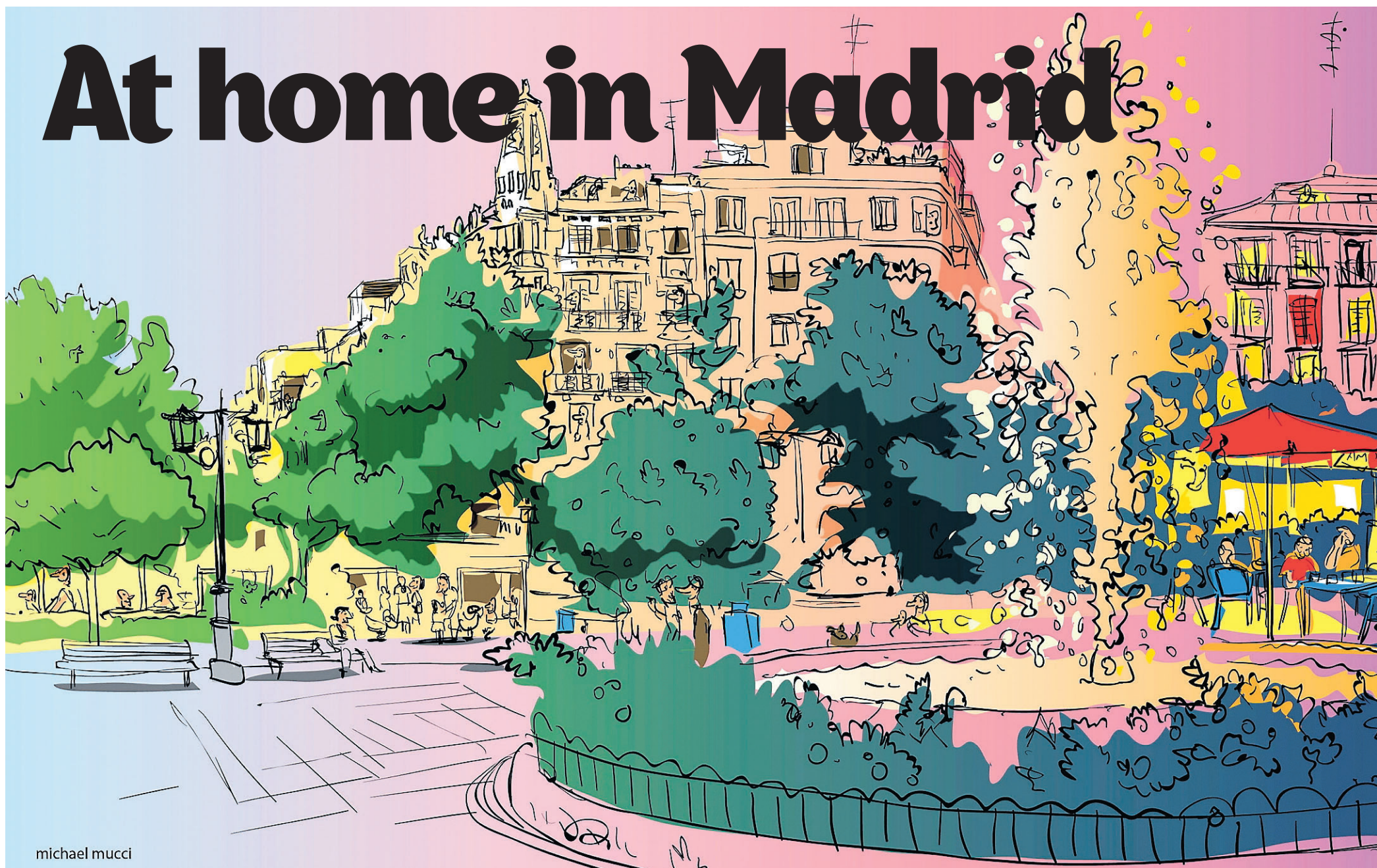


Essay

At home in Madrid



michael mucci

The energy and elegance coursing through the Spanish capital makes for a rich and sociable life, writes **Anthony Ham**.

It was after midnight when the airport taxi left me on the footpath in Madrid's Puerta del Sol. The night was warm and people swirled around me.

Here was a city in perpetual motion, bathed in the candy-bright colours of a Pedro Almodovar film in which everyone appeared slightly crazy and to be having an outrageously good time because of it. It all seemed so terribly exciting.

A year later, drawn back by little more than a vague notion that this

could be home, I wandered into the tangle of lanes known as La Latina in the heart of old Madrid.

As day became night, I found myself in earnest conversation with a good-natured Madrilenos.

The city's secret was, he assured me, simple: "Every Spaniard carries in his or her pocket a letter from the king which reads: 'This Spaniard is entitled to do whatever they feel like doing'."

Hours later, just before dawn, I crossed the Plaza Mayor while the

street cleaners hosed down the cobblestones. Nearby, queues stretched around the corner from the Chocolateria de San Gines, decades-old purveyor of the ultimate dawn comfort food of chocolate con churros.

It was impossible to know whether the city was marking the passing of night or gearing up for the day ahead. As ever in Madrid, the line between night and day was irretrievably blurred.

Years have passed since those

first encounters. In time, I would fall in love with a local, my two children would be born in Madrid, and the city would become home for more than a decade.

But this is a city where first impressions are built to last and living in Madrid was not so different from visiting it - life here is improvised theatre, a relentless siren's call to celebrate the good things in life and to always do so in the company of friends.

And in time, in this city where "si

estas en Madrid eres de Madrid" (if you're in Madrid, you're from Madrid) is a popular refrain, in a city where everyone comes from somewhere else, I came to belong.

Without knowing exactly when it happened, I became a Madrilenos.

Every city has its unwritten rules, the unique behavioural norms and shared understandings by which its inhabitants live their lives. In Madrid, unlocking these keys to existence was relatively simple:

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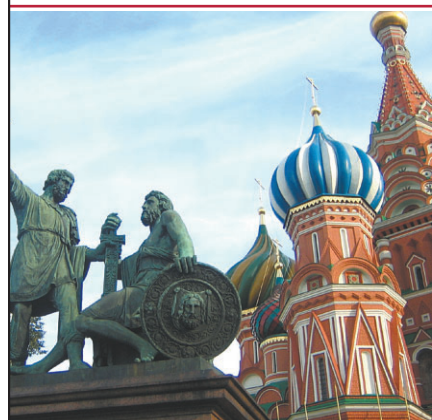
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