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MADRID

After the madre of all makeovers, the Spanish capital is fizzing with a renewed sense of energy, glamour and artfulness – with smart new hotels to match.

By Catherine Ostler



CRYSTA
Glass ch
suspend
poolsid
The Spa a
Oriental



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A museum display of portraits in the bar, the bar, consider the new Academic Or...



ENTLEK... from the H.A. D.A. ... from the H.A. D.A. ...

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT MADRID

that is just so easy. And aesthetically pleasing. And fun. No overwhelming tourist hordes or unexpected piles of rubbish, no obvious crime spots or hawkers or... enough of what it isn't. What it is, is back, so back that it is squeaking with refurbished glamorous newness in its rush of polished hotels, its restaurants, its exhibitions, its tantalising food markets and its independent speciality shops selling gloves or leather.

The place is roaring with pent-up energy and youthful entrepreneurial zeal, with a zen-style coffee shop on every corner and the kind of safe, friendly vibes that make urban travel breezy. If it is madly hot in high summer, most of the year it has bright light and blue sky: serotonin-enhancing luminosity. The local council made a decision to attract more big-spending tourists, and in the past few years the city has revealed its makeover itself, with wider pavements, cleaner streets and a tapas-fuelled spring in its step. (A notable 33 new hotels are currently being built here, half of them deluxe.)

It works particularly well for families and groups because there is so much for everyone – for art and architecture lovers, for foodies, for historians, romantics and modernists. Galleries,

paella, parklife (more diverting shopping. If we start with the first of the leafy Paseo del Arte, which is one of the world's big-ticket museums in proximity: the Prado (medieval to 20th century) with its jaw-dropping art and the enchanting *Las Meninas* on stage; the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection; and the Reina Sofía National Museum (20th century, including Picasso). The Prado – based around the home of the Spanish royal family, which has housed Goyas and the Rubens collection – is a place for Philip IV's hunting leopards to orientate; it's easy to take a break to look at the pictures, as in *real* life rather than catch a stressed glimmer of a crowd (though pre-booking is essential).

Two things: the nearest and best place to stay for Madrid art is the **Oriental Ritz** – still simply the best, so close to the Prado you could take one of the turret suites into the second floor. And for a pitstop before coffee, Café is the place, which proudly displays Obama's favourite carrot cake', and a jolly tavern with salami on p...



*Back into Ritzmod
de Magno to be close
to smart shops.*

handed round to prosperous Madrileños, here you have to make that difficult nightly decision: whether to gorge on myriad tapas before dinner (which they also serve) or try to tame a slate of tapas as dinner. It's an eclectic menu – not sure how Spanish those hamburger orders are, but they definitely slide easily. If only tapas is required, you could squeeze into the sardine-packed Taberna La Dolores, hosting local gossip with patatas bravas since 1908.

But back to the Ritz, where the rizz has been restored, courtesy of an extensive three-year design by Spanish architect Rafael de La-Hoz and the French designers Gilles and Boissier. Like a white wedding cake on the outside, it is something approaching hotel nirvana within. Sweep to the reception, where golden and silver chandeliers dangle from the ceiling, into the Palm Court, top-lit through its glass-domed roof, champagne bar at one end, and the colourful Art Deco bar off the lobby, past a gold wall and a gallery of artisans cosplaying Prado portraits.

Take a turret suite, with its circular sitting room where a curved sofa hugs one of the walls and an ingenious built-in mirror-backed headboard hides a coffee machine and minibar. In the bathroom are Natura Bissé products and a case containing not only a ghd hairdryer but a hairbrush too; and in the bedroom, dark



*The bathroom in the
Atrium Suite in the
Villa Magno's top floor
views over Calle*

parquet, soft rugs and Spanish leather embossed headboards. The proportions remain of a palace built in the Belle Époque at the request of the playboy King Alfonso XIII, who envied the Ritz in Paris and London, and opened it in 1910 with his wife, Victoria Eugenie, granddaughter of Queen Victoria. Since then, guests have included Grace Kelly with Prince Rainier on their honeymoon, Mata Hari, Randolph Hearst and Madonna. Now lighter and brighter, its gold-and-white transformation extends to the basement, which houses a gym, a pool in marble with starlit constellations in the ceiling, a misty rainshower lined with gold tiles, a hammam, and three sparkling glass chandeliers, which hang in a bunch over the recliners. A bespoke facial uses products by the likes of Cellcosmet

and Valmont. The breakfast buffet has everything dripping on a comb, pastries, hams, and everything you can think of, healthy and delicious.

The Ritz isn't the only hotel to have life breathed into it. There's a smaller one, the first five-star boutique hotel in the building opened in 1915 as the headquarters of Papelera Española, the nation's biggest paper company. Laidback and rather good value, the fashionable Las Salesas *barrio* is between Chamberí and buzzy Chueca. The Urso Hotel and Spa is opposite the recently remodelled Barceló market, full of food and tasters. Urso's central lift is a masterpiece of early 20th-century design, beautifully restored with a leather seat, swirling metalwork and a joy. The rooms are high-ceilinged

itect Ramón de Arana, with the entrance
scaped with water (and in winter, a small
rink); inside, the vibes are soft, low-lit and
ling. Its open-plan lobby, the work of
tralian BAR Studio, featured a collaboration
a Loewe in the garden when we were there;
ther times, it forms a firelit, dark, atmos-
tric stage set for the comings and goings
well-heeled Madrileños and their visitors.
y Nata is the adjacent *pastelería* that serves
nemade pastries of an equally addictive
are to the people-watching, while Las Brasas
Castellana is the restaurant where grilled-to-
er fillet steak and bearnaise is served at night
a lavish breakfast in the morning.

