



NEIGHBORHOODS

Madrid: On the Edge

by [Jacqueline Ostrowski](#) • May 27, 2011 •

It's easy to fall into a routine upon return trips to [Madrid](#) — churros dunked in thick, steamy chocolate with the boisterous crowds at San Gines, taking in [Guernica](#), a dusk-lit pre-tapas stroll near Puerta del Sol and Plaza Mayor, and a relaxing picnic in the serene [Retiro](#) park.

But on a recent visit, I found myself curious about the other Madrid, the neighborhoods off the tourist trail that exist alongside its monuments and artistic treasures.

This time, I decided to explore the streets near the Plaza de Santa Ana, and then move on to Malasana and Chueca, in search of local boutiques, cafes, and a few really good walks.

After a leisurely morning browsing the collections at the [Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza](#) —no matter how familiar, always a must-see for me! — I headed south down the Paseo del Prado to the Fuento de Neptuno, a grand fountain of stoic Neptune that seems to keep watch over the museum corridor.

A left on the Calle del Cervantes led me to Calle Leon. As I slipped down this quiet street, the crowds of a few moments ago became but a memory. Here, neighboring boutiques [Vinca Per Vinca](#) and [Adhoc](#) sell fresh flowers alongside equally fresh blouses and dresses.

Just steps away, [La Integral 25](#) looks like a retro bakery storefront, but don't be fooled. Step inside and you'll see that this store specializes in vintage-inspired quirk — think Modcloth's dresses mixed with Urban Outfitters' gift section.





photos by Jacqueline Ostrowski

It's the place to stock up on gifts for your hipster friends who wouldn't be caught dead in a Spain T-shirt with a cartoon bull on it (can you really blame them?).

Pick up some no-fuss, patterned fabric-covered hair pins, tiny robot toys to adorn your bookshelves, or pillows that await your custom, marked-on message.

Head down Calle Huertas, making a detour at one of the tapas bars lining the Plaza de Santa Ana for a bocadillo — a baguette sandwich — of the famed local manchego cheese or Serrano ham. Save room for fried bacalao at [Casa Labra](#) just off Sol; wait in line with the regulars and cough up your 1.20 euros for a toothpick-stabbed individual

portion of freshly fried cod.

After lunch, take the blue line metro to the Tribunal stop to explore [Malasana](#) and relax at one of its cafes. Its clubs may vibrate by night, but by day Malasana is a quieter scene marked by coffee shops and boutiques.

For wifi in a friendly, stay-all-day atmosphere, try [La Cocina de Mi Vecina](#) (My Neighbor's Kitchen), a café that wouldn't be out of place in NYC or San Francisco. Park yourself at the communal table and, if you can, strike up a conversation with the friendly staff — they were more than happy to indulge my rusty Spanish. This place is more about the atmosphere than the food, but if you're craving vegetables, you could do worse than one of their create-your-own salad bowls with tuna and tomato.



A few blocks away, [Lolina Vintage Café](#) has a more extensive menu but a less intimate feel. It fills up quickly, so go early to get a seat.

From Malasana, I wandered south on Calle Fuencarral to Calle Augusto Figueroa, a prime shoe shopping strip in [Chueca](#), Madrid's gay neighborhood.

Prices and styles vary, but Muestrario Mallorca in particular offers reasonably priced leather pumps and boots in straight-from-the-runway shapes. I picked up black ankle boots and stone grey mid-heel pumps, but you could do equally well hunting for flats or stilettos.

Outside of the store, a cobalt Smart Car zipped by, windows down and volume turned way, way up on a techno remix — an audible reminder that another of Madrid's long nights was about to begin.

As night fell, I finished a long day of exploring with a glass of tinto at [La Bardemcilla](#) down the street. It's a relaxed bar/restaurant owned by the Bardem family, powerhouses of Spanish cinema.

You probably won't see Javier in the flesh, but his image is everywhere in framed family photos. No need to be disappointed — an order of cod croquettes, calamari, or one of the many egg dishes on the menu provides a tasty distraction.

Tomorrow I'd be one of the camera-toting hordes at the Palacio Real or Prado once again, but for tonight, I leaned back at Bardemcilla and took another sip of wine. A man embraced a group of friends as they entered, one of them hauling a cello case. Across from me at the bar, an older couple became immersed in ever deeper conversation.

All around me, life was happening well into the night, and nothing could be more Madrid than that.

