

All Singing, All Dancing: A Day and Night in Madrid

Marsha Scarbrough

After starting my day with a light breakfast of coffee, fresh fruit, and delicious sheep's milk yogurt, I'm straight off to Zumba class.

When I arrive at Bailememucho gym, four blocks from my studio apartment in central Madrid's Chamberi district, I'm welcomed with a cheery, "Hola, buenos días!" from Javi, the owner/instructor. He's tall, 40-ish, impossibly fit, and fashion-model handsome. Although I'm the oldest student (at 72) and the only English-speaking expat in the class, the other women are always friendly and supportive.

We do our best to follow Javi as he swings his hips and vogues outrageously to the rhythms of salsa, bachata, and reggaeton. Besides getting us to sweat, he makes us feel sexy and joyfully alive in our bodies. I can't quite understand all the banter in the dressing room after class, but it's clear that everyone had fun. If I buy a package of 10 classes, it's less than \$6 per class, so I can afford to have this much fun three times a week.

In the afternoon, I meet my friend, Gema, in a local bar for our weekly *intercambio*, an informal exchange between people who are learning each other's languages. We order glasses of white wine and converse for half an hour in English, as I gently correct her grammar and pronunciation, then half an hour in Spanish while she corrects mine. I have also taken formal Spanish classes and private lessons. But after two years in Madrid, I've settled into a routine of two *intercambios* a week.

In recent decades, Spain has improved English instruction in public schools, so Spaniards 30 and younger speak English very well. However, older Spaniards (Gema is 50) must work hard to improve. I need to improve, too, and like all of my Spanish friends, Gema is intelligent, well-read, and well-traveled. She was a photo editor with a national magazine until recently, and I enjoy our conversations.

After wine in the afternoon, a siesta is in order, and I take full advantage of this luxurious Spanish custom. Later,



Spain's capital city is convivial and lively from morning to late, late night.

at 10 p.m., I meet my friend Alberto in a bar near Retiro Park for...more wine! It's a neighborhood bar, not frequented by tourists but packed with people and buzzing with conversation. It's impossible to get a table, so we stand holding glasses of hearty red Toro, shoulder-to-shoulder with young professionals and mature couples.

Alberto is a regular, so the bartenders call him by name. He's a fine arts professor at a private university and a new media/performance artist. I met him in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where he was my student in an English immersion program. We know each other well, and it was at his invitation that I first visited Spain in 2016.

Tonight, we speak English because he wants to stay in practice. He has been my steady support and a tremendous resource during my transition to life in Spain. He's heading into a new phase of his life, too. The university where he has taught for more than 10 years is closing its fine arts department. It's not a total surprise. In

fact, he has already secured a part-time job teaching at a film school, and he will get a severance package. So, we decide to celebrate his imminent redirection with a night on the town.

We jump on the metro (as a resident senior, I pay a little less than \$15 a month for unlimited metro and bus rides) and head to Madrid's hippest neighborhood. Chueca, formerly a distressed downtown district, is now the city's gay district, a vibrant village of restaurants, trendy shops, bookstores, bars, and clubs. We step out of the train into a rainbow-striped cavern and emerge into festive late-night street life.

Our destination, Toni 2 Piano Bar, has been around since before LGBT gentrification. It's old-fashioned, with classic dark-wood paneling and red velvet banquettes. From the time it opens at midnight until it closes at dawn, it's jammed with partying people, young and old, gay and straight, stylish and bohemian. They come to sing. But make no mistake, this is not karaoke.

The action centers around a 12-foot-long piano, and the people who step up to the microphone sing at a near-professional level. No monitors or sheet music are at hand. They know the songs, and so do all the patrons (except me). After a few notes, the crowd sings along with romantic Spanish ballads, folk songs, pop ditties, and flamenco classics.

Alberto and I squeeze into the tight circle around the piano as a genteel, bow-tied waiter hands us generous gins and tonic. We take a sip and are enfolded in instant camaraderie. Even though I don't

know the songs and can only understand snatches of the lyrics, it doesn't matter. I'm swept away in a sea of *joie de vivre*. Within minutes, Alberto seems to lose 20 of his 45 years.

The music flows seamlessly into the wee hours.

When it seems like the night might be winding down, the pianist plays the opening strains of "Imagine." A young man sings from his heart. Everyone joins in. They know all the words...in English. At 3 a.m., in a Spanish bar, I feel John Lennon's "brotherhood of man" become tangible reality.

I get a little teary. And I'm not the only one. ■

"After wine in the afternoon, a siesta is in order."