

Trekking in Andalucia

Once upon a time, not so very long ago, I looked at myself in the mirror and saw a burnt-out case. I saw a man consumed by a demanding year of business, family and an unrelenting schedule which had visibly taken its toll. I was worn down, worn out, and in need of spiritual renewal.

I asked myself if it was possible for a 56-year old executive -who had long nursed an unfulfilled fantasy of trekking in Southern Spain- to go there, roam the legendary cultural places by day and seek out the gypsy flamenco by night. Did the authentic and traditional still exist in Andalucia, or had it all disappeared, drowned out by the mobile phones, internet and rap music? Had modern life's endless intrusions wormed their way into the *peñas* of Seville, and the grounds of the Alhambra? I needed to find out. If that classical world endured I would use it to soothe my heart and invigorate my mind.

As a destination, Andalucia holds incredible allure. The Mediterranean arc of the Iberian Peninsula has everything to offer from prehistoric cave paintings to Roman walls and aqueducts, the incredible legacy left behind by the Moors during their 800 years of rule, exhilarating cuisine and wines, great art and flamenco. From afar flamenco has been dear to my heart, but I wanted the real thing, firsthand, up close, in the land where it originated. I held hopes of seeing Farruquito dance, learning the names of the up-and-coming singers and *guitarristas*. Ten days is not a long time to fulfill a dream, but it would serve.

Locating lodging was by far the easiest part. A simple email to www.innsospain.com was soon answered with a list of properties fitting my unique criteria: grown-up accommodation, Seville, Granada, Ronda, authentic and traditional. Inns of Spain represents hundreds of properties to choose from, many of them delivering exceptional hospitality and outstanding value. Getting over to Spain was equally easy. My British Airways round-trip NY-Madrid-NY came to \$466, with a connection through Heathrow. I changed some money into Sterling, and rushed to buy Euros before the dollar got any softer. I grabbed a single veteran rolling case, threw in a black suit and two white dress shirts as camouflage for the flamenco performances, added sturdy walking shoes, and looked faraway to my destination across the sea and toward the Southeast.

NY-Heathrow

A radical and uniformly excellent renovation of directional signage at JFK Airport has made navigation into that behemoth relatively easy. Just the same, expect long lines once you get into the terminals, and certainly arrive early. One may or may not speed through the ticketing counters and security checkpoints; it is advisable to always have a bottle of water and some reading material on hand, as delays can occur at random. The better prepared you are for calamity, the less will probably happen to you. I arrived 2 hours early for my late-night international flight, and sped through the process, largely thanks to the efficiency of BA's ground team, arriving at my

departure gate a luxurious hour and a half before boarding. I browsed the duty free stores, surprised to find that there were few values of note. It defies logic to load up on heavy and overpriced goods on the outbound leg. I watched entitled middle class people and their corpulent hip-hop themed children leave unattended bags in public aisles- and despite the endless announcements over the PA system, no FTA marshals bothered to investigate them. Nor is it possible in major US airports to escape the ubiquitous blather of CNN, with its mind-numbing and repetitive assault on the eyes and ears. Once I finally boarded my jet I heaved a sigh of relief to escape into the cocoon of silence a headset allows. In days of yore, travel was a luxury; today it is an obstacle between you and your destination. Before the plane left the ground I guzzled a fizzy glass of Airborne, a vitamin supplement designed for travelers. On the advice of a doctor friend I wore a surgical mask, since the recirculated air in the airplane cabin is an invisible but rich toxic soup. It was a good strategy, since many people surrounding me onboard coughed and sniffled the entire flight. I watched 3 movies across the Atlantic, and ignored my fellow travelers. To keep my body from freezing up I did a small yoga workout every so often, using the galley for stretching.

Hours later the flight touched down in London, in a bleak, grey dawn. Heathrow Airport, a sprawling, decaying institution, combines vast distances between terminals with an antiquarian shuttle transport system. Connections there can be tight, as disheveled humans pack into buses like fatigued sardines, all demonstrating zombie-like behavior en route to their vague connection points. It is a surreal scenario in the waiting areas, too much walking, stepping around sleeping figures sprawled across any seating available, the occasional sickening waft from the open smoking areas, and a weird cacophony of light, sounds and glaring promotions and disoriented aliens in dashikis and djeballahs competing with grungy students for a spot at the counter where they bolt their overpriced espressos. It is advisable to have a few quid in your pocket while passing through. Everything costs twice as much as the USA, but this is a place not to be penny wise, especially where enforced starvation could figure. Better to plop down some hard-earned currency for a snack somewhere, since flights often leave late. If you must be marooned, at least be full-bellied. Ever intrepid, I browsed the duty-free stores (overpriced, no bargains), Harrod's (the only brand opportunity for gift-giving in the airport), and finally located one interesting twist: the bookstores. Not that the book vendors are cheap, never that, but they do have special softbound editions of books not yet released in the USA, available at the unenviable price of two for £18, which seems staggering to a Yankee with wimpy dollars in hand. It is, if one values reading, a good deal, and may be the most attractive shopping prospect in that gawdawful place. It's easy to leave Heathrow once you get to your departure gate. It may necessitate another of those bus rides to nowhere on the tarmac, but eventually off you whoosh, and in less than 2 hours the plains of Spain appear below, mainly with no rain.

