

Travel & Outdoors

WISH YOU WERE HERE



Madrid finally comes of age

Anna Pointer finds out how the Spanish capital has had an epiphany and entered a bold new era – while staying true to its roots

The Spanish phrase “El duende” translates roughly as “soul and passion”, and in my front-row seat at Madrid’s Salon Flamenco de Leones, I witness its most raw and heartrending form. Though the origins of flamenco may lie hundreds of miles south in Andalusia, here in the heart of Spain it feels as authentic as any backstreet bar in Seville. During the 90-minute set, feet stomp, hands clap furiously, guitars throb, voices wail and sweat drips from the dancers’ tortured brows. It’s genuinely mesmerising, even if I have no idea what they’re singing about.

But while the tradition first began in the 18th century, my visit to Spain is about the rebirth of its capital rather than a trip back in time. For decades, Madrid has hovered in the shadow of its glamorous not-so-near neighbour, Barcelona, but not anymore. Temples of cool such as Nobu and Phillippe

Starck’s Brach Hotel are soon to rise from the ground, while outposts of the Four Seasons, Mandarin Oriental and Ian Schrager’s Edition are among glitzy recent openings.

Fresh out of the blocks in an area dubbed the “Golden Mile” is the Thompson Madrid, a five-star offshoot from Hyatt which blends the traditional with the contemporary. “Madrid is booming,” Carlos Ebruru, the hotel’s immaculately-styled general manager tells me. He’s not wrong, and Europe’s third largest city is increasingly attractive to tourists seeking relative bang for their buck.

Though Thompson has 17 hotels in the US, this is the brand’s first European venture, so it’s all down to Carlos and his team to fly the flag this side of the Atlantic. Inspired by

If you’re keen to tread the tapas trail properly, save yourself for night-time



Catedral De La Almudena, main; Gran Via, above

the original Thompson in New York’s SoHo district, the hotel is just yards from Madrid’s ever-hectic Gran Via and Puerta del Sol square – currently undergoing major reconstruction itself. With 175 rooms and suites spread over eight floors, the high-end design is “infused with local culture” so there are curated Spanish artworks, carpets that resemble the city’s cobblestones and playful nods to the theme of travel.

Rooms are ultra-plush yet cosy, with warm woods and marble bathrooms, while sumptuous beds pass the essential bliss-out test. Upon check-in, I’m wowed by my suite’s

private terrace, but unseasonably stormy weather makes it off-limits for most of my stay. Still, the tantalising full-sized bottle of Gin Mare, my favourite, which crowns the bespoke minibar offers some solace from the wind and rain. During a rare break in the clouds, I dash to the hotel rooftop, where 360-degree views take in the old city and Puerta del Sol clocktower – the main focal point for Madrid’s New Year celebrations. Up here, there’s also an infinity pool and bar/restaurant which seem straight out of Manhattan.

Gastronomy at the hotel is overseen by chefs Nino Redruello and Patxi Zumarraga, whose industrial-esque bistro and bakery, The Omar, is a hive of activity all day long. Over a long and lazy lunch, standout dishes include small plates of smoked chicken rice and lightly fried hake spiked with wasabi. Then there’s the remarkable house cheesecake, which has the texture of an oozy baked camembert but tastes deliciously sweet.

It’s just as well Madrid is so walkable after such a hefty calorific intake. Most key attractions lie within a mile or so from the hotel, and I make

a beeline for the leafy museum quarter. But on this occasion, I swerve the famed Prado and Reina Sofia art collections and instead head to the lesser-known Thyssen-Bornemisza. Until mid-January, there's a great temporary exhibition charting the creative relationship between Picasso and Chanel, with a showcase of 50 lustworthy designer garments interspersed with paintings and drawings. If you miss it, the permanent gallery is full of rare treasures too. Showcasing pieces from the 13th to 20th centuries, there are works from the likes of Canaletto, Caravaggio and Rembrandt, through to Van Gogh, O'Keefe, Freud and Hopper. With the day's cultural fix taken care of, next stop is the nearby Retiro Park, a UNESCO World Heritage Site spanning more than 125 hectares. Home to some 15,000 trees and a picturesque boating lake.



