

Celebrating International Women's Day with Leah Pattem, the inspiring woman behind Madrid No Frills

All throughout the world I'm always seeking out the no-frills places. In the UK I'm always in the filthy pubs. Even in India, you'll find me in bars lit by one fluorescent light, where I'm the only woman. I love these really divey 'salt of the earth' kind of places. Pure, raw... no-frills.

Today, in celebration of International Women's Day, I'd like to introduce you to Leah Pattem (UK), the creator of the truly extraordinary blog [Madrid No Frills](#). Through her powerful stories and photos, Leah passionately documents the city's old-fashioned bars and traditional businesses, many of which are on the brink of extinction. She is one of the city's most inspiring independent female journalists, and is making her voice heard to support a sector that is often overlooked in the mainstream media.



Leah also explores Madrid's lesser-known neighborhoods and forgotten legends, revealing a side of the city that most residents rarely see: from [dark messages hidden in the city's street art](#) to [Spain's last toy hospital](#). And her efforts are making an impact in the lives of many, including local shopkeepers, migrants and artists.

Madrid No Frills really took off last November, when Leah published a photo series of [100 No-Frills Bars](#). The series went viral and was also featured in top publications like [El País](#) and [Cónde Nast Traveler](#). Her website now receives

25,000 visitors per month. But despite all the acclaim she's earned, Leah has no plans to change the core purpose of her blog. This is her personal hobby – her incredible gift to the city.

// 100 OF MADRID'S NO-FRILLS BARS //

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That bar in the cover photo is the most famous bar in Spain right now. The day I published the photo series, I literally had to increase the website's capacity overnight. It's been shared by millions of people around the world, in Lithuania, Mexico, America... That's just amazing.

I actually first met Leah just before she started Madrid No Frills (MNF). She got in touch with Naked Madrid to write a piece about [an olive grove tour](#) run by her friends in the

outskirts of Madrid. Three years have passed since she embarked on her own mission – and now, it's my turn to write about her inspiring work. We met up for a coffee in Plaza Cascorro, and here's what went down:

How did it all start?

In a no-frills bar, just thinking: all of these cool, new chic bars get huge shout-outs all the time, with hordes of people coming to visit while, at the same time, these little bars – often tired, physically and emotionally – don't even have a location on Google Maps.

Nobody would ever write about these places but, to me, with an 'outsider's' perspective, they're the most special – they're unique to Madrid. One doesn't move a thousand miles to have the same thing you can get back at home, so I thought, these places need to be celebrated, or else they're going to close.



The death of the Spanish bar and the invasion of the square plate



Bar Lozano: one of Malasaña's last no-frills bars (closed 2018)



Botón de Oro, a centenarian haberdashery featured in: [An archive of places Madrid has lost](#)

Why do you do it?

I just want to raise awareness of the Madrid that very few know about. It may sound naive, but I got into journalism because I want to change the world. I've recently become a professional journalist and my blog is a part of that. But, you've got to be so sensitive about the information you receive and the way in which you share it, such as people's specific details and photographs of them.

I love to share my personal angle on things but don't want to cause controversy in doing so, but at the same time, I need to be bold and stand up for what I believe in. This combination is tricky, but it can be powerful.



[71 enchanting years of Bodegas Jiménez](#)

How did you get into photography?

Photography has always been a hobby. I've always loved taking photos, even in single digits. I used to process my own photos. Several years back, I dabbled in professional photography for a year and a half in Newcastle, mainly working with startups. Well, that was big mistake. I felt like I was selling my soul and was so traumatized that I didn't pick up my camera for three years. Once I picked it back up, Madrid No Frills started. That's a lesson I learned: don't sell your hobby. You've got to keep something for yourself.



Leah Patten, the inspiring creator behind Madrid No Frills

You realize you've become an influencer, right?

I actually have influenced! Bar Cruz just over there [she points out the window] has been seen by millions of people on their screens and another 99 bars from [my 100 Bars](#) project have been seen by millions of people around the world. That's just insane.



Bar Cruz, featured on [100 of Madrid's No-Frills Bars photo series](#)

Is Madrid No Frills still a one-woman mission?

Yes, mostly. I also have a growing team of writers who are helping me try to save these authentic, time-warp kind of places. These no-frills bars. And it seems to be working! And that's what crazy. It seems to be *actually* working.

What are some of the other articles that have made a big impact?

The one about the Senegalese tailor, he had a really powerful story: [How a starry-eyed rumour of a better life brought this young Senegalese tailor to Madrid.](#)



And another article about Vallecas that went viral around Madrid: [Vallecas: Madrid's rebellious working-class neighborhood](#).