Madrid

A veil miraculously lifted when my feet touched the ground in Spain, as the dark gloom of the northern latitudes faded to faint memory, replaced by a sunny landscape and the sense that time had slowed to a more manageable pace. It was

morning, and people moved in a leisurely manner through the airy terminal. Everyone was friendly, helpful, speaking varying levels of English. Segovia, my first destination, lay an hour to the northwest, and I had been advised to forego the 1-hour cab ride into town for €50. Take the subway, my counselor whispered, it's less than two bucks and it goes right to the bus station. Don't rent a car, buses go everywhere and they're cheaper and faster than the trains. But free advice and reality often collide: while the numerals were correct, the first tiny detail omitted was that the metro station is easily a quarter mile walk from the international terminal. I had been en route now over 13 hours and the hike to the station through endless Orwellian terminals took almost a half an hour, albeit through relative calm. The subway itself is a modern marvel, clean, efficient, well-marked, distinguished by uncomfortable seating and a television monitor repeating a strange video broadcast loop in every car, a flickering item about Eurovision song contest winners and avant-garde performances in the city of Madrid, interspersed with something resembling news, mixed with rock video fusion snippets barely comprehensible to the sleep-deprived. There is smoking everywhere. Mingling with the *Lumpenproletariat* in the subway cars allows one to form an impression of Spain today: a nation of many cultures, prosperous, filled with beautiful people enjoying their renaissance. Franco is old news, as are the Olympics, a World's Fair, and membership in the Euro Zone. It is a nation of new cars and new clothes and a cell phone for every citizen. The Spain I saw 35 years ago – a landscape of poverty and disrepair- has been replaced by a booming economy, with opportunity for everyone. It is a lovely and encouraging picture, and I wondered if tradition had bothered to survive at all, for modernity's seductions were ever-present. What need for the past, when the present offers so many enticements?

I dragged my rolling bag lethargically behind me, navigated a stairway-filled connection at Nuevos Ministerios and a half hour later emerged from the Principe Pio subway station into the blazing sunlight, eyes burning in the glare, inhaling the first semi-fresh jet fume-free air in hours. Across the street from the station nestled the La Sepulvedana bus station, whose well-concealed façade masked a subterranean space, seedy and dim, filled with sinister people with scars on their faces and wearing extravagant bandannas and stinking of street crime waiting to occur. Groups of lurking Gypsies huddled in corners and a crazy and toothless indigent woman screamed for somebody to help her please until the security guard lent her his cell phone, she composed herself, and pleaded and sobbed with whoever answered. I turned back to the ticket window, asked if everything was okay, the ticket man shrugged and sold me a one-way fare to Segovia for €4.85. I ducked into the coffee bar, where humanity quickly returned to my existence. The barman insisted on helping me use the phone to call ahead to Segovia. A man at the counter bantered happily in Spanish. They made me an excellent double espresso, and I revived, as I fractured their language with an idiot's delight. When it came time to board they gave directions, replete with wild gesturing. I stumbled down a decaying staircase, entrusted my bag to the bowels of a spluttering bus and plopped into a surprisingly comfortable seat. The bus started up on time, and off we rode past olive trees and a statue of Goya, past a wide urban park, and soon witnessed the fading blight of urbanity as we headed northwest. Development could be seen adjacent to the

highway, but vast fields surrounded it, and distant hillsides promised respite from the realities of city life.

Segovia

I understood not what Segovia would offer. My plan was to collapse at the home of a family I knew who were posted there, correct my body clock to local time, and head for the south as soon as I felt no longer caught somewhere in the weird no-man's darkness halfway over the Atlantic. When the bus peeled off at the Segovia exit I expected I would land in a small industrial city off the beaten path. This was a magnificent and erroneous presumption on my part, since Segovia proved to possess much of the authentic and traditional I sought. It was a glorious introduction to everything wonderful about Spain, collected into a small city which can be navigated on foot, a place rich in history, architecture, and lifestyle. A city I did not want to leave once I had sampled its myriad of enticements. One is hard pressed to define what is so great about Segovia: lifestyle, beauty or the wild delirium induced by the foods to be found there. Andalusia beckoned, but Segovia held me tight in its grip.

