A visit to Old Madrid

Old Madrid

The old part of Madrid —the centre area today— was built in the times of Felipe IV (1621-1665). However, its origins date from the second half of the 9th century, from the time of the Muslim conquest by Emir Muhammed 1(860-886). Muhammed built the 'alcazaba', or Moorish fortress, and the first walled enclosure of Madrid, called the Almudena. Muslims, Mozarabs, Jews, Christians and Mudejares inhabited medieval Madrid . When it became part of the Kingdom of Castile, it was used as a place of rest by the Castilian kings.. It became the Court in 1561 for the first time in the reign of Felipe II (1556-1598), and the permanent capital under Felipe III (1598-1621). In the 17th century, Old Madrid was full of Baroque splendour.

Satellite view of old Madrid

1. El Palacio Real

This Palace is the official residence of His Majesty The King of Spain, who makes use of it for official ceremonies, but does not live there.

The origins of the Palace go back to the 9th century, during which the Islamic Kingdom of Toledo built a defensive fort (alcaázar) on the site, which was later used by the Kings of Castile.

The Alcázar was destroyed by fire on Christmas Eve, 1734, and King Philip V wished for a new palace to occupy the same site. The entire complex was built with stone and brick, without any wood, so that no future fire could destroy it.

Building work took from 1738 to 1755, and King Charles III took up residence in the Palace in 1764.

The Palace gardens are known as the Campo del Moro ("The Moor's Field"), but they originated during the reign of King Philip II. Their present appearance dates from 1890.

The square situated to the east of the Palace, and known for this reason as the Plaza de Oriente, has recently been remodeled. It contains several of the statues of the kings of Spain carved during the reign of King Ferdinand VI.

2. La Almudena

This section belonged to the first walled enclosure, or almudena, of Muslim Madrid (Mayrit in Arabic). The wall was built by Muhammad I at the end of the 9th century. These are practically the only remains of the wall still preserved in Madrid. On its site stands the Cathedral of Santa Maria de la Almudena,, which was founded at the end of the nineteenth century by the Marquis of Cubas.

3. Palacio Uceda

It was built in the first half of the 17th century for Felipe Ill's favourite, the Duke of Uceda. It is one of the best examples of palace architecture of the Baroque style and was built by Juan Gomez de Mora. Today it serves as Military Headquarters.

4. Plaza de la Villa

A Muslim market place in the Upper Middle Ages, the Plaza turned into a square during the reign of Enrique IV of Castile (1454-1474). It is now the seat of the Madrid Municipal Institution (in what used to be the San Salvador Church).

5. Casa de la Villa

This was the first building especially built to house the Madrid City Council. It was built in the second half of the 17th century following the plans designed by Juan Gomez de Mora. Its style is post-Herrera and already has end-of-the-century Baroque ornaments in its portals.

6. Casa de Cisneros

Originally it was a Plateresque (ornate style of Spanish architecture) palace built in the first half of the 16th century. Today's building is the result of Luis Betlido's reconstruction between 1910 and 1915. Part of the original façade is preserved in Sacramento Street.


7. Torre y Casa de Los Lujanes

These are the oldest buildings of the Plaza de la Villa and are Mudejar (Mudejars were Muslims who lived under Christian governance) dating from the 15th century.

8. Cava de San Miguel and Arco de Cuchilleros

This was an old moat of the 12th century wall. The houses which stand beyond the Arco de Cuchilleros in the direction of Mayor St are the retaining wails of the earth on which the Plaza Mayor is built. This explains its shape of an inverted parabola.
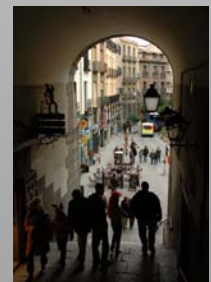
9. Plaza Mayor

The Plaza Mayor (Main Square) took its name at the start of the 16th century. Juan de Herrera was commissioned to remodel the old square of Arrabal, but its construction didn't begin until 1617 by order of Felipe III.

Inaugurated in 1620, this large rectangular, stone-paved plaza with ground floor arcades underwent its last remodelling in 1853 under Juan de Villanueva. Until the last century, the Plaza Mayor was used as a marketplace on weekdays and was the scene of popular events like bullfights, public announcements of sentences during the Inquisition, religious processions, public executions and dance and theater festivals. Beneath the arcades, you can find an assortment of shops that sell fabrics, costume jewelry and souvenirs, along with outdoor cafés, taverns and bakeries. On Sunday mornings a stamp market is held beneath the arches, and during the Christmas holidays numerous stalls offer all types of Christmas decorations for sale.

