

Tour of Spain

May 24 – June 09, 2000

This memorable two-week tour of Spain was a gift to his parents from our youngest son, Christopher, who planned the itinerary, made all the lodging and other arrangements en route, and drove the rental car.

Air travel between Washington and Madrid was provided by Spanair, which gave us smooth flights and excellent service. Our Spanish-made and diesel-powered rental car performed admirably on our 1,478-mile journey, and we found the main highways to be in excellent condition. With one exception, our overnight stays on the road were in inexpensive *hostals*. Most breakfasts were simple (*tostada y café con leche*), and lunches consisted of sandwiches or snacks nibbled in the car. Our one good meal each day was a restaurant dinner, usually partaken in Spanish style between 10 p.m. and midnight.

In planning our itinerary, we relied on travel guides by Rick Steves and Dorling Kindersley. In the account that follows, descriptive phrases in quotation marks are from one or the other of these guidebooks.

In our first three days in Madrid, we lodged at the eighth-floor Hostal Alibel on the Grand Vía, a main thoroughfare that, as Rick Steves warned, “stays awake all night” (and very noisily, too!). During the first two days we tramped all over the heart of the city, frequently traversing the Puerta del Sol and the Plaza Mayor, and took in two major sights. The first was the Royal Palace, which with 2,000 rooms, is Europe’s third greatest after Versailles and Vienna’s Schönbrunn (both of which Rebekah and I have also visited). Next we spent several hours in the famed Prado Museum admiring some of the more than 3,000 masterpieces by Spanish and other painters. On our third day, we enjoyed a garden barbecue at the country home of Reino and Olga Rodriguez and their children, María and Carlos. Reino is the son of old friend Esperanza Illera Brooks, currently of Baltimore, Maryland.

On day four we picked up our rental car and headed toward León. Our first stop was at the 16th century Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial, which is packed with famous paintings, contains the elaborate tombs of 26 kings and queens and their children, and has a spectacular illuminated altar. Nearby, in El Valle de los Caidos (Valley of the Fallen), we visited the immense underground monument containing the grave of dictator Francisco Franco and the remains of some 50,000 people who lost their lives in the Spanish Civil War. This memorial, topped by a 150-yard-tall granite cross, was dug out of solid rock by Franco’s prisoners.

Our first overnight stop was in Segovia, famed for its 2,000-year-old Roman aqueduct. To quote the guidebook, it “is 2,550 feet long and 100 feet high, has 118 arches, was made without any mortar, and still works.” Another major sight was Segovia’s cathedral, “Spain’s last major Gothic building” and the first of many beautiful cathedrals we were to see on this trip.

Steady driving the next afternoon brought us to León, where Chris had been a student at the university in 1993-94. The following morning we first visited León's 700-year-old cathedral, "illuminated by the finest display of stained glass windows in Spain." Next we toured the university campus, where Chris was able to meet some of his former professors and attend several classes. That evening, with two of Chris's old friends, we visited the city's famed *parador* (a historic building converted into luxury hotel accommodations – one of many throughout Spain), the Hostal San Marcos.

On the last day of May, we began our journey southward toward Sevilla. With a brief, unplanned stop at the ruins of a 12th century monastery between Benavente and Zamorra, our route took us through Salamanca, Bejar, and Plasencia before our 9 p.m. arrival in Cáceres. Back on the road at noon the next day, we stopped in Mérida, founded by Roman Emperor Augustus in 25 B.C. We briefly visited the huge stone bridge of the Río Guadiana (those Romans were talented engineers) and the Temple of Diana, but the famed amphitheater was closed during the siesta hours.

Driving on through hilly country, the road flanked by acre after acre of olive trees and huge fields of sunflowers, we arrived in Sevilla in early evening. This "flamboyant city of Carmen and Don Juan" and "gateway to the New World" is Spain's fourth largest. After dinner and a long walk to the Plaza de Santa Cruz, we enjoyed reserved, front-row seats at a fantastic 2-hour show of flamenco dancing at the popular Los Gallos bar. Since the show didn't begin until 11 p.m., lights out at our hostel that night was at 2:45 a.m.!

