

Madrid: City of squares, art, tapas

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SPECIAL WRITER

You could hopscotch Madrid. It is a city of squares, or as the Spanish prefer "plazas," each with its own personality. Each is defined by the people who come there, the architecture around it and the public art — a fountain or statue — within.

In just a few days, elongated in summer by daylight until 10 p.m., you can land on quite a few in the historical part of this highly walkable city.

Over several hours, we hopscotched through a number of them, beginning at our "home" square, the Plaza de del Castillo. It features Neptune at the center of a magnificent marble fountain and is set between two of the city's premiere hotels, The Palace and The Ritz.

The city's heart, Puerta del Sol, is a little Times Squareish, but like Times Square is redeemed from tackiness by its history and vibrancy. It is, by the way, where the people of Madrid gather to usher in the New Year, by way of the clock tower dating from 1867.

A stone's throw away is Plaza Mayor. We sat peacefully at one of the many cafes on a sultry evening with children chasing pigeons and street musicians in full voice. Yet this is the political

heart of Madrid. An equestrian statue of Philip III, who completed the square, is at its center.

On to one of the smallest and sweetest of the squares we saw, the Plaza de Valle. It boasts Madrid's city council building as well as one of the city's oldest structures from the 15th Century. In a pretty garden at one end is a statue of the artist Francisco de Goya.

The Plaza de Oriente, with another Philip (V) on horseback, is more of a park than the other squares we have seen, perhaps because it leads up to the very impressive Royal Palace.

Our last "jump" is to the Plaza de España, where a huge monument represents, according to our guide, Spain's people. A statue of Cervantes, who some believe wrote the first and others the greatest novel, overlooks representations of its literary creations, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

Our room at The Ritz overlooked the world-famous Prado Museum, a "do-able" museum despite its size and number of masterworks if you concentrate on its Spanish and Flemish collections.

I gained new appreciation for the Flemish painter, Hieronymus Bosch, whose *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, seems amazingly prescient.

But we also were within an easy walk of the Thyssen-Bornemisza with its eclectic collection of European painting arranged, if you start at the right-hand side of the top floor and work down, in chronological order.

We were close to the Reina Sofía Museum, as well, set in a converted 18th century General Hospital that incorporates several attached glass elevators as an architectural feature. It features an impressive collection of 20th century art, including Picasso's *Guernica*, which I last saw at New York City's Museum of Modern Art while it was banned in Spain. It was allowed to come "home" in 1980. The difference in the way it's displayed — it no longer has a wall of its own — gives a slightly different sensibility.

A side trip to Toledo, where Christians, Jews and Moslems once peacefully co-existed, is worthwhile and easily accomplished.

It can be done in half a day, but you will miss a delightful lunch at the Hotel del Cardenal, a former 18th century palace. There we sampled "summer wine," which is wine mixed with a carbonated beverage such as Seven-up or Sprite.

Guidebooks generally cancel out Spain in July and August.

But we found the temperatures in Madrid, although sometimes approaching 90, were not that uncomfortable due to a lack of humidity.

In Madrid, we ate primarily at outdoor tapas bars or cafes, where you can select a series of small dishes.

Ordering no more than one or two at a time — and then ordering another round if you are still hungry is the best strategy which we found out the hard way. They are usually meant to be shared, so are larger than we thought.

I learned that a Spanish omelet is actually made out of potatoes, and that I like Spanish olives better than Greek.

I also have a new respect for gazpacho, which is creamier than our version. Each restaurant had its own recipe — and all were delicious.

It was not a shopping trip, but the El Corte Ingles department store chain is Spain's finest.

Leather products are a good buy. As a tile maven, I found that Spanish tiles didn't compare to what I have seen in Portugal.

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Cervantes oversees his literary offspring, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza in the Plaza de España.

RESORTS

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train excursion, yoga, an afternoon sail on a schooner and more spa pampering. We sipped wine, meditated, shopped, and treated ourselves to a last-minute rendezvous at a spa.

With the onset of fall, travelers will reap the benefits of lower rates and special package deals at many of the resorts.

