My Trip to Portugal and Spain
(2022)

I was getting antsy. My previous trip abroad (to South America) was now two and a half years in my rearview mirror. As cliché-ish as this may sound, the world was a different place back then. People didn't wear facemasks in public. Medical certification wasn't required for international travel. The stock market was still stubbornly bullish, and gas and food prices were still reasonably stable. But suddenly, towards the very end of 2019, the world as we knew it started to become…well, *unraveled*.

SARS-CoV-2, better known as Covid-19, erupted across the globe, creating a pandemic the likes of which humankind hadn't seen in decades, initially gripping humanity with fear and forcing a large portion of the world to shelter in place. Hospitals were overrun. Death tolls were mounting. Whole societies began to shut down as governments and segments of industry were put in lockdown mode. Supply chains worldwide were disrupted. Schools closed and students (of all ages) had to learn from home via the Internet. To make matters worse, the rest of the news – streaming 24/7 into our homes – wasn't any better: mutating viruses, job lay-offs, mass shootings, political divisions, climate change, war in Europe, rising inflation. *Holy shit on a cracker!* The only thing keeping me sane at this point was my subscription to Netflix. I became, like the rest of the country, a sheltered binge-watching fool hoping to distract myself from the chaos engulfing the world.

And like many of my fellow *pandemicians* (a word I probably just invented) I quit the rat race altogether, retiring from the United States Postal Service and settling into a 55-and-older condo community in South Florida, perfectly content to ride out my

'Golden Years'. And this is where the *antsy* part set in. I had retired relatively young (at age 60) so I could see more of the world, but here's the thing...there was no place to go. There seemed to be no end to this freaking pandemic! I had seven travel tours cancelled on me in the space of a year and a half. So desperate I was to travel that when I happened upon this limited tour of Portugal and Spain in my Internet searches – *and the tour company swore to me it would go off on schedule* – I immediately jumped on the opportunity. Perhaps if the situation had been different I would have chosen a more comprehensive tour of these two countries, or at least one that included a few more days in Portugal, but I was nonetheless ecstatic to finally be traveling again.

I soon discovered, though, it was not easy to travel internationally during this ongoing Covid pandemic. In a way, it felt like riding a bike for the first time since childhood – I knew how to do it, but I was rusty and a little shaky. Besides, this 'bike' came with a new set of gears that took some adjusting; namely, a slew of health protocols such as masks, vaccinations and boosters, antigen tests, special entry requirements and Covid medical insurance. Plus, there was a strong element of risk involved, because if you get the virus or test positive for it during the tour – (like one of our fellow travelers did) – then you'd be immediately quarantined and sent back home once you tested negative again, a process that could take a week or more, resulting in an expensive and anxiety-fraught scenario for someone traveling abroad. This became my greatest fear on the tour, especially since the newer Covid variants making their way around Europe, while milder, were easier to contract *even* for the previously vaccinated.

And yet, despite all these obstacles, my wander lust … (or *antsy-ness*, take your pick) … prevailed. Regardless of the circumstances, I was heading to Western Europe for only the second time in my life and I was very excited because both of my

Cuban-born parents could trace their lineage back to Spain. I would be able to explore a part of my roots. But more importantly, I was going to be traveling the world again…*come hell or high water*.

I had booked my own flights for this tour to save a little money. I was traveling non-stop from Miami to Lisbon where the tour began. Although I did not need a visa for this trip, I did have to adhere to a list of entry protocols, which required two Covid vaccines and a booster shot, a negative PCR-test administered no later than 72 hours before my departing flight, and a locator form that needed to be filled out digitally before the airlines would even allow me to board their planes. I had to pay for Covid insurance coverage in case I caught the virus while on tour. I also registered my trip (as I always do) with the State Department's STEP program, something I highly recommend to all my readers. Once registered, the State Department will send you notices via email concerning issues that might affect your trip and things to be cautious about.

I was embarking on the first week of April, and the weather most mornings and evenings would be a little chilly (and rainy, at times), but usually warming to a nicer temperature throughout the day. When it was time to pack I had a dilemma. This is an embarrassing thing to admit, but I have been wearing the same travel clothes for nearly 15 years now. It's an ensemble of nylon safari pants combined with plaid or striped buttoned shirts and polos. The reasoning behind this is that nylon pants do not get as dirty as cotton ones, at least in my experience – besides, they weigh next to nothing and can be hand-washed in a sink and dried in no time – and the striped and plaid shirts help conceal wrinkles. Of the more than thirty countries I've visited in my lifetime most have been in Latin America, Africa or Asia, and these clothes suited me just fine. Europeans, on the other hand, tend to be snazzier dressers, and YouTube is full of videos telling Americans

what *not* to wear to avoid being singled out as an American (read: baseball caps, baggy clothes, white socks, T-shirts with university logos, etc, etc). As a result, I briefly considered buying a new wardrobe for this trip. But then, my *Americanism* got the better of me. One of the things about living in a country where we're brought up to believe in our unalienable right 'to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' is that we really don't like being told what to do or how to think…*let alone how to dress*. So, the heck with it, I was going to wear the same clothes I've always worn, like the Yankee Doodle Dandy I am…

…Um, here's the thing, though, after only a few days in Europe (to my increasing chagrin) I discovered that while my spirit of 'defiance' was in the right place, my clothes were not. They were old, worn and made me look frumpy. For example, instead of buying a new coat for the colder weather I simply brought along my hoodie jacket, and together with my baggy nylon pants and baseball cap I must have looked like a walking caricature of a typical American. In my defense, throughout the tour I tossed most of my clothes into the hotel trashcan after wearing them. So, for what it's worth, I'll be sporting a whole new wardrobe in the future. Think of it as the new and *improved* traveling (ex) mailman.

Another thing foreshadowing this trip was Russia's invasion of the Ukraine on February 24th. This brutal, unprovoked assault by Russian forces against their neighbor led to immediate condemnation and economic sanctions worldwide, threatening to usher in a new Cold War as totalitarian and democratic governments (both in Europe and elsewhere) began taking sides in the conflict, with the possibility that hostilities might even spiral into a wider NATO vs. Russia confrontation. As I watched the war unfold on CNN I was consumed with anger at the mounting destruction and death toll inflicted on the Ukraine by Putin's forces. By the time I went to Europe the war had been raging for a

month and a half with no end in sight. And while the conflict was occurring in Eastern Europe, far from Spain and Portugal, I wasn't sure what the situation or attitude would be on the streets or how it would interfere with my trip. The Russian invasion of the Ukraine disrupted vital energy and food supply chains worldwide, leading to higher consumer costs across the board. Again, I had no idea how this would impact my tour.

So there you have it. To paraphrase the famous postal motto, "neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night" – or for that matter, Covid, war or outdated clothing – was going to stop this former letter carrier from venturing abroad. On April 7th, after all the health protocols and preparations – and two and a half *long* years of waiting – I took an Uber to Miami International Airport to begin my new adventure…

DAYS ONE AND TWO

My non-stop flight to Lisbon was scheduled to depart at 4:25pm. I called for an Uber at half past noon anticipating a 45-minute ride to Miami International Airport. The Uber driver, while nice, was new on the job and had trouble getting his bearings. Because I assumed he knew what he was doing I didn't pay much attention to where he was going, but after fifteen minutes of side streets and U-turns it dawned on me this man was lost, despite using the GPS device on his smart phone. I actually had to direct him onto the highway. It took over an hour to reach the airport.

Due to the Covid protocols, checking in was longer than usual, as travelers needed to show not only a negative PCR-test but also proof they were registered with the airline's locator program (which was implemented internationally to keep track of people if they became infected with the virus). At first I wasn't concerned because I had arrived almost three hours prior to my original flight's departure time. But as the lines to check-in and clear security grew longer and the pace slowed considerably, I became worried. I reached my departure gate less than thirty minutes before boarding time, only to discover my flight was delayed an hour and a half.

This delay was a big concern for me. Originally, I was scheduled to touch down in Portugal's capital at 6:00am the following morning. Since this would be a free day for my tour group I wanted to make the most of it and had booked a separate walking tour of Lisbon with a company called Viator for 10:00am. I thought four hours would be more than sufficient time for me to clear immigration and reach my hotel to make the walking tour. But now, if my flight arrived an hour and a half later, I wasn't so sure.

Thankfully, the pilot 'hit the gas' to make up for lost time and our flight lasted only 7.5 hours. We touched down at 6:30am, only thirty minutes behind schedule. I was elated…*until I reached immigration*. The lines were longer than the ones at Disney World during July. Inching myself forward, it took almost 90 minutes to clear immigration and grab my luggage. And to add insult to injury, on the way to the exit I stopped by an ATM machine and withdrew $250 in euros. A costly mistake. I was charged almost thirteen percent for this transaction. So, a word of caution: check the transaction fees before using an ATM in Portugal.

A sign-carrying representative of the tour company met me after I cleared the baggage claim area. This young man welcomed

me to Portugal and immediately led me outside the terminal building and deposited me in an awaiting taxi van before taking his leave. I was the only passenger. Traffic was heavy heading into the downtown area of the city. I didn't reach my hotel – the H10 Duque de Loule – until 9:00am. No sooner than I entered the hotel lobby I ran into our tour director, a bald, thin, middle-aged Spaniard named Javier who was busy coordinating the arrival of the other tour members. He had an approachable disposition, very friendly and polite, and he greeted me warmly.

Javier's English was good, but on occasion he would struggle to find the right words and I decided to use my Spanish-speaking skills to help facilitate the conversation. Being able to speak Spanish, especially in Spain, obviously, was very helpful on this trip. But it had limitations. Spanish has its uniform grammatical rules, but there are over 20 Spanish-speaking countries worldwide and each one adds its own distinct 'flavor' to the language – accents, slang, regional colloquialisms – and sometimes my 'Miami Spanish' collided with the superior Castilian Spanish spoken by Spaniards (who, after all, invented the language). And the problem wasn't with *me* trying to communicate with *them* – my Spanish is simple enough for any native speaker to understand – it was when I engaged a Spaniard in conversation and was met with an unusually thick provincial accent or words and phrases I was not familiar with. But, at the very least, I could follow the gist of most conversations.

It was now almost 9:20am and I had only forty minutes to get to the rendezvous point for my scheduled walking tour, which was located in Rossio Square in the downtown historical quarter near the Tagus River. My hotel room would not be ready until later that morning so I left my luggage at the front desk, extracting beforehand a small, prepared backpack I normally use for daily excursions. Javier asked the hotel staff in Portuguese what would be the fastest way for me to get to the Rossio Square and they said

it was just a fifteen-minute walk from the hotel. *Awesome*. After freshening up in an upstairs bathroom (this was a small boutique hotel), I grabbed my mini backpack – filled with my camera, an extra camera battery, a bottle of water, and a tourist map of the city provided by the front desk – and set out to explore Lisbon.

I walked two blocks to a roundabout plaza called the Marquis of Pombal Square (*Praca do Marques de Pombal*), which lies at the northern end of Liberty Avenue (*Avenida da Liberdade*). Situated in the central part of the city, Liberty Avenue is one of Europe's most expensive shopping streets, with luxury and designer-brand stores, a mix of modern and historical buildings and large hotels lining both sides of this massive 10-lane boulevard. It originates at the foot of King Edward VII Park, a sloping, beautifully-landscaped public green space just in front of the Marquis of Pombal Square, and continues for roughly half a dozen very long blocks before ending at another plaza, the Square of the Restorers (*Praca dos Restauradores*).

I made my way south on Liberty Avenue along a spacious sidewalk laid entirely in decorative mosaic stones. There is quite a bit to see along this boulevard. In addition to the upscale shopping, the avenue has notable buildings showcasing Portuguese architecture from the 19th and early 20th centuries, and several small plazas with monuments and statues paying homage to Portuguese intellectuals, artists or historical events. I hastened my step, not knowing how much farther I needed to go. I managed to reach the Restorers Square at the end of Liberty Avenue in less than fifteen minutes. I stopped briefly at this plaza to admire its monument, commemorating Portugal's victory over the House of Hapsburg during the mid-1600s. The House of Hapsburg was an Austrian-Spanish dynasty that rose to become one of Europe's most powerful royal families. Their defeat in the Restoration War established the House of Braganza, the Portuguese royal family

that would rule the country and its territories and colonies into the 20th century.

From the Restorers Square I continued south for another block until I reached the Queen Maria II National Theater (*Teatro Nacional D. Maria II*), one of the most prestigious theatrical venues in the country. Built during the middle of the 1800s, this beautiful building – with its Ionic columns façade – is considered among the best examples of Neoclassical, Palladine-influenced architecture in the city. Directly across from the theater is Rossio Square. Our meeting point for the walking tour was in front of the King Pedro IV statue in the center of this square.

When I approached the statue I encountered several different tour guides working for Viator. After giving them my name I was placed in a group with nine other tourists (a family from Wisconsin, a Finnish couple, and a retired Portuguese woman currently residing in the UK). Our guide was a lovely, young Italian woman named Anna, who had an excellent command of the English language. Anna was a free-spirited, fun-loving individual who visited Lisbon ten years earlier and had fallen in love with the city, making it her new home. She possessed a contagious sense of humor, often telling us amusing back-stories to all the sites we visited, making the tour very entertaining.

We had to wait fifteen minutes for another couple to arrive. Anna apologized to us for the delay and most of us took to exploring Rossio Square and taking pictures while we waited. The official name of this plaza is the *Praca de Dom Pedro IV* (or King Pedro IV Square) but most locals refer to the plaza as Rossio Square, instead. An equestrian statue of King Pedro IV sits atop a 75-foot column in the middle of the square, at the base of which are four female allegorical figures representing Justice, Wisdom, Strength and Moderation. In addition to the king's statue, the plaza is adorned with two large baroque water fountains on each end.

For me, the most striking thing about Rossio Square was the continuously wavy cobblestone pattern covering every inch of this open plaza. Made of basalt and limestone, the cobblestone design symbolizes the power of the Tagus River (*Rio Tejo*). Lisbon is located along this wide river, which forms a natural harbor along the city's waterfront, making Lisbon an important trading seaport throughout much of its history. On November 1, 1755, Lisbon was hit by a series of powerful earthquakes in the region that leveled huge portions of the city and sent a tsunami into the downtown waterfront area killing more than 30,000 inhabitants. The destruction caused by this seismic event was so massive that large areas of Lisbon had to be rebuilt from scratch. The man responsible for rebuilding – and eventually re-imaging the city – was Sebastiao Jose de Carvalho e Melo, who served as chief minister to King Joseph I (1750-1777). His extraordinary efforts in rebuilding Lisbon earned him the title of the Marquis de Pombal. It's *his* statue that graces the beginning of Liberty Avenue.

Over the following two days I would hear a lot about this Marquis de Pombal. Today's downtown Lisbon still retains the elegant charm that he envisioned for the city back in the 1700s. During his reconstruction of Lisbon, military engineers came up with a new architectural layout for the *Baixa* district, the historical downtown waterfront area most affected by the 1755 Earthquake. The entire district was re-designed in a grid-like pattern with wide streets and pavements, and a new plaza called Commercial Square (*Praca do Comercio*) was created on the spot where the royal palace once stood along the Tagus River that became the most important plaza in the city, surrounded by new government buildings and a thriving market and port area. Today, strolling through sections of the downtown Baixa-Chiado districts feels as if you've been transported back to the late 18th century.

When the couple we were waiting for failed to materialize after fifteen minutes, Anna decided to begin the tour without them. She gathered us in the center of the plaza and gave us a brief rundown on the immediate area. Rossio Square is considered the nerve center of the downtown Baixa district. Located a short walking distance from Restorers Square, and situated on the northern end of a very famous pedestrian street (*Rua Augusta)*, this plaza is often used as a meeting spot for locals and tourists alike. Bars, restaurants and small shops fill the areas around the square.

Above the rooftops on the eastern side of the plaza, on top of a hill overlooking the heart of the city, we could see the walls of the St. George Castle (*Castelo de Sao Jorge*), a 12th century citadel that once served as the royal palace and military garrison of Lisbon. It is now a national archive and museum. According to Anna, this particular hilltop has played an important role in the history of the city. The first military fortification built on top of this hill dates back roughly 2,100 years, but various groups have occupied the hill since the 8th century BC. During this time, a litany of historical regional powers have controlled Lisbon from atop this vantage point: the Phoenicians, the Carthaginians, the Romans, the Moors, and eventually the Portuguese themselves following the Siege of Lisbon in 1147.

We crossed the street on the eastern side of the square. Anna pointed to the top of a nearby lamppost, which had an image of a boat with two ravens. This image is part of the city's coat of arms, dating back to the 12th century. You will see this boat-and-ravens symbol everywhere in Lisbon if you look closely enough. The legend behind the image is that when the Romans martyred St. Vincent of Saragossa –the patron saint of Lisbon – ravens protected his body from being devoured by vultures until it was discovered. Towards the end of the 12th century his relics were taken by boat to Lisbon, and the city adopted a coat of arms

depicting this sea voyage and the ravens that guarded the saint's body.

We walked to the corner, just across from the Queen Maria II National Theater, and stopped to visit the *A Ginjinha*, a small standing room only bar that opened in 1840 and is famous for selling only one item, *ginjinha* – a strong and very sweet cherry liqueur. The drink is made from infusing *ginjin* (Morello cherries) with *aguardente* (a potent distilled alcohol) and adding vast amounts of sugar to the mix. Ginjinha is usually served straight up in a tall shot glass (cost: approximately 1.2 euros) and can be sipped or downed in one gulp. The conconction comes in two forms: with cherries, or without. I do not drink alcohol so I wasn't able to sample the liqueur. But I can tell you that it resembles the color of blood and is *extremely* popular among the Portuguese. According to Anna, from the time *A Ginjinha* opens at 9:00am until it closes in the evening, you'll see people lined up in front of it to do a shots before continuing on their way. The original owner of this establishment – whose descendents still operate the business 182 years later – was responsible for introducing the drink to the Lisbon public in the mid-1800s, so the place serves as a cultural icon in the area. There are two other competing historic ginjinha bars nearby, as well; each has its own guarded recipe for the drink. A word of caution, the sidewalk in front of the establishment can get very sticky from people spitting out the sugary cherry pits.

From here we headed west, to the other side of the plaza, and continued to the Rossio Train Station located across from the Queen Maria II National Theater. At this point, Anna told us one of the major challenges facing newcomers to Lisbon is the amount of hills that make up the city's topography. Like Rome, Lisbon was built along seven major hills, and when you combine all that upward and downward trekking – on cobbled stone sidewalks – it becomes an exhausting endeavor. As we stood directly in front of

the Rossio Train Station, Anna grinned mischievously and said, "I'm going to show you a few *hacks* us locals use to get around all these hilly streets". What she meant was *shortcuts*, and they were quite remarkable, saving us considerable walking time in the downtown area (notably the uphill portions). Our first shortcut was to take the elevators inside the Rossio Train Station to get from our current street level up to the Carmo Sidewalk (*Calcada do Carmo*) that leads to the ruins and museum of the medieval Convent of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel (*Convento da Ordem do Carmo*). This little 'hack' saved us at least three street levels of uphill walking.

We emerged from the top of the train station onto a small plaza overlooking the area. Below us was the full expanse of Rossio Square and its surroundings. To the east we could make out St. George Castle (or its walls, anyway) with greater detail, and below it was the historic Alfama district, the oldest section of Lisbon. To the south we could look down onto the famous pedestrian streets of the Baixa and Chiado shopping districts and the Tagus River. We walked along the Carmo Sidewalk for several minutes before reaching the ruins of the Convent of our Lady of Mt. Carmel. Most tourists have to maneuver winding uphill streets, or climb a series of steep stairways, or wait in a long line to take the nearby Santa Justa Lift to see this historic site, but thanks to the train station elevators we were now standing in the small plaza known as Carmo Square (*Largo do Carmo*) just in front of it without feeling winded.

Anna provided a brief history of the convent, which, together with its adjacent church, was constructed around the turn of the 1400s. Designed in a simple Gothic style typical of the mendicant nature of the Carmelite Order, the south side of the church has five flying buttresses that make it look like a fortress. During the 1755 Earthquake, both the convent and church were ruined, and although attempts were made to restore the complex over the centuries the entire structure was never fully rebuilt. It was

eventually turned into a preserved archeological site and museum. But even today, the ruins of the Convent of Our Lady of St. Carmel still impress, with its dramatic presence atop the hill. Anna told us the ruins along the southern portion of the church (the most severely damaged section) also serve as one of the last remaining traces of the devastating earthquake that once destroyed Lisbon.

Adjacent to the convent is the headquarters of the National Republican Guard (*Guarda Nacional Republicana*), the national gendarmerie of Portugal. This agency is part of the military and provides policing services throughout the country. It is headquartered inside what is referred to as the *Carmo* barracks, the former residential section of the convent. In 2014, a small museum opened here that traces the history of the National Republican Guard, from its roots in the early 1800s as the Royal Police Guard to its current transformation following Portugal's transition from a Constitutional Monarchy to a Republic back in 1910. Anna said this building played a significant role during the Carnation Revolution; a popular uprising that restored democracy to the nation back in 1974.

From here we made our way along a cobbled stone walkway next to the convent. From various observation points along the way we could see sections of the monastic complex, including the ruined church. After walking approximately a hundred or so meters, we came across a short metal pedestrian bridge covered by an awning that led directly to the top of the Santa Justa Lift, another key tourist attraction of the downtown area. We spent ten minutes on the Santa Justa Lift observation deck – situated more than 145 feet (45m) above street level – taking in the wonderful panoramic views of the city.

The Santa Justa Lift (or elevator) became operational in 1902, and was designed so that the lower streets of the main Baixa district could be connected to the higher Carmo Square area. There

are other historic 'lifts' located in Lisbon, but they use a funicular train. The Santa Justa Lift is basically a vertical elevator. When first inaugurated, the elevator was powered by steam engines but was later converted to an electrical system in 1907. In the 120 years since its initial opening, the Santa Justa Lift has become (like the other lifts in the city) a National Monument and is a popular stop on the downtown tourist circuit. Located at the end of Santa Justa Street, it consists of a metal tower seven stories tall resting on a base made of four vertical columns, each composed with two pillars. An observation platform runs along the top. Its iron structure is decorated in a Neo-Gothic style. Two elevator cabins – decorated in wood, mirrors and windows – can accommodate up to 29 people each. They charge a small fee to use both the elevator and to gain access to the observation deck, but I'm not sure of the cost because it was included with our walking tour.

From the Santa Justa Lift we descended to the pedestrian shopping streets of the Chiado district below and stopped briefly at a bakeshop to sample a national dessert delicacy called *pasteis de nata*, an egg custard tart pastry dusted with cinnamon that is absolutely delicious. Different locales offer up different varieties of these egg custard desserts, and you can be sure that throughout my stay in Portugal I attempted to sample every last one! The pastry was invented by members of the Catholic orders in the city prior to the 18th century. Supposedly, convents and monasteries used large quantities of egg whites to starch the frocks and habits of the friars and nuns, and whatever egg yolks were left over were often used to make cakes and pastries.

After eating our *pasteis de natas* we continued walking east along Santa Justa Street through the heart of the Baixa district, turning right onto Augusta Street (*Rua Augusta*), a popular pedestrian street lined with small shops, restaurants and open-air cafes. This street runs from Rossio Square in the north for about seven blocks before terminating on its south end in front of the

Arch of Augusta Street (*Arco da Rua Augusta*), a triumphal arch gate that marks the entrance into Commercial Square near the Tagus River. We walked for a few blocks on Augusta Street before turning left onto another, smaller pedestrian walkway called Vitoria Street (*Rua da Vitoria*) and continued until it ended on Franqueiros Street (*Rua dos Franqueiros*).

During this section of the tour, Anna pointed out some of the architectural highlights of the downtown area, like the beautiful *azulejo* tiles covering the facades of buildings, the iron balconies and the decorative neoclassical features on windows or portal entrances. She spoke briefly about the grid-like street designs that characterize the Baixa district, and how these buildings were constructed following the 1755 Earthquake. When the Marquis de Pombal ordered a complete do-over of the downtown area, she said, he implemented strict building codes intended to prevent the tragic losses incurred during the earthquake. As a result, Lisbon became one of the first cities in the world to implement wide ranging earthquake-resistant forms of construction. Military engineers built architectural 'test models' that were subjected to stress tests consisting of hundreds of army troops marching vigorously around them to simulate mini seismic events. The key architectural fortification against strong tremors was a unique wall design called a ‘Pombaline cage’, a lattice-style wooden cube frame supported by reinforced masonry. Also, walls tended to be higher than the timber roofs to contain the spread of fires. An entire forest of wooden poles was driven into the ground throughout the entire downtown area, she said, which would absorb salt water and expand, making the ground more stable. This was pretty innovative stuff for the late 1700s.

Reaching Franqueiros Street we took our second ‘hack' of the tour, the Castle Elevator (*Elevador do Castelo*), a public lift located inside a restored building that is used by locals to go from the Baixa district up to the hillier streets of the historic Alfama

district. This elevator left us off on Madalena Street (*Rua da Madalena*), the next level up, where we took yet another lift, the Baixa Elevator (*Elevador do Baixa*) situated inside a supermarket called *Pingo Doce*. This elevator brought us up to a walkway called *Calcada do Marques de Tancos*. We were now standing just below the fortress walls of the St. George Castle (which could be reached by walking ten-minutes further uphill). Anna led us to the patio terrace of a popular East African establishment called the Zambeze Restaurant. The restaurant's patio offered a spectacular panoramic view of the city looking westward.

We were now in the heart of the Alfama district. We continued walking uphill along a series of cobblestone streets that led to an observation point called *Miradouro de Santa Luzia* that provided yet another dramatic view of the area. This is one of the most popular viewing points in the old quarter. It overlooks a series of hillsides leading down to the Tagus River, giving an excellent overview of the Alfama district. Located next to the 16th century Church of St. Lucy (*Igreja de Santa Luzia*) – the headquarters of the Order of Malta in Portugal – this lookout features a pergola (a shaded walkway decorated with grapevines and purple bougainvilleas), which leads down into a tiled terrace with benches and a reflecting pool. On the south side of the church's outer walls are two separate tile renditions of Lisbon: one depicted the city prior to the 1755 Earthquake, and the other portrays the storming of the Moorish citadel (where St. George Castle now stands) by Christian Crusaders in 1147.

As I looked out over the terrace, beyond the red terracotta rooftops of the Alfama district, I could spot several notable historical churches. Just below us, on a winding hilly street, was the white-painted Church of St Michael (*Igreja de Sao Miguel*). Constructed during the 1700s, the plain, unassuming exterior of this church belies the beautiful gilded woodcarving that fills its interior. Not far away was the equally impressive Church of St.

Stephen (*Igreja de Sao Estevao*), another baroque-style masterpiece built over the ruins of a 12th century temple in 1733. Unlike the churches of the day, the Church of St. Stephen is unique because its interior is not covered in gilded wood. It has a stone altar with statues of a Crucified Christ surrounded by angels.

Looking further out towards the northeast, I could see the large religious complex called the Monastery and Church of St. Vincent Outside the Walls (*Mosteiro de Sao Vicente de Fora*). Originally constructed after the Siege of Lisbon in 1147 – the battle that liberated the city from Moorish rule – this hilltop structure was later reconstructed during the reign of King Phillip II of Spain (who also became king of Portugal in 1580). This is one of the most important sites from medieval times. Dedicated to the patron saint of the city, it is considered a fine example of the *Mannerist*-style of architecture (also referred to as Late Renaissance). In addition, the monastery is home to the Royal Pantheon, where the monarchs of the Braganza dynasty have been laid to rest.

To the east of the monastery is the National Pantheon (*Panteao Nacional*). The initial construction of this building began in the late 1600s, becoming the Church of St. Ingratia (*Ingreja de Santa Engracia*). It was later converted into the National Pantheon in 1916 following the formation of the First Portuguese Republic. Former Statesmen, artists, intellectuals and national celebrities are entombed inside. The shape of the building was inspired by St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Anna told us the National Pantheon is notable for several reasons. It was the first Baroque-style building in Portugal, despite lacking all the gold ornamentation and *azulejo* tiles of other such structures. Another interesting tidbit is that it was not fully finished until…*1966*. Yep, you read right. The National Pantheon took more than 330 years to complete, making this monument the longest construction project in Portuguese history. In fact, there is a witty saying associated with it. Whenever

a task takes too long to accomplish, locals often joke: “This is a job like St. Ingratia!”

After getting our fill of the view, Anna led us to a corner restaurant across from the reflecting pool and purchased for the group *pasties de bacalhau* (fried cod fish cakes) and shots of *ginjinha*, the cherry liqueur. When I reminded her I didn’t drink alcohol, she smiled sympathetically and said, "That's okay, I’ll take care of it” and then proceeded to down my shot in one gulp. Ahhhhh, to be young again…

From here we began a slow descent through the hilly, winding streets of the Alfama district. For the sake of this journal I tried to map out the path we took, but it was impossible due to the twisting corridors and alleyways, which resemble a labyrinth to the uninitiated. According to Anna, this is the oldest section of Lisbon…even *before* there was a Lisbon. The Romans, the Visigoths and the Moors all established settlements in this section. Under the Moors (Alfama is Arabic for ‘hot fountains or baths’) this area was essentially the city limits.