The following day we were treated to lunch at a swanky restaurant, the San Marco, by the mother of one of Chris's colleagues who works with him in Fairfax. After lunch we visited Sevilla's cathedral, "the third largest church in Europe (after the Vatican's St. Peter and London's St. Paul) and the largest Gothic church anywhere." Construction of the cathedral, upon the ruins of a Moorish mosque, began in the year 1401. Then our hostess's second son (who recently began working in Washington) drove us to sights around the city, including the former 1992 Expo grounds and the Plaza de España, where – in fierce heat – we visited an imposing building erected for the 1929 World's Fair.

Departing Sevilla the next day, we drove south to Jerez de la Frontera, then left the main highway and followed narrow, bumpy country roads to Medina and south to Tarifa, Europe's most southerly town, located on the Strait of Gibraltar. Since it was only mid-afternoon, as soon as we had found a hostel we headed for the beach and immediately learned why the place is called the "windsurfing capital of the world." The wind blew fiercely and nonstop. The ice cold water didn't faze Chris; I only waded in once, then sunbathed with Rebekah next to a well-tanned woman who was shamelessly topless (as were others on the beach).

A one-day excursion to Tangier, "the Tijuana of Morocco," was next on our agenda. After a 1½-hour crossing of the Strait on a Greek ferry boat, we were met by a trilingual guide who took us on a bus tour of the city, with a stop for Rebekah to pose for a photo seated on a camel! Next we walked through the *medina* (market), hounded by hordes of annoyingly persistent peddlers of cheap jewelry, leather goods,

souvenirs – you name it, they had it. Then we visited a carpet shop, where Rebekah succumbed to a smooth sales pitch; the purchase was our gift to Chris for making this trip possible. After a lengthy demonstration of Moroccan spices alleged to relieve every ailment known to man (my snoring persists notwithstanding!), we were served lunch accompanied by live “music.” For a photo op, Rebekah joined the musicians wearing a red fez and shaking a tambourine.

Last stop on the tour was the hotel where, according to our guide, the Bogart-Bergman movie *Casablanca* was filmed. Who knows? Naturally, a visit to the hotel gift shop was on the agenda, and we were dutifully relieved of more dollars and pesetas. All in all, this was a fascinating, once in a lifetime experience. We were back in Tarifa in time for Chris to return to the beach.

Resuming our tour of Spain at noon on Monday, June 5, we drove northeast along the coast (passing up a visit to Gibraltar) as far as Algeciras, then headed northwest back toward the same Medina we had passed through two days earlier. This stretch was on a narrow, winding road through mountainous country dotted with cactus and lovely wildflowers. From Medina we proceeded north on a somewhat better road to our destination, Arcos de la Frontera.

Arcos is described in the guidebook as “the romantic queen of the white towns” of Andalucía (all the buildings are white-washed and fairly gleam in the sunlight). Our elegant parador was perched on the veritable edge of a steep cliff, with a commanding view of the surrounding countryside. After checking in, we took a one-hour guided walking tour of the old town section, including the Plaza del Cabildo, where the city hall sits “below the 11th century Moorish castle where Ferdinand and Isabella met to plan the Reconquista”; the Church of Santa María, built in the 13th century atop a Moorish mosque; and the Church of St. Peter. According to the guidebook, when the pope recognized Santa María as Arcos’s leading church, the angry St. Peter’s parishioners, refusing to refer to Mary in their prayers, instead invoked “St. Peter, mother of God”!

While walking the narrow streets of Arcos, we frequently had to duck into doorways to allow automobiles to pass. Many of the walls of these alleys bore long scratch marks made by car mirrors.

Dinner that night was in the parador’s elegant dining room. We passed up breakfast there the next morning, only to learn when we checked out that the cost was included in our fixed room charge! After walking up and down very hilly streets, checking on pottery vendors, we finally settled on one artisan and purchased three *azulejos*, glazed ceramic tiles.

