

# The Lady

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## AUTUMN BREAKS

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Back in 1971, when we students arrived in Madrid one baking-hot August, Franco was still in power. Armed policemen blew their whistles and became very agitated if pedestrians tried to cross the road when the lights were still red, El Cordorbes was just about to retire as king of the bullfighting ring and ice-cold *horchata* (the milk of crushed *chufa*, or tiger nuts) was sold by vendors in the streets.

Hitchhiking was my method of transport in those days; but, today, we arrive at the airport to be met and driven off in style in an air-conditioned people-carrier. Then, we dossed in the cheapest hostels in El Rastro (the flea market); now, we are staying at the Hotel Ritz opposite the park. How are the fallen mighty!

But some of my impressions of Madrid 35 years ago still hold true: all of its wide elegant boulevards, elaborate splashing fountains presided over by marble gods and goddesses, the haughty equestrian statues and wonderful art galleries are still there – and you can even get *horchata* although, now, more often than not it is sold bottled. Staying at the palatial Hotel Ritz, however, makes this a totally different experience from my first time here all those years ago.

This traditional establishment prides itself on four things that begin with the letter L. The first is its “Location”. Set on a small green plaza, it is next to the Retiro Gardens in what is now known as the Golden Art Triangle, formed by the three major galleries – the Prado, the Reina Sofia and the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection.

The second is the “Legend” behind it. Designed by Charles Mewes, the architect also responsible for the Ritz in London, this hotel was built, in 1910, at the instigation of Alfonso XIII himself. The king personally intervened after being embarrassed when guests at his wedding to Princess Victoria, in 1906, could not find a hotel in the city that was quite grand enough for them. Some of the Ritz’s carpets, restored originals dating from that time, are decorated with patterns taken from the Royal Tapestries.

“Life” is the third – this hotel is very much a part of what is going on in Madrid. It is the place to see and be seen – many weddings and many other private events are held in its sumptuous salons.

Taking afternoon tea is a tradition here and one which, seated beneath splendid marble columns with gilded capitals, we enjoy very much. We watch as a glamorous bride, dashing groom and their guests arrive in the foyer and hear that, today, Hollywood star Daryl Hannah has booked in.

The last L stands for “Loyalty” – many members of staff have worked happily here for years, ensuring a very good continuous standard of service. Hotel Ritz is slightly less formal than it used to be but guests must still adhere to its strict dress code – no shorts are allowed. But, as most people look less than their best in them, I applaud this and, also, an interior conceived during the Belle



## ELEGANT MADRID



Revisiting the Spanish capital after 35 years, **Lindsay Fulcher** finds that a few things have changed as she enjoys a luxurious weekend



1. The Cybele Fountain is one of many that grace Madrid's wide boulevards
2. Casa Botin, the oldest restaurant in the world, serves roast suckling pig
3. Taking afternoon tea at Hotel Ritz captures the spirit of the Belle Epoque
4. A bronze statue of the great Spanish artist, Goya, stands near the hotel

as *gjetost*, a brown fudge-like cheese from Norway, and the princely Torte del Casar, a sheep cheese so liquid inside that, after you slice off its top, you are obliged to eat it with a spoon – and a silver one I should think, as it costs 20euros a kilo! Diverse kinds of fish and seafood are displayed in tempting arrays, sprayed with water to keep them cool and looking sea-fresh.

After looking at all this delicious food, we need more artistic nourishment and find it at the little-known Museo Sorolla. Dating from 1910 and set in a charming Moorish-style courtyard garden, this 19th-century mansion is the former home of painter Joaquin Sorolla. The house, which includes his studio, has been preserved more or less as he left it.

A native of Valencia, Sorolla is known as “the painter of light” and we soon see why – his paintings exude an extraordinary luminescence and his portrayal of light and water is quite exceptional, although it was as a society portrait painter that he became rich, famous and successful.