I lingered in Segovia for two days, wandering the narrow passageways of the old Jewish quarter, delighting in the variety of ceramic motifs on antique building facades, sketching at the Alcazar- a fairytale castle perched on the old city walls, running my fingers over stones set into foundations built by the Romans, standing at the foot of the perfectly-preserved 2000 year-old aqueduct which runs through the center of town. How commendable they have left the new city out by the highway, and kept the old city within its walls as a world unto itself. Modernity is a faint apparition at the periphery. There is more history than can be assimilated here, and far too many distractions. Local delicacies abound, among them fresh beans smothered in savory sauce with slices of sausage; uncountable varieties of ham of which each institution is intensely proud; delicately spiced olives; the ever-present local sheep cheese typically served in narrow crescent sections 7mm thin, cut from a wheel; a lethal 33° herbal *digestif* called cilantro. Any regional red wine is recommended, tannic, forthright, fruity, balanced, presenting a range of flavors from berry to chocolate. One could spend hours at an outdoor café table, sipping coffee, watching storks circle and swoop around the *catedral* spires, atop which they have nested for centuries. One can slip into a *tapas* bar, nurse a glass of *tinto*, nibble on local snacks. It is considered correct to toss what you don't like onto the floor, be it an olive pit, a chunk of stray gristle or a crumpled napkin. If the floor of the *tapas* bar is clean, leave immediately: something there is definitely not right. At dusk the whole town turns out for a nightly promenade along the main streets. Here the heart of Segovia shows, for there is space enough for everyone, young lovers, the elderly, couples pushing prams, children rushing about, tourists, and the sweet gossipy encounters of friends meeting by chance. It reflects a lifestyle which still values direct social interaction, honors the old, and maintains a healthy respect for the traditional idea of human relationships. Every intrigue and drama is present in the most beautiful way. It is intoxicating, inspiring, out of whack with the rest of the high-velocity world, but it feels honest and true. Segovia people are relaxed, sophisticated, and have a clear idea of how the universe works, an altogether alluring proposition.

On my last night in Segovia my host booked an early dinner for 11pm at La Concepción, (Plaza Mayor 15, telephone 921 460 930), a subterranean dining space, arguably the best restaurant in town, well-deserved in its reputation. Reservations essential. We sat at table for nearly three hours, moving through a succession of opulent courses: local greens in a delicate vinaigrette, paper thin ham slices, beef loin with poached foie and salsa, two bottles of outstanding wine, and two soufflés- one of chocolate and the other hazelnut. It was an honor and privilege to spend €116 for the entire meal. We tipped an extravagant 15%, almost unheard of, but drunkenness and delight figure heavily when life is as abundantly good as this.

Madrid-The Prado

Sadly, Segovia is not a flamenco town. The next morning, in search of the thing that had brought me to Iberia, I boarded a southbound La Sepulvedana bus, returning to Madrid just before noon. I had booked a mid- afternoon fast train -called the Ave- to Seville, at a cost of €67 round trip, which left ample time for an obligatory visit to Sr. Goya, specifically his painting of a swimming dog. I took a cab directly to The Prado, €4.50, checked my bags and dove into one of the most remarkable art collections in the world. During my NYC stopover I had enjoyed a heated and affectionate argument with a woman curator friend, who insisted that the paintings by Velazquez were the ones to see, far more worthwhile than the Goyas. It was one of those recreational disagreements which posed compelling questions about how we each individually see art. Nathalie's premise was that she viewed the Velazquez as more *painterly*, thus superior. I walked every gallery, examining every painting which caught my eye. I saw temporary installations of Spanish portraiture from Velazquez to Picasso, the new display of Rubens' Adoration of the Magi, a show of Italian Renaissance drawings from the permanent collection, endless Flemish artists, El Greco, but when it came time to compare Velazquez and Goya I found them dissimilar as apples to oranges. Say one simply factors out that they are of the same era, and that they are grossly different as draughtsmen. Velazquez primarily addresses *technique and surface*; Goya is about what today we refer to as *content*. There's an incomparable exhilaration in witnessing how Velazquez throws the paint onto the canvas, with the vigor and energy of the Flemish painters- he was the Andy Warhol of his time; Goya's themes, conundrums, mysteries, bad dreams and deep social statements resonate as timeless- only Josef Beuys approaches this depth of message in our own era. The swimming dog looks large in reproductions, yet it is actually quite small, 134 x 80cm, and required careful scrutiny. But enough talk of art! I had passed 3½ invisible hours in the museum. Soon the fast train was due to depart for the South.

