



WHERE TO STAY

FIRST LOOK

# SMALL BUT MIGHTY

AMID A CONSTELLATION OF NEWBIES ON THE SPANISH CAPITAL'S RAPIDLY EVOLVING HOTEL SCENE, THE BOUTIQUE SPIRIT OF BRACH MADRID TWINKLES BRIGHTLY. BY LYDIA BELL

PHOTOGRAPH: GUILLAUME DE LAUBIER/  
EVOK COLLECTION

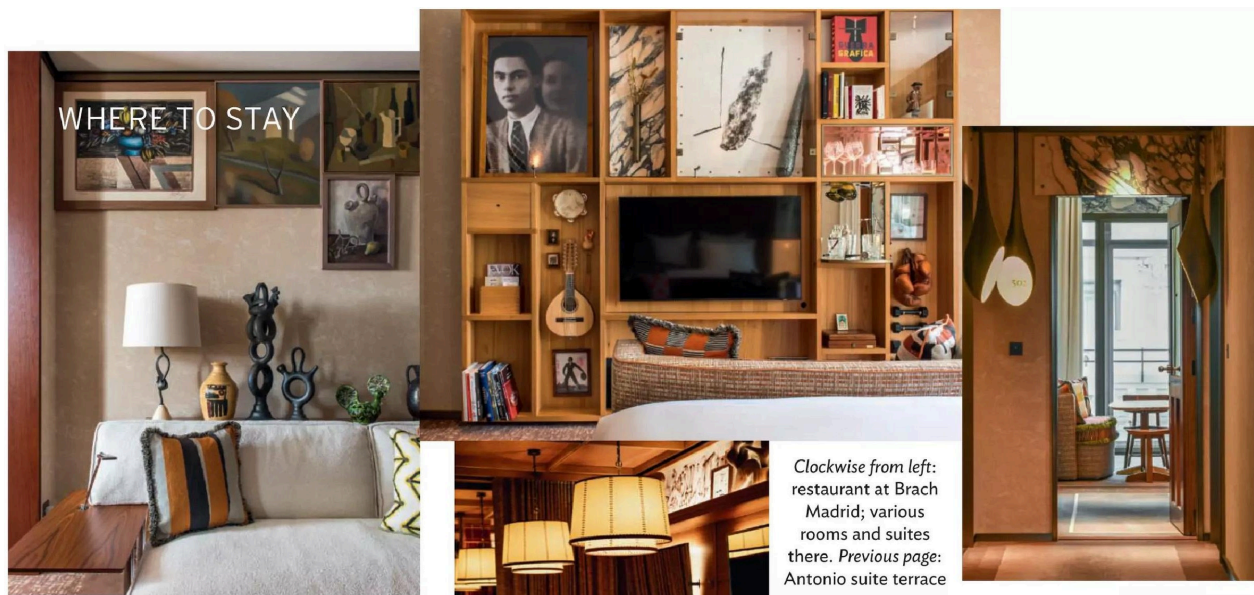
WHILE THE 20TH CENTURY WAS in its birth throes, King Alfonso XIII of Spain developed envy issues around the great capitals of Europe and their grand thoroughfares, and ordered the demolition of a swathe of properties to realise a Haussmann-inspired dream for his hometown. Construction started on Gran Vía, Madrid's answer to Regent Street and the Champs-Élysées, in 1910. Its tall emblematic buildings mostly went up in a 20-year period until the early 1930s (when they were bombed during the Civil War), so, in spite of their eclectic blend of Haussmannian, art deco and revivalist styles, they have a pleasing unity.

Fast forward to the mid-1990s, when I was a study-shy Erasmus exchange student in Madrid with the blinding luck to be living off

Plaza Mayor in an elaborately tiled flat-share of faded grand beauty, and Gran Vía was not smart. It had a kinetic energy, but it was utilitarian, a tad grubby and lined with giant tired cafés and workaday cinemas pumping out dubbed romcoms. Its backstreets were secreted with dens of iniquity, while Chueca, Malasaña, Huertas and the Barrio de las Letras were the louche and loud late-night spit-and-sawdust barrios for La Marcha, Madrid's famous frenetic nightlife. Those were good days.

Over the past decade, central Madrid has been radically gentrified. Downtown neighbourhoods have soared upmarket and high street brands have invested in Gran Vía. Far from being a hotel backwater, Madrid now has a checklist of top brass marques. Before the ➤





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Clockwise from left: restaurant at Brach Madrid; various rooms and suites there. Previous page: Antonio suite terrace

pandemic, Urso, Único and Gran Hotel Inglés arrived. Then, in 2020, Four Seasons launched its ornate, Martin Brudnizki-designed space, moments from Puerta del Sol (The Madrid Edition unveiled its sleek minimalism here two years later). In 2021, Rosewood Villa Magna created a buzz in Salamanca, and Mandarin Oriental Ritz revived the belle époque Ritz, by the Prado. A year later, Thompson Madrid opened off Gran Vía, blithely overlooking the sex haunt of Calle de la Montera.