Here's a peek at some of the treasures we uncovered on our journey:

SHANTY CREEK

We didn't have a clue what a stone facial massage entailed. However, we were eager to try one. So we booked appointments at the spa at Shanty Creek in Bellaire.

"We created our own stone therapy for the face," explained Kelly Challis, Shanty Creek's spa director. Stone therapy, she said, helps to relax muscles in the head and face. Persons who suffer from headaches and sinus troubles often benefit from the treatment.

Our facials began with three misty minutes in the steam room. Challis said that the steam helps to open up pores and raise the body temperature.

Next, in the privacy of a small, dim-lit room, when a client is snug and comfy under a blanket, the therapist lays hot wash clothes on the face for several minutes. An herbal cream is used to massage the face, neck, shoulders and arms, and then, a mask is applied.

"After 20 minutes, I remove the mask and then apply hot stones in a pattern on the face, (including the areas) over the sinuses," said Challis. Cold stones are placed on the eyelids. The spa incorporates a variety of different shaped, smooth stones that are retrieved from Lakes Michigan and Superior. The treatment also specializes in a gentle circular motion with the stones.

The Shanty Creek complex sports indoor and outdoor pools, live entertainment, multiple eatery choices, a fitness center, bicycle rentals and hiking trails. Access to fishing and boating is available off property. Oh, yes — the golf courses are world-class!

BOYNE COUNTRY

Get out of bed before the birds sing their morning serenade. (Hey, if the golfers can do it, so can you!)

Sip into loose, comfortable clothing. Then, head for The Inn at Bay Harbor just west of Petoskey to join the informal yoga and/or the meditation classes on the sprawling lawn overlooking the glistening Little Traverse Bay.

Close your eyes. Stretch and breathe deeply. Do you feel the tension and tightness melt away?

You're primed for a trip to The Spa at The Inn. Once there, treat yourself to a pedicure, aromatherapy massage or, one of my favorites, the rich mud wrap.

FOR INFORMATION

— Shanty Creek, (800) 678-4111 or www.shantycreek.com

— Boyne Highlands Resort or Boyne Mountain Resort, (800) GO-BOYNE or www.boyne.com

— Petoskey-Harbor Springs-Boyne Country Visitors Bureau, (800) 845-2828 or www.boynecountry.com

— Grand Traverse Resort and Spa, (800) 748-0303 or www.grandtraverseresort.com

Or perhaps you might want to meander around town to search for shopping possibilities.

"Downtown Petoskey is framed in an historic, old time shopping district. It's eclectic, interesting and a little more upscale," said Peter Fitzsimons, executive director from the Petoskey-Harbor Springs-Boyne Country Visitors Bureau.

Of course, tee times are available at nearby Boyne Highlands Resort and Boyne Mountain Resort.

Note: Schedules for yoga and meditation classes vary and registration is required. For information call The Inn at Bay Harbor at (800) GO-BOYNE or (231) 439-4000.

GRAND TRAVERSE RESORT, SPA

The ladies locker room at the Grand Traverse Resort and Spa buzzed with snippets of conversation.

"The cherry massage is awesome!"

"You really should try a cherry treatment!"

These spa-pampered women were very convincing. So, we booked several cherry-theme treatments.

"The spa started using cherry products because Traverse City is considered the Cherry Capital of the World," said Michele Brandt, lead massage therapist.

Studies have shown, Brandt explained, that cherries produce some positive medicinal benefits for the body.

The cherry honey glow is one of the most popular treatments. A blend of sea salt, honey and cherry concentrate is applied in this full body exfoliation. Six showerheads are expertly maneuvered to rinse and refresh the skin.

The session ends with a gentle, cherry lotion massage.

In addition to the spa, the Grand Traverse offers swimming pools, water exercise classes, and spectacular golf courses.

Just minutes west of the resort is Traverse City. Here visitors can sail on a tall ship, board a dinner train, sample wine, shop and enjoy a potpourri of museums.

Mary Ouhley writes dining and travel stories. You can reach her at Mario@aol.com.

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