



The famous towers of the Sagrada Família church in Barcelona designed by Antoni Gaudi

Viva la España

If Madrid, the Spanish capital, is all about heritage and culture, the coastal city of Barcelona is symbolic of Spain's raw energy

TEXT AND PICS: ARUNA RATHOD

IT was exciting to land at Madrid's Barajas airport. Spain was all about passion and paella. Once out, we rushed to the bus stop of the Airport Express, bang outside the arrival gate. The friendly Spanish lady attendant in a smart blue uniform helped us hop on and we were on our way to the city centre of Madrid! The airport is about 16 kms away from the capital and it's a traffic-free road so we reached in about 45 minutes, taking in the beautiful sights of the brown and chrome buildings on the outskirts.

We got off at a beautiful city square, soaked in the magnificent city of Madrid and then asked a couple of strangers for Calle del Prado, the address for our hotel Vincci Soho. Later, I got to know that Calle means street in Spanish. The good thing about Calle del Prado was that it was centrally located, with all the major historical spots of the city within a radius of a couple of kilometres.

PLAZAS AND PALACES

We started our sojourn in Spain with a Mexican meal at a small cheerful restaurant called Rosa Negra; it caught our eye because of the colourful sombreros and antlers as a

décor element. We chose the Pollo en mole - Chicken with chocolate sauce, sprinkled with sesame seeds, served with a green salad and tomato flavoured rice. At 11 Euros, not only was it reasonable but delicious too!

After the meal, the first place we headed for was the Plaza Mayor, one of the most important squares in Madrid. A large complex with three storey buildings with a pink exterior, the origins of the Plaza go back to 1577. The buildings have 237 balconies facing the Plaza, and nine entranceways. In earlier times, the plaza was used as a market place, for bullfights, games, and even executions. Now, the space is used for Christmas markets and also to celebrate San Isidro's feast, the patron saint of Madrid.

Our walking tour continues and just a kilometre on we come to the grand Catedral de Santa María la Real de la Almudena. The stately Cathedral is a grey and white relatively modern building. Spread over a huge area, it is a mixture of styles and opposite the cathedral is the Palace Real. The majestic structures are separated by a spacious square called the Plaza de la Armeria. If you are up to it (literally) walk up the stairs, plenty of them, to



ARUNA GRACIAS RATHOD is a Goan who doesn't need magic to disappear, but just a destination. Her home is in Mumbai and her heart is all over the world.



Architect Gaudi's famous Casa Batlló on Passeig de Gracia in Barcelona

the top of the cathedral for a magnificent view of Madrid and the Palace which has 2000 rooms! There are a few statues of Saints that tower above you on top of the cathedral.

CULTURE CAPITAL

The most modern part of Madrid is about a kilometre from here - called the Plaza de Callao and the Gran Vía. This part of Madrid houses tall buildings and is an extremely busy quarter. Tourists, locals and pedestrians make this street busy. Since it was lunch time, we scouted for a good restaurant, and we chanced upon an 'Eat all you can' outlet priced at 10 Euros per person. And the spread was just too amazing - salads, sauces, fried chicken, paella and dessert!

After our meal, we strolled around the Gran Vía and came to the Peurta del sol which is Madrid's historic centre. This is a car-free square and bustling with tourists. Everyone wants a photo of the most famous symbol of Madrid - statue of a bear eating fruits from a tree. The official name of the statue is 'El Oso y El Madroño'. The Madroño is a tree related to the strawberry tree. The female bear symbolizes the fertile soil of Madrid and the tree symbolizes the aristocracy. After seeing the bear, you could shop at some of the designer stores, or just have a coffee and watch the colourful tourists pass by.

We start our walk back to the hotel. The lights make Madrid look even more beautiful. Most buildings have magnificent sculptures on their roofs, lending a grand look to the buildings.

LAND OF LANDMARKS

Next day, there is a light rain throughout the morning, so we decide to walk into the Retiro Park which is a huge park, with plenty of walking paths. Peaceful and serene, the European life allows one to just walk a dog, have a jog, or just sit amidst nature. After spending a couple of hours relaxing in the oases, we walk outside, past a few bookshops near the park and chance upon a McDonalds. It's time for a coffee to warm up and then we continue to the Prado Museum. A Goya statue greets visitors outside and the museum is famous for one of the world's finest collections of European art (including Spanish art), from the 12th century to the early 19th century, based on the former Spanish Royal Collection.



