

An insider's guide to Sol: avoid the tourist traps and beat the Christmas crowds

Madrid is a fantastic place to be at Christmas and nowhere is more festive, and more popular, than the area around Puerta del Sol, Ópera and Plaza Mayor. As well as the usual hordes of foreign tourists, Spaniards from all over Madrid and beyond flock to the city centre to see the Christmas lights, queue up at Doña Manolita for their lottery tickets, shop for nativity supplies in Plaza Mayor and take in the spectacle of Cortylandia.

If you plan on doing any of these things, my top piece of advice would be avoid going at the weekends, as the whole centre is utter chaos. During last year's December *punte* they even had to temporarily suspend metro services to Sol and make people get off at neighbouring stations, due to the sheer volume of people already in the plaza and surrounding streets.

Whatever day you embark upon your festive jaunt, you'll no doubt be in need of a break and some refreshment after a while. Christmas shopping can be thirsty work! Many of the bars and restaurants around Puerta del Sol are incredibly touristy or incredibly busy (or both!), so how do you find a decent spot?

Read on for our insider's guide to the hidden gems of the Madrid's centre.

If you want breakfast...



You'll need a decent desayuno to set you up for a busy day of shopping and sightseeing, and in time-honoured tradition you might head to [San Ginés](#) (Pasadizo de San Ginés 5) or [Valor](#) (Calle Postigo de San Martín 7) for some chocolate con churros. Go early if you do, and certainly don't visit at merienda time as the queues are out of the door. Alternatively, you could try one of these lesser-known spots for breakfast:

[Ferpal](#) (Calle Arenal 7)



Many tourists eye up the delicious meats, cheeses and other treats in the windows of this top-quality delicatessen, but few realise there's also a bar inside. They serve delicious coffee, croissants, bocatas and sandwiches, all for only a couple of euros. Kill two birds with one stone and pick up a few tasty Christmas presents while you're here. They normally close on Sundays but will be open over the festive season.

[El Riojano](#) (Calle Mayor 10)



Ok, so it's not exactly a hidden gem, but did you know that this famous pastry shop has a secret tea room in the back? If you have a sweet tooth and you fancy a more relaxing experience than the scrum at [La Mallorquina](#) (another must-see, although perhaps at a quieter time of year!), then this is most definitely your place. Read Laura's more detailed [post on El Riojano here](#).

If you fancy a drink...

Battling your way to the front of the Cortylandia crowd on a Saturday afternoon is enough to make anyone need an alcoholic beverage! (If you've never heard of Cortylandia I won't go into details other than that it's one of those Spanish traditions that you probably need to see for yourselves. Oh, and this year, it's penguins.) Here are a couple of my favourite places:

[La Torre del Oro](#) (Plaza Mayor 26)



If you've been shopping for your Christmas tree or the moss for your nativity, then this bar is extremely handy for a quick beer. The terraza outside is like any other, you need to go inside for the decor that makes this bar special. The waiters are all extremely jolly and dish out tasty tapas with every drink. An Andalusian classic hidden slap-bang in the centre of Madrid.

Matador (Calle de la Cruz 39)



Another bull-themed bar with interesting stuff on the walls, I love this place for its cosy atmosphere, great-value drinks and generous tapas. Its cave-like interior is pretty small so it can get crowded, but if you're lucky enough to grab a stool you might end up forgetting the shopping and spending all afternoon here!

If you're hungry...

There are times when tapas just won't do and you need something more substantial. Try one of these spots for some tasty grub:

[El Ñeru](#) (Calle Bordadores 5)



Cachopo at El Ñeru. Image from [El Ñeru's Facebook](#)

There are plenty of Asturian restaurants around this area but this one is my favourite. You can stand at the bar upstairs and gorge yourself on free tapas (try the cabrales cheese one) and dishes such as their magnificent cachopo, or you can take the weight off your feet and dine in the cavernous restaurant downstairs. It isn't the cheapest but it's worth it for the exquisite (and extremely filling!) food and excellent service.

[Bar Lambuzo](#) (Calle de las Conchas 9)



Image from [Lambuzo's Web](#)

If you fancy something a little lighter, stop by this delightful restaurant run by a family from Cadiz. From salmorejo to croquetas to a whole array of pescadito frito, everything on the menu is absolutely delicious, extremely reasonably-priced and will inject a little ray of Andalusian sunshine into even the darkest winter day. Check out Daphne's [post for more information on Bar Lambuzo](#).

If you need to get away from it all...

Even for the most die-hard Christmas fans, the crowds can sometimes get a bit much. All of these bars are just a short walk from Puerta del Sol and each provides a much-needed oasis of tranquility away from the masses.

Anticafe (Calle Unión 2)



Image from [Anticafe's Facebook](#)

Tucked away on a quiet street near Ópera, Anticafe is a great place to chill out with a coffee, caña or cocktail. The music

is great and the decor wonderfully quirky, so just sink into one of their mismatched armchairs, put your feet up and forget all about your festive to-do list.

Casa Pueblo (Calle León 3)



Image from [Casa Pueblo's Facebook](#)

This cosy bar is the perfect antidote to the madness of the Christmas crowds. Let the friendly staff whip you up one of their delicious mojitos or order a tasty slice of cake if you're in need of some sugar. If you're lucky you might catch one of their live jazz sessions too.