Geographically, the Alfama is situated on the slopes that descend from the St. George’s Castle down to the Tagus River. Throughout history, towns and cities usually developed around their major fortifications, like a castle or citadel, where the local population could seek refuge during invasions or protracted sieges. The Muslim Moors built the original castle on top of the hill (it was later upgraded by the Portuguese into St. George’s Castle). And while different cultures have influenced the district over the centuries, it is really the Moorish influence that lends the area its historical quaintness. The Moors were the ones who designed the narrow, winding street patterns, which were initially done as a defensive measure to slow down invading armies. Some of the alleyways here are so narrow they can only be navigated in a single file, creating a bottleneck effect during times of battle that made

the city easier to defend and difficult to capture. The Christian influence can be seen in all the beautiful churches, but the real 'feel' of the district is that of a Moorish village. During the 1755 Earthquake the Alfama was spared the kind of major destruction the rest of the city experienced (I'm assuming this was due to the district's heightened position along the hillsides). As a result, the Alfama did not have to be rebuilt from scratch like the Baixa-Chiado districts and still retains its original medieval aura. For history buffs, this is a wonderful place to get lost in.

As we maneuvered our way down stone staircases and through the cobblestone streets and mosaic-laden pathways, passing small plazas and businesses along the way, Anna mentioned that the Alfama is the birthplace of Fado music, which dates back to the 1820s. The following evening my tour group experienced a Fado performance during our last night in Lisbon. I will explain more about this style of music when I get to that section of the journal.

At one point, we stopped to visit the historic Cathedral of Saint Mary Major, more popularly referred to as the Lisbon Cathedral or the *Se de Lisbon*. Built in the year 1147 – right after the Moors lost the city – this is the oldest Christian Church in Lisbon. Over the centuries since its construction, the Lisbon Cathedral has survived numerous earthquakes, leading to renovations, modifications and restorations on several occasions. Owing to this, the building is an architectural historian's wet dream, featuring an eclectic mix of building styles that have permeated European culture since the Middle Ages: Romanesque, Gothic, Baroque, Neoclassical and Rococo (late Baroque).

From here we eventually reached ground level on Alfandega Street (*Rua da Alfandega*) and headed west towards Commercial Square. Along the way, we stopped briefly to check out the façade of the 16th century Old Church of Our Lady of the Conception (*Igreja de Nossa Senhora da Coneicao Velha*). The structure

suffered significant damage during the 1755 Earthquake, and was later reconstructed and modified. In addition to traditional Renaissance and Gothic styles, this church offers an example of Manueline, sometimes referred to as Portuguese Late Gothic, an architectural design that was popular during the reign of King Manuel I (1490 – 1520). Portugal gained enormous wealth during its Age of Discoveries, when Portuguese navigators were sailing all over the globe, discovering new worlds, colonizing new territories and bringing back unheard of riches to Lisbon. This wealth was used to fund the extravagant ornamentations of a typical Manueline-style building, which featured complex decorative maritime themes together with elements from newly discovered lands. A main characteristic of this style is the ornately decorated portals, windows, columns and arcades. This was evident in the portal entrance of the Church of Our Lady of the Conception, the only part of the structure that survived the 1755 Earthquake.

We continued walking westward a few more blocks before reaching Commercial Square (*Praca do Comercio*), the last stop on the tour. The square was built on the spot where the former royal palace once stood before it was destroyed by the 1755 Earthquake and tsunami. Understandably, King Joseph I, the monarch at the time, decided he wanted to live elsewhere and the site became this massive open-air plaza. It is one of the largest in Portugal, measuring 574 ft by 574 ft (175m by 175m). The only thing adorning the square is the equestrian statue of King Joseph I, erected in the middle of the plaza. And, as statues go, it was pretty impressive, if a bit unusual, with the king dressed in his regal ensemble atop his horse symbolically crushing snakes with the horse's hooves (his enemies, I'm guessing). A series of limestone statues around the base depict scenes of chaos, like a man about to be trampled by a horse and another being stomped on by an angel-cavorting elephant. I'm not sure what all this symbolism meant, but this King Joseph I seemed like quite a paranoid individual.

At the southern end of the square is the Tagus River. This section is still referred to today as *Terreiro do Paco*, which means the 'Palace Yard' in reference to the former royal palace. At one time, ships would unload cargo here from around the world. Surrounding the square on three sides, behind arcades lined with marble tiles, are important government buildings. On the north side of Commercial Square is the magnificent triumphal arch called the Arch of Augusta Street (*Arco da Rua Augusta*), which marks the beginning of that street. Originally, a bell tower was to be erected here, but by 1873 this beautiful arch took its place. Measuring over 100 feet tall (more than 30 meters), the top of the arch's cornice has three giant statues representing the allegorical figures of Glory rewarding Valor and Genius, and below them is the coat of arms of Portugal. Above the columns that embrace the arch entrance are four smaller statues of historical figures (one of them is the Marquis of Pombal).

When the tour ended, the group thanked Anna and tipped her generously (I know I did). It was around 1:00pm by now and instead of taking the nearby subway train back to my hotel (which was my original plan), I decided to walk up Augusta Street and get some lunch. I selected an open-air cafe in the middle of the pedestrian walkway and ordered a codfish dish cooked in olive oil with onions, tomatoes, fresh olives and served with a side of potatoes. Prior to booking this trip it had not occurred to me that I would be traveling through Portugal and Spain during Holy Week. I was raised a Roman Catholic but I am not a religious person, *at all*. At the time I had no idea how much Holy Week was going to impact my tour. But already I could tell that fish was going to become a staple in my diet over the coming week due to the Easter holiday, which Portuguese and Spaniards take very seriously and celebrate with much enthusiasm. So, what the heck, I thought, I decided to order fish (something I rarely do) in keeping with the

spirit (no pun intended) of the season. The codfish was very tasty, by the way, despite all the little bones I had to pick out of it.

I spent an hour for lunch, ordering two non-alcoholic beers and just taking in the crowds and surroundings, my legs welcoming the respite after nearly three hours of walking. When I was done, I headed back to Rossio Square, taking a few more pictures of the area, and then proceeded to walk north along Liberty Avenue back to my hotel. It was almost 3:00pm when I reached my hotel room. Exhausted, I took a 90-minute nap. Afterwards, I showered and dressed in fresh clothes. At 7:00pm, I headed down to the lobby for our orientation meeting.

Our tour director, Javier, led the group to a conference room. This was the first time I met the people whom I would be sharing the next two weeks with. There were only 16 of us, which is an awesome size for a tour group. We went around the room introducing ourselves and saying where we were from. Krishnappa (Krish) and his wife, Pratima, from Virginia, near Washington, DC; Ninette (Nina) from Washington State; Jack and Christina from Florida; Siu and Katherine, two friends from (I believe) California; Dave and Susan, a married couple from Canada; Abigail and Matthew, a married couple from California; Toni and Carol, a mother-daughter team from California; Angela and Norman, a married couple from (I believe) California; and, of course, myself. I hope these details are accurate. I apologize if I got anyone's information wrong.

After the introductions, Javier handed out name badges and tags for our luggage, and then launched into the standard 'orientation meeting' protocols. He not only welcomed us to Europe, he thanked us for coming. He said that traveling during the Covid pandemic was not easy, and he praised our resolve to continue to see the world despite the many obstacles we had to face just getting there. He discussed our itinerary for the next two weeks,

and went over the Covid protocols we needed to adhere to (testing, masks, etc). Javier also spoke briefly about himself, telling us he was from Spain, was married with children, and had been working in the tourism business for a number of years.

The meeting ended at 8:00pm and we proceeded to walk from the hotel to a small local restaurant just around the corner for an included dinner. The fare began with a series of *tapas*, which are small groupings of foods or snacks leading up to the main meal. All of our included lunches and dinners during the tour came with free beer, wine and soda. To start, they served plates of olives, a soup and plenty of bread with olive oil for dipping. Then came a variety of tapas like toasted bread squares with tuna spread, thinly sliced prosciutto and an egg-and-chorizo spread. The main meal consisted of fried fish with a side of yellow rice and veggies. The pace was very leisurely by American standards. Europeans tend to eat dinner later than we do and do not like to be rushed. Dinner was good, and the group started to bond almost immediately. By 10:15pm most of us had already staggered back to the hotel. In my room I tried to write down the day's events in my journal, but I was too exhausted. I fell asleep immediately.

DAY THREE

I was wide-awake by 5:00am. Unable to go back to sleep, I did my simple 20-minute travel exercise routine using a resistance band I'd packed in my suitcase. Afterwards, I shaved, showered and sorted out the clothes I would be wearing for the next two days. I then made instant coffee and sat down to write in my

journal notebook, intermittently watching the international news on the BBC. At 7:00am, I went downstairs to the hotel restaurant for the included breakfast buffet. I was joined by Nina, Siu and Katherine. Over breakfast we shared not only traveling stories but also how the pandemic had affected our lives over the past year or so. All four of us were retired, and having to stay home while the travel industry shut down was very frustrating. In my own experience, avid world travelers view the early years of their retirement as the ‘go-go' years, the time to really see the planet. So you can only imagine our dismay when this precious traveling window was suddenly closed down to us for two nearly two years.

After breakfast I returned to my room and prepared my little backpack for the day’s outing. This morning we would embark on a driving tour of Lisbon, followed by visits to Queluz to see the National Palace, and then onward to the quaint, historic town of Sintra along the Portuguese Riviera, both of these municipalities are part of what is called the Greater Lisbon region of Portugal. In the afternoon, we would head back to Lisbon and continue our sightseeing of the western part of the city before returning to the hotel. In addition, Nina and I had agreed over breakfast to visit the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum before dinner. So it would be a *very* long day of sightseeing.

At 9:00am the entire group was in the lobby eager to get started. We boarded a large, very comfortable modern tour bus. As is customary on all guided tours, a rotating seat assignment was put in place so that everyone gets a chance to sit near the front of the bus, but with only 16 of us in the group and plenty of empty seats this was not a problem. I’ve been on some tours with forty passengers or more, and trying to get a coveted seat on the bus was difficult because people would arrive early and stake their claim like pioneers in some Wild West land grab. My only criterion for a bus seat is that I am able to sit by myself. This is not because I am

anti-social. I measure just over six feet tall and need the extra room to spread my legs to avoid cramping on long bus rides.

Once onboard the bus, Javier introduced us to our local guide for the day, a young Lisbon woman named Maria Jesus. At first, I thought her last name was Jesus, which seemed odd. But as it turned out, *Maria Jesus* is a popular name for girls in the Iberian Peninsula. If you don't believe me, we had *four* different female local guides on this tour named Maria Jesus. I noticed that Javier kept calling them 'Jus' in Spanish. After our third Maria Jesus, I finally asked him about this and he said, almost with a sigh, that every other woman in Spain and Portugal is named Maria, and those with the second name of Jesus usually prefer using the more affectionate *Jus* nickname, which I'm assuming is a contraction of Jesus. *Whew*! I was relieved, because for a moment there, with his accent, I could have sworn he was calling them 'Jews'.

We departed from the hotel shortly after 9:00am, going around the circle of the Marquis of Pombal Square and eventually heading north alongside King Edward VII Park. Some of the streets were lined with jacaranda trees (from Brazil) that bloom beautiful, fragrant purple flowers. We reached Marquis of Fronteira Street and turned right. We were now crossing the northern end of King Edward VII Park. From this hilltop vantage point we could see all the way down to the Marquis of Pombal Square and the length of Liberty Avenue beyond it all the way to the downtown area, including the Tagus River.

The local guide told us the park was originally called Liberty Park but was renamed when King Edward VII of the UK visited Portugal in 1903 to strengthen the Anglo-Portuguese Alliance. Incidentally, the Anglo-Portuguese Alliance dates back to the year 1386, making the pact the oldest alliance in recorded human history. The park is situated on a hilly green space measuring roughly 64 acres (24 hectares). The only trees visible were the ones

lining its edges. In fact, looking down at this grassy slope, with its neatly trimmed hedgerows, reminded me less of a park and more of a very long, well-manicured lawn. Located within its boundaries are the Carlos Lopes Pavilion, which was built for the 1922 Rio de Janeiro International Exposition, and a 3.7-acre greenhouse garden. An enormous Portuguese flag adorns the north side of the park.

Opposite the park, on Marquis of Fronteira Street, is the city jail complex, and adjacent to it the Palace of Justice (*Palacio de Justicia*), a long modernist structure housing various civil and criminal courts. I remember Maria joking about the convenience of having the jail and the criminal courts side-by-side. From here, we turned right on Antonio Augusto de Aguiar Avenue and headed south, back to the Marquis de Pombal Square roundabout, and proceeded onto Liberty Avenue and to the downtown area. We spent the next 30 minutes or so looping around the waterfront section, driving by many of the places I had seen the previous day on foot. As we drove down Liberty Avenue, Maria pointed out several landmarks and briefly discussed both the impact of the 1755 Earthquake on Lisbon and the rebuilding efforts that followed, which totally transformed the downtown area. I would recommend to anyone who is visiting Lisbon – especially if your time here is limited like mine was – to sign up for a walking tour of the historic Alfama, Baixa, and Chiado districts. This area near the waterfront is the heart and soul of the city.

Maria talked about the beautiful mosaic stone sidewalks along Liberty Avenue. Known as 'Portuguese Pavement' (*calcada Portuguesa*), this notion of paving pedestrian streets in a stylish mosaic stone pattern dates back to Roman times (and possibly earlier). During the 19th and 20th centuries, mosaic-laid pavements became the rage in Portugal and throughout its colonies (I've seen similar sidewalks in Rio de Janeiro). But today, because of the skill, cost and time required to lay such a pavement, the craft is quickly disappearing and few such sidewalks are being made.

She also spoke about the decorative tiles (*azulejos*) that adorn many of the historic buildings of Portugal. Made of painted ceramic, and glazed for endurance and weatherproofing, these tiles have a long tradition on the Iberian Peninsula. Originating in Egypt, the art of ceramic tiling was probably introduced by the Moors. But it was King Manuel I (1580 – 1620) who is credited with making the use of decorative tiling popular in Portugal. He had visited Spain and was completely enthralled by the polished look of these glazed tiles, and began importing them from Seville to decorate his palace walls in Sintra. Most of the tiles you see covering the façade of buildings have typical Arabic geometrical patterns, but on traditional monuments the tiles are often painted with some kind of historical imagery.

We passed the World War I Memorial along Liberty Avenue. Maria told us that while Portugal eventually fought on the side of the Allies during World War I, the country remained neutral during the Second World War. The reason for this, she explained, was that by the end of the 1930s, prior to Germany's invasion of Poland, both Spain and Portugal had right-wing fascist governments with sympathetic views towards Hitler's anti-Communist stance, although neither country ended up joining the Axis Powers. Spain had just concluded a bloody civil war between rightists and leftists, and could ill-afford another major war undertaking (they did remain sympathetic and at times helpful to the Nazis until the tide began favoring the Allies), and Portugal had that long-standing alliance treaty with England. In the end, the UK did not insist that Portugal join the war, and accepted their neutrality. As a result, Lisbon became a hotbed for espionage. Today, you can book walking tours that visit some of the interesting and clandestine meeting places used by spies during War World II.

As we approached the downtown area, Maria pointed to one of the tramlines on a steep hilly street. She told us that Lisbon

currently has five different tram routes and 58 trams, most of which are vintage streetcars that are very popular among locals and tourists alike. The tramlines are an economical and fun way to maneuver around the city. A few of these streetcars are real throwbacks, too, like the nostalgic wooden Tram 28, which runs for approximately 6.2 miles from the St. George Castle to the Bairro Alto district, just west of the downtown center, its horn constantly ringing to warn pedestrians to get the heck out of its way. Prior to my trip, I debated with myself whether to see the downtown area on foot or by tram. Now that I've been here, I could recommend both, really.

We drove through sections of the Baixa district, near Rossio Square. Maria told us something very interesting. Rents in Lisbon, like just about any big city nowadays, are sky high, and most of the apartment buildings – those historic Pombaline structures from the 1700s – are devoid of residents and are basically used for commerce, as either shops, restaurants or business offices. She said that every year more and more of Lisbon's younger population is choosing to live in the suburbs to avoid the high cost of city life.

We were now driving east on national road N6, a busy thoroughfare that hugs the city's coastline and extends all the way to the seaside resort town of Cascais on the Portuguese Riviera. The hilly streets of the Alfama district were to our left. Maria spoke about its history and architecture, mentioning the many historical sites in the area, some of which I had seen during my walking tour the previous day. We made a U-turn near the Santa Apolonia metro train station and were now heading west on N6 towards Commercial Square. From the square we continued westward, along the waterfront areas that were once the home of Portugal's shipbuilding industry, and then turned north and drove briefly through the small, hilly bohemian district of Bairro Alto; sections of this centuries-old neighborhood are decorated with lavish street art.

We continued west from Bairro Alto and drove through the upscale Lapa and Estrela districts. These areas were created or expanded during the 18th century, becoming an exclusive residential neighborhood for the country's elite. Today, you'll find beautiful mansions, foreign embassies, and important government buildings situated along its tree-lined streets. We passed the impressive-looking, block-long St. Benedict's Palace (*Palacio de Sao Bento*), home to the National Parliament of Portugal. The structure dates back to a Benedictine monastery built during the 17th century, which was later taken over by the government following the Liberal Wars (1828-1834).

Maria spoke briefly about the Liberal Wars. She said that after Napoleon's army invaded Portugal, the royal family fled to their colony in Brazil for 13 years. During this time, and especially after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, there was a strong sentiment in Portugal to have a more liberal, democratic government. In 1820, a military insurrection in the city of Porto led to constitutional changes and the establishment of a liberal party that, for all intents and purposes, presented a clear threat to the ruling aristocracy. Towards the end of the 1820s, a civil war broke out that ended badly for the liberals. As a result, institutions deemed to be supportive of liberal ideology were suppressed, and this included some of the religious orders in Lisbon. The St. Benedict's Monastery was taken over and redesigned, eventually becoming the beautiful structure we see today. In back of the National Parliament building is the residence of the country's Prime Minister.

Continuing west, not far from the parliament building, we passed the beautiful 18th century *Basilica da Estrela*, an ornately decorated Baroque church with twin towers that houses the tomb of Queen Maria I. We drove around a large public park called the *Jardim da Estrela* (directly in front of the Basilica) and across

from it on its northern end was the entrance to the British Cemetery, which Maria told us is owned by the Queen of England. Founded in 1717, the cemetery grounds include the St. George Anglican Church (a Victorian-era structure where services in English are held every Sunday) and the remains of an ancient Jewish cemetery. For nearly 300 years, British nationals who died in Lisbon have been buried here, including some notables like writer Henry Fielding, who wrote the book Tom Jones and is considered one of the founders of the modern English novel (he died in Lisbon in 1754).

We drove further north – through sections of the Campo de Ourique district – and eventually hooked up with highway road IC15 near the upscale Amoreiras Shopping Mall. We were now heading west out of the city through a sprawling hilly wooded area known as the Monsanto Forest Park (*Parque Florestal de Monsanto*). Covering almost four square miles, this park is Lisbon's biggest green space. It was reforested during the 1930s after extensive agricultural use had stripped the Monsanto Sierra bare. This preserved stretch of greenery has numerous public attractions, including a very diversified ecological park.

Immediately after passing the Monsanto Forest Park we merged onto another highway (N117) and proceeded north to the small municipality of Queluz. During the 30-minute drive Maria spoke briefly about the history of Portugal:

Portugal is a small country with only 10.4 million inhabitants. Lisbon is its largest city, and has a metro population – (which includes the city and surrounding towns and suburbs) – of approximately 2.8 million, which means that twenty-seven percent of the total population lives within the nation’s capital region. As a result, Lisbon is the third largest urban center on the Iberian Peninsula, behind only Madrid and Barcelona. Geographically, the country is situated on the southern-most western corner of Europe.

Spain is the only country that borders Portugal. Its territories include two North Atlantic archipelagoes, the Azores and the Medeira, which are both autonomous regions.

Portugal is also one of the oldest existing nation states in Europe, and *the* oldest on the Iberian Peninsula. In fact, Lisbon is considered the second-oldest European capital city after Athens. Since prehistoric times the country has been overrun and settled by numerous groups, beginning with the Celts (and their predecessors) who established trade in the region with the Phoenicians, the Carthaginians and the ancient Greeks. More than 2,000 years ago in what is now Lisbon, the Romans ruled a municipality they called Olissipo. The disintegration of the Roman Empire in Western Europe saw a slew of invasions of the Iberian Peninsula from Germanic tribes like the Vandals and the Visigoths (the so-called 'barbarians') originating out of Central Europe, and even groups from as far away as Iran (the Sarmatians).

In 711 AD, groups of tribal peoples from the Maghreb Region of Africa (Northwest Africa) invaded the Iberian Peninsula. These were the Muslim Berbers and Arabs who were collectively called the Moors by Christian Europeans. They established Muslim dynasties that would control *Al-Andalus* (the Iberian Peninsula) for hundreds of years. During this time there were numerous attempts by the existing Christian nobility to reclaim the Iberian Peninsula from the Muslims. Between the 9th and 11th centuries, as part of this Reconquest (*Reconquista*), Visigoth noblemen succeeded in establishing Christian medieval counties in the region around Braga and Porto. The creation of these vassal medieval counties led to the identity of the modern-day Portuguese people. By the mid-12th century, these counties would rise to become the independent Kingdom of Portugal, which ruled, to one extent or another, until 1910 when the monarchy system ended and the First Portuguese Republic was formed.

Despite its small size and population, Portugal has had an enormous impact on the world. Approximately 250 million people speak Portuguese today. This can be traced back to the country's maritime explorations during the 15th and 16th centuries. Known as the Age of Discoveries, Portuguese explorers circumnavigated the world, mapping out uncharted lands that led to the colonization of territories throughout Africa, Asia and South America, making the country the world's first truly global commercial empire. During this lucrative period in its history, Portugal was able to monopolize the world spice markets and pretty much create, together with Spain, a worldwide sphere of influence that lasted for centuries.

We arrived at the National Palace in Queluz around 10:00am, spending roughly 40 minutes touring the palace and its gardens. I have visited a number of such palaces in my travels. Whether in Eastern Europe, Asia or the Americas, these ostentatious structures often leave me feeling somewhat ambivalent. I had a middle-class upbringing, the kind where success is usually measured by hard work, perseverance and sacrifice. To see these opulent displays of wealth and privilege, especially by a class of people who believed themselves the anointed ones simply because of their birth, is something I find repulsive. In fact, I don't understand how aristocratic classes are still a *thing* in today's modern tech world. It spits in the face of egalitarian principles, even in countries where their monarchs only serve in a symbolic national role. To me, people who have ascended along aristocratic lines are nothing more than self-absorbed assholes who – while playing lip service to the masses – feel they're above the common fray simply because of some skewered notion of social pedigree. But, having ranted all of this, I must confess that every time I visit one of these palaces my jaw drops in awe. *Go figure*…

The National Palace of Queluz is considered a representative example of the kind of extravagant construction that occurred in

Portugal as a result of the wealth brought in by their colonies, especially after gold was discovered in Brazil in the late 17th century. Maria told us it was one of the last great Rococo (or late Baroque) buildings to be designed in Europe. Construction began in 1747 but was interrupted after the 1755 Earthquake when Portugal's laborers were urgently summoned to rebuild the capital. Most of the palace's interior wasn't finished until the late 1700s. The National Palace is sometimes compared to the beautiful Palace of Versailles in France. But this is not really an apt description because the Palace of Versailles was intended to showcase the greatness of its sovereigns and the country itself, whereas the National Palace was originally intended as a grand summer home. It wasn't until the end of the 18th century that the palace became the official residence of the royal family.

After King Joseph I died in 1777 his mentally unstable daughter Maria I ascended to the throne. When her husband (King Peter III, who was also her uncle) died nine years later, Queen Maria I began a steady descent into madness and the National Palace served as a convenient way to keep her out of the public eye. By 1794, the now fully completed palace became the official residence of the royal family and remained so until they fled to Brazil following Napoleon's invasion of the country in 1807. Throughout the 1800's, the palace fell out of favor with the country's subsequent monarchs and in 1908 it became the property of the state. Portions of it had to be extensively restored following a devastating fire in 1934, and today it is a national monument and museum. One wing of the palace, the Queen Maria I pavilion, is used in an official capacity to house visiting heads of state.

The main architect was Mateus Vicente de Oliveira, who was assisted by several prominent French and Portuguese architects. The destruction caused by the 1755 Earthquake prompted Oliveira to make changes to his overall design to incorporate the newer anti-earthquake architectural concepts being introduced in the

capital. When construction on the palace resumed in 1758, the newer structures were longer and lower to the ground in order to provide stability in case of another earthquake. Basically, the palace became a series of aligned suites that are connected to each other by slightly higher pavilions.

The public façade of the main building, the largest structure, faces a wide open square that is divided into two sections, or wings, forming a semi-circle. On one end is an onion-domed chapel, and on the other the kitchen and servant quarters. The entire structure forms a three-sided courtyard with beautifully landscaped gardens. If any elaborate Baroque decorations were planned for the public façade they were quickly scrapped after the earthquake; it hardly seemed fitting to put on a grand frontal display when the nearby capital was in ruins. The only impressive decorations on the public façade are the pediments above the windows.

The real elegance of the palace can be found in the great western wing, which was designed by French architect Jean-Baptiste Robillon. Known also as the Robillon Wing, the indulgent features of Baroque and Rococo architecture are on full display here, with Doric columns running the full length of the western and southern facades, and a balustraded balcony decorated with heavy pediments and statues, the whole thing overlooking the wonderful gardens below. Robillon also created an entrance into the main palace from the western wing via a staircase of graduated steps (adorned with statuary) that lends a perception of height to the overall structure. Very clever.

The interior of the palace was designed and decorated by French artisans. Most of the rooms (besides the wide halls and ballroom areas) were not necessary large, but were gorgeously decorated, with paintings on the ceiling depicting allegorical or historical scenes, and tiled or redbrick floors to provide a little

extra coolness on those hot summer days. An interesting part of the interior is the varying heights and lengths one encounters walking through it. Long corridors suddenly open up into the tall, wide halls of the pavilions. Many sections are decorated with imported *azulejo* tiles in stunning colors and images, and premium marble, stone and wood (from all over the world) was used throughout the rooms. Sadly, the fire of 1934 destroyed quite a number of the original rooms, so I'm not sure how much of what we saw had to be recreated. Either way, it was all very nice to look at.

We entered the palace through the public façade entrance and toured the sections that have been restored. We encountered a series of sitting rooms first, and then gradually made our way through the palace and eventually outside into the 'hanging gardens'. The big halls were outstanding, like the Ambassadors Hall with its tall windows and paintings on the ceiling depicting the royal family, the floor made of checkered black-and-white marble; or the Ball Room, its large oval shape created out of five smaller rooms, decorated in mirrors, paintings and gilded walls, and a coffered ceiling supported by columns adorned with golden Greek statues.

Besides the great halls, I enjoyed the long elegant corridors or galleries that connected the pavilions. One in particular, the Salas Das Manga gallery, was one of the few sections that was spared from the 1934 fire. This beautiful corridor leads into the larger State Rooms (the great halls and music room), which were designed to impress visiting dignitaries. Its walls are covered with colorful tiles painted with images from Portugal's territories and colonies, and large windows facing the courtyards. We also toured the palace's private apartments, the actual living quarters of the former royal family: the dining room, the king's bedroom, the queen's boudoir…all of them elegantly furnished and lavishly decorated (from that time period) with authentic personal items and curios on display. We also spent some time walking through

the impressive gardens, which were designed by a Dutch master gardener who worked closely with Robillon. Laid out in a symmetrical pattern, the main garden resembles a labyrinth of plants, hedgerows and shrubs neatly trimmed into interesting patterns and shapes, interspersed with canals and formal terraces and walkways adorned with statues and large water fountains. My final thoughts on the palace? To quote Mel Brooks: *"It's good to be the king!*"

We re-boarded the bus and proceeded to our next destination, the beautiful hillside village of Sintra, situated within the heavily forested Sintra-Cascais Natural Park. From Queluz we traveled west along (I believe) highway A37 for about 30 minutes, at one point traversing some of the winding hilly roads within the park to reach the town, which sits near the top of the Sintra Mountains and offers some spectacular views of the whole area.

We were given an hour and a half to explore the historical quarter of Sintra on our own. As we ascended the mountains, Maria recommended we sample the two pastry delicacies of Sintra: the *travesseiros* ('pillows'), a heavenly puff pastry filled with egg and almond cream, and the *queijadas*, an equally delicious baked tart made with cheese, milk, eggs, cinnamon and sugar. Both pastries, she told us, could be purchased in any of the number of bakeshops in Sintra, but she specifically mentioned Casa Piriquita, an iconic bakery in the village center where the *travesseiros* pastry was created back in the 1940s. Casa Piriquita itself was founded in 1862, and was a favorite morning stop of King Carlos I whenever he vacationed in Sintra. I made a mental note to visit the bakery and try both pastries.

The bus dropped us off near the Museum of Natural History of Sintra, in the village center, and we followed our guide to the plaza just in front of the Palace of Sintra so we could get our bearings. Maria pointed out the old Jewish Quarter and several museums in

the area, including the Palace of Sintra, and suggested several places where we could have lunch. Our rendezvous point was down the street where the bus dropped us off. The group quickly dispersed, heading off in different directions to explore the area.

Sintra and its surrounding region have been influenced by human settlement since pre-historic times. Archaeological artifacts have been discovered dating all the way back to the early Paleolithic age, so this region has seen its fair share of epochs and cultures, each leaving behind some traces of its past. Under Roman occupation of the peninsula, the Sintra region was controlled as part of the greater Olisipo (Lisbon) area. During the Middle Ages the region went back and forth between the Moorish occupiers and the Christian kingdoms that fought to re-conquer the Iberian peninsula from them. In 1139, after consolidating his forces in the County of Portugal (a Christian enclave in the north of the country), Afonso Henriques (Afonso I) declared himself the first ruler of the Kingdom of Portugal. He would go on to liberate Lisbon from the Moors in 1147 with the help of Christian Crusaders on their way to the Holy Lands. In 1154, King Afonso I signed a charter officially creating the town of Sintra.

