

MADRID OR BARCELONA: TWO VERY DIFFERENT DESTINATIONS



When deciding on a city for a Spanish holiday, two names come to mind - **Madrid or Barcelona**. Both are seen as very different tourist destinations, with Barcelona being viewed by locals as the obvious, yet less appealing, tourist trap - especially since the 1992 Olympics - and Madrid seen as a real, complex city with more culture and authenticity. Is Madrid really better for tourists? Will their experience of Spain and its culture be hindered by Barcelona's attempts to appeal to the foreign masses and does the authentic feel of Madrid come at a prize?

Madrid or Barcelona side by side.

As Madrid is supposed to be the better city, according to its citizens, it is best to start there. This idea of the city being cultured really is the main argument that locals and fans have for placing it above Barcelona as an attractive destination: it clearly has more history, with a number of Civil War battle sites to visit; beautiful architecture, with some walls retaining the bullet holes from those battles; and a number of sites of cultural interest like the famous Prado museum and Palacio de Madrid. It is easy to lose yourself in a quiet Spanish street full of boutiques and local delicacies and soak in the local flavours in this city, which leads nicely to another important highlight - the authenticity of the cuisine and its availability. Whichever restaurant you dine in, it may take some time to get used to the hour at which residents enjoy their meals - 10pm being the ideal time for dinner here rather than a late supper - but at least there are plenty of different establishments to choose from. Following the meal there is always the optional experience of continuing the night at one of Madrid's bars and clubs. Here you can arrive at 2am and dance until sunrise, but you should be prepared to spend quite a few Euros for the pleasure.

So how does Barcelona, the proclaimed tourist capital of Spain, compare? There are some clear differences between the two cities and one of the most obvious has to be the presence of the beaches; not only are there a number of sandy shores to compliment the vibrant city, they allow for topless sunbathing and are often crowded with foreign visitors, which means they are not quite as relaxing as the historic streets of Madrid. Interestingly, while some would say that the architecture and history of the two cities is another major contrast, it cannot be denied that Barcelona is still a beautiful city and it is, of course, home to Gaudi's unbelievable La Segrada Familia Cathedral. When it comes to dining and night-life, the same cuisine and late-night opportunities are still available but there are some subtle differences. The food in Barcelona is still authentic, but it seems to become more so the further out of the city centre you go, meaning a little extra effort for the finer foods, and the prices can also be higher as that aforementioned "tourist trap" closes in on unsuspecting victims. Much like Madrid, there are plenty of tapas restaurants as it is often the dish of choice for most visitors. The night-life also differs here because even though the late opening times are the same, the nightclubs are enormous, multi-storey establishments that welcome thousands of guests on one night and have smaller entry fees.

Madrid vs. Barcelona: which comes out on top?

It is impossible to pick a winner because they are both very similar in a number of ways and any differences can be seen as great incentives for the tourists they are designed to appeal to. It all comes down to the elements that are most desired from the holiday; the contrast of a foreign holiday

full of sun, sand, shopping and affordable clubs and one that is much more relaxed and cultured with a deeper Spanish identity. Spaniards may feel that the attempts of Barcelona to target the foreign market with cheaper nightclubs and a less authentic feel make it the lesser option; however, the expense and attitude of the high-brow Madrid mean it is not automatically the number one choice either. There are some clear shared experiences and differing target markets and that means that Madrid and Barcelona both appeal to different tourists in their own way.

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