

Madrid and Barcelona, Spain

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The Metro is very easy to use and great for getting around the area — the cost is 1 Euro per ride, or you can get a 10 ride ticket for 6.15 Euros. You can also get a Madrid card which gives you free use of metro and free entrance into some museums — it comes in 1, 2 or 3 day lengths. You can take the Metro in from the airport as well.

We stayed at the Tryp Ambassador, it's well located near to the Gran Via and two Metro stops. It's on a side street where there is a lot of construction, which actually was a plus because there was very little car traffic when we were there! The hotel is in a former palace, the rooms are quite good size, hardwood floors, good size bathroom, breakfast was ample and included in the rate. The hotel entry area small, but there's a nice sitting area just off of the check-in area.

The city guides put out by the Spanish Tourist boards include lots of walking tours, which is what we did. The Plaza Mayor is one of the original central plazas -a very large open area surrounded by buildings and lots of vendors had set up their tables as it was Sunday. We even braved the local Sunday market crammed with people!

The area around the Plaza Cibeles the buildings in this area re reminiscent of Market Street in San Francisco! The one exception is many of these buildings have very large statues on top of them! Our impression of Madrid was that it is a bustling city with a lot of green space. The largest park is Park De El Retire — it's a huge park with lots of walking paths in the gardens; in the middle of the park is a green house, called the Crystal Palace. The Prado is closed on Mondays, but very inexpensive admission 6 Euros!

Just as we expected, there were tons of people out walking in the evenings and the restaurants were still pretty empty when we ate — about 8 or so! I felt pretty safe walking around, of course I was very careful, had my purse my coat, etc.

My meals didn't cost all that much, we ate mostly at local small restaurants or cafes, of course you can also stop in at Starbucks, KFC, etc if so inclined. Many restaurants have larger three course meals which are a bit more expensive

You can take a day trip to Toledo. It's a 30 minute ride on a nonstop train and the trains run quite often. The train station is at the bottom of the hill of the medieval walled city, It's quite a hike to the top — we saw a couple dragging their rolling suitcases up the cobblestone streets. I would have taken the bus! Be prepared to get lost in the maze of small streets!

Barcelona is a 5.5 hour train trip from Madrid. The train to Barcelona leaves from Atocha station, where they are building a memorial to the people killed in the bombing. Also the station has a huge atrium inside the station; it's amazing to see this garden when you enter the station!

In Barcelona we stayed at the Colon, right on cathedral Square, well located, short walking distance to a couple Metro stations, and La Ramblas. The hotel is very nice, good size lobby; they have an outside café with view of the Cathedral as well as inside bar and restaurant. Most of the rooms have large glass doors that open up to a tiny balcony. The major complaint I read was that the walls were thin — but not that much worse than a lot of European hotels. When we checked in we were given a notice about pick pocketers and not to get fooled by someone pointing something out to you and taking your valuables.

There was another notice in the room as well! I felt a bit uncomfortable for the first evening, but then felt better during the day. Again the Spanish tourist board has great walking tours and maps — I loved the old town, La Ramblas, with it's history. It's quite crowded at all times of the day. It is interesting to visit the Olympic area, as well as the waterfront area. The waterfront area has been developed recently and can accommodate major cruise ships.

One remarkable cathedral was La Sagrada Famili — to me it's like the Winchester Mystery House of Barcelona, the cathedral has been under construction for hundreds of years, the newest addition has fruit on top of the spires!

I heard a lot more English (American and British) being spoken in Barcelona than Spanish and found the Spanish difficult to understand too, but would go back to either city again. We took the train out to the airport the night before we left. It took about an hour to get out there. We stayed at the Renaissance at the airport; they do have a shuttle from the airport. This is a very new hotel; rooms are typical size for Europe, but very modern, glass top table, lots of electronics, plus the new Marriott beds. There is a lounge and restaurant, and room service is very reasonable. It seemed that this hotel was located in a commercial/business area and I didn't see any restaurants around the hotel.

We took one of the low fare carriers Vueling Airlines from Barcelona to Paris before connecting back to the USA. The planes were very new; announcements were in English and Spanish.