Sintra's rise as one of the most coveted real estate places to live on the Iberian Peninsula began during the late 18th century and throughout all of the 19th century. Inspired by the Romanticist Period of the time, both aristocrats and foreign visitors to the region rediscovered the charms of Sintra, with its beautiful mountain forests and cooler climate. Several hotels (or inns) were built in the village towards the end of the 1700s, which eventually paved the way for the wealthy and the aristocrats to construct summer homes here. One of the prime examples of the Romanticism architecture in the region can be seen in the elegant hilltop Pena Palace, a royal castle built just above the main town. It became one of the summer homes of the Portuguese royal family, and was constructed during the middle of the 1800s using

Romanesque Revival and Neo-Manueline styles. From a distance it resembles some kind of eclectic fairy tale castle, with its multi-colored walls and towers and domes, and serves as a sharp contrast to the Palace of Sintra, a royal castle in the center of the village, which, together with the Pena Palace, are now national monuments and museums and very popular tourist attractions.

Today, this historical town is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and still remains one of the wealthiest districts on the entire Iberian Peninsula. The Sintra region is also home to a very influential expatriate community that lives in beautiful homes and mansions along this mountainous retreat and near the coastline of the Portuguese Riviera. The section of the town we visited was the well-preserved historical quarter around the village center.

I decided to skip lunch and explore as much as I could. I crossed the street from the Palace of Sintra and began making my way through the twisting alleyways of the Jewish Quarter. Around the time that Sintra became an officially sanctioned town, a thriving community of Sephardic Jews developed around the village center. Sephardic Jews (sometimes referred to as Hispanic Jews) are members of the Jewish diaspora population exiled from their ancestral homelands who eventually made their way to the Iberian Peninsula, settling in both Spain and Portugal. Excellent merchants, many of their communities thrived throughout the peninsula until anti-Semitism, sparked by the Christian Reconquest of the region, began to drive them out violently. In 1492, the Alhambra Decree issued by Spain's Catholic Monarchs (Queen Isabella I and King Ferdinand II) ordered the expulsion of Jews from their kingdoms. In 1496, King Manuel I of Portugal followed suit by issuing an edict expelling all Jews and Muslims from his kingdom. You know, considering how badly the Jewish people have been treated throughout their history, it's surprising for me to see cities across Europe and North Africa touting their well-preserved Jewish Quarters, when in fact the Jewish people who

lived in them were forced out centuries ago. I wonder if this is due to collective guilt.

The Jewish Quarter, and adjacent neighborhood, is clustered along the hillside opposite the Palace of Sintra. Like a typical medieval village, the streets and walkways, which are all paved with cobblestones, are narrow and twist and bend the further up you go. Most of the two-and-three story buildings in the area have shops or restaurants on the ground floor that cater to the massive influx of tourists.

It was overcast all day, with intermittent drizzles, and the cobblestones were wet and very slippery. I had to maneuver gingerly up the steeper walkways to avoid falling. Along the way, I stopped to browse in several shops and ended up buying some souvenir magnets and a nice decorative ceramic tile for my office wall. At one point I reached a two-lane mountain roadway (N375) and had to turn around, walking back down to the square in front of the Palace of Sintra. I opted to pay the admission fee and tour the palace. Before entering the building I stopped to photograph the picturesque view of the Old Quarter from the entranceway. A slow moving blanket of fog was inching its way down the forested mountain, framing the colorful medieval buildings along the hillside. It was absolutely beautiful.

The Moors built two castles in Sintra during their era. The first was the Castle of the Moors (*Castelo dos Mouros*), a stone, hilltop fortress located higher up the mountain that was constructed during the 8th and 9th centuries. Today, the castle ruins are a national monument. The second castle, which served as the residence of the local Moorish rulers, was built on the spot where the current Palace of Sintra (also known as the Town Palace) is located. After the Moors were defeated, subsequent Portuguese kings rebuilt the palace. None of the original Moorish structure survived. This ‘newer' castle was mainly constructed in stages throughout the 15th

and 16th centuries using a mix of Manueline, Gothic, Moorish and Mudejar styles. It is regarded as one of the best-preserved medieval royal residences in Portugal.

I spent the next forty-minutes walking through this historic structure. Unlike the National Palace of Queluz, which was fully decorated with time-period furnishings, the rooms inside the Palace of Sintra are not as elaborately decorated, giving it a plainer, stripped essence. But the palace was impressive nonetheless because one could appreciate the various architectural styles without being distracted by all the medieval knick-knacks. The National Palace of Queluz had the luxury of space, but the Palace of Sintra, built on a hillside, had to be more compact, so there are no expansive gardens or courtyards here. The oldest part of the castle is the Royal Chapel, constructed during the reign of King Dinis I in the early 1300s. The beautiful wooden latticework ceiling was covered in Moorish geometric patterns, which I thought was odd for a Christian chapel. The walls were decorated with continuous images depicting the Holy Ghost descending from the Heavens in the form of a dove; the tiles leading to the altar resembled a finely laid carpet. The earliest part of the palace was constructed around the central courtyard, where you'll see the Manueline and Moorish styles in more detail. Over the ensuing centuries, additional wings were added.

The *azulejo* tile work used in many of the rooms was outstanding, in particular was the Coat-of-Arms Hall (*Sala dos Brasoes*), a stunningly beautiful room that was worth the price of admission alone. Its domed coffered ceiling was an intricately carved masterpiece showcasing the 72 different coat-of-arms representing the king and all the noble families of Portugal at the time. The blue-and-white tiles that covered every inch of the walls were imported from Seville and had painted images of the royal family and nobility frolicking in the countryside. Other impressive rooms were the Swan Room with paintings of swans on the ceiling,

and the Magpie Room, which had paintings of magpies on its ceiling. The Arab Room contained a Moorish style fountain. The kitchen section had a row of ovens and stoves aligned along one length of a completely tiled wall. I also saw the king's bedroom where King Afonso VI – the second ruler of the Braganza dynasty – was imprisoned in 1663 by his own brother (the future King Pedro II) when he grew mentally unfit to rule. I managed to walk through the entire palace in the time I had.

After touring the palace I headed over to the village center and ran into Krish and Pratima, who pointed out where the iconic Casa Piriquita bakeshop was located. I purchased one each of the *travesseiros* and *queijadas* pastries recommended by Maria, and a *café con leche* (coffee with hot milk) to wash it all down. The puffy travessseiros was to die for; the queijada was tasty, but had the drier consistency of a muffin. A few minutes after finishing my snack I crossed the street and re-boarded our tour bus. We left Sintra shortly after 12:30pm and drove back to Lisbon where we continued touring the western part of the city.

Our first stop was at the Belem Tower, located along the edges of the Tagus River. The bus dropped us off just west of the site, in front of the Fort of Bom Sucesso, a former military fort (1780 – 1999) that now houses the Combatant's Museum (*Museu do Combantante*). The museum has a permanent indoor exhibition – featuring the country's involvement during WWI, the colonial wars of the 1960-70s, and various U.N. peacekeeping missions – and three outdoor exhibits featuring various military equipment used by the different branches of the armed forces. There is also a large, triangular-shaped monument in front of the museum called the Monument to Overseas Combatants, honoring all of those who have fought overseas for Portugal. This simple, but elegant monument rises above a pool of water, with an eternal flame at its center and two soldiers standing at attention around the clock. We

walked from here along the waterfront to the Belem Tower just a hundred meters or so away.

The Belem Tower (officially named the Tower of St. Vincent) was a fortress constructed during the 16th century, at the height of the Portuguese Renaissance, and was regarded as the ceremonial gateway into Lisbon. It became the landing and launching point for the country's explorers. The riches that poured into Portugal from its far-flung territorial acquisitions all filtered in through this historic riverside fort, making the country's capital one of the wealthiest in all of Europe. Today, it is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the most potent symbols of Portugal's Age of Discoveries.

The fortress was commissioned by King Manuel I in 1514 for the purpose of protecting the northern margin of the Tagus River from enemy invasion. Built on a basaltic rocky outcrop just off the riverbank in the Belem district of Lisbon, the fortress would be expanded and strengthened over the centuries. It became a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1983, and today it serves as a national monument and museum. In 2007 it was listed as one of the Seven Wonders of Portugal. Besides being an iconic symbol from the Age of Discoveries, the Belem Tower is also famous for being one of the great examples of Portuguese Late Gothic architecture, referred to as Manueline-style architecture, named after King Manuel I. This construction design was popular during the king's 26-year reign. Manueline-style buildings were elaborately decorated and expensive to build, but money was not an issue apparently during the Age of Discoveries.

To be honest, considering its original defensive purpose, I found the complex rather small and unassuming. The rectangular tower sits within an irregular, hexagonal bastion, with elongated flanks extending south into the river. Its lower bastion has openings accommodating 17 cannons facing the water. A small

wall covers the upper bastion with over-hanging turrets along its edges. The Manueline-style designs are evident in the armillary spheres poking up from the top of the tower, and in the carved images of twisted ropes and knots, which are a nod to the country's nautical history. Sections of the tower and the parapets along the upper bastion walls are decorated in rounded stone shields with large crosses, representing the Order of Christ.

After taking some photos of the site, we moved on, walking further west along the Garden of the Belem Tower (*Jardim da Torre de Belem*), a public park directly in front of the tower and the Fort of Bom Sucesso. On the eastern side of the park were restroom facilities and outdoor souvenir stalls, and the group was given a twenty-minute break before we boarded the bus again and continued three blocks west along Brasilia Avenue to visit the Monument of the Discoveries (*Padrao dos Descobrimentos*). This giant (170-foot tall) monument was inaugurated in 1960 and pays homage to the country's maritime explorations of the 15th and 16th centuries. As monuments go, it's pretty impressive. A massive stone wall rises up from a marble foundation that has a large inlaid map of the world listing the countries, colonies and territories founded or established by Portuguese sailors. I stood over this map, genuinely impressed by the achievements of these Portuguese navigators who had traveled so far and wide, from the Americas to Africa to the furthest reaches of Asia; these men were fearless.

Beyond the marble map of the world, the walkway leading to the monument was covered in the same blue-and-white wavy cobblestone pattern I saw at Rossio Square, symbolizing the oceans. The back edge of the monument's wall has the carved image of a gigantic sword pointing into the ground. On each side of this wall are groups of sculptured images featuring the country's most famous navigators and explorers, positioned as if they were climbing the prow of a Portuguese sailboat. The whole thing sits

near the river's edge, which is also fitting since this was where their journeys began. I took a lot of photos here.

Our next and final stop of the included tour of the city was a visit to the 15th century Jeronimos Monastery, which was located just a few blocks north of the Monument of the Discoveries. In fact, we could see it clearly from where we were standing on the monument's marble plaza and assumed it would only take a few minutes to get there. Instead, we embarked on a 30-minute detour because – according to Javier – the metro train tracks running parallel to Brasilia Avenue obstructs vehicular access to that part of Belem. The detour felt more like an odyssey. I tried following our path on my tourist map but was unable to do so. We began by heading east along the waterfront from the Monument of the Discoveries and then made a U-turn heading west. At one point we merged onto a highway going north through a section of the Monsanto Forest Park before reconnecting with the city streets, traversing the embassy row area of the city and heading so far north we actually drove by the Mahatma Ghandi Memorial. We then turned south again, back towards the riverfront. At one point we passed the National Palace of Belem, a pink-colored 18th century former palace that now serves as the official residence of the country's president. We ended up returning to the very *same* area of the Belem waterfront where the detour began, but on the other side of the metro train tracks! Holy shit, I wondered aloud if the Portuguese had ever heard of railroad crossings?

Our bus pulled up to the monastery and we disembarked. The Jeronimos Monastery (*Mosteiro dos Jeronimos*) was a former monastery of the Order of St. Jerome, also known as the Order of the Hieronymites. The structure was commissioned by King Manuel I who wanted to establish a royal pantheon for the rulers of his dynastic line. Although construction of the monastery and its church began in 1501, it wasn't completed for more than a century. The project was delayed repeatedly for a number of reasons, the

two biggest delays occurred following the death of King Manuel I in 1521, and then again when Portugal came under the rule of Spain in 1580, an untenable situation that lasted until 1640 when the independent Portuguese monarchy was re-established following the Restorations War.

The monastery and its adjacent church, the Church of St. Mary, are considered the city's most *prominen*t examples of the Portuguese Late Gothic architectural style made famous during King Manuel I's reign, now referred to as Manueline-style architecture. Believe me, this complex is definitely worth a visit. All of the richly ornate decorations that make up a typical Manueline building are on full display here. The complex sculptural themes – like nautical elements and exotic objects discovered by the country's navigators – are beautifully carved in limestone along the portals and windows of this magnificent complex. Thankfully, the whole thing survived the 1755 Earthquake with relatively minor damage.

In 1833, the monastery was secularized by state decree and came under the control of the Pious Royal House of Lisbon, which designated the Church of St. Mary as the parochial church for the Belem district. The monastery was to be used as a national museum. Many of the fine artworks and treasures of the monastery were either transferred to the crown or lost following this period, and the monastery began to decline physically. But since then, work has been continuously ongoing to restore and maintain the building. The entire structure takes up the length of a very *long* city block. I've included a stock photo of the structure on my website to show its size.

Unfortunately, we could not tour the monastery museum due to time constraints (we did, though, have the option of returning on our own during our free time). Instead, we toured the adjacent St. Mary Church, which is part of the monastic complex. The portal

entrance into the church, on the western end of the monastery, is one of the most intricately carved late-Gothic designs I have ever seen. All of the decorative elements of the Manueline-style are visible. I will not do it justice by writing about it here, so feel free to either look it up online or view my photos. The interior of the church has a single towering nave, supported by six beautifully carved columns. The stunning ceiling is a continuously ribbed vault that was uniquely created from a collection of stellar vaulting and tracery vaults that mesh together like a series of well-defined symmetrical spider webs. Along the sides of the aisles are decorated smaller altars dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries (including one of St. Jerome). The chancel around the main altar contains several royal tombs. On one side are the tombs of King Manuel I and his wife, Maria of Aragon; on the other side are the tombs of his son, King John III, and his wife, Catherine of Austria. The tombs sit atop sculptured marble elephants. Also, along the lower choir of the church are the tombs of the famous Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama (the first European to reach India by sea) and the great poet and chronicler of the Age of Discoveries, Luis de Camoes.

After touring the church, we gathered in the park directly in front of the monastery. Javier surprised us with a box of *pasteis de Belem*, another scrumptious custard tart considered the pastry delicacy of the Belem district. *These Portuguese really take their desserts seriously*, I thought, wolfing down my third pastry of the day. I made a mental note to throw out my bathroom scale when I got back home.

We re-boarded the bus and headed back to the hotel. Nina and I had asked Javier if the bus driver could drop us off at the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum. Several members of the group had visited the museum the previous day and recommended it. The museum (and its gardens) is located just northeast of the King Edward VII Park not far from our hotel. Nina and I were let off the bus in front

of the museum around 4:00pm. We spent over an hour going through the exhibition halls and strolling through the gardens. I wasn't too impressed with the garden area, but perhaps that was due to the time of year; nothing was in bloom yet. The museum itself, on the other hand, was *definitely* worth a visit.

Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian was a British-Armenian oil tycoon who traveled extensively and lived in several great European cities throughout his life, including Lisbon. A trained petroleum engineer, he played an important role in making the oil fields of the Middle East available for Western consumption, and is credited with being the first person to exploit Iraqi oil. As a result, he amassed a huge fortune during his lifetime, allowing him to pursue a number of philanthropic projects, one of them being his collection (for posterity's sake) of important artwork from around the globe, which he discerningly selected with the help of trained specialists. In 1956, a year after his death, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation was created (based in Portugal) to promote the arts, sciences and education worldwide. In 1969, the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum – constructed over a former public park – was inaugurated, showcasing what is considered to be one of the finest private art collections ever assembled. In his lifetime, Gulbenkian acquired over 6,400 pieces of artwork and artifacts, the majority of which are on display in this wonderful museum.

The single-floor layout of the museum interior is partitioned into exhibition halls and galleries that form two separate circuits aligned into chronological and geographical order. The first circuit has Greco-Roman artwork from classical antiquity, and includes pieces from the Nile Valley and the Ancient Near East (Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Persian and Armenian, including some Islamic art) and the Far East (China and Japan). The second circuit features European artworks grouped by specific traditions like paintings, book making, sculptures and decorative artworks, including excellent jewelry peices. I'm no art historian, but even I could tell

this was no run-of-the-mill collection. All of the pieces were exquisite representative samples from the masters of their time. We saw works by Rembrandt, Renoir, Rubens, Monet, Van Dyck, Corot, Degas and a slew of other famous artists that constituted a veritable Who's Who list of the world's best. I highly recommend this place to all the art and museum lovers out there. You won't be disappointed.

Nina and I decided to head back to the hotel shortly after 5:15pm. We briefly debated whether or not to just call for an Uber, but Nina had checked the Google Map on her cellphone and the walking distance was only 15 minutes, so we decided to walk back. This was a mistake. Despite our combined travel experiences (and me being a retired mailman, no less), neither one of us had a good sense of direction. And not even the GPS-guided walking instructions on Nina's app could correct this. But, in our dubious defense, the absence of street signs made it difficult for us to gauge if we were heading the right way. Suffice it to say, we got lost (and this wouldn't be the first time this happened to the two of us on this trip, either). I'm sure at one point Nina must have been thinking, *well, at least I got this big lug to protect me*; while I was thinking, *thank goodness this woman knows where we're heading with her GPS-guided app.* We continued in what I'll describe as a *general* direction towards our hotel, but nearly thirty-minutes into our 'fifteen-minute walk' we had to stop a young woman on the street to ask if she knew where the damn place was. Turns out the young lady was not only a visiting American student, but she was also a Millennial. These kids were born to tech! Nina handed her the phone and the young woman looked at it momentarily before saying (concealing the amusement in her voice, I'm sure): *"According to this, it's just up the block to the right*". I could have hugged her. Sure enough, the hotel was right around the corner. Go figure.

Back in my room I decided to take a quick shower and put on a nicer shirt for our scheduled dinner. At 7:45pm, the group gathered in the lobby and we proceeded to board the bus and head back to the downtown Alfama area, to a popular restaurant called Casa de Linhares, a beautiful establishment built within the ruins of a former palace. We sat in the dining room on the second level. While we were eating, a group of fado musicians – a male and female singer accompanied by two guitarists – entertained us by singing traditional fado songs.

Fado music is said to have originated near the port areas of the Alfama district around the 1820s, although most historians would argue that its musical roots probably go back much further than that. The name *fado* comes from Latin, and can be interpreted to mean 'death', 'fate' or 'utterance', take your pick. And, depending on the actual fado song you listen to, all three meanings might be present in the same song. Basically, fado lyrics can be about anything, but there is a certain traditional structure that each song must adhere to in order for it to be considered fado. The male singer, as a way of introduction, told us that fado music embraces the Portuguese word of *saudade*, or longing, so that a traditional fado song is actually an impassioned plea (or anguish) for something already lost (a love, a life, or whatever). Not surprisingly, fado developed along the areas of the city where the majority of the poor people – who are no strangers to tough times – used to live. So, in many ways, it incorporates the same kind of themes present in the blues music of the African-American culture, because underneath all the beautiful singing and guitar playing, these are essentially *sad* songs. I don't speak Portuguese so the meaning of the songs was lost to me. But, having said that, it was still a pleasure to listen to these skilled singers and musicians.

The meal (I don't recall what they served) was good, but not necessarily outstanding. The group had a great time and continued to bond. There was one funny incident that occurred during the

serving of the soup I would like to mention, only because we kept bringing it up throughout the tour and it never failed to get a laugh. One of the members of the group, Krish, is a practicing vegetarian. Whether this was for religious or health reasons (or both) I never ascertained; but, either way, he could not eat meat. Usually, this isn't a problem on guided tours because food requests are made prior to the trip to accommodate individual needs. At the beginning of the meal they served everyone a bowl of what looked like a creamed cilantro soup with sliced chorizos (smoked pork sausage). I remember Krish asking the waiter if his soup had meat in it. The waiter shook his head in the negative and Krish dug right in. However, when he brought the spoon up out of the murky soup there was a thick piece of chorizo resting on top of it. At first, he was slightly annoyed because the waiter had just told him there was no meat in his soup. The waiter apologized and brought him another bowl of soup. Krish and his wife Pratima were sitting directly across from me, so I couldn't resist glancing over as he placed his spoon inside the bowl. Once again, the spoon came up with another piece of chorizo on it.

Immediately, the waiter was summoned, and this time Javier, Pratima and Krish all explained to the man that Krish was a practicing vegetarian. The waiter made a smacking-of-the-head gesture, as if to say, "I'm so sorry, so stupid of me" and disappeared into the kitchen to try again. By now, everyone at the table, including the fado musicians who were setting up nearby, was anxiously awaiting Krish's next bowl of soup. The waiter placed it in front of him with a big smile to assure Krish the matter had been taken care of. When Krish proceeded to pull the spoon out of the soup, I kid you not, there were now *three* pieces of chorizo piled on top of it. The table erupted in laughter! It's as if the chef thought *vegetarian* meant 'a guy who loves chorizo' and kept dumping more into the bowl each time. To his credit, Krish never lost his sense of humor, and when the *fourth* bowl was placed in front of him, with everybody watching intently, he

comically locked eyes with the waiter, raising one eyebrow in the process, and without even looking down at the bowl he inserted the spoon and – wa-laa! – pulled up yet *another* piece of chorizo. I almost fell to the floor laughing. At this point Krish told the waiter to forget the soup.

We got back to the hotel by 10:30pm. I tried jotting down some of the day's events in my journal notebook, but I was too tired to concentrate. I crawled into bed and fell soundly asleep.

Day Four

I was up at 4:30am. Not by design, either. According to my cellphone alarm clock I still had another hour of precious sleep to go, but jet lag is the bane of all world travelers. I busied myself writing in my journal notebook, had several cups of instant coffee, and repacked my luggage. I then shaved and showered and watched the international news on TV until it was time for breakfast. I noticed that the news coverage of the Russian invasion of the Ukraine didn't seem as intense as it did back in the States. Don't get me wrong, news stations in both Portugal and Spain (and elsewhere in Europe) were covering the unfolding tragedy, but considering that the conflict was only six weeks old and so close to Western Europe's borders, it didn't appear to garner the same kind of news coverage intensity that the early part of the invasion provoked in the U.S. But then again, I wasn't watching a lot of television on this tour so perhaps my early morning observations were a little off…um, I'm blaming it on the jet lag.

By 8:30am we were on the bus heading out of Lisbon. Our next stop on the tour was a one-night stay in the city of Evora, located in the geographical region of Alentejo. We exited the city by crossing the 25th of April Bridge (*Ponte 25 de Abril*), an orange-colored, 2km-long suspension bridge that connects Lisbon to the municipality of Almada on the other side of the Tagus River. This iconic bridge, which resembles our own Golden Gate Bridge, can be seen from many areas of Lisbon. It was opened in 1966 and originally named the Salazar Bridge after Antonio de Oliveira Salazar, the dictator who ruled Portugal between 1932-1968. When his fascist party was finally overthrown in 1974 – in a popular uprising known as the Carnation Revolution – the bridge was renamed the 25th of April to commemorate the start of that uprising. As we approached the bridge, Javier excitedly told us to focus our attention to the east for a great view of the city, but after getting our cameras ready we soon discovered (rather comically, I might add) that the morning fog surrounding the bridge obscured visibility in all directions. Oh, well.

We headed east from Lisbon on highway A2, eventually turning onto highway A6 once we entered the Evora district near the town of Landeira. The entire drive took roughly an hour and thirty minutes with one bathroom break along the way. Considering Portugal's small land size I had assumed the country would be packed with small towns and cities, but that was not the case, at all. Once we left Lisbon, we drove through nothing but countryside dotted with farms and grazing fields. Upon entering the Evora district we passed rows of cork trees, as well. Javier told us the cork industry is very big in Portugal, accounting for more than 50 percent of the global market. He explained the process to us, which entailed peeling back layers of the cork trees and using a combination of boiling, centrifuge and curing before the cork is ready to be cut and shaped. In addition to making corks for wine bottles, the substance can be molded and processed to make any number of things, including clothing. Back in Lisbon, I saw hats,

shirts and even *bikinis* made entirely out of cork. Javier told us that cork is an excellent insulation material, retaining heat and cold, and was used in ancient times to preserve food and drink on ships. In fact, NASA uses cork insulation to protect its rockets from fire and ice. Hmm, go figure.

During our bathroom stop Javier received a call from our local guide in Evora telling him she would be a little late due to a minor traffic accident. When we arrived in Evora a short time later, Javier led us on a leisurely stroll near the Giraldo Square (*Praca do Giraldo*), the city's historical main plaza, to kill some time while we waited for the local guide to appear. She arrived around noon, and immediately apologized to the group. Her car had been involved in a fender bender and she needed to wait for the authorities. Her name…(ta-daaa!)...was Maria Jesus. And once again, Javier referred to her by the nickname Jus. I will do the same...(*when in Rome, folks*).

Jus gathered us in the center of the Giraldo Square and gave us a rundown on this historic city. She told us that the *entire* old quarter is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Evora is the capital of the Evora District, which is part of the larger Alentejo region, in the south-central part of the country. On its eastern edges, the Alentejo region borders Spain. In fact, Evora is only about 50 miles (80km) from the Spanish border. Due to its inland position near Spain, Evora has served as a 'crossroads center' that has seen its fair share of human development. The first group of peoples to establish a town here were the Celtici, a confederation of Celtic tribal peoples who lived within the Iberian Peninsula and established their capital in Evora. The name Evora is from an ancient Celtic word (*ebora/ebura*), which refers to the species of yew trees indigenous to the region.

In 57 BC, the Romans conquered the fortified town of Evora from the Celts. Because the city was situated on the junction of

several important trade routes, it flourished under Roman rule. It became one of the most important cities in the Roman-controlled *Hispania* (what they called the Iberian Peninsula). As such, the Romans —over the ensuing centuries – constructed not only a massive defensive wall around Evora but also the kind of infrastructure that usually went along with an important Roman provincial city. Architectural remnants from their time are still evident in the city today. In fact, in certain areas, Roman structures have been blended into newer constructions over the centuries.

In 584 AD, following the Barbarian invasions of Western Europe, the Visigoths conquered Evora. The city retained its importance in the region, and even became a Cathedral city; but despite this, Evora began to decline under the Visigoths. The Moors conquered Evora in 715 AD. During their rule the city began to prosper again. They built a strong fortress, a mosque and developed the region into an agricultural center. Examples of their architectural contributions can also be seen in the city today.

During the middle of the 12th century, a Portuguese warrior by the name of Geraldo Geraldes, better known by the moniker of Geraldo the Fearless, raised an army in the Alentejo region as part of the on-going *Reconquista* (the Christian Reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula from the Muslim Moors). His army proceeded to topple one Moorish stronghold after another using tactics that were considered mostly revolutionary at the time. His forces would travel and attack at night, even during the winter months, and instead of sieges, he trained commando-like warriors to stealthily scale defensive walls with specially designed wooden ladders, attacking sentries before they could warn the towns and villages. Before the Moors knew what was happening, Geraldo's warriors would have the town gates open for a full-scale attack. He conquered Evora in 1165-66. His exploits in defeating the Moors (in the Alentejo region) were so impressive he has been immortalized as the El Cid of Portugal in the history books. The

main square of Evora is named after him. There is also a dramatic tribute to Geraldo the Fearless in the city, a statue of him brandishing a sword in one hand while holding up the severed head of a Moorish soldier in the other. *Yeah, this guy was badass to the bone*!

Following the conquest of Evora by Geraldo the Fearless, the city came under the jurisdiction of Afonso I, the man who established the first Kingdom of Portugal. Evora became the royal court (capital) of the first two Portuguese dynasties during this time. The city flourished during the Middle Ages with impressive palaces, monuments and grand churches. During the 15th and 16th centuries, Evora also became one of the great intellectual centers of Portugal, home to prominent sculptors, painters, writers and philosophers. (One ugly aside to all of this is that Evora also had a fairly large African slave population). The city's importance began to decline with the closing of the University of Evora in 1759 by the Marquis of Pombal (remember him?). The Jesuits who had founded the university back in the 1500s had lost favor with the king's government for advocating religious and intellectual enlightenment. And while the city today is the capital of the Alentejo region, and is once again known as a college town, it is no longer the great urban center it used to be. But its past is well preserved in the buildings and monuments erected throughout the centuries. One of the stated purposes of this tour was to visit cities and towns like Evora that have played a significant role in the cultural development of the Iberian Peninsula.

We spent the next several hours following Jus around the historic quarter of Evora. The group donned our Whisper listening devices (provided by Javier back in Lisbon) so we could hear our local guide as she explained the significance of the places we visited. We began in the Giraldo Square, one of the oldest plazas in Evora. The entire square (and for that matter, *all* of the historic quarter) is paved with cobblestones. On its northern end stands the

16th century Church of St. Anthony (*Igreja de Santo Antao*). In the square in front of the church is a Baroque marble fountain that also dates back more than 500 years. Surrounding the plaza are shops, restaurants, a bank and some government buildings, many of them housed in preserved medieval buildings with typical late Renaissance architectural designs. Jus told us only about 5,500 of the 56,000 people who live in Evora actually reside in the historic quarter, sections of which are still surrounded by the defensive walls built by the Romans.

