
Tea in Madrid’s Plaza de San Ildefonso

The UN climate conference in Madrid last month may have ended poorly, but conference attendees had a big success story right in front of them in the host country. Spain’s success achieving efficient – and enjoyable – land use and transportation outcomes is a model other countries and states should emulate to address climate change.

Spanish cities and towns feature many remarkable urban spaces, not unlike those found in other European countries. These areas tend to prioritize compact apartments located within walking distance of abundant transit, shops, bike lanes and jobs, with many containing pre-automobile-era narrow cobblestone streets built for people and not vehicles. Cities are often built around plazas, typically along with town halls and churches. They also protect against sprawl by prioritizing open space and agricultural land, particularly in the central and southern part of the country. Meanwhile, a high speed rail network connects most of the country’s major urban areas.

The result? While many factors probably come into play, US News in 2019 ranked Spain tops among all countries in terms of the overall happiness of its citizens. The country also ranked 18th in overall quality of life and among the top in food and culture.

You can see this effect on the ground. Spanish cities and towns are among the most walkable and enjoyable cities I've experienced. Particularly in the capital city of Madrid, where the UN conference was held, residents can access most destinations by transit or on foot, and the central city is closed to vehicles not registered to central city residents, while any other entering vehicle must meet low- or zero-emission standards. As a result, the Madrid city center is a quiet and clean pedestrian playground. And this same dynamic is present in cities and towns throughout the country, based on my travels there. It's likely a major reason for the country's success in terms of emotional well being.



Sunday morning in Madrid's Malasana neighborhood

This urban walkability has positive environmental effects, too, particularly on greenhouse gases. According to World Bank figures, Spain's per capita carbon emissions is 5 metric tons, ranking it approximately 60th on the list of 192 countries, despite having a GDP per capita that ranks roughly 30th. These emission figures stand in stark contrast to the 16.5 metric tons of emissions for the average United States resident, more than 3 times as much as the average Spaniard. And even similarly developed and urban countries like Japan and Germany have almost twice the emissions per capita of the Spanish, with 9.5 per Japanese resident and 8.9 per the average German.

To be sure, some of this climate progress is due to their increasingly clean electricity grid, which has seen a significant deployment of renewables over the past decade. But smaller homes and walkability that decreases driving miles helps, too. For example, overall driving miles (or kilometers, in this case) in the country is relatively low for a developed nation, at approximately 400 billion per year. With 47 million residents in Spain, that equals roughly 8,500 km per person, or 5,287 miles per year (14.5 miles per day per person). By contrast, according to the Eno Center, the average Californian drives 50% more miles than the average Spaniard, at 8,728 miles per year, or 24 miles per day (rural states do even worse, with Wyoming at a whopping 16,900 miles per year, or 46 miles per day per person).

The lessons learned? Policy makers should design towns to maximize walkability and transit access, limit private vehicles, prioritize public spaces like plazas, and preserve surrounding farmland and open space from sprawl. Hopefully attendees at the UN Climate Conference experienced some of these Spanish practices on land use and transportation firsthand. Because the climate-friendly results mean cleaner and happier living overall, something worth achieving everywhere.