

MARIBEL'S HOTEL GUIDE TO MADRID ©



MY MADRID LODGING GUIDE

How to choose your Madrid accommodations

- If you'll be in the city for **only a few short days** and want to hit all the major sites easily, including the "Big Three" art museums, I highly recommend that you choose a hotel in the section of 17th century, Hapsburg Madrid known as the **Barrio de las Letras**, former home of the Golden Age writers such as Cervantes and Lope de Vega, which is very handy to Museum Mile, walkable to the Puerta del Sol, the Plaza Mayor, the café-lined square, Plaza Santa Ana, tapas bars of La Latina and the Royal Palace. You will never need the metro or a bus for your sightseeing.
- If you're a repeat visitor to the city, enjoy a **quiet** location and **sophisticated** environment with **upscale shopping** and wouldn't even think of booking a Manhattan hotel not located in midtown East or the upper East Side, I suggest you choose lodgings in the posh Salamanca district or directly on the Castellana Boulevard, above Plaza Colón.
- When you visit New York and insist on bedding down in the very heart of the theatre district, in the teeming **Times Square-Broadway** area, you'll be equally happy at a hotel in the **Gran Vía-Puerta del Sol** area of town, with its constant, 24-hour stream of street life, fast food outlets, leaflet bearers, never ending stream of tourists, cinemas, theaters and tourist shops. Here consider the well run 4-star

- Hotel Preciados on pedestrian Preciados street or the Best Western Atlántico (but for the latter, be aware of the constant street noise).
- If you're young, hip, an urban dweller who likes to dive head first into the "action" and loves the **downtown vibe** and **nightlife**, you'll be very happy at any of the ultra contemporary Room Mate hotels or the Vincci Soho.
 - No nonsense, practical, dedicated **budgeters** who want a functional, tidy, inexpensive, simple and handy hotel (rather than hostel) should consider the Plaza Mayor or the Hotel Prado.
 - Those on a **very tight budget** who do not require a full service hotel might consider one of the family run, comfortable hostals (not youth hostels), such as Hostal Adriano or Santa Ana or Hostal Barrera.
 - If you need a smart, smooth functioning, high-end **business class** hotel, you can't go wrong with the Westin Palace, Intercontinental Castellana, the Hesperia Madrid or the Meliá Gran Fénix (with its new Dry Martini bar).
 - If you're a fan of the **Relais & Chateaux** group, Madrid's only member is the 5-star Hotel Orfila.
 - Readers of **Wallpaper** should like the AC Palacio del Retiro, Hospes, De las Letras and Radisson Blu Prado.
 - Celebrities and aristocrats enjoy the **privacy** and **intimacy** of the AC Santo Mauro.
 - If the **Ian Schrager** or **André Balazs** designed hotels with a hip and happening bar scene fit your personal style, you'll be happiest at the ME Meliá Reina Victoria or the Derby Urban.
 - If only the very finest will do in a gorgeous location, and if you're accustomed to the **five-star service** provided by Ritz-Carltons, Mandarin Orientals, Four Seasons, Sheraton Luxury Collection, you'll feel right at home at the Villa Magna or Ritz, or perhaps the much larger Westin Palace or at the AC flagship, Palacio del Retiro.
 - If you long for that Grande Dame, Old European Luxury hotel in the style of days gone by and love the romance and elegance of the **Orient Express** trains, look no further than the Hotel Ritz. It's been home to royalty, A-list stars and world leaders for one hundred years, since 1910.

THE FOLLOWING ARE MY RECOMMENDED MADRID HOTELS IN ALL PRICE RANGES

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OLD MADRID BUDGET HOTELS

Doubles from €70 to €100

Most budget properties are located in Old Madrid, either around the Puerta del Sol, Plaza Mayor or the Plaza Santa Ana areas. Of the three, I prefer the Plaza Santa Ana. To see the immediate surroundings of your hotel, go to <http://fotos.qdq.com>, type in the street name in "Nombre de la calle" box, then the street number.

Note on budget hotels/hostals in Old Madrid: Expect walls between rooms to be thin, soundproofing sometimes poor, windows usually not double-glazed and the room size small; with few exceptions, these are no frills accommodations. Do not expect in-room coffee maker, an iron or ironing board or multiple English language channels on the TV or a large elevator (they are tiny). Towels or bed linens may be changed only every other day. Due to lack of carpeting and the use of tile floors, the noise level can be high, from slamming doors to street noise from the street side rooms. If you are a light sleeper, at any of the properties listed below, request an inside room to avoid the customary late night/early morning revelry that may keep you awake. And there's the 3:00 am trash and recycling pick up that may startle and awaken you if you occupy an outside room.

Also, most budget properties don't turn their a/c systems on until May and turn them off in September, so if you happen upon some very warm days in April or October (which is increasingly probable), you may have to sleep with your windows open. If you wish a/c on demand, choose a newer property whose rooms have individual climate controls.

3-star Hotel Miau

Around the corner from the Plaza Santa Ana, opened in '03. 40 simple and light rooms with a/c, double glazed windows, wall mounted satellite TV, baths with shower, elevator. Half of the rooms have tiny Juliette balconies overlooking the square. Belongs to the same owners as bar/restaurant next door. Summer specials for as low as €75 for a double, including breakfast. Rack rate: doubles for €98, singles for €88. Offers some style for a fairly low price in the heart of Old Madrid, but you may want to request a room that does not face the always lively square. It is represented by Secret Places, which describes the hotel as simple and unpretentious, which it is (www.hotelmiau.com).

2-star Hotel Plaza Mayor*

Is located at Calle Atocha, 2, facing Plaza Santa Cruz, on a pretty, recently renovated square near the Plaza Mayor. The 20 rooms are freshly decorated and have individual a/c and double glazed windows to keep out street noise. Rooms 103-104 have spacious marble baths. Room No. 503, on corner, is done in blue and has three large windows flooding the room with sunlight, brass bed coordinated with table and chair and bath that rivals those in more expensive, 3-star hotels. Room 303, in yellow, is equally nice, as is room 302 with stall shower. Top floor, attic suite with timber beamed ceiling, No. 600, *La Suite del Palomar*, and terrace goes for €140, but it cannot be booked online and is much in demand. This L shaped space (non-smoking) measures 450 square ft., has three

skylight windows that open, floor to ceiling windows facing the street, a DVD and is accessible via a private staircase.

The hotel does have an elevator, free Wi-Fi throughout (although some have complained about reliability), and bedrooms have in room safe (for a small fee). Superior rooms are outfitted with TDT TV. Hair dryers are provided upon request only, and rooms do not come equipped with coffee/tea making facilities, mini bar, iron or ironing board, since it is only a 2-star hotel. Those who wish plenty of space should upgrade to a superior room. This hotel does have a few triple rooms that go for €120. Rates do not include breakfast, which costs an additional 7.50 (but there is a Pain Quotidien handily located on the Plaza Mayor). It is featured in the red Michelin Spain guide and receives solid reviews on Trip Advisor and Booking. Guests remark on the friendliness and helpfulness of the staff (www.h-plazamayor.com).



From "Cheap Sleeps in Spain" by Sandra Gustafson: "rooms demonstrate how a little thought and attention to decorating detail can turn a small, ordinary space into a bright, cheerful home away from home."

2-star Hostal Adriano

A favorite of readers of www.madridman.com, this option in the heart of Old Madrid, just four blocks from "nightlife central", the Plaza Santa Ana and 150 meters from the Plaza Mayor (on Calle de la Cruz) offers some genuine style and immaculate housekeeping for a budget price. Plus rooms come with a/c, private bath, sat. TV, phone, hair dryers, an in room safe large enough to hold a laptop, mini fridge (rather than mini bar) and free ADSL Internet access if you have your own computer. It's highly popular, but with only 15 rooms, advance reservations are imperative. It now has an elevator. Book at www.hostaladriano.com.

2-star Hostal Adriá

Hostal Adriá, located nearby at Núñez de Arce, 15, on the 3rd floor, also has a/c and extra large in room safes.

2-star Hostal Adriá Santa Ana

This is the newest creation (opened in '07) of the owners of the above, and offers the same hotel-like amenities but without the elevator. With their high ceilings, crown moldings, chandeliers, flat screen TVs, pretty drapes and valances, the bedrooms have a decidedly un-hostal look. It is a four-floor walkup, but the staff will help guests with their luggage if asked. Check in for this hostel is done at the **Hostal Adriano**, two minutes away. This hostel is located right off the Plaza Santa Ana at Núñez de Arce, within 150 meters of the Puerta del Sol. Doubles go for €70, triples for €90 and quads for

€110. It has been recommended by the NY Times. See each room's unique décor at www.hostaladriasantaana.com.

2-star Hostal Persal

On the Plaza del Angel, directly across the bustling plaza from the Hotel Meliá ME, it has 77 rooms, a lobby, reception desk, elevator, large breakfast room on the ground floor with breakfast included in the room rate, basic "hostal" style rooms with tiny baths, safes and hair dryers, wall mounted TV, Wi-Fi and a/c. Room 413 has twin beds and a Juliette balcony overlooking the square. Attached to the hotel is the Ginger restaurant with a sleek 1920s style décor and a bargain menú del día, very popular with travelers on a budget. Double rooms cost €65 - €85, depending on dates. The hostel also offers triples (for €95) and quads (for €110), a rare commodity in Madrid (www.hostalpersal.com).

The Persal gets solid reviews on www.madridman.com as well as Trip Advisor, but I would book here only if the lodgings above have no vacancy, as the rooms there are newer and thus fresher.

2-star Hostal Barrera

On the very busy Calle Atocha, 96, located on the 2nd floor, but the building has an elevator. This is a Trip Advisor favorite, whose reviewers uniformly praise the helpful staff. All the recently refurbished rooms sport "IKEA-type" furnishings, sparkling private baths, phones, a/c, wall mounted Sony flat screen TV (with CNN and Eurosport), free Wi-Fi and safes (for €1 per day). The hotel's desk is manned 24/7, and laundry service is available. The hostel does not serve breakfast, but it's only a 3-block walk to Calle Huertas where one can find good value-low cost eateries, such as Bodeguilla los Rotos and Platerías Bar Museo (Plaza de Platerías, at bottom of Huertas) for an inexpensive breakfast.

Calle Atocha will never pass as Madrid's prettiest street, it needs a face-lift and it does get heavy traffic, but this location is handy to Atocha station for day trips to Toledo or Cuenca or to catch the AVE to the south and to visit the three great art museums of the Art Walk. And this hostel is pleasantly run by a friendly family. To avoid street noise, be sure to book a room not facing bustling Calle Atocha. Recommended in the Lonely Planet Guide. Doubles go for €68 and triples for €85 (www.hostalbarrera.com).

2-star Hostal Gonzalo

At Calle Cervantes, 34, in Las Letras district, this family owned and run hostel is located on a quiet and safe street in a building housing three hostals, the Gonzalo, the Cervantes and the Pensión Corbero. The Hostel located on the third floor, but the building does have an elevator. The very helpful and English speaking son, Javier, runs the inn and gets good reviews for his friendliness and kindness. The eleven rooms (singles, doubles, triples) come with a/c, private, modern baths (soap provided but no shampoo), TV (Spanish channels only) and complimentary Wi-Fi. This is a tidy but bare bones little place with no extra services such as breakfast, bar, lounge with coffee/tea or laundry

service. There is a laundry nearby as well as a metro station (Antón Martín), and the Prado is just a short, two block shop away (www.hostalgonzalo.com).

Its Trip Advisor reviews do not reflect the fact that the construction on this street has now been completed. Recommended by Rick Steves, Lonely Planet and Rough Guide.

Budget dining is within an easy walking distance of the above: Ginger, Bar Museo Platerías, Tapería del Prado, Maceiras, Domine Cabra, Terra Mundi, Prada a Tope, Lateral, Casa Alberto, Taberna la Daniela, Come Prima, Le Petit Bistrot, Per Bacco (pizza) and Lamucca de Prado. All have been reviewed in the new dining guide.



Taberna la Daniela



Bar Museo Platerías



Plaza Santa Ana

OLD MADRID MODERATE HOTELS

From €120 to €150

4-star Hotel Opera*

At Cuesta de Santo Domingo, 2, a small side street in old Madrid directly in front of the Teatro Real (Madrid's Opera House), is just steps from the Royal Palace and the handy Opera metro station. This family-run hotel (*the family also owns the Meninas*) is very popular for its price to quality ratio and central location, and thus is always full. It offers 79 rooms divided among singles, twins or doubles and triples (with sofa bed), and some rooms for the disabled. Some superior rooms, priced at €190, offer terraces with Jacuzzis and panoramic views of Old Madrid. The stylishly decorated and newly renovated rooms with their clean lines, upscale reproduction furniture and natural colors reflect the hotel's recent fourth star.

All rooms have plenty of natural light, satellite plasma TV, safe, work desks, bedside reading lamps, mini bars, complimentary Wi-Fi, ADSL broadband and sparkling baths. Rooms face the street, but it's a narrow side street and the noise level on the lower Cuesta de Santo Domingo isn't too bad, although there is currently construction work on the Opera square, and guests may be awakened by late night revelers (beyond the hotel's control). Along with the guest quarters, the lobby-reception area has been given a stylish re-do. The renovation has maintained the English Bar and pleasant breakfast room. The hotel has a new gym on the top floor with panoramic views of Old Madrid.

Online bookings include the ample buffet breakfast in the room rate. The adjacent Cafe de la Opera is very handy for snacks and meals at all hours and features singing waiters. The hotel can provide massages, a personal shopper or limo service for an additional charge. Recommended by Rick Steves and represented by Tablet Hotels (www.hotelopera.com).

Dining near the Hotel Opera: Chic Madrid, Genoveva de Bari, Taberneros Gastroteca de Santiago, Café de Oriente, Taberna del Alabardero, Anema e Core, El Mollete, La Bola, and Cornucopia.

3-star Hotel Room Mate Alicia*

At Calle del Prado, 2, at the corner of Príncipe, adjacent to the lively café lined Plaza Santa Ana, is the *Barrio de las Letras* sister to hip siblings, the Room Mates Mario, Oscar and Laura, also located in Old Madrid. The building is a former wool factory whose interior was designed by decorator-to-royalty, Pascua Ortega.

