

Make like a Madrileño

Can anyone be a good guide? **Laura Holt** tries out a website that lets locals show you their city

I'm leaning against the bar at El Cangrejero, an out-of-the-way joint in Madrid's artsy Malasaña neighbourhood, trying to get the attention of Angel, otherwise known as "The Grumpiest Barman in the World". After much gesturing, he slaps down two cañas in front of me – the miniature Madrileño measure of beer – sending the contents flying. To the uninitiated, this whole experience might be intimidating, but luckily, I have Jacobo, a Madrid native and an aspiring tour guide.

Jacobo is one of a clutch of locals who have signed up to a website called Trip4Real since it launched in 2013. The peer-to-peer platform claims to offer everyone the chance to become a tour guide, much as Airbnb invited people to become hoteliers six years ago. While variations on this theme are numerous, Trip4Real has clout in the form of financial backing from Ferran Adrià, the Catalan experimental chef.

Having first launched in Barcelona, Trip4Real now operates in more than 70 Spanish locations, plus Lisbon, with a network of 2,500 locals all offering their own take on the ideal tour. Last month, the concept kicked off in London, so I decided to road-test the model in the Spanish capital. As a starting point, Jacobo set the bar high. His "Unforgettable Gastronomic Experience" proved just that, taking me to five belt-busting tapas bars over two-and-a-half hours. The upfront sum was €25, with food and drink payable on top.

Highlights included the 175-year-old Madrid institution L'Hardy, where we started with a *media combinación* cocktail of gin and vermouth, traditionally drunk by ladies as an afternoon aperitif; Casa Revueltos, where we sampled delicious *bacallà* (salt cod); and Toma Café, a hipster coffee house, where we ended with Americanos and chocolate brownies. The real star of the show, however, was Jacobo, whose strong English and specialist knowledge made the tour a breeze. In between courses, he explained that his route to joining Trip4Real had not been an easy one. "I was an architect before, but now, as there are no jobs for us in Spain, I work in real estate and also run my own publishing house." His personal story added colour to what could have been a run-of-the-mill tapas tour, but which ultimately transpired to be an insight into local life, with food on the side.

My next outing, a "Private Tour of Madrid's Contemporary and Alternative Art Scene", was cancelled at the last minute due to illness (the guide's, not mine). I'd been interested to see how they would justify the €120 price tag, which seemed steep. However, another Trip4Real guide stepped up and the next day I found myself meeting Ignacio for his €40 "Ruta Panorámica de Madrid" photography tour. Rather than being an instructive tour, he led me to places where I'd have the best opportunity to take photos – all hidden away above the rooftops of Madrid.

We started at Casa de Granada, a sixth-floor restaurant filled with local families, whose hidden location above an uninspiring apartment building gave nothing away about the smart, contemporary interiors and panoramic views upstairs. Next, we headed to El Corte Inglés department store, where on the top floor another surprise awaited – a lively rooftop bar that looked down on to the Gran Vía, Madrid's main thoroughfare, which provided a perfect photo opportunity. Along the way, Ignacio explained he had worked



Wheel deal: a Trip4Real cycle tour of Madrid

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

Getting there

Madrid is served from a range of UK airports by easyJet (0843 104 5000; easyjet.com); British Airways (0844 493 0787; ba.com); Iberia (0870 609 0500; iberia.com); Ryanair (0871 246 0000; ryanair.com) and Air Europa (0871 423 0717; aireuropa.com).

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Staying there

The Hat (00 34 91 772 85 72; thehatmadrid.com) offers dormitory beds from €17pp and doubles from €65, including breakfast.



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More information

trip4real.com
spain.info

as a photographer in Brazil and Cape Verde, before returning to Madrid to join a local paper, covering stories such as Spain's austerity protests.

My final tour sold itself as a chance to "Enjoy Madrid Riding a Fixie or Retro Bike". Priced at €40, the two-hour excursion was led by Natalia from The Cycling Project, a small group of friends who rent bikes and offer excursions. Natalia was easy company, chatting away as we peddled through Casa de Campo park. She explained how she had originally worked in construction, but moved to Madrid after two of the companies she worked for went bust.

I'd been concerned that the quality of Trip4Real's locals might not be up to scratch, given that anyone can be a guide – the only criterion being that you need to propose a tour, which, once approved, gets uploaded on to the site. Customer reviews also pay a part and Trip4Real claims to meet or blind-test most guides, though with only 10 staff, and ambitions to bring the model worldwide, I find it hard to see how they can ensure everyone hits the mark.

Overall, I was pleasantly surprised to find the standard high. Even more interesting, though, was how each of my guides had been affected by Spain's financial predicament, telling their stories to me as we went. This said more about the country than any organised activity could.

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