

CHURROS AND hot chocolate, a perfect Spanish breakfast.

Madrid

A guide to the Spanish city of food, fun and fashion



TOURISTS EYE tapas at Mercado San Miguel.

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When Israelis think of a vacation in Spain, the first city that comes to mind is Barcelona, ranked as one of the top three flight destinations for Israelis in 2015. Barcelona is Spain's premiere, glossy, postcard-worthy tourism city. But for those who want to experience a more authentic taste of Spanish food, fun and fashion with fewer tourist traps and – yes – fewer Israelis, try the Spanish capital, Madrid.

Walk into any of the hundred tapas bars lining almost every block in the Madrid city center, dominated by the happening Puerto Del Sol plaza, and you'll understand that Israelis got this snack thing all wrong. Tapas in Israel are more like miniature meals; in Spain, they're like open-faced sandwiches – carb and protein heaven. This makes more sense, actually, since the primary meaning of *tapa* is "lid" and one theory has it that tapas were used as lids to protect drinks.

For an orientation, try any of the number of *mercados* – akin to Tel Aviv's Sarona market – with bustling, gourmet and fashionable fast-food stands. Right off the central Plaza Mayor is Mercado San Miguel, where you can get cod, salmon, chicken and, of course, *jamón* (ham) tapas starting at €1.

Madrid is not kosher-friendly, and you'll be hard pressed to find decent salads as you would in Israel, but get on your Israeli aggression; the market is packed, and you must push your way to the counters.

Start with a €3 glass of wine to ease the food race, and don't leave without trying the sautéed, mild pimientos. For a more urbane atmosphere, there's Mercado San Anton, a relatively new market located in Chueca, the funky gay quarter, an area worthy of a self-made tour, but keep your eye on the clock. Most places are dead between 4 p.m. and 6 p.m. for that traditional siesta.

AFTER WORKING hours, Madrid wakes up again and locals are out and about eating those tapas – which for them are staples, not a tourist attraction.

To find the best of the ubiquitous snack, go to the La Latina bar compound. One criterion: judge each bar by the volume of locals inside, since tapas are displayed on

bar counters, and you'll want to make sure there's a good turnover.

While bars abound with *joie de vivre* and Mediterranean warmth, Tel Aviv still has one up on nightlife professionalism. Madrid bars seem to lack careful attention to detail when it comes to music and lighting; some bars were alarmingly bright, while others played little or no music, and if they did, it was often from MTV or VH1. But Madrid has one up on Tel Aviv when it comes to the perfect hangover breakfast: churros and hot chocolate dip – which you can find at Maestro Churrero and the iconic Chocolateria San Gines.

When Spanish appetizers begin to bore you (and they undoubtedly will) and you want a place that pays careful attention to detail, head to the neighborhood of Goya for one of the city's best restaurants – a national institution: Ten Con Ten. No common, tapas-seeking folk here, just the city's best-dressed enjoying €15 cocktails and scrumptious meals that start at €20. Make a reservation in advance, or try your luck at the bar. Nearby are several clubs, such as Graf, Eccola and Le Boutique Club, but if the more alternative vibe is your thing, try Berlin Café. If Ten Con Ten inspires you to dress more fashionably, then Goya is home to all the fancy brands and the familiar retail havens such as H&M and Zara.

IF YOUR pocketbook is in a pinch, stroll along the main artery, Gran Vía, which is dominated by a gargantuan Primark clothing store, more like a museum dedicated to affordable skinny jeans. Four floors of retail wonder even had the Israeli ladies talking about it on the plane ride back. From accessories to pajamas, you'll probably make up the cost of the flight just by doing your season's shopping here.

The Humanas vintage store, where everything goes for €5, also has some great finds, as does the Ale Hop accessory chain.

When it comes to food, give your pocketbook a break at a Tapa Tapa chain and especially happy hour at the Papizza chain, where slices go for €1 between 5 p.m. and 7 p.m.

For budget travelers, use the Metro instead of cabs. It's really easy once you get the hang of it.

So what if the Museum of Primark is not your thing? The Prado Museum (not to be confused with "Prada") holds a collection of some of the finest Renaissance art: masterpieces by Titian, Velázquez and Rubens.

Admittedly, with all the hedonistic pleasures available in Madrid, it's easy to want to skip on fine culture. If you insist, check out the free Madrid History Museum to learn, through art and artifacts, about the city's transformation from a small medieval town into the metropolis it is today. The historic Toledo is just a 30-minute train ride away and is ideal for a day tour, but a guide is recommended since the €7 trolley tour lacks substance and audio functionality. Toledo is also the prime place to satisfy curiosity about the Jews (and Marranos) of Spain. Home once to Maimonides, Toledo houses the Sephardi Museum.

SPEAKING OF Jews, while you can't really escape the dark history of the Jews in almost every European country, the Sandeman free walking tour (or more like a free classroom history lesson) featured Jewish history prominently, and sites where Jews and other Christian "heretics" were executed or expelled during Spain's dark days were not glossed over.

For more authentic, popular Andalusian culture, stop your trip with a flamenco show. The more celebrated ones start at about €40, like Casa Patas and Cardamomo, but the dancers, singer and guitarist at the historic, intimate Tablao Flamenco Villa Rosa in the happening Plaza De Santa Ana performed with mesmerizing, memorable passion against colorful murals, for €32.

Finally, in choosing a place to stay, if you try Booking.com you may be tempted to make a choice based on price and location (stay near the city center). But if you don't speak Spanish well, look for good reviews about customer service. If this is your first time in Spain and your Spanish leaves something to be desired, the front-desk clerks will become your best friends. The Catalonia and Room-Mate chains offer various rates and should be a safe bet. Take a nice room, because you'll definitely want a comfortable bed to sleep in when your feet get tired and you experience a deep tapas food coma. ■



MERCADO SAN Anton in Chueca.

PRE-SAUTEED pimientos at Mercado San Miguel.

OUTSIDE CHOCOLATERIA San Gines.