The Room Mates are a smart collection of design "budget boutique" properties in Madrid, Valencia, Málaga, Granada, Barcelona, Salamanca, Oviedo, Miami, Buenos Aires, Mexico City and New York. Each Room Mate is named for an imaginary personality-the concept is that guests are staying with a friend. Their wide popularity among young travelers comes from their high style for reasonable rates, the freebies such as Wi-Fi and buffet breakfast served until noon on weekends, a nice touch for those who

want to sample Madrid's notorious late, late nightlife, their convenient downtown locations and little touches such as apples at the check-in counter and tomorrow's weather report left by your bedside with turndown service.

The Alicia rooms are done in earth tones-browns, creams, and mustard, and those facing the square have floor to ceiling windows letting in great natural light but with electronically controlled blinds for shutting out the light. Some interior standard rooms are quite petite with the lavatory and a small shower with transparent door integrated into the sleeping quarters, and the WC has a sliding door that doesn't fully close-not for those with modesty issues. All have a/c, flat screen TV, mini bar (with Swell green teas and natural juices), safes and free Wi-Fi.

The hotel has 34 rooms with two duplexes (sleeping quarters with double bed and the bath are accessed via small, spiral staircase), with large terraces (401, 402, 403) and tiny (bathtub size) dipping pools along with two lounge chairs. There are also executive rooms with small terrace, three junior suites facing the Plaza, with floor to ceiling windows and a curved modular sofa. I particularly like 301. Rooms 106-107 are compact standard rooms but well designed with high ceilings that make them feel more spacious. But remember that the standard rooms do have an "open bath" exposed to the sleeping quarters, which may not appeal to some. The small lobby is done in all white.

There is a downstairs café/lounge where the free buffet breakfast is served from 7:30 until 11:30 and on weekends until noon. The front desk staff receives high marks for their friendliness and professionalism. The location of the Alicia couldn't be better, as the Prado is only a 10-minute walk away, as is the Antón Martín metro, the Reina Sofía and the Thyssen. No gym and no room service (www.room-matehoteles.com).

I would happily stay at the Alicia if my budget required a double room for €100 - €120/night, including breakfast and free Wi-Fi. Recommended in Conde Nast Traveler and the NY Times "Check In/Check Out". It receives high praise on Trip Advisor.

Secret Places (www.secretplaces.com), Rusticae (www.rusticae.es), I-Escape (www.i-escape.com) and Inns of Spain (www.innsofspanain.com) also represent the Madrid Room Mates.

Dining near Room Mate Alicia: Lateral, La Mucca de Prado, Cervecería Cervantes, Taberna de la Daniela, Estado Puro, Le Petit Bistro, Ginger, Domine Cabra and Prada a Tope.

3-star Hotel Room Mate Mario*

At Campomanes, 4, formerly **HH Campomanes**, near the Opera. This Room Mate too enjoys a great location near Madrid's most beautiful square. This is a budget "design" hotel, kind of Phillipe Starck on the cheap, "laid back minimalism", with 54 playful "designer dormitory", a former apartment building from the 1800s, painted peach. It switched affiliation to the Room Mate Hotels group after a total renovation by the hip interior designer Tomás Alía who has also done the interiors of several chic nightspots

and other hip hotels. Some rooms have balconies, and some are non-smoking. The hotel offers two mini-suites.

Decorated in charcoal grey, black, or red mixed with white with white walls, the rooms are pleasant enough, but seem a bit more pared down than the other Room Mates and have small baths separated from the bedroom by a frosted glass panel. For extra space, guests should consider upgrading to an executive double. But all Room Mate rooms come equipped with flat screen TV, free Wi-Fi, safes, mini bar and a/c. Hallways have been done in black and white with translucent panels.

The cost of a double ranges from €85 during low season, to €120 in high season. Rooms 102 and 202 are the largest and lightest while 112 and 212 are the quietest. Room 101 is a mini-suite with balcony. Some baths are divided from the sleeping area by only an opaque glass door, which is de rigueur in hip design hotels in Spain today but not for those who must have absolute privacy. Perfect for the young, party hearty 'Time Out' guidebook crowd. And the staff receives much praise from guests.

The downstairs lounge has a kind of Pop Art look, done in red, white and black. No room service, no in-house bar/restaurant, no gym. The ample breakfast buffet is included in rate, as is the case with all Room Mate hotels, and is served until noon. And green apples are left out for guests in the lobby. Take a virtual tour at www.room-matehoteles.com.

Dining near Room Mate Mario: Chic Madrid, Genoveva de Bari, Taberneros Gastroteca de Santiago, Café de Oriente, Taberna del Alabardero, Anema e Core, El Mollete, La Bola, Cornucopia and Toma Jamón.

3-star Hotel Room Mate Laura*

On the Plaza de San Martín, across from the Las Descalzas convent, just two blocks from the Puerta del Sol (on same square as Hotel Palacio San Martín). Opened in the fall '06, a sister to Alicia, Oscar and Mario, decorated by nightclub designer Tomás Alía in a red, black, white "retro cool" color scheme, closer to the look of the Oscar than the Alicia. There are only 36 rooms, here called "apartments", including duplexes, executives, loft rooms, and suites. These rooms have mini kitchens with microwave and full size fridge (but no coffee maker, toaster, utensils, plates or glass ware), and the eight duplexes on the corners have downstairs living rooms, bedroom and bath upstairs. But beware the narrow, steep stairs.

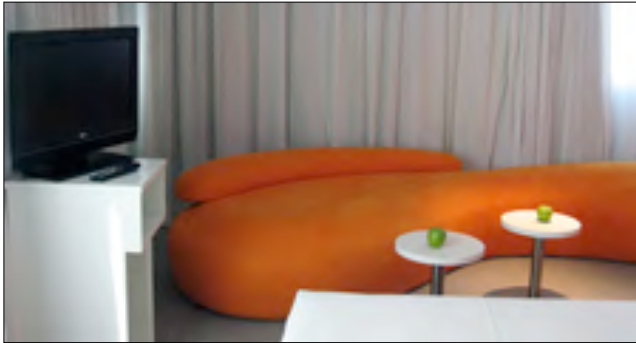
All of the hotels have the same Room Mate amenities; flat screen TV with international channels (the Chic Lofts have a DVD), free Wi-Fi, mini bar, safes, buffet breakfast (here for an additional charge, but also served until noon) and trendy baths. But the Laura has no public space downstairs except for a small sitting area in the narrow lobby, where a bowl of green apples is left out for guests. Since the accommodations open to an interior atrium, noise is somewhat of an issue. Some say avoid room 101, the noisiest. There is no in-house restaurant or bar here as there is at the Oscar. Book through Room Mate Hotels (www.room-matehoteles.com).

A note for the Room Mate Laura and Intur Palacio San Martín - there is a group of homeless men and their dogs that camp out at night just to the northeast of the square, around the corner from the Palacio San Martín, a harmless but noisy and unkempt group.

Dining near Room Mate Laura: Cornucopia, Anema e Core, El Cucurucho del Mar, Chocolatería Valor and Chic Madrid.

3-star Room Mate Oscar

The newest of the Room Mates, opened in June of '07, is located on a square (Plaza Vázquez de Mella) behind the Gran Vía, between the very "cool" Fuencarral and



Hortaleza streets. Not my ideal, ultra attractive location, but this somewhat gritty but increasingly trendy area should appeal to urban hipsters who enjoy clubbing in Chueca or to those who would like some whimsical style on a budget. This 75-room hotel offers a hip bar and restaurant called GIFT where one can have cocktails until the wee morning

hours. There is also a rooftop terrace lounge and mini pool where (rather expensive) drinks are served at night. (The tiny dip pool is not open year round, and the rooftop terrace is not free for guests' use, a €20 fee is charged.) Interiors are done in Pop Art style by designer Tomás Alía in colors of lime green, orange, pink, blue, black and white. I particularly like executive rooms 501 and 502 (in orange), which are large enough for a party of three. The junior suites (303 and 503 are favorites) come with bathrobes and are done in blue, orange and pink. But recent reviews have complained of the poor insulation between rooms. Because of the thin walls, noise travels easily from the corridor into the guest quarters. Rates include free Wi-Fi and buffet breakfast served until noon. Next door a Basque pintxos bar, Txueca, has opened with a set menu for only €15.

Look for promotional specials at Room Mate Hotels. If you can snag a €90 rate here and don't plan on spending extra to use the rooftop terrace pool, you'll be happy with your choice, and you'll have free Wi-Fi and free buffet breakfast included (www.room-matehoteles.com).

Dining near Room Mate Oscar: El Original, Come Bien, La Barraca (paella), Bazaar, La Bardemcilla, Vegaviana (vegetarian), Home Burger Bar, el 26 de Libertad and El Armario.

3-star Hotel El Prado*

Calle del Prado, just below the Room Mate Alicia. While the entrance can most kindly be described as non-descript (not much they can do to jazz up this 70s style brick building) and the narrow lobby "chain-hotel like functional", this spic and span 3-star in a

highly enviable location in the heart of the Barrio de las Letras provides great value for one's money. No longer a member of the "Green" hotel group of environmentally friendly hotels, it belongs to another group of three, the *Hoteles Culturales Temáticos*,



along with its sister in the neighborhood, the Hotel Lope de Vega. *The hotel is also now part of ACCORHotels (All Seasons Madrid Prado)*. While the 60-room Lope de Vega has adopted a literary theme, the

43-room Prado sports a wine theme, each room named for a particular wine-producing region in Spain.

All the double rooms are reasonably spacious (the '03 rooms having the most space) and kept spotlessly clean. Note: the single rooms are quite compact. My preferred rooms here at those ending in '03, '04 and '05. The sixth-floor rooms have tiny terraces but outfitted only one aluminum chair and are covered with green outdoor carpet. Nonetheless, room 601 is a spacious triple, with separate bedroom door, off the entryway, keeping all hallway noise at bay.

The functional rather than stylish baths have showers with good water pressure, and plenty of bath amenities. The bedrooms are simply but attractively furnished, with blonde wood furniture, laminate floors, beige and burgundy bedspreads with a grape leaf pattern, burgundy wood headboards, plenty of pillows, ample closets with safe, a writing desk, side chair, mini bar and good bedside reading lights along with comfortable mattresses. On each floor there are apples and little candies left on a table in the hallway for guests. At check in, guests are given a helpful "orientation" folder of brochures, maps, cards for restaurants, clubs, flamenco, plus a plethora of tourist material is provided in the lobby.



Other more handy but prosaic items in the lobby (which to me give it a chain motel like feel) are the Nespresso coffee machine for take away espresso (1 euro) and serve yourself soft drinks from an honesty fridge (you pay at the desk). A security guard is posted at the door 24/7, and a computer is provided next to the desk for guests' use. In addition the hotel provides very good free Wi-Fi throughout the building. The breakfast room is located to the left of the lobby and serves a buffet breakfast starting at 7:30 am. There is

a three-tier pricing system at breakfast: one can sit and have just a coffee, a coffee and pastry or partake of the full buffet for €11 (the hotel often runs breakfast specials-the full buffet for only €5).

In addition to the very reasonable tariff, the hotel's other major selling point is its nearly perfect location for easy sightseeing. You'll never need the bus or metro. One can walk to the Prado and the Thyssen Museums in about 5 minutes, to the Reina Sofía and Caixa Forum, plus lovely Retiro Park, in around 10 minutes, to the Puerta del Sol or Plaza Mayor in 5 minutes, and the tapas bars of the Cava Baja in about 10 minutes. The lively tapas bar filled Plaza de Santa Ana is just a short block away and directly opposite the hotel you'll find a tapas bar, Lamucca de Prado with a kitchen that's always open. The immediate area abounds with inexpensive restaurants. If you plan a day trip to Toledo, the AVE station is only a short walk from the hotel. This holds true, of course, for its Calle del Prado competitors as well.

Although I've been given exterior rooms facing the Calle del Prado, I've suffered no real problems with noise; however, on weekends there will be some early morning street noise, and traffic from a constant stream of taxis that serve this "hotel row". Street noise is just unavoidable in the Barrio de las Letras neighborhood, a very "happening" section of the city. If you are extremely noise sensitive, request a room on the sixth floor that faces the back (www.pradohotel.com).

All in all, while not "chic", like the Room Mate Alicia, or "hip" like the Soho, or as refined as the Catalonia las Cortes, its three competitors on the Calle del Prado, the Hotel Prado does offer a rock solid value (with rates from €90 - €120) and practicality, particularly for the first time visitor to Madrid.

***Dining near the Hotel El Prado:** Olsen, La Mucca, El Lateral, Cervecería Alemana, Cervecería Cervantes, La Taberna de la Daniela, Prada a Tope, Per Bacco (pizza), Le Petit Bistro, Midnight Rose, Artemisa (vegetarian), La Bardemcilla de Santa Ana, Vinoteca Barbechera, Come Prima, East 47 at the Derby Villa Real, Estado Puro, Domine Cabra and Maceiras.*

4-star Hotel Quo Puerta del Sol

At Sevilla, 4, a few blocks from the Puerta del Sol, directly across from the bargain seekers' budget restaurant of choice, La Finca de Susana. The entrance appears rather unprepossessing, as there are a few steps up to a narrow entry door, which could not be widened or made more accessible due to its historic building status. Nonetheless, the Quo has modern, high style rooms, stylishly decorated by Tomás Alía in a black/white/red color scheme, with black and white photographs of Madrid adorning the walls. All rooms are equipped with two small closets, flat screen TV, free Wi-Fi, safe, pillow menu. Bathroom doors are made of frosted glass (this you'll find as well in the AC, H10 and NH chains and all new designer hotels). Room 702 has a Jacuzzi plus terrace. This Quo has 62 rooms, 10 superior (with robes/slippers), 6 of these with terrace, some no-smoking rooms and one junior suite.

The Quo offers a very nice and ample breakfast buffet with delicious coffee served in the Quo room. There is also room service, and laundry service. Although windows are double glazed, I would ask for a room overlooking the side street rather than on heavily trafficked Sevilla. A solid value at a promo rate of €120 (or July 15-August rate of €110), but like the Vincci Centrum, not a good value in the least at a rack rate of €225.

I stayed here as a guest of the Spanish Tourist Bureau in April and was pleased with my stay but this was prior to the transfer of the city bus hub from the Puerta del Sol to across the street, making Sevilla a much noisier location. I found the décor more appealing than the olive green/orange color scheme of the Vincci Centrum, but not quite as appealing as the Vinci Soho or Room Mate Alicia rooms. It is a selection of Époque Hotels, along with the Meninas and the De Las Letras below (www.hotelesquo.com).