The walk to Atocha station is short, perhaps 10 minutes at a leisurely pace. One transits a long tree-lined palisade on the Paseo del Prado, which is filled with sculptures of artists on pedestals, a statement of what the community worships. Bless them. The Ave glides to a halt on its track like an elegant serpent. At the very same instant all the coach doors open. As you descend to the train, a conductor stands at each coach entrance in the same position, all identically clad, an instant of

some indescribable order and beauty out of a modern-day fairy tale. You find your numbered seat and are issued a tiny headset, which allows you to watch “Runaway Bride” with Richard Gere and Julia Roberts, dubbed in Spanish, no Inglés spoken here. Other audio channels play classical, Eurovision winners, and something resembling rock n roll, except with Spanish lyrics. For 2 hours you zoom through endless fields of olive trees and orange trees, occasionally leafing through the glossy magazine the railroad provides. En route the prevailing energy palpably diminishes, one feels miles from the hubbub. And then you reach Seville.

Sevilla

Seville, a flat city on the banks of a river surrounded by mountains, has 600,000 citizens, a modern place which has rebuilt itself over past half millennium since the expulsion of the Moorish rulers. Outside the walls of the old city the new city churns with energy and activity, a maze of construction sites, gaudy new homes, part of a region in motion. There are orange trees heavily laden with oranges on every block of every street, oranges which people don't eat because of auto pollutants. Inside the oldest districts street plan which abuts the river, another ambience presides: an easygoing passion, a contented coexistence with history, and the preservation of flamenco. There are reputed to be over 300 flamenco venues in the city alone, with the Tirana neighborhood across the river a haven for small clubs called *peñas*, a word which doesn't easily translate. Perhaps the best definition is “place where like-minded people congregate.” Two clubs you might visit if brave enough are El Bollo and El Mantoncillo, where the passion and hearts are true. Perhaps you will hear the *guitarrista* Martin Chico, a name I heard mentioned more than once.

To get into the mood of things I installed myself in La Casa del Maestro, an inn which had once been the home of Niño Ricardo (1885-1980) a legendary *gran maestro de la guitarra*. The house is filled with memorabilia and ephemera, and utterly comfortable. I now was ready to execute Plan A, sleep until 11pm, at which time I would venture out. I made sure the concierge knew I sought the real thing. I mentioned a place called El Arenal on Calle Rodo near the Plaza de Toros and she scoffed at me. “Don't go there,” she admonished, it was barely entertainment and certainly not flamenco. She would make a few calls and see what she could find. Go have a nap, she said. She would find me a place to go. And so I slept, but my mind was abuzz with vertiginous anticipation.

It is inadvisable for the uninitiated to walk from the old quarter across a dark bridge and into Triana after 11pm, searching out smoky clubs whose names and locations one does not know. This the concierge obviously understood. When I appeared at the reception desk at the appointed hour she had located a starting point for me on this side of the river, La Carboneria (Calle Levies 18, telephone 954 214 460), but she warned me to be prepared to wait. Sevilla speed, she reminded me, is slower, and flamenco takes time to happen. You go, order a drink and eventually something happens. This particular establishment was known to feature younger performers and the entertainment might begin –if I was lucky- before midnight. Against her advice I left on foot from the hotel, trusty street plan in hand, puzzling through the

labyrinth of cobblestone streets with surprising precision. By 11:30pm I found myself facing another dimly-lit door, which led into a smoke-filled and cavernous bar thick with what looked to be a motley student crew, definitely not your upscale tourists, and a bevy of ex-pat English speakers sporting British accents. I was the only person wearing a suit in the entire place. Off to the left of the entrance another dark portal deposited you into an empty metal frame patio kind of place, corrugated aluminum roof with long communal tables, a bar on one side, a tapas stand on the other, and a low stage at the front. Definitely down, dirty and deserted. The Cockney barman was less encouraging. He felt that the entertainment would start at a vague and indefinite point in the near future. I asked for a glass of red wine, and he advised me to opt for the *tinto*, which proved surprisingly agreeable to the palate, a Tempranillo from "somewhere in the north." Who were the performers? Those people sitting over at that table in the corner, none more than 25 years old, 3 men and a rather big woman. I immediately sent drinks over to them, and took a place midway down an empty table, and sat sipping my wine. Time passed. Nothing happened, except the flamencos raised their glasses to me from afar. I hoped that did not mean they were offended and a murder was about to occur. More time passed. I revisited the barman. Eventually, he said. A young couple meandered in and sat at the table a few seats down. From Denmark, a lady lawyer here for a week to study flamenco dancing in Madrid, her companion a maritime engineer and amateur flamenco guitarist. They said nothing was happening tonight in Triana, but something ought to happen in this place. Eventually. I interrogated them, writing down every shred of insider information they imparted, and we bought each other drinks and *tapas*, the worst I tasted in Spain, especially execrable after the *taparias* of Segovia. We ate them all. Then a miracle occurred: the room filled, every seat, every table, with people standing at the back and in the doorway, and conversation hummed throughout the room. The performers took to stage, and the enormous woman had now donned a gaudy dress, gigantic red polka dots a la Minnie Mouse with ruffles, and she stood at the front staring defiantly at the crowd. A skinny man at her right sat tuning his guitar, a long-haired guy in a black shirt nodded amiably, and a bearded man in a chair next to him seemed to be lost in thought. Some cosmic exertion of psychic energy occurred and the noise level dropped, and the woman began to dance, stomping her feet, swishing her abundant backside, strutting and weaving and she turned absolutely beautiful, taking command of the room for all of her dances, each more spirited than the last. The show went on, guitar, dancer, singer and guitar, dancer, yet the bearded guy never danced, sung, said a word, only did the *palmas* all through the performance. Finally, the guitarist played one emotional solo, the woman spun around and suddenly it was over. More than an hour had passed invisibly.

