

# Apartment hunting in Madrid

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I've had something like two years of college Spanish and have a friend who has a friend in Madrid, so I wasn't in a completely hopeless position when I awoke on a train going through Spain.

David picked me up at the train station, shoved everything I own into his car, and took me back to his place in Delicias, just south of central Madrid. His apartment was incredibly nice, with modern interiors and a view for miles. It served as a reminder of the apartment I wouldn't be renting. By David's suggestion, I went to the City University to pick up some postings on the bulletin boards. I got seven, most of which were a bust.

Calling about the place was by far the most difficult part, since you have no hand gestures or familiar courtesy to help you along. People were very curt with me, and a lot of people hung up without waiting for me to say adios (not that I expect them to hold my hand through it all). I can speak better than I can listen, so I learned to not give people a chance to say things that involve a vocabulary greater than 100 words. 'I want to see your apartment. What is the address? Is 7:30 OK?' I went to see 7 apartments, during which I took the grand walking tour of central Madrid.

- The first was from an agent. She was unhelpful on the phone, but I got the address. It's on a long highway along the Manzanares river. It's an emaciated green river, and the occasional dams are probably the only thing keeping the river from being completely dry. I had to stop now and then to make sure the tiny waves were actually moving, 'cause they seemed to just stand still like the surface of a thick stew. The apartments between the river and the highway were strongly reminiscent of the apartments I lived in as a kid: three or four story brick things with an exposed stairwell for each column of apartments and loads of parking and a few trees. I walked for about 45 minutes without finding the right address. Since I had another appointment, and I was feeling oppressed, I never actually saw the place.

- The next place, in the Embajadores neighborhood of south central Madrid, is evidently what they were thinking when they told me Madrid is the asshole of Spain. It was built in the 60's, for the most part, and it is like the last neighborhood but without the trees, river, and sky. Just big brick buildings. I passed through a large courtyard (a giant concrete slab with some benches), and there were all ages of people running around and having a pleasant time. Here and there I'd pass through a side street which the concrete sprayers missed,

which looked like a nice residential street, like a residential street in Chicago but for older buildings and the shops on the first floor (there ain't a building in all of Western Europe that doesn't have a shop on the first floor.), with the playground noises carrying from the concrete courtyards. I found the street after asking many, many people, but the number I had didn't exist (somebody told me as much.) I called the girl again from a payphone (it cost me US\$2. But now I know how they work. The phones display the time when you pick up the receiver, which is very convenient when you don't speak the language.) So I think girlfriend tells me that she rented the place out since I last called. Whatever.

At this point, I was strongly in the mood to assume the foetal position and die. It is physically possible that she found a new roommate in the last two hours, but the likely story is that she didn't like my accent. I would class being the brunt of discrimination, especially in life & death matters such as house or job hunting, as unpleasant. It should be illegal.

When I got home, I had missed David, who left to see a movie while I was getting screwed, so I just peeled off my socks, watched *Los Expedientes X* with a pathetically dubbed Moulder & Sculley, and went to bed. By the way, they even overdub stuff like grunting & screaming, and watching a badly dubbed shriek has to be the funniest thing on TV, even above lip-reading expletives on sporting events.

The next day, I went to the other university to get more fliers. It was massively discouraging, because it all gave me a massive sense of not belonging. Here were all these beautiful people, talking amongst themselves in their beautiful language, and there's me, looking lost. I came back with nothing at all. Though earlier in the day I had bought a *Segundomano*. You buy the paper, but people place the ads for free, so you have loads of crap worth next to nothing for sale in it. It had three pages of roommates wanted.

- The first apartment that I called had a guy with an incomprehensible accent. Some folks are just easier than others, and this guy was near impossible. He handed me off to a girl who spoke a few words of English, and she told me to come over in an hour. I left shortly thereafter, and arrived in about 40 minutes.

The neighborhood was extremely busy. It was a prime shopping strip, with loads of expensive shops and grandiose movie palaces and a Pizza Hut. The apartment was on a tiny street by the Gran Via, and it was ug-ly. However, as soon as you got off the main street, it got really quiet. It seems true throughout Madrid that if you don't like a street, you just have to go a block down to find something different. I rang the buzzer, and I guessed that they told me the apartment wasn't ready, so I kept walking around.

The neighborhood north of Gran Via is relatively poor, though it seemed OK to me. There were a lot of sex shops, which should have been a tip-off. A whore who was the closest thing I'd ever seen to a man in drag without *being* a man was standing outside of one shop (I know it was a woman because she was displaying more than enough breast to confirm their reality). A block down I was propositioned by another. She was skinny and stoned, and I just felt really sorry for her. 'Quieres pasar la noche conmigo?'

‘I’m sorry, I don’t speak Spanish’

‘Oh. Would you like to spend the night with me?’

‘I’m sorry, but no.’

‘Would you like to go for a drink?’

‘Thanks, but I have to find myself an apartment. Do you know who’s renting this one?’ [I point to a nice-looking apartment with a For Rent sign]

‘No, I don’t. Just one drink?’

‘I’m sorry, but I have to find an apartment. Good bye.’

Poor thing. I pass by the shop which offers services including ‘transmission sexual’ and ring the apartment buzzer again. The girl who speaks less English than the whore answers and tells me something I don’t understand but which obviously meant ‘thanks for coming, sucker, but I don’t want to rent you the place.’

• I called the next place, and she was nicer—she let me in. I walked from Gran Via to this place, and it was more of the same small shops and old-style buildings all the way. ‘I could live here,’ I thought to myself. I was looking for the right number, and looking at the stunning architecture all along the street, trying to decide which house I wanted to live in more. Mine was apparently at the back of a courtyard, behind one lovely throwback to the 1800s. I turned the corner, and there was my brick box.