By 2:30 p.m. we were off toward Córdoba, again for most of the journey driving on narrow, winding roads through hills covered with olive trees. Along the way, we encountered a goatherd, who, with the aid of several dogs, was tending 400 goats that rambled all over the countryside, dragging their ample bosoms beneath them.

Arriving in Córdoba by early evening, we settled into a hostel and then enjoyed a dinner nearby that featured very tasty bull’s tail, which I washed down with a jug of

red wine. After dinner we walked across the Guadalquivir River on an ancient Roman bridge illuminated by floodlights along the water's edge. Córdoba is one of Spain's three big Moorish cities, "the center of Moorish civilization in Spain for 300 years (and an important Roman city)," so our visit the following day was to the famed Mezquita. This 1200-year-old mosque, the largest in its day, contains "800 rose- and blue-marble columns and as many Moorish arches," a truly awesome edifice.

Then we were on the road again, driving through endless miles of olive groves covering every foot of every hillside until we arrived in Granada in mid-afternoon. According to our guidebook, "for a time, Granada was the grandest city in Spain," and its "magnificent Alhambra fortress was the last stronghold of the Moorish kingdom in Spain." It is said to be one of Europe's top sights, attracting up to 8,000 visitors a day.

We took a taxi to the top of the hill and first visited King Charles V's palace, a somewhat nondescript place, in my opinion, although the guidebook describes it as "the most impressive Renaissance building you'll see in Spain." Next came the Alcazaba, the ruins of a mid-13th century fort, with fine views of the surrounding countryside, including snow-capped mountains.

After waiting in the lovely gardens for our scheduled 30-minute visiting time, we finally entered the Palacios Nazaries, "the jewel of the Alhambra: the Moorish royal palace." Space does not permit an adequate description here of this truly magnificent sight. I can only suggest that you make it a major target of your overseas travels.

Leaving here, we taxied to a high overlook opposite the Alhambra and joined numerous tourists and locals waiting to view the palace at sunset and, later, bathed in floodlights after dark. In a small, noisy plaza nearby, we enjoyed a steak dinner at an outdoor café, then headed back to our hostel for yet another after-midnight bedtime.

With only 1½ days left before our flight home, it was high time that we headed back to Madrid. The drive north was mostly through flat, unremarkable farmland (La Mancha, Arabic for "parched earth"), but we made good time when we reached a limited access highway. An hour south of Toledo we turned onto a side road to the town of Consuegra, where, on a high hill, stands a row of huge, silent windmills, 200 to 300 years old. This is the setting made famous by 17th century writer Miguel de Cervantes in his *Don Quixote*. One of the mills is open for inspection, so we could see the massive wooden gears of the grain-grinding machinery. We scrambled all over the hillside taking photos but did not visit the adjacent ruins of a Crusades-era castle, built from the ruins of a Roman circus.

The final stop on our tour was Toledo, Spain's political capital until 1561. Its history dates back 2000 years, and its setting is "a high, rocky perch protected on three sides by the Tejo river." After we had parked the car, we trudged up and down many hilly streets to reach the magnificent cathedral, built between 1226 and 1493. As the guidebook puts it "the interior is so lofty, rich, and vast that it grabs you by the vocal

ords, and all you can do is whisper ‘Wow.’” You would think that we would have become jaded after seeing so many cathedrals, but Toledo’s still managed to impress us mightily.

After some shopping for Toledo’s famed gold jewelry (we passed up a complete suit of medieval knight’s armor in the same establishment), we were off to Madrid. Ordinarily this is an hour’s drive, but we ran into backed-up traffic. Finding another hostel around the corner from the Grand Vía, we had a final, Chinese dinner. Some last-minute shopping the next morning at the giant department store El Corte Inglés led to a hurried dash to the airport, but we arrived in time to turn in the rental car and catch our plane.

The great of city of Barcelona, the Basque country and the northern coast along the Bay of Biscay, and the Mediterranean coastal cities down to the Costa del Sol were not on our itinerary for this trip, but considering our time constraints, we think that Chris did a marvelous job of giving us at least a glimpse of several thousand years of Spanish history.

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