as I've ever tasted.

Caceres is only about one hour north of Merida, and we arrived there in mid-afternoon. Again, we stayed at the parador, which is composed of three old palacios joined together.

Salamanca is a university city and therefore a party city. There are two large universities in the historic center. In the mid-1800's, under pressure from the Spanish government, the University of Salamanca, which dates from the 1500's, eliminated ecclesiastical subjects. In response, the Church established the Pontifical University of Salamanca practically across the street. Salamanca's cathedral is enormous, consisting of two churches. The older church is a mix of Romanesque and early Gothic architecture—pointed arches, solid walls, few windows. When the new high Gothic cathedral was built, the old church was left intact, with the nave of the newer church built parallel to the old nave and the two separated by a common sidewall. Entrance to the old church is through the newer church.



**Salamanca Cathedral**

When I asked the car rental office manager how I should handle the motorway tolls, he suggested I stay off the toll roads and enjoy the Spanish scenery. This turned out to be excellent advice, and on the way back to Madrid from Salamanca, we exited the motorway at Avila where the tolls begin. As it happened, shortly after we turned off, we reached a viewpoint on the crest of a hill that provided a panoramic view of Avila on the next hill over. So, even though we passed on the planned day trip to Avila and Segovia, we nevertheless got a view of Avila on the drive back to Madrid.

I was surprised at how mountainous the landscape is west of Madrid. As I've noted above, the mountains between Toledo and Salamanca were snow-covered at the higher elevations. We crossed over lower mountains between Caceres and Salamanca and between Salamanca and Madrid.

Away from the mountains, the Spanish plain is reminiscent of Croatia or the Texas Hill Country. The soil is rocky, the trees are low, but the ground cover in Spain seems greener than I remember it in Texas. Around Salamanca, however, the land is rolling hills with few trees and long vistas, somewhat like our Midwestern plains.

Our take-aways from this trip are three: (1) we still have much we'd like to see and do in Spain, (2) we like Madrid enough to plan for one or more return trips, and (3) I wish I'd studied Spanish instead of French even though we're on our way to France a few days after I write this.