Dining near the Hotel Quo Puerta del Sol: Europa Decó and Glass Bar of the Urban, DL of the Hotel De Las Letras, Artemisa (vegetarian), Olsen, Prada a Tope, Come Prima, Cervecería Alemana and Finca de Susana.

4-star Hotel Vincci Centrum

At Calle Cedaceros, 4, which opened in March '04, is a minimalist design, stylish-for-the-price downtown hotel with 85 rooms, two junior suites and some triples with tailored modernist furnishings. The three Madrid Vincci properties in my guide look and feel to me like a Phillippe Starck or Ian Schrager hotel for the low budget crowd. Good location in heart of city, within easy walking distance of museum triangle and Old Madrid. Black and orange décor downstairs, trendy/dark bar, coffee shop, free daily papers, non-smoking rooms, in room safe, mini bar, Wi-Fi internet access, two phones. Nice baths with ultra modern raised sinks. Five superior doubles have balconies. The superior rooms come with trouser press. Desk staff is friendly and helpful. Some superior rooms have a small terrace.

Recommended by the NY Times, reviewed in “Check in/Check out” and always full. The earlier you book, the better the rate. One can snag a €90 rate in low season by booking several months in advance, but the €225-rack rate, for my money, is just over priced (www.vincci-hotels.com).

Dining near the Hotel Vincci Centrum: Europa Decó and Glass Bar of the Urban, DL of the Hotel De Las Letras, Artemisa (vegetarian), Olsen, Prada a Tope, Come Prima, and Cervecería Alemana.

4-star Hotel Vincci SoHo

On the Calle del Prado in Las Letras district, just a block below the Hotel Room Mate Alicia and the Plaza Santa Ana, sits another (larger) Vincci property, newer than the Centrum, with 169 guest quarters distributed in a slightly confusing warren of five, rambling, renovated buildings. It offers the same contemporary amenities as the Centrum but with a trifle more comfort and an even sleeker look, and its location in this very up-and-coming neighborhood is a real plus. Of the 169 rooms, 140 are standard doubles, 24

executives (half with balconies), a few are triples and one is a suite, done in a black, beige, white and dark red color scheme. But the overall effect of the interior design is a bit dark, particularly in the “nightclub-ish” downstairs chill out bar and lounge. This look, however, will appeal to urban hipsters who inhabit trendy hotels and the W properties, but

I recommend that one book a patio rather than street side room because of street noise issues. This Vincci does have a restaurant, the *Hyragana*, serving fusion Mediterranean cuisine.

Check for very competitive promo rates here, particularly from mid July to the end of August. It's a JP Moser downtown selection. However, on the same street, right above the Vincci, I personally prefer the more classically elegant, but also more expensive, **Catalonia Las Cortes**, or for a lower tariff than the Soho, the lighter and brighter **Room Mate Alicia**.

Dining near Hotel Vincci SoHo: Olsen, La Mucca, El Lateral, Cervecería Alemana, Cervecería Cervantes, La Taberna de la Daniela, Prada a Tope, Per Bacco (pizza), Le Petit Bistro, Midnight Rose, Artemisa (vegetarian), La Bardemcilla de Santa Ana, Vinoteca Barbechera, Come Prima, East 47 at the Derby Villa Real, Estado Puro, Domine Cabra, and Maceiras.



La Tapería de Prado, Paseo del Prado, 22

OLD MADRID

UPPER MODERATE HOTELS

€130 to €150

4-star Hotel Meninas

This is a 34-room family-owned, elegant rather than trendy, boutique sister to the Hotel Opera at Campomanes, 7, in same convenient and strategic location near Palacio Real, opened in June '05. Housed in a lovely 19th century building and renovated to preserve its original structure and design with classic details such as the silver framed antique lithographs in guest rooms and the vaulted basement dining room (the old wine cellar) where the very ample buffet breakfast with a wide array of sweet and savory items is served. The guest quarters come appointed with modern amenities such as designer baths, flat screen TV, DVD player and free DVD library, free ADSL Internet access by cable and Wi-Fi in the common areas. Some rooms have complete "office facilities"-a private phone and fax line, laptop, printer and photocopier. Some are non-smoking rooms plus triples and quads are available. I like room 404 in particular, a junior suite for three, although it does face the street. Rooms ending in '03, '04 and '05 are street side rooms that do catch late night noise from revelers and the quite loud trash pick up at 2 am, which the hotel cannot remedy. Nor can they "fix" the ongoing construction that is currently taking place on Opera Square.

The buffet breakfast, available beginning at 7:30 am, includes fresh fruit and juices of all types, cereals, cheeses, hams, jams, numerous cakes (even a *brazo gitano*), tortilla, fried potatoes, sausages, boiled eggs, churros, donuts, muffins, bread and rolls. The hotel also offers a bargain priced *menú del día* for lunch. Rates drop from July 15 - August 31 when doubles can be had for €120. An airport transfer is offered for a reasonable €12 (www.hotelméninas.com).

Époque and Tablet Hotels represent the Meninas, but the Meninas' own online rates are guaranteed best rates, so book directly through the hotel.

Dining near Hotel Meninas: *Chic Madrid, La Bola (cocido), El Mollete, Taberna del Alabardero, Café del Oriente, Toma Jamón, Anema e Core, Genoveva de Bari and Taberneros.*

4-star Hotel Intur Palacio San Martín

At Plaza San Martín, 5, you have an almost perfect solution for those who really, really want to be right in the thick of things, in the Puerta del Sol, Gran Vía area (Madrid's Times Square and Broadway) but who don't want to contend with the constant stream of mass humanity there, the pickpockets, the "street life", the noise. It's located just around the corner from the huge El Corte Inglés shopping complex but on a quiet square next to the Descalzas Reales convent. It's directly across from the Caixa Madrid, which is a venue for special art exhibits organized in conjunction with the Thyssen Museum. Only three blocks from Madrid's epicenter, but what a difference a little distance makes.

This Intur is a reconverted private noble home, and the designers have kept the original iron elevator cage (modern elevators too for guests), the regal Persian rugs, and the public rooms are built around a stylish pretty atrium. The guest rooms are sparely but nicely decorated with sparkling modern baths. The rooms with plaza views are larger and some have balconies. There is a nice breakfast room downstairs adjacent to the atrium parlor. One can often find very competitive Internet rates here. I've seen mid-July thru end of August rates as low as €90 - €110 (www.hotelinturpalacio.com).

Note: Around the corner from the hotel (not directly in front) there is a semi-permanent encampment of "street people", vagrants with their dogs, who are harmless but do sully the look of the street.

Dining near Hotel Palacio San Martín: *Cornucopia, Anema e Core, El Cucurucho del Mar, Chocolatería Valor and Chic Madrid.*



Los Rotos, C/Huertas, 74

4-star Hotel Lope de Vega

At Calle Lope de Vega, 49, is in the heart of old Madrid, on a very quiet street near Paseo del Prado and just steps from the Prado in the Barrio de las Letras, super convenient to the museum triangle. This 60 room 4-star is rather spare with an unfussy modern look. It formerly belonged to the Green chain, which had an environmentally conscious theme, thus the simple, pared down look and rather bland exterior. It now belongs to a group of three nice and reasonably priced hotels all with a different cultural theme-the Hoteles Culturales Temáticos. While the Lope de Vega's theme is literary (Lope de Vega was a

17th century dramatist and contemporary of Cervantes), its sister, the Hotel Prado, has adopted a wine theme.

The rooms here are simply dressed with attractive light wood furniture, bare wood floors, but are a bit on the small side, but some have room for a settee. They come equipped with a safe, CD player and a remote control A/C. The functional rather than stylish brown marble baths have good showers and plenty of toiletries. Email access is from a computer in the lobby or from the free Wi-Fi now provided in the guest rooms. Only 59 rooms with 15 designated non-smoking. Two junior suites have balconies overlooking the Prado. Downstairs there is a bar, breakfast room and reading room.

Some Trip Advisor comments have complained about poor soundproofing between the rooms. If you are a light sleeper, request a room on the top floor and towards the back. I have found the staff to be friendly, helpful and efficient. The desk managers rotate between the Lope de Vega and the Prado hotels (www.hotellopedevega.com).

***Dining near Hotel Lope de Vega:** Dómine Cabra, Bar Museo La Platería, La Tapería del Prado, Taberna la Dolores, Taberna la Daniela, Cervecería Cervantes, Maceiras, and Estado Puro.*

4-star Hotel VIP Preciados*

At Calle Preciados 37, in block-long extension that turns west from pedestrian Preciados, which runs from the Puerta del Sol to Plaza Callao. I feel this hotel, and the nearby Palacio San Martín, are both far nicer, fresher alternatives to the inexpensive “tried and true”, but “tired and old fashioned” Carlos V, which is right in the center of the pedestrian walkway at the Puerta del Sol.

The attractive guest rooms at the Preciados have clean lines, Ikea-type furniture, bare polished wood floors, plasma TV (42 channels), free mini bar (with juices, still and sparkling water), individually controlled a/c, double glazed windows that keep the noise at bay, electric shutters that black out the light and high speed internet via Wi-Fi. The deluxe doubles and jr. suites offer private balconies or terraces, they have sloped roofs, skylights in the baths and extra amenities such as make up mirrors, bathrobes and slippers. The top floor suite (very hard to book, as it's much in demand) offers its guests a separate living room, two plasma TVs with 42 channels, an exercise bike, king bed and in the bath, a separate Jacuzzi tub and shower and twin sinks.

This hotel is a JP Moser selection (jpmoser.com) and gets terrific reviews on Trip Advisor from well-satisfied guests. Online booking offers special rates for a 3 or 5-night stay. (www.preciadoshotel.com).

***Dining near Hotel Preciados:** El Cucurucho del Mar (seafood), Chocolatería Valor, Cornucopia, Anema e Core, and Casa Perico.*

OLD MADRID MODERATELY EXPENSIVE HOTELS

€160 - €200

4-star H&R Hotel de las Letras*

This very contemporary but elegant hotel, with 103 guest rooms, is located on the lower (and more attractive) Gran Vía. The hotel is a harmonious blend of the old and new, interiors smartly designed by Virginia Figueras. The designer has kept the original tiles, canopies and carvings of this lovely 1917 building and has mixed the original historic elements with hip urban design features. Normally I don't recommend hotels directly on the Gran Vía, but this designer boutique hotel, member of Design Hotels and opened by the owners of the trendy Hotel Bauzá (now a Vincci) in the Salamanca district, just won me over. The double glazed windows muffle most all traffic noise, which makes staying on Madrid's "Broadway", the bustling Gran Vía bearable.

I was given a full tour, and I left impressed with the quality/price ratio. The original features-the mosaic tiles, beautiful stained glass, the gorgeous staircase with elaborate railing and ornate carvings- have all been preserved from the original turn-of-the-century building, but bedrooms have a clean, minimalist look. Each guest bathroom has double sinks; the rooms themselves are quite spacious (larger and more light filled than the Hotel Urban's) and seem more so due to the high ceilings. They're soothingly decorated in cream and dark red or gray, or blue and white with Spanish literary quotations stenciled on the walls and bare parquet floors. They have Ikea type furniture, wall-mounted plasma TVs, CD/DVD players, Wi-Fi, a pillow menu, safes and free newspaper.

The special DL rooms have a terrace and Jacuzzi, and the duplex suite occupies the tower of this magnificent neoclassical structure. An added attraction is the basement Spa, with Jacuzzi, Hamman and fitness room. There's also minimalist looking downstairs trendy bar/lounge with orange plastic rocking chairs, red and blue sofas plus **DL's restaurant**, an open space around the corner from the bar, done in gray, and serving both Spanish and Japanese dishes with daily set menus for €25 (this is where breakfast is served as well).

I've yet to visit the **Air Lounge**, the hotel's "cool place to be" in the summer months, a penthouse chill out bar which offers cocktails and Wi-Fi, open from 7:00 until 2:00, Thursday - Saturday and until 12:30 Sunday - Wednesday (www.hoteldelasletras.com).

This property, along with the two new Vincci hotels, can, I hope, add a little note of glamour to Madrid's once glamorous "Gran Old Way" which has become over the years decidedly dowdy. Although less over-the-top, avant-garde hip and trendy than the Urban, it represents a good value for the style and comfort.

Represented by Époque Hotels (epoquehotels.com), i-escape (www.i-escape.com) and Tablet hotels (www.tablethotels.com) and is a member of the Rusticae Metr poli Madrid selection (www.rusticae.es).

Dining near Hotel De las Letras: El Original, La Gloria de Montera, La Barraca (paella), and Cubik.

4-star Catalonia Las Cortes*

This is a relatively new ('06), very appealing, but chintz not minimalist, hotel on Calle Prado in the heart of the Barrio de las Letras, Old Madrid, just a few blocks from the Prado Museum and adjacent to the lively Plaza de Santa Ana. It is housed in a former palace, and the designer had the good sense to keep the beautiful stained glass windows and marvelous frescoed ceilings in some of the guest rooms, such as gorgeous room 202. This small hotel exudes class and charm, and the interior rooms facing a courtyard are a haven of quiet. Even the exterior rooms, with double glazed windows facing the Plaza, do not suffer from street noise.



Most of the rooms are very spacious (a few, however, are quite petite, such as 201), decorated in a classically elegant style and each has a beautiful antique desk and headboard, flat screen TV and safe that can hold a laptop, plus nicely appointed baths with separate showers and towel warmers. Room 103 boasts two terraces. Downstairs you'll find a pleasant breakfast room, which also serves a bargain € 20 full menu for dinner, a quiet bar/lounge and umbrellas at the door.

This is a fine upper moderate choice for those who wish to be in the heart of Old Madrid, yet do not want to sacrifice quiet, comfort and class. And the location is superb with the majority of Madrid's prime sightseeing venues easily walkable from the hotel (www.lascortes.madridhotels.it).

Note: Rates here during high season can rise above the €200 ceiling. I stay here in the low season for €165 per night.