How do your articles affect the bars and people when you feature them?

A lot of the owners are quite old and they don't even know what a blog is. They're so unplugged, so unconnected to the Internet. I mean, many don't even have Google locations for their own establishments. I'm the one who puts them on the map – literally.

Before writing an article about them, I'll let them know and give them the option to say no, which they never have. Then, after writing the article, I'll go later on and ask if my article may have made an impact on their bar. A lot of the owners do say: "I've suddenly received a lot of foreign people in my bar, from France, Germany, people from all around the world..." But usually they don't understand why.



[Relive the old Vallecas in Bar Etiquio](#)

So what exactly is a no-frills bar?

It's just really interesting to understand *what is a no-frills bar*. There are so many "codes" to learn, especially as an Englishwoman new to this whole thing. There's the steel bar, the formica cladding, and the serviettes. Then on top of that,

you've got the owner's personality and that's what sets each bar apart.

Behind every no-frills bar you'll find family photos, a little mascot such as a teddy bear sitting on top of the oven or in the extractor fan area. And then a couple of little trinkets, souvenirs that people have given them.

They all have a beautiful, mid-century modernist design throughout, which, even though they were built to last, are beginning to fade. I'm trying to understand what this all means – trying to find the parallels and patterns. These specific designs and the personality superimposed on top of that.

What could a “new” no-frills place look like? For example, I saw you wrote about a new restaurant, 100 Mandela.

They've got a slightly different aesthetic. [100 Mandela](#) is more about the immigrant communities. I'm a huge fan of raising awareness and telling stories about ethnic minorities, the elderly and also women. I'm also working on an LGBT+ story as well.

I'm trying to raise awareness of these communities through physical access points like restaurants or shops, so you can actually meet them in person. Here they are, right here, right now. They're part of your community and here's how you can connect with one another.



[Mandela 100: Emblematic Senegalese diner opens on Plaza Nelson Mandela](#)

What makes Madrid No Frills so unique?

It's not just "I recommend this place." It's "understand the story and the history" and experience the very same thing that I experienced when I went there too. I'm trying to open people's eyes to see the city in a new way. Not just my way, but in a really special way that maybe people have overlooked or simply forgotten about.

I want you to think about what is around you – not just all the exciting new places, but be conscious of the harder-hitting truth: there's a lot of suffering that happens in Madrid, and it's often right in front you. The places where you're eating, the people you're talking to, the [scars that have been covered up on the walls](#). It's all around us.

Every now and then, we should stop and think and process... just by being aware of something helps, and simply discussing

it is huge.



Barrio Aeropuerto, one of the poorest neighborhoods of Madrid, captured in [10 no-frills finds \(Vol. VI\)](#)



[Discover the dark messages hidden in Madrid's street art](#)

Why should we make a point of going to these no-frills places?

Well, it's all about supporting the local community. I really appreciate my *barrio* [referring to the Rastro area and Lavapiés]. I've got my bread girls, my Spanish shoe guy, [my Mauritanian veg guy](#).



[From the Jarama Valley to a Lavapiés okupa: Meet Usman, the alternative organic veg farmer](#)

As foreigners, we often feel a lot more in common with people who are in the same boat as us – people who've come from another city or country, who've moved across Spain, or the Atlantic – to a new city. You find you have a lot in common with your community, and you might be surprised what your community looks like.

It's also about building bridges between communities, where everybody's welcome under one roof. For example, if you're a Brit in a Senegalese restaurant with Senegalese people, you're creating a bridge and simultaneously supporting a local business.

You've got to be a little bit adventurous. Sometimes it can be a little daunting being different. At a no-frills bar, you might be surrounded by a bunch of old men. But, if you go with a bunch of your girl friends, you've suddenly got a small

space that's more representative of society. We're bridging a gap between two sexes, two generations, and often between two ethnicities too, bringing everyone together and supporting the local communities as well.

What inspired you?

Honestly, Naked Madrid was a huge inspiration. As you know, I've written many articles for you. I remember how excited I was to have my first article published about the Italian place in Mercado Chamartín, and then [the olive grove run by my friends](#). They're also doing a kind of unusual thing: they're millennials reconnecting with a traditional industry: farming. They've had a lot of English-speaking people come on their tours since that article came out, and they're so grateful!

How much time do you dedicate to it now?