The most striking building in the Plaza Mayor is the **Casa de la Panadería** (bakery house), with its colorful fresco-adorned façade. On the opposite side of the square is the **Casa de la Carnicería**; this former butcher shop now houses Municipal offices. In the center of the Plaza is the equestrian statue of Felipe III by the Italian sculptor Juan de Bolonia.

10. Puerta del Sol

The Puerta del Sol (Gateway of the Sun) was once part of a 15th century wall which enclosed the town of Madrid as protection against the populated outkirts. The former Casa de Correos (Post Office) was built in 1768 under the direction of French architect Marquet. It is crowned with a tower with a clock on its four sides; this is the most famous timepiece in Madrid. At the stroke of midnight on December 31st, Madrileños (the inhabitants of Madrid) usher in the New Year to its chimes. On the ground in front of the building, there is a marker indicating Kilometer Zero from which all the country's road distances are measured. All Spanish roads radiate from here, as well as the numbers of the streets. Three historical statues adorn the plaza: Venus; a replica of an original in the Museo Municipal (Municipal Museum) called "La Mariblanca"; and another called the Oso y el Madroño (the bear and the berry tree) made of stone and bronze in 1967.

Carlos III and Madrid: towards a new status of the Capital

Madrid did not become a true capital city until the 18th century. Until that time, the city was simply viewed as the physical location of the King´s Court, nothing more. There was no integration of the population and the Court. The Court even established its own area called the Retiro, located in an area near the city, but officially outside of it.

Things started changing in the 18th century. The Court began to extend its influence over everything in the city. As a result, Madrid became part of the Court and therefore the true capital of the absolute state. Madrid´s new status was accompanied by special treatment during this period in the form of 'improvements'. The Bourbons were the main promoters of these improvements. King Carlos III (1759-1788) is the central figure historically associated with the urban development plans of the period. He was able to carry out ideas and projects originated during the reign of his father and brother (Felipe V and Fernando VI), and to develop new projects which would

be carried out in time by his successors. Although the structure of Madrid did not change, the foundation was laid for its future development as a metropolis. The urban development of even the outskirts of the city is the best example of the transformative spirit of the time. With this renovation, public buildings begin to appear as organizational centres of the city, contributing further to its new status as a capital.

11. Real Casa de Aduanas

This is yet another public building constructed during the reign of Carlos Ill. It serves to organize the area and its façade is the guideline for the street. It was built by the king's favorite architect, Francisco Sabatini, between 1761 and 1769. The doorway was constructed by Pedro Ribera. Today it houses the Spanish Ministry of Finance.

12. Real Academia de Bellas Artes

The Goyeneche Palace, built by José Benito de Churriguera in 1725, was chosen to house this institution, a clear example of Bourbon cultural politics. In the reign of Carlos III, in 1774, Diego de Villanueva remodeled the façade to suit the neoclassical taste of the time. The priceless art gallery includes 16th and 17th century works by artists of the Spanish School.

13. Iglesia de San José

This church was built by Pedro de Ribera between 1733 and 1742 during the reign of Felipe V. Ribera was one of the leading figures of 18th century Baroque architecture, a movement which disappeared after the construction of the Royal Palace. It provides a contrast to the Neo-Classical models built in the second part of the century.

14. Palacio de Buenavista

The Palacio is an excellent example of Madrid palace architecture from the second half of the 18th century, when the city moved beyond its original wall. It was built for the Dukes of Alba in 1777. It is an example of what the Paseo del Prado looked like when it was lined with the estates of Madrid's nobility.

15. La Plaza de Cibeles

The Cibeles fountain is surrounded by some of the city's most important monuments, and the fountain itself has become an important symbol of Madrid.

On the northwest corner of the Calle Alcalá, half hidden by shrubbery, there is a view of the old **Cuartel General del Ejército** (Military Headquarters), now the Buenavista Palace, built in 1769. Across the street, we find the Palacio de Linares

(Palace of Linares), presently the **Casa de América** (House of the Americas Culture Center), a Neobaroque structure finished in 1878. On the southeast corner is the immense Neoclassical-style **Palacio de Comunicaciones** (Main Post Office) with its ornate stone walls, started in 1905 by architects Otamendi and Palacios.

17. Puerta de Alcala

The Puerta de Alacala (Alcala´s Gate) is a monument in the Plaza de Independencia (Independence Square) that was originally constructed as a triumphal arch through which to enter the city. Its construction was ordered by Carlos III in 1774, and it became the principal access way to Madrid, via the Aragón road, after its completion in 1778. It was built by Sabatini and decorated with sculptures by Francisco Gutierrez and Roberto Michel. Noteworthy is the fact that two sides of the arch were designed differently, with columns on the outside and mainly pillars on the inside.