Time to move on, to a tiny bar called La Andaluziana on Calle Garcia de Vinuesa, where everyone is a flamenco. The same drill: we show up, order drinks and wait for something to happen, keyword Eventually. It is not long in coming, as a portly, tweed-suited middle-aged man with a thick moustache breaks into song, spontaneously accompanied by a guitarist, and he sings with passion and conviction and emphatic motions with his hands, his expression changing to punctuate his lyrics, and I cannot understand a single word of what he says, something about his cousin, perhaps something about his heart. Cognacs are offered, as are more songs, this time from

another man who sings to the tweedy guy, and a kind of dialogue between them happens, exchanging verses from across the room. The guitarist stays hidden behind a half-wall. Tears well up in my eyes. More cognacs are consumed.. At approximately 3:45am a group of middle-aged women appear. They are well-groomed and well-attired, prosperous and confident. They obviously have been out for a girl's night, and have now come to fetch their husbands. The ladies have an obligatory drink, reunite with the singing men, we all say our goodnights and the place empties, deserted. I am alone again. I stumble out into the vacant street tottering, absolutely ignorant of where I am, where my hotel is, where my passport is, where my money is, and struck by the utter craziness of this trip, and I laugh out loud at myself, drunk somewhere in the middle of Seville at 4:15am, a giddy, inebriated moment of delight at my folly and good luck. A man can get what he wants. Even the street sweeper in the plaza I eventually happen upon is understanding: he has seen this before, potted foreigners unable to stand upright in need of someone to hail them a cab, and as he looks to his left a taxi magically rounds the corner and though I do not remember how, I am soon safe in my comfy little bed, with the room spinning around, still chuckling at what fate has already delivered. It is Spain, it is flamenco, and all one can reasonably say is *olé*, uttered with delirious conviction.

The next day I breakfasted alone at 1145am in a tiny room off the tiled courtyard at my hotel, on bread and little wrapped sweets from the bakery of Ines Rosales of Cidra, a nearby village; local ham and cheese; more of that strong coffee; fresh squeezed orange juice; local olive oil, butter, pate and chorizo. Thus fortified I went forth to the banks of the river Guadalquivir, leisurely strolling from Puente de la Barqueta along a clear path, peeling down to shirtsleeves in the brilliant afternoon sun. A few joggers swept by, some meandering lovers, while on the water teams of scullers rhythmically transited the stretch known as the Canal de Alfonso XIII. At the Torre del Oro, garlanded with scaffolding for repairs, I turned inland and in a few blocks easily identified the eponymous Hotel Alfonso XIII, an elegant revival structure dating from 1929, completed just before the worldwide economic collapse which marked the end of the Jazz Age. It is a marvelous complex, with an ornate lobby which prefigures the opulence that lies within. The hotel, operated by the Westin chain, preserves much of the authentic, with its intricate ceramic treatments, an over-the-top pool area of the ilk preferred by fashion editors for photo shoots, luscious gardens, and the most expensive rooms in town starting at around €600 per night. One can also experience a world class restaurant, or simply pass the time on a cushy couch sipping drinks and nibbling on the long-stemmed pickled capers served as bar snacks. Two odd and incongruous details struck me, though: the proliferation of generic Westin ashtrays which might be found in any of the chain's lower-end hotels anywhere in the world, terribly out of place in such elegant and distinguished surroundings; and the weird, ugly energy-saver lightbulbs in all the remarkable vintage chandeliers. A property of this level of exclusivity and taste deserves better emphasis in the details. Still, it is a worthwhile landmark to experience, and a gratifying detour.

Next I explored Sierpes, the flamenco street and its surrounding district, where one discovers entire stores dedicated to the minutiae of this arcane science: fans and

castanets, headgear, wild colored dresses, boot and shoemakers, scarves and mantillas, cute ceramic figurines and literary esoterica. What appears to be one of the better dress shops is Maria Rosa (Cuna 13, telephone 954 22 21 43), whose windows are worth a cursory glance simply for the blaze of color and variety of garments presented. If you are in search of the ubiquitous flat-brimmed hat called alternately *sombrero de ala ancha*, *Cordobès*, *flamenco* or *Sevillano*, look no further than Sombreria Maquedano (Sierpes 40, telephone 954 56 47 71) where the seriously funky (€45) to the profoundly better (€115) can be bought off the racks or made to order for adults and children. Sustenance can be taken at La Campana (Sierpes 1 y 3, telephone 954 22 35 70) where coffee and overly-rich cream pastries provide the needed sugar jolt to continue one's odyssey. For those lunatic enough to be besotted, extravagant and betrothed, get thee specifically to Cuna, near Plaza del Salvador. An entire wedding industry resides there, and many of the bridal gowns to be seen on display are of such a uniqueness, elegance and richness that it is no mystery why people come to Seville to be married. What better place to begin a lifelong relationship than in a place known for the highest evocation of romance?

