

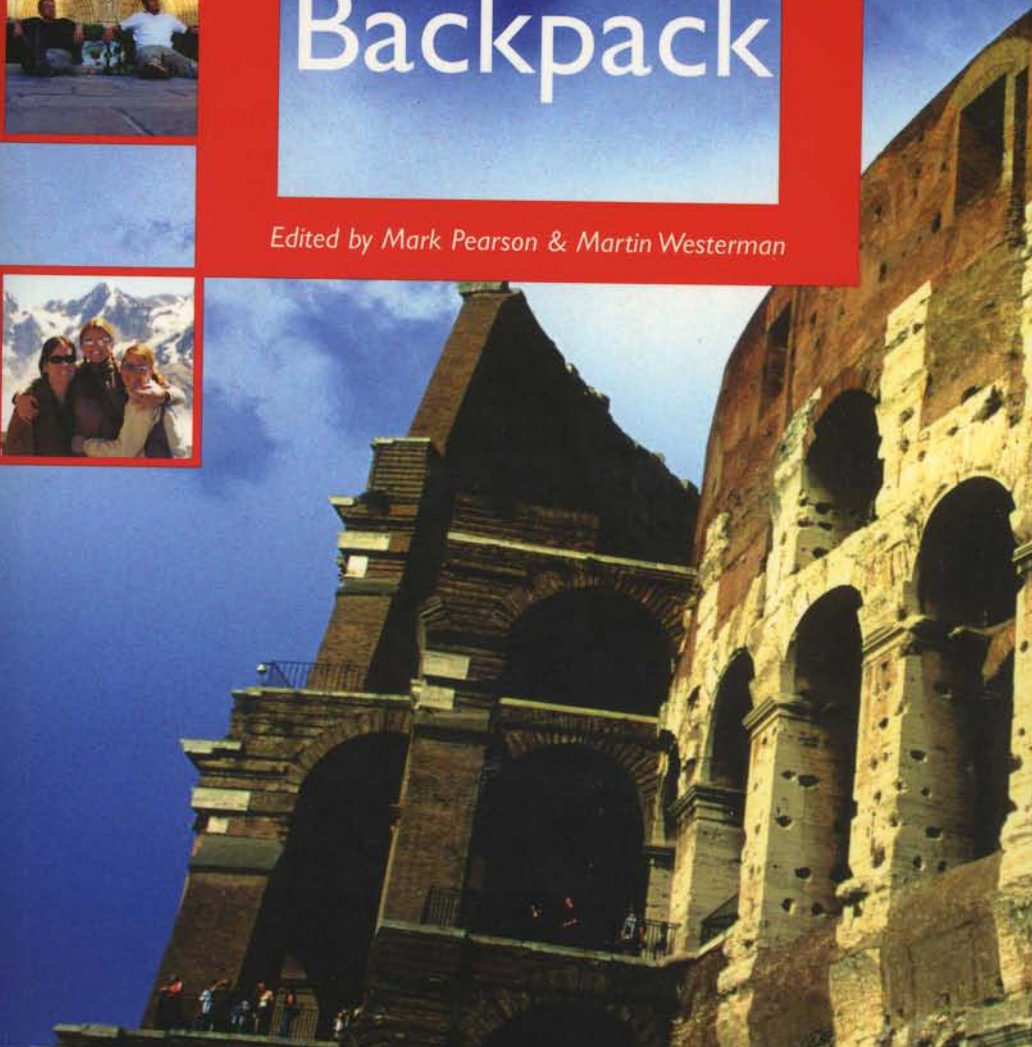
"An inspiration and a springboard... This book can help backpackers put their travel dreams in focus and then turn them into reality."

– Rick Steves, author *Europe Through the Back Door*

*Real Stories from Young Travelers Abroad*

# Europe FROM A Backpack

*Edited by Mark Pearson & Martin Westerman*



## Madrid at Midnight

Madrid, Spain

CARA NISSMAN

I SPIED THE YOUNG BARTENDER *MADRILEÑO* THROUGH THE window, fascinated by the motions of his rippling arms as he wiped down a countertop. Then and there I decided to seek refuge from the chafing January wind.