From the square we began walking in a loose circle around the narrow medieval streets of the city. At one point, we had to wait for a religious procession to pass by. It was Palm Sunday, and all over the Iberian Peninsula the Catholic faithful were out in full force. I don't recall how many of these processions we witnessed over the following week, but believe me it was enough to make you wanna exclaim: "*Jesus*!"

We headed north from Giraldo Square and stopped in front of what Jus described as the 'water box' (*Caixa de Agua*) on Rua Nova Street. This ancient-looking stone chamber, sitting on a street corner in the historic quarter, was a part of the Silver Water Aqueduct (*Aqueduto da Agua Prata*). According to Jus, this 16th century aqueduct system – a good portion of it still stands today – was paid for by taxes levied by the king on the nobility. Commissioned by King John III in 1531, the aqueduct is considered to be one of the greatest engineering projects of the Renaissance Period, consisting of a massive hydraulic system that channeled water into Evora from a natural springs source some 18 kilometers away. I'm assuming the water flowed into this stone chamber for distribution. The Romans had previously built an aqueduct here, as well, and parts of it were incorporated into the construction of this much bigger water system.

We continued further up the street and walked by the Municipal Hall building. Jus told us this structure is important because it was unknowingly constructed over the ruins of the former Roman bathhouse. As it turns out, the size of these ruins, which were only uncovered in 1987, suggests that the Roman bathhouse was probably the largest building in Evora during Roman times. Sections of the excavated bathhouse are now on display inside the Municipal Hall. Unfortunately for us it was Palm Sunday so the building was closed. But during our walk, we did see other Roman ruins. In fact, because the entire old quarter is a listed World Heritage Site, any existing or newly discovered ruins must be preserved, so you will find storefronts and apartment buildings here that have been built *around* the ruins. I thought it was kinda cool. We saw entrances of shops and residential buildings with stone doorframes leftover from Moorish or Roman times, and in certain areas medieval structures were erected alongside the Roman defensive walls.

We headed east now, passing the *Arco Romano de Dona Isabela*, one of several stone arched gateways into the city built by the Romans. This one was remarkably well preserved. We crossed in front of the Garden of Diana (*Jardim Diana*), a public park adjacent to our next stop, the famous Roman Temple ruins of Evora. This temple was constructed during the 1st century AD and is billed as one of the best-preserved Roman temples on the Iberian Peninsula. The structure is sometimes referred to as the Temple of Diana, in reference to a Roman Goddess, but that turned out to be a misnomer. The temple was actually built to honor Roman Emperor Augustus, who was venerated as a god during and after his reign. The ruins consist of the base (or podium), made out of granite blocks, with wide steps leading up to it. Along its northern façade is a colonnade of six fluted Corinthian columns, with the eastern and western facades having four and three columns, respectively. The southern façade is devoid of pillars. All of the columns have traces of decorative frieze or architrave work on them. Ongoing

excavations have revealed that the temple was much larger in size, and had a reflecting pool and a hexagonal portico. The temple was badly damaged during the 5th century when the Visigoths invaded. During medieval times, stones from the temple were used to build fortifications and other structures, further degrading the site. And at one low point in its history, butchers used this once fine temple as a public slaughterhouse. I'm sure Emperor Augustus must have been spinning in his grave!

The Roman Temple is located in another of the city's historical squares, the Largo do Conde de Vila Flor. This plaza has several important buildings surrounding it. On the northeastern corner sits the Palace of the Dukes of Cadaval (*Palacio dos Duques de Cadaval*), a former medieval castle with two massive stone towers with pointed battlements once used to protect the city. It is now a museum. On the western side of the square is a 16th century structure called the Center for Art and Culture (*Centro de Arte e Cultura*), its innocuous name belies the building's former role during medieval times as the Palace of the Inquisition. One can only imagine the Holy Shenanigans perpetrated behind these walls! On the southern end of the plaza is yet another interesting museum, the Museum of Evora (*Museu de Evora*), situated inside a 17th century Baroque palace that once housed the city's archbishops. It contains a fine collection of sculptures, paintings and archaeological artifacts from Evora's long history.

From here we walked one block south to tour the inside of what is arguably the grandest structure in Evora, the city's Catholic Cathedral. At first glance, the church did not seem outwardly impressive. But that was because tall trees in front of the church obscured its length, and the narthex (the entranceway) appeared tucked away on a corner at the end of the street. But after closer inspection, this was *definitely* a place worth visiting. Originally constructed out of large granite blocks in the year 1186, additions and renovations were added over the centuries. It's hard to

describe the feeling one gets from entering a structure that has been standing for almost 850 years. And it didn't even look like a church from the outside; two large asymmetrical towers and battlements along its walls gave the whole thing the appearance of a fortress.

Dedicated to the Virgin Mary, the Cathedral of Evora is the largest medieval cathedral in Portugal. And while it is considered one of the finest examples of Gothic architecture in the country, there are many other prominent architectural influences on display here, as well. We began by touring the cloister, which was added during the 14th century. Here you'll find Gothic design mixed with *Mudejar* influences (an architectural style that originated in Aragon, Spain starting in the 12th century, incorporating Romanesque and Islamic ornamentation traditions). Along the cloister's walkway were the tombs of famous religious clergymen dating back centuries. We also saw a statue of a pregnant Virgin Mary, which Jus told us was very rare. The interior of the church was designed as a Latin cross, and closely resembles the floor plan of the Lisbon Cathedral. There are intricately carved Manueline and Gothic decorations along the arched entranceways and windows; the main chapel was redone in a beautiful Roman Baroque style during the 1700s.

The nave has a towering barrel vaulted ceiling, with white mortar used along its tall red brick walls, lending the church an austere look, punctuated only by the more elaborate Gothic decorations. Another interesting thing about this church, according to Jus, were the windows, which did not have stain glass patterns on them. They were located high up on the walls, allowing for sunlight to bath the cross sections of the church, illuminating the inside. This, she said, was a startling difference from the gloomier interiors of churches that survived the Dark Ages. The cathedral also has a museum located in its towers with religious artwork on display.

From the cathedral we headed back into the heart of the historic quarter, walking through some of the artisan sections of the city. We passed shops specializing in cork and ceramic souvenirs, and another area famous for selling Portuguese wines. Our next stop was a visit to the Church of St. Francis (*Igreja de Sao Francisco*) several blocks south of Giraldo Square. This was another must-see church for several reasons. First, the church was built during the 15th and 16th centuries to replace a Romanesque church that existed on the spot since 1226. Its construction was unique because the narthex was situated in the very front of the church (and not to the side or corner like in the cathedral). Another thing that made this church special was the arcade that leads into the narthex, which has seven arches decorated in different forms utilizing both Moorish and Gothic elements. Inside, the church has twelve chapels separated by buttresses, and a very wide single nave – considered the largest of its kind in all of Portugal – with a beautiful interlocking vaulted ceiling known as a groin vault. But perhaps the biggest reason tourists flock to this church may have nothing to do with the church itself, but rather the small chapel attached to it: the Chapel of the Bones (*Capela dos Ossos*).

During the 17th century, three Franciscan monks used their own dorm and reflecting room adjacent to the church to build this chapel (all three are entombed inside). According to Jus, the monks were upset that only the higher echelons of society (the nobility and the clergy) could be buried or entombed inside of a Catholic Church. Peasants were usually buried in common or unmarked graves. My own follow-up research on this matter revealed that the three monks actually wanted to convey how temporary and fragile human existence really is. Whatever their motivation, these monks dug up the graves of 5,000 peasants and started rearranging the bones along the walls and columns of this small chapel. I'm not talking a few bones here and there, either. This place is covered almost wall-to-wall with bones and skulls, an in-your-face macabre

experience if ever there was one. When you first walk into the chapel, above the entrance, is a sign that loosely translates into "We bones that are here, for yours we wait". How's that for a morning inspirational? They might as well have written: *"You're eventually gonna die, so act accordingly!"* I have to admit, it was a tad creepy. And I was also hesitant about taking photos because doing so seemed somewhat sacrilegious or disrespectful.

Our walking tour ended on this rather somber note. We gathered in front of the St. Francis Church, thanking and tipping Jus for her service. Afterwards, Javier gave us some free time, instructing us to rendezvous back in front of the church in an hour and a half. Most of us had lunch. I joined Nina, Siu and Katherine and we went to a corner restaurant nearby. The streets of Evora were now filled with tourists and local families celebrating Palm Sunday. Every restaurant and outdoor café in the old quarter was packed, and the service was slow going. We managed to get a table and ended up ordering the roasted lamb, which came with a side of potatoes and a salad. Lamb (together with fish) is a popular dish during Holy Week. But that wasn't the real reason we ordered the lamb. We had fellow tour member Dave to thank for this. Dave and his wife, Sue, are from Canada. They're avid travelers and diehard foodies. Throughout the tour they were always looking for new culinary experiences, even booking a reservation at a Michelin-rated restaurant in the town of Ronda, Spain that easily set them back several hundred dollars. But, hey, people gotta eat, right? Earlier, as we were walking the streets of Evora with Jus, Dave sauntered up to her and started talking about lamb dishes for some reason. Because we were wearing our Whisper listening devices, everyone in the group could hear their conversation. They started talking about lamb recipes and how they marinate the lamb and the spices they use and how they roast the lamb and so forth…heck, my stomach began grumbling and I knew right then and there I would be eating lamb for lunch. And I wasn't the only one. In fact, I bet our group made a helluva dent in the local sheep

population that day. As for the lamb…*it was delicious*! Thanks, Dave.

After lunch we headed back to the Church of St. Francis to take some more pictures. By 3:30pm we were on the bus heading to our hotel – the M'ar de Ar Aqueduto – located on the edge of the historic quarter with an excellent view of the Silver Water Aqueduct just down the street. The rest of the day was free for us to explore Evora on our own. When we checked into the hotel I had asked Javier for suggestions on where I should spend my free time and he called my room a little while later and ran some ideas by me. One of those was a visit to the Almendres Megalithic Site just outside the city. I love exploring archeological sites and ran the idea past Nina who was also game. She, in turn, convinced Angela to join us (her husband Norman declined because he was tired from all the walking and wanted to rest before dinner). The three of us gathered in the lobby around 4:30pm. I spoke to the concierge, who contacted a taxi service for us. We somehow negotiated with the driver – an affable older Portuguese man who spoke no English (*or* Spanish) – and he agreed to take us to the site and back for 50 euros. I have no idea if we were being ripped off, but the price, split three ways, didn't seem outrageous. We hopped in and took off.

The Almendres Megalithic Site is situated 13 kilometers west of Evora. It is the largest megalithic monument site on the Iberian Peninsula, a collection of mostly upright stone monoliths dating back over 7,000 years (think Stonehenge but not as dramatic). To reach the site we traveled on highway N114 for about 20 minutes or so and then turned onto a one-lane country road (that quickly became a one-lane dirt road) through rolling hills of very lovely farms and pastures. The driver dropped us off just before we reached the largest collection of monoliths and we had to walk the rest of the way. There weren't many people at the site, and we found a local band setting up to do what looked like a music video.

Nina, Angela and I began photographing the series of monoliths in the area. Angela, who is a great photographer, had us all posing in different positions around the rocky monuments.

Henrique Leonor Pina discovered the site in 1966 while doing geological charting work in the region. How this assortment of stone monuments was overlooked for so long is a mystery to me, though. I mean, the entire area was basically rolling grassy fields and cork trees, without a mountain or quarry nearby where these heavy rocks could have been excavated from, making them stick out like a sore thumb. The site contains 95 menhirs (man-made upright stones that taper off at the top) organized in a circular pattern and broken down by groups. Three phases of stone monoliths have been uncovered: an Early Neolithic (6,000 BC), a Middle Neolithic (5,000 BC) and a Late Neolithic (4,000 BC). Most of the menhirs were incredibly worn down due to constant exposure to the elements. Very little markings remain on the stones. But their formation coincides with other monolithic sites found throughout the region, denoting how important the Iberian Peninsula was to early human development. These stone monuments were distributed in a pattern associated with the Equinox. Some of the monoliths measured between 2 and 3 meters tall, but the majority were smaller (probably due to erosion).

We spent thirty minutes here (which, I admit, is a long time to stare at rocks) and returned to the taxi. On the way back our driver stopped next to a field not far from the site we just visited and conveyed to us (somehow) that we should follow this uneven trail – running along an irrigation ditch – to see what was on the other end. Curious, we carefully made our way along the trail, expecting to see another collection of menhirs. Instead, we came across a solitary monolith measuring around 4.5-meters tall (almost 15 feet). This was the tallest one in the entire complex. My research indicated it was purposely aligned with the other site to correspond with the Winter Solstice. *Go figure*.

We got back to the hotel around 6:30pm. I made a cup of coffee in my room and sat down to write the day's events in my journal notebook. At 7:30pm I proceeded to the hotel restaurant for an included dinner (a delicious pork tenderloin meal). Everyone was excited to share what they had done during their free time. By 9:30pm I was back in my room. Once again, the day's activities left me feeling exhausted, and a half hour later I was sleeping soundly.

Day Five

I was up at 4:00am. Unable to go back to sleep I began editing the photos on my digital camera. Afterwards, I did my exercises and hopped in the shower. Before heading for breakfast I left my luggage in the hallway for the porter to pick up. By 8:00am we were on the bus heading towards our next destination, a two-day stay in the city of Seville, Spain. We left Evora traveling northeast along highway A6 through the Alentejo region, a beautiful landscape of rolling hills covered with green pastures, farmlands and vineyards. A short distance after passing the former garrison town of Elvas we crossed the border into Spain, saying goodbye to Portugal. I really enjoyed my limited time in the country, and hope to return in the future to see the northern areas.

We were now traveling on Highway A5. The first city we came upon in Spain was Badajoz, the capital of the province by the same name, situated just over the border on the left bank of the Guadiana River. This city is part of the autonomous community that makes up the *Extremaduro* region of Spain, which consists of Spain's two largest provinces, Badajoz and Caceres. Javier told us that under

the Spanish Constitution of 1978, Spain is not really a federation, but rather a decentralized unitary country. While sovereignty is vested in the nation as a whole through its central institutions of government, he explained, the constitution guarantees limited autonomy to the nationalities and regions of the nation. Spain is divided into 17 autonomous regions (and two autonomous cities). As such, the governance of the country has devolved over the past four decades into a group of autonomous regions exercising self-government within the confines outlined by the constitution. Basically, what this means is that each region sets up its own laws but is still subordinate to a national government made up of representatives from throughout the country. I was a little confused. For a nation that is not supposed to be a federation, it sure sounded a lot like a federation to me.

We had to set our watches an hour ahead once we entered Spain. Javier explained the reason why. *And it was a doozy*. Before the onset of WWII, Hitler tried to convince Francisco Franco, the military dictator of Spain, to join the Axis powers. Spain's civil war (1936-39) – which ended favorably for Franco's Nationalist (and fascist) government – had decimated the country, leaving over 500, 000 dead and cities and towns in ruins. At the time, Franco could ill-afford to join the Axis Powers, although he remained sympathetic to their fascist, anti-communist causes. In 1940, Spain decided to adopt Berlin time as its own to show its solidarity with the Nazis. What is puzzling (for me, anyway) is that this time change has never been corrected. Spain should be on the same Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) as other countries on the western end of Europe. As a result, everything in the country runs an hour later than normal time. This has impacted the country in many ways over the past 82 years. Spaniards eat lunch and dinner much later and stay up at night much longer, including children. For decades, the negative impact of staying on German time has been studied and documented; yet the country refuses to revert back to GMT. Hmm, now I know where my stubbornness comes from.

We made a pit stop near Badajoz before continuing on Highway A5. Once we passed the small town of Talavera la Real our driver made a right onto Highway Extension 300 and we began traveling in a southeasterly direction through the Badajoz Province. When we reached the town of Almendralejo, our driver turned south onto Highway E803. (Incidentally, Almendralejo is famous for a horrendous battle during the Spanish Civil War that left over 1,000 civilians dead). From this point on we stayed on E803 heading directly south until we hit Seville. The entire journey from Evora to Seville took approximately four and a half hours with two bathroom breaks in between.

I had a moment on the drive when I thought I was hallucinating. As we approached one hilly pasture covered with grazing cattle, I noticed what appeared to be a rather large black bull at the top of the hill. As we drew closer the animal seemed to grow in size and I soon realized I was looking at a gigantic billboard with the black-silhouetted image of a full-grown bull. We would see quite a few of these giant black bulls during our trip. Javier told us they are known as the Osborne bulls. The Osborne Group is one of the oldest companies in Spain, a renowned purveyor of fine wines and food products. In 1956, as part of a marketing campaign to promote a new line of brandy, they came up with this gimmick. When laws were passed prohibiting billboards on the national highways in the 1960s, the Osborne bulls were positioned further back from the roadways (devoid of any advertising logos to comply with the new law) and became much larger in size for visibility. Currently, there are 92 Osborne bulls throughout Spain, ranging from seven to fourteen meters (23ft to 46ft) in height. Javier said these billboards have since become quite popular and are now an iconic image in Spain.

It was a relaxing drive. Like the Portuguese countryside, farms, vineyards and olive groves punctuated the scenery throughout

much of the Extremaduro Region of Spain. Occasionally, we'd pass a small town or village. Many of the houses in the region were whitewashed single or two-story affairs with red tiled roofs. According to Javier, this was a Moorish influence. We arrived in Seville shortly after 12:30pm and instead of checking into our hotel we proceeded to the Old Quarter of the city to visit the Cathedral of Seville (*Catedral de Sevilla*). We were supposed to tour the church the following day, but due to the Holy Week festivities the cathedral would be closed to conduct special religious ceremonies and processions. If we wanted to see the inside of the cathedral, Javier explained, we needed to do it right now. And, believe me, it was definitely worth seeing!

We entered the city and followed a major avenue along the Alfonso XIII Canal, which is part of the Guadalquivir River. This strategic river played an important role in the development and defense of Seville. It is the only navigable river in Spain, and during the 15th and 16th centuries was responsible for making Seville the mercantile center of the western world. During that period, the Guadalquivir River was the main Spanish maritime route to the Atlantic Ocean. In fact, it was from here, in 1519, that Ferdinand Magellan set sail to circumnavigate the world. While driving alongside this waterway we passed the Grand Royal Bullring of Seville (*Plaza de Toros de la Real Maestranza de Caballeria de Sevilla*), a gorgeous Baroque style structure dating back to 1761. I will cover the topic of bull fighting later in this journal.

We turned left at a bridge called the Puente de los Remedios and drove east along the wide Maria Luisa Avenue adjacent to the beautiful Maria Luisa Park. When we reached the northwestern corner of the park we came upon a roundabout, the *Glorieta del Cid Campeador*, with an equestrian statue of El Cid (the famous knight of medieval Spanish lore). We circled the roundabout and proceeded several blocks along Menendez Pelayo Avenue before

stopping directly across from the Murillo Gardens (*Jardines de Murillo*), a landscaped public park that serves as the southern entrance into the city's historic Old Quarter. Our group got off the bus and followed Javier through a landscaped plaza within the historic Santa Cruz neighborhood, the city's former Jewish section. We made our way through the meandering cobblestone streets, at times walking next to the walls of the Royal Palace of Seville (*Real Alcazar de Sevilla*), a palace built over the remains of a former Moorish residential fortress during the reign of King Peter I of Castile (1350-1369). It is now a national monument and museum. I toured the palace by myself the following day during our free time in the city.

The Old Quarter was hopping with visitors. Holy Week in Spain is a big affair. The Catholic faithful were out in droves, and not just to commemorate this sacred Christian event but also to enjoy what is clearly a weeklong national holiday. Long processions initiating from the major churches in the city were ongoing, at all hours of the day and night. And this was true all over the country. In fact, the further we traveled in Spain the more festive the cities became. And it was quite contagious, regardless of one's faith. I was raised a Roman Catholic but stopped believing in organized religion back in college. As a result, I rarely follow any of the major religious events worldwide, so it hadn't even occurred to me that I would be traveling through the Iberian Peninsula during Holy Week. But now, having witnessed it, I'm glad I came during this time of the year. It was a real cultural experience.

Javier led us to the Plaza de Triunfo, a square in the heart of the Old Quarter surrounded by all three of Seville's most venerated historical structures: the Cathedral of Seville, the Alcazar Palace complex and the General Archives of the Indies. This is a popular starting point for many of the walking tours that explore the old town. The line to get inside the cathedral was very long and

required a ticket. Our local guide, Elena, met us in front of the cathedral and informed us we were scheduled to tour the church at 3:30pm. Since it was only 1:30pm, Javier gave us an hour and a half for lunch and instructed us to meet back at the cathedral. The group split up. I spent about thirty minutes walking along a very popular pedestrian street called Calle Mateos Gago located in front of the cathedral. The street is lined with shops, bars and taperia restaurants. I explored several alleyways, as well, photographing some of the beautifully crafted oversized wooden doors that mark the vestibule entrances of the older medieval residential buildings.

Circling back towards the cathedral I ran into Krish and Pratima having lunch at an outdoor café on Calle Mateos Gago and joined them. I ordered something light from the tapas menu. When it was time to rendezvous we headed back to the cathedral together with Nina who spotted us from the street while we were having lunch. By now there was an enormous queue to enter the church – and for a moment I thought we would be waiting a long time to get in – but because we were a tour group we whisked to the front of the line when it was our designated time. By the way, this is one of the benefits of guided touring, the easier accessibility to very popular – and crowded – tourist attractions.

We donned our Whisper listening devices so we could hear Elena through the non-stop chatter of the crowds and competing tour guides. There were so many things to see we actually spent forty-five minutes inside this marvelous cathedral. I have visited many beautiful churches and temples throughout my travels. In fact, if I had a dollar for every one I've seen...um, I'd have a *shitload* of dollars! And the Cathedral of Seville turned out to be one of my favorites. The combination of history and architecture on display within this church is truly stunning.

Construction of the cathedral began in 1401 and was completed in 1507, although structural problems and additions led to further

work over the centuries. But the history surrounding this magnificent church goes back much further. In 1182, Abu Yaqub Yusuf, the ruler of the Almohad Caliphate that controlled North Africa and much of the Iberian Peninsula, built a grand mosque on the site where the cathedral would later stand. In 1248, King Ferdinand III of Castile – one of Spain's most successful monarchs, uniting several independent Spanish kingdoms during his reign – conquered Seville from the Moors. Shortly thereafter, the grand mosque was converted into the city's cathedral. The inside of the mosque was reconfigured; it was partitioned and adorned to accommodate a Christian house of worship, with walls added to create chapels along the bays of the southern and northern parts of the former mosque.

By the turn of the 15th century, following the Christian Reconquest (*Reconquista*) of the Iberian Peninsula, Seville became a successful trading center, and to showcase its rising status and wealth among cities, a new, spectacular cathedral was commissioned in 1401 to replace the one built within the converted mosque. The new cathedral was designed in a Gothic style while still retaining some Moorish elements, most notably the Giralda Tower, the cathedral's bell tower, which was actually the minaret of the former mosque. This 343-foot tower, the top of which was re-created during the Renaissance, is an iconic symbol in the city. Another feature of the former mosque that survived the new construction was the *sahn*, the courtyard where Muslims would perform ablutions (ritual cleansing) before prayer. It is now a wide, beautiful courtyard known as the Patios de los Naranjos, containing a fountain and rows of orange trees.

The stated purpose of the cathedral builders at the time was to awe the world with its grandness. And that's exactly what they did. When it was finally completed, the Cathedral of Seville – officially named the Cathedral of St. Mary of the See (*Catedral de Santa Maria de la Sede*) – became the largest cathedral in the world. A

title it held for centuries. Today, this World Heritage building still ranks as both the largest Gothic cathedral on the planet *and* one of the top three largest cathedrals of all time. This thing is huge, with fifteen doors along its four facades, each entrance decorated with its own Gothic designs.

We entered through the courtyard next to the Giralda Tower, walking underneath...(I kid you not)...a suspended stuffed alligator. Elena told us the alligator was a gift from the Sultan of Egypt to King Alfonso X when the sultan asked for his daughter's hand in marriage. And while the marriage fell through – *is anyone really surprised?* – King Alfonso X kept the gator, known as El Lagarto (the Lizard). As for why this stuffed creature ended up hanging over a courtside entrance into the cathedral is a mystery to me, but it's a popular thing with the kiddies, I read. And, I have to admit, a priceless *WTF…?* moment for most adults, too.

When we entered the cathedral, the first thing I noticed was the cavernous nature of the structure. The transept that crosses the central nave is 138-feet tall (42m). The interior had the intricately carved vaulted-ceilings of a typical Gothic church, a somber ambience made even more so by the limited amount of light filtering in from its stain-glassed windows, most of which are set high on the walls. The cathedral has an astonishing number of beautifully gilded wooden chapels that are closed off using wrought-iron gates, a unique feature of Iberian cathedral art. How many chapels did the cathedral have? The total number is 80. *Whoa*.

Along these chapels are exquisite sculptures, paintings, royal historical artifacts and famous tombs. In the domed Royal Chapel (*Capilla Real*) you'll come across the tombs of King Fernando III – who captured Seville from the Moors in 1248 – his son, King Alfonso X, and one of their descendents, King Pedro I of Castile. (Later, when I did my own research, I thought it odd that King

Pedro had been interred inside the cathedral because he was described as a maniacal bastard who committed so many atrocities, including persecutions against the clergy, that he was ex-communicated and dethroned). And in a portal on the south side of the cathedral you'll find the tomb of Christopher Columbus. Built in 1892, his tomb is surrounded by four statue pallbearers from the Middle Ages, representing the four kingdoms of Spain. Whether or not Columbus' remains are actually inside was a matter of fierce debate until not too long ago. Columbus died in 1506 and supposedly his remains have been moved and re-interred several times throughout the centuries. According to Elena, though, recent DNA testing has confirmed that at least some of the remains within the tomb are authentic. One of his two sons, Diego, is also entombed inside the cathedral.

We began our tour in front of the enormous twin organs suspended above the central nave. The two original organs – the Gospel organ of 1793, and the Epistle organ of 1831 – did not survive the earthquake that hit the region in 1888. According to Elena, the current twin organs were installed at the turn of the last century and are now controlled electronically from a console lying on the floor between them. Directly in front of the organ facing the south side of the cathedral is the incredible Gothic altarpiece of the Grand Chapel (*Capilla Mayor*). Considered the tallest altarpiece in the world, it was created by the Flemish sculptor, Pieter Dancart, and took more than 40 years to complete. This towering work of art, consisting of 45 wooden panels – each intricately carved, painted and gilded – depicts the life of Christ and scenes from the bible. It was the most remarkable altarpiece I've seen in all my years of traveling.

We slowly made our way through the cathedral, seeing the more important chapels, tombs and artwork, and finished our tour at the famous Chapel of St. Anthony (*Capilla de San Antonio*). This chapel contains a large, popular painting entitled the *Vision of*

Anthony, one of the greatest works by the 16th century Baroque painter Bartolome Esteban Murillo. The reason this painting is so popular is because St. Anthony is considered, among other things, the patron saint of the lovelorn. Young women apparently pray before this huge painting asking for a husband. The painting is also famous because it was defaced when thieves cut out the image of St. Anthony in 1874. The section that was stolen was eventually recovered the following year and returned to the cathedral where famed art restorer Salvador Martinez Cubells was able to re-attach it. Besides the works by Murillo, you'll find plenty of artwork on display throughout the cathedral– spanning the 15th to the 19th centuries – including works by such notables as Goya and sculptor Pedro Roldan (to name a few).

We finished our tour of the cathedral at 4:15pm and exited through the Courtyard of the Orange Trees (*Patio de los Naranjos*), the oldest section of the cathedral dating back to the Grand Mosque of the 13th century. Outside, a sitting section was erected along one side of the cathedral to accommodate visitors and dignitaries for the upcoming procession scheduled for later in the evening. Inside the cathedral we were able to see some of the large religious floats that would be used in the procession. Elena told us that the men who carry these incredibly heavy floats down the streets (on their shoulders) are positioned underneath them and cannot see in any direction. There is a person who guides them, telling them when to stop, walk, turn right, etc, etc.

We said 'goodbye' to Elena (but only for the day since she would be our guide the following morning when we did our tour of the city), and then we headed back to the Murillo Gardens to our awaiting bus. We arrived at our hotel, the Macia Sevilla Kubb, around 5:30pm. Most of us relaxed until it was time for dinner, tired from all the driving and walking. I made instant coffee in my room and wrote the day's events in my journal notebook. At 7:45pm our group met in the lobby and we walked around the

corner of the hotel to a taperia restaurant called the Cinco Jotas Sevilla for an included dinner. I have no idea how many different tapa dishes they served because they just kept putting new ones on the table. Some of the ones I could remember were oxtail croquettes, a shredded shrimp and potato salad, and stuffed artichokes with blue cheese. Dinner was a fish filet, and dessert a delicious cream pastry drizzled with chocolate syrup. Someone in the group asked Javier what was the origin behind tapas, and he told us that *tapa* means 'to cover' in Spanish. A long time ago, he said, it was customary for local taverns to serve a piece of bread with beer. While drinking, most patrons would often cover their cups with the bread to keep the flies out. Eventually, tapas evolved beyond just bread, and today this concept of 'appetizers' has become an extension of Spanish cuisine.

We were back at the hotel by 10:00pm. The front desk had provided a printed timetable of the religious processions scheduled for that evening, and where we could go to see them, but I was too exhausted to stay up any further. My body had finally acclimated to the new time zone and I could barely keep my eyes open. I crawled into bed and quickly dozed off.

