

# Paseo in a winter wonderland

Jo Caird discovers the secret of Christmas in Madrid - and not a mince pie in sight

Unlike in Britain, when the Christmas period begins sometime in October, things only start to kick off in Spain on December 8th, when they celebrate the festival of the Immaculate Conception. These last three weeks however will contain more revelry and festive spirit than several years of British holiday fun. In Spain, and more specifically in Madrid, the fiesta is taken seriously.

There is nothing a native of Madrid, or madrileño, likes better than a stroll, or paseo, around the centre of town; there they are, out in force, wrapped up against the cold, on every weekend day and public holiday throughout the month of December. They proudly push buggies, lug carrier bags and stop to admire one another's children. The pace is relaxed, nothing like the pre-Christmas rush of a British high street. Trying to get anywhere quickly on a day like this is impossible; the madrileños simply have no sense that anyone might be in a hurry. Although initially irritating, this behaviour becomes rather endearing: who can blame them for taking full advantage of all the time off (two public holidays in one week is pretty good going by anyone's standards), having fun in a way that is totally alien to a Brit.

There are however certain things that are necessary for an enjoyable pre-Christmas stroll. Children are an essential: many people have little bundles of joy of their own to parade around, but being childless is not necessarily a problem as one is fully entitled to approach other people's children and talk to, kiss and coo over them. This excites no suspicion as children and babies are regarded as public property in Spain, in much the same way as dogs are in America. It is from this child-friendly basis that most of the other fiesta add-ons



One of the brightly lit streets that radiate from Puerta del Sol

spring: helium balloons, sparklers and balloon swords (surely the simplest and therefore least impressive of all balloon shapes) punctuate the crowds as far as the eye can see. Brightly coloured wigs are worn by both children and adults, giving the

proceedings a decidedly transvestite-on-parade feel.

Once equipped with the above, one is ready to take advantage of all the excitement on offer in the centre of town. This includes window-shopping (although the streets are so crowded

that it's difficult to get a proper look at a shop window unless you are pressed against it); watching statue people (a matador doing 'the robot' is a truly rewarding sight); and buying lottery tickets from the army of old women who sit at one end of Madrid's central

square, the Puerta del Sol, on fold-up chairs next to pin-boards on which the tickets are proudly displayed. All this is accompanied by the constant background noise of a gypsy band, which plays the same five songs over and over throughout the day.

The streets are so crowded that the people appear not to be moving at all. Any claustrophobic shoppers made nervous by the oppressive atmosphere inside would find themselves feeling significantly worse upon venturing into the streets. The Christmas lights in the centre of Madrid are hung low enough to make the narrow streets that give onto the Puerto del Sol feel like corridors. Even the most innocuous alleys are illuminated, with the result that people are tempted down them only to find themselves in front of the goods entrance to Spain's favourite department store, El Corte Inglés.

This pedestrian merry-making will continue until long after night has fallen, even though the temperature hovers around 7 degrees. Fiesta means that bed-time is an even more flexible concept than usual and young children will still be out with their parents until 9 or 10pm. The families gradually slope off to dinner around this time and the shops start shutting up for the night. The old ladies will pack-up their folding chairs and pin-boards, the statue people will go home and the gypsy bands will finally, finally, stop playing. But there will still be people in the streets until very late, going to bars and discos and eventually seeking the retiring party-goer's holy grail, one of the city's elusive cabs. And then, even when the final revellers are safely tucked up in bed there will be no quiet because the street cleaners will arrive to ready the area for the next day of fiesta fun. It's a party, and everyone's invited.

## Lonely Planet Competition How to get piste on the cheap

In May this year Lonely Planet launched Encounters, a new series of city guides, each written by an author that has lived in that destination. They provide insider tips about how to get away from the popular tourist attractions and experience the hidden gems and unusual haunts known and enjoyed by the locals.

To mark the launch of this series and the September release of an additional 13 titles that include Bangkok, Madrid and Tokyo, London Student is running a competition and asking London students to share an encounter experience of their own.

First place will win a copy of The Travel Book (RRP £40.00), which captures every country on the planet in photographs and atmospheric text, as well as three Encounter guides of your choice. The runner-up will receive a Lonely Planet guidebook of their choice and two of the Encounter series.

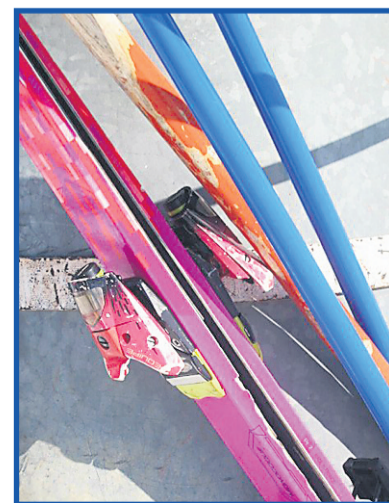
For a chance to win these great prizes, write 100 words on a city secret that you think more people should know about. It could be somewhere far away or right here in London. Entries by email (put Lonely Planet competition in the subject box) to [travel@london-student.net](mailto:travel@london-student.net) by December 28th 2007. The winning entries will be printed in the following issue of London Student.



Aside from sailing, skiing is the most expensive sport you can do. In the old days you could be sure of an invitation onto the annual family ski trip (usually a no expenses spared style holiday), but as parents become more and more obsessed by the fragility of their aged knees, this tradition has petered out, to be replaced with gentler pursuits. The other option of course is the university ski club, but what if you can't make the dates, don't fancy 22 hours on a coach either end of a week in the snow, or don't like your fellow students? There is now another way.

The beauty of both the university and family ski trips is that they are organised for you, which means that you don't have to do the planning. Which is where a company like Topdeck comes in to save the day. From £259 Topdeck will whisk you off to top resorts Pas de la Casa in

Andorra (the highest resort in the Pyrenees), Kirchburg in Austria or Lauterbrunnen in Switzerland for seven nights. Prices include accommodation, all breakfasts and three or four group dinners with other Topdeck travellers. Once there you pay



for your ski or snowboard pack, with all prices guaranteed by Topdeck to ensure you get the best deal for what you need. Accommodation is close to the slopes in all three destinations so you know you're not ending up in a hotel half-way down the mountain. All you have to do is book your flights.

Everyone on Topdeck's trips will be in the 18-30 something age bracket so you can be confident that the people you'll be bumping into at breakfast (and boozing with at night) are up for the same things you are. And the joy of skiing means that you can do your own thing in the daytime and meet up with people in the evening.

Nothing is ever going to beat the beautiful private chalet your parents used to rent, but if you're up for great winter sports and a laugh with people like you, then Topdeck is the way to go. Visit [www.topdecktours.co.uk](http://www.topdecktours.co.uk) for further information, dates, prices and to book online.