I walked in, grabbed a stool and ordered a *café con leche*. He was 19 years old, his name was Borja, and he invited me to have a drink with him after he finished his shift – at 12:30 a.m. In the endless nightlife of Madrid, people generally stay out past dawn. While I never would have agreed to a date that late back home, I was studying and backpacking abroad for a year. I decided to let down my guard, accept his offer, and see where the hypnotic power of the interminable night would lead me. The bartender turned out to offer more warmth than my coffee.

When we met outside the *cervecería* later on, I could smell the sweet scents of *chorizo* and coffee in the air. Borja laid his hand on my shoulder and led me to his favorite hangout.

If ever arose the question “Where would Jesus drink?” I have the answer:

Borja brought me to a shadowy bar decked out in red lighting and religious paraphernalia. Seated in a pew topped off with a large cross and surrounded by paintings of the man with heavenly connections, I decided to ignore the irony of getting smashed in front of Jesus — hey, I’m Jewish, so it didn’t matter, right? — and chatted with my date about favorite sports, pop-culture icons, including Robert DeNiro and Penelope Cruz, and spots in Madrid.

I remarked on my infatuation with the *Museo del Prado*, re-

vealing that I had spent countless hours trolling the art museum's halls to bask in the brilliance of painters Francisco de Goya and Diego Velázquez. I expressed my appreciation of the regal *Parque del Retiro*, where I often picnicked while watching *niños* play tag around the fountains. And I described my fondness for aimlessly wandering alone around the narrow, medieval streets of Madrid, discovering antique bookshops, quaint clothing boutiques and irresistible *pastelerías*, brimming with the aromas of fresh pastries.

He told me about his obsession with his *moto* and other Spanish youths' love of speeding on their motorcycles, explaining why I had seen so many of Madrid's young adults with crutches and casts. We shared a love of movies, including the film "Abre los ojos" (which unfortunately became "Vanilla Sky" in the United States). Acknowledging our spiritual setting, we talked about our values. I found it interesting that he didn't consider himself a particularly religious person, yet he favored this bar above countless others clustered in the area of northern Madrid, saying he enjoyed talking with the other regulars there. And Borja told me that he, among many other Spaniards in their early 20's, lived at home with no eagerness to leave until he married. Madrid's high cost of living and shortage of living spaces, he said, are partly to blame, but he also acknowledged a strong sense of tradition and familial ties.

As Borja walked me back to my apartment, he took my hand and asked if we could be *novios*. I laughed, considering that we had just met. He seemed sincere, so I diplomatically said that I thought we needed to know each other a little bit longer before we committed ourselves. Yet, his innocence was endearing. He hugged me and gallantly asked me for a *beso* goodnight. He kissed me on the cheek! After watching me struggle with my front door's old lock and making sure I got into my apartment, he waved goodbye.

I never went out with Borja again, but stored that night deep within my heart as one of my only encounters with a genuinely sweet young man from Madrid, recognizing after traveling the city alone for nearly a year that Borja's chivalry was the exception rather than the rule.

Indeed, a few months later, I suffered a serious wake-up call amid the shadows of Madrid's seemingly utopian nightlife.

I had spent the last four hours *saliendo de la marcha*, going clubbing, with my friend Judy one night in the part of downtown Madrid known as the *Puerta del Sol*. This area teems with youths, who like to meet at *Kilometro Cero*, a symbol on the ground that marks the center of Spain's road network, and disperse to various bars under the Great Gatsby-esque glow of the enormous neon sign for *Tío Pepe* sherry.