Dining near Hotel Las Cortes - Olsen, Lamucca de Prado, Lateral, Cervecería Alemana, Cervecería Cervantes, La Taberna de la Daniela, Prada a Tope, Per Bacco (pizza), Le Petit Bistro, Midnight Rose, Artemisa (vegetarian), La Bardemcilla de Santa Ana, Vinoteca Barbechera, Come Prima, East 47 at the Derby Villa Real, Estado Puro, Domine Cabra, Maceiras, and Terra Mundi.

4-star deluxe NH Paseo del Prado

At Plaza de las Cortes, 4, formerly the *Gran Hotel Canarias*, this deluxe member of the NH chain enjoys a really ideal location, perfectly placed for easy sightseeing, just across the street from the much larger Westin Palace and across the Paseo del Prado from the Hotel Ritz and Prado Museum. It's the re-conversion of an eight story, 1904 small palace, the former home of a count, and it has 116 rooms (some rather compact).

All rooms have the same amenities, including Bang & Olufsen plasma TV, thick carpets woven by the Royal Tapestry Factory, floor to ceiling gilded mirrors, pillow menus,

sparkling green marble baths with lighted make up mirrors and power showers, thick, plush towels, bathrobes and slippers of fine Egyptian cotton.

Room 601 has a nice view of the Plaza Cibeles. Room 517 has a large picture window, can hold a crib or rollaway but has no shower, just Jacuzzi bath. The very quiet interior rooms '03 and '05 rooms are larger with beautiful, spacious baths in green marble, but with a window that looks out on an airshaft. I would avoid the lower front view rooms (such as 117), as they are very small and more appropriate for the single traveler.

The difficulty here is that there is quite a spread between the cost of a standard and a superior room, and while standard rooms can be had for around €100 in low season, the superior room rates do not qualify as a bargain. In addition, there is no complimentary Internet access in the rooms, but limited free Wi-Fi time is available in the lobby.

The hotel does house a very trendy gastro-bar, Estado Puro, a creation of Paco Roncero, Michelin starred, El Bulli trained chef of La Terraza del Casino. I did prefer the hotel as the Gran Canarias and feel that as an NH hotel the service has slipped somewhat.

The NH chain will soon open its 5-star property **NH Palacio de Tepa** in the Barrio de las Letras, in a former 18th century mansion on the Plaza Jacinto Benavente, across from the Me Reina Victoria and adjacent to the lively Plaza Santa Ana. The 85 rooms will be divided into standard, superior, junior suites and suites, with some unique two-story suites. Rooms will be equipped with i-pod docks, CD players, coffee & tea makers, and the bathrobes and slippers will be provided. They will also have complimentary Wi-Fi. Since some rooms face the very noisy Calle Atocha, I do hope that the windows are double-glazed. I have yet to inspect his new five-star. Reservations are now being accepted for December, and the hotel is offering some advantageous, pre-pay, non-refundable rates. Chef Paco Roncero will open a branch of his Estado Puro, and the hotel will also have a second café, La Cuchara de Tepa and a lounge bar (www.nh-hotels.com).

Area dining - Dómine Cabra, Terra Mundi, East 47 at the Villa Real, Olsen (Belvedere Vodka Lounge), Tapas at Bar Museo La Platería, La Tapería del Prado, Taberna la Dolores, Taberna la Daniela, Cervecería Cervantes, Maceiras, Estado Puro, Lamucca de Prado, Lateral, Viva la Vida (vegetarian), Per Bacco (pizza), high end-Balzac, Goya at the Ritz, Asia Gallery at the Palace, Europa Decó at the Urban

4-star Radisson Blu Hotel, Madrid Prado**

This is a new, sleek, super stylish boutique hotel with 48 rooms and six suites, created from a pretty, neoclassical building, in an enviable (and fairly quiet) location on a pretty café lined square directly opposite the Prado Museum. From here the three museum giants of the Art Walk are an easy, quick stroll away, plus guests find themselves in the heart of the most picturesque section of Old Madrid, el Barrio de las Letras, filled with tapas bars and restaurants.

This is NOT your everyday Radisson. The Blu category refers to their high-end, luxury boutique European properties, and well-known hotel and restaurant designers, Sandra

Tarruela and Isabel López, authors of the interiors of Barcelona's Hotel Omm, decorated the Radisson's interior space.



The compact but cossetting standard guest quarters, measuring 24 square meters, sport very comfortable beds with duvets and a pillow menu, and the walls are decorated with huge black and white photographs of Old Madrid. Guests have Nespresso machines at their disposal, the TVs are LCD plasmas, mini bars feature Iberian ham and Spanish wines, and there is free Wi-Fi. In the attractive black slate baths, guests find bathrobes, slippers, rain showers and Anne Sèmonin toiletries. The larger Business Class guest rooms throw in a balcony, two complimentary dry cleaning items on arrival day and one for each other day, a work desk, complimentary photocopying and fax services and a complimentary breakfast buffet. The normal price of the buffet is a steep €21 for those in standard rooms, but the continental breakfast, consisting of coffee, juice and pastry is priced at €5.60. Or guests can have the same at the Tapería del Prado or Bar Museo Platería next door for slightly less.

Other hotel amenities include a small indoor plunge pool-spa, a restaurant that offers a 15-euro lunch menu during the week, a (seldom used) Whiskey Bar and health club access. This is a hip, contemporary spot without slipping into the “hotel-night club” scene like the Me Reina Victoria or the Urban.

It's quickly gained an excellent reputation for its sophisticated quarters and polished service. 48 rooms, including six suites, some connecting rooms for families and some with handicapped access (www.radissonblu.com/pradohotel-madrid).

Dining near Radisson Blu - Casual: *Dómine Cabra, Bar Museo La Platería, La Tapería del Prado, Taberna la Dolores, Taberna la Daniela, Cervecería Cervantes, Maceiras, Estado Puro, Lamucca de Prado, Bodeguilla los Rotos, Terra Mundi, Viva la Vida (vegetarian) and Zerain (Basque).* **Gourmet:** *Balzac, Goya at the Ritz and Asia Gallery at the Palace (very exp.)*

IN THE FASHIONABLE AND POSH SALAMANCA DISTRICT

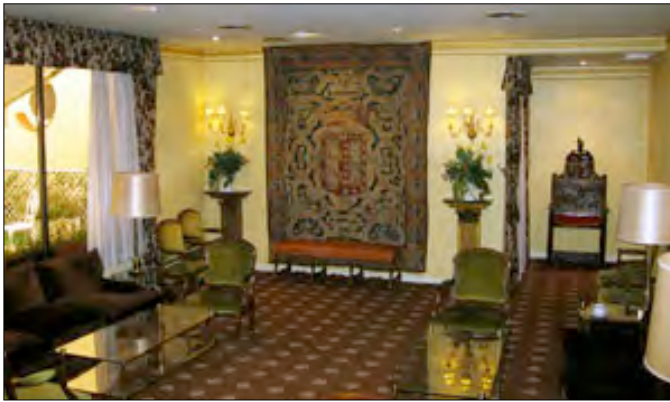
UPPER MODERATE

€130 to €150

3-star Hotel Residencia Galiano

Located at Alcalá Galiano, 6, near Plaza Colón, this hotel is on Madrid's safest and one of its quietest streets because it's above the Ministry of the Interior, which is in charge of fighting ETA terrorism. There are submachine gun totting guards stationed at the entrance of this one-block long street 24-hours a day. The Salamanca quarter is located just across the Castellana Blvd. to the east.

It was once the private palace of the Marqués de Perija, whose family still lives there. There is an antique filled parlor with tapestries, ivory chests and coats of arms. The rooms are as comfortable as an old shoe, classic furniture, sponge painted yellow walls, older baths and halls are so quiet I call this my Madrid decompression chamber; total and



complete silence. No Wi-Fi in rooms but there is a downstairs computer to check one's email for a modest hourly fee. Only 29 rooms, 7 are exterior-most face the inner courtyard, with private bath, satellite TV, phones. One family suite sleeps four for €187. Doubles now go for € 128, but there is a 5% discount for those who wish to pay in cash. No restaurant or coffee shop, just a

breakfast room downstairs which serves a buffet breakfast of croissants, rolls, cold cuts, packaged cheese, fruits, yoghurts, cereals and tortilla, in off season included in the room rate. A new Starbucks and VIPS have opened on Calle Génova, just a few blocks away. This is a place for those in the know who are familiar with the city and **not** for those who need handholding, pampering or ultra-modern conveniences. Not in Old Madrid, but for me this is a definite plus. Only a 20-minute leisurely stroll to the Prado, or one can catch bus No. 27, 14 or 45 down the Castellana or bus No. 5 will take you to the Puerta del Sol. Metro stops at Plaza Colón, but line transfers make it no faster than the bus.

This is my ace in the hole for **mid-week lodging during high season** or during **trade fair** dates; and my double room at single occupancy rate of €101 can't be beat, as the Galiano offers very old-style comfort in a much more elegant, refined, quiet and safe setting than do downtown budget hostals/hotels. But if you're a lover of trendy designer type hotels, the Galiano is **far, far** too old-fashioned for you. On weekends, I often switch to a newer, more contemporary hotel in the Salamanca district or in the Barrio de las Letras of Old Madrid offering low weekend rates (www.hotelgaliano.com).

Dining near Hotel Galiano: Enzo, Bice and Dilola, all Italian.

3-star Hesperia Hermosilla*

Opened in late '05, (*now part of the NH chain*) this is my moderately priced hotel of choice in this quarter, with an enviable location in retail heaven, right at the “shoe lover’s” corner of Hermosilla and Claudio Coello. It’s sleek and modern, has an inviting enclosed atrium, and is light and airy. There are 95 quiet rooms distributed on five floors. The spacious exterior rooms have plasma TV (with CNN), minibar, free Wi-Fi (guests need to secure the access code from the front desk), solid soundproofing, three telephones and contemporary, immaculate baths with super showers and aloe vera bath products.

I would avoid the interior doubles, as they are efficiencies, with the sink in the bedroom, thus reducing the room size. This great hotel has only a 3-star rating because of the lack of a restaurant, although there is a casual Gino’s Ristorante (pastas, pizzas, salads) adjacent. A limited room service menu is available which includes salads and sandwiches. But great restaurants and tapas bars abound in the immediate vicinity. The hotel has retained the original, beautiful wood staircase of the original mansion, giving it a touch of class. Superior room 108 is a corner room filled with light. ('08 rooms are all superior rooms). The fifth floor dormer rooms are charming. In the sleek atrium a buffet breakfast is served from 7:00 - 10:30 on weekdays, 7:30 - 11:00 on weekends but for an additional €15. Coffee/drink service is available all day. There is laundry service, and the garage charges €22 per day.

Rates drop significantly on weekends and from July 15 - August 31, and during most of December and Holy Week. During those dates, this hip hotel is a steal with standard doubles as low as €112, superiors for €145. Since the exterior doubles have ample space, there’s really no need to book a superior. During low season, bargain weekend rates are available which include buffet breakfast, late check out on Sunday (until 5:00 pm) and free mini bar (but not restocked daily). The front desk staff has always been very helpful and accommodating to me (www.hesperia.com).

Dining near Hesperia Hermosilla: Paninoteca D'E, Teatríz, El Rincón de Goya, Loft 39, Estay (tapas), El Lago de Sanabria, Ramón Freixa, Asador Frontón, La Trainera, Teatríz, La Colonial de Goya, Sula, Zen Central, Alcalde, El Paraguas, Lateral (tapas), Iroco and La Cesta de Recoletos

4-star AC Recoletos

This is the newest member of the hip AC chain in Madrid, opened in April '07. It has an equally enviable location in this posh quarter between fashionable Serrano and the Paseo de Recoletos, only a 10-minute (or less) stroll from the Museum Triangle and steps away from Retiro Park (www.ac-hoteles.com). I enjoyed a short but pleasant stay in late July for a promotional rate of €150. Because my trip required bringing a car (thankfully arriving on a quiet Sunday afternoon), the valet parking proved to be a godsend.

Like its luxury cousins, the Palacio del Retiro and Santo Mauro, the Recoletos was created via a total remake of a handsome neoclassical seigniorial home. The interiors have been decorated with this chain’s customary contemporary grey, black, tan and white

palette with abundant use of chrome. It offers the usual amenities of an AC Selection hotel: free minibar (water, sodas, juices), free newspapers (in Spanish only), bathrobes & slippers, CD players, 24-hour room service and speedy laundry service, but Wi-Fi service comes only with purchase of a Telefónica card. On a future visit I would book one of the cozy top floor dormer rooms, which I find more inviting and spacious.



Note: If you are traveling with someone you do not know well, you will not be comfortable with the not-so-opaque frosted glass wall separating the bathroom from the sleeping area, which provides little privacy for ablutions.

The downstairs breakfast room serves the typical ample AC buffet, but I don't partake, as my favorite gourmet delicatessen, Mallorca, stands just a half block away on the corner of Serrano and Alcalá. I do have pre-dinner drinks in the mezzanine lounge (delectable nuts served with drinks) but have yet to sample the light fare (sandwiches, salads) prepared by the chef of the nearby Palacio del Retiro. All in all, I find that this AC provides smooth and welcoming service (despite grumblings to the contrary in a Trip Advisor review) and a fabulous, upscale location for a lower tariff than its two 5-star AC cousins.

If you plan to visit on a weekend in July or August, during Christmas or Easter, take advantage of the AC "green days" with rates as low as € 120. The AC online booking system is user-friendly and offers a "best rate" guarantee. However, in high season, you can stay in almost equal style in the Salamanca quarter for fewer Euros in a superior room at the aforementioned 3-star Hesperia Hermosilla.

This property and all 3 and 4-star AC hotels will soon come under the umbrella of **Marriott**, who will incorporate them into their empire, branding them as AC by Marriot. Guests can in 2011 obtain and redeem Marriot Reward points at all AC by Marriot hotels in Spain, Portugal and Italy (www.ac-hoteles.com).

Dining near Hotel AC Recoletos: Kabuki Wellington, Dassa Bassa, Nicolás, Alcalde, Vino Tinto, Zen Central, El Paraguas, Pandelujo, Sula, La Colonial de Goya, Iroco, Alfredo's Barbecue (NYC style burgers), Pelotari (Basque), Mallorca (delicatessen) and La Cesta de Recoletos.

