



Madrid & Toledo

Cities of Empire

24 April–1 May 2026 (MM 936)

8 days • £3,620

Lecturer: Gijs van Hensbergen

A comprehensive survey of Spanish art, balanced by architecture, gastronomy and literature.

Madrid's great galleries: two visits to the Prado plus the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection and the Reina Sofía, home to Picasso's *Guernica*.

Toledo is architecturally varied; home to Moorish, Jewish and Christian monuments, as well as El Greco masterpieces.

In the heady days of Madrid's *movida* movement of the 1980s, following Franco's death, it was obvious that 'Culture' would play centre-stage in Spain's new democracy; from Pedro Almodóvar's avant garde film to the collections of the dusty Prado. Daring new projects with high capital risk like the Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, the Thyssen and the Prado extension demanded a rethink; rehangs at old established museums shaped the now spectacular Museo de Arqueología and San Fernando de Bellas Artes, while careful restoration transformed old monuments like Goya's frescoes at San Antonio de la Florida. Banks and other institutions filled in any gaps with pioneering builds like Herzog de Meuron's Caixaforum, the conversion of a power station with a 70 foot vertical garden wall by Patrick Blanc. As a result, Madrid's art scene is now second to none. From Velázquez's breathtaking *Las Meninas* to Picasso's *Guernica*, from van der Weyden's *Deposition* to Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* and through to its contemporary galleries, there is a common thread – the celebration of genius.

Madrid's unique character feeds off the perennial tension between Spanish identity and cosmopolitan modernity, where gastro energy, tapas hopping, markets and designer fairs sit side by side with Golden Age houses. It was designated capital of Spain by Phillip II in 1561 and back then it was a dry, impossibly hot and boisterous wild west town in the summer, while in the winter the cold winds from the snow-topped sierra "couldn't blow out a candle but could kill a man." Madrid proudly boasted its status as a *villa* – a town, not a city – until King Felipe's wedding in 2004 forced the consecration of the Almudena cathedral. It has had to constantly remake its history where rival Toledo is as old as the hills.



Toledo, the Tagus and Bridge of St. Martin, wood engraving, c. 1870

En route, Phillip II's imperious El Escorial was his haven from a Toledo he found too cold and the noise and bustle of nearby Madrid. Here masterpieces sit behind forbidding walls: a Cellini marble Christ – a gift of the Medici – rivals an illuminated manuscript as rare as Alfonso the Wise's mythic *Book of Chess*.

Toledo's stone island has been cut by the Tagus out of hard granite rock. The skies with their bruised El Greco clouds sweep out across the *meseta* plain. The Imperial City, capital of the Visigoths, was home to the remarkable St Ildefonso, later the Arab taifa court, a School of Translators, synagogues and was invaded by the monastic orders. It is a warren of streets, where tolerance and the Inquisition faced-off in an uneasy, sometimes violent, confrontation that sits right at the heart of the Spanish character and it's rich, Quixotic diversity. Masterpieces like El Greco's *Burial of the Count de Orgaz* are seen in situ and gloriously on our own. There are few luxuries in life that beat it, except perhaps, as Quixote would tease Sancho Panza, a 'pickled partridge' married with a deep rich *caldo* of blood-red wine, followed by the sweetest marzipan heart – rolled out by a nun.

Itinerary

Day 1. Fly at c. 9.15am from London Heathrow to Madrid (Iberia Airlines). Begin at the Archaeological Museum, good on ancient Iberian civilisation and Roman Spain. First of four nights in Madrid.

Day 2: Madrid. Visit the Royal Academy of Fine Arts, home to works by Goya, Zurbarán, Ribera and Murillo. Continue to the Lázaro Galdiano Museum with works by El Greco, Goya and Murillo. In the afternoon visit the beautifully curated Royal Collections Gallery, which reveals a panoramic *paseo* through Spanish royal taste from the 15th century Catholic Kings, through Hapsburg and Bourbon.

Day 3: Madrid. Start at the Prado for our first visit, concentrating on the Spanish school. The afternoon is spent at the Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, housed in the 18th-century Palacio de Villahermosa, one of the world's largest private art collections until its purchase by the Spanish state in 1993.

Day 4: Madrid. Return to the Prado for a second visit, this time primarily to see the Italian and Netherlandish schools. Continue to the Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, one of the greatest modern art museums and home to Picasso's *Guernica* plus works by Miró, Dalí and Tàpies. Dinner is accompanied by a flamenco show.

Day 5: Madrid, El Escorial. Leaving Madrid, stop at San Antonio de la Florida with fine Goya frescoes before continuing to El Escorial, a vast retreat-cum-palace-cum-monastery-cum-pantheon built from 1563 to 1584 for Philip II, successfully embodying his instructions for 'nobility without arrogance,

Madrid & Toledo
continued

majesty without ostentation, severity in the whole'. Continue on to Toledo for the first of three nights.

Day 6: Toledo. Visit the church of Santo Tomé with El Greco's *Burial of Count Orgaz*, his greatest work (private view) and see more of his art at his burial place, the convent of Sto Domingo el Antiguo. Fine architecture includes the 14th-century Taller del Moro, 13th-century San Román, now the Visigothic museum, and the exquisite tenth-century mosque of Bab al-Mardum. The Gothic cathedral is Spain's largest and the most richly endowed with paintings (El Greco, Velázquez, Titian) and also has furnishings and sculpture of the highest quality. The Museo de Santa Cruz is housed in a remarkable early 16th-century hospital, built to the designs of Antón and Enrique Egas, and is best known for its late medieval and later paintings, including works by El Greco.

Day 7: Toledo. El Greco's house and museum contains his finest series of apostles and *View of Toledo*. Explore the Jewish quarter, starting with a pair of former synagogues: Ibn Shoshan (Santa María la Blanca) from the 13th century retains its original stuccowork and wooden ceiling, while El Tránsito is a more lavish galleried synagogue financed by Samuel Levi in the 1360s. San Juan de los Reyes is the breathtakingly ambitious Franciscan monastery constructed under Ferdinand and Isabella. Free afternoon, or optional visits to some of Toledo's lesser-visited sites, including the tapestry museum.

Day 8: Illescas. El Greco spent two years in the undistinguished town of Illescas, and the Hospital de la Caridad contains five of his works. Fly to Heathrow (Iberia Airlines) arriving at c. 6.15pm.

Lecturer

Gijs van Hensbergen. Art historian and author specialising in Spain and the USA. His books include *Gaudi*, *In the Kitchens of Castile*, *Guernica* and most recently, *La Sagrada Familia*, and he has published in the *Burlington Magazine* and *Wall Street Journal*. He read languages at Utrecht University and Art History at the Courtauld, and undertook postgraduate studies in American art of the 1960s. He has worked in England, the USA and Spain as exhibitions organiser, TV researcher and critic and is a Fellow of the Cañada Blanch Centre for Contemporary Spanish Studies at the LSE.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £3,620 or £3,410 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £4,240 or £4,030 without flights.

Included: flights (economy class) with Iberia Airlines (Airbus 320); travel by private coach; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts and 5 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. **NH Collection Palacio de Tepa, Madrid** (nh-collection.com): small and excellently located 5-star hotel. Rooms are comfortable and décor is contemporary. **Hotel Eugenia de Montijo, Toledo** (fontecruzhoteles.com): 5-star hotel in a converted palace in the Jewish Quarter with smart rooms. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use.*

How strenuous? The tour involves a lot of walking and standing in museums (which can be more tiring than moving around) and town centres where coach access is restricted. Many streets are narrow, steep and unevenly paved. A good level of fitness is essential. Average distance by coach per day: 20 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.