So, what does Brach Madrid, part of the French-owned Evok Collection, add? Well, it's leading the charge of the third boutique wave (in the next couple of years it will be joined by Nomade, Zel by Meliá, Bvlgari and Nobu). Which is probably unsurprising since it's been designed by the man who invented the boutique hotel in the first place, and spawned a thousand imitations: Philippe Starck.

The hotel takes over an elegant seven-storey, belvedere-topped building from 1922, which has variously been tenant apartments and government offices, though there was a fun spell from 1922 when the American Bar Pidoux, known for its Champagnes and Grand Marnier cocktails, took the ground floor. Now it tucks 57 bedrooms, including four suites, behind its façade. Because the reception has been popped on the first floor, the ground floor is purely the bar, restaurant and patisserie, which segue into each other, creating a clubbable brasserie feel with an open kitchen at the back. In the patisserie, tarte tatin, éclairs, and Paris-Brests are lined up for inspection like something out of Tiffany's, a sweet soupçon of the group's Frenchness. This is Evok Collection's first location in Spain and second outside Paris. The low-lit dusky restaurant has woven-leather ceilings hung with double lampshades that create a canopy of warmth, and the mahogany-panelled walls are lined with limited edition Hispanophile books and vivid modern art. There are brown leather banquettes and chairs, and columns tiled in glazed terracotta. American brasserie mirrors from the 1920s tilt at angles and polished sculptures by Patrick Kim-Gustafson and others are dotted around like little creatures.

Chef Adam Bentalha's menu is pan-Mediterranean, with recipes that roam from the Middle East (the croissant-fluffy challah with olive tapenade is as exceptional as the za'atar-drenched suckling lamb shoulder) via Iberia, using Spanish produce (red tuna, Bellota ham et al)



and, sometimes, a Spanish charcoal oven. The sea bass tartare topped with avocado, radishes, and kalamansi needs to be ordered twice, as does the Las Huertas cocktail with beetroot, bitter oranges and hints of lime and peach.

Rooms and suites have a similar palette, with jatoba wood joinery warmed by pinks, terracottas and flashes of mossy green. Starck was inspired by the notion of a man who loved a woman to distraction, adorning his spaces with objects that

reminded him of her (perhaps he has read Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence* lately?). In ours: boxing gloves dangling from the wall, a mandolin and other curios. It's all reassuringly, conceptually Starckish.

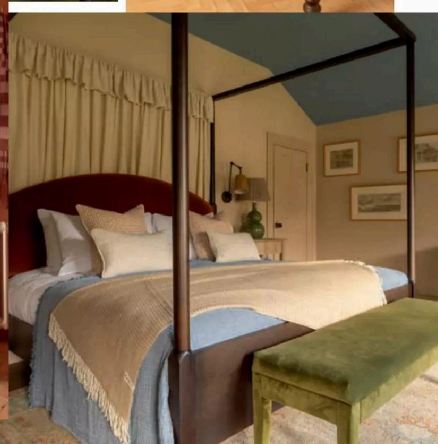
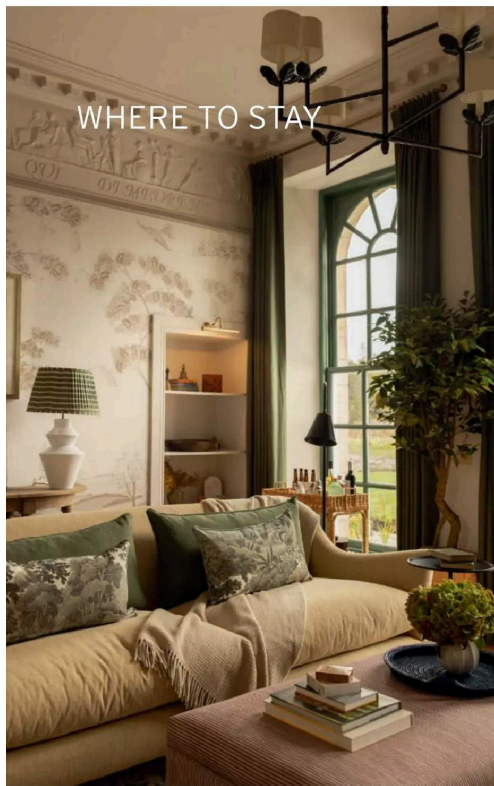
Contrastingly, La Capsule spa is dressed with white floaty curtains and low-hanging tubular lights (very Delano Miami à la 1990s). There's a 20-metre pool decked in cream marble, and a suite of biohacking gadgets: the only hyperbaric chamber in a Madrid hotel; a steam room; float tank; infrared sauna and ice bath; as well as an impressive jewel case gym, and treatments from facial electro-stimulation to Chinese internal organ massage Chi Nei Tsang.