4-star + High Tech President

Located off posh Serrano on Marqués de Villamejor, at the corner of the Castellana Boulevard, another snazzy entry to the Salamanca hotel scene, along with its more expensive cousin, the **Petit Palace Embassy** right on Serrano. The **President** has

received a favorable review from the hotel critic of El País and offers competitive promo rates that include breakfast. It provides the usual High Tech hotel amenities including its “High Tech” rooms (77) equipped with laptop and free high-speed internet access, trouser press, exercise bike, 20” plasma TV. All rooms have king size beds, Jacuzzi showers. As with the Embassy, there is a restaurant, bar and buffet breakfast room. There is Wi-Fi throughout the hotel, plus a garage, laundry service and a business center. The feedback on the President has been generally positive, although some have found their rooms quite compact (ask for the largest double available).

The High Tech chain is not known for the comfort of their mattresses, however-most guests find them quite hard. And the rapid-fire expansion, really explosion of this chain has caused their new properties to have been built very quickly with the fit and finish work somewhat lacking. I feel that the Room Mate and Vincci contemporary style chains can offer an even better value. Nonetheless, the family rooms, quads with a double and two bunk beds can be a very economical solution for a family with two small children (www.hthoteles.com).

***Dining near Hotel High Tech President:** El Lago de Sanabria, La Trainera, Asador Frontón, El Plató and Harvest Company of Natural Goods.*

4-star Vincci SoMa

When this 70s-era hotel at Goya, 79, was completely renovated in 2000, it was inaugurated as a Habitat hotel, an Ian Schrager wannabe and member of Design Hotels and a sister to the Hotel de las Letras on the lower Gran Vía. It has been recently sold to the up and coming Vincci group and re-baptized as the SoMa. In minimalist design, the rooms have blond Ikea-type furnishings and bedside reading lights, really nice, hip baths, plain bare parquet floors, walls lined with contemporary photographs, shades of grays and blues combine with brushed steel fittings. They also offer a pillow menu, CD menu, stereo system, Wi-Fi, TV with Play Station and free daily paper upon request. With 170 rooms and three suites, it caters to the media, marketing and music industry types. Rooms 802, 901 and 902 have terraces overlooking bustling Goya Street.

There is a downstairs library and trendy gourmet restaurant, plus a gym and sauna. Fresh apples are left for guests at the front desk. A very hip but also competitively priced hotel-nonetheless, it is located just four blocks too far east on Calle Goya for easy walking to tourist sights. However, there's a metro stop adjacent, and the huge shopping complex of El Corte Inglés is a stone's throw away, and El Retiro Park lies within a short stroll. The hotel also has 7 apartments ranging in size from 40-60 square meters, sleeping from 1-4 persons, equipped with Wi-Fi, CD and pillow menus and a shopping basket of groceries for the kitchen. Daily cleaning and laundry service is provided. Featured in the Louis Vuitton guide. (www.vinccihoteles.com)

***Dining near the SoMa:** All of my favorite “secret gems” of the Retiro District are just a ten-minute walk to the south (see Where Maribel Dines section).*

4-star Selenza*

Claudio Coello, 67, is one of the most select addresses in this very posh shopping and residential quarter where the Selenza opened in '09 as a 44-room boutique hotel, housed in a stunning, white 19th century mansion. The renovation from aristocratic residence to hotel maintained the original marble staircase and beautiful black and white mosaic flooring in the dramatic lobby and added a playful red ribbon sculpture as a contemporary note. The guest quarters come well equipped with polished wood floors, comfy beds, large plasma TVs, DVC and CD players, a pillow menu and laptop sized safes. They have lovely white marble baths.



Some rooms have balconies overlooking the garden, where the Fora Terrace Bar is located, open only in summer for cocktails and pre-lunch or dinner snacks. The rooftop room is quite small. The hotel offers free Wi-Fi, 24-hour room service, 24-hour laundry/dry cleaning, concierge service and valet parking.

The Selenza is very lucky to house the highly regarded **Ramón Freixa Madrid** restaurant, honored with one Michelin star, one of the city's top tables. The restaurant is closed on Sundays/Mondays and the entire month of August. Breakfast here is served until 1:00 pm on weekends. It's a selection of Johansen's Guide and is represented by Tablet Hotels (www.selenzahoteles.es)'

Dining near the Selenza: Oter, El Lago de Sanabria, Teatríz, Asador Frontón, Loft 39, plus all the dining establishments on Jorge Juan are found only 4 blocks south.

5-star Wellington*

I include the Wellington in this section rather than Luxury in Salamanca because during the low season it offers quite advantageous tariffs that place it in the upper moderate bracket. It's located on posh Calle Velázquez, 8, in the heart of the prestigious Salamanca quarter's very best high style shopping area and lies right across the street from beautiful Retiro Park.

Now a member of the Summit Hotels marketing group, it is a classic Old European style hotel with oodles of character, opened in 1952 by Baltasar Ibán Valdés. While not as luxurious as the Ritz, it's been a favorite of Spain's leading matadors, and Ernest Hemingway and Gene Kelly once called it home, along with Spanish royalty.

The Wellington offers five categories of guest rooms-standard, superior, junior suites, suites and Presidential suites. Rooms come outfitted with traditional wood furniture, writing desks, plasma TV, i-pod docks, and there is evening turndown service and room service, 24 hours. The marble baths offer make-up mirrors, robes and slippers.

It provides a 24-hour business center, a garden, terrace bar and seasonal outdoor pool and has recently added a top notch Caroli Spa & Health Club. It offers two of Madrid's finest (and priciest) dining establishments, the Goizeko Wellington for gourmet Basque cuisine and Kabuki Wellington, one of the city's top sushi bars. Other hotel dining venues are the Llave de Oro café, English bar and the poolside outdoor terrace bar.

While the breakfast buffet comes at an additional €20/person unless one chooses a B&B rate, there is a branch of the wonderful delicatessen, Mallorca (Madrid's answer to Paris' Gerard Mulot) at Velázquez, 59, on the corner of don Ramón de la Cruz, with a bar for having a quick continental breakfast (www.hotel-wellington.com).

Dining near the Wellington: *La Fonda (catalán), Pan de Lujo, Sula, El Paraguas, Zen Central, Alcalde, Vino Tinto, Iroco (brunch), La Colonial de Goya (evening tapas), El Chiscón de Castelló, La Cesta de Recoletos, Dassa Basa, Nicolás and Le Dragon.*



Inside the Crystal Palace, Retiro Park

ALL SUITES HOTELS SALAMANCA DISTRICT

UPPER MODERATE (For the single business executive or for families of 3-4)

4-key Apartotel Jardín de Recoletos*

This little known gem is found on Gil de Santivañes, a quiet side street, that lies just south of Plaza Colón and the National Library and just north of Cibeles square and the town hall, a very attractive and handy area for touring. This property belongs to the four-member VP mini chain of very well run and immaculate apartotels. It is decorated in an elegant, Old European style (no trendiness here), with marble, mirrors, elaborate crown molding, and its English-speaking staff receives much praise from guest reviews on Trip Advisor and other booking sites. It provides me with a little oasis of calm in a hectic city thanks to its tucked away location away from the fray and its lovely interior garden. Yet the Prado and Thyssen Museums and galleries, such as the Mapfre Sala Recoletos, are only a 10-15 minute stroll away down pretty, tree-lined Castellana Boulevard, and the elegant shops of Serrano just one block north.

The hotel offers 43 rooms, standard, superior and junior suites, all with very comfortable beds, doubles or twins, dressed in crisp Egyptian cotton sheets. Even the standard rooms here are very generous in size, measuring 35 square meters, and have a sitting area with sofa bed for extra guest (or two children) and a mini kitchen with fridge stocked with complimentary non-alcoholic beverages, a sink, a burner for cooking and a microwave (but no tea kettle, tea bags, milk or sugar packets). The hotel has two superior rooms that measure 40 square meters with private terrace overlooking the tranquil garden. Baths in the superior rooms come with Jacuzzi tubs, robes and slippers. There are five suites, with 25 square meter terraces and separate living rooms. Maximum capacity of these suites is 3 persons. All guest quarters have flat screen satellite TV, complimentary Wi-Fi and the kitchenettes. Baby cots and cribs are available.

The hotel offers special weekend rates of €130 for a standard room and buffet breakfast, which includes the 8% vat-a great deal for an immaculate 4-star hotel in a quiet corner of a very posh neighborhood. The ample buffet breakfast is served from 7:00 -10:30 am weekdays and from 8:00-11:00 am on weekends. (www.recoletos-hotel.com/es/)

Dining near the Jardín de Recoletos: Dassa Basa, Nicolás, Mallorca (delicatessen), Pelotari (Basque), El Barril de Recoletos (seafood), El Dragón (Asian), Almounia (Moroccan) and La Cesta de Recoletos.

Apartamentos Ramón de la Cruz*

At Don Ramón de la Cruz, 41, also in the chic and aristocratic Salamanca quarter, these serviced apartments are handily located between international boutique-filled Ortega & Gasset and Calle Goya and near the Núñez de Balboa metro station and the beautiful Marqués de Salamanca square. This exceptionally well-run property, housed in a very pretty turn-of-the-century building, consists of just 13 executive studios/apartments, each (except for the basement studios) having a living room with sofa bed, TV and work desk,

separate bedroom with ample wardrobe with safe deposit box, and a complete kitchen, equipped with full size fridge, stove, coffee maker, utensils and dishware, microwave, dishwasher and washing machine! In addition, all breakfast items (cereals, packages pastries, cream, sugar, milk, coffee, tea) are provided in the room rate and replenished when needed. Also included in the room rate is daily housekeeping and free Internet connection.



I received a full tour of the facilities and left quite impressed both with the high standard of the apartments and with the energy and enthusiasm of the desk manager, who is very proud of his property. These very nicely equipped suites are the third member of the HCT group, along with the 3-star Hotel Prado and 4-star Lope de Vega, both in the Barrio de las Letras of Old Madrid. I believe that these suites can be ideal for a person on business, a family or just a couple who plan to spend a week or more in the city and want a very comfortable, extremely safe and most attractive (and swank) base from which to enjoy the city (www.ramondelacruz41.com).

Dining near Apartamentos Ramón de la Cruz: *Finos y Finas, Mallorca (delicatessen), Lateral, T.A.R.T.A.N, Pizzicheria, Sanxenxo (seafood-exp), Asador Frontón and Lago de Sanabria.*

R & R Amador de los Ríos*

On Calle Amador de los Ríos across from the legendary Jockey restaurant, which gives hotel guests preferential seating, this Apartotel is now under new ownership after being purchased from the Espahotel apartment-hotel group, whose properties I have used frequently. And this 29-room property has been newly renovated. It lies in the tranquil and elegant Chamberí embassy quarter, near the Interior Ministry, on a very quiet and safe street (plenty of police protection in this area). It's smart, with interior décor done by designer-to-royalty Pascua Ortega, discreet, and it consists of all studios (not one bedroom apts.), which have flat screen TV, DVD players, mp3 docks, a safe that will hold a laptop, writing desks, a small expandable dining table for two, a kitchenette with microwave and Nespresso machine and sink, sparkling, although smallish baths with make up mirrors, Molton Brown toiletries, hydro massage showers and towel warmers. The top floor executive suites have terraces overlooking the Plaza Colón. There's even a pretty garden pool, open only in summer, plus a garage. The metro (Colón) is an easy walk away as are the buses that ply the Castellana Boulevard.

This property has all the comforts of a hotel (concierge, laundry, room and turn down service, buffet breakfast served in the downstairs bar area, free high speed internet access) with the privacy of a studio apartment. Perfect for a 5-7 day stay. Always check for discount rates, as in low season tariffs here can be a steal-under €100.

Dining near Amador de los Ríos: *Astrid y Gastón, Bar Tomate, De María de Hortaleza, Bice and Enzo.*

ALL SUITES HOTELS THE ROYAL PALACE AND TEATRO REAL DELUXE

Casa de Madrid

At Arrieta, 2, is a little gem I've yet to personally try. British Condé Nast Traveler Magazine calls it: "A new exquisitely decorated place run by aristocrat interior designer and historian Marta Medina. She's turned her spacious apartment in an 18th century house overlooking the Royal Opera House into a luxurious, seven room B&B furnished with family heirlooms and items that she has brought back from her world travels. Rooms range from a small double to a large suite with its own balconies, sitting room and kitchenette. The Blue Room has a sleigh bed and swan bedposts, while the Indian Room has colonial style furniture and the Greek Room has an Aegean beach scene fresco. Medina is the decorator behind the exquisite Casa de Carmona outside of Seville. Breakfast can be served on a silver tray in bed." I stayed in a B&B owned by Spanish aristocrat-sherry baron in Sevilla, the Casa 7, and loved the experience, but it's not everyone's cup of tea. Much like a very chic London B & B. There is only a tiny note next to the apartment bell at the entry to indicate its presence-very discreet. Featured in the Louis Vuitton guide (www.casademadrid.com).



Two reviews from Fodor's Forum:

"Absolutely fabulous. They have a Greek room that is prominently displayed on their web page (room No. 3). SPECTACULAR, featuring 14-foot high ceilings and incredible plasterwork! The staff was outstanding and special kudos to Christine at the front desk and Maria who brought breakfast on a silver tray every morning! I travel extensively and never have I been made to feel so at home. The staff sewed on buttons, made dinner reservations and even made dinner reservations for me in the other 2 cities I was to visit and had my train tickets delivered to the hotel!! Fodorites-this place is a find. Every room is a gem. I will be back. One complaint. VERY NOISY! Bring your earplug-or ask the desk which cheerfully supplied us."

"We also took your suggestion about the CASA DE MADRID. We stayed there four nights. Staying in a B&B across from the Opera House was great. What a unique place that is. It has been open 6 months. We had 2 rooms with a sitting room (triple). We looked at several rooms. I especially liked the Greek room and the Indian room if it were a couple traveling. There was a room next to the entry that wouldn't appeal to me. I like more privacy. The main suite was beautiful. The only two disadvantages would be street noise for some rooms (our unit had interior windows), and the owner smokes. Her room is next to the gorgeous living room where complimentary cocktails are available each evening. It is a bit smoky. I don't let it bother me in

Europe. The staff is WONDERFUL, and the owner is the most creative decorator you could meet. The continental breakfast is brought to the room on silver trays with china. I have never seen such gorgeous linens used for everything, including the beds. The guidance and service was exceptional. I had asked the hotel if they would order flowers as a surprise for our mom prior to our arrival. I had given a 30 Euro budget. The most gorgeous bouquet was waiting in our sitting room. Both women at the front desk were VERY helpful and gave as much guidance as anyone would want. One was at the desk at a time. Marta (the owner) also would give suggestions.

