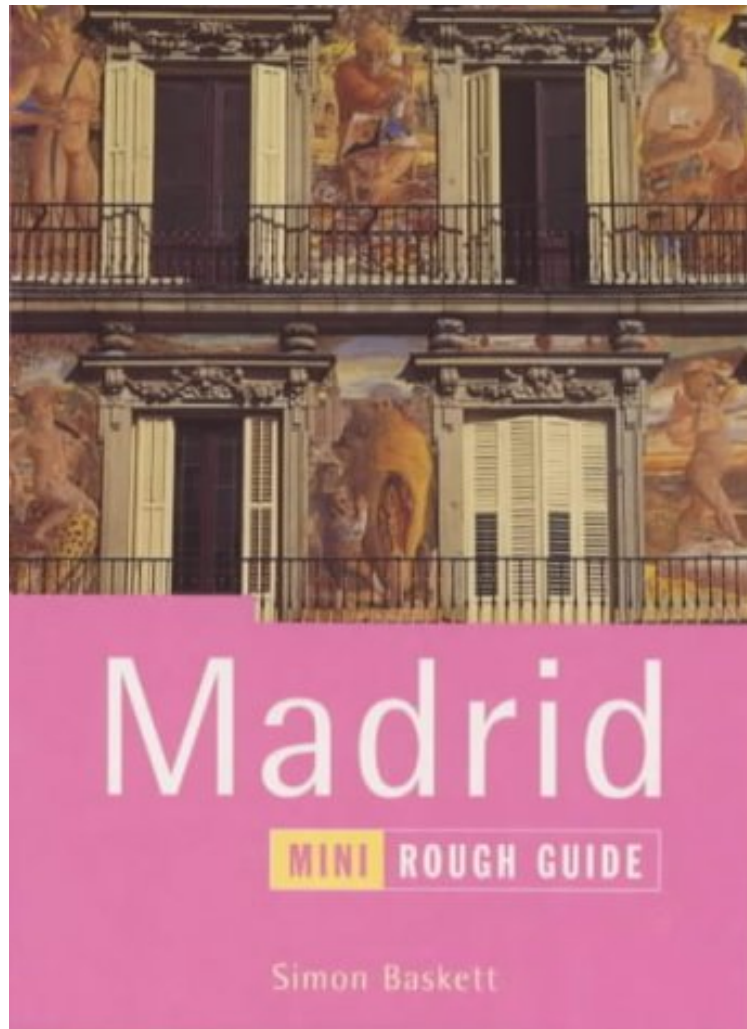


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Simon Baskett

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Simon Baskett : The Mini Rough Guide to Madrid, 2nd Edition (Rough Guide Miniguides) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Mini Rough Guide to Madrid, 2nd Edition (Rough Guide Miniguides):

Featuring reviews of the famous, and not-so-famous, accommodation, bars, restaurants and shops, this pocket handbook to Madrid gives the lowdown on cultural, social and historical context, outings to Toledo and Segovia, activities for children, shopping, sports, music and the arts.

Excerpt. © Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. Introduction Madrid became Spain's capital city at the whim of one man, Felipe II. Its site possesses few natural advantages - a fierce climate, no harbour and a pretty poor excuse for a river - but it lies exactly in the centre of Spain. In 1561, Felipe decided to base the formerly itinerant court here to avoid giving too much power and status to any one region in the recently unified Spain. In Madrid he created a symbol of the unification and centralization of the country, and a capital from which he could receive the fastest post and communications from each corner of the nation. However, it was only the determination of successive rulers to promote a strong central capital that ensured the city's survival and development. Today, Madrid is a large, predominantly modern city, with a population of some four million and a highly schizophrenic character. There are, in effect, two cities: "Madrid by day" and "Madrid by night"; the capital is freezing in winter, burning in summer; outwardly flamboyant, yet inwardly conservative; seemingly affluent, yet concealing serious levels of poverty. The highest, sunniest and greenest capital city in Europe - despite being choked with traffic and people - its inhabitants, the Madrileos modestly declare, "Desde Madrid al Cielo": that after Madrid there is only one destination left - Heaven. Largely a city of immigrants, it is difficult to find a person whose real roots are in Madrid, apart from the castizos who proudly exhibit their Madrileo heritage during the San Isidro festival and the summer verbenas (street fairs). As a consequence, the city is a mosaic of traditions, cultures and cuisines. As you get to grips with the place you soon realize that it is the Madrileos themselves that are the capital's key attraction: hanging out in the cafs or the summer terrazas, packing the lanes of the Rastro flea market, or playing hard and very, very late in a thousand bars, clubs and discos. Madrileos consider the nightlife of other European cities positively dull by comparison; for them enjoying themselves is a right not a luxury. Much of their everyday life is acted out in the streets of Madrid outside their rather small houses or apartments. They dress up whenever possible, never wanting to be seen at anything but their best. They are noisy - horns blare, TVs are set at full blast and conversations are conducted at top volume. Whatever Barcelona might claim, the Madrid scene, immortalized in the movies of Pedro Almodóvar, remains the most vibrant in the country. Despite its recent rapid growth, Madrid still seems small for a capital city. It is strikingly compact, yet each barrio still manages to retain its own individual identity. However, the city can no longer be accused of provincialism, for it has changed immeasurably in the two and a half decades since Franco died, guided by a poet-mayor, the late and much-lamented Tierno Galván. His efforts, including the creation of parks and the renovation of public spaces and public life, have left an enduring legacy, and were a vital ingredient of the movida Madrileña, the "happening Madrid", with which the city made its mark in the 1980s. The movida may have gone but Madrid has survived as a stylish city, highly conscious of its image and in better shape than for many years, after an \$800m refurbishment for its role as 1992 European Capital of Culture and the continuing urban regeneration programmes by the active local authority. As a tourist destination, Madrid has been greatly underrated. By comparison with the historic cities of Spain - Toledo, Salamanca, Sevilla, Granada - there may be few sites of outstanding architectural interest, but the monarchs did acquire superlative picture collections, which form the basis of the Prado museum. This has long ensured Madrid a place on the European art-tour, and even more so since the 1990s arrival - literally down the road - of the Reina Sofía and Thyssen-Bornemisza galleries, state-of-the-art homes to fabulous arrays of modern Spanish painting (including Picasso's Guernica) and European and American masters. When to visit Traditionally, Madrid has experienced a typical continental climate, cold and dry in winter and hot and dry in summer. There are usually two rainy periods, in October/November and March/April. With soaring temperatures in July and August, the best times to visit are often spring and autumn, when the city is pleasantly warm. In recent years, however, the weather has become more unpredictable and there have been hot periods in spring and autumn, while summer temperatures have dropped. Madrid virtually shuts down in the summer; from around July 20 you'll suddenly find half the bars, restaurants and offices closed, and their inhabitants gone to the coast and countryside. Not until September does the city properly open for business again. Luckily for visitors, and those Madrileos who choose to remain, sights and museums stay open and summer nightlife takes on a momentum of its own. In addition, the city council has initiated a major programme of summer entertainment. All in all, it's not a bad time to be in town, as long as you're not trying to get anything done.