From here, it's a short hop to Salamanca, dubbed Madrid's most stylish quarter. Here you'll find wide boulevards flanked by all the designer labels, as well as more interesting indie boutiques in the side streets. Don't miss the eye-poppingly original Agatha Ruiz de la Prada, whose colourful pop-art designs made her one of the enduring figures of "la Movida Madrileña", the city's creative and cultural movement of the 1980s. Now boasting clothing, kitchenware, stationary and jewellery, it's a range to lift the heart.

Back in the old city, the Plaza Mayor square is top of any sightseeing list. It once hosted bullfights, Spanish Inquisition trials and grisly executions. Today, it's better known for the lively cafes and bars along its perimeter, where you can sip a coffee and gawp at the warm-hued frescoes and intricate wrought-iron balconies. Two minutes away is the Mercado de San Miguel, a covered market and veritable foodie paradise. Inside, counters groan with every kind of Iberian delicacy. They're ideal for a light lunch, but if you're keen to tread the tapas trail properly, save yourself for night-time when the scene roars into life.

Rooms at Thompson Madrid start at £392; see www.hyatt.com/hotel/thompson-hotels. For more information on the city visit <https://www.esmadrid.com/en>



A bedroom in the Thompson Madrid hotel, above; the rooftop infinity pool, top

STAYCATION



Some instant

Catriona Thomson arrives at the Karma Lake of Menteith hotel at just the right time

A gentle breeze whispered through the reeds that hug the edge of the lake, which caused shimmering ripples to appear. The water's surface then appeared to turn golden, as two fishermen provided a picture-perfect silhouette and the sun dipped below the horizon. I had arrived at the Karma Lake of Menteith hotel on a two-night winter break at just the right time.

The hotel was originally the manse house for the minister at the Port of Menteith Church, sited next door. The manse was converted first into an inn and it has now morphed into a 16-roomed boutique hotel and bar.

In 1979, the lake froze and the hotel hosted a famous Bonspiel or outdoor curling match. Visitors still return here to reminisce about what must have been a magical experience. There are old archive mementos of the event hanging on the walls. In 2010, the lake froze again but the ice wasn't thick enough for the contest to be revived, so perhaps with global warming, there may never be one again.

The hotel is owned by The Karma Group, which is run by an unconventional character and former band manager to Bananarama and

Culture Club, John Spence. After he left the music industry he diversified into the property and hospitality sectors. Today The Karma Group has 44 global destinations, stretching across four continents. Last year he bought this place, his only Scottish offering. My temporary abode is the spacious Osprey room, with lakeside views, ensuite and a massive and incredibly comfortable bed. The complimentary Tunnocks, shortbread tin and a miniature of whisky are nice touches, but it's the lakeside view that provides the wow factor.

There are three islands in the lake; Inchmahome, Inch Talla and Dog Isle, and on the largest isle is the ruined Inchmahome priory, which was founded in 1238. This place is awash with history, as Robert the Bruce and Mary Queen of Scots both visited. Sadly due to dangerous high-level masonry work Inchmahome priory is currently closed.

Tonight I'm dining in the hotel restaurant. It has a distinctly New England décor vibe, something which is slightly at odds with the fact that we are in the heart of Scotland, but the food is good. Head chef Mike Potts has created a broad international menu to cater for global travellers as well as home-based tourists.



lake karma

The kitchen is a proud champion and supporter of local suppliers, and if you are a meat and game fan you are in for a treat. The dinner menu during my stay featured a Highland wagyu burger, venison pie sourced from nearby Rednock Estate, and Lake of Menteith-sourced trout fillet served with mussels in a beurre blanc sauce. If you are looking for somewhere else locally to eat, I would recommend Nick Nairn's place, Nick's at Port of Menteith just down the road.

Breakfast is either a continental buffet which is included in the price or something from the cooked menu. I opted for a full vegetarian platter (£15) to fuel my day of sightseeing,

If you're a game fan, venison pie anyone? you're in for a treat

but I made sure to take my time, to drink up more of the views and was rewarded by spying some fish leisurely leaping.

