

En Route to Plaza Mayor

(Julia Gardner, 3/8/2024, Central Madrid)

This picture is of a side street that leads to Plaza Mayor, a central square in Madrid; at the end of the street, the side of the archway is visible. On one hand, the plaza is a tourist attraction, a wide-open cobblestone plaza framed by old buildings with archways and columns on all sides, featuring an iconic statue of King Phillip III on horseback and outdoor seating at restaurants featuring Spanish specialties at tourist prices. On the other hand, the plaza is a crossroads between several major streets in the center of the city, and is regularly traversed by local residents as a shortcut from one place to another. The busy-ness of this side street is indicated by the group of people, but it is unclear whether or not they are tourists.

This picture was taken in early March, and it was still a bit chilly, but the clear sky and bright sun that draw many people to Spain are evident. The facade of the yellow building matches the idea of what people want from a Spanish city like Madrid, a mixture of vibrance and “old European charm.” Indeed, many buildings in the center have a similar look, although as you get farther from the center the buildings do get newer. The balconies and doors at every window hint at the fact that time spent outdoors is a big part of Spanish social culture, an idea played on by the statue of the man holding a clock that leans out of a window. He is situated right above a storefront labeled Antigua Relojes, meaning “Old Watches” in Spanish, serving as an attention-catcher for the store. To me, although the figurine advertising the store tries to play up the idea of vibrant Spanish outdoors life and pleasant weather, he also breaks the sense of “authenticity” that visitors seek from walks down side streets—despite the fact that the street leads to a major tourist attraction— with connotations of newness and consumerism.

Another part of the image that would be notable to locals and Spanish-speakers, although perhaps not non-Spanish speakers, is the Jamoneria storefront. Regardless of language ability, the part of the storefront cut off by the side of the image speaks for itself— displays of traditional Spanish ham and cheese sandwiches. Unlike the slabs of lunch meat that might come to the U.S. American mind, Spanish ham looks more like prosciutto, and is organized in hierarchies based on what kind of pig the ham comes from and what the pig’s diet was. This ham, especially the highest quality kind (jamón ibérico) is an iconic symbol of Spanish cuisine.

My homestay was near Plaza Mayor, and I walked past this store while exploring my neighborhood. I eventually ended up going a few times to grab sandwiches to eat in the park, and I

really enjoyed them! However, I do also know the place was aimed at tourists; its location near Plaza Mayor, and its prices– just a Euro or two more than the same sandwiches would be elsewhere, although still appearing reasonable to people from countries with higher costs of living– were a giveaway. Navigating the line between being a student immersed in the community and an American there to consume Spanish culture often led to these kinds of habits, especially living in the city center where many establishments are inevitably touristy. One time, for example, my friend proposed we eat paella in a restaurant in Plaza Mayor for her birthday. Her host mom discouraged her, saying that these establishments are always overpriced and touristy, and that we should look elsewhere.

The Madrid– and, in a broader sense, Spain– portrayed in this image hits on many truths about the place. Buildings in the center generally look like the one pictured; people enjoy being outside when the weather is nice, both on balconies and in the street; it is sunny most of the time in central Spain; and jamón is widely consumed and seen as iconic by local Spaniards. However, despite its resemblance to the quaint European side-street ideal, the street is commonly traversed by tourists, and its stores and image are aimed at them. As an exchange student on a language and culture immersion program, I found myself in an interesting spot. On one hand, I enjoyed walking down a street portraying a curated image of the “quintessential charm” of a place that was different from the country I grew up in. On the other hand, I knew– and know– some of the small ways in which the experiences of locals and tourists who walk down this street differ.