

October 2004

Portugal



Just returned from two glorious weeks in Portugal. The country exceeded our expectations by far: The culture, the scenery, the people, the food, the wine, the weather ... it has a lot to offer and mostly at reasonable value for the dollar. We'd like to share with you our discoveries.

Bullfighting – Portuguese Style

On our second day we took a 20-minute train ride out of Lisbon to the small town of **Villa Franca de Xira**. For three weekends in October the city puts on a Running of the Bulls and a bullfight ala Pomplona, Spain. They run the bulls from a corral to the arena through paved streets that are covered with dirt for the occasion. They are shepherded by *picadors*, men on horseback dressed in traditional garb who carry *pics*, long-handled spears with sharp metal points. Young men are allowed to run before the bulls. A few bulls choose to stop for a rest along the route. These slackers become the target for amateur matadors, who do everything they can to goad the bull into a charge. When the bull does charge the wannabes take the prudent course. They scurry behind barriers that are erected by shop owners to protect their storefronts. We watched as an extremely mild-mannered bull, undoubtedly a direct descendant of the famous Ferdinand, refused to charge despite all attempts by the wannabes.

The event brought back memories of Pomplona in 1962 when I participated in the Running along with brother Kevin and college friend Seymour Smith. Kevin ran right out of his shoes and beat everybody to the arena by half an hour. Your truly ended up ... way up in the air launched by a bull. Luckily the bull quickly lost interest in me, and I ended up ... or down, with a few minor scratches and the praises of my fellow drunken Spanish comrades for my *machismo*.

Eventually all of the bulls end up at the arena, where they await the bullfights that begin around 3 PM. As with all bullfights tickets are sold according to location – *sol* or *sombra*, either sun or shade. The shadyside tickets normally cost double the sunnyside, but it's worth it. The matadors seem to play to the shadyside. After all, that's where the VIPs sit.

We took our seats a half hour before the fights began. The arena is small and intimate, seating no more than 2,000 spectators. Compare this to the arenas of Madrid and Pomplona that seat up to 40,000. The bullfight is a great social event. Regulars seat themselves ringside and drape colorfully designed cloths on the wall before their seats.

The President of the Arena arrives in the presidential box. The trumpeter announces the commencement. His tune is picked up by a twenty-piece band.

The parade of the matadors begins. In the front are the assistant matadors (aka AM's). These are the guys that first work the bull to tire him out and so the main matador can check him out for any peculiarities. Does he favor one side when he charges? Is he blind in one eye? They also plant the *banderillas*, the three-foot long *pics* that are pointed and barbed at one end. With their multi-colored skewered plastic rosettes they resemble shish-kebabs. Then come the primary matadors (aka PM's). Six in all, each one looks magnificent in his "suit of lights". We understand that these costumes weigh about 20 pounds. Each matador wears a suit of a different color -- gold, silver, green, etc.— each one embroidered with much gold and silver. The costume is completed by hot pink stockings and what look like Pappagallo black dancing slippers. They each carry a cape, magenta on one side, school- bus yellow on the other. A colorful spectacle? You bet.

A man carries a large placard into the ring. On it is listed the bull's number and its weight in kilos. He exits, and a hush falls over the arena as the huge doors that lead from the bullpen beneath the stadium open. A pause ... then a bull bursts forth into the arena looking for someone or something to hit. As he left his pen for the arena a small, barbed *pic* adorned with colored streamers was plunged into his hump. You can tell that he's not pleased about it. An assistant matador jumps out from behind a barrier and waves his cape. As soon as the bull charges, he scurries back behind the barrier. Another matador repeats the maneuver from another barrier, followed by another and another until they've succeeded in leaving the bull with tired neck muscles and gasping for breath.

The action ceases. The bull stands in the middle of the ring, wondering where all his targets disappeared to. The band strikes up a tune to announce the second act – the planting of the *banderillas*. The AM's distract the bull by waving their capes, while others run at the bull from an angle to execute the plant, two *banderillas* at a time. They jump into the air using their full body weight in order to assure a good plant, then use the *banderillas* to lever themselves out of harm's way. It's a scary and graceful maneuver. Sometimes a *banderilla* falls out. Harsh boos and whistles follow.

The matador must continue his escape maneuver until he's out of danger. He either jumps over the wall or behind a barrier. One of them didn't quite make it. He was half way behind the barrier when it appeared that the bull hooked him by the pants. The bull threw the matador into the air, and appeared to juggle him on his horns. We could see several bloody puncture marks on his pants .

The other matadors were finally able to separate man and bull. The man was immediately carried to the infirmary under the arena. We didn't think he was seriously hurt until we spied the copious trail of blood. The bull must have punctured an artery.

The *banderillas* set, the band strikes up a tune to announce Act III – the primary matador. The PM enters the ring with his cape and sword. He uses the sword as a batten to spread and flatten out the cape. PM proceeds to work the bull. When he can make a pass on the bull while keeping his feet flat and unmoving, the crowd shouts "Ole!". If he can keep it

up in a series, the “Ole’s” get louder and louder, followed by wild applause when the series ends. We witness a variety of moves like the paso doble and the veronica.

