



and its night-time crowds carouse in sideburns, flared collars and hair gel.

Nearby, Plaza de Chueca is unremarkable by day, but a crescendo of noise rises from its hollows after dark, from its rainbow-rich collage of people in the heart of gay Madrid.

And nothing speaks to Madrid's passion for extravagance quite like Paseo de la Castellana, the grand old boulevard that courses through the city like a river, its route charting the history of a place whose grand and contradictory impulses are legion.

From north to south, it connects the Estadio Santiago Bernabeu – the home of Real Madrid and brash temple to the marriage between celebrity and sport – with the lavish galleries that constitute Madrid's peerless golden mile of art.

At one end, for a time, was

But my real entry point to city life was an altogether more modest affair.

There was something about Plaza de Olavide, an unassuming octagonal "square" in the barrio of Chamberi, three Metro stops north of downtown Madrid, that called me from the beginning.

The architecture that surrounded the square was handsome rather than eye-catching, and its simple fountain bore little resemblance to the elaborate marble confections that elsewhere adorned the city.

But here was a laboratory of barrio life freed from pretension and the stories that cities tell to visitors.

Every morning, old men and women in their Sunday best shuffled to park benches, there to pass a morning beneath the reassuring red of Australian bottlebrushes.

sight of the plaza, they closed Calle de Fuencarral to traffic, as they have done for decades. It was there, on such days, that my eldest daughter learned to rollerblade, that my youngest daughter discovered the joys of jumping castles and puppet shows.

There, without plans, we would bump into friends on Sunday morning and still be together hours later as the shadows lengthened and night fell.

And when night arrived, the outdoor tables of the plaza's eight bars were always full, so full that you might have to shout to make yourself heard as conversations built to a sustained roar that rumbled out across the city like the clamour of a not-so-distant war.

This was Madrid life, rich and social, and filled with the intensity of experience that had first drawn me here but later became reason enough to stay.

The plaza's charms were not those that slotted easily into a guidebook's checklist of sights for those with limited time.

Beckham; at the other Goya and Velazquez.

In between, arrayed along the boulevard's shores are the august remnants of the Madrid of empire: the patrician mansions, the gilded cafes such as El Espejo or the Gran Cafe de Gijon with their studied civility and pillared follies.

Near the southern end, on Plaza de Cibeles, the sacred and profane collide as they often do in Madrid: over-exuberant celebrations of the city's footballing success have scarred the 18th-century statue to the goddess Cybele within sight of gilded belle epoque masterpieces.

Along its length, the Paseo draws crowds of the kind that in the 1980s transformed the boulevard into a symbol of Europe's most dynamic city.

Gritty and graceful, devoted to Madrid's cult of excess, the Paseo de la Castellana, like all of the city's open spaces, is Madrid writ large, its wild energy and stately elegance flowing through the city without respite.

One elderly man in a beret was a regular, often seen nursing a late-morning glass of cognac.

Young men and women, students and professionals alike, would sit on the ground, sometimes with a guitar, occasionally in song, often to fall asleep in contented piles.

Small children, including my own, tumbled out into the plaza's playgrounds, filling the air with excited chatter while the old folk murmured their approval.

It was an impressionist painting come to life, a village square in one of the world's busiest cities.

Tourists rarely ventured out this far. The plaza's charms were not those that slotted easily into a guidebook's checklist of sights for those with limited time on hurried grand European tours.

For those of us who lived nearby, however, life in Chamberi very often began in the plaza and, in that spontaneous way of Spaniards, there was no end to where it might lead.

On Sunday mornings, within

Then, after 10 years in Madrid, we decided to leave.

The plaza was still a magnet for all that was good about the city, but a pall of gloom had settled over the country, a deep recession that we mistook for a broken spirit.

Unable to bear the pressure, some friends separated, while others left the city in search of a life. It was the end of something.

Where once I had laughed at the quirks of Madrid life and the strange ways of Spaniards – the endless drama, the genius for approaching life's calamities and triumphs with the same passion – I came to realise that I was, in truth, laughing at myself.

The city's trials were my own and they became an impossible burden to bear.

As we left, I found myself musing often that lover's refrain to a city I loved with all the fervour of a broken heart – it's not about you, it's about me.

Life moved on and the pain of separation has dimmed. But my clock is still set to Madrid time.

Where once I looked out over the plaza from our apartment while I wrote, I now pause to check the time back home in the Plaza de Olavide.

And there I lose myself in moments of longing, planning for the day when we can return. **T**

spontaneity and a belief in life as an outdoor pursuit lie at the heart of everything.

The good people of Madrid are like sunflowers – when the sun, even the weak sun of mid-winter appears, they emerge into the light and turn their faces to the sky.

Or to paraphrase the 19th-century Spanish writer Benito Perez Galdos, going out for a walk in Madrid counts as an occupation.

Where they do this is also important. Madrid is a city of barrios (neighbourhoods), each with its own character, each with its own plaza (square) or iconic

open space. These epicentres of local life are the building blocks upon which life in Madrid is built.

But not just any old square will do.

The utterly splendid Plaza Mayor or the monumental Plaza de Oriente may reflect the city's grandeur, a time when Spain ruled the world. And yet, they belong to tourist Madrid and the real windows on to city life lie elsewhere.

Away to the north, Plaza Dos de Mayo is more intimate, the perfect foil for Malasana's retro leanings.

Here the square, like the barrio itself, wears its graffiti like a tattoo,

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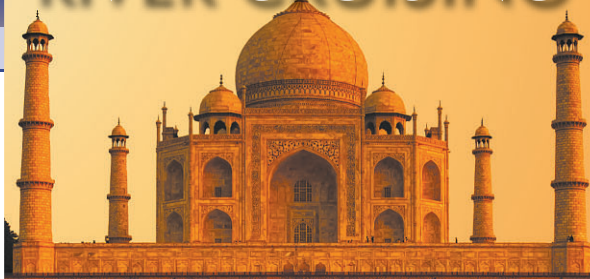
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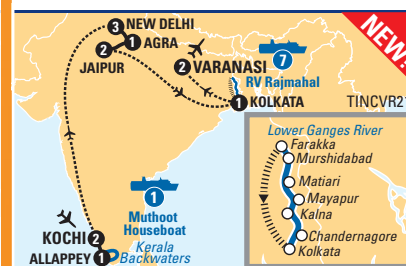


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