Plaza Menor (Calle Gómez de Mora 3)



Head to this fantastic little drinking den nestled right behind Plaza Mayor for a cocktail, a copa or just a cup of tea. The interior is a maze of low-roofed caves so grab a spot and maybe some of their yummy carrot cake and lose yourself for a couple of hours.

Know of any other hidden gems in the centre of Madrid? Let us know!

Bar Lambuzo, a family-run Andalusian restaurant

offering a mix of activities in their wine cellar

Tucked away in the side streets of Sol, [Bar Lambuzo](#) is an Andalusian oasis in the center of Madrid, lovingly run by a family from **Cádiz** with a history in the food business that goes back to their great grandfather. This family has brought all their favorite recipes and passion from their home to the capital. In fact, the bar makes it a point to sell products from Southern regions such as Cádiz, Seville and Huelva, calling itself an **Abacería**, meaning a bar that sells local products.



the entrance invites you in with thousands of wine bottles decorating the walls

Opened a little over a year ago, **Bar Lambuzo** has already become a beloved neighborhood spot for its authentic cuisine,

warm ambience and family-style service; it is a haven for Andalusians living away from home, and for anyone seeking a **true taste of the South in the center of Madrid.**



with friends in Bar Lambuzo's underground cellar, tasting wines from Bodegas Barbadillo

What's more, **Lambuzo** offers **fun activities in the downstairs wine cellar**, from football forums to **wine-tastings** and **olive-oil-tastings**. I've been to the tastings and highly recommend them! At the last wine tasting I went to, we had a presentation from [Bodegas Barbadillo](#), a winery from Cádiz that is actually the house wine at Bar Lambuzo. As usual, we tried three different types—rosé, white and red—the red was really spectacular.

In between each generously poured glass, we were served an assortment of homemade tapas: **ensaladilla rusa** (potato salad), croquettes **de ortiguilla** (translated into English as "sea anemone", so let's keep it in Spanish), and **ragu de ternera con arroz** (veal stew on rice). The tapas were wonderful as always, and the wine portions are best described as **plentiful**.

The bottles were left open on the tables, and we were welcome to serve ourselves as much as we liked. Meager portions are unheard of here.



Owner and father Pepe serving at a wine tasting in the cellar

On Thursdays, Lambuzo also holds **Microteatro**: they showcase 30-minute theater performances, from 9pm-11pm. Each session costs **4€**, plus you're more than welcome to grab a drink at the bar and bring it down to the cellar as you enjoy the show, and then go right back upstairs for more when it's over.

As far as the menu goes, father **Pepe** will gladly tell you about the daily specials, and you can't go wrong with anything on the set menu. Their star dishes are from their selection of **fried fish**, a staple in Andalusian cuisine. And you can count on it being good—the first time I went, a guy from the South of Spain popped out of his seat and called up a friend to say: "You won't believe it. I'm in Madrid eating real *pescaito*

frito".



assorted pescadito frito



boquerones fritos con limón (fried white anchovies with a squeeze of lemon) and white wine from Bodegas Barbadillo

My husband, James, and I have been going to **Bar Lambuzo** practically since it opened. What keeps us going back so often is the warm service and delicious food and wine (not to mention, really affordable!). Our favorite dishes are their varied **croquetas** (croquettes), **salmorejo** (a cold, tomato and bread-based soup), **arroz con atun rojo y pisto** (*rice with tuna and ratatouille*), and **solomillo al whiskey** (*whiskey pork loin, served on delicious handcut fries*). For dessert, try the

tocino del cielo (similar to creme brûlée without the crunchy top), made by Ignacia.



Croquetas



Salmorejo, a cold soup or dip originating from Cordoba,

made with tomato, bread and olive oil, topped with tuna and then drizzled with some more, olive oil



solomillo al whisky (pork tenderloin with roasted garlic, served on top of handcut french fries)



tocino de cielo, made by daughter Ignacia (similar to creme brûlée without the crunchy top layer)

Lambuzo's tapas range in price from 3€-5€, and main dishes average at 11€. For lunch. They offer a menu del día (set lunch menu) for 10€ with a starter, main dish, drink, plus coffee or dessert. And they have an express lunch menu for 8€, including one dish.

If you decide to go to Lambuzo for dinner, I recommend making a reservation—the secret's out and the place gets packed!

Info:

[Facebook page](#)

[Web](#)

Hours: Tuesday – Thursday: 13:00 – 16:30, 20:00 – 0:00

Friday – Saturday: 13:00 – 17:30, 20:00 – 1:00

Sunday: 13:00 – 17:30

Closed on Mondays

Price range: 10-20€ per person

There are currently two locations:

1. The first **Lambuzo** is the one with the downstairs cellar:

Address: Calle de las Conchas, 9

Metros: Sol, Callao, Santo Domingo or Opera

2. **Lambuzo** has just opened a second location in [Chamberí](#) which is smaller but still has the same charm and family feel:

Address: Calle Ponzano, 8

Metros: Iglesia & Alonso Cano