Eventually the band signals Act IV – the “over-the-horns banderilla plant”. The PM approaches the bull head-on, pointing the banderilla like a sword. He drops his cape to the ground to avert the bull’s attention so that he lowers his head. He then lunges over the bull’s horns and plunges the banderilla into the hump. His assistants divert the bull away from the PM with their capes while the PM basks in the wild applause.

The huge doors open once more, and out comes a herd (five or six) of cattle, all with large brass bells around their necks. The bull follows them through the doors and back into the pens ... to fight another day? I’m not sure on that account. Can you imagine the bull planning his revenge? “Wait ‘til next time. I’m gonna go for the legs, not that silly cape!”

I noted some big differences between bullfighting in Portugal and in Spain. In Portugal the bull lives. Back in the 18th century one of the more revered heads of state, Pombal, decreed that bulls would no longer be killed in bullfights. Pombal is also famous for rebuilding Lisbon after the tremendous earthquake of 1755. All in all, the Portugese bullfight is a much less gory affair.

The Spanish add another act to the fight. After the banderillas are set, the *picador* arrives on horseback carrying a long, thick spear under one arm. The horse is weighted down by many pounds of mattress-like padding that covers the horse’s left side almost to ground level. When the bull charges the horse, the *picador* spears the hump. As the bull continues his attempt to topple horse and rider (occasionally he’s successful.) the *picador* continues to plunge his pic into the wound, making it deeper and wider until the blood is absolutely streaming.

Of course, the objective is to tire out the bull’s strong neck muscles in preparation for the matador’s *coup de grace*. After he has executed several passes on the bull and has determined that the bull’s ability to lift his head is sufficiently impaired, the matador prepares to execute the *coup de grace*. Also known as the “Moment of Truth”, the matador must go in over the horns and plunge his sword in at the perfect angle so that it penetrates up to the hilt through the neck and directly into the heart. If done perfectly, the bull drops dead instantly. The matador then receives a number of the bull’s appendages depending upon the judges’ perception of his work: one ear up to both ears, a tail and a number of hooves. If the *coup de grace* is unsuccessful and the bull still lives, the matador must dispatch his victim as efficiently as possible, usually by a dagger to the brain. He is then hooted out of the stadium.

Sounds pretty gory, Huh? It did take watching a few bullfights for this initiate to get beyond the blood and gore, and begin to appreciate the ritual as art form. Although the aura of danger is somewhat lacking in the Portugese format, the nice part is that none of the participants are mortally wounded. They all go home happy.

Dining in Vila Franca de Xira

VFX is a cozy little town, now a bedroom community for Lisbon. Unlike most bedroom communities VFX has a personality, an ambiance all its own. When, not if, we return to Portugal, we'll make the 20-minute train trip just to go to a restaurant, **Petiscos & Companhia**. Begun by Junto and Tipografia Simão one year ago, this seven-table restaurant is a real find. The food is excellent, but what makes the visit truly worthwhile are Junto and Tipo. Their welcoming hospitality made us feel at home, part of the family. The Portuguese as a group can be rather dour. You have to make the first move. One smile from you and they absolutely light up. Anzie's and my approach to strangers being what it is, open armed and trusting, we became fast friends with our hosts.

We were looking for *tapas*, appetizers on small plates. Tipo displayed her concoctions much like a deli. We chose three and were about to choose another when Tipo advised us that three would be enough. We sat down and Junto, a big man for a Portuguese – my height but weighing in at probably 300 lbs. -- introduced himself and asked for our drink order. We looked around and noticed that the other patrons were drinking pitchers of sangria. We ordered a pitcher, and I watched Junto make it. It was typical sangria -- red wine, lemonade, oranges and lemons – until the end. I watched him add generous dollops of two clear liquors that turned out to be gin and vodka. No wonder the clientele seemed so happy!

The plates arrived. They weren't *tapas*. They were *demi-raciones*, like salad plates, heaped with food. We followed Tipo's recommendations and had ordered snail stew – a mixture of snails, mushrooms and spices; Bacalao – this is Portugal's national dish -- dried salted codfish (It harkens back to their history as seafarers when bacalao enabled them to survive for many months on the open seas). In this case it was served in a salad with a vinegar dressing and minced peppers and onions. Our last dish was Serano ham and fava beans. All of them were excellent and, en toto, were too much to eat, even though we finished them off.

We were finishing off the remainder of our Killer Sangria when Tipo arrived with another plate her special meat stew that she wanted us to try. Called upon to make the supreme effort, we tucked into this delicious dish and polished it off. We and Tipo exchanged encomiums re her culinary skill and our efforts. She returned with another dish, this time a dessert – a vanilla custard with ground chestnuts – for us to test. Junto also arrived with a cherry liqueur for each of us. After the dessert they presented us with a dish of the cherries from the bottom of the liqueur bottle. Junto hit us with a couple more glasses of his liqueur. We finished everything and, surprisingly, hadn't fallen off our chairs.

We got to know each other using a combo of English – Tipo studied to become a teacher – and Spanish. Interestingly enough their son, a Portuguese Naval Officer, is on his way to San Diego for training with the Navy Seals. We suggested that he look up friend Tommy Nelson, USN Seals Retired.

After our three-hour lunch, we asked for the bill. We fully expected to pay for everything, including the extras. The bill just covered our original order. We took

several pictures and left, promising that we would be in touch. See photos from all the places we visited:

Chuck