We sucked down *vodka y limón* (vodka mixed with lemon Fanta) and *Cuba libre* (rum and Coke) while swaying to Shakira, experiencing little drama, save a sneer from a bearded guy twice our age. We had been living in Madrid for five months, studying the city's culture and customs as much as the subjects introduced in our art history and theater classes. We claimed the night as our public playground, knowing that if we didn't take part, we would be missing the pulse of Madrid.

Parts of Madrid, we had learned, betray a struggle between tradition and modernity. Austere Internet cafes buzzing with activity share the same streets with tiny fabric shops boasting dusty bolts of lace and silk. The intellectual dramas presented at the historic *Teatro Español* compete with bawdy drag-queen shows down the block. And the spots where you can find trendy threads and popular music during the day often degrade into dangerous haunts for heroin addicts and raucous drunks at night. But we had grown confident about exploring the city's hot spots on our own, feeling as if we were impervious to any evil that might have

lingered in the shadows.

Before my friend and I parted ways that night, we decided to share *churros*, or plain doughnuts, and *chocolate*, hot chocolate as thick as hot fudge (the typical Spanish post-partying indulgence) at the venerable *Chocolatería San Ginés*. We mooned over the muscular *camarero* who served us. After dancing for hours, ignoring sore feet, strained eyes and impending headaches, savoring these treats fortified us for our long walks home.

Having strolled back solo to my apartment dozens of times before without difficulty, I began my trek feeling as safe as I would walking from the laundry room to my dorm in Boston. Passing the *panaderías* that would soon emit scents of sourdough, I hummed a Chayanne song and turned aimlessly on to my street. At 12:30 a.m., the street was silent, save for one *cervecería*, at which a couple of men and women chatted casually in the cool spring breeze.

As I passed them, a gangly guy in a gray suit shouted a greeting and asked me if I'd fancy sharing a *copa* with him, holding up his wineglass as if he were toasting a ghostly dinner party in the dead of night.

Exhausted from dancing downtown, I acknowledged him with a tepid "Hola," shook my head and continued on my way, feeling the warming effects of the chocolate wearing off and my eyelids drooping toward sleep with every step.

As I neared my apartment, which was then about half a mile away, I heard footsteps and turned to see the boisterous man grinning mischievously at me.

His voice stilted and hair mussed, the strange man asked me why I didn't want to have a drink with him and implored me to accompany him back to the bar for a beer.

I chuckled nervously and again declined politely as I quickened my pace, but he continued to shadow me until he suddenly caught up with me and grabbed my right arm and purse, now

shouting about the damn drink. I swung around in shock at how rapidly everything had escalated, struggled and wrenched myself free, running and screaming in vain. There was nobody but my pursuer to hear my pleas.

Fortunately I had sobered up by that point and dashed with a fervor I would have killed for during my junior high track meets. Whizzing past my favorite coffee shop and grocery store, with colorful signs advertising comforting items such as milk and crackers, I ran past my apartment, fearing that he would catch me at the door. As I ran around the block to try to lose him, I noticed that the man's energy persisted while my faith dwindled. I started imagining the worst scenario and tightened my grip around my keys.

Without warning, the guy tripped and a last burst of hope shot through me and carried me to my door. I fumbled with the latch as he collected himself and sprinted towards me. I leapt through the open door and locked it behind me as if a ravenous pit bull were lunging at me. Watching him wail and bang on the door, I defiantly stepped into the elevator and reclaimed the night.

*Cara Nissman lived in Madrid and backpacked alone around Western Europe for about a year, thanks to the Boston University Madrid Internship Program and a Pamela Posen Endowed Memorial Scholarship. She is now a features reporter at The Boston Herald. She travels and writes about her experiences every chance she gets, and hopes to return to Europe soon.*



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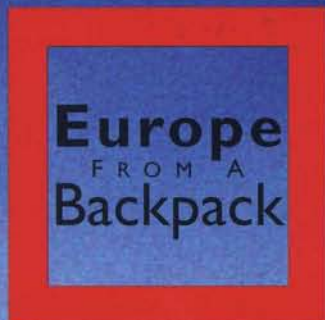
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