Day Six

I woke up at 6:00am feeling fully rested after a solid eight hours of sleep. I did my exercises and then shaved and showered. I busied myself editing my photos and writing some more notes in my journal. At 7:30am I headed downstairs to the hotel restaurant for breakfast. By 9:00am we were on the bus for a driving tour of the city. Our local guide was Elena, the same woman who led us

through the cathedral the day before. She officially welcomed us to Seville, and as the bus pulled away from the hotel she told us some interesting facts about the city, giving us a brief historical overview.

Located in the southwest corner of the country, Seville is not only the capital of its province, but also the capital and largest city of the autonomous *Andulasia* Region of Spain. Seville is situated along the lower reaches of the Guadalquivir River, which flows into the Atlantic Ocean at the Gulf of Cadiz approximately 110 km (or 68 miles) southwest of the city. The metropolitan area of Seville – which includes the municipality and its surrounding suburbs – has a population of over 1.5 million, making it the fourth largest urban area in Spain. The Old Quarter we visited yesterday contains several UNESCO World Heritage Sites, all within walking distance of each other. And while the Old Quarter only makes up about 2 square miles of the city's total land space, this is where the vast majority of visitors to Seville spend their time.

Seville has a long history of human settlement. Archaeological excavations found in the city date back to the 8th century BC. The city was known as *Hisbaal* under the Phoenicians and the pre-Roman inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula. When the Romans took over, the city was called *Hispalis*. Under the Romans the city prospered, growing into an important trading and industrial hub. Several archaeological remains from Roman times can still be seen in the city today. During the 5th and 6th centuries various groups of Germanic peoples (Vandals, Suebi and Visigoths) took turns controlling the area before the Moors arrived in 712-13. Over the ensuing 500 years a revolving door of different North African Islamic and Berber Muslim dynasties held sway over the city until it fell to the Christian Kingdom of Castile in 1248. During Castilian rule Moorish buildings were converted and new architectural designs sprang up mixing Gothic and Mudejar (a form of re-imagined Moorish art).

Towards the end of the *Reconquista* in 1478, the Christian monarchs of Spain (King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella I of Castile) established the Tribunal of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, better known as the Spanish Inquisition. The very first tribunal was established in Seville. The Spanish Inquisition was instituted for the purpose of maintaining Catholic orthodoxy in the Spanish kingdoms, and also to replace the older Medieval Inquisition that was strictly under Papal control. Earlier, during the pogroms of the late 1300s, Jews and Muslims who lived within Christian kingdoms on the Iberian Peninsula were forced to convert to Catholicism. A hundred years later, the goal of the Spanish Inquisition was to ferret out 'heretics' among these converted peoples. But it wasn't long before the Spanish Inquisition took an even more ominous turn: testing the faith of the new (and older) converts to Catholicism, hunting down witches, violently suppressing any anti-Catholic notions, and, eventually, the outright expulsion of Jews and Muslims from the Iberian Peninsula.

In 1503, as a result of Columbus' New World discoveries, the Kingdom of Castile established the House of Trade of the Indies (*Casa de Contratacion de las Indias*) in Seville, making this port city the crown agency for trade in the Americas. The House of Trade was responsible for collecting a hefty royal tax on all goods and trade from overseas, making Seville a very wealthy metropolis and ushering in its Golden Age, which lasted until the early 1700s when the principal port city of Spain (and the House of Trade) was moved from Seville to Cadiz in 1717. By then, the Spanish Empire was beginning what would turn out to be its future worldwide decline, and, in a way, Seville's diminished status seemed to reflect that.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, the city's urban land space was greatly expanded. Elena said this was due to two main

factors. The first was the construction of its railway system at the end of the 19th century; the second was the intense preparations made for the Ibero-American Exposition of 1929, which led to the modernization of its streets and buildings and prompted urban growth in the southern part of the city. During the Spanish Civil War, Seville was one of the first cities to fall under Franco's forces in 1936. It remained, like most of the country, economically and culturally isolated throughout WWII. Since then, the city's shipyard was re-opened and there has been steady growth in industry, trade, agriculture and tourism. Seville is a popular tourist destination and receives millions of visitors annually.

We drove south along Menendez Pelayo Avenue until we reached the El Cid Monument and then turned left onto Portugal Avenue traveling east between two parks – the St. Sebastian Square Gardens (*Jardines del Prado de San Sebastian*) on our left, and the much larger Maria Luisa Park (*Parque de Maria Luisa*) on our right. A short distance later we pulled into the parking lot of the landmark Plaza de Espana, a beautifully laid out public square built specifically for the Ibero-American Exposition of 1929. We exited the bus and followed Elena into the square where she told us more about the Plaza de Espana and then gave us time to walk around and take pictures.

This was one impressive public square, consisting of a series of connected buildings in the shape of a large half-circle with towers on each end. In front of these buildings, surrounded by a canal, is a massive paved plaza – also in the shape of a semi-circle – with an enormous water fountain in the middle. The entire complex is huge, roughly 50,000 square meters in size. The canal separating the buildings from the plaza can be crossed by one of four intricately decorated pedestrian bridges representing the four previous kingdoms of Spain. The whole thing was designed by Spanish architect Anibal Gonzalez, and was used during the Ibero-American Exposition to showcase Spain's Industry and technology

exhibits. Completed the year before the fair, it is a work of art unto itself. Gonzalez used an unusual mix of architectural styles ranging from Art Deco to Revival Renaissance and Revival Baroque to Neo-Mudejar; in a combination he called Regionalism. He wanted the Plaza de Espana to embody the history and influences that have shaped not only the country but also its individual regions. Along the base of the buildings facing the square are 48 beautifully tiled alcoves (with benches) representing the different provinces of Spain, each decorated with images of historical events exclusive to that province, including a map of the province in front of every alcove. There was so much to look at, one could easily spend hours here. Elena told us that today the buildings of the square are used as the headquarters for the military in Seville.

The Plaza de Espana was built along the eastern edges of the Maria Luisa Park, a public green space that once served as the gardens of the Palace of San Telmo. The youngest daughter of King Ferdinand VII (um, Maria Luisa) donated the land to the city, and in the early 1900s a French landscape architect, Jean-Claude Nicolas Forestier, redesigned the gardens into the park we see today. And it's absolutely beautiful; I walked through a section of it later that afternoon when I was heading back to our hotel from the Old Quarter. In addition to serving as a botanical garden – with a lush mix of palm, orange and Mediterranean trees surrounded by stylized flowerbeds and plants – there is roughly a half mile of tiled fountains, benches, pavilions, walls and monuments to look at, some of it hidden behind overflowing vines.

From here, we spent an hour driving around the streets adjacent to the southern sections of the Maria Luisa Park, which were expanded and modernized for the 1929 Ibero-American Exposition. Seville at the turn of the previous century had relatively narrow streets (a common thing in old European cities), a holdover from a time when horses and carriages ruled the roads. To accommodate the increasing flow of vehicular traffic – and the

expected increase in tourism as a result of the exposition – it was decided to widen the streets in this particular section of the city. The prime example of this is the much wider Maria Luisa Avenue.

From the Plaza de Espana we returned to the El Cid Monument and made a left onto Maria Luisa Avenue from the roundabout in front of the University of Seville, heading south towards the Guadalquivir River. We passed the city's large public library (*Enfanta Elena Biblioteca Publica*) in the process. Just before reaching the Puente de los Remedios (one of many bridges that cross the river), we made another left at the Monument of Juan Sebastian de Elcano – a famous navigator who led one of the boats during Magellan's historic trek around the globe – and made another left onto a street called Paseo de las Delicias following it to the southeastern corner of the park before making a U-turn and heading back.

During the drive, Elena told us that Seville also hosted the Seville Expo of 1992, which included exhibitions from over 100 countries, making it the largest world's fair at the time. The '92 Expo lasted six-months and drew more than 44 million visitors to the city. She pointed out the official pavilions of various countries that were used in the fair. We passed the Peruvian, Mexican, Columbian, Brazilian, Guatemala and American pavilions. As we approached the southeastern edges of the park we passed two museums: the Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions (*Museo de Artes y Costumbres Populares de Sevilla*) and the Archeological Museum of Seville (*Museo Arqueologico de Sevilla*). Sandwiched between these two museums was another beautiful square called the Plaza de Americas with ornately decorated pavilions built around a pond and gardens.

Our short driving tour of the city ended in front of the Murillo Gardens. Yesterday, when we visited the cathedral, we walked through this area but didn't really stop to appreciate it. The Murillo

Gardens is a spacious, landscaped public park filled with an array of trees and flowers like palm, orange, bougainvilleas, jasmine and more, situated along the outer walls of the Royal Alcazar Palace complex. In its center is a tall monument to Christopher Columbus. Beyond the gardens, Elena and Javier led us through the medieval cobblestone neighborhood of Santa Cruz, the former Jewish section and heart of the Old Quarter.

We walked through the Jewish quarter's meandering narrow alleyways, passing many small plazas and courtyards lined with orange trees and traditional Moorish tiled benches; the balconies of the homes decorated with flowers. Once again, this wonderfully preserved 'Jewish quarter' belies the harsh reality of its past, when Jews were murdered in their homes or banished from the city on orders of the Spanish monarchs back in the Middle Ages. But it wasn't always like that. Originally, when King Ferdinand III conquered the city from the Moors in 1248, the Jewish community – which included about 200 families – welcomed their new Christian overloads and were rewarded with good farming lands and allowed to co-exist peacefully. A new Jewish Quarter was created for them and their merchants prospered despite being heavily taxed. In fact, several synagogues were built in the area, attesting to the relatively good relationship the Jews had with their new Christian rulers (who depended on the Jews for financial support). But all that changed during the pogroms of the late 1300s when Jews and Muslims were viciously attacked and forced to convert to Catholicism. By the time of the Spanish Inquisition a hundred years later, most of the remaining Jews and Muslims were either killed or forced to flee the peninsula. Synagogues were converted into Christian churches. An example of this is the Iglesia Santa Maria la Blanca (Church of St Mary the White), located in what used to be the busiest square in the Jewish quarter. This church was once a mosque under the Moors, but was later converted into a synagogue. Today, it is a Catholic church, which still contains remnants of the former synagogue.

Elena told us the Jewish quarter was not confined to Santa Cruz; it extended into the adjacent San Bartolome and Santa Maria neighborhoods, as well. We entered the Jewish quarter and followed *Callejon de Agua* (Water Street), an alleyway running alongside the walls of the Royal Alcazar, so-named because the former aqueduct system that provided the palace with water ran along its path. We continued walking through the twisting medieval narrow streets, which had unusual names like *Pimienta* (Pepper), *Vida* (Life) and *Muerte* (Death). The last one, *Muerte*, has now been renamed Susona Street and has an interesting history. In 1481, a group of Jewish leaders in the city, upset over the rising anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment of the Christian rulers, had plotted an uprising in Seville. A successful banker named Diego Suzon was the ringleader. He had a beautiful daughter who had fallen in love with a Christian knight. When she realized her lover would be a target of the upcoming insurrection, she informed on the group and the rebellion was stopped before it could get off the ground. Diego Suzon and the other leaders were arrested and later executed. When his daughter died, she asked that her skull be placed in front of the house where she lived inside the Jewish quarter as a form of punishment for betraying her father and the others. Near her former home are two tiles that tell the legend of the Jewish Susona.

At the end of a street called *Calle Gloria* we stopped briefly in front of the *Hospital De Los Venerable,* located on the corner of the Venerables Plaza. This former hospital was originally constructed in a cheerful Baroque style in the late 1600s, and was used to treat the elderly and poor, and to house retired clergy. The building now serves as a museum. Although we did not go inside (they charge an admission fee) Elena told us the two-story building wraps around a gorgeous central patio and has an attached church with unique paintings covering the walls and ceiling. From here we walked the length of an extremely narrow street called *Calle*

Reinoso, better known by the locals as *Calle de los Besos* (or Kissing Street). I'm not sure why this claustrophobic-inducing alleyway is such a *puckerable* place, though. I think Elena told us it's because someone can stand on the balcony on one side of this street and kiss a person standing on the balcony on the other side of the street simply by leaning over. Or…(hear me out)… maybe because the alleyway is so narrow and secluded it becomes an ideal place for lovers to make out. *Who knows*?

We back-tracked to Calle Gloria and took a 20-minute break at the Imitad Café, a corner establishment known for its delicious churros. Afterwards we walked down Calle Gloria to see the Plaza de Dona Elvira, a charming little square with shady orange trees. From here we headed west, coming upon another, much larger historical plaza called *Patio de Banderas*, which is surrounded by the walls of the Alcazar Palace. It is called the Patio de Banderas (Courtyard of Flags) because it was the traditional place to hang official flags announcing the arrival of a king. Today, this open plaza serves as the exit point for people visiting the Alcazar palace.

It was a short walk to the last stop on our included morning tour, the *Plaza de Truinfo* (Triumph Square). This square is surrounded by all three of Seville's UNESCO World Heritage Sites (the Cathedral of Seville, the Alcazar Palace and the General Archive of the Indies building). The plaza gets its name from a Baroque-style shrine called Triumph of Our Lady of the Patronage, which has an image of the Virgin Mary holding the Baby Jesus. This shrine was erected in 1756 to commemorate what the faithful consider to be the 'divine sparing' of Seville from the intense damage caused by the 1755 Earthquake. Nowadays, the Plaza de Triunfo is usually the meeting point for walking tours since it is located in the heart of the Old Quarter.

It was now 11:15am. The rest of the day was at leisure for us to explore Seville on our own. Javier offered suggestions for those of

us who wanted to stay in the Old Quarter, and told us that he would be hanging around until 12:15 in case anyone just wanted to have lunch and return to the hotel on the bus. Several of us formed a group consisting of Nina, Krish, Pratima, Siu, Katherine, Angela, Norman, Jack, Christina and myself. We wanted to visit a site called *Las Setas* (the Mushrooms) – a wood-and-steel viewing platform built in the geographic center of the Old Quarter that offers panoramic views of the city.

Krish lead the way since he had mapped the site's destination on his cell phone. I was grateful (and equally astonished) by Krish's ability to get around with only his phone as a guide. As I mentioned earlier in this journal, I have no sense of direction, despite being a retired mailman. Sometimes I have trouble getting my bearings even when I *use* Google Map. I have no idea why my brain functions this way. As the tour unfolded I came to rely heavily on Krish's 'navigational skills' whenever we had free time on our hands.

We set out from the Plaza de Triunfo and walked along Calle Mateos Gago for several blocks before Krish's cell phone instructed us to turn left. I cannot tell you the exact route we took because the Old Quarter is a large labyrinth, twisting and meandering at every corner. All I can say with any certainty is that we trekked mostly through the *Casco Antiguo*, which is described in my guidebook as the core of the Old Quarter just to the north of the Cathedral of Seville. This area encompasses several different barrios (or neighborhoods), including the biggest commercial streets of the city, brimming with storefronts, taperias, cafes, museums, historical plazas and churches. No wonder tourists to Seville spend most of their time here.

The walk to Las Setas took us about thirty or so minutes because we stopped often to take photos of some of the historical buildings and plazas in the area like the Plaza of the Passion of

Jesus (*Plaza de Jesus de la Pasion*). Without a tourist map (or some prior research and planning) it is very easy to overlook many of the historical places within the Old Quarter. The shops and restaurants lining the streets here make everything look very similar after a while. Most visitors to the Plaza of the Passion of Jesus, for example, wouldn't know that this quaint, unassuming square has been around since the 13th century. Back then it was called the Bread Square (*Plaza del Pan*) because it was the center of the Bakers Guild. I read online that most locals still affectionately refer to this plaza as Bread Square. At one end of this plaza sits the four-story Pedro Roldan Building – built during the 1920s in a Regionalist architectural style by one of the city's famed architects, Jose Espiau y Munoz – its façade and dome decorated with beautiful blue tiles.

From this plaza we walked one block over to yet another historic public square called *Plaza del Salvador* (Square of the Savior). This rectangular-shaped sunny plaza, situated in the Alfalfa barrio, features another of Seville's grand Catholic churches: the Collegiate Church of the Devine Savior (*Iglesia Colegial del Divino Salvador*). This 17th century church is the second largest in the city after the Cathedral and – judging by the queue to get inside – another popular tourist attraction of the Old Quarter. Again, most visitors to Seville would be surprised to discover that this square has existed, in one form or another, since Roman times. Under the Moors, the area was a public market and contained the biggest mosque in the city, which was eventually demolished to make way for this structure. The Collegiate Church of the Devine Savior was built in both a Mannerist (Late Renaissance) and Baroque style over a 38-year period. It was completed in 1712 and is famous for its magnificently gilded woodcraft, spectacular altarpiece and numerous frescoes.

We continued heading north for about ten more minutes before reaching Las Setas. At first glance Las Setas seemed quite bizarre;

six connecting parasols shaped like gigantic honeycombed mushrooms reaching a height of up to 85-feet (26m). It was built inside the Incarnation Plaza (*Plaza de la Encarnacion*), one of the oldest squares in the city, dating back to the Romans. The story of how this structure came to be is as convoluted as its shape. During the 19th century a large indoor marketplace was built inside the plaza, which continued to function until 1973 when the dilapidated building housing the public market was finally torn down. The site was fenced-in and remained dormant for decades. In the 1990s, the city government commissioned an underground garage to be built on Incarnation Plaza with a new marketplace above it. During its construction, though, Roman and Moorish ruins were discovered underneath the site and the plans had to be nixed while the area was excavated. In 2003, not certain what to do with Incarnation Plaza, the city accepted architectural bids from the international community. *This* is what they came up with. The project took six years to build (2005 – 2011) and was plagued with construction delays and cost overruns that doubled the initial price of the complex, making the whole thing a controversial boondoggle for the city. But, its here now, and to paraphrase the movie *Field of Dreams*: "If they build it, tourists will come…"

Initially entitled the Metropol Parasols, the city changed the name to Las Setas when the architect who designed it registered the original name and wanted to charge the city a fee for using it. The structure is divided into four levels. The underground level (the Antiquarium) has a museum displaying the Roman and Moorish ruins discovered on the site. Level 1 (the street level) has a central market. The roof of Level 1 is an open-air public plaza that is shielded by the towering parasols. Levels 2 and 3 consist of the viewing platforms that wrap around the mushrooms offering a 360-degree view of the city. There is also a restaurant and gift shop on the upper levels.

In order to access the elevators to the viewing platforms you need to go to the underground level and pay a fee. I don't recall how much it was, but it was reasonable as far as touristy things go. The only problem was the long lines in front of the ticket windows. I got on the shortest queue I could find and assumed everyone else in the group had done the same. But when I got my ticket and proceeded to the elevators, only Jack and Christina had joined me. The three of us spent roughly twenty minutes walking the platforms, taking photos of the city before heading back down to the street level where we met up with the others again. At his point, our little group split up. Krish, Pratima, Nina, Angela and Norman decided to walk to the riverfront to see the view from there. Jack and Christina wanted to go shopping for souvenirs. I had my heart set on touring the inside of the Alcazar Palace.

I accompanied Katherine and Siu back to the Cathedral area. The day had been overcast with intermittent drizzling and the two women wanted to catch the bus back to the hotel to rest. I left them before we reached the Plaza del Truinfo, opting to have a quick lunch before touring the Alcazar Palace. I stopped at an outdoor café and ordered a light lunch of toasted bread topped with Iberico ham, tomatoes and olive oil, and a non-alcoholic beer. Afterwards, I walked over to the ticket counter for the Alcazar Palace (located within the Patio de Banderas) and waited nearly 30 minutes on line to purchase my ticket. The wait should have been much longer but it started to rain harder and the line thinned out as people ran for cover. Thankfully, I had a small umbrella in my backpack. I entered the Alcazar Palace at 2:00pm and spent the next hour and a half touring this beautiful UNESCO World Heritage Site using the small map brochure they provided at the entrance as my guide.

The official name of the palace is the *Reales Alcazares de Sevilla* (the Royal Alcazars of Seville), but it is popularly known as the Alcazar of Seville. The word 'alcazar' is Arabic for residential fortress. During the early part of the 10th century, the ruling caliph

built a fortified residence on this spot. Over the ensuing centuries, different Moorish rulers continued to expand the original alcazar, adding more palaces, courtyards, stables and warehouses. A mosque was added that would later become the Cathedral of Seville. After the fall of the city to the Kingdom of Castile, the Moorish palace would be converted into the residence of the new Christian monarchs. I read online that the royal family of Spain still uses the upper floors of the palace whenever they visit Seville. It is one of the most popular attractions in the city, and after walking through it I can see why.

Under Christian rule the former Arabic alcazar was transformed into a totally new palace complex. Over a five hundred year period most of the Arabic features gave way to a unique blend of European styles. In fact, the Alcazar today is considered an excellent example of Mudejar architecture, which combined Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance and Arabic structural elements. I entered through the *Puerta de Leon* (the Lion's Gate). Above this entrance is a tiled image of a crowned lion gripping a Christian cross in its claws. Because I did not have a tour guide with me to explain what I was seeing – the little map brochure only gave an outline of the complex – I wandered through most of the rooms and courtyards relatively quickly, and yet still managed to spend an hour and a half inside the palace. That's how big this place is.

While there are many exhibits to see (paintings, icons, prints, etc) there aren't a lot of furnishings, so most of the rooms look bare. The real details are in the architectural layout of each palace addition and the beautifully laid out garden areas. Perhaps the most striking thing I noticed was the extensive tile use. The Alcazar is famous for its tile decorations. The rooms of the various palace buildings are lined with both ceramic majolica and arista tiles. During the 15th and 16th centuries Seville became a major producer of these tiles, which were decorated with ridged images or had a

painted glazed finish. Most of the tiles featured geometric shapes inspired by Arabesque ornamentation. I made my way through the different buildings; most were connected through courtyards, with names like the Palace of King Pedro, the Gothic Palace, and the Cuarto Real Alto (the Tall Royal Room).

One of the most striking rooms I saw was the Hall of the Ambassadors (*Salon de los Embajadores*) inside the Palace of King Pedro. This hall served as the royal throne room and was built in the same spot as the older Moorish throne room, but greatly expanded. It became the central piece of the palace. Besides the phenomenal tile work, the hall features plant motif plasterwork and intricately decorated spandrels along its three arches, and a gold-mirrored cupola for a ceiling. The Hall of the Ambassadors leads into a spectacular courtyard called the Patio of the Maidens (*Patios de las Doncellas*), a sunken garden with a long narrow pool running along its center, surrounded by 24 intricately carved arches.

The last part I walked through before exiting the palace was the gardens. I deliberately saved this for last because there were benches and steps along its different sections where I could sit down and give my aching feet a respite. As you walk along the upper levels of the palace you get a nice view of the gardens below, which take up more than twice the space of the palace buildings, each section beautifully landscaped, with fountains, statues and man-made grottos. I left the palace through the Patio de las Banderas at 3:30pm.

From here I went over to visit the nearby General Archives of the Indies building, the only World Heritage Site in Seville I had not yet toured. It is housed in a Spanish Renaissance structure – the former merchant's exchange building that regulated trade with the colonies – and now serves as the repository of important archival documents from the time of the Spanish Empire (mostly pertaining

to its acquisitions in the Americas). Unfortunately, I could not go inside because it was closed on that day, I'm assuming because of the religious holiday. I took photos of the façade and then proceeded along the adjacent Santo Tomas Street and eventually ended up on the sidewalk of a wide avenue named after Christopher Columbus that runs parallel to the Alfonso XIII Canal. I decided to walk back to the hotel from here because Javier told us it would not take long and (I quote) 'impossible to get lost'. Well, getting lost is my middle name, folks.

I should have turned left prior to reaching the University of Seville. I assumed since I was walking alongside the Old Quarter I would run into the Murillo Gardens. Instead, I continued heading south and reached the Remedios Bridge in front of the Maria Luisa Park. The only good thing about getting lost was that I was able to walk through the park, which was very nice. I eventually got my bearings and made my way north on Menendez Pelayo Avenue, passing the Murillo Gardens (*finally*) on my left. I had to stop for a bathroom break at a café and decided to have a quick pastry and coffee before continuing on my way. It took me almost an hour and a half to reach the hotel. When I entered the lobby I ran into Nina, Angela and Norman who were on their way to see a religious procession that was passing through the area a few blocks from the hotel. As exhausted as I was I joined them and we walked to the designated intersection but were told by policemen in the vicinity that the procession had been cancelled due to the rain. *Oh, well*. I returned to my room and took a thirty-minute nap.

At 5:45pm our group gathered in the lobby and Javier led us on a twenty-minute walk (in light rain, mind you) to the famous Flamenco Dance Museum located in the Old Quarter. Along the way we stopped inside a small local church that was preparing for one of the many nightly processions in the city. Javier wanted us to see the religious float up close. It was standing in front of the altar surrounded by a growing crowd of parishioners. The centerpiece of

the float had a large image of Jesus on the cross. I have no idea how many men it takes to get inside this thing and hoist it around, but it sure looked heavy. From here, we continued down the street until we reached the Flamenco Dance Museum (*Museo del Baile Flamenco*), situated inside a beautifully refurbished 18th century town house.

Cristina Hoyos, one of Spain's most renowned flamenco dancers, opened the museum in 2006. I read online that she grew up in the Old Quarter near the museum. The building has four floors, each one dedicated to a different aspect of flamenco dance, culture and history. In addition, there is also a school dedicated to the art of flamenco dance and music. But we were not there to see the museum, which was closing by the time we arrived. Each night on the ground floor, after the museum closes, live shows are performed on a small stage in the courtyard section of the building. We had reservations for the 7:30pm show. The reason we arrived early was because Javier had also booked for us a private one-hour flamenco dance lesson prior to the performance. It was held in a small dance studio adjacent to the stage.

A dance instructor greeted us and immediately had the group on its feet practicing basic flamenco moves. I did not participate, and sat behind the group watching. Those of you who have read any of my previous journals know that I do not dance. I grew up listening to head-banging heavy metal music, which doesn't really lend itself to the art of dancing. As a result, I suffer social anxiety every time I try to dance in public. So, I avoid doing it. Besides, I was also very tired from all the walking and standing from earlier in the day, and all the damp, rainy weather was making the arthritis in my right knee act up. But, I tip my hat to my fellow tour members, most of who participated in the dance lesson. Some of them were pretty good, too.

After the dance lesson we took our seats on the left-hand side of the small stage. The theater is set up in the former central courtyard of the building. When I looked up I saw an odd thing; a group of chairs were suspended in the ceiling space above the stage. The show lasted an hour. There were six performers: three flamenco dancers (one male and two females) and three guitar-playing musicians. I don't recall how many dance routines they did, but it was pretty entertaining. I sat in the front row, literally an arm's length from the stage, and was able to appreciate the physical conditioning of these dancers up close as they stomped and twirled in cadence with the excellent guitar music. The male dancer would work his way into such a frenetic pace that sweat flying off his brow hit many of us in the front row! Seville is definitely the place to witness flamenco dancing, as evident by all the *tablaos* (flamenco bars) in the city. Every visitor to Spain should experience this little slice of Andalucian culture before they leave the country.

The show ended around 8:30pm. The rest of the night was free. The group split up. Some remained in the Old Quarter but most walked back to the hotel with Javier. Nina and I were both pretty hungry and we agreed to look for a restaurant in the area. There were throngs of people everywhere at that hour. All of the restaurants and cafes were packed. We found a tapas bar on one street corner that had a table open next to the bar. Many of these tapa bars do not provide chairs (or enough of them), so we had to stand like in an old western saloon. We managed to get the attention of the waitress (and it wasn't easy, let me tell you) and ordered some drinks. As we perused the tapas menu, we met a retired American couple from New Mexico who were driving through Spain and Portugal. The four of us shared the table and chatted away. Nearly an hour later the waitress hadn't come back and Nina and I decided to go elsewhere for something to eat. It was getting late and we had an early departure the next day. We bid the

American couple farewell and headed out into the night in search of food.

We found an Arabic/Mediterranean restaurant down the street that was not crowded and spent the next hour and a half sharing stories about our lives while consuming meat kebabs, chicken tajine and pita bread with hummus. It was nearly 11:30pm when we asked for the check. As we exited the restaurant I was confident we were not going to get lost because we were not that far from the hotel and the path back was straight ahead. *Or so we thought*. Apparently, as we searched for a place to eat earlier in the evening we must have turned down a different side street without realizing it. When we left the restaurant we didn't make the necessary correction and ended up walking the wrong way. By now, the crowds were gone and the streets seemed deserted. After about twenty minutes we came to the same conclusion. Or rather the same question. *Where the hell are we*? It was late, dark and a little rainy, but we mustered on – the blind leading the blind – until we found an open restaurant and went inside to ask for directions. I didn't reach my hotel room until 12:15am. I immediately crawled into bed.

Day Seven

I awoke at 5:00am and couldn't go back to sleep. So much for getting acclimated to my new time zone. In addition to being groggy from lack of sleep, I was also physically tired (and a little achy) from the hours of walking I did the previous day. In other words, I was dragging my ass big time. After making a cup of instant coffee I repacked my luggage, shaved and showered. I wrote the previous day's details into my journal notebook and by

7:30am headed downstairs for breakfast. At 8:30am we were on the bus heading for our next destination, the ancient cliff side city of Ronda situated approximately 80 miles (128 km) southeast of Seville in the province of Malaga.

We drove west out of Seville for thirty minutes and made a scheduled stop at the Basilippo Olive Oil Mill to learn about the production of olive oil in the country. Located in a rural community on the outskirts of Seville, the Basilippo Olive Oil Mill is a family-owned business that sits on a 20-hectare (49 acres) farm called the Hacienda Merhha. The estate has 14,000 Arbequina olive trees on four separate farms that produce a ripe, delicious fruit. Utilizing both traditional and state of the art production methods, the Basilippo Olive Oil Mill is famous for making award-winning olive oils which are sold all over the world.