Sculpture of the apostles atop the Almudena Cathedral in Madrid

One of the most photographed landmarks and sculptures in Madrid is the Neptune fountain which has a lady standing on a chariot, drawn by two sea horses and surrounded by dolphins. Under the orders of King Carlos III, sculptor Juan Pascual de Mesa began to build this marble statue in 1780, which represents Neptune, God of the Sea, with a trident in one hand and a coiled snake in the other. Some of the city's symbolic buildings are Villahermosa Palace, the Ritz hotel, the Congreso de los Diputados (House of Commons) and San Jerónimo el Real Church.

Being the land of bull fighting, a visit to the Las Ventas bull fighting arena was a must. Situated about 30 minutes by bus from the city centre, it is a magnificent Moorish

structure with a seating capacity of 25,000. The seats are all around the arena and the price of the seats depends upon how close they are to the arena. One of the attendants tells us that the bullfighting season starts in March and ends in October. During off season, the bulls are fattened in Andalucía and fed for the fights. A bull fight lasts for two to three hours! And matadors are 'heroes' in Spain akin to Hollywood celebrities.

After taking in the sights and sounds of the capital, the next morning it was time to board the train for Barcelona.

BEAUTIFUL BARCELONA

We do the Goa-Mumbai distance of 600km from Madrid to Barcelona in just three hours on the superfast Renfe train. We made the cab journey from the quaint station complex to the modern, planned district of Poblenou which housed our hotel Four Points. The landmark of this modern district is the 142-metre tall Torre Agbar, a phallic shaped high-rise that lights up in a million colours in the night.

Barcelona is a city that is synonymous with Antonio Gaudi, it is full of life, warm people, great history, street sculptures and a superb sea front with beaches. We decided to see the city on the hop-on hop-off bus since it's the best way to cover this city that has so much to offer. The two routes on the bus show the entire city in a matter of a few hours. Depending on the number of days you are in Barcelona, you could take a two/three/



The bear and the strawberry tree is a famous Madrid landmark.



The colourful offerings at the Boqueria market

four day pass to cover the city and alight at museums or places that you find interesting. The audio guides are helpful and tell about the sculptures, the history, the streets and more. The amazing expanse of the sea with its nude beach (during summers) is a great experience.

Barcelona's biggest landmark is the Sagrada Familia – the famous Gothic church designed by Architect Antonio Gaudi. The spiraling towers are visible from most parts of Barcelona and this is the most visited landmark of Barcelona. Visitors throng outside and the structure is fascinating. It is difficult to take photos as the church is undergoing restoration at all times, being a protected monument. History has it that Gaudi in 1882, took the reins of the project to make the church more fascinating.

Across the street is another Gaudi landmark, the Casa Batlló. The main street of Barcelona has beautiful buildings and the Casa Batlló stands out on Passeig de Gracia. Gaudi stayed here and on the first floor of the Casa Batlló, a large balcony sandstone reveals the elegant main floor, while the other floors are balconies shaped as masks. The building is unmistakable from the outside and there are always tourists admiring this artistic building.

MARKET WATCH

And then it was time to make the trip to the most colourful address of Barcelona – the Ramblas. Bustling with life, full of energy – and a hundred touts – Ramblas is a street

that has to be experienced. Mid-way along is the Boqueria market, which was once upon a time St Joseph's convent. Now it's nothing like one – colourful with an amazing range of food items right from lobsters to chocolates, Boqueria is a must on everybody's itinerary. The market is the complete food market of Barcelona - vegetables, meat, fish and thousands of other products in stalls.

At the end of Ramblas, near the seafont, is the statue of Christopher Columbus towering high into the sky. This viewpoint and this majestic piece opened in 1888 for the Universal Exhibition, and was dedicated to Christopher Columbus, who returned from his trip to America chose the Barcelona port to disembark. Inside the elevator travels 51 meters of its iron Corinthian style column up to the viewpoint, where you can enjoy a bird's eye view of Barcelona. ☺

TBI Trail Blazer Tours India Pvt Ltd

Holidays within India & Abroad
Visa Assistance & Travel Insurance
Air Tickets & Hotel Accommodation
Corporate Travel, MICE

Address: 201-204, Gera's Imperium – II, Patto Plaza,
Panaji, Goa 403 001

Tel: 6456466 E-mail: goa@tbi.co.in