Next we move on to Casa Mingo for a glass of cool Asturian cider – a drink not usually associated with Spain, but a good local brew nonetheless. Conveniently, Casa Mingo just happens to be situated

Epoque deserved to be peopled by smartly dressed individuals, not beach bums.

The large Garden Terrace is used for alfresco dining and here, under a blue and white canopy, we lunch on anchovies with tomato compote, baked hake and ice-cream chocolate with streaks of liquorice. After a very short siesta I notice my room looks out directly on to the Prado – and that is where I intend to spend the latter half of the afternoon.

Remarkable paintings, such as Bosch's surreal triptych, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and Dürer's extraordinary self-portrait of 1498, hang alongside many other masterpieces by Goya, Velasquez,

el Greco, Rubens – the list is endless. Is it greed for beauty, or madness, that then sends us off on the second leg of the Art Walk – to the great art gallery, the Reina Sofia? Here, like so many other visitors, we have come to look at Picasso's monumental painting, *Guernica* – so poignantly does it convey the utter havoc and pointless destruction of war that I am moved to tears.

As we leave in the glass lift that moves down the outside of the building we agree that the third art gallery of the triangle, the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection will have to wait till tomorrow.

That night we dine at Casa Botin. Set up in 1725, according to *The Guinness Book*

### AUTUMN BREAKS

next door to the Hermitage of San Antonio de la Florida, a real neoclassical jewel of a building containing some astounding, now superbly restored, frescoes by Goya, and also his tomb.

You can view the frescoes by looking into four big mirrors – a good idea as it stops us from getting a crick in our necks, but not a rumble in our stomachs, so off we go to Chocolateria St Gines for cups of deep, dark, hot chocolate and *churros* (long wands of light, dry, deep-fried batter).

We pass by the Museo del Jamon, a kind of ham heaven where it is sold in all its manifestations. We are told that the best ham comes from Iberian black pigs that put on weight very slowly; then, during the autumn of its life (literally, its last three months) it is let out into the countryside to munch on acorns. This ham can sell for as much as 70euros for a kilogram.

The pig is big in Spain – as well as ham, there is *chorizo* (red meat flavoured with smoked pimiento) and black pudding (made from its blood) but the real delicacy is the pig's ear.

Talking of which, surely it must be time for lunch by now – and it is. We are going to the lavishly neo-baroque, traditional Café de Oriente, near the Teatro Real, or opera-house and opposite the royal palace. In the afternoon we tackle our last amazing art gallery, the vast Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, before dining at the Ritz.

Next day is Sunday and a good day to explore El Rastro, the flea market which sells everything from upmarket antique shops to pure junk.

Here, I am reminded of my first trip to Madrid when I tried on some long, leather ex-army boots that I wanted to buy. This seemed to excite the passions of one of the other vendors, who chased me down the street shouting and brandishing a large carrot. Today, I am glad to say that no such excitement occurs.

A tapas lunch at Taberna de Antonio Sanchez, a dark, old tavern dating back to 1830, makes the perfect end to our stay. It takes its name from a famous bullfighter, also a painter, who bought it in 1920.

As we drink beer and eat fried calamari, we admire his portraits of matadors, as well as all the bullfighting photographs and souvenirs, as we sit under a large, stuffed bull's head – the symbol of Spain – in its elegant capital, Madrid.

● Abercrombie & Kent offer two nights at Hotel Ritz Madrid from £485 per person, inclusive of economy class flights with British Airways, private transfers, on arrival and departure, and bed and breakfast accommodation in a Classic double room. You can book through Abercrombie & Kent on 0845-070 0612 ([www.abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://www.abercrombiekent.co.uk) or at [www.ritzmadrid.com](http://www.ritzmadrid.com)).

● Further reading: *Madrid For Pleasure: Seven Walks Through The City's History* by Michael Jacobs (Pallas Athene, £14.99); *Madrid* by Simon Baskett (Mini Rough Guide, £5.99); *Madrid* (Time Out, £11.99).