



Hotel Ritz Madrid: 100 years of elegance

Bursting at the seams with classical splendour, the **Hotel Ritz Madrid** retains its crown as the Spanish capital's most stylish achievement

Words: Nicci Perides

It's 1910; King Alfonso XIII is on the Spanish throne and the world is four years away from the Great War. Spanish Influenza is yet to strike and Spain is a country on the verge of being thrust into the international spotlight.

Industrious leader King Alfonso XIII had a vision that Madrid would become one of the great capital cities of Europe, so he set about transforming its buildings into spectacular showpieces, fit for any visiting aristocracy. He was quick to realise that the city was missing a grand hotel, so he employed the expertise of hotelier Cesar Ritz, along with architects Charles Mewes of Paris, and Luis de Landecho and Lorenzo Gallego of Madrid, to create the Hotel Ritz Madrid.

Swiss hotelier Cesar Ritz had already opened Hotel Ritz in the Place Vendome in Paris and of course The Ritz London on Piccadilly, but King Alfonso wanted Hotel Ritz Madrid to rival both properties and take the crown as the most luxurious hotel in Europe.

While Hotel Ritz Madrid was being built, Cesar Ritz's health was beginning to fail him, but by this time he had created a team of inspired professionals to form the Ritz Development Company, with King Alfonso XIII acting as one of the major shareholders. It was this team of professionals who developed the hotel that would bear the Ritz name.

King Alfonso had just returned from a trip around Europe feeling inspired by the various great cities he had seen, and quickly acquired what was once the Tivoli Theatre and Pleasure Gardens in the heart of Madrid.

Charles Mewes was brought in from Paris for his experience with the other Ritz properties, then Madrid-based architects Luis de Landecho and Lorenzo Gallego interpreted his designs in line with the brief given by the King. The hotel finally opened its doors on October 2, 1910.

The beautiful baroque palace complete with immaculate gardens can still be seen in all its glory today. The hotel's interior is both English and French inspired, with magnificent antique furnishings. Made-to-order carpets run throughout the rooms and corridors, all crafted by the Royal Manufactory Weavers.

The hotel was one of a kind – it was the first building in Spain to be built using steel frames for starters. Each section of the hotel boasted four or five bathrooms, plus a telephone on each floor next to the elevator, which was unheard of at this time. These unique luxury features instantly put Hotel Ritz Madrid among the most luxurious hotels in the world.

As the hotel's reputation grew, so did its portfolio of high-calibre guests – it was always destined to be a place for royalty. King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia often attended banquets and celebrated special occasions at the hotel. In fact, even before Juan Carlos became king, he would pass by the hotel just to read the international newspapers and get a haircut at the barbershop.

Although it bears the name Ritz, Hotel Ritz Madrid could never be compared to the other hotels, indeed no two Ritz hotels should ever be compared due to each embracing and embodying its surroundings. For Madrid, the Spanish al fresco life really shines through.

Vintage luxury
A rare photo of the Ritz taken shortly after it opened in 1910



“As the hotel’s reputation grew, so did its portfolio of high-calibre guests – it was always destined to be a place for royalty”



Spanish delicacy
The Presidential Suite at Hotel Ritz Madrid is a sanctuary of opulence

The beautifully manicured gardens are often the setting for weddings and other celebrations – perhaps this is how King Alfonso envisaged the space after housing his own wedding guests in private estates prior to Hotel Ritz Madrid’s existence.

The hotel has passed through many hands over the years and each change has brought new facets to its colourful history. When the Marquet family bought the hotel from the Ritz Development Company in 1932, they imposed a set of etiquette rules – the Ritz Etiquette.

The Marquet family was of the opinion that the Hotel Ritz Madrid wasn’t just for anyone. The criteria that determined whether or not visitors made the cut had little to do with wealth (although it must have helped) and more with background, education, style and manners. Those who didn’t make the grade were known as NRTs, meaning Not Ritz Types. They were carted off to more suitable hotels.

Firstly there was a strict dress code. Ties had to be worn at all times. Ladies would never be seen in trousers. Smoking was only allowed in the lobby. Strictly no animals were permitted, and to begin with no group bookings were accepted. Artists and bullfighters were not allowed either, due to the noisy fans that would gather outside the hotel entrance in the hope of catching a glimpse of their heroes.

The Hotel Ritz Madrid is now a part of the elite portfolio of the Orient-Express Hotel Group. Having just celebrated its centenary, guests are encouraged to come and take part in a year-long programme of celebrations that takes you on a historical journey through the life of the first luxury hotel in Madrid.

After you’ve experienced the hotel’s regal beginnings first-hand, enjoy a delightful al fresco dinner of Paella in the garden or the terrace restaurant when you’re done to round off this quintessentially luxurious Madrid experience. ■

THE GOLDEN BOOK

Here at *Destinations of the World News*, the Golden Book is a compilation at the end of a feature that lists the key hotels and establishments endorsed by our writers. However it seems we were pipped to the post. At the Hotel Ritz Madrid, The Golden Book refers to the star-studded guestbook that bears the names of the famous faces who have crossed its elegant threshold.

Ava Gardner came to Madrid for the first time in 1950 to shoot a film and lived at the Hotel Ritz Madrid for an extended period of time before purchasing her own home in the city.

Fidel Castro stayed in Suite 206 in 1992 and refused to receive any official delegation in his suite – that is except for a delegation of Hotel Ritz Madrid staff.

Antonio Banderas celebrated his first wedding at the hotel and later returned with second wife Melanie Griffith.

Frank Sinatra stayed in 1986 for a concert he was giving. Due to the concert being a complete flop (2,000 tickets were unsold), he handed out complimentary tickets to the staff.

Alexander Fleming enjoyed the cuisine so much that he asked the chefs to prepare a little doggy bag so he could take back the typical Madrid dish called ‘Callos’ – tripe with garlic – when he returned to England.

The important bit

What: Hotel Ritz Madrid
Location: Madrid, Spain
Cost: from EUR 546 (US\$736) per night
Web: www.ritzmadrid.com