We spent an hour here touring the estate with one of the owners, a middle-aged, cultured individual named Isaac, who first took us into the olive groves to talk about the different types of olives. The family's two dogs followed us around the entire time. Throughout the estate were information boards in both English and Spanish explaining how olives are cultivated and processed into oils. Isaac would lead us to one of these signs at the end of a row of olive trees and elaborate. The very first thing he told us surprised me. All olives are green when harvested. Colored olives (like black, brown or red) are actually just very ripened green olives. He said there are essentially four types of olive oil. The first is Extra Virgin Olive Oil (EVOO), which is produced from cold-pressing the first harvest and has a fresh, fruity aroma. This is the very best kind of olive oil, and the only type they make on this estate. The second oil is labeled Virgin Olive Oil (VOO); this is the by-product of the second or third pressings. This oil does not smell fruity, and can be a little rancid. The third kind of oil is called Lampante Oil, which is not suitable for human consumption. It has a high acidity rate, and is produced from either poor quality

or improperly processed olives. This kind of oil is used for refining or for other technical uses. Its name stems from when the oil was used as fuel for lamps. The fourth kind is Olive Pomace Oil. This oil is part of the residue left over from the first pressing, which has to be treated with solvents to make it edible. This oil has industrial or technical applications, as well.

Isaac told us there is only one crop per season, which is usually in September. Due to global warming, the crops over the past two decades have been coming in earlier. This is critical because the percentage of oil inside an olive varies greatly depending on when it is harvested. The very first batch produces olives with only about 8.5 percent oil (which is the best), by the middle and late harvests the olives contain between 12-20 percent oil, but the quality drops significantly. When it is time to pick the first harvest, nets are placed on the ground around the olive trees and raking devices are used to gently pry the fruit off the trees and onto the nets where they are rounded up and immediately taken to the mill for processing. In order to preserve the fresh aroma of Extra Virgin Olive Oil, the olives must be milled within three hours of being harvested. Isaac told us that handpicking olives is the best way to harvest them, because it minimizes bruising. Olives that are bruised oxidize quickly and cannot be used to make Extra Virgin Olive Oil. But handpicking is also labor intensive and not practical, so they use rakes or boards that gently shake the tree branches.

From the groves we went inside the milling section of the hacienda to see the machines that grind out the delicious oil. The machines must be cleaned daily during harvest season to prevent contamination that could lead to a loss of aroma. There is no storage area for olives. Once the first crop comes in it is quickly milled. The collected olives are brought here and are run through a blower that extracts leaves and twigs, and then put on a conveyer belt where employees separate any damaged or bruised olives before going into the hopper. Once the fruit is grinded through the

milling machine, a paste is created and oil begins to rise to the surface. This mash is put inside a centrifugal machine to separate the oil, which is then transferred into large stainless steel containers that must be kept below 80 degrees (um, I'm assuming Fahrenheit). Isaac said nitrogen gas was also used when storing the oil, but I don't remember why. The last step is to simply bottle the olive oil. I did not know that Spain was the largest producer of olive oil in the world (over 1.1 million tons annually). But as we continued through the southern portions of the country, and later up north to Madrid, the amount of land space used for olive farming was truly staggering. At times we would drive for long stretches surrounded by nothing but rows of olive trees that extended up into the hillsides.

When our tour of the estate was over, Isaac invited us to a courtyard-dining hall where we sampled the olive oils produced on his farm. We became olive oil connoisseurs in just fifteen minutes. Different varieties of oils were lined up in small glasses in front of us. He told us to pick up a glass and smell the aroma (extra virgin olive oil has a fruity or vegetable-like smell). Then we tasted the oils. Isaac said a good olive oil is sweet on the tongue but has a bitter, peppery kick in the throat. He was right. And then, Isaac treated us to something I didn't even know was possible. His staff placed dishes of chocolate ice cream in front of us and we were instructed to pour one of the oils over the ice cream like a syrup. It was an orange-flavored extra virgin olive oil (they also produce a vanilla one, both using natural flavors). The group hesitated briefly, as if collectively thinking: *This is insane, chocolate ice cream covered in olive oil*? It was DELICIOUS! When the sampling was over we had some time to browse the gift shop and buy the different variety of oils they produce on the farm (some of us opted to have the oils shipped back to the States to avoid carrying bottles in our luggage).

By 10:15am we were back on the road heading towards Ronda. We drove southeasterly for roughly an hour and a half along a highway that changed names frequently (A-376, A375, A-384 and finally A-374). The natural beauty of the Andalusia, Spain's southernmost Autonomous Region, punctuated the entire drive. And while Andalusia's eight provinces combine to make this the second-most populated region of the country, you wouldn't know it from driving through its seemingly vast expanse of olive groves, farms, pastures and mountainous valleys. I never tired of the scenery. It was one gorgeously green, hilly landscape.

During the drive Javier gave us some basic information about Andalusia. He actually hails from the region. The name is derived from the Arabic word *Al-Andalus*, which is what the Moors called the Muslim-controlled areas of the Iberian Peninsula. To the east are Portugal and the Atlantic Ocean, and directly south are the Strait of Gibraltar, the northeastern tip of Africa and the Mediterranean Sea. Andalusia has historically been an agricultural region (hence all the farms and olive groves). Its hinterland is considered the hottest zone in Europe, with temperatures in the summer easily approaching or exceeding 100 degrees Fahrenheit (36-40 degrees Celsius). This region is fiercely proud of its Spanish identity and cultural influences, like flamenco and bullfighting. And due to its close proximity to North Africa, it has a long history of Moorish influence, as well, as evident by all the Hispano-Moorish architectural designs found in the older cities.

The geography of Andalusia can be loosely divided into three distinct sections: the Sierra Morena, a 450 km-long mountain chain that runs from east to west; the Cordillera Penibetica, a part of the much larger Baetic Cordillera mountain range, which stretches along the southern coast of Spain; and the valley of the Guadalquiver River. Historians often define Andalusia by these three geographical areas; each zone has made its own unique contribution to the overall Spanish identity. As we approached

Ronda, Javier played a selection of classical Spanish guitar music over the coach sound system. It was nice, but not my cup of tea, with one exception. He played a number entitled "*Entre Dos Aguas"* (Between Two Waters) by Paco de Lucia, a famed flamenco virtuoso guitarist from Andalusia who passed away in 2014. The guitar solo ends with an exhilarating build-up that is hard not to like.

We arrived at the Hotel Catalonia Ronda – located on Virgin de la Paz Street right across from the Plaza de Toros (the bullring) – shortly before noon. Most of the narrow streets in this mountaintop medieval city cannot accommodate large buses, so our driver parked across from the hotel, adjacent to the bullring. We did not check in, though. We were scheduled to have an included lunch at a restaurant just up the street, and immediately afterwards we were going to visit a local winery in the valley below. While we ate lunch our driver had our luggage brought to the hotel (our bags would be waiting for us in our rooms when we returned later that afternoon).

We ate our included lunch at the Pedro Romero Restaurant across from Ronda's bullring. This tavern-style eatery is decorated with photos of famous bullfighters and has mounted bull heads along the walls. The place is popular for its selection of local dishes. Our lunch consisted of a tasty soup with plenty of crusty bread, a fish and mashed potato dish, and a crème pastry drizzled with chocolate sauce. Afterwards, Javier led us down the street to an 18th century park called Alameda del Tajo, a series of tree-lined promenades that offer an excellent view of the valley below from suspended cliff side balconies. The view was spectacular. Ronda is located on a mountaintop 2,460 ft (750 m) above sea level. Surrounding this mountain is the beautiful Guadalevin valley that stretches out towards the Grazalema Mountain Range. And this was just one of many observation points in the city, which is divided into two sections by the Tajo Gorge. I took a ton of photos

of this place. In fact, it was one of my favorite destinations on the tour.

From the Alameda del Tajo we crossed the street at the Plaza de Merced (in front of Our Lady of Mercy Church) and walked several blocks to a public parking station where our bus was waiting for us. We drove down into the valley to visit a local vineyard called the Bodega Los Frutales-Joaquin Fernandez, an ecological winery dedicated to producing wines free of synthetic fertilizers or pesticides. The winery is one of three in the valley that produce organic wines. This family owned business was started in the year 2000 and is situated on a hilly 25 acres (10 hectares) vineyard. In addition to the hacienda's main residence, the site contains a distillery, cellar, tasting hall and a small guesthouse for visitors. Our bus could not fit through the estate's gatehouse, so we had to walk from the road up to the main house along a cobbled stone driveway. At the top of the driveway were two cages containing several insanely barking watchdogs (which can be a little disconcerting for the first time visitor).

We were greeted by the owner's son, whose name I do not remember. His English was impeccable, and he led us around the estate explaining to us the process of producing organic wines. We started out by walking to the edge of the vineyard, which slopes down towards the main road. It was not harvest season, so there were no grapes growing on the vines yet. He told us they get one crop each year and in between harvests they use sheep to graze and clean the fields and lady bugs to prevent some kind of tree fungus. From here we went into the distillery where he showed us the machine that mills the grapes. The ancient way of stomping grapes with human feet or wooden paddles is no longer practical; instead, grapes are fed into a machine with a large corkscrew device that grinds the juice out. The liquid is then stored in large stainless steel vats for 20 days – at a temperature between 57-73 degrees Fahrenheit (14-23 Celsius) – and then lactose is added. The

fermenting process continues for another 60 days before the wine is put inside oak barrels (which have been burned on the inside to lend a smoky flavor) and routinely stirred and stored for an additional time period, usually 6-12 months depending on the kind of wine they are making. He told us that white wines, or fruitier ones, need only six months of storage, while heavier, dark, smoother varieties require at least a year or longer. The last section he showed us was where the wine is bottled and corked and stored in a cellar (bodega). The estate also has around 25 beehives that not only help pollinate the grape vines, but also produces the wax that is used to seal the corks onto the bottles. The whole process seemed quite efficient and self-containing.

The Bodega Los Frutales-Joaquin Fernandez produces around 62,000 bottles of wine annually, and they also process and store wines for privately owned smaller vineyards or farms in the valley for a fee. When our tour of the estate ended, we were taken to a large tasting hall with numerous awards hanging on the walls. Three different types of merlot wines were placed on the long table in front of us. Our host would have us sip each glass and talk a little about the flavor and the kinds of food that best accompany that particular wine. I do not drink alcohol, but I wanted to partake in the sampling. I briefly swished each sample around my palate before discreetly spitting it out. I'm not a wine connoisseur (even when I used to drink) so I cannot offer an intelligent analysis of the wines, but I don't think my fellow travelers enjoyed them too much. Nobody purchased any of the varieties – as either gifts or to consume back at the hotel – and we had some active wine drinkers in the bunch. In fact, I think Javier was a little embarrassed by that, I heard him making excuses to the owner's son in Spanish before we left. (Yes, eavesdropping is a little known talent of mine).

We got to the hotel by 5:00pm. I sorted out my luggage and washed up, and then spent almost an hour writing down notes in my travel journal. At 6:15pm our group met in the lobby. Javier

had a surprise for us. He led us on a ten-minute walk from the hotel. We crossed the 18th century *Puente Nuevo* (New Bridge) – which lies over the Tajo Canyon – and entered the Old Quarter section of the city. We continued along *Calle Arminan,* the main street of the Old Quarter before turning right onto a narrower street called *Calle Tenorio*. A short distance later we arrived at the *Casa Museo de Don Basco* (the Museum House of Don Basco) where we were booked to attend a one-hour concert by internationally renowned composer and guitar soloist Paco Seco. Each year, during the spring and fall, classical guitar concerts are held in the house's main salon on the second floor.

The Museum House of Don Basco is a beautiful mansion built in 1850 and remodeled in the early 1900s in a modernist style. The house was owned by an upper-class family and named 'Don Basco' in homage to Giovanni Melchiorre Basco (1815-1888), an Italian priest who founded the religious society known as the Salesians of Don Basco, which sheltered and trained juvenile delinquents into a better life. Pope Pius XI declared him a saint in 1934. Incidentally, the term 'don' in Spanish is used to infer respect to an older, distinguished member of a community. It is placed before the individual's first name. For example, if I were given the title of Don Richard, it would be like saying Mr. Richard, and would denote that I was someone special or revered. The couple that owned the Don Basco House was childless, and when they passed away (during the 1930s), the house was donated to the Salesians Congregation. It was converted, among other things, into a sanatorium run by the Salesian priests until 2008. Today, this gorgeous property is used as a museum and entertainment hall for classical guitar performances.

We arrived at the Don Basco House thirty minutes before the scheduled concert, which was great because it allowed us time to explore the residence. The house retains its original interior from the early 1900s. In addition to the elegant tapestries, the collection

of paintings, and the unique panels of bull-fighting motifs on display, the house also features exquisite Castilian style walnut wood furniture and a remarkably handcrafted fireplace in the grand salon. But the most striking part of the mansion has to be the gardens, a terraced section built along the cliffs overlooking the valley and the Tajo Gorge, one of the most breathtaking views in the city. If you don't believe me, go look at my photos. The garden consists of an orchard surrounded by mosaic patios decorated with ceramic Nazarite tiles, fountains, and elegant stone benches. There was a staffed bar outside in the courtyard, and Javier bought us a round of drinks.

By 7:00pm we gathered in the main salon on the second floor (together with two dozen other tourists) for the Spanish classical guitar solo by Paco Seco. A gifted musician, he played several popular tunes, including some of his own compositions. I can't say I am a big fan of the genre, though. His picking was incredible, don't get me wrong, but there seemed to be no particular rhythm to any of the numbers. I guess outside of Guns N' Roses or Led Zeppelin I don't really have an ear for the finer nuances of virtuoso guitar playing. The concert lasted roughly an hour. And judging from the tired facial expressions of my fellow travelers I think that was more than enough. Afterwards, the group split up for the night.

I returned to the hotel with some of the others and spotted a McDonalds restaurant next to the Parador de Ronda, the city's nicest hotel, situated in a small square called the Plaza de Espana one block from our hotel. Nowadays I don't really like to eat American-style fast food when I travel, but I wasn't hungry enough for a sit-down restaurant meal and decided to have a quick burger for dinner. I was back in my room by 9:00pm. I tried to stay up for the nightly religious procession that was scheduled to pass by the hotel at 10:00pm. Unfortunately, I couldn't keep my eyes open (I'm not sure if it was the burger or the classical music). I slept soundly.

Day Eight

I was awake by 5:00am and felt fully rested. I recharged all my electrical gadgets, exercised, showered, wrote in my journal notebook and reviewed the information about Ronda in my travel guidebook. By 8:45am I went downstairs for breakfast. At 10:00am our group met in the lobby for a walking tour of the old quarter with local guide Andres. We all wore our Whisper listening devices so we could hear him clearly as we trekked through the streets. He told us that Ronda has a current population of approximately 30,000, with an additional 200,000 inhabitants living in the surrounding valley, who use Ronda as a hub for shopping and entertainment. On the weekends and during holidays this small city can sometimes get very crowded. As we walked, Andres gave us a brief historical rundown on the area.

Ronda is situated in the Malaga province of the Andalusia Autonomous Region. The town, together with the surrounding villages, is now part of the recently created Sierra de las Nieves National Park system. Ronda is perched atop a high mountainous area surrounded by a natural depression that gently rises, offering up good pasturelands and soil for farming. This is the beautiful valley one sees from the various lookout points. The city is divided – rather dramatically, I might add – into two sections (Old and New) which are separated by the Tajo Canyon, a gorge 120 meters deep (390ft) with the Guadalevin River running through it. Three historic stone bridges span this canyon: the Arabic Bridge (*Puente Arabe*), the Old Bridge (*Puente Viejo*) and the New Bridge (*Puente Nuevo*). We would see all three on our morning walk.

What is referred to as the 'New Town' section of Ronda – on the north side of the Tajo Gorge – is really 500 years old. But the Old Town on the other side of the canyon – and much smaller in size – has seen human settlement dating back more than 5,000 years. Andres said evidence of Neolithic tribal peoples have been found in many areas of Malaga, including cave paintings. The first to build an *actual* settlement or town in Ronda were the Celts, who arrived around the 6th century BC. They called it *Arunda*. Eventually the Romans moved into the area around the time of the Second Punic Wars (the epic battles fought between Rome and Carthage). Later, Ronda became an official city under Julius Caesar. And like much of the rest of the Iberian Peninsula, the Visigoths and then the Moors would end up conquering Ronda. In 1485, the city was liberated from its Muslim rulers and quickly converted into a Christian enclave. Most of the oldest buildings in the city today were built or modified from this period forward.

Ronda has also seen its fair share of violence, not the least of which were the ancient battles fought throughout the centuries between the Romans, Barbarians, Christians and Moors for control of the region. During the Napoleonic invasions of the early 1800s, Ronda suffered greatly, losing two-thirds of its population during that conflict. The mountainous areas surrounding Ronda became famous for its guerilla fighters and romanticized bandits. And in more recent times the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s exacted a heavy toll on the city, as well. Ernest Hemmingway gave a fictionalized account of an incident where Fascist sympathizers were executed and thrown off a cliff in his book *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which is supposedly based on true accounts of what happened in Ronda at the time. But today this idyllic mountaintop city is a joy to visit. It was one of my favorite stops on the whole tour.

From the hotel we walked up Carrera Espinal, a popular pedestrian street lined with restaurants and small shops. Most of

the businesses were still closed at that hour of the morning. On Virgen de los Remedios Street we turned right and walked to the Jardines de Cuenca, a small public park that offers a nice view of the Tajo Gorge and the city's New Bridge (*Puente Nuevo*). This is the 'newest' of the three stone bridges that cross the gorge. It was completed in 1793 and took 34 years to construct. A previous one-arch bridge built over this same area collapsed in 1741 killing 50 people. This bridge was made using *three* arches and has stood the test of time. According to Andres, the government routinely checks the structure to ensure its safety. In the center of the bridge, over the middle archway, is a chamber that was once used as a prison where criminals and political agitators (from both sides of the spectrum) where kept and tortured. Andres said guarding the prison was easy, since the only means of escape was a window that led to a 390-foot drop into the gorge. We could actually see the window from where we stood. At the very bottom of the gorge is the Guadalevin River, which, due to the season, was reduced to a trickling stream.

Directly across from us on the other side of the Tajo Gorge was a cliff side palace called House of the Moorish King (*Casa del Rey Moro*). The name is a misnomer since this was not a royal residence. It was built in the 18th century over the remains of a previous Moorish castle. The mansion is famous for its hanging gardens and for the remains of a water mine constructed during the 14th century by the Moors. The mine runs all the way down to the Guadalevin River and was used during times of Christian sieges to supply Ronda with water. Today, the house is rather dilapidated, I read, but you can tour the gardens and the mine tunnels leading down to the bottom of the gorge.

From the Jardin de Cuenca Park we walked further east and crossed the Old Bridge (*Puente Viejo*). We were now in the Old Town section of Ronda. The smaller one-arch Old Bridge – situated at a much lower elevation than the New Bridge along the

gorge – was built in 1616 and is used solely as a pedestrian pathway. The bridge provides a good view of several important sites in the area. Further down the gorge below us was the Arab Bridge (*Puente Arabe*), which was constructed during the late 1300s and sometimes referred to as the Roman Bridge (remnants of it date back to a previous bridge built here by the Romans). Near this bridge are the remains of the 13th century Arab baths, one of the best preserved of its kind in all of Spain.

From the bridge we continued into the Old Town, walking underneath a stone arch known as the Arch of King Philip V, built into the city's former Moorish defensive walls. We made our way through the winding cobblestone streets of this medieval section and reached the entrance of the 18th century Palacio del Marques de Salvatierra, a large aristocratic residence built over a 16th century palace. On the balcony above the main entrance are a series of four gruesome statues depicting Mesoamerican slaves from Peru bound and looking terrified. I read online that the house has a small museum containing Renaissance art and artifacts.

From here we proceeded to Arminan Street, the main artery of the Old Town, passing numerous side streets with centuries-old homes designed in the typical Spanish whitewashed style, with iron balconies and terra cotta roofs. Andres told us that buildings in the Old Town section are very expensive, and many locals have been selling their homes and moving into condos in other parts of the province. Most of the newly acquired homes in the old quarter have been converted into businesses like shops, restaurants, museums or small lodgings. He said a typical home here is usually no more than 800 sq feet, including the courtyard, and many require a lot of work and upkeep. I'm assuming the city also has strict regulations when it comes to new constructions or renovations in order to preserve the area's historical heritage.

We walked south on Arminan Street for a few blocks and came upon the biggest church in Ronda, the *Iglesia de Santa Maria la Mayor* (known locally as the Church of St. Mary of the Incarnation). Although not as impressive as some of the churches I had seen so far on this trip, this building does have quite a bit of history attached to it. The original structure was a mosque built during the 14th century. It was converted into a cathedral shortly after the Christian conquest of Spain was completed in 1485. A powerful earthquake destroyed the cathedral in 1580, and the church standing there now was constructed in its place. The small vestibule beyond the main doors contains one of the original columns from the cathedral of 1485. The church is located in front of the old town square, the Plaza Duquesa de Parcent. Several other notable buildings surround this plaza. On one side is the city's town hall (the *Ayuntamiento*). This three-story, block long structure was originally built in 1793 as a military barracks. The top two levels are decorated with superimposed arches. The bottom level of the building was once part of a Moorish public market, and some Arabic decorations can be seen, especially around the main entrance. The whole thing has been renovated twice, the most recent during the 1970s. Today it contains the offices of the mayor, the city council and several administrative departments of Ronda. The square also has two convents that date back centuries, one adjacent to the church, the other opposite the town hall.

From the Plaza Duquesa de Parcent we walked north along Manuel Montero Street, passing the beautiful Mondragon Palace, a public museum housed in a 14th century home with well-tended gardens, courtyards and cliff side balconies that offer panoramic views of the valley. A short distance later we reached the Plaza de Maria Auxiliadora, another small square with wonderful lookout points over the area. We noticed tourists hiking up and down the hillsides here and Andres told us there are trails leading to other observation points below, including one that can take you all the way to the bottom of the gorge just beneath the New Bridge.

From here we walked north along Tenorio Street, passing the Museum House of Don Basco where we attended the guitar concert the night before, reconnecting with Arminan Street and the New Bridge a few minutes later. On the corner directly in front of the bridge is the Santo Domingo Convent. This was one of two convents the Catholic Monarchs of Spain ordered to be built in Ronda after the defeat of the last Moorish king. Its rectangular church has three naves and was designed in a mix of Gothic, Renaissance and Mudejar styles. During the 16th century the convent was the seat of the Spanish Inquisition for the area.

We crossed the bridge, back into the New Town section of the city, and walked three blocks to tour the inside of the *Plaza de Toros*, Ronda's historic bullring. Andres led us first to a bronze statue of a Spanish bull located outside the bullring so we could see the type of bull used in bullfighting. I was surprised by its size; it was much smaller than I thought. Don't get me wrong, an angry, charging bull is frightening under any circumstances, I was just under the impression they were taller. Andres said the type of animal used for bullfighting in Spain (called a *toro bravo*) is a breed of Iberian heterogeneous cattle that some historians think may have come from wild bulls used by the Romans in their arena games. The bulls are bred free-range and are selected based on their aggressive behavior and strength. During the breeding process they have very limited contact with humans, which make them particularly aggressive towards them once they are in the bullring together. Most of the bulls are brown or black, and are raised in large fenced in pastures in the south of Spain. Under Spanish law the bulls have to be at least four years old and reach a minimum weight of 460 kg (just over 1,000 pounds…*yikes*!) before they are allowed to fight.

We spent the next thirty or so minutes touring the arena and its museum. Bullfighting, at least in Ronda, is limited to only one day

a year (in September). Three distinguished bullfighters fight a total of six bulls (two each) during the event. It is a sold-out annual affair, according to Andres. It's interesting to note that while bullfighting has a long tradition in Spain, it is becoming less popular due to animal rights activism. Some cities have banned the practice and there is an ongoing public debate whether this cruel sport should be abolished altogether. But Andres said bullfighting is a time-honored, deeply rooted cultural aspect of Spain and he doesn't see it disappearing anytime soon. In fact, there are bullrings in just about every major city in the country.

The Plaza de Toro of Ronda was built in 1785, making it the oldest, or one of the oldest in the country (other cities claim to have the oldest, so there seems to be some contention on this point). But nobody can refute Ronda's claim to the oldest or most noble order of horsemanship in Spain, where Spanish bullfighting originated. In 1572, King Philip II issued a royal decree establishing the creation of noble militias called *Real Maestranza de Caballeria* for the purpose of training the nobility in horsemanship and the art of cavalry fighting. The first such militia was the one in Ronda. During the 16th century, the cavalry was the typical military branch that members of the nobility went into. Over the centuries these militias would disappear or revert into horsemen clubs, which went on to perfect the art of bullfighting. In its infancy, bullfighting was originally done on horseback. When or why they decided to get off their horses – in bedazzled capri pants and capes, no less! – to confront an angry half-ton bull is a mystery to me. But it definitely takes a pair of *half-ton cojones* to do it.

We entered the arena through a side entrance, and saw the pens and stables where the bulls are kept prior to the fights. According to Andres, humans stay clear of these beasts. They are corralled into a stable by the opening and closing of heavy metal panels that are maneuvered by thick ropes from above. In fact, the only people

in the arena who want to get anywhere near these ferocious animals are the bullfighters. Each stable (one per bull) has water and grass and kept dark to calm the nervous creatures down. When its showtime, the metal door of the stable is lifted and the bull runs out into a corridor leading to an outdoor pen just inside the bullring. The pens are lined with thick wooden panels. The bulls, in their agitated state begin to kick the wood causing quite a ruckus, making the crowds roar with delight as the bullfighter, the only one in the bullring at this point, awaits the opening of the final gate that allows the beast to enter the ring.

According to Andres, the style of fighting is unique to each bullfighter. Some are guarded and use traditional methods, some like to show off with flamboyant moves and twirls. If the crowds like the performance they shout "Ole, Ole!" If not, they sit quietly with their arms folded. Each fight lasts roughly twenty minutes. Usually, the bull is killed and then afterwards butchered for its meat, which is in high demand. But there are times when a fiercely determined bull outwits a bullfighter (even gouging and killing them on occasion) and the life of the bull is spared. They are then retired to pastures where they will have the pick of dozens of cows to mate with.

We walked around the interior of the bullring. Its diameter is 217 feet long (66 meters) and is surrounded by two stone rings that serve to separate the animals from the ring prior to the fight. The arena has two levels of seating, each with five rows that run along the entire oval – accommodating up to 5,000 spectators – decorated with 136 pillars forming 68 arches. There is very little shade in this open bullring, and the seats are bench-like and didn't look too comfortable. The Royal Box, I believe, is the only section with any sun cover, a sloping roof decorated with Arabic tiles.

From the bullring we walked through the museum located within the curved halls of the ring. Here you'll see paintings,

costumes, swords, posters and other bullfighting memorabilia dating back two centuries. This is also a good place to learn about Ronda's two great bullfighting dynasties, the Romero and Ordonez families. The patriarch of the Romero clan invented the *muleta*, the red cape worn during the last phase of the bullfight. His grandson, Pedro Romero (1754 – 1839), is considered the greatest bullfighter who ever lived, having killed more than 5,000 bulls during his incredible 30-year career without any serious injuries, a feat yet to be replicated. During the 20th century, the Ordonez family produced several excellent bullfighters who were immortalized by Earnest Hemingway in two of his books. After the museum we exited the bullring through the main entrance, its enormous doors framed by two Tuscan columns decorated in a baroque style with the royal shield of Spain above it. We thanked and tipped Andres for a great walking tour and returned to the hotel, which was just down the street. It was ten minutes past noon and our group was scheduled to have a home-hosted lunch provided by two local families.

I quickly went up to my room to use the bathroom and freshen up, returning to the lobby at 12:30pm. We were divided into two groups. In my group were Nina, Angela, Norman, Sue and Dave. Javier introduced us to a woman named Pilar, a local radio personality, who accompanied our group. She would act as our interpreter. We followed her down Virgin de la Paz Street to the Plaza de la Merced and made a right onto Pozo Street. Halfway down the block we stopped at an apartment building. The family we were having lunch with lived in a three-bedroom apartment on the second floor. Our host, Maria, a lovely middle-aged woman who runs a small restaurant in the city with her husband, greeted us warmly. She was the only member of the family present. Her husband was attending to the their business while her two grown sons were away at school. The living room area had been converted into a dining hall, with two tables set side-by-side. We took our seats while Maria and Pilar set bowl after bowl of food on

the tables in front of us. The amount of food we were served was a little overwhelming. I'm not sure if Maria had anticipated a larger group, but it was impossible for us to consume everything she had prepared for us. And believe me, we ate a lot.

For starters, Maria placed bread, olives, and plates of sliced cheese, salchichon (sausage) and Iberico dried ham on the table. She offered us beer, wine and Coca-cola to drink. Next came another appetizer of toasted bread squares topped with potato salad, goat cheese and jam. Four tasty vegetable dishes followed: zucchini salad with guacamole, boiled cauliflower with roasted garlic and mayo, a delicious hot spinach and garbanzo dish that had us asking for the recipe, and a green bean and egg casserole. Then came the main entry, pork meatballs in a special sauce. *Whew*. This was by far the biggest meal I ate while on the tour. Dessert was yogurt with honey and fresh strawberries.

