

Trekking through Spain

A self-guided tour includes everything from the ancient to the modern

BY LIISA ATVA, SPECIAL TO THE PROVINCE AUGUST 1, 2014



One way to get around Seville is with a horse and carriage.

Photograph by: Liisa Atva, Handout

“Get your hand out of my bag!” I heard Linda, my travel partner, yell from behind me. Bleary-eyed from an overnight flight to Madrid, we’d lugged our suitcases onto the crowded airport-to-city subway. Sandwiched into a tight crowd, hands grabbed at my day pack as I turned toward her. “Get out of here!” she said trying to shove a clean-cut young man through the closing train doors. After we pushed our way through to the middle of the train we checked our bags. Luckily, nothing was missing and the would-be-pickpockets hopped off at the next station.

We were two women, old enough to leave real backpacking to our kids, but adventurous enough to skip a group tour. In late May we embarked on a 20-day, 13-stop self-guided tour of Spain. Despite our subway experience, Spain was safe — although I used a money belt after that — and the travelling easy.

Getting around

Starting in Madrid, we travelled 1,600 kilometres through Spain on local trains and buses. The 300 km-an-hour, bullet-shaped high speed trains were luxuriously smooth — barely a slosh in a cup of coffee — and the local buses adequate and inexpensive at C\$15 for a two-hour trip.

We avoided taxis whenever we could as the fare from stations to hotels often cost more than the entire bus trip. And then there was the fear factor. Our taxi driver in Toledo whipped around the cobblestone streets, barely big enough to fit a car, as if it was an Indy racecourse. One corner was such a tight squeeze that he stopped, removed some previously loosened bricks from a wall, squeezed the car mirrors through, and then put the bricks back.

In most city centres and small towns we walked, taking whichever street beckoned. When we ended up at the bottom of the hilltop cities of Toledo and Pamplona there were outdoor escalators to whisk us back up. The circular streets of downtown Madrid were confusing, but whichever direction we headed off in, somehow we'd end up back where we started. The streets of Toledo, however, were a maze that we got lost in more than once.

With the sights of Barcelona well spread out, we opted for a double-decker tourist bus. We hopped off at Montjuic, one of Barcelona's highest points, and took an aerial tram to the beach at Port Vell. The bird's eye view, soaring 107 metres above the city, was a trip highlight.

We did take one organized tour, from Madrid to Segovia, only to find that we could easily have taken a high-speed train there for a fraction of the cost with more time to linger. Which would have spared us the grumpy guide who, like the rabbit in Alice in Wonderland, kept looking at his watch muttering, "I'm late, I'm late," as he rushed us through the sights.

Hotels

We booked our first and last night's hotels before we left home, and the rest online, a day or two in advance. Travelling during late May and early June, we had no trouble finding hotels on short notice, except for in San Sebastian, a popular destination for the rich and famous. Given the shortage of accommodation on weekends, apparently the not so famous as well.

When we left booking a hotel in Ronda until the midnight before our arrival, we missed the small print — the hotel was 5 km out of town. Our bemoaning a C\$25 taxi ride soon turned to delight. Set in the pastoral countryside of Andalucía, we imagined our hotel, the Casa de Campo Los Pastores, with its air of faded grandeur, a former hunting lodge for Spanish Royalty. In front was a riding ring overgrown with grass; inside were tasteful horse sculptures and paintings, and dishes with crown insignias. Our room was a whitewashed cottage, with two wood-burning fireplaces, a four-poster bed and lace trimmed curtains. Birds sang and peacocks strutted amid the intoxicating scent of lilacs and honeysuckle.

The sights

Throughout Spain we marvelled at the architecture, art and unique culture. The architecture spanned 2,000 years, ranging in style from Roman to ultra-modern, with everything one could imagine in between.

The towering aqueduct slicing through the centre of Segovia appeared, at first, an improbable sight as if it were a computer-generated image in a movie clip. Built by the Romans in the 2nd century AD, the aqueduct is over 700 metres long, 28 metres high and has 167 arches constructed from granite blocks cut so precisely that no mortar was required.

The Alhambra, overlooking the city of Granada, dates back to the Moors in the 10th century. While Granada was stifling, the Alhambra, with its combination of cleverly designed water features, ponds, gardens, and its breeze-catching hilltop

location, stayed cool. By limiting the number of tourists — buy your tickets online in advance — the site was a tranquil oasis. One could almost hear the haunting melody of an Arabian lute.

The walled city of Toledo, with its narrow cobblestoned streets and shade awnings strung above, was a trip to the Medieval Ages. Famed for centuries for its steel, Hannibal, the Romans, the Musketeers and even Japanese Samurai are said to have acquired their swords from Toledo. Many shops still sell swords. Linda bought a full-sized sword as a gift for her collector partner and toted it around, none too easily, on the rest of the trip. I settled for a letter opener.

Barcelona boasts a number of Antoni Gaudi's architectural creations from the late 1800s to early 1900s. Gaudi's work is a visual delight edging towards gaudy, but veering instead to amazing. His church of La Sagrada Familia, with its sky-scraping spires and fairytale quality, is a Barcelona landmark. Park Guell, a collection of Gaudi's whimsical structures and dripping icing buildings, is also worth a visit.