They will make dinner reservations too. We mentioned that we needed to send a package to the Canary Islands. They did not want us wasting our time at the post office. They packaged and mailed it for us, only the 3 Euro postage charge. That is service! The smoking is not an issue unless you are near the living room at the time Marta is there. Her bedroom (the Damascus suite) is next to the living room. None of the guest rooms are in that area. She is very friendly, interesting, and willing to share where she gets her decorations and linens, etc. So...we found it OK to deal with a bit of smoke. My sister was looking for specific knobs for a dresser. Marta sent her to the perfect place to find them. Marta, the owner, didn't mention any new projects. She is still perfecting this one. The opera singers are starting to stay there for weeks at a time, because they have minimal kitchens in the suites, and the homey feeling."

The Casa de Madrid is a selection of Secret Places (www.secretplaces.com), of Mr. and Mrs. Smith (www.mrandmrsmith.com) and of i-escape (www.i-escape.com), whose web page notes that since all rooms have double beds, it is not a place for friends traveling together, and that the two smallest rooms do not have views. Free Wi-Fi. This is an elegant townhouse, an antique-filled, eclectically, artfully, dramatically decorated private home, not a hotel. "A true luxury hideaway in the heart of Madrid."

Dining near Casa de Madrid - Chic Madrid, La Bola (cocido), El Mollete, Taberna del Alabardero, Café del Oriente, Anema e Core, Genoveva de Bari, Taberneros and Gastroteca de Santiago.



The Changing of the Guard at the Royal Palace

DOWNTOWN LUXURY

€250 and up

5-star Hotel Ritz***

If nothing but the very finest will do, the legendary Grand Dame Hotel Ritz has the most illustrious past, Old World elegance and snob appeal of all the Madrid luxury hotels,



having housed dignitaries and royalty from around the world for one hundred years. Recent guests have included Bill Clinton, Pierce Brosnan, Kevin Costner, Julio Iglesias, Nicole Kidman, Oscar de la Renta and George Clooney. Think of the Ritz as Madrid's equivalent to London's Claridge or Connaught. King Alfonso XIII, upon marrying Victoria

Eugenia, granddaughter of Queen Victoria, realized that there was no proper Madrid establishment to accommodate royal guests; thus, he commissioned Cesar Ritz to create the hotel in 1910. Now run by Orient Express, the grandiose public rooms glisten. The hotel offers 137 rooms and 30 suites.

Although I was able to secure a heavily discounted rate for my stay, much to my delight, I wasn't assigned a broom closet, but instead an elegantly appointed, quiet interior Classic room on the top (sixth) floor, facing the courtyard, with all the predictable Ritz luxuries.

I was escorted to my room, at the end of a long and winding, never ending hall thickly and luxuriously carpeted (carpets are hand woven by the Royal Tapestry Factory) by a young woman from the reception staff that spoke flawless English, as does virtually every member of the staff. Bags arrived swiftly and separately, and staff members addressed me by name. My large, newly renovated marble bath boasted double sinks, a separate and enormous shower stall, gold plated fixtures, including towel warmers, too many white and blue porcelain trays/cups to count, a scale, truly enormous, thick, heavy towels, floor length but narrow bath robes, slippers. The generous toiletries are by Bulgari. And a single fresh flower is left daily. At check in, guests choose among a half dozen free newspapers (Financial Times, Wall Street Journal, El País, El Mundo, to be delivered each morning (the IHT costs extra). Afternoon turn down service left plates of chocolates or fresh fruit daily (including delicious coconut covered grapes). Evening turn

down service left the Ritz Chronicle, listing museum special exhibits, suggestions for excursions, and the weather forecast.

I slept soundly on a supremely comfortable king size mattress covered with hand embroidered bed linens by Robinson and Cleaver. My Classic room was decorated in a dark Edwardian style, in a Venice-Simplon Orient Express Pullman look, with antique desk and armoire, burgundy velvet lounge chair and matching settee. The two ample closets had heavy mahogany doors, large and removable wood hangers, and pillow menu. I had my choice of 45 channels of TV, including Al Jazeera and a large classic motion picture menu of video rentals. Budget constraints forced me to skip both the €36 full breakfast and €22 continental, and I took coffee elsewhere, across the Paseo del Prado at one of the cafes on Plaza Platerías. Nor did I sample the full spa services (treatments starting at €90) or the gym. But I was able to test the efficiency of the concierge desk, and the staff took swift and good care of my restaurant reservations.



The stunningly opulent Goya restaurant serves a set menu or a la carte lunch or dinner (jackets required inside but not in the garden) and its justly famous weekend Brunch, served from 1:30 - 3:30 pm and accompanied by harp music is popular but pricey at €65. Also popular is the afternoon tea (€30) served from 4:30 – 7:30 and accompanied by classical guitar. One can dine early (20:30) in the Goya restaurant, or sit in the afternoon in white wicker chairs under a blue parasol with a pot of tea in the garden to rest after a long day at the Prado. The Goya restaurant boasts one of the top female sommeliers in Spain, Gemma Vela.

The Ritz is a member of Leading Hotels of the World. The location, on the shady Plaza de la Libertad, across from the Stock Exchange and just steps away from the entrance to the Prado, simply can't get any better. It is indeed the most prestigious address in the city. I found it a wonderful experience. Relatively “affordable” rates can be secured by following the promotions on their web site (ritzmadrid.com).

The hotel began its centennial celebration in October, which will run until October of 2011. During this period, the Ritz is offering a special 3-night centenary package, including breakfast buffet and 8% vat tax, for €800 (or €267 per night).

Dining near Hotel Ritz: *Casual dining: Estado Puro (gastro bar), Cervecería Cervantes, Taberna de la Daniela, Taberna la Dolores, Tapería del Prado, Bar Museo Platerías. Gourmet dining: Viridiana, Horcher, Balzac, Club 31 and Asia Gallery.*

5-star ME Madrid Reina Victoria*

You'll find the ultra hip ME directly facing the lively Plaza de Santa Ana, in the heart of



the Barrio de las Letras in Old Madrid. It opened in the October '06 (originally planned as Spain's first Hard Rock Hotel). I was given a complete tour of all facilities by the management upon inauguration, and I did love what I saw; in fact, as far as modish Madrid hotels go, I do prefer the Reina Victoria to the Urban, as it seems lighter and more airy and has maintained the elegant 1919 façade. This is the third in a series of designer "contemporary resorts and urban hotels", by the new **ME by Meliá** brand of the Sol-Meliá group, with sister hotels in Cabo San Lucas, Cancún and Barcelona. It has been decorated with great style and surprising comfort. It is a complete

remake of the former bullfighter's hotel, the Reina Victoria, a turn-of-the-century "wedding cake" building complete with turret. From its former bullfighters' hotel past, the hotel has retained the mounted bulls heads at the end of the trendy bar.

The 192 bedrooms (including 12 suites) have polished wood floors, lots of wonderful natural light, three phones, CD and DVD player, surround sound speakers, 32" plasma TV, free Wi-Fi, laptop safes, US power adapters, iron and ironing board, a single red rose in bath with marble showers and Aveda bath products. And each room is equipped with the ME brand signature MAXI-bar for making martinis. There is 24-hour room service and twice daily maid service.

The "Level" (VIP) rooms come equipped with iPods, Nespresso machines, access to Nintendo Wiis and a private lounge and afford extra services, such as free local phone calls, daily paper, early and late check in, the ironing of three garments upon arrival and an extra garment during one's stay, plus free car wash and special concierge service. The seven suites are located on the top, 6th floor, and most have two plasma 42" TVs, extra power room in addition to the huge bath with double sinks and separate tub and walk in shower. The suite 601 with separate living room (with chess set and white leather sofa and recliner) and enormous terrace (outfitted with two lounge chairs, Jacuzzi and dining table for 6), dining area and Jacuzzi is the best in the entire city, bar none. I also liked room 306 facing the Plaza Santa Ana and No. 311, a deluxe interior room facing the courtyard. Free ice machines are provided on each floor.

The USA based After Midnight group (Randy Gerber) runs the trendy **Midnight Rose** restaurant serving fusion cuisine created by a 24-year old chef, Jaime Renedo, of Asiana and Asiana Next Door. The adjacent bar has a disc jockey at night. The enormous Penthouse roof terrace bar and disco has a separate entrance, and is **the** spot to be at night

with its lovely views of Old Madrid and remains open until 2 am. The hotel also is equipped with a small fitness room, free business center open 24/7 and massage room in the basement. While the hotel doesn't offer a pool, it does offer discounts at the nearby Spa Excellence. Breakfast costs an additional €20+ per person, but cafés abound in the immediate vicinity, so no need to take breakfast in the hotel. And the museum triangle is just a few minutes walk away.

I think this is a fabulous, hip reincarnation of the classic Reina Victoria, and I would stay here happily (in a larger room) even though it's designed to be a bit night-clubbish. Again, the rooms are brighter and lighter than those at the Urban. It's a selection of Mr. and Mrs. Smith (www.mrandmrsmith.com) and Tablet Hotels (www.tablethotels.com). The hotel offers 192 rooms, including 12 suites.

Dining near Hotel ME: Olsen, La Mucca, El Lateral, Cervecería Alemana, Cervecería Cervantes, La Taberna de la Daniela, Prada a Tope, Per Bacco (pizza), Le Petit Bistro, Midnight Rose, Artemisa (vegetarian), La Bardemcilla de Santa Ana, Vinoteca Barbechera, Come Prima, East 47 at Derby Villa Real, Europa Decó at the Urban, Estado Puro at the NH Paseo del Prado, Domine Cabra, Maceiras and Terra Mundi.

5-star Westin Palace

At Plaza de las Cortes, 7, across from Parliament, and the Plaza de Neptuno from the Ritz, the Palace is its direct competitor with an equally superb location but with somewhat less snob appeal. King Alfonso XIII also commissioned this 1912 Belle Époque, wedding cake style building, Madrid's second classic old-world Grande Dame. With 466 rooms, covering the entire block, it can accommodate high-end tour groups and can seem more impersonal and certainly sees more hustle and bustle. It went through a 42 million dollar refurbishment in the late nineties, and the public rooms still sparkle, if not all the guest quarters.



The Westin Palace is a member of the Starwood Group and has Madrid's second best concierge desk. The gorgeous La Rotunda lounge with beautiful Art Nouveau stained glass dome and carpets hand woven by the Royal Tapestry Factory is where the city's movers and shakers meet and where society balls and wedding receptions are held. La Rotunda makes a wonderfully tranquil setting for a pre-dinner drink (classical music performed both for tea and in early evening). It also has a very British gentlemen's club bar, handy La Rotunda dining area serving a daily buffet (open for early diners) plus a pricey Sunday Opera brunch (€65), and the signature restaurant, Asia Gallery, gets

terrific reviews. Some standard doubles do run somewhat small so it might be wise to upgrade to a premium or an executive room, which measure 312 square feet.

All rooms come equipped with the Starwood Heavenly beds (queen or two twins), a writing desk, a cozy chair, cocktail table, bathrobes and dual line speaker phone with voicemail. Although in room Wi-Fi comes with a charge, there is complimentary Internet access in the Business Center (www.westinpalacemadrid.com). The Palace once again made the 2010 Condé Nast Traveler's Gold List. It's also a member of the Kiwi Collection.

If you're a Priceline bidding fan, the Palace is a regular 5-star offering in the Old Bourbon Madrid zone. See www.biddingfortravel.com

Dining near the Westin Palace Hotel: East 47 at Derby Real, Europa Decó at Urban, Paradís Madrid, Cervecería Cervantes, Taberna de la Daniela, Midnight Rose at the ME, Lateral, La Bardemcilla de Santa Ana, Cervecería Alemana, Goya at the Ritz, Viridiana, Olsen and Estado Puro.

5-star Derby Villa Real

On the Plaza de las Cortes across the square from the Westin Palace and Parliament, the Villa Real is a smaller (115 rooms), boutique-like hotel belonging to the Barcelona based Derby group, which also owns the ultra hip Urban, and whose owner, Jorge Clos, is a noted Egyptologist. Thus, the public rooms display part of his Greek-Roman-Egyptian art collection (you'll find a piece or two in the guest rooms as well). Some front rooms have balconies, and the duplex suites come with private terrace. The Villa Real a member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World and the Concorde group.

I recently took an extensive tour with the PR staff, and while the décor is beginning to look dated compared to the trendy Urban (the classic Villa Real is the antithesis of the Urban), the hotel is impeccably maintained. Even though the baths have older fixtures, they still shine and come supplied with bathrobes and all the usual 5-star amenities. Many of the rooms have now been recently redone (such as the duplex suites 514 and 517 and the suites with terrace), so it's best to request a renovated room when booking.

The fine service remains the same, and the Villa Real attracts a very loyal repeat clientele, guests who don't need or want the ultra hipness of the Urban. The rooms here feel larger than they actually are thanks to the sunken sitting room below the bed area. The suites have a separate living room with leather sofa and are on one level. The loft suite is wonderfully private and cozy. The small, Andy Warhol themed **East 47** restaurant at the Villa Real provides light Mediterranean fare and drinks, nothing out of the ordinary, while the gourmet restaurant of the Urban, **Europa Decó**, whose chef Joaquín Felipe, has a fine reputation among food critics, is one of Madrid's best hotel restaurants. Guests at the Villa Real have privileges to the rooftop terrace and plunge pool at the sister Urban.

The most competitive rate and great "deals" can be found on the Derby Hotels own web site: www.derbyhotels.com. This Derby is also represented by Tablet Hotels.

Dining near Hotel Villa Real: Asia Gallery at the Palace, Goya at the Ritz, Europa Decó at Urban, Midnight Rose at the ME, Viridiana, Paradís Madrid, Cervecería Cervantes, Taberna de la Daniela, Estado Puro, Lateral, La Bardemcilla de Santa Ana, Cervecería Alemana, Lhardy, Olsen

5-star Derby Urban

At Carrera San Jerónimo, 34, the Urban, too, can pride itself on a fantastic location above the Hotel Palace and directly across from Parliament, and it lies within an easy walk to the museum triangle and also to Old Madrid. It's also within a very easy stroll of the lively tapas bars of Plaza Santa Ana. This is the Derby chain's Madrid "hip and happening" hotel, opened in '04, with dramatic interior spaces created by Carles Bassó and Mariano Martitegui. It is for now one of the most visually exciting (read ultra cool) hotels in the city. The guest rooms have sleek, ultra modern leather furnishings, with black leather couches, comfy white or orange leather chairs, black bed covers and black leather trimmed wall serving as a headboard, dark wood floors, black or grey shimmering curtains and dramatic lighting. The baths are done in solid grey marble. As at the Villa Real, there are some loft suites, decorated with leather and chrome along with pieces of the owner's collection.

