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La Vida Loca? In a Plaza in Madrid

By OTTO POHL

MADRID, Aug. 8— It was 10:30 p.m. on a recent Friday and the Plaza de San Ildefonso was packed with a young party crowd.

"This is the place to come to hang out and to be away from parents," said Paula, 16, sitting with a group of friends from school. She brushed her hair back and lighted some hashish.

A friend mixed a fresh glass of calimocho, a fifty-fifty blend of red wine and Coca-Cola and passed it around. Everyone drank except for the couple who had been kissing for the past 20 minutes without coming up for air. The sound of bongos gave the growing din a rhythm that echoed off the buildings around the square.

"Nothing ever really happens," said Paula, who said she went to the plaza every weekend night, "but I totally like it here."

When she tried to stand up a few minutes later, the hashish and wine overwhelmed her and she sagged to the ground. As she lay there, cheek to pavement, her friends gathered around, calling her name and shaking strength back into her rubbery limbs.

Around them, the party continued, as it would until 6 a.m. That's when the last revelers catch the first subway home and the city cleaning crews wash away the night's stench with high-pressure hoses.

Meeting friends for a drink in public places is mushrooming among young people, who see it as a cheap evening out, or a first stop before heading out to more expensive dance clubs. This fiesta of teenagers and college students, repeated on public squares all across Spain, is called el botellón, the big bottle.

As the gatherings have gained in popularity -- on the big nights it can be hard to find a place to sit down -- the noise and filth that the botellón generates has raised tempers in this otherwise drink-and-let-drink society.

"The noise wakes me up 40 times a night," said a 73-year-old woman whose apartment overlooks a popular square. "My husband has had to move to a back room to sleep at all." Like some other residents of the neighborhood, she identified herself only by her first name, Guille.

Eduardo Dominguez, a neighbor with 3-year-old twins, said he dares to take them to the square only in the afternoon.

"Don't even think about coming here with kids after 10 p.m.," he said. "It's full of people and trash and broken bottles. There are fights."

Signs hang out of windows around the squares, with foot-high letters begging the crowd below for No More Noise and Bongos No. Residents have demanded that the mayor of

Madrid spend an evening with them, to see how bad it is, but the complaints have had little impact and the city is unsure how to combat what it considers essentially harmless youthful exuberance.

"We can't take legal action against them," says Carlos Martínez Serrano, a city official who handles botellón complaints for central Madrid.

"Any restriction of liberties would affect us all."

So the city has largely been reduced to playing busboy to the party, hiring extra cleaning crews to pick up the tons of broken bottles at dawn and wash away the debris.

The problem, the authorities say, is that the botellón crowd isn't doing anything illegal -- or at least nothing that they want to crack down on. Drinking in public is legal, possession of small amounts of hashish has been decriminalized, littering is tolerated and loitering in public squares is considered a basic civic right. Laws on under-age drinking are rarely enforced.

"In the culture of Spain," said Isabel Paris, a sociologist, "life takes place in the streets, and alcohol has never been seen as a bad thing."

So as young people practice being Spanish, the neighbors are left with ear plugs and restless nights.

The revelers know they're bothering the neighbors. "I complain when I'm the one trying to sleep," said Isabel Bueno, 19, having a few drinks before heading to a bar. "But when I'm here, I don't care."

Without specific crimes to crack down on, the police are reluctant to act. Carmen, 61, whose apartment overlooks the square, has pretty much stopped bothering to call them.

"When you call the first time, they get your name and phone number," she said. "Now when I call, they just put me on hold until I hang up."

Convenience stores that sell liquor and snacks have sprung up around the public squares. The big seller is red wine in one-liter boxes that cost 50 cents each. Although there are fights and occasional trouble, the overall atmosphere is friendly.

Neighborhood groups are now fighting for a more active solution. Manolo Domingo Delgado, owner of a pastry shop near the square, has founded a group to organize residents against the botellón. Neighborhood patrols and public protests worked when addicts and drug dealers threatened to overwhelm his neighborhood five years ago, he said.

"This is just as bad as it was then," he added. "Business in the neighborhood suffers. People don't want to go out. The urine is damaging the buildings."

But this time around he is not optimistic. "What they're doing is essentially legal," he said.

Ms. Paris, the sociologist, sees the botellón as a delayed reaction to the authoritarian Spain of the recent past. "People that lived through the post-Franco exuberance in the late 70's are now much more permissive with their kids," she said.

The only way to solve the botellón problem, Mr. Serrano said, is to wait.

"These things go like a pendulum. Let's hope it just goes out of fashion."

As dawn broke across the square, Paula and the rest of the party had straggled home. The cleanup crew once again washed away virtually all traces of the night before, and neighbors, at least briefly, regained control of the area. But traces remained. The pavement was wet and a bit sticky. A few bottles lay in the gutters. A statue of a rebel hero had napkins stuck to his face.