

Madrid

A magnificent queen and a real beauty

> Armin Gemmer

Barcelona, Seville, Valencia, Cordoba – there are many beautiful women in Spain but there is only one queen – or so an old saying tells us. Which Spanish city is the most beautiful will probably continue to be a point of discussion for the next 100 years. But only Madrid is responsible for forming the specific character of modern Spain. Since its nomination as the capital city in the year 1556 no other city has been able to threaten its supremacy.

Cities which have played any significant role in history were founded near bays, fords, river mouths or important trading routes. Because of their strategic location they became important trade cities gaining wealth, power and political clout. This is ideally the typical way a city rises to become the capital city of a nation. Madrid belongs to the few cities that are an exception. The only special characteristic of Madrid is its

location exactly in the centre of the Iberian Peninsula. To be precise, the square “Puerto del Sol” is not only the heart of old Madrid but also the centre of the country. This is the point from which all the national highways start, spreading out in all directions, in a star-like network crossing all regions.

With regard to Spanish or Andalusian history the focus on Madrid is relatively new. In comparison to the other Spanish cities, Madrid, which is a very significant city today, was totally insignificant 1,000 years ago.

The Arabs founded Madrid

The name Madrid is a modification of the word “Mayrid” which in Arabic roughly translates into “near water”. It takes some attention and searching for tourists who visit modern Madrid to discover relics which bear testimony to the foundation history of the city. Just below the Madrid city palace one can still find the remains of the old Arab city wall. Other than some street names and a small park which bears the name of the city’s founder Mohamed I, only these scarce remains of the wall testify to the Arab



البلازا مايور

Equestrian statue at the Plaza Mayor

Madrid. In the 9th century the emir of Cordoba built a wall to protect the Islamic kingdom, and in particular Toledo, from the attacks of the Christian equestrian armies from the north. In his search for a suitable border post to strengthen the demarcation line, he discovered the place where the city palace stands today. To him this place seemed such an ideal strategic location that he immediately decided to build an Alcázar. Nevertheless it took several years before people founded a small insignificant settlement at the foot of the fortress.

From a village to a capital city

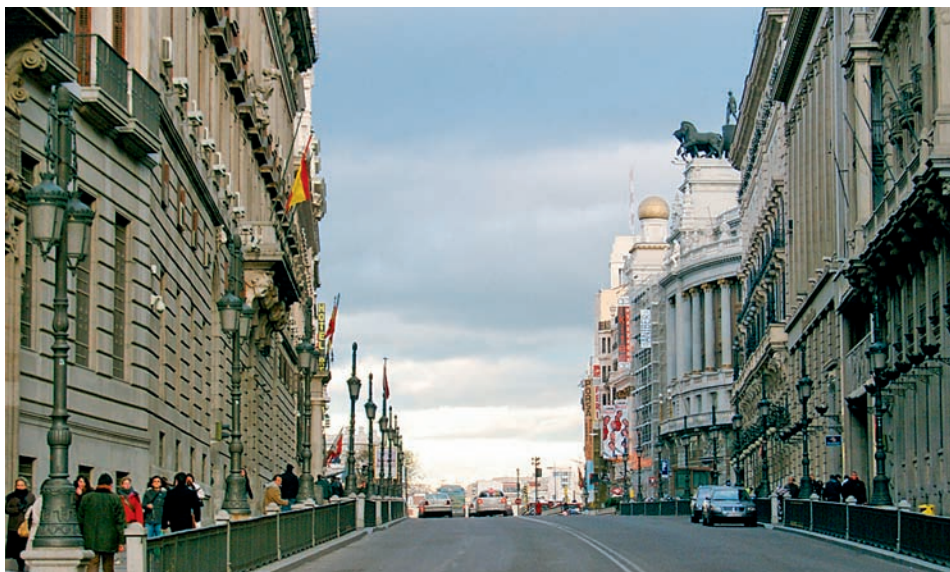
The present-day Spanish nation is in fact the result of a marriage. With the marriage of Isabella of Castile to crown prince Ferdinand of Aragon their once independent kingdoms were united. Spain exists from this day. Other marriages led to the unification with the Habsburg Kingdom and Karl the 5th became the most powerful monarch in Europe. On a whim, his son Phillip II who by then had become ruler of a vast empire "on which the sun never sets" changed the capital from the metropolitan city of Toledo to a provincial village called Madrid.

Siglo de Oro – the Golden Age

The decision posed a major challenge for the royal architects. A village made of primitive huts was to be turned into the centre of a world kingdom. In a very short time government offices, palace buildings ▶

The Palacio de la Equitativa between Calle de Alcalá and Calle Seville

البلاسيو دي لا إيكوتاتيفا الذي يقع بين شارعي كاي دي ألكالا وكاي سيفيل



Wide arterial roads connect Plaza del Sol with the rest of the country
شارع عريض يربط ساحة بلازا ديل سول مع بقية البلاد



The top of the Palacio de la Equitativa
البلاسيو دي لا إيكوتاتيفا

and houses for diplomats, state officials, rich patricians and artists were built. Plaza Mayor with its arcades, Plaza del Sol and the Palace El Escorial are relics from this time. Even today the Spanish call these times "Siglo de Oro", the Golden Age. No other time has produced as many artists, philosophers, painters and poets. Almost all Baroque buildings which adorn the city today were built by the Habsburgs. The Madrid Baroque is famous for being unobtrusive. One has to look very closely to discover the hidden ornaments on the buildings. Under the Habsburgs the city extended from the royal palace to the place where the boulevard Paseo del Prado is located today. The historic quarter can still be recognized by its chaotic alleys.

With the defeat of the Armada by the English and the end of the Habsburg-Spanish kingdom in sight the rise of Madrid continued. With the War of the Spanish Succession in 1700 a Bourbon came to the throne. Karl III is considered the master builder of Madrid. All the neo-classical buildings which dominate the city today originate from this time. Karl commissioned the most famous architects in Europe to build a geometrically circular street system surrounding the Habsburg quarter. Around the old city noble palaces and wide boulevards arose, for example Casale de Alsaca or Paseo del Prado where the famous galleries are situated today. This is also where more than a hundred years later, during the Belle Epoque, the magnificent manor houses of the upcoming middle class were built. Today they are predominantly used as banks and insurance offices.

Madrid is now a modern, fast moving city, a functional and lively metropolis. The numerous preserved buildings from Habsburg times make it a magnificent capital city. Because of its economic and political importance, it has earned the right to be described as the Queen of Spanish cities. Owing to its unique internationally-renown museums and sights it is always worth a visit. However, there are some tourists who question the fact that Madrid is the 'beauty of the nation' because strolling through the city many miss the relics from the middle-ages and its cultural history which distinguish it from the other "beauties" in the country. ■



Plaza de la Cibeles

ساحة بلازا دي سيبيل



Puerta de Alcalá

بوابة بويرتا ديل ألكاليا



Building on Paseo del Prado

مبنى في شارع باسيو ديل برادو