Quite a lot. I have full-time work – I'm a teacher and a writer – but I love Madrid No Frills so I don't see it as work (OK, well it's not work because I don't get paid!). I currently put out one new article a week, plus research... if you even consider it research. It's fun! It's just that I fancy going to this place, so let's go check it out...

It's genuinely a reflection of my life, how I roll. I don't want it to be the opposite, ever. Every now and then there might be a mission, for example, I [recently covered an eviction](#). I knew it was going on. I was there for a few hours.



Madrid's anti-eviction warriors

Is there a game plan?

For a long time, I didn't have one, and that's what's been so fun about it. I've always been very spontaneous and I think that's what's made MNF what it is. There was no strategy – it's a passion project. There are a lot of people who are asking me to write a book, and Madrid deserves a book.

I've been approached by publishers and even investors, but I've always said no because I want to do things my way. Also, if I did write a book, it would be a collaborative thing, bringing in illustrators and other writers. It also wouldn't just be a guidebook, but more of a portrait of Madrid.

Having said all that though, I've recently hatched a top-secret plan to grow MNF, so watch this space!

How has Madrid No Frills changed over the years?

Looking back to the very beginning of Madrid No Frills, I've brought in a lot more human stories. But the core of MNF is still Madrid's no-frills bars. I absolutely love no-frills bars. I genuinely spend a lot of time in them.



[Bar El Jamón: the godfather of Lavapiés](#)

What would you say to people who don't see what's so special about no-frills bars?

I would say "take my hand and come with me, and let me show you why I love them so much." Maybe I could explain the

details and the hidden narrative of the place: the history, and what it all means from within.



[The 128-year-old Chueca hideout for generations of simmering lefties](#)

Would you like to see Madrid No Frills go global?

I would love to see Mumbai No Frills, London No Frills, Newcastle No Frills, raising awareness of those little places that are being overlooked all over the world. The No Frills mission is a great cause. If it turns into a global trend, that would be great.

What about if people start copying you?

I've already come across a lot of copycats, but I'm beyond fine with that. I'm so excited when I see a copycat – it means they're doing a service to their city. A hundred no-frills bars in Berlin? Go for it! 100 no-frills bars in Vallecas? Please, dude, go for it. Steal my ideas. You're going to be doing an amazing service. I never get worried about it.

Have you thought about monetizing the site?

I've been asked that question so many times [Leah laughs]. I'm lucky enough to earn a vaguely sustainable income through teaching and journalism, and still have just enough free time and energy to give to MNF. Not making money through my blog has meant that this is a project that is so pure...

The fact that it's not monetized means I've never been influenced by sponsored content. People have tried to get me to plug them for money or freebies but I've never accepted because I don't support their particular business.

If a no-frills bar approached me asking for a plug, I might accept, but they typically have no money, so I couldn't really ask for it. There's no money in the places I write about, and that's a big part of why I write about them. MNF is purely based on what I love. People can sense that. Money isn't the only resource – love and passion make the world spin too.

Any thoughts on Women's Day... in terms of Madrid No Frills?

It's not like blogging is a man's world or anything. But what's weird is that I'm a woman behind this, also of color, who goes to these predominantly white, male-heavy bars. That's kind of unusual. Not many people look like me here. I speak to

quite a lot of male migrants and old Spanish men. I do often find myself in a male-dominated space in many ways, but perhaps it's made me more confident. I can hold my own more than ever before. I've had to learn to speak louder, be more persistent and I probably have to fight harder than men to be listened to.

Women's Day has also made me more aware of myself as a woman, and it's helped me realize that my voice is important. Through MNF, it now reaches 25,000 people a month, and I don't take that lightly. I use my voice to fight for those who don't have one.

I'm also working on having more women stories on the blog but they're a lot more shy and a lot harder to find in certain professions, like being a *portero* (doorman). There aren't as many female shopkeepers or female bar owners. I'm trying to find more, but here are some that I've written about:



[Tale of a Lavapiés concierge](#)



[Meet Miss Beige, an ordinary Madrileña after all our hearts](#)

Is Madrid No Frills going to keep its core?

Yes, definitely. The blog is based on passion, a personal passion. Also, the one thing that's consistent about Madrid No Frills and that's never going to change is that I'm behind it. I trust myself to keep it real, so I know that it's going to continue as it is, staying true to Madrid and its no-frills soul.

Thank you, Leah, for sharing your story with us! And Happy International Women's Day to all the inspiring women of the world – get your work out there and make your voices heard!

- **[Please follow Madrid No Frills' incredible mission on Facebook and Instagram, too.](#)**

- You can also [sign up for the newsletter](#) to receive a copy of the free weekend guide.