The standout for modern architecture is the Guggenheim Museum completed in 1997. Designed by Canadian-American architect Frank Gehry, it is a one-of-a-kind architectural wonder of titanium-covered curves and angles. The only attraction of note in the industrial city of Bilbao, it is reason enough to go there.

Throughout Spain, but especially in Seville, the sidewalks were works of arts themselves — grand boulevards with intricately patterned tiles cleaned at night with what looked like a Zamboni machine.

We toured several art museums. Highlights included the sculptures that came alive at the Prado in Madrid; Pamplona's Museum of Navarre, deceptively larger than it appears — not just one floor but five — with an excellent exhibit ranging from prehistoric to modern art, and the Guggenheim, where I lost myself in *The Matter of Time*, a dizzying, spiral metal maze, by Richard Serra. The Picasso Museum in Barcelona offered an interesting progression of his work; realistic pieces from his child prodigy years, to the later more well-known abstracts.

Spain abounds with natural beauty as well. In Andalucía I discovered that "Purple Rain" is not just a Prince song. The 20-metre high Jacaranda trees that bloom in early June showered us with their lavender-blue, trumpet-shaped petals.

We visited two beach towns on the Costa del Sol. It was too early in the season for the beach to be crowded, but warm enough for hearty Canadians. The upscale Marbella boasts a beautiful beach with a busy promenade where people come to see and be seen — Antonio Banderas has been spotted there. We donned our best clothes just to eat at a beach bar, but without miniskirts, big hair, and Prada purses accessorized with small dogs, we were still underdressed. The town of Nerja was much quieter and more laid back.

Adding to the scenery were the handsome, well-dressed Spanish men and beautiful women. And romantic too — the bridges in Seville were adorned with padlocks on which lovers had inscribed their names, and to symbolize their eternal love, thrown away the key.

Synonymous with Spanish culture is bullfighting and flamenco, and we found both. At our hotel in Seville we enjoyed a flamenco show featuring a young dancer, singer and a guitarist, for the price of a drink and a tapas. In Ronda there were no bullfights on while we were there but we did tour the ring. Built in 1750 it is reputed to be the best in Spain. The attached museum provided an interesting glimpse of bull-fighting history. Later, I learned all I wanted to know, and more, about bullfighting from Hemingway's surprisingly interesting book *Death in the Afternoon*. Not only is the bull killed, the picador's horse is often gored to death as well. Many a restaurant menu offered steak of the brave bull, and occasionally its testicles. We didn't try either.

In Pamplona we were too early for the “running of the bulls” that takes place during the San Fermin festival in July. But we traced the route on foot — narrow streets with very few escapes — bought the T-shirt, and had a drink in the restaurant that Hemingway used to frequent.

Eating and Drinking

Woman can live on appetizers alone, especially in Spain. We ate tapas for almost every meal. Throughout Spain we enjoyed boquerones, crunchy deep-fried fresh anchovies eaten whole; patatas bravas, a dish of cubed, fried potatoes served with tangy tomato sauce and aioli; and for breakfast, tortilla, a potato omelette with or without ham. Big crowds at small bars on side streets usually meant inexpensive but decent tapas. San Sebastian, known for its culinary delights, offered the tastiest and most creative tapas — prosciutto wrapped artichokes, small crepes filled with smoked salmon and cheese, skewers of pickled beans with anchovies and olives, and caramelized goat cheese topped with sun-dried tomato and walnuts.

To accompany the tapas we ordered the tinto de la casa, the house red. I didn't know what type of wine it was or where it was from, but it was all good, and could be had for as little as C\$2 a glass, often with a free tapas. We quickly learned to ask “how much” before ordering a second round of tapas to avoid being dinged a hefty “tourist” price.

Although there was a Starbucks in Madrid, we opted for the decadent Valorfine Chocolate Café and sipped small cups of melted chocolate with a hint of black pepper — the best hot chocolate ever — but skipped the deep-fried churros that came with it. A healthy indulgence — or so we told ourselves — was the frozen yogurt from Liao Liao, a chain of frozen yogurt stores, that actually tasted like tangy, Greek-style yogurt rather than soft ice cream. The servings of fruit and vegetables at the tapas bars tended to be skimpy, but we ate the fruit in the sangria and considered olives a vegetable serving.

A note of caution — if you use the washroom in a restaurant flick the light switch off and on to reset the energy-saving timer. Otherwise you might get caught, as I did, with your pants down in a pitch-black room blindly searching for a light switch.

If you go

Trip Cost: The 20-day trip, including hotels with two sharing a room, meals, entrance to tourist attractions and travel within Spain (but excluding airfare to and from) cost \$2,500 dollars each.

Where to stay

Madrid: Hotel Mercure Madrid Santa Domingo — a good central location.

Toledo: La Posada de Manolo — great location, lots of charm, and included breakfast. Skip the medieval themed room as it came with medieval beds — rock hard.

Seville: Hotel San Gil — a bit far from the city centre but still walking distance, clean and modern

Ronda: Casa de Campo Los Pastores — 5 km from town but a delightful country retreat

Marbella: Apartamentos Princess Playa — a decent one-bedroom apartment in a great location with an ocean view

Granada: Hotel Anacapri — clean and quiet, with a good central location

Bilbao: Holiday Inn — very nice, not central but close to the metro

San Sebastian: Silken Amara Plaza — a nice business hotel next to the bus station, a 30-minute walk to the old town and with its own tapas bar

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