During lunch we had plenty of time to ask questions. Dave, who is fond of cooking, wanted to know how some of the dishes were prepared. The ladies in our group asked about Maria's sons and what they were studying. I was curious about how the pandemic had affected the people of Ronda. Maria told us the pandemic had hit the city's economy pretty hard. Ronda, she told us, relies heavily on tourism, and the subsequent ban on international travel during the pandemic forced many family-owned businesses to close down. In fact, prior to covid, Maria and her husband had a thriving restaurant on a busy street and were doing quite well. Once the pandemic hit they had to shutter the restaurant and only recently opened a much smaller food stand. I guess providing these home-hosted meals was a way to generate extra income while they got back on their feet.

Pilar spoke about her career as a local radio personality and some of the famous Spaniards she had interviewed over the years. At one point Pilar told Dave that he had a good voice for radio

commentating. Dave spoke in a deep, distinguished-sounding tone (reminding me of the actor Robert Wagner). And then, to our surprise, both Pilar and Maria started to go on about how handsome he was and that he looked like a movie star. I could almost see Dave's head growing larger with each passing compliment. They even took photos with him as he kissed both of them. Meanwhile, I was exchanging *"What are we, chopped liver?"* glances with Norman. Don't get me wrong. Dave was an attractive man, in his mid-sixties (but looked much younger), tall, in great shape and had most of his hair. Norman and I were both pudgy and bald. *So it was kinda like a reality slap…*!

We asked Maria if we could see the rest of the apartment. Most Spaniards – due to the scarcity and/or sky-high prices of real estate in Spain – live in apartments like this one, which many own like condos. It was a three-bedroom affair. The rooms were not large, and appeared even smaller because her husband was an avid collector. I wouldn't call him a hoarder, but he wasn't far off the mark. The rooms were filled with his model airplanes and boats, train sets, rock band posters, Star Wars memorabilia, etc, etc…it was like being married to a 12-year old. By 2:30pm we thanked both Pilar and Maria for a wonderful lunch and started heading back to the hotel. Dave and Sue split off to go and explore the city.

At 3:00pm I met Nina and Angela in the hotel lobby. The three of us had agreed earlier to explore the trail in the Old Town that led to the bottom of the Tajo Gorge, just underneath the New Bridge. We thought it would be cool to take pictures of the bridge looking up from the gorge. In our increasingly digital age, in order to wow people with your photos you have to get creative. We trekked back to the Plaza de Maria Auxiliadora and began descending the trail, stopping along the way to photograph the gorge and valley from different angles. At one point the trail broke off into two sections, one went further down into the open valley while the other hugged the ravine wall all the way to the bottom.

We kept going down until we reached as far as we could go. A locked chain-link fence prevented us from going directly underneath the bridge, but we got fairly close. There was one scary moment when we had to cross a concrete ledge with a deep ditch on one side and the gorge on the other. After posing and taking our pictures we climbed back up the trail, which proved to be an exhausting endeavor. All three of us were over 60 years of age, and we needed to take several breaks on the way up to catch our breath and wipe the sweat off our faces.

We made it back to the hotel just before 5:00pm. Angela went up to her room to rest while Nina and I decided to cool off with some refreshments. We found an ice cream shop on Carrera Espinal (Street) a few blocks from the hotel. We sat outside the shop eating gelato and watched the crowds go by. A half-hour later we returned to the hotel and agreed to meet at 8:45pm in the lobby to witness the nightly religious procession. I immediately took an hour-long nap. Afterwards, I made some instant coffee and wrote the day's events in my journal notebook. When Nina and I met in the lobby the crowd gathering outside the hotel was huge and we decided to go to the rooftop terrace for a better view of the procession. We ran into Krish and Pratima having cocktails in the rooftop bar/restaurant area. The four of us proceeded to the roof's terrace.

By 10:00pm the front of the procession began inching its way past the hotel. The rooftop terrace was now packed with hotel guests and we had to stand on the side facing Carrera Espinal. This gave us a slanted bird's eye view of the proceedings. The first group leading the procession was clad in white hoods and robes and looked – I kid you not – like members of the Klu Klux Klan. Later, Javier told us the people who wear these costumes during the Easter processions are called 'Nazarenos' (or Nazarenes). They wear this unusual get-up – and the robes come in different colors, too, not just white – as penitence for their sins. A lot of young

people (including children) enjoy dressing up and making the commitment during Holy Week. I have to admit, for someone who lives in the southern part of the United States, seeing these hooded marchers for the first time was a little disconcerting. But *my* dismay was nothing. Javier told us he once took an African American tour group to see an Easter procession in Seville without telling them beforehand about the *Nazerenos*. He said he nearly had a mutiny on his hands!

The next group in the procession was a military formation followed by soldiers carrying an enormous cross with the image of a bloodied Jesus. They were holding the cross flat, not upright, and it appeared as if they were actually carrying the body of the Savior. Several large religious floats surrounded by brown-hooded Nazarenos soon followed. We decided to go down to the street to get a better view. The procession ended in front of the bullring. It was really interesting to witness this. Again, I'm not a religious person, but the Holy Week celebrations in Spain (and elsewhere) are really more than just an affirmation of a country's religious beliefs, it is also a deeply rooted cultural event. I was back in my room by 11:00pm. I skipped dinner that night because I was still full from the home-hosted lunch. I went straight to bed.

Day Nine

I was up by 5:00am. I performed some stretching exercises and then shaved, showered and repacked my luggage. At 8:00am I went downstairs for breakfast. Forty-five minutes later we were on the bus heading towards our next destination, the city of Granada located approximately 180 kilometers (112 miles) to the east. As we left Ronda we passed a poppy field. I was not aware that Spain cultivated poppies. Javier told us that due to the geographical

make-up of Spain, the country enjoys several different climates and microclimates conducive to growing a wide variety of orchids, which Spaniards love. Poppies in Spain produce red flowers (in Eurasia and North Africa they tend to be white). Throughout the trip we saw iron balconies decorated with brightly colored orchids, and most of the public parks here contain some kind of flowering tree species.

We traveled mostly along A-92, a major highway system that stretches across the Andalusia Region. The drive took just over two hours with one pit stop. The scenery was similar to all the other drives so far: farmlands, olive groves, pastures, lush green mountain chains and a few lakes. Perhaps because I grew up primarily in urban areas I never got tired staring at the beauty of the Spanish countryside. And as we approached Granada, the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range provided a dramatic backdrop to this medieval city. According to Javier, former president Bill Clinton once said the most striking sunset he ever witnessed was the one in Granada over these mountains.

Before we reached Granada, Javier gave us a brief background on the city and the Arabic influence of the Moors. Located within the Autonomous Andalusia Region, Granada is the capital of its own province and sits at the foot of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, at the confluence of four rivers (the Darro, Genil, Monachil and Beiro rivers). The city has an elevation of 738 meters (just over 2,400 ft) from sea level and is only an hour away from the Mediterranean coast (the *Costa Tropical*). Granada's inhabitants number just under 250,000, and Javier said there is a fairly large immigrant population here who hail from South America. This is also a college town, with over 46,000 students enrolled in one of the five different campuses of the University of Granada.

The city's history is similar to the rest of the Iberian Peninsula, starting with early Iberian tribal peoples and followed by the

Romans, the Visigoths, and a long succession of Moorish kingdoms. The *current* settlement of Granada dates back to the 11th century, when it became a major city under the Zirid Taifa of Granada, a Muslim Berber kingdom originating in North Africa that ruled for 80 years before being replaced by the Almoravid dynasty, another Muslim Berber Kingdom from Morocco. In the 12th century, the Almohad Caliphate (yet another North African dynasty) conquered Granada and much of the Iberian Peninsula, but by the early 13th century they were replaced by the Nasrid dynasty, which become the last independent Muslim state to rule in Spain. The cultural impact of hundreds of years of Moorish rule has left quite a mark on the country, as one can imagine, ranging from the sciences to architecture, music, the various ethnic influences and different cuisines.

Once we entered the city we headed straight to the Alhambra palace and fortress complex for a scheduled tour. The Alhambra is considered to be one of the best-preserved palaces of the historic Islamic world. This UNESCO World Heritage Site also serves as an important monument for the study of Islamic architecture from medieval times. It is one of Spain's most popular tourist attractions and tickets are usually purchased in advance as they only allow 8,000 visitors a day, which enter in timed intervals of 300 people to avoid congestion and damage to the site. Local guide Maria Christina met us at the entrance. We put on our Whisper listening devices and followed her inside while she briefly went over the history of the complex.

The Alhambra is located atop a rocky outcrop of the Sierra Nevada Mountains called Sabika Hill. Because of the hill's strategic position it was continuously used as a fortress under various ruling dynasties, and once contained the 11th century palace of Samuel ibn Naghrillah, the most prominent Jew in Muslim Spain who rose to become a vizier of the Muslim ruler of Granada and also (incredibly enough) the head of his army. In the

year 1230, the Nasrid dynasty came to power in the region, they would establish the Emirate of Granada – the last Muslim state on the Iberian Peninsula – ruling until their defeat in 1492 by the forces of the Catholic Monarchs of Spain (Queen Isabella I and King Ferdinand II). The Alhambra's construction began in 1238 under the first Nasrid sultan and was continuously expanded over the ensuing two centuries. When Granada fell, the new Catholic rulers added their own extensions and alterations to the site, featuring Spanish Renaissance architecture.

During the time of the Nasrid dynasty, the Alhambra was a self-containing royal city – with up to 2,500 inhabitants (including soldiers) – separate from the rest of Granada below. I'm assuming this was for their own protection against not only invading armies but also uprisings by the local population. To accomplish this, they built a defensive wall around the whole complex. Within these walls were royal palaces, a mosque, hammams (public baths), a road system, homes, artisan workshops, a tannery, some limited farming and a sophisticated water supply system that channeled water from the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Pretty ingenious. On the western tip of the Alhambra is the Alcazaba fortress, which, together with the towers and fortified gates running along the defensive walls, protected the entire site. Beyond the walls on the eastern side is another palace complex called the *Generalife* that served as a Nasrid country estate, or summer palace, with spectacular gardens and orchards. Much of what I just described, together with the Spanish Renassiance additions, has been well preserved through an on-going restoration process dating back to the early 1800s.

Maria Christina explained to us the basic layout of the Moorish architecture within the Alhambra. The main characteristic was the courtyards, which served as the central space and basic unit around where other halls and rooms were built. These courtyards had a water feature at their center, like a reflecting pool or fountain, and

some type of garden. The entrances preceding the halls had intricately decorated arches on slender columns. The rooms of the palaces were decorated with tile mosaics along the lower portion of the walls, usually depicting geometric patterns, Arabic inscriptions or vegetal motifs. I read online it was forbidden to use human or animal images in Arabesque decorations. The top section of the walls featured carved stucco, and the ceilings had a unique style of stalactite-like sculpturing called *muqarnas*, adding a three-dimensional look to some of the larger rooms. Many of the big halls had a *mirador*, a room with a view of the courtyard or the city below. The walls of the Alhambra were built from rammed earth, lime concrete or brick and then covered with plaster. The roofs, window shutters, ceilings and doors were mostly made from pinewood. Put all of this together and you have one pretty-looking palace complex.

As for the name *Alhambra*, our guide told us it means 'the red one' in Arabic, but the origins of the name (there are several) are murky, at best. The first reference pertains to one of the Muslim rulers of Granada who had red hair and beard (um, Sultan Abdul O'Donnell...?). Another theory behind the name is the reddish clay used on the buildings and defensive walls (in my own research, though, the originally site was actually painted white and was later changed to its current reddish hue). And finally, and this one seems like a stretch, our guide said the fruit of Granada is the red pomegranate. So take your pick, folks. Hair, tint or fruit.

We entered the Alhambra through the Gate of Justice near the Palace of King Charles V (we had to show our passports to get in, for some reason) and spent the next two hours or so walking through the complex while Maria Christina pointed out the various architectural styles and decorations that make this place such a historical marvel. We began at the Palace of King Charles V. This was one of the Spanish Renaissance buildings built after the fall of the Nasrid Kingdom of Granada. The last ruler of the Nasrid

dynasty, Muhammad XII, surrendered the Alhambra to the advancing armies of the two Catholic Monarchs, which essentially spared the palace complex from being destroyed. Afterwards, the Alhambra became a royal palace of the Spanish Crown, with subsequent alterations and additions added to the site. In 1526, King Charles V visited Granada and decided to build his own palace. Construction began in 1527 but the palace was never completed (probably because the king left and never returned). In 1637, construction stopped altogether and the building has remained unfinished till this day. From the outside it looks like a typical Renaissance structure, but when you enter its enormous oval courtyard, it looks like an open-air arena because the dome ceiling is missing.

From here we began touring sections of the Nasrid palaces: the Mexuar (main hall), the Comares Palace, and the Palace of the Lions. These palaces, along the northern side of the complex, are interconnected via large courtyards. The structures overlook the famous hilltop neighborhood known as the Albaicin, the old Moorish quarter that lies just to the north of the Darro River at the foot of Sabika Hill. The Albaicin still retains most of its medieval street designs dating back to the time of the Nasrid dynasty, and is a popular tourist destination within the city. We walked through the 13th century Comares Palace. Our guide told us this building served as the core of the original complex. It became the official palace of the Nasrid sultan and has a long, beautiful courtyard known as the Court of the Myrtles at its center, with ornately decorated porticos on each end, one of them leading into the Comares Tower where we saw the Hall of the Ambassadors, the sultan's throne room and also the largest room in the Alhambra. This was one impressive hall. The ceiling consisted of over 8,000 interlinked pieces of wood forming a geometric pattern representing the Seven Heavens (an ancient religious concept depicting heaven as having seven divisions).

From the Comares Palace we walked through the Courtyard of the Lions – with its large central water fountain surrounded by 12 marble lion statues – and entered the Palace of the Lions, one of the most famous examples of intricately designed Islamic architecture in the world. The porticos surrounding the Courtyard of the Lions have ornately decorated arches and columns aligned in an interspersed configuration of one column followed by two or three columns, a unique style of Islamic architecture. Around this courtyard are four halls that make up the Palace of the Lions. In the Hall of the Kings we saw several paintings on the ceiling with images of the sultan consulting with dignitaries and scenes of court life, sports and hunting. Maria Christina told us this was unusual for a Muslim palace and said the idea was probably influenced by Christian Gothic art popular in other parts of Europe at the time. In the Hall of the Two Sisters (so named because of two matching marble floor slabs that lead into the room) we saw a remarkable *muqarnas* ceiling that made my jaw drop. Consisting of 5,000 hanging prismatic pieces forming 16 miniature domes that extended down just above the windows, it had a mesmerizing effect on the beholder. I think our guide told us this was the sultan's bedroom, and the ceiling was designed to look like the universe. For me, it resembled a massive work of 3-D art, both awesome and spellbinding.

There is one hall inside the Palace of the Lions with an interesting legend attached to it. The Hall of the Abencerrajes is named after a once prominent family in Granada whose elder members were slaughtered inside the hall on orders of the sultan. The story goes that a member of the Abencerrajes clan had an illicit affair with a female member of the royal family. In a scene reminiscent of the Red Wedding episode in Game of Thrones, the enraged sultan invited the members of the family to a banquet inside this hall where they were all killed. And despite a lack of evidence to this grisly event, the legend of the slaughter has persisted. Interesting to note that famed American writer

Washington Irving, who wrote a collection of essays and short stories entitled *Tales of the Alhambra* after visiting the palace complex in 1828, disputed the Abencerrajes massacre, writing that most of the family's male members had been killed in battle prior to the fall of Granada.

From the Hall of the Two Sisters we entered a room called the Mirador de Lindajara, a small but stylish observation room with double-arched windows overlooking the Courtyard of Lindajara, a nicely landscaped cloistered garden just to the north of the Palace of the Lions. On two sides of this courtyard, along the upper floors, we saw a section of the Emperor's Chambers, a group of Renaissance apartments constructed for King Charles V when he stayed in Granada (1528 – 1537). One of the rooms had a marble fireplace sculpted with the king's coat of arms. We started walking now towards the edges of the defensive walls facing the *Generalife* (the section containing the 13th century Summer Palace and Gardens adjacent to the Alhambra but part of the overall complex). We walked east along the Paseo de las Torres, a pathway surrounded by neatly trimmed hedgerows, orange trees, grapevines, tall coniferous evergreens (also trimmed), and a kaleidoscope of flowering orchids. Our guide pointed out several partially excavated or preserved ruins of former palaces, like the Partal Palace, the oldest part of the Alhambra, the Rawda mausoleum where the Nasrid rulers were once buried, the Mosque baths, and the Palace of the Convent of St. Francis. Some of these structures, according to our guide, were ruined when Napoleon's armies invaded.

We spent the rest of the tour walking through the beautiful Generalife Gardens. And while we were not able to enter the Summer Palace itself, we did get to see several rectangular courtyards with their manicured gardens and sprouting water fountains. In fact, on the walk from the walls of the Alhambra to the Summer Palace we trekked through wonderfully landscaped

areas with colorful rows of orchids, trimmed hedgerows and walkways framed by towering cypress trees. In one section was an outdoor theater. Our tour of the Alhambra ended shortly after 2:00pm. We said 'goodbye' to Maria Christina (I'm sure she was tipped well, she did an awesome job) and exited the site at a different location from where we had originally entered. The reason for this was our included lunch was at a popular eatery right across the street from here called the Jardines Alberto Restaurant. They served us a delicious lunch of leek soup, lots of bread with olive oil, a nice salad with goat cheese dressing, and a tasty chicken breast in sauce with mushrooms on the side.

By 4:00pm we checked into our hotel, the Melia Granada, conveniently located in the heart of the city just two blocks from Reyes Catolicos (Catholic Monarchs) Avenue in the downtown Centro district. The street in front of the hotel was lined with moveable spectator stands for the upcoming religious procession. At 4:30pm, I met Nina, Krish and Pratima in the lobby. We had earlier agreed to walk the city streets together. Javier had provided the group with tourist maps of the area. Krish had also downloaded the map of the city on his cellphone, and Pratima carried photocopied pages of her guidebook detailing the historical places within the Centro district. Armed with all this information, and Krish navigating, we set out in earnest.

We walked two blocks to Reyes Catolicos Avenue and made a right, heading east for several blocks. It was Good Friday, and the street had been closed off to vehicular traffic to accommodate the large crowds and processions scheduled for later in the afternoon and evening. We turned left on Estribo Street, in front of a large candy store called *Dulces Pecados* (Sinful Sweets), and walked two more blocks. On the balcony of one building, just above an antique shop, were two displays of knights in armor watching over the area. I thought that was a nice touch. At the end of this narrow street we reached our first stop, the Plaza de la Madraza. Located

on the south side of the Cathedral of Granada, this historic square contains several notable buildings. On one corner was the Palacio de la Madraza, a palace built on the site of a former Muslim university founded by Nasrid ruler Yusuf I in 1349. When the city fell to the forces of the Catholic Monarchs the school was used as a town hall before it was torn down and this baroque palace built in its place. I read there is a semi-circular arch leading to the elegant mihrab niche, the only part of the former Islamic building that remains today. The Palacio de la Madraza now belongs to the University of Granada, and is used primarily for cultural activities. It also houses the headquarters of the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Our Lady of Sorrows (*Real Academia de Bella Arte de Nuestra Senora de la Angustias).* I read online the palace's baroque interior was worth visiting, but unfortunately for us the building was already closed.

Directly in front of the Palace of the Madraza was the *Real Capilla de Granada* (the Royal Chapel of Grenada). Constructed between 1505 and 1517, and integrated into the Cathedral of Granada on its southern boundary, this was the royal tomb of the Spanish monarchs, Queen Isabella I of the Kingdom of Castile and King Ferdinand II of the Kingdom of Aragon. The two were second cousins, and their marriage in 1469 dynastically unified Spain. They are referred to as the *Catholic Monarchs* and accomplished quite a bit together. With their united armies, they finished the *Reconquista* of the Iberian Peninsula, defeating the Nasrid dynasty, the last Muslim state in Spain. They issued the Alhambra Decree (the mass expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula), and established the Spanish Inquisition to make sure everyone was on board with Catholicism. In 1492, the same year they defeated the Nasrid Dynasty, they financed Christopher Columbus' voyage, leading to the discovery of the New World and making Spain a global empire. I would love to describe the inside of the chapel, which was designed in a Spanish Late Gothic known as Isabelline-style, but it was already closed at that hour.

We wanted to visit the cathedral next – situated behind the Royal Chapel – and initially thought the entrance would be located on Gran Via de Colon Street, a main avenue of the Centro district. So we headed east and soon discovered the entrance was actually on the western side of the church along the narrow Pie de la Torre Street. We ended up going around the entire structure until we reached the main façade. At first I was a little perplexed as to why this grand cathedral would be built in such a confined space, surrounded on three sides by relatively small streets. But then I reminded myself this city dates back to medieval times.

Mass was being served when we arrived, and a police officer on duty told us we could not approach the altar or take photos. Nina made the sign of the cross and told the man she was Catholic and wanted to say a prayer for her sister who had recently passed away. He let her into the pew section while I stood waiting for her, taking in the cathedral's interior (and, um, sneaking a photo here and there). Another thing I found somewhat perplexing was the amount of parishioners who were attending this late afternoon Good Friday service. The cathedral was half empty. Considering all the processions and the large crowds they drew, I assumed Holy Week services (and on Good Friday, no less) would be jam-packed affairs. Perhaps this, too, was a cultural thing, denoting the changing of the times.

The Cathedral of Granada was constructed during the 16th century with modifications done in the 17th century. It was built – like many other great churches in Spain – over the site where a mosque once stood. Initially, it was designed in a Gothic style, like the Royal Chapel, but construction was delayed until 1526 and by then the Spanish Renassiance style was becoming more popular. In the 1600s, Baroque was all the rage in Catholic Europe and you can see this style reflected in the carvings on the main façade. The Catholic Church first introduced the Baroque style in Italy – with

its intricate decorations and theatrical-like presentation – to combat the Reformation and the growth of Protestantism. Protestant Churches tended to be plain and basic, keeping with the tenets of Christianity, while Baroque-inspired Catholic Churches were meant to inspire awe. The cathedral had a rectangular shape with five cavernous naves, the center one being the tallest, its white-and-gold interior supported by Corinthian columns. It was a beautiful church, but by now I had seen so many on this tour they were all starting to look alike to me. (The exception would be La Familia Sagrada Church we saw on our final day in Barcelona; an architectural marvel, unlike anything I've ever seen before).

The square in front of the cathedral, the *Plaza de las Pasiegas,* was closed off to the public. Stands filled with pink metal folding chairs had been set up in the square for an upcoming procession. From here we continued to the southern corner of the cathedral and turned right onto Libreros Street, walking one block to the Plaza de Bib-Rambla. This historic square, in the heart of the Centro district, serves as the city's main plaza surrounded by narrow shopping streets, kiosks, restaurants and cafes in every direction. A very popular spot for the locals – who affectionately call it *Bibarrambla* – the place was brimming with families, street entertainers and tourists. The square has a large water fountain from the 17th century called the Gigantones Fountain made from gray stone and marble and featuring a statue of Neptune. This pretty but otherwise unassuming square has a fascinating history. It was the first plaza built in the old Medina Garnata section during the Nasrid dynasty and was used as a public bazaar. Under Spanish rule, the square was utilized for spectator sports like medieval jousts and bull fighting, and also for public executions and religious processions.

We walked north from the Plaza de Bib-Rambla for two short blocks and reached a much smaller, nondescript square called Plaza Pescaderia with numerous markets and restaurants

specializing in seafood. From here we looped back towards Reyes Catolicos Avenue, walking through the *Alcaiceria* market area, a series of narrow alleyways filled with small shops. This was the site of the former Moorish silk market of Granada. During the 6th century, Roman Emperor Justinian gave Arabs sole rights over the silk trade and the term 'alcaiceria' – which means 'the place of Caesar' – was coined and used to describe *all* silk markets in Moorish territories. Granada's Alcaiceria market dates back to the 1400s and was twice the size of this current area. It was partially destroyed over the centuries and the market we see today is an attempt to replicate the feel of a former Moorish bazaar (with some success, I might add) but the items sold here are mostly touristy stuff. When I first started doing guided tours I would often come home laden with souvenirs, and the extra cost, luggage weight and added responsibility became too much for me. Nowadays I try to buy just one authentic item for myself that represents the country I'm visiting (usually a small sculpture, print or painting). *Everyone else gets kitchen magnets*.

We reached Reyes Catolicos Avenue and turned left, heading east. Two blocks down we arrived at the Plaza Isabella La Catolica, another nice public square with a large water fountain-and-statue monument featuring Queen Isabella I giving her blessing to a kneeling Christopher Columbus. I read that Columbus was in Granada to witness the fall of the Nasrid dynasty. Shortly afterwards he was given the green light for his famous expedition. The plaza sits at the end of the Gran Via de Colon Avenue and the streets were packed with locals and tourists alike awaiting one of the grand religious processions. We continued east along Reyes Catolicos Avenue and came upon the Plaza Nueva de Granada, a rectangular square stretching several blocks with open-air cafes, plenty of benches and street entertainers. This square runs into the adjacent Plaza de Santa Ana where we saw a group of young people performing flamenco dances for tips. Behind them was the historic Palacio de la Real Chancilleria (the Palace of the Royal

Chancellery), the former court established by Queen Isabella I in 1505 and now housing the High Court of the Andalusia Region. I noticed that several other courthouse buildings surrounded these two plazas.

At the end of the street stood the 16th century Church of San Gil and Santa Ana, built over a mosque in a Mudejar style. This small church has a single nave, and its tower was once the minaret of the former mosque. The area is situated near the foot of Sabika Hill, and as we looked up over the church we could see the defensive walls of the Alhambra. From here we decided to head back to the hotel. I was in my room by 6:30pm and thoroughly exhausted. I checked my cellphone exercise app and discovered I had walked over seven miles that day. To avoid napping I made a cup of instant coffee and repacked my luggage. The following day we were scheduled for an early morning departure. To ensure a little extra sleeping time I wanted to have my luggage ready before I went to bed that night.

Our included dinner was a buffet inside the hotel restaurant at 7:30pm. I helped myself to some delicious arroz con pollo (chicken with rice), steak and grilled veggies. As we ate dinner, the Good Friday procession passed by our hotel. Some of us went outside to take photos. After dinner, Javier invited the group to join him for a visit to the observation point next to the San Nicolas Church in the Albaicin district – the old medieval Moorish Quarter – to watch the sunset. It was located on the hillside just north of the Alhambra and would require a local bus ride and some uphill walking. He also said we might get back a little late. I really wanted to go but when I returned to my room after dinner the arthritis in my right knee was acting up badly, and coupled with all the walking I had already done that day and our early morning departure I decided not to risk it and stayed in. My guidebook's Granada section stated that most visitors to the city are content with just visiting the Alhambra complex and moving on, which I

think is a shame because Granada has a lot to offer (especially for history buffs like me). I really regret not being able to see the Albaicin district. I spent the next hour or so writing in my journal notebook before going to bed.

Day Ten

I was up at 5:00am feeling well rested. The pain in my knee was gone so I chanced a few body weight exercises and stretches before jumping in the shower. I edited the photos in my camera and watched the international news on the BBC channel and then headed downstairs for breakfast. By 8:00am we were on the bus. Our next destination was Madrid, with one stop along the way to visit the historic town of Ubeda. As we left the area of our hotel I noticed a sort of squealing noise whenever the bus made a turn. According to Javier that was caused by the accumulation of candle wax dripping onto the streets from the nightly processions, making the surface a little slick. *Whoa*.

As we made our way out of Granada, Javier spoke about his time in Madrid. He had lived there for 14 years as a young man, and was quite fond of the nation's capital. Because many of Madrid's residents come from other parts of Spain, there tends to be more openness and acceptance. He said he felt ‘at home' very quickly after arriving in the city, as opposed to other regions that were not quite as cosmopolitan and required more time to adjust to or feel assimilated.

We exited the city of Granada and took highway E-902 north (which turned into E-5 at one point) for much of the trip. We saw endless fields of olive groves. On our right was the Sierra Nevada

Mountain range, and about 16 kilometers from Granada we passed the Cubillas Reservoir, a large man-made lake that is popular for camping, swimming and kayaking. Near the small town of Bailen our driver made a right turn onto highway A-32 and we drove east approximately 40 kilometers (25 miles) before reaching Ubeda. It was now 10:00am. Local guide Jorge was waiting for us when we arrived. He took us on a walking tour through the town's historic quarter that lasted roughly an hour and a half.

Ubeda is a small town in the Jean province of the Andalusia Region. The municipality lies atop the flat southern ridge of a large hilly terrain and serves as the economic (and geographic) center of the province, supporting not only its 35,000 inhabitants but also other smaller communities in the area numbering close to 200,000. Two of the main industries in this province are the cultivation of olives and cattle ranching. Jorge told us the town is located between two riverbeds, which makes for a very fertile soil, and has been an ideal location for human settlement for nearly 5,000 years.