It's all very modish and visually striking, especially the spectacular glass and gold cylindrical atrium, the trendy **Glass Bar** (with transparent chairs tables and gold settees) for drinks and sushi, an acclaimed **Europa Decó** gourmet restaurant and a basement museum displaying 78 pieces from the Derby owner, Jordi Clos's, personal Egyptian antiquities collection. Some stunning pieces can be found in the suites, blending the ancient with the ultra modern. It also boasts a small rooftop plunge pool with lounge bar/terrace restaurant, the **Cielo del Urban**, open in summer, plus sauna, solarium, small fitness room and business center with computer, Internet and printer downstairs. The hotel does have Wi-Fi, but like at the Villa Real, it is not complimentary.

The 96 compact bedrooms all have in-room safes, satellite flat screen LCD TV, CD players (upon request only), laptop size safes and mini-bars. The junior suites actually run surprisingly small, as they simply have a sofa next to the bed, but the suites are enormous and quite impressive with the bath in the center of the room, surrounded by glass (but one can lower the black blinds for privacy). At turndown, a fried egg rather than a chocolate is left on your pillow. There's 24-hour room service plus garage.

I have sent several friends here lately who enjoyed their stay in the interior rooms, although room service breakfast left much to be desired. (Better to grab a coffee and pastry at the Starbucks below the Hotel Palace, the Faborit below Las Cortes or one of the cafés that line the Plaza Santa Ana). But I've had good reports about the downstairs buffet breakfast, although it's pricey. Be sure to book an interior room in the back, not one facing the Carrera San Jerónimo or the Ventura de la Vega side street, as the street facing rooms get significant noise, as do those closest to the bar. The Urban is a member of Rusticae's Metrópoli collection (www.rusticae.es) and is also represented by Tablet Hotels and the Kiwi Collection (www.derbyhotels.com).

I've toured the hotel and had dinner at the much-lauded **Europa Decó** on New Year's Day (one of the few dining options in Madrid on January 1st). While I did enjoy the slightly Asian inspired fusion cuisine, the stunning dining room was quite a "scene" with nightclub-like lighting, lots of turning of tables and a frenzied staff. Perhaps this was due to the holidays, or perhaps I just didn't flip over the all glass and gold décor of Venetian mosaic columns, black granite floors (lots of black at the Urban!), Papua New Guinea totems and faux snakeskin menus. It's not a place for a quiet, relaxed dining experience, as there's too much "buzz"-somewhat like dining in a dance club. The international wine list has high prices for Madrid. Nonetheless, many consider the Europa Decó one of the city's top tables, and it receives a 7.5 rating in The Best of Spanish Gastronomy. It's closed for Saturday lunch, all day Sunday and in the month of August.

Dining near the Hotel Urban: Asia Gallery at the Palace, Goya at the Ritz, Midnight Rose at the ME, Viridiana, Paradis Madrid, Cerveceria Cervantes, Taberna de la Daniela, Lateral, La Bardemcilla de Santa Ana, Cerveceria Alemana, Lhardy, Olsen and Estado Puro.



Hotel ME in the Plaza Santa Ana at midnight

LUXURY UPTOWN

On, or near the pretty Castellana Boulevard

€400 +

5-star Villa Magna*

At Paseo de la Castellana, 22, in the heart of the elegant Salamanca district, this luxury hotel, formerly the Park Hyatt, Villa Magna has now reopened after undergoing a 14-month long transformation and is now a member of Leading Hotels of the World. It now combines Old World grace with very modern and sleek elegance. Designer Thomas Urquijo created the luxurious interior décor. For those who prefer deluxe NYC hotels on the Upper East Side, the location of the Villa Magna is quite similar. And it's only a block away from the city's shopping Golden Mile, Calle, Ortega y Gasset, Madrid's version of Madison Avenue, Rodeo Drive or Bond Street. Since the hotel's reopening, it's received superb reviews from guests who remark that the highly polished service equals that found at a Mandarin Oriental, Ritz-Carlton or Four Seasons.

During its two year renovation the loyal staff was rigorously retrained to offer an even higher level of service. The concierge desk is manned around the clock and the members of the concierge staff belong to Les Clefs d'Or. Readers of Conde Nast Traveler selected the Villa Magna to the magazine's 2010 Gold List.



Here luxury abounds. The extremely plush guest quarters are quite large, ranging in size from 35 square meters to 290 square meters, and some have private terraces. During the renovation the 181 rooms were reduced to 150, to increase room size and to add more suites. All guest quarters come outfitted with thick carpets, heavy drapes, very comfortable beds and high quality linens, writing desks, i-pod docking stations and walk in closets. Blaise Mautin created the bathroom scents exclusively for the Villa Magna.

Other hotel facilities include two restaurants, the opulent Villa Magna and the Tse Yang, serving Cantonese cuisine, the Art Deco style Magnum Bar, the Magna chill out terrace

in the hotel's private garden, a state-of-the-art business center and the Club Wellness which features massage rooms, a Turkish bath and brand new fitness facilities (there is no indoor pool). The hotel does offer complimentary Wi-Fi, but guests must secure a new password every day.

Butler service for its Royal suites, babysitters, limo service, garage, complimentary car washes complete the hotel's luxury offerings. The Villa Magna is also member of the Kiwi Collection (www.hotelvillamagna.com).

***Dining near Hotel Villa Magna** - Oter, Ramón Freixa at the Selenza, Lago de Sanabria, Teatriz, Pedro Larumbe at ABC Serrano, El Plató.*

€280 or less

5-star Orfila

Opened in 1999, this jewel box five-star at Calle Orfila, 6, near Plaza de Colón, has only 20 doubles, 8 junior suites and 4 suites and is housed in a reconverted 19th century palace from 1886, previously a theater, then an aristocratic family's private residence. Currently it's the only Madrid member of Relais Chateaux. Here you'll find elegant French empire décor, marble floors, beautiful flower arrangements in the lobby, rooms filled with antiques, each individually decorated and each with a Jacuzzi bath. Pascua Ortega, decorator to the Royal Family and Madrid society, created the interior décor here, as well as the interiors of the hotels Hesperia, Adler, R&R Amador de los Ríos and Room Mate Alicia. Room 52, a superior double, is a cozy attic room, a clients' favorite. Guests are welcomed with a glass of cava or sherry. Evening turndown service leaves fresh towels and chocolates (www.hotelorfila.com).

The Orfila lies in the very quiet, upscale residential district of Chamberí, filled with embassies and private mansions, an oasis in this bustling city, but it's only a 20-minute stroll down pretty Castellana Boulevard to the Thyssen and Prado Museums. Featured in the Louis Vuitton guide and is a JP Moser selection.

The bijoux restaurant, **Jardín de Orfila**, which faces the interior garden, has a new chef who prepares mouthwatering Mediterranean cuisine (that come with a high price tag) and has quite a following among Madrid's elite.

Note: A few reports on Trip Advisor speak of frayed carpet and a need for new paint in halls. Extra services here, such as breakfast and dinner, can be quite expensive.

***Dining near Hotel Orfila:** Bice, Enzo, Dilola*

5-star AC Santo Mauro

This is a very discreet, classy and intimate, 19th century French-style palace-mansion located at Zurbano, 36, a very tranquil, tree-lined street in the most select quarter of the Chamberí embassy district, about a 10 minute taxi drive from downtown. Built in 1894 as a private residence for the Duke of Santo Mauro, it has been converted into an ultra chic luxury boutique hotel combining classic architectural style with very modern design elements, such as the Eames furniture in the public rooms. It attracts a celebrity

clienteles; soccer star, David Beckham, was a guest before purchasing his home in Madrid; also Bill & Melinda Gates and Gwyneth Paltrow have been guests here, as have other “important figures”. This was the Madrid flagship of the hip and ultra modern AC group, and it's rumored soon to become a Bulgari Hotel, as the 3 and 4-star AC hotels come under the umbrella of the Marriot Corporation.

The guest quarters are spacious, with their original parquet floors and ornate crown moldings. Rooms come equipped with a free mini bar (soft drinks, mineral water, juices), deluxe bathroom amenities, super king beds (2 meters x 2 meters), i-pod docks, bathrobes and slippers. The hotel provides a fitness center, a cozy and attractive heated pool in basement, 24-hour room service, and a gorgeous oak paneled library, which serves as the gourmet restaurant with cuisine by celebrated chef, Carlos Posadas. There's also a splendid garden filled with chestnut and eucalyptus trees, open in summer for drinks. The new rooms are found in the former stables. Room 106 boasts a private patio. The Santo Mauro is where the Mario Batali and Gwyneth Paltrow held the press conference for their Spain, On the Road Again travelogue. Because the front-facing rooms suffer from street noise, request an interior room or one facing the tranquil garden. The hotel offers only 51 rooms and 10 suites (www.ac-hotels.com).

Weekend and discount rates as low as €250 are sometimes available. Featured in the Louis Vuitton guide.

Dining near Hotel AC Santo Mauro: Mosaik (Moroccan), Paulino de Quevedo, Las Tortillas de Gabino, Sergi Arola Gastro, Zorzal, Bar Tomate, Astrid y Gastón, La Broche.

5-star Castellana Intercontinental*

Located at Paseo de la Castellana, 49, on Madrid's most attractive major thoroughfare, the Castellana, no longer a dowager but instead a fashionable, service oriented, deluxe hotel, came through a multimillion-euro stem to stern renovation in 2002, which left the hotel gleaming. The renovation retained the hotel's Old World Classic décor but brought it up to 21st century global business standards making it a great for business or pleasure. It offers a 24-hour health club and business center and “snap to” service from front desk staff. Guests find a metro stop right outside the door plus plenty of buses to whisk them downtown, or they can take the pleasant 20-minute walk down leafy Castellana Boulevard, a beautiful walk at night with its fountains illuminated. The fashion boutiques of the Salamanca quarter are just a short walk away, and the hotel is handy to the northern business district. In addition, the hop on/hop off Madrid Vision bus stop is nearby.

Standard rooms come equipped with marble baths, separate W.C., bathrobes and scales. These rooms also have coffee and tea making facilities, iron and ironing board, work desks, dual line phones with voice mail, in-room fax and printers. The Executive Club level rooms offer a work and living room area, CD/DVD players and access to the Club Lounge where guests can find complimentary buffet breakfast, free cocktail hour and free lunch and dinner snacks. Club level room guests have a separate check-in area.

Additional hotel facilities include a beauty shop, gift shop, lobby Bar 49 and an interior garden restaurant, el Jardín del Intercontinental, which serves Sunday brunch. The Intercontinental has 302 rooms, 77 of which are non-smoking and 33 suites. I have loved this address for over 30 years (www.ichotelgroup.com).

Dining near the Hotel Intercontinental: St. James (paella), Brasserie de Lista, El Almirez, El Plató, Harvest Company of Natural Goods, la Gabinoteca, Fortuny 34, Café Saigon. High end, Michelin-starred dining: La Broche at Hotel Miguel Angel, Santceloni at the Hesperia.

5-star Hesperia

At Paseo de la Castellana, 57, at Plaza Doctor Marañón, two blocks north of the Intercontinental, is the Madrid flagship for the Hesperia chain and a member of *Leading Hotels of the World*. It features an ultra modern design, dramatic, soaring lobby-atrium with lots of open spaces, plants and a Scotch bar (offering 70 single-malt whiskies), 171 sumptuous rooms with all the luxury amenities, decorated in a classic, timeless style by designer Pascua Ortega. Five suites on the top floor have terraces. It has a 24-hour business center, offers complimentary wireless Internet access throughout the hotel, a welcomed extra found in all Hesperia hotels, and a new 10th floor Sky Gym with great views of the city.

Although smaller and less luxurious than the ultra deluxe quarters at the Villa Magna and Ritz, my room was stylishly furnished. I had a comfortable queen bed, armchair and side table, an elegant bureau chock filled with tempting edibles (yes, with high price tags), a large mini bar, pillow menu, a single red rose in the bathroom, along with Bulgari toiletries, slippers and double sinks, a make up mirror and huge, thick, fluffy towels-most every item one would expect in a deluxe hotel room, and was quite happy with my stay, especially for the low tariff paid. Because my rate did not include breakfast, I didn't partake of the quite pricey €25 buffet but instead took breakfast at a corner bar. There's a Starbucks just across the street.

Though the hotel is not as central as the Villa Magna or other luxury Salamanca quarter accommodations, you'll find the metro station outside the door along with the city bus No. 27 that will transport you to the Art Walk. And the area is quiet. Taxis fares from this end of the Castellana, to the Prado, run around €7.

Their formal restaurant, **Santceloni**, the Madrid outpost of the famed 3 Michelin Star **Racó de Can Fabes** of Catalunya, received one Michelin star after its first year of business and now boasts two stars. It's one of Madrid's most elegant, most refined but also most expensive dining venues, costing a bare minimum of €120 per person. The hotel also offers a more casual dining option, **La Manzana**, whose kitchen is also supervised the Santceloni's chef Oscar Velasco.

One can often find very attractive rates at the Hesperia on various Internet booking sites. I found an offer just too good to pass up, and although I paid far less than the going rate, I was not shortchanged with my standard room. If you're a Priceline fan, the Hesperia has been one of the 5-star choices Priceline offers in Madrid. See www.biddingfortravel.com

for reviews. Featured in the Louis Vuitton guide and a JP Moser selection. The Hesperia chain is now a division of NH Hotels. (www.hesperia.com).

*Note: Some Trip Advisor reviewers feel differently, that the Hesperia doesn't measure up to the other Madrid LHW members, but it does offer plenty of comfort for far less money, as Hesperia keeps the rates here extremely attractive. These competitive rates *may eventually lead to a lowering of standards, so be sure to read current reviews on TA and Venere.*

Dining near Hotel Hesperia: Casual - La Gabinoteca and Café Saigon. High-end dining - El Jardín del Intercontinental, La Broche, Zalacaín and El Bodegón.