My last night in Seville I attended a performance at Casa de la Memoria de Al Andalus, a conservatory of traditional flamenco whose entrance is just left of the Hotel Alcazar (Calle Ximénez de Enciso 28, telephone 954 56 06 70). Performances every day at 7pm, sometimes a late show, in the patio of a converted 15th century Jewish house. Front row seats are desirable, so be in line at least a half hour early. The most promising of young flamencos dance, sing and play in this 2-story high open-air space, where roses climb a trellis to the roof and tiled benches line the walls. I spent my final night sleeping at Alcoba del Rey, a boutique hotel of only 11 rooms, in a converted 13th century sultan's palace. Its Moroccan-themed luxury proved an excellent preface for the next part of my journey, and set the tone for Granada, where the Nazarin sultans held court for 800 years from a legendary citadel called Alhambra.

It was somewhere on the outskirts of Seville, early in the 3 hour ride to Granada, that I realized I had passed the halfway point of my journey. I would be home in less than 5 days, but panic did not set in, for I had shifted into Andalucian time. The train sidled through orange groves, then endless fields of olive trees, past ruins of old houses, as the slope of the land increased and we began to climb. Next to a stand of carob trees just outside San Francisco de Roja a man driving two white mules plowed in a vast field, surrounded by emptiness. Beyond us the Sierra Nevada Mountains loomed. What flamenco now would present itself? After all, the gypsy caves of Sacromonte remained to be seen.

Granada

Granada, population 400,000, a university town with 60,000 students, sits on the banks of the Rio Darro, and at dusk peacocks call along the river. The people here love their city, it is clear. Even the cabdriver knows the ages of buildings, that the tap water is very sweet in Granada and has a good reputation; later, on the terrace of my lodgings, engrossed in conversation with the lady innkeeper about the thousand

different water sounds at the Alhambra, I try a glass from a flask on the table and yes, it is sweet and delicious and good. The inn is hidden on a side street of the Albaicín (there are many alternate spellings at play here), and when I invite her to recommend a local restaurant she says she will “bring out some food”. I sketch on the terrace as the light changes, and she brings out a silver tray with asparagus, *salchicon*, *pabo ahumando*, olives, chicken breast with herbs, sheep cheese and bread and opens a bottle of 1997 Enate, the red Galican wine following me around Spain like an old friend. Around midnight I dine at Carmen Mirador de Aixà (Carril de San Agustín, 2, telephone 958 22 36 16) on local cheese served on a cracker with thick gazpacho and olive oil, a scramble of codfish and shrimp, oxtail, and finish it off with *orujo*, the sweet version of a local digestif. While the food is exceptional, it is the unimpeded view across the valley to the Alhambra, illuminated at night, which demands your attention. Save for the addition of a few strategically placed floodlamps, it is the same view as 500 years ago, another of those time-traveling moments of timeless realization. Later yet my hosts take me to a downtown flamenco bar I will never find again, reached by steep and twisty dirt paths between old buildings, through a low door and into a smoke-filled 3-leveled basement space which cannot have been renovated for a hundred years, crowded to the walls with people smoking and drinking and talking to a background of recorded flamenco pumping out through a sound system at serious volume. I immediately catch sight of a wild-looking heavy set gypsy guy with bleached blond hair tied behind his head, a pot belly, pockmarked skin, wearing an earring, looking at me with too much curiosity. I think: he is a very efficient pickpocket checking me out and I had better be careful. Not that he is going to get anything from my pockets: with the jacket I am wearing it takes me five minutes to get my wallet into the narrow inside pocket. In a minute or two he nudges by me, bumping my shoulder a bit too hard, the first test of an easy mark, and one I do not fail by starting a ruckus provoked by his effrontery. A minute later he is back, and as he squeezes past me he grabs my forearm from behind and shakes it a bit, the move to distract, and with his other hand pats down my side pockets, quickly disappointed, nothing there. As he drifts away he looks back at me sneering, challenging, then reunites with his vodka-slamming friends. Here is the first line of a flamenco song I made up at that moment: *Once again I've escaped the bad guys ay-ay-ay-o*. We then cruise up the hill to the deserted, winding lanes of Sacromonte, but no flamenco spots are open, the quarter quiet and chilly, its whitewashed walls shimmering iridescent in the moonlight. I ask my hosts about the possibility of seeing Farruquito, and they shrug; he has been involved in some kind of scandal, a hit-and-run accident, and is not performing. At 2:45am we give up, and say our goodnights. Sometimes the flamenco sleeps, and tonight is such a night.