I then headed to nearby Doune, but decided to sidestep a visit to the castle made famous by Monty Python, and instead made my way onto a whisky tour at Deanston distillery. You might recognise some of the locations, as it featured in both Ken Loach's film, Angels' Share, and briefly in Outlander.

Prior to the 1960s Deanston used

Karma Lake of Menteith hotel, above and top; one of the bedrooms in the hotel, above

to be a cotton mill powered by the nearby river Teith, but its maverick owner Brodie Hepburn decided to change to become a distillery. After I had soaked up all the smells and atmosphere of the mash room I headed to the nearby town of Callander, to stock up on award-winning bread from Mhor bakery. From there it was off into the hills to explore the Trossachs scenery.

The area has inspired a veritable who's who of writers, poets and painters, each captivated by the romantic beauty of the landscape. We're talking William Wordsworth, Samuel Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, Hans Christian Andersen, Gerard Manley Hopkins, Jules Verne and Sir Walter Scott – who set his poem Lady of the Lake at Loch Katrine. A gentle ramble was just the ticket to end my day and to fully experience the Trossachs' rugged beauty, but the views of the lake and a warm spot by the roaring log fire in the bar were calling to me back to the hotel.

Karma Lake of Menteith, Port of Menteith (07871179950) karmagroup.com/find-destination/karma-resorts/karma-lake-of-menteith; dinner, bed and breakfast, in the Osprey room based on two sharing, costs £220 per night.

WELLNESS

Get healthy on holiday with these fab fitness breaks

From getaways with gurus to outdoor adventures, use your time off to get in trim, says Sarah Marshall

Added up all the Christmas parties, winter puddings and sneaky mid-afternoon mince pies, and the average person's calorie intake over the festive period runs much higher than usual. And if your exercise routine has been replaced by hours sitting in front of the TV too, you aren't the only one. There are plenty of fitness breaks running this year though if you're planning a health kick from this month. Whether it's a weekend bootcamp or wellness getaway further afield, here's how to make healthy eating and working out the focus of your holiday...

St Michael's Resort, Falmouth, Cornwall
Get set for the year ahead by booking into a New Year Reboot weekend in the West Country. After conducting a body analysis, instructors at St Michael's Resort will advise on studio classes and cardio sessions at the Health Club, along with beach runs.

Unwind afterwards in a hydrothermal area with 21 stations designed to target different muscle groups.

Take advantage of an outdoor hot tub with views of Falmouth Bay.

How: Doubles from £70 per night with breakfast. A three-night package costs from £415pp in addition. Various dates. Visit stmichaelsresort.com; 01326312707.

BXR Retreat Daios Cove, Crete, Greece

Sharpening skills of mental agility while burning stacks of calories, boxing is an excellent sport for getting fit fast.



Aerial yoga at Kandima Maldives

Elite London studio BXR have an outdoor functional training centre at the Daios Cove resort in Crete, with a team of expert trainers leading intense sessions designed to deliver results. Yoga and Pilates sessions are also thrown into the mix to keep bodies supple.

How: A six-day retreat from 11-17 and 18-24 May full board costs from £3,000pp, excluding flights. Visit daioscovecrete.com.

Preseli Venture, Pembrokeshire, Wales

Take advantage of nature's playground by working out in the wilds. Eco lodge Preseli Venture offer fitness breaks combining coasteering, surfing and wild swimming with runs through woodland.

Ideal for people who hate the idea of sweaty gyms, the motivational getaways also provide an opportunity to learn new skills. Afterwards, relax in a front of a wood fire back at the lodge.

How: The next Fitness Weekend takes place June 2-4 and costs £325pp full board (two sharing). Visit preselivventure.co.uk or call 01348837709.

Kandima, Maldives

Fitness guru Ramona Braganza has worked with Hollywood stars – Jessica Alba, Anne Hathaway and Sandra Bullock all apparently owe their toned physiques to her 321 fitness regime.

Enjoy a rare opportunity to hear her tips and advice during a retreat at Kandima resort, where the focus is on playing sports and having fun. Group training sessions will be based on a mixture of cardio, strength and core exercises to boost metabolisms. There will also be meditation and breathwork sessions.

How: A seven-day retreat from March 14-21 costs from £4,578pp (two sharing), excluding flights. Visit kandima.com.