

Prefer to work less hours? Then you need to know how to live in Madrid on a Budget

TEFL graduate and English teacher Chris Trout knows the importance of a work life balance...work less and enjoy life more.

I love teaching English, don't get me wrong, but I also like having time to enjoy Spain. I love those lazy sunny afternoons sipping a cold beer at my favorite bar or drinking a *café con leche* while watching as a Spanish driver literally uses a bumper as such when parking their car. I came to Spain to have a wonderful experience full of adventure, music, and stories I cannot tell my grandchildren. If I'd wanted to work like a demon I would have stayed in California.

Many of my friends work more than 25 hours a week. This doesn't sound like much, but when you factor in commuting it can be demanding. I personally have chosen to work 15 hours because, well, I don't like mornings. I certainly don't make enough to pay off a mortgage or live like a king, and my friends are often mystified as to how I survive on the amount I earn, but to me a little bit of planning and restraint can provide for an amazing lifestyle if you play your cards right. So, let's talk budgets.

The first thing you need to do when you start teaching is get a monthly metro pass, which is called an *abono*. A one way trip on the metro is one euro. Most teachers make 6 to 8 trips a day (which would equate to around 120 euros per month and this doesn't include weekends). In comparison an *abono* costs around 45 euros and you can use it for the metro, buses and the train, the Cercanias, as frequently as you want. To get an *abono* you will need to take a passport photo and your passport to a tobacconist. There is generally a tobacconist every couple of blocks – they're little and their signs are brown and yellow. Not all tobacconists sell them but it won't be hard to find one that does. If you don't have a passport photo you can get one in most metro stations by using a photo booth, but be warned, it's likely to be worse than your driver's license photo or a mug shot. So if you're already in Madrid stop reading and go get one now...seriously.

The next thing is that you can't eat out everyday or even more than once a week when you're starting out. I understand that most of us aren't inspired chefs and that Spanish food is very tempting, but eating at restaurants all the time will break you pretty fast. I'm sorry to say this, but even our beloved kebab must be saved for appropriate occasions. Anyway, you should be getting your favorite Spanish recipes off your students and learning how to cook these culinary delights yourself. The markets here are wonderful and absolutely chocker block full of the highest quality fresh produce at very reasonable prices. They will provide you with all you need, and if you make a big batch of food then you will have delicious leftovers the next time you get hungry. I recommend returning to the same market week in, week out because the shop attendants love to help you learn Spanish and will really look after you if you are seen to be giving it a go.

Now, on to drinking! I know not all of you partake in alcoholic beverages so let me bestow upon you my considerable knowledge in this area. Being an English teacher tends to attract a certain type of person, and I'm pretty sure it has something to do with flexible hours in a great city for partying. I would never tell someone to give up drinking, but if you're on a budget then I will ask that you do it in a smart way. Here again the markets only help our cause. My supermarket sells some delicious beer for 35 *centimos* a pint (and its not even Mahou which is just Spanish Budweiser); yes, I said a pint. I rarely pay over 2 euros for wine and its always good stuff, and if you're going to mix it with *Casera* (which makes *tinto de verano*) then less than a euro is fine.

Now I realize that you're thinking, "What about the bars? That's why I'm here!" Well, I'm getting to that. The bars are absolutely great here in Madrid, but one of the best parts is that they go all night. This means that if you get there at 10:00pm it will probably just be you and the friends you brought with you until around 1:00am and you'll have to pay more than is necessary for the few hours of drinking in limbo. The better option is to have those friends over to your place for some card games, personally selected tunes, and cheap drinks. Hell, if you're looking for somewhere to do this then you can come over to my place, and we can catch the last metro downtown together. If you need help finding a place that serves food with drinks (our beloved *tapas*), then I suggest *El Tigre* next to *Gran Vía* metro station. There, if you buy one beer for 1.50 they will give you a mountain of food, which consists of everything from Spanish *tortilla* to *jamón* (ham slices) with tomato.

What about cheap sightseeing trips I hear you asking? Well, apart from the ones that the TtMadrid social committee organizes here are some of my recommendations:

Segovia. Segovia is a picture perfect medieval town to the northwest of Madrid that has UNESCO World Heritage listing. It has one of those castles you'll only ever see in fairytales, and has an ancient Roman aqueduct that is still intact. It is one of the most beautiful places to spend a day walking and exploring. You can do this trip by taking the fast train, the *AVE*, but I recommend taking the Cercanías from Chamartín (the big train station in the north of Madrid). It's cheaper (around 15 euros return) and it winds its way through the picturesque mountainside.

Toledo. Another magnificent, UNESCO-listed World Heritage town famous for its swords, knives and marzipan. It has an Alcázar and a beautiful cathedral. It only takes 30 mins on the *AVE* from Atocha Renfe, the main train station in the south of Madrid. A round trip on the fast train will cost you about 15 euros.

Aranjuez lies 48 km south of the city of Madrid. Aranjuez is known for the *Palacio Real de Aranjuez* (the Royal Palace) with its vast gardens. The surrounding area (the Tagus valley) which you'll see on the train ride there has been intensively farmed since medieval times and the strawberries are famous throughout Spain. To get there catch the Cercanías (line C3) from Atocha Renfe. The trip will cost around 8 euros and getting into the palace is about the same.

Hiking. The *sierra* (mountain range) to the northwest of the Madrid is very cheap and easy to get to. Once you do there are loads of great walks all year round. Temura, one of the Directors of TT, knows all about these trips so ask her when you arrive for information.

These are suggestions for if you want to leave Madrid, but remember that this is the New York or London of Spain and there is lots to see here. There are plenty of museums, statues, and old buildings, so just ask anyone, or better still, wander around for a bit...it won't take long to bump into something historic and beautiful.

My final suggestion is to sit down and actually write out your monthly budget. Usually my idea of organization is one shoebox for receipts, and one for pending bills, but if you take this step you will know financially where you are at, and where you need to be. One thing to remember is that they take more holidays than we are used to, so not only will you not be working those days, but probably spending more as well. However, I do recommend finding out when the public holidays are because if you're organized you can suggest to your students ahead of time that you'll do an extra class

to ensure they don't miss out due to the public holiday (and you'll still get paid). Taking these steps I've managed to get my weekly budget down to about 40 euros a week (and I love the bar scene!). So do yourself this favor, and save an embarrassing phone call to Mom or Dad asking for a loan, plan ahead!

Hopefully you all found this helpful. I have liked everyone I've met teaching English, and feel a small part of me die when they "go home for the weekend," never to return again, which seems to be how too large a proportion of English teachers finish their career (I've already lost a roommate this way). I live like this, so I know it can be done. If you ever have any questions, I'm not real hard to find. Or better yet, if you are just looking for a partner in crime then I'm always ready for a little trouble. You can bring the cards and I'll bring the beer. See you out on the town!