In the morning I breakfasted at my inn, and walked the easy distance to the minibus which goes up the hill to The Alhambra, a ride which costs about \$1, and takes all of 10 minutes. I bought my admission ticket keyed to a given hour for entry, and began the hike to the highest point, *Generalife*, the summer palace of the sultans, through a labyrinth of gardens and terraces, with a profusion of water courses and fountains. It is a surrounding of luxury, design and seclusion unlike any other place I can recall. As the innkeeper promised, water sounds were everywhere, especially memorable on a famous stairway, with burbling streams inset into the banisters- many of the 500-year

old hydraulics still function. In the Spring this place must be a blaze of color, with roses in bloom and wafting fragrances everywhere. Yet there are still roses in Granada in late January. I imagined the courtiers who once wandered here, but it was too distracting a vision and time was my enemy, so I allowed gravity to reluctantly guide me downwards to the Nasrid Palaces. There one ornate room succeeded another, far too many details to take in, garden followed courtyard followed room filled with mosaics and wood reliefs, ceiling filigree, unimaginable opulence. I wrote in my notebook the word “overwhelming.” Finally I stopped, sat, and sketched for an hour in a long courtyard with a reflecting pool. I made a list of tile colors which seemed to repeat from room to room adding an abiding continuity to the changing motifs: light blue, dark blue, green, ochre, Arabic white. Some very nonchalant cats came over to visit, permanent residents establishing their ownership. Even out of season a regular stream of crowds drifted by, insinuating themselves into my every photograph. Eventually I made my way over to the *Alcazaba*, a complex of battlements and fortifications at the west end of the promontory, where I climbed to the top of the highest tower and viewed the surroundings in the brilliant afternoon sun, looking down on the Albayzin. I had somehow passed 5½ hours in a dream state. I had not seen everything, but who could? As I walked down the Cuesta de los Chinos, a narrow path along the back side of the Alhambra which is deserted and seemingly unknown to tourists and gives a beautiful view of stonework not seen in the popular areas, I considered that the sultans ruled for 700 years, from the highpoint of their cultural achievement to the eventual decadence and corruption that led to their decline and expulsion. Time is the great equalizer. The Alhambra survives as a celebration of their highest achievement. I had waited 47 years to visit this place and it had been worth the wait.

That afternoon I prowled the narrow alleyways of the Mercado Morroqui, ducking into tiny shops filled with kitschy flamenco souvenirs, and *tatherias* for sweet tea, served in thin glasses. I could have been in Rabat or Casablanca. In the evening around midnight I sat down for dinner at Meson Alegria, (4 C/Moras, telephone 958 22 67 69) a place where the locals go, certainly not the tourists. There I enjoyed beef served on a scalding hot ceramic plate, seasoned with garlic and rock salt. There was the traditional plate of roasted green chilis, grilled lamb served on thin cut potatoes French fry style. We drank a wonderful bottle of Rioja called Azpilicueta, a bargain at €16.40. Then we drove up to the windy heights of Camino del Sacromonte yet again. The cave houses of this district are hewn from limestone cliffs, and once sheltered subversive types who opposed the Franco regime. Today they have been converted to homes with wild cactus gardens, and transformed into tiny nightclubs like *La Buleria*, the club where every flamenco with ambition must perform at least once. It was late, and the place was jammed with young people well beyond inebriated, seated in a tiny room dense with smoke, bellowing songs at each other, pounding on tables. The scene was claustrophobic, deafening, humid, hormone-charged. A woman did a decidedly lewd dance to the applause of those assembled. I was introduced to the owner, and handed a healthy glass of scotch. He looked distastefully at the crowd, displeased at the inauthentic conduct, where another kind of passion was clearly at play. “Gypsies are weird,” he said simply. My hosts looked sympathetically at me: this is what flamenco sometimes is, their expressions said. We decided to step outside

into the chilly air. One forgets that Granada is at a high altitude, and that the temperature can drop after dark. It was crisp, calm, late and obviously time to say goodnight.