Menchu was nice enough, and I know it can be hard for a single mom trying to send her kid to a private school. She sells tanning beds from her home, and I later found out that she also ran a liquor store. We talked, and she was very patient, and the concrete hollow that was my room was very spacious, and the balcony over the courtyard had a certain charm, knowing I could spit down on the people in the outdoor cafe below, and it’s nice that I wouldn’t have to shop for my own knick-knacks for the TV room. I took her number and promised to give her a call.

• The next guy recognized my accent and immediately started speaking English on the phone. He told me to come right over, so I hopped the Metro to the Opera stop.

Indeed, you walk out of the subway onto the plaza in front of the National Opera. So this neighborhood is a step up. Next door is a large sculpture-filled park, and then the Palacio Real, where the King of Spain used to live (now he just entertains guests there). I found the address and was overjoyed that it was not poured from a single block of concrete. I’m told that the building was built in 1844, which would make it older than nearly every building in Chicago. It sort of looks it. Going up to the first floor (those crazy Europeans don’t count the ground floor), the wooden steps had lost all their paint and were badly warped from years’ worth of feet and each step had a slight downward slope. There’s always a switch to turn on the light in apartment hallways, but unless you live there, you never know where it is. I stumbled my way up to the first floor.

Dave, the professional harpsichordist, let me in. He was quick in showing the apartment. I was flabbergasted by the parlor. The fifteen foot ceiling, the old piano, the shelves filled with books, the view from the two small balconies

outside the window, all gave off an ambiance that was somehow missing from Menchu's TV room, even if this place didn't have a La-z-boy. The hallway to what would be my bedroom was long and windy, and it felt like I could easily get lost. The kitchen looked a lot like a kitchen should, as did the bedroom. Dave and Rob the Brit and I talked a lot; they seemed more interested in chatting than showing off the apartment, though I guess you have to screen out the assholes among the applicants. Over the course of the fifteen minutes we talked, Dave offered to set me up twice.

- I finally got out of there to see some other apartments. The next one is in Bilbao, which is the party center of Madrid. It was too early to see the throngs of clubbers, though you had a couple of younger ones just coming out. I think the drinking age in Madrid is 16 or so, and there are always clubbers maybe two years younger who got themselves a passable ID. The pedophiles of Madrid must have a swell time, surrounded by clueless 14 year old boys & girls trying to look sexy (subtlety, guys, subtlety!).

Anyway, the apartment itself consisted of two large bedrooms, a kitchen and bathroom. Though the guy spoke English and had even spent time in Chicago, he didn't seem as enthusiastic about conversing as the last fellows. 'This is the kitchen. That's a clothes washer, not a microwave. The bathroom is over here.' I didn't have much to say either. Seeing an empty bedroom is a lot like visiting the art museum with a friend: you want to talk about it, but it's a purely wordless emotional response, and you're left to say things like, 'I like this shade of beige.' The guy put my name down on his notepad and said he'd call me if he wanted to live with me.

- The next apartment was just south of Gran Via, on Calle Montera, which at that time of night seemed to be entirely casinos with names like Iowa 42. I later garnered from the bug-eyed responses of everyone I mentioned this apartment to that this is whore & dealer central, and I must be some kind of moron to have missed it. [El Pais, which is to Spain what the NY Times is to the States, has several pages of whores listed in the entertainment section. The prices listed are as low as US\$21, or two for \$35.] The first floor was a photography studio, and the door had pictures of beautifully displayed food on it. I buzzed, gave my one fluent phrase of Spanish (I want to see your apartment), took the elevator to the fourth floor and the stairs to the fifth.

This was the most modern apartment I had seen, right down to the space-age plastic kitchen sink. But the real draw, which I all but ran to see, was the terrace. See, my studio apartment in Chicago had two windows, which faced a brick wall. From 11:45 to 12:10 every day, my apartment was sunny and warm. More than anything, I think I came to Madrid so I could sit on a terrace overlooking the city.

It was a bit disappointing. It was chilly, what with night coming on, and despite the reputation, I knew it'd be like this most of the year [Chicago: 41.8 degrees N; Madrid: 40.4 degrees N]. The terrace was pretty closed off, by three walls and a thick layer of ivy on a grid of cables, and since this was one of the shorter buildings on the block, it didn't have the beautiful vista I was hoping for. I sat and chatted with the renter for a while. She was French, and foreigners

always speak more slowly, with a smaller vocabulary and more mime. Spanish classes also had me very prepared for the ‘Where are you from What do you do’ conversation. But this wasn’t quite as I had fantasized relaxing on the Spanish terrace to be. I should know to leave my fantasies as fantasies (see *The Iceman Cometh*, Eugene O’Neil).

I was out of phone numbers who would speak to me, so I walked back to the grand old house by the Opera. No terrace, but there’s a giant garden next door. Chatty roommates may get on your nerves, but you can always just get lost down the hall somewhere. I’m not quite sure why I picked the place. Perhaps the mystique of living on a spot which has been a part of Madrid since it was just a fortress a millennium ago, though I don’t quite know how that’d affect my day-to-day existence. I’ll never know if I made the right choice; later, I would regret living with English speakers who would never challenge my Spanish, and the disrepair of everything in the apartment, and the roommates who continued to chat my ear off no matter how clearly I tried to indicate that I couldn’t talk right now. But at the time, walking through El Centro, along streets where the cars had somehow disappeared, surrounded by people drinking and laughing, I was pretty happy with the place.