



Olé: Isabel and her teacher

BY ISABEL CONWAY

# A pretty (difficult) flamenco

*How this dance fan fared on her Madrid refresher course*

**A** MAN with buttock-hugging trousers, buttons almost popping off his shirt with exertion, is strutting, stamping and twirling in time to the pounding guitars. His face is contorted with intense soulful passion, his thunderous footwork thrills his audience. It's all uninhibited, passionate, faintly dangerous and oh so Spanish!

Welcome to Corral de La Moreria, the most famous of Madrid's flamenco temples, listed in 1,000 Places To See Before You Die.

Flamenco's roots lie deep inside the sun-baked gypsy enclaves of Andalusia and is thought to have been born out of the persecution of gypsies, Moors and other minorities who banded together during the Inquisition.

These days, it's Madrid, though, which attracts the top performers to small intimate stages like this one performing authentic 'Tablao Flamenco' a fusion of singers, dancers and musicians.

Corral de La Moreria's walls are festooned with photos of past customers such as Sandra Bullock, Muhammad Ali, Ronnie Wood, Michael Douglas and Richard Gere.

**T**WO male and one female performer – a multi-award trio – and a suitably anguished looking guitarist kept us spellbound, letting our dinner go cold as the show climaxed into a spectacular Dervish-like finale.

The woman, all wild hair and flounced skirts, flaunted her disdain with much head-shaking and finger-clicking to her would-be suitors. One of the men then spun like a top into the air, spraying beads of sweat into my companion's glass of wine. That's how close we were!

Having taken tango lessons in Buenos Aires years ago, tying myself up in knots with an Argentinian beginner who also had two left feet, I am keen to briefly explore the challenges of flamenco here in Madrid.

Amor de Dios (God's Love) Centro de Arte Flamenco y Danza, a famous flamenco dance academy hidden away on the upper floors of Anton Martin market, Calle de Santa Isabel, is a flashback to Fame, Alan Parker's 1980 teen musical drama.

Dublin-based Spaniard Sara, a flamenco natural, joins me in a private beginner's lesson (€20 each) in one of the studios, lined with glass cases displaying dance



Dome, sweet dome: The Cathedral of Saint Mary the Royal of La Almudena and the Royal Palace.

memorabilia. The first shock is that I will not be kitted out in a beautiful polka dot frilled flamenco dress.

The academy director rummages through the office cupboards and finds ('suitable for practice') an outsized, circular black skirt – and it has to be wrapped twice around to stop it falling down.

And it gets worse... I catch myself in the wall-length mirror, attempting a classic movement, stretching one arm up to pick an imaginary apple from the tree with a twist, then holding it behind my back. I look more like a pantomime hunchback.

Our teacher, human dynamo Isabel Trivino, takes us through more basics: how to lift the heels of our shoes in rhythm to our clapping hands, and stamp at high speed while moving our hips back and forth.

'Listen to your heels hitting the ground, there's an animal inside you waiting to get out' she urges. 'You're fierce, you're angry, you're passionate; you're feeling the flamenco.'

After an hour and a half of foot-stamping, whirling around, hands sore from clapping, I am perspiring almost as much as the dancer

## TRAVEL FACTS

### HOW TO GET THERE

Aer Lingus and Ryan Air fly all year Dublin to Madrid, from €52 return, approx. €89 ex Cork with Iberia Express June 1- Sept 15 twice weekly. Visit [www.spain.info](http://www.spain.info) and [www.esmadrid.com](http://www.esmadrid.com)