Ronda

To reach Ronda from Granada you must first ride down to the sea for 1½ hours, past fields where I saw a man using a scythe, then through forests of construction cranes into the Malaga city limits, a sunny, booming, garish, prosperous, overbuilt honkytonk coastal town thick with palms. People seemed universally happy on all sides, gregarious, outgoing. The Malaga bus station is another mystery, with an arcane system in which the tourist booth gives wrong directions and the intermittently-open information window has answers, but doesn't know where to send you. I wandered around in circles for 20 minutes, found my gate, waited. The bus eventually headed northwest back into the hills, past endless orange and lemon groves, olives and more olives, encountering a narrow winding gravel road under construction, whose many hairpin turns caused the driver to slow to a crawl, cross himself and sound his horn. With all the pitching back and forth I began to feel nausea. We stopped at several of the white cities, where there were tacky new houses, construction and the smell of money everywhere. About 15km outside of Ronda the bus emptied and I was left as the only passenger. Panic set in. I wrote in my notebook: Nobody is going there? But then the landscape changed as we reached mountain passes, higher altitudes, conifers and twisty rock formations like taffy. It was straight out of *For Whom The Bell Tolls*, piney woods, rocky peaks, where I fantasized that partisans peered around from behind the boulders. Then down a rocky pass where the strata stood upright and true vertical, the earth in upheaval, past hundreds of sheep grazing on a steep hillside, and into upland alluvial plains that lead to the city of Ronda, which is perched above a chasm, and has a famous bridge.

Rilke had been here, Hemingway as well, and Orson Welles is buried in a graveyard of bulls on the outskirts of town. Ronda is birthplace to a distinctive style of bullfighting, not to mention the most beautiful bullring in Spain. Once a year the family of Ordoñez returns to preside over the Goya style bullfight, all pageantry and costume in the traditional style. The rest of the year the Plaza de Toros is a museum in glorious preservation. There is more to see around Ronda than one day permits; other quirky museums (Museum of the Bandit, Museum of Motion Pictures, the Mondragon Palace) and within striking distance are prehistoric cave paintings, remains of a Phoenician settlement, a Roman amphitheatre, well-preserved ruins of 13th century Arab baths, old bridges and a long stretch of medieval city wall intact. It is a marvelous place simply for hiking around with your camera in hand and nowhere in particular to go. I had hours enough for a day's walk around the old city, a visit to the chasm below the bridge, but neither time nor energy to look for flamenco in Ronda. The road was beginning to catch up with me, time had run short.

Two fine and different dining experiences characterized my stay. The first, Doña Pepa (Plaza de Socorro 10, telephone 952 87 47 77) had all the formality and authenticity of the corrida, with memorabilia on the walls of a Beaux Arts palace, red tablecloths,

dark wood and tile work, attended by super-pro waiters who have seen it all. A procession of local ingredients paraded like a bullfight: some sweet aperitif before the meal, bacon-wrapped dates, chicken rolled with herbs in a pimento sauce, local sheep cheese, smoked duck, brilliantly flavored cherry tomatoes, and at the conclusion *Helado de Aceite de Oliva* – olive oil ice cream, the chef's specialty. A visit to the area called "specialties" at www.dpepa.com will be of interest for its stratospheric tour de cuisine of items available, far too numerous for one meal. Another night without reservation I stumbled upon Casa Maria (Ruedo Alameda 27, telephone 952 87 62 12) and into the very personal world of chef Elias Vega, whose family-run restaurant in partnership with his charming wife Isabel Alba is a true gem. Do not be fooled by the tiny 3-tabled space downstairs, onto which the miniscule kitchen opens. A staircase leads to a cozy second floor dining room, though I chose to remain downstairs and watch the magic: four people crowded into a tiny space, creating exceptional courses one-after-the-other. Vega also prides himself on his wine selection- a vintage guide for Ribera del Duero and Rioja is printed on the back of the restaurant's business card- and he features a wine of the week. My confidence thus inspired I tried his special Rioja and it was superb. He happily customized a full meal for me: soup of noodles, egg, broth and vegetable, followed by a fish preparation in garlic and oil cooked to perfection accompanied by rice, corn and carrots. After dinner he made a tea and honey and brandy drink for me. Nothing I ate was listed on the menu, everything created spontaneously. This restaurant is in a class of its own, and deserves to be visited in Ronda. It is neither highbrow nor presumptuous, only real and sincere and delicious. *El estilo Rondeño es muy austero.*

Madrid and home again

A hard day of travel back to Madrid followed, and I checked into a modern 4-star hotel in the center of the city, ordered room service and flipped on the television, Canal Sur, a show called *Los Ratones Colorados* hosted by a Qadaffi lookalike named Jesus Quintero, a wrinkled guy wearing a scarf, who is a legend of Andalucian broadcasting. I was astounded at what I saw. For an hour, uninterrupted, he profiled Farruquito, cutting between video clips of performances and face-to-face interview, where the young man talked about his life, the scandal, and how he is dealing with it. In one particularly arresting segment a group of gypsies sat around a table singing to the accompaniment of 2 guitarists. Suddenly Farruquito jumped onto the table, threw off his jacket and shoes and socks and danced a solo in his bare feet. It was mesmerizing, everything I had wanted in Spain, the last piece of a spiritual puzzle, and the next morning I caught a very early flight home.

I had been renewed.