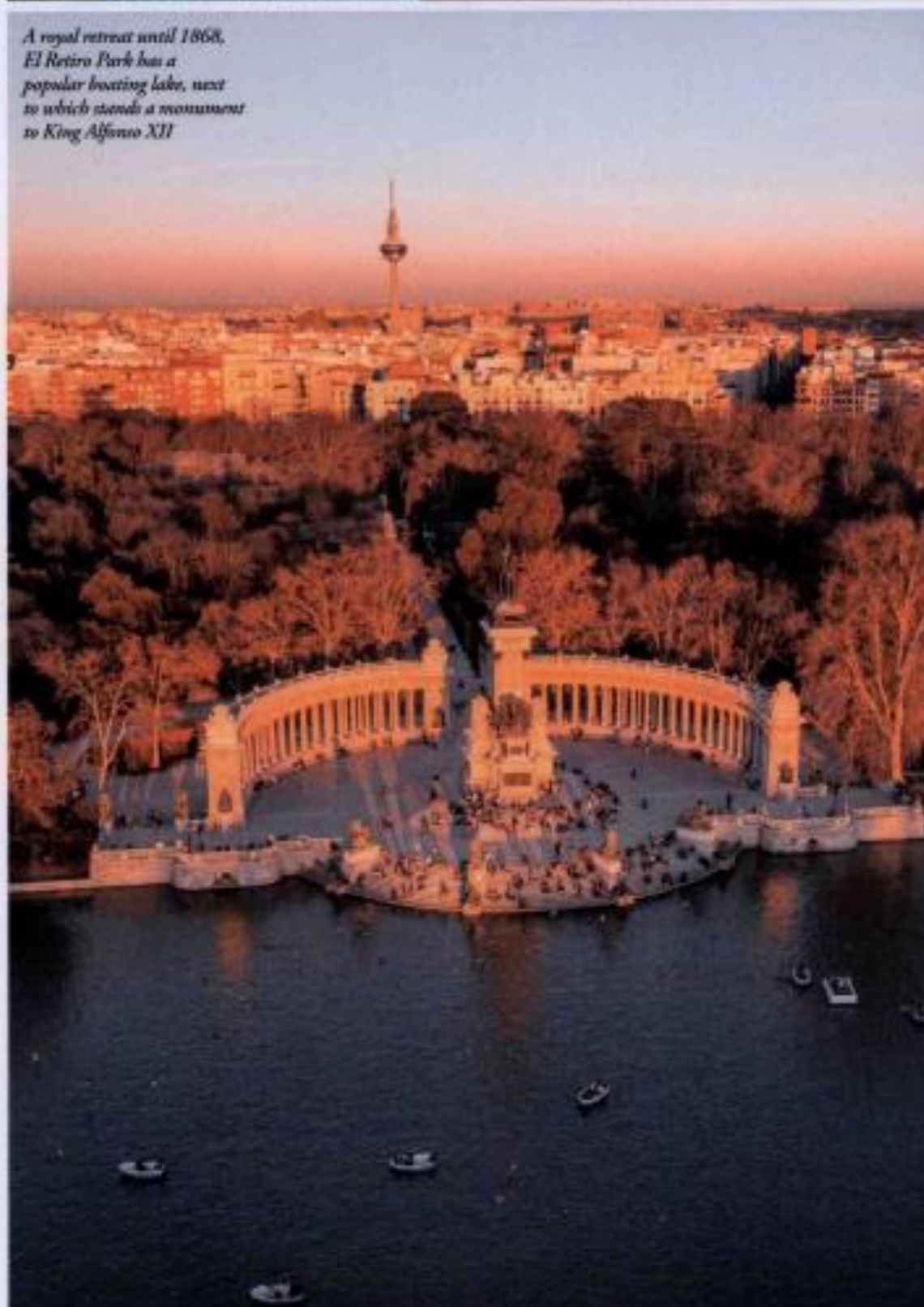
Welcome here is instant; there is a big jar of
i cookies before you even get to reception.
staircase with a stained-glass window and
lead up to the rooms (artfully redesigned
n marble bathrooms, soft beds, black-and-
te chevron carpets) or down to the spa,
n its ovoid jacuzzi, sauna, hammam, and
ert signature massages that use delicious
by Ground from Co Cork.

opping is the obvious distraction – open
ack door and you fall into El Corte Inglés,
rid's premier department store. But within
minutes, you could be in the romantic
e of the Sorolla Museum, once the house of
n's impressionist artist Joaquin Sorolla, the
ter of light', with its statue-lined garden
rooms full of tender family pictures. Or
e is the exquisite Retiro Park, with its lake
memorial to Alfonso XII (father of the Ritz
, its fountains, and its Crystal Palace,
d on ours in London. Or stroll down the
a Vía – full of dramatic architecture, as if
and New York had a Spanish love child.

é haven't even got to the Royal Palace,
h boasts not only a staggering 3,418 rooms
also, next door, the new Royal Collections
ery, planned since the 1930s but which
ly opened in June 2023. It has more Goya,
ens and Caravaggio, alongside jewellery,
ages and tapestries. Madrid is a walking
with no end of attractions, so stock up on
apas and don't tell anyone how stellar the
ls are, because we want it to remain as airy
smooth and easy as it is now. □



Revive tired limbs after an exploration of Madrid on foot with a water retreat in the spa at Ursa Hotel.



A royal retreat until 1868, El Retiro Park has a popular boating lake, next to which stands a monument to King Alfonso XII.