In our room we have a splendid terrace, a private version of a seventh-floor alfresco lounge bar, with ceramic lamps, a dining table and citrus, pink and orange tasselled cushions. There's a phrase Madrilenos are wedded to: "De Madrid al cielo", which roughly translates as "From Madrid to eternity" – some say it refers to those big periwinkle skies the city has, even in January. This suntrap veranda is the place to read.

It's been some years since I've been in Madrid and I'm feeling nostalgic. As I peer down on the tail-lights along Gran Vía, I ponder that the past is another country. Not quite, though: turn right out of here, and right again, and we are plunged back into the matrix of charismatic Chueca, still the heart of queer Madrid, where my best friend lived and where I spent endless hours (why did we have so little to do?). Although some of its tiny intense bars, cut-price tattoo shops and drag queen maitre d' restaurants are gone, some are still there, just joined by concept stores, boutique gyms and bougie wine bars. Chueca's grown up – and I guess I have now too. 📍

**BOOK IT** Doubles from about £480; [brachmadrid.com](http://brachmadrid.com)





## THE WEEKENDER ESKFIELD, PENICUIK ESTATE, MIDLOTHIAN

**WHY STAY?** If there's a lovelier, more charming, more thoughtfully restored 18th-century red-brick Palladian one-bedroom pavilion with a walled garden bisected by a fast-flowing burn in the middle of an intensely picturesque 7,500-acre estate anywhere else in Scotland, well, good luck finding it. In the meantime, Eskfield, on Penicuik Estate, a 30-minute drive south of Edinburgh, at the foot of the Pentland Hills, will do nicely.

**WHAT'S THE STORY?** Penicuik (pronounced "Pennycook") has been in the Clerk family since 1654, when it was acquired by John Clerk, a successful importer of ladies' stockings, rat traps and fine art, possibly including the first Rembrandt to come to Scotland. Clerk's grandson, also a John – John Clerk, 2nd Baronet of Penicuik – was responsible not only for the small wonder that is Eskfield but also the greater wonder that is the Penicuik Designed Landscape. He planted more than 600,000 trees in his lifetime. His descendants have kept it up and the figure is now in the millions. Other major changes followed, notably the addition, between 1761 and 1769, of Penicuik House, one of the finest examples of Palladian architecture north of the border, which became a hub of the Scottish Enlightenment. In 1899 the house was largely

destroyed by fire. However, the fire burned so slowly from the top down that there was time to remove almost everything of value. There are photographs of spectators gathered on the lawn, among stacks of rescued paintings, panels, pianos and pieces of furniture, watching the blaze as if it were a cricket match.

In 2022 the estate's current custodian and CEO, Ed Clerk, the affable, grounded youngest child of the 11th Baronet, revealed his 50-year vision for Penicuik. Clerk speaks of his plans with contagious enthusiasm. "I was always the one with lots of annoying ideas," he admits. In its late-18th-century heyday, Penicuik ran to about 15,000 acres. Today it's down to half that. Traditional income streams barely keep the lights on. Clerk sees hospitality as the core business that will allow him not only to regenerate the built and natural environment of the estate but also to support the local community and implement best practices to address climate change and biodiversity loss.

So five of the estate's cottages have been gorgeously done up as self-catering rentals. Eskfield is the most recent to become available.

Six more will follow in 2026. The building into which the Clerk family moved after the big house burnt down – an uncommonly splendid stable block that resembles one of the cosier Cambridge colleges – is also being repurposed, as a 16-room exclusive-use hotel and events venue.

**SLEEP** Eskfield was developed in stages between 1714 and 1768. It was a failure in its original 18th-century capacity as a kitchen garden ("Total frost-pocket," says Clerk) but it's a triumph as a swishy 21st-century bolthole. For a one-bed, it's vast. The ground floor comprises an airy, light-flooded sitting room and kitchen-dining area. Upstairs there's just the bedroom and a huge bathroom. The decorative style is plush, plummy, faintly Soho Farmhouse, with the odd Clerk family heirloom. Outside, the long semicircular wall serves not to limit but to emphasise the sense of unfolding space all around.

**EAT AND DRINK** The high-spec kitchen is well equipped for self-catering. Amazingly, Waitrose delivers. You can ask to have your fridge stocked with goodies and fancy oven-ready meals ahead of your arrival. Alternatively, a private chef can be arranged. The kitchen dining table seats four and there's a terrace with a Big Green Egg barbecue and wood-burning stove.

**WELLNESS** Sybarites and Scandinavians will enjoy Eskfield's immaculate indoor sauna, accessed through a boot room that adjoins the cottage, and outdoor hot and cold plunge pools.

**CONTACT** [penicuikestate.com](http://penicuikestate.com). Eskfield from £380; other cottages from £265. STEVE KING