5-star Gran Meliá Fénix

Located on Castellana Boulevard at Plaza Colón, this is flagship hotel of Spain's Sol Meliá chain, which beautifully restored this 1953 building in 2003, bringing it back to its former glory. At first glance, it appears to be a lesser version of the Hotel Westin Palace, a smaller "Old Fashioned European Charm" style Grand Hotel. Its main floor salon has an aristocratic look, decorated with ornate rugs, velvet chairs and beautiful floral arrangements, is far smaller, more intimate than the Palace's but also boasts a magnificent stained glass ceiling in the rotunda. It has an enviable location facing leafy Castellana Boulevard with the posh boutiques of Calle Serrano just one block to the east. It's also handy to the Colón metro, and a bevy of buses stop at Colón square just steps away. One can walk down Paseo de Recoletos to the Thyssen in about 10 minutes. Add a few minutes more to reach the Prado.

The Gran Fénix has 214 rooms, divided into numerous (and a bit confusing) categories; the "deluxe" rooms are standard interior rooms, somewhat compact by American standards, while the "premium" and "supreme" rooms go up a step and are larger (30 square meters), with the same standard amenities, pillow menu, high-fi system with CD player, Bang & Olufsen TV, writing desks, trouser press, robes and slippers, scales, Eto toiletries.

The really attractive accommodations here are the **Royal Service** guest quarters, located on the hotel's top two floors, which offer private check-in, late check-out, valet service, complimentary pressing of one garment and access to the Royal Service lounge with open bar and complimentary pre-dinner hors d'oeuvres, media library and where the free breakfast is served. These rooms measure 33 square meters, have king beds and free Wi-Fi. The Gran Fénix is a member of *Leading Hotels of the World* and a selection in the Condé Nast Johansens Guide (www.solmelia.com).

Downstairs you'll find the buffet breakfast (€25) and a cozy and comfy English bar serving afternoon tea with piano music, a business center, fitness center, small Spa and Wellness Center and helpful concierge staff. The hotel has recently opened a branch of Dry Martini from Barcelona for craft cocktails.

Dining near Hotel Gran Fénix: Teatriz, El Rincón de Goya (tapas), La Trainera (seafood), Loft 39, Embassy (tea), Alcalde (Basque), Sula (Iberian ham), El Paraguas (Asturian), Zen Central, Vino Tinto, Iroco (brunch), la Colonial de Goya (tapas).

LUXURY IN THE TONY SALAMANCA DISTRICT

Madrid's Upper East Side

5-star Hospes Madrid*

As of October '07, this addition to Madrid's Salamanca quarter luxury hotel scene was opened by the luxury Hospes boutique hotel group, whose other deluxe properties are located in Granada, Córdoba, Valencia, Alicante, Palma de Mallorca and the Catalonian Pyrenees (plus the Hospes Lancaster of Paris). Here, as with their other outposts, Hospes has painstakingly restored this stunning, circa 1883 private mansion, but has furnished it in high fashion style: Philippe Starck meets Louis XIV. Like its AC palace competitor, it sits at an extremely privileged location, perched right at the Plaza de la Independencia, Alcalá gate (Madrid's Arc de Triomphe and opening photo to this guide), at the southern end of the swank Salamanca quarter and directly across from Retiro Park, the city's most delightful green space. You couldn't find a more exclusive, elegant, refined and beautiful spot as this. We were lucky to be invited for a tour by the marketing director and cocktail reception and left quite impressed with the facilities. Since the opening, many of our clients have enjoyed their stays here.

This fashion hotel boasts only 41 rooms, including four duplex suites, one junior suite and one grand suite. All guest quarters have stark white walls, those facing the front have floor to ceiling windows that envelope them with natural light, lots of marble, dark wood floors, and they retain the stately architectural touches of the original 19th century noble home. The design palate, done by the in-house Hospes team rather than a famous name decorator, is softer here than the cool, industrial look of the AC Palacio del Retiro, as the mix of soft gray, moss, white, beige, metallic, pink and lavender and the Louis XIV style chairs give it a more feminine feel. The baths have a wide-open design, as is the case in most new design hotels in Spain, so this may be problematic for those not traveling with one's spouse, who need the privacy of closed doors. Rooms are outfitted with complimentary Wi-Fi, flat screen TVs, tiny writing desks and Korres toiletries in the baths.

The public spaces include an intimate and romantic interior terrace, votive candle-lit at night, an upstairs wood-paneled library-lounge furnished with Chesterfield leather sofas and chairs and with windows overlooking the Alcalá gate, the **Sensone restaurant**, lounge bar and chill out terrace. In a separate 3-story small building, accessed through the interior patio, you'll find the signature Hospes **Bodyna Spa**, with spa treatment rooms, hair salon (arranged by prior appointment), fitness room, dry and wet saunas and a small but extremely inviting hydrotherapy pool-an urban oasis. In the downstairs reception area there is a table with two computers for checking email.

If your breakfast is not included in your room rate, I recommend that you take a short walk across the magnificent square to **Harina**, an all white bakery serving Nespresso coffee, delicious baked goods, sandwiches and light lunch fare along with afternoon tea. There's also a handy branch of Café y Té on the square. The Hospes is a selection of Johansen's Guide and Mr. and Mrs. Smith (www.mrandmrsmith.com).

Dining near the Hospes: Nicolás, Dassa Bassa, Ramsés, Le Dragon, La Cesta de Recoletos, Kabuki Wellington, Goizeko Wellington (Basque), Harina (breakfast & tea), and Horcher (3 Repsol suns).

5-star AC Palacio del Retiro*

This 51-room gem and sister hotel to the aristocratic **AC Santo Mauro**, is located on the elegant Alfonso XII street between Retiro Park and the Paseo de Recoletos, the avenue which leads you to the Prado. This is my luxury ultra contemporary hotel of choice. This AC is housed in a gorgeous white, 19th century palace, a former aristocratic Edwardian palace belonging to the Oriol family, but like all 5-star AC properties, it mixes the historical elements with the contemporary, using minimalist, ultra modern design furnishings (which at first startle until you get used to the AC hip look).

Inaugurated in September '04, it has all the usual mod cons of the hip AC chain, including their trademark free mini bar (stocked with juices, waters and sodas), 24-hour room service, very speedy laundry service, Internet access (for a fee), CD/DVD players plus a “mood music” CD, robes and slippers, double basins in baths, plentiful toiletries, Algoterm amenity kits, large plasma TV, laptops to lend, morning coffee bar, free newspapers. The baths of the suites offer creams from Germaine de Capucinni, and some baths are decorated with Lichtenstein screen prints on the glass bathroom doors. Another trademark of the AC chain are their supremely comfortable beds with plenty of pillows and high thread count sheets. The next day's weather forecast is left at one's bedside with the turndown service.

Since there is one staff member for every room, highly personalized service is assured by the friendly, attentive, English-speaking staff. The hotel also offers a business center, fitness center, sauna, massage rooms and Jacuzzi in the basement and small avant-garde design restaurant, **Indice**, serving Mediterranean cuisine by rising star David Herranz, which is getting solid reviews from the local critics.

I was given a full and lengthy tour when it opened by the lovely female resident manager (a native of Chile) and loved what I saw. The dramatically lighted and ultra cool reception area (which unfortunately looks a bit like a night club entrance at night) is located in the former carriage entrance, preceding the restaurant and to the left of the bar/lounge reserved exclusively for guests (with complimentary Wi-Fi). Up the magnificent original staircase with extravagant iron railing one reaches the “noble” floor, the 2nd floor. This floor has kept its elaborate “wedding cake” crown moldings, wrought iron lamps, Maumejean stained glass, marble fireplaces, the iron cage elevator, Julio Romero frescoes, carpets designed by the Royal Tapestry factory and original parquet floors.

The original chapel is room 209, a superior room with small parlor. Room 201 is the presidential suite housed in the huge (but dark) mahogany lined library, with marble fireplace, 2 plasma TVs, enormous gilt mirror and original floors. Room 211 is my favorite, an enormous deluxe room with view of the park, Jacuzzi tub, huge desk plus a table that seats 4 along with marble fireplace and lots of storage room. Room 210 is equally lovely. Room 212 is a standard room with original parquet floor and separate

shower stall in bath. Room 208 is a huge single. All guest quarters on the noble floor have a high ceilings and a wide-open floor plan. The fourth floor dormer rooms are romantic and cozy. Room 405 is a spacious single, while 406 is a cute double. All rooms have very modern gray and brown upholstered furniture with lots of chrome-again a startlingly modern look in this historic setting.

The hotel is blissfully quiet, a real haven of peace and tranquility. The only amenity not offered here (as it is at its sister the Santo Mauro) is a pool, there's no room for one. Since the breakfast costs a steep €30, I would skip it and walk over to Calle Serrano to the Mallorca gourmet delicatessen (Madrid's version of Gerard Mulot in Paris) and have coffee and pastries there or head to the aforementioned Harina on the Puerta de Independencia.

Recommended in the Madrid update of Departures magazine, this AC is also a member of Tablet hotels (tablethotels.com), and a selection of JP Moser, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, and i-escape.com. It's also featured in the Louis Vuitton guide and is a member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World, as is the Derby Villa Real (www.ac-hotels.com).

Dining near the AC Palacio del Retiro: Nicolás, Dassa Bassa, Ramsés, Le Dragon, La Cesta de Recoletos, Kabuki Wellington, Goizeko Wellington (Basque), Harina (breakfast & tea), Horcher (3 Repsol suns), Viridiana, Asador Frontón III (steaks), Harina (breakfast & tea), and Balzac.



Restaurante Balzac, Moreto, 7, behind the Prado



Dassa Bassa, Villalar, 7

5-star Adler

Located at Velázquez, 33, the Adler also enjoys a terrific location at one of Madrid's most distinguished intersections, on the corner of exclusive Velázquez & Goya, the city's premier shopping district. It's located in an opulent former small palace dating from 1884, once the headquarters of the Banco Central, and is run by a German group (Adler means eagle in German) with only 48 very spacious rooms equipped with 21st century amenities. Pascua Ortega, Spain's famed decorator to the Royal Family, executed the interior design, along with the interiors of the Hesperia, Orfila, R&R Amador de los Ríos

and Room Mate Alicia hotels. The walls are lined with the contemporary art of Chillida, the floors are of black and white marble, and warm colors give it a soft and inviting look. The guest quarters come with DVD players, plasma TVs, turndown service with chocolates. Baths have separate tubs and showers, robes and slippers. Some suites come with fireplaces (www.adlermadrid.com).

But the Adler hasn't quite caught on as has its competitors, the nearby **AC Palacio del Retiro** and **Hospes**. I believe that the AC and Hospes brands offer a better price to quality quotient at this level of the stratosphere, but you can sometimes find reduced rates, under €250, on certain Internet booking sites such as www.epoquehotels.com. The Adler has been received superb guest feedback on Trip Advisor. It's also a JP Moser and Secret Places selection and featured in the Louis Vuitton guide.

Dining near the Hotel Adler: Loft 39, D'E (tapas), El Rincón de Goya (tapas), La Trainera (seafood), Teatríz, Lago de Sanabria, Asador Frontón (steak) plus all the dining spots on Jorge Juan.



Asador Frontón, Calle de Pedro Muguruza, 8

AIRPORT HOTELS

BEST PRICE-TO-QUALITY RATIO NEAR THE AIRPORT

4-star Clement Barajas

New in '06 and highly rated on Trip Advisor and Venere, this airport hotel seems to have it all: an airport handy location that **isn't** out in no man's land surrounded by cargo bays, reasonable tariffs year round available online, comfortable and immaculate rooms equipped with all the proper amenities including bathrobes and slippers, magnifying mirror, free mini bar (juices, waters, soda), free high speed Wi-Fi in rooms, two restaurants, a gourmet affair, La Fachada, and a casual brasserie that serves an evening buffet starting at 8:30 pm for under €10 and a buffet breakfast from 7:00 - 11:00. A free airport shuttle runs 24/7 (with prior reservation), there are two computer terminals in the lobby for checking email, and a friendly and helpful English-speaking desk staff. Coffee and pastries are available in the lobby for early risers. There are four non-smoking floors. Some superior rooms have a little terrace or a Jacuzzi shower and some rooms are handicapped accessible.

This hotel is located in a working class residential neighborhood on a street of bars, restaurants and shops, with a convenience store across the street. The metro that will transport you in to central Madrid is a 15-minute walk away. The airport shuttle takes under 10 minutes to reach the terminals.

LUXURY NEAR THE AIRPORT

Hilton-Barajas

Madrid's only Hilton opened in the summer of '08. It offers have king or twin bedrooms, 398 square feet in size, all with marble baths and floor to ceiling windows, plus the usual Hilton amenities, including wireless Internet access and plasma TV. The suites measure 743 square feet and have a separate living room, and guests in the suites have access to an executive lounge for complimentary continental breakfast and refreshments.

Downstairs there is a bar and two dining venues, the fine-dining spot, Reserva, and a casual eatery, La Plaza, which provides breakfast, lunch and dinner service from 5:00 am until 11:00 pm (www.hilton.com).

ROCK BOTTOM BUDGET NEAR THE AIRPORT

The three most popular coupon/voucher programs, talonotel.com and bancotel.com often have availability at such airport vicinity hotels as the 4-star **Silken Puerta de Madrid**, the 4-star **Hotel Auditorium** (with a whopping 870 guest rooms!), and the 4-star **Meliá Avenida de América** (part of the Auditorium group) if booked well in advance. Rates on these three sites can range from €60 - €120, depending on your dates.

These three comfortable but very large and impersonal convention-type hotels do offer a free shuttle to the airport but they run during limited hours. The Silken shuttle runs Monday - Friday only, in the morning from 8:00 - noon and in the evening from 6:00 - 9:00. The Meliá shuttle runs from 7:00 am to midnight. Check their individual web sites for special offers.

I would choose these aforementioned properties only if the Hilton or Clement are fully booked and just for a last night's stay when catching a very early morning flight, as there is absolutely nothing to do/see in the immediate vicinity and no attractive dining options in the neighborhood.

www.hoteles-silken.com

www.auditoriumhoteles.com

www.solmelia.com



Inside the Prado Museum