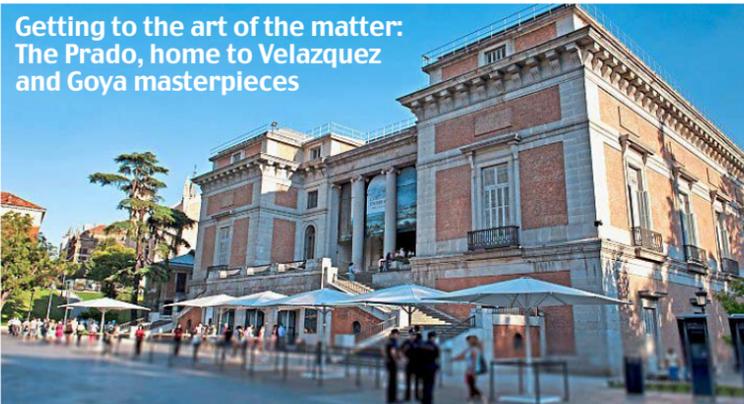
### WHERE TO STAY

Isabel stayed at the 4\* NH Madrid Nacional Hotel housed in a converted 1920s mansion offering foyer snacks and meals with various cheeses ([www.nh-hotels.com/hotel/nh-madrid-nacional](http://www.nh-hotels.com/hotel/nh-madrid-nacional)).

we later watch. Kissing us warmly as I limp, and Sara skips out, the other Isabel smiles. It has all been 'rapido divertido' (fast and fun!) Olé!

We're on a Madrid city break but how can we fit it all in over three and a half days: the majestic squares and monuments, atmospheric barrios (neighbourhoods), famous art museums, notably the vast El Prado and Reina Sofia, temple to modern masterpieces of Picasso and Salvador Dali, and all those atmosphere-laden cafés and bars.

Enter city guides Enrique and Marta. From Ernest Hemingway and Real Madrid haunts to traditional food markets, the lofty opera house, enlightened insights into Spanish art, long lunches at



Getting to the art of the matter: The Prado, home to Velazquez and Goya masterpieces



Give us a twirl: A flamenco dancer

Dos Cielos Madrid, an elegant new culinary experience and Platea, a magnificent food emporium, we cover it all and more.

Hemingway loved Madrid, leaving a boozy trail at high-end restaurants, literary bars and spit and sawdust cafés down by the Matadero where he watched the matadors practise. His novel *The Sun Also Rises* features one of his favourite restaurants *Sobrino de Botin*, recognised by the Guinness Book of Records (established in 1725) as the world's oldest eating house.

**E**NRIQUE offers us a rare insight. We peer over the half door into a small kitchen. 'Here's the secret to this restaurant's staying power.' He points to platters of suckling pigs stacked ceiling-high awaiting their final fate inside the domed wood fired oven. The house speciality – *Cochinillo asada* (roast suckling pig) (€25 or €45.40 for a three-course menu) was Hemingway's favourite dish, washed down with lots of Rioja Alta. He would arrive mid-morning and write upstairs, permitted to mix his own cocktails, while waiting for friends.

Later our tapas marathon takes us into Casa Alberto, in business since 1827, that bursts with locals

and tourists and where Real players hang out. An expert in the art of 'Ir de tapear' (going out for tapas) Enrique feigns horror when someone orders a Sangria. He pleads 'order a Tinto de Verano (wine soda water and Vermouth) perfect with tapas.'

Madrid's La Latina, Santa Ana and Huertas districts are renowned for their tapas cafés and you can graze for free on your tavern crawl, ordering a glass of wine or other drink in each bar with a free tapa.

'If they don't bring a tapa, demand one,' advises the guide sharing out free Iberico ham, little salted green peppers, slices of Manchego cheese and pincho de tortilla (Spanish omelette).

Madrid's best-known food market, Mercado de San Miguel, is in a restored belle époque style glass and wrought-iron covered hall whose stalls display tempting tapas and cava by the glass.

Long rows of dried hams hanging from the ceiling, cheeses from all over Spain, olives, various breads and the opportunity to graze and drink with the locals (or enrol in a flamenco for beginners lesson upstairs at the Amor de Dios Academy) draws visitors to authentic municipal market Anton Martin.

Don't miss two of Madrid's culinary icons – chocolate con churros (delicious cylindrical fritters dipped in hot chocolate) and Bocata de Calamares (deep fried calamari served in a bread roll).

Wear comfortable shoes and take time to visit the vast Prado, one of the world's greatest art galleries and home to the classical geniuses Velazquez and Goya.

No visit to Spain would be complete without a visit to this inspiring place while nearby Reina Sofia museum houses one of Europe's most important contemporary art collections. Both museums offer free entry after 6pm.