

# Falling in love with Madrid not a difficult task

## Spain's capital city teeming with art, architecture and history

Venice may be the “City of Love,” but Saint Valentine is buried in Madrid.

The Patron Saint of Love rests in the Church of Anton. The tomb sits on plush red velvet within a golden casket. A clear, glass front panel allows visitors to see what are said to be the remains of the saint.

Saint Valentine's relationship to Madrid dates to the 18th century. Remains were discovered in Roman catacombs and gifted by the pope to the king of Spain, Carlos IV, who passed them to the church, and they have been on display ever since.

The story of Saint Valentine is one of many to be learned in Spain's capital city. Madrid is considered to be among Europe's most intriguing and beautiful towns. Its history dates to the ninth century and it has aged better than a fine wine.

Unique architecture meshes with museums, athletics and the hustle and bustle of a metropolis. Sights and sounds overwhelm the senses and harmony and tranquility clear the mind.

Prado Museum has one of the largest art collections in the world. Opened in 1819 at the encouragement of Queen Maria Isabel de Braganza, it houses nearly 9,000 paintings and more than 700 sculptures, featuring Spanish, Italian and Flemish styles. Among the most famous featured include Velazquez's “Las Meninas,” Goya's “The Third of



**WATERMARK** – Plaza de Cibeles sits in the background of a fountain, featuring Roman goddess Cybele, “the Great Mother.” Image: dimbar76. Adobe Stock.

May 1808” and El Greco's “Adoration of the Shepherds.”

Art aficionados can continue to satisfy their appetites at Thyssen-Bornemisza National Museum and Queen Sofia Arts Center. Thousands of works by artists throughout the Old Country date centuries.

El Retiro Park – translated as “Park of the Pleasant Retreat” – is centrally located

and offers a sprawling swath of lush greenery comprised of formal gardens, lakes and cafes. The previous location of Felipe IV's palace and gardens, its beauty stands out among vast competition.

Absorb the regality of the Royal Palace of Madrid. The home of kings from the mid-1700s to the 1900s, it's the largest of its kind in Western Europe, with 3,000 rooms. Guests are wowed by its

luxury and grandeur – an atmosphere that sends them to a crowning era.

Barrio de Salamanca sits near Retiro Park and often is compared to New York's Fifth Avenue or London's Bond Street. Nicknamed the “Golden Mile,” shoppers can peruse shops like Gucci, Armani and Cartier. Tiny boutiques mix seamlessly among the famous shops.

Shopping lures guests to Barrio de Salamanca, but 19th-century architecture steals their attention. Decorative balconies and ironwork highlight edifices, providing unforgettable sights.

Circulo de Belles Artes is a cultural center that can be found in Gran Via. Visitors take advantage of sweeping rooftop views and enjoy drinks while appreciating the sunset over the Metropolis Building.

Plaza de Cibeles is considered the most famous of its kind in Madrid. The main building is Cibeles Palace and the plaza's fountain features Roman goddess Cybele, “the Great Mother.”

Soccer fans should visit Bernabeu Stadium, home of Real Madrid, a member of the renowned UEFA Champions League. Casa de Campo is a recreational hotspot, where amusement parks, zoos and aquariums can be found. And Flamenco Madrid is an entertainment hub that plays host to many of Madrid's finest shows nightly.

Madrid might not be the “City of Love,” but it's a town with which its guests fall in love.

# Shimmering sun makes Clearwater special

## Blue skies brighten days at Florida, gulf-coast town

The sun shines brightly on this Florida town that sets up shop on the shore of the Gulf of Mexico. It even has the perfect name: Clearwater.

Clear skies are synonymous with this blessed city. The sun steals the stage, sparse clouds add inspiration and rain is a rarity. Clearwater averages 361 days of sunshine per year and it holds the record for most consecutive clear days with 768 – more than two consecutive years.

It's an astonishing record – one that boggles the mind of those who reside above the Mason-Dixon Line. Clearwater boasts temperatures from the low 70s to low 90s. The water is warm and as unblemished as the sky, and the beaches hug the seawaters, creating the perfect tropical neighborhood.

Sugar-white sand meshes flawlessly with Clearwater's tranquil setting. Beaches arguably are the town's finest attribute. Guests spend hours bathing in the sun or comfortably resting under an umbrella. The teasing scent of saltwater wafts from the gulf. Beach bums can't help but take a dip.

Beach Walk is one of shore's primary attributes. The \$30 million redevelopment initiative transformed the look and atmosphere of south Clearwater Beach. It's a long and meandering promenade – a half-mile in length – surrounded by resorts, entertainment, restaurants



**SUNSATIONAL** – Blue skies steal the spotlight nearly every day in Clearwater, Florida. Image: Gabriele Maltini. Adobe Stock.

and artwork. It's dotted with palm trees, resting areas and lush landscaping.

Pier 60 is a popular stop along the esplanade. Drop your fishing lines during the day. By evening, appreciate the free sunset celebration, a local tradition for more than a quarter-century. Street performers, artists, crafters and

live music sparkle during the festival. The event begins two hours before sunset and concludes two hours after the sun drops beneath the gulf's horizon.

Shopping, dining and live entertainment highlight Clearwater's revitalized downtown. The Cleveland District overlooks the fabulous Clearwater Harbor

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and Marina and provides a stunning backdrop, making it a popular spot for concerts, festivals and exhibits.

Mouthwatering seafood is pulled regularly from the Gulf of Mexico, making Clearwater known for its fresh daily catches. Grouper is the town's favorite. The flaky, white fish can be prepared many ways and is a hit among the locals and visitors. Stone crab is another specialty, available from May to October.

Food festivals and events pack the calendar, including Frenchy's Stone Crab Festival, Cooters Annual Crab Fest, Clearwater Beach Uncorked and many more. The seafood might be just as delectable as the beaches.

Guests can golf, charter fishing boats, go dolphin watching, or simply ... Just relax.

The sky is blue, the sun is shining, and the gulf waters are pure. It's safe to assume that Clearwater more than lives up to its name.