In 1233, King Ferdinand III (of the Kingdom of Castile) conquered Ubeda from the Moors and greatly expanded its territory. The city became an important military buffer between Granada (controlled by the Moors) and modern-day Castile-La Mancha, an Autonomous Region in the central part of the country that was ruled by the Kingdom of Castile. Because of its geographical importance, Castilian kings bestowed a lot of official privileges on Ubeda, creating a very rich and powerful middle-class nobility within the city that eventually rose to hold very important positions within the administration of the Spanish monarchy. By the 16th century, following the final defeat of the Moors on the Iberian Peninsula, these fabulously wealthy aristocratic families became serious patrons of the arts, ushering in the Renaissance style of architecture to Ubeda, where it would spread to other parts of Spain and even the Americas. And if Granada is considered the ultimate Moorish city, then Ubeda's

historic quarter can be considered Spain's ultimate Renaissance center, with a collection of spectacular structures from late medieval times that have been *incredibly* well-preserved or restored. In fact, Ubeda is sometimes referred to as the 'Florence of Andalusia'. In 2003, UNESCO declared the old quarter of Ubeda and Baeza as World Heritage Sites. Baeza is a smaller, neighboring town with a similar history. If you want to get a feel of what living in a Spanish medieval Renaissance town must have been like, then look no further than Ubeda.

We walked from the bus into the old quarter of Ubeda along the remains of the city's former defensive walls. Our first stop was at the Plaza de Vazquez Molina, named after a member of one of the two most prominent families in Ubeda back in the 16th century. The other dominant aristocratic clan was the Cobos family. Together, these two families controlled much of the wealth and power within the town and were responsible for building some of its most magnificent Renaissance structures during the 1500s. Our guide Jorge told us that warring factions among the nobility during the 14th and 15th centuries had almost doomed the town. In 1351, a civil war broke out over the succession of the throne in the Kingdom of Castile that lasted nearly 15 years, fueling an intense rivalry between aristocratic families in Ubeda, leading to political instability not just in the town but also in the region. The rivalry ended when the Catholic Monarchs came to power in 1469. They ordered the destruction of Ubeda's *alcazar* (the former Moorish fortress) so that none of the warring noble families could use it for military purposes. Following the pacification of the feuding nobles, the ensuing century saw the town prosper and grow in prominence with many aristocratic families living within its boundaries and building the beautiful Renaissance palaces and churches one sees today in the old quarter.

The historic section of Ubeda consists of a series of wide plazas surrounded by 16th century palaces, churches and government

buildings located along the southern end of Calle Real, the main street of the old quarter. I cannot speak for my fellow travelers, but the sheer number of Renaissance structures so close to one another just blew me away. It's as if this zone has been frozen in time since the 1500s. For example, around the Plaza de Vasquez Molina alone, Jorge pointed out seven historical buildings. On the southern side of this plaza is a church called the *Basilica de Santa Maria de los Reales Alcazares.* This site dates back to the 13th century, although the church we see today was built during the 16th and 17th centuries, with more alterations made during the 19th century, so it exhibits a number of architectural influences (Gothic, Renaissance, Mudejar, Baroque). On the opposite side of the plaza from the basilica, fronted by lion statues, is the *Palacio de las Cadenas* (Palace of Chains) one of Ubeda's prime examples of Renaissance architecture. Sadly for us it was partially concealed due to extensive restoration work being done on the building's façade. The palace was built for Juan Vasquez de Molina, who served as the Secretary of State to King Philip II during the mid-1500s. The façade's three-story length is divided into seven vertical sections with varying widths. When Juan Vasquez de Molina passed away, the palace became a Dominican convent until the government took possession of it and converted it into the town's city hall in 1837.

Standing adjacent to the basilica is the 15th century *Carcel del Obispo* (Bishop's Jail), so named because erring nuns from the town's various convents were often sent here to be 'rehabilitated'. Today, the building serves as a courthouse. Across from the Bishop's Jail along the eastern side of the plaza is the *Palacio del Marques de Mancera* (Palace of the Marquis of Mancera), a medieval tower palace that represents a throwback to the style of fortress-like homes built by the old noble lineages. Next to it is the 16th century *Antiguo Posito* (the old granary), which is now a police station. On the northeastern corner of the plaza stands the *Palacio de Dean Ortega*, a 16th century palace built for Francisco Ortega y Salido, who was the Dean of the Cathedral of Malaga and

also served as the chaplain of the Holy Chapel of the Savior located right next door. The building's rectangular ground plan has a large Renaissance patio with graceful columns. The palace is now part of the Parador hotel chain.

On the far eastern side of the plaza is the spectacular Holy Chapel of the Savior (*Sacra Capilla del Salvador*). The word 'church' is not an apt description for this beautiful medieval structure since it was constructed in the mid-1500s to serve as the family mausoleum and private chapel of the powerful aristocratic Cobos family. I think Jorge told us the Catholic Church does allow Sunday services to be performed here. But otherwise, this building, which is still owned by the descendants of the Cobos family, is a private mausoleum. *And what a mausoleum it is*! The structure could easily pass for a cathedral in any number of small Spanish cities. It was commissioned by the patriarch of the family, Francisco de los Cobos. He rose to become the Secretary of State for King Charles V (the Holy Roman Emperor who controlled huge swaths of Europe). After 1528, Cobos ascended to the leadership of the state council running the Spanish portion of King Charles V's vast empire, enriching himself beyond imagination. He used his enormous wealth to foster patronage of the Italian Renaissance artists, and funded many projects, like his own mausoleum, that have stood the test of time as masterpieces of the era. The portal of the main facade of the Holy Chapel of the Savior is richly embellished with carvings and statues, and that's just a glimpse of the splendor one encounters inside according to my research. Unfortunately for us the mausoleum was closed due to the Easter weekend.

From here we continued north one block to another historic square called the *Plaza del Ayuntamiento* (Townhall Plaza). Along the west side of this plaza is the 16th century *Palacio Vela de los Cobos* (one of the palaces commissioned by Francisco de los Cobos). On its south side is the entrance of the city's townhall (the

ayuntamiento), which is actually the backside of the Palace of the Chains. Several blocks down the street heading east from this plaza you'll find the remains of *Casa de los Manueles*, a 17th century palace built in a Baroque style with Renaissance elements. Not far from it is the 16th century stately manor of Francisco de los Cobos, the *Palacios de Francesco de los Cobos*, constructed for him in the first half of the 1500s. I read online the current owners, an elderly couple, actually live in the palace and conduct small walking tours of the property. But based on the reviews they do not adhere to a regular schedule and can hurry people along when they are not in the mood for visitors.

We finished our tour of Ubeda at the *Plaza del 1st de Mayo* (The First of May Plaza). This is the largest of the public squares in the old quarter and served as the central plaza during medieval times. The square dates back to the Moors when it was used as a souk (marketplace), and even today the locals refer to it as 'market square'. Under Spanish rule, bull-fighting and public executions were once conducted here, as well. It is a wide-open space paved with square stone tiles and dotted by a variety of trees. In the middle of the square is the white marble monumental statue of St. Juan de la Cruz (St. John of the Cross). His real name was Juan de Yepes y Alvarez, a co-founder of the famous Barefoot Carmelite Order of monks. St. John is considered one of the great Christian mystics and was a famous Spanish poet who died at the age of 49 while visiting Ubeda in 1791 to seek medical attention for a persistent fever. If you walk one block east of his monument, you'll come to the Museum of St. John, the former convent building where he died. Today, it is a museum housing some of his relics and items associated with his life and writings.

On the north side of the *Plaza del 1st de Mayo* is the St. Paul Church (*Iglesia de San Pablo*). To the uninitiated, this would appear like a well-preserved church from medieval times, but it has, like the rest of the old quarter, a fascinating history. This is

one of Ubeda's oldest buildings; parts of it date back to the Visigoths. After the Moors of Ubeda were defeated, the original St. Paul Church was constructed on this site where a former mosque used to be (which, in turn, had been built over a previous Visigoth church). During the 1300's, when the Kingdom of Castile was plunged into a brutal civil war over who would succeed to the throne, the original church was destroyed, and the St. Paul Church we see today was reconstructed sometime after 1368. It underwent a series of alterations and additions throughout the ensuing centuries, which has created an unusual mix of architectural styles.

The main base of the church was Gothic, in keeping with the preferred style of the Catholic Church at the time. Normally, a Gothic church would have its main entrance on the western side, and the St. Paul Church does have a side entrance decorated in a Romanesque style (a combination of Roman and Gothic styles featuring semi-circular arches), but during the 16th century, as the wealthy and powerful aristocrats of Ubeda came into their own, a new portal entrance was created that faces south, towards the main plaza. This was decorated in a more lavish Isabelline-Gothic style. Between the two massive metal-studded main doors is a carving of St. Paul, and just above his head is the tympanum (a semi-circular decorative wall space located atop an entranceway) with an intricately carved image of the Mother Mary surrounded by symmetrically shaped angels. What is fascinating about the design is that you can still see green paint on the tympanum. I was not aware Gothic masons painted their outdoor statues and carvings because most traces of paint have usually been washed away with the passage of time. The church's single tower was designed in a unique ornately decorative style known as Plateresque (sometimes referred to as Early Renaissance). I believe the church was closed when we arrived, so I could not see the interior, which I read online was also quite exceptional.

On the western corner of the plaza is another architectural gem called the *Palacio Antiguas Casas Consistoriales* (the original town hall building of Ubeda). Constructed during the 16th century, the building is a little faded but still retains its historic charm. Along the bottom of the main façade are three large arches supported by Corinthian columns. Above it, running along a *mirador* (balcony) that overlooks the plaza, are six smaller arches supported by Ionic columns. The building now houses a music conservatory. Around the plaza you'll find other structures from the 16th and 17th century that now appear to be either storefronts, museums or residential apartments.

From the *Plaza del 1st de Mayo* we walked several blocks to Calle Real, the main touristy street of Ubeda. Our tour of the city ended here, and while we were able to visit the three main historic plazas and see most of the important Renaissance structures, there was still quite a bit to do (and view) in this town. We thanked and tipped Jorge for his service. Before re-boarding our bus, we availed ourselves of the local cafes to get a quick coffee or snack and use the restrooms. By 11:40am we were heading west along A-32 out of Ubeda, reconnecting with highway E-5 twenty-five minutes later and proceeding straight north towards Madrid. At 12:25pm, as we approached the border of the Castile-La Mancha Autonomous Region, we made a 45-minute lunch stop at a roadside service area called Abades Puerta Andalucia that offered a buffet-style fare. By 1:10pm we were back on the road. It would take us another three and a half hours to reach the nation's capital. Before we could dose off, Javier took this time to speak to us about the transition from dictatorship to democracy in Spain.

It may surprise many Americans to know that Spain's current democracy is less than fifty years old. Like most countries in Europe, the transition from a monarchy system to a democratic one was often wrought with violence and civil uprisings. The entrenched elite rarely fades quietly into the night. At the end of

the 1800s, Spain was a declining world power, having lost most of its colonies. Following the country's defeat in the Spanish-American War of 1898, a sobering and embarrassing moment for the country, a new generation of young people began to question the established order.

By the 20th century, industrialization, the development of a railroad system and the growing influence of capitalism allowed the country to grow and prosper, but this did not address the many social ills of the populace. Labor unions and socialists demanded more workers' rights and benefits. The ethnic communities of the Basque and Catalan regions demanded autonomy or outright independence from the rest of the country. To make matters worse, the constitutional monarchy system established after the military coup of 1874 (known as the Restoration), led to a corrupt two-party system of Liberals and Conservatives who literally took turns running the government. This was known as *turnismo*, and it usually required a lot of election fraud to pull off this constant switching back and forth between the two parties. The main opposition to this political system came from Republicans, Socialists, Anarchists, and the Basque and Catalan nationalists. Further undermining the government (and monarchy) was the disastrous toll its military was taking in trying to maintain its few colonies in North Africa.

In order to stem the social and political unrest in the country, between 1923 and 1931 Spain was run by a crown-supported dictatorship that proved to be very unpopular. In 1931, free municipal elections were held, which turned into a plebiscite on the whole constitutional monarchy system itself. The Republican and Socialist parties won resounding victories in the major cities. Just six months after the municipal elections, a new constitution was passed, which led to the formation of the Second Republic (the First Republic was the short-lived government toppled by the Restoration coup of 1874). The new constitution paved the way for

social and civil liberties and protections unheard of in Spain's history, and did away with the monarchy system. Alas, these sudden changes and liberties deeply divided the nation as well, and violence broke out almost immediately throughout Spain between leftists and rightists. In 1936, the Nationalists (the right-wing faction) attempted a coup that only succeeded in one part of the country. This act led to the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.

Over a three-year period the country was consumed by a viscous battle between the Nationalist faction (led by General Francisco Franco) and the Republican faction (a movement of democracy-loving groups and leftists). More than 500,000 Spaniards were killed and cities were laid to ruin. Another half million fled the country. In April of 1939, just five months before the start of World War II, the Nationalists emerged victorious and General Franco became the country's new ruler, his forces imprisoning hundreds of thousands of 'rebels' and protestors and stomping out much of the dissent among the left. Due to the destruction caused by the Spanish Civil War, Spain remained neutral during WWII. But if it *had* entered the war, it would surely have sided with the fascists of Germany and Italy. These authoritarian types stick together.

In 1947, under the Law of Succession, the monarchy was restored but General Franco became 'head of state for life' with the power to choose the new king and his own successor. His fascist dictatorship ended only when he died in 1975. Prior to his death he appointed King Juan Carlos I to succeed him, and within a few years a new constitution would be drafted that restored democracy to the nation. To be sure, the transition hasn't always been easy – with the occasional violence from independence-seeking ethnic groups and wildly competing political parties – but democracy in Spain has prevailed until the present. As I researched Spanish history for this journal, I couldn't help but see similarities in the vitriolic contempt between rightists and leftists during the 1930s in

their country and the current political climate in the United States. I have to admit, I've been guilty of it myself. I only hope we do not need another 'civil war' to resolve *our* differences.

For the next several hours we drove through the countryside of the Castile-La Mancha Autonomous Region on our way to Madrid. This region is located in the very center of the country and situated largely along the southern half of the Iberian Peninsula's Inner Plateau (the *Meseta Central*), which is dissected by a mountain range known as the *Sistema Central*. As we drove north towards the nation's capital the rolling hills began to give way to a flat terrain of rich, red soil. It was pretty much farmlands, olive groves and pastures. After a while most of us nodded off.

We took a bathroom break about an hour outside of Madrid. When we got back on the bus, Javier entertained us with some funny stories about what he called the 'bizarre rituals' of his fellow countrymen. In Valencia, for example, the city conducts an annual springtime festival in March called Las Fallas de Valencia. The term 'Las Fallas' refers to large wooden-and-papier-mâché monuments that are ceremoniously burned on the final day of the festival (March 19, the feast day of St. Joseph). If you want to compare this to something, then imagine that at the end of the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade all of the floats are pulled together and set on fire. This unusual festival is said to have originated from pre-Christian Iberian carpenters who, on the onset of spring, would burn the beams holding the torches they used during the winter months to work. The monuments (or floats) can be enormous, over thirty feet tall, and once this pile is set ablaze it becomes one gigantic bonfire. The festival attracts over a million people each year, and the monuments can get outrageous (in addition to religious icons, they can include images of politicians, artists and even cartoon characters).

Another example of a bizarre Spanish ritual is the Annual Tomato Fight (*La Tomatina*) in the tiny town of Bunol. Supposedly, it started during the 1940s when some mischevious locals, upset over a lackluster parade through the town, began pelting the crowds with vegetables. Soon, a major food fight broke out and the incident has spiraled into a very popular annual event. On the day of the actual tomato fight, trucks unload roughly 150,000 very ripe tomatoes in the center of town and for one full hour the participants (numbering around 40,000) engage in a massive tomato flinging free-for-all. According to Javier, the crowds usually don white clothing and use goggles or snorkeling gear to prevent tomato juice from entering their eyes and nose. When the hour is up, the streets of Bunol (not to mention its inhabitants and homes) turn bright red.

Or how about the town of Berchules, nestled high in the Alpujarras region of Andalusia. On New Year' Eve in 1993, the town was all set to celebrate the incoming year when suddenly the power went out due to bad weather. Everything went pitch black, including the big clock that was suppose to ring in the New Year. The electricity wasn't restored until the following day, but by then the celebration was over and the townsfolk were livid at the electric company for robbing them of this special event. *So what did Berchules do*? They collectively said, "Screw it", and decided to re-celebrate the New Year…but on August 6, 1994. And it has now become a tradition that attracts over 10,000 visitors annually.

And, of course, no list of bizarre Spanish rituals is complete without including the annual Running of the Bulls Festival in Pamplona, which is held during the larger Festival of San Fermin in July. The practice originated during medieval times when bulls from the outlying fields were transported into the town's bullring via streets that were closed off. The bulls would be made to stampede down these roadways towards the bullring, and young men – in a show of bravado – would run alongside them, taunting

the animals. Today, roughly a dozen bulls and steers are let loose and large crowds (numbering in the thousands) attempt to outrun the bulls before they get to the bullring. At times, spectators have been gorged and even killed by these animals. The bulls are then used in that afternoon's bullfights.

We finally reached our hotel in Madrid – the Sercotel Gran Hotel Conde Duque – by 4:30pm. I was pretty tired by this point. I had been awake since 5:00am, and in addition to the hour and a half we spent touring Ubeda, we had also logged more than 300 miles (approximately 500 kilometers) by bus. But one of the things I always emphasize in my journals is that ‘guided touring’ is not a leisurely affair. When you make your own travel plans you can afford to take it slow, the trade-off between guided touring and going your own way is the amount of time it takes to see the areas you want to see. Guided tours are designed to incorporate the most important sites to maximize your stay in the country, so you must cover a lot of ground in a shorter period of time. Some people may not like the pace (and early hours) and to them I recommend they make their own travel plans and itinerary (or try riverboats and cruises). As for me, at the age of 62, if I want to ‘see the world' I need to do it with some alacrity, because time is definitely of the essence once you enter your retirement years. I mention this because we were in Madrid for only two days , and I didn’t have the luxury to rest in my hotel room. Once again, I got together with Nina, Pratima and Krish and we agreed to meet at 5:30pm in the lobby and walk the areas of the Centro district, not far from where our hotel was located in the Chamberi neighborhood of Madrid. It was the night before Easter Sunday, and the city was hopping with visitors and locals.

Madrid is the third largest capital in Europe after London and Berlin, but despite its massive sprawl it is a fairly easy city to

navigate, especially for tourists since many of the places you'll want to visit are usually close together. Madrid also has one of the most thorough and least expensive transit systems in Europe, which makes the going even easier. In our case, we didn't need to avail of the local transportation system since we were just walking distance from the historic Old Madrid section of the city. Krish entered the sites we wanted to visit into the Google map app on his cellphone and then we followed the GPS directions through the streets of this lovely capital.

We began by walking two blocks from our hotel and taking a street called Calle de Conde Duque, passing the Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art and Cultural Center housed in a restored 1700s military barracks. In back of this structure is another museum, the Palacio de Liria, an ornate 18th century palace with furnishings, tapestries and a collection of classic artworks. We reached a wide boulevard called Calle de la Princesa and turned left, walking one long city block to the beautiful tree-lined Plaza de Espana, a large open square recently renovated according to Javier. In the center of this plaza is an enormous monument to Spain's greatest writer, Miguel de Cervantes, in front of which are two smaller bronze statues of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza on horseback overlooking a wide man-made pond (these were two characters from Cervantes' epic novel *Don Quixote*, considered to be one of the first novels ever written and among the world's best works of literature). Surrounding the square are two of Madrid's biggest skyscrapers: the 384-foot tall *Edificio de Espana* (1953) and the 466-foot tall *Torre de Madrid* (1957).

From the Plaza de Espana we continued east on Calle Gran Via ('Great Way Street'), an iconic mile-long boulevard sometimes compared to New York City's Broadway. Besides being an important upscale shopping district, the buildings along Calle Gran Via contain over two dozen wonderful examples of 20th century revival architecture, featuring a variety of architectural designs like

Art Deco, Neo-Mudejar, Art Nouveau, Platersque and more. We eventually turned right on Calle Gran Via and headed south again, passing through Plaza de Santo Domingo, a modern concrete park that has undergone various incarnations since the late 16th century when a Dominican convent once stood there. A short distance later we arrived at the Plaza Isabel II, another historic public square named after Queen Isabel II (1833-1868). In the center of this plaza is a bronze statue of the queen that was commissioned after her death.

Directly in front of the Plaza Isabel II along its western side is the Royal Theater (*Teatro Real*) originally completed in 1850. It quickly became one of Europe's grand opera houses but was damaged during the 1920s by the construction of the city's metro train system. The theater was remodeled, but its renovation took decades due to the Spanish Civil War and its financial repercussions. In 1966 the theater reopened as a concert hall and further remodeling allowed the theater to host opera again by 1991. On the opposite side of the theater (not visible to us from this point) stands the magnificent Royal Palace of Madrid, the official residence of the King of Spain (although I read online the royal family does not actually live there, preferring to stay at the Zarzuela Palace on the outskirts of the city).

From here we walked east for several blocks on Calle del Arenal, a lovely pedestrian street lined with shops, until we reached the Church of San Gines (dedicated to the French saint, Genes d'Arles). This is one of the oldest churches in Madrid. It was originally constructed during the 1600s. Its current tile and brick façade was added during renovations made in the late 1800s. Inside is a masterpiece painting entitled 'Purification of the Temple' by El Greco, the famous Greek artist of the Spanish Renaissance period. We walked along the back side of the church, (which is deceptively large) through an alleyway and came upon the *Chocolateria de San Gines*, an iconic café that has been serving

the best hot chocolate and churros in Madrid since 1894. The line of customers extended outside the establishment. We continued heading south for a few more minutes before arriving at the majestic *Plaza Mayor* (Town Square), the original public square from medieval times.

This rectangular plaza measures 423 ft by 308 ft (124m by 94m) and is enclosed on all sides by a symmetrical row of red residential buildings with over two hundred balconies that face the square. The columned arcades along the bottom of these buildings offer restaurants and outdoor cafes. To enter the plaza you can use any of its ten entrances (nine of which are gated). In the center is an equestrian statue of King Philip III made in 1616 but not placed in the square until 1848 for some reason. This king – who ruled from 1598 until 1621 – was responsible for converting this former 14th century town market into Old Spain's main public square. When we arrived we witnessed a religious procession going through the plaza. Pratima told me that on a long-ago trip to Spain, her and Krish had unexpectedly run into old friends inside the Plaza Mayor, so the place brought back fond memories for them.

From the plaza we walked east along Calle Mayor and reached yet another historic public square called *Puerta del Sol* (Sun's Gate). This plaza was the spot of one of the gates along the defensive walls leading into the old city (hence its name), and has seen some wild and raucous times. Geographically located in the exact center of Madrid, this is the spot where *madrilenos* have traditionally congregated for big celebrations (like New Year's Eve) or to stage political protests and uprisings. On the south side of the square is the Royal Post Office Building (*Real Casa de Correos*), which now houses the office of the president of the Autonomous Region of Madrid. Atop this building is a large clock tower that has been ushering in the New Year since 1962. At midnight on New Year's Eve the clock chimes twelve times (one for each month) and *madrilenos* – and pretty much all Spaniards

everywhere – will eat one grape for each chime, a tradition that even my Cuban-born parents held dear.

Along the north side of the square, on top of a pink building, is the enormous Tio Pepe billboard sign advertising a popular brand of Spanish dry wine. This emblematic symbol has graced the plaza since 1936; it features a cartoon wine bottle dressed like an Andalusian gentleman sporting a red hat, jacket and holding a guitar. Another favorite image in the plaza is a statue called the *Oso y el Madrono* (the Bear and the Strawberry Tree), which represents the symbol of the city. And just to the southeast of this plaza is an interesting area known as the *Barrios de las Letras*, or the literary district, an old section with narrow streets that used to be the favorite (and often shady) hangouts of Spain's literary elites from the 16th and 17th centuries. Today, like back then, the area offers plenty of lively bars and theaters.

From the northeast corner of Puerto del Sol we began heading north along Calle de la Montera, another busy pedestrian shopping lane. A short while later we reached Calle Gran Via again. Just to the east of us were two of the architectural gems of this famous street. The first was the Grassy Building (*Edifico Grassy*) built in 1917 in an Eclectic style featuring a rotunda topped by two superimposed belvederes decorated in a Renaissance fashion. Right next to it at the beginning of Calle Gran Via is the Metropolis Building (*Edificio Metropolis*), a stunning 1911 structure designed in a French Beaux-Arts style popular during the second half of the 1800s. It features a combination of Renaissance, Baroque and French Neoclassicism styles that has to make this one of the most photographed structures in the city. The round cupola topping the building is intricately decorated with statues and thousands of carved leaves made from 24-carat gold. Perched atop the dome is a winged statue of the goddess Victory.

We crossed Calle Gran Via and continued north along Calle de Fuencarral, another pedestrian shopping street. At one point we passed the History Museum of Madrid (*Museo de Historia de Madrid*) a city museum housed in an 18th century hospice/orphanage with a striking Baroque façade portal. Just before reaching the end of Calle de Fuencarral we stopped to have dinner at a café called Superchulo that specialized in vegan and vegetarian dishes. Krish had made reservations before we left our hotel. I'm not big on vegetarian cuisine, but the food was pretty good. I ordered one of their famous veggie pizzas and we shared appetizers consisting of pita bread, wheat crackers and three very tasty vegetable spreads. By 9:45pm we started heading back to the hotel, running into Angela and Norman on the street. We walked west along Calle de Carranza, crossing a large roundabout with a monumental water fountain called the Glorieta de Ruiz Gimenez. A few minutes later we reached our hotel. I was back in my room by 10:00pm. I brushed my teeth, stripped to my underwear and went straight to bed.

Day Eleven

I was up at 4:30am and soon entered panic mode. The room did not have a coffee maker and when I plugged my water immersion heater into the socket (with its adapter) it immediately sparked, turning black and smoky. I almost cried. This apparatus had been providing me with hot water for five consecutive trips, which is a lifetime as far as water immersion heaters go. Without my morning cup of coffee I cannot function, and the hotel restaurant wouldn't be open for another several hours. Luckily, the hot water from my bathroom faucet was scalding hot and I was able to make instant coffee with it. With java juice flowing once again through my system, I did my traveling exercise routine, shaved, showered and

finished entering yesterday's events in my journal. I was downstairs for breakfast by 7:30am.

Shortly after 9:00am we were on the bus heading to the medieval city of Toledo, located roughly 47 miles (76km) southwest of Madrid. Our local guide for this stop was named (you guessed it) Maria Jesus and she gave us some background information on Toledo before we arrived. The city is the capital of the Toledo province and serves as the seat of the autonomous community within the Castilla-La Mancha region. Strategically situated in the center of the country, the 'old city' of Toledo has been an important political center dating back more than 1600 years. Between the 6th and 8th centuries it was the capital city of the Visigoth Kingdom that ruled Iberia after the fall of the Romans. During this period a series of synods, known collectively as the Councils of Toledo, convened to interpret Christian doctrine or to influence or establish ecclesiastic laws. And in the 16th century, when Spain was busy conquering the New World, Toledo became the main venue of the court of Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, and was regarded as an imperial city. Perched atop a hillside along the Tagus River, and still protected by its fortress walls, the entire old city section of Toledo is now a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site.

We approached the city along a perimeter road just to the south of the Tagus River. We stopped briefly at one of several observation points on this road to take panoramic photographs of the medieval fortress city from across the river. From this vantage point it was easy to see why Toledo would have been a formidable adversary to conquer. Besides the Tagus River, which acted as a natural moat on three sides, the city was set atop a hill surrounded by thick, stone fortress walls that have withstood the test of time. Additionally, on the hilltops outside the old city were defensive castles or structures that would have sounded the alarm of an impending attack and provided the first line of defense. As a result,

the old city is pretty much intact and quite a marvel to view from a distance.

Around 10:30am we entered the old city on its north side, taking a series of long escalators to the top. From within the fortress walls we could now look out onto the plains of La Mancha; it was quite the view. Maria Jesus led us through the narrow, winding medieval streets towards the Toledo Cathedral, also known as the *Catedral Primada de Espana* (Primate Cathedral of Spain), the very seat of the country's Catholic Church. This impressive 13th century High Gothic cathedral is considered to be among the premier examples of Gothic architecture in the country. We approached through the *Puerta del Reloj* (the Clock Tower Gate) but were stopped near the entrance of the cathedral from going any further. It was Easter Sunday, and the police had set up barricades in the area as the cathedral prepared for a special mass and procession for later that day. What a bummer, I really wanted to see the inside of this place. I had to settle for the outside facade, which was pretty awesome in its own right. Construction of the cathedral began in 1226, on the site of Toledo's previous chief mosque, and was not completed until 1493 when the Catholic Monarchs were in power. During its earlier heyday, Toledo was touted as the city born of three cultures because Christians, Muslims and Jews coexisted peacefully for centuries. All that changed when the Catholic Monarchs began expelling Jews and Muslims from their kingdom.

Unable to enter the cathedral, we walked west towards the Jewish Quarter. Due to the labyrinth nature of the alleyways and pedestrian streets it was impossible for me to accurately say what path we took, but along our way we passed many historical buildings (some now museums) dating back centuries. This is a historical quarter one needs to plan an entire day for. While we were able to get a good *feel* of the old city, our two-and-a-half hour walking tour did not do this place justice. And there are many

excellent shops and restaurants here, as well. Toledo is famous for various things, like antique-inspired swords, handmade marzipan (sweet almond candies) and a unique form of metal artwork introduced by the Moors known as damascene. We took a bathroom break inside a shop that specialized in *damasquinado* (damascene metal work). The owner provided a brief demonstration of this ancient art form, which has been around since the time of the Egyptians. From what I could tell, the craft involves infusing gold and silver onto steel pieces of jewelry, swords or decorative items. A shop artisan was busy inlaying gold onto a steel bracelet. Toledo is also known for the quality of its steel, and damascene swords are a popular souvenir item here. I was tempted to buy one (they make nice wall decorations) but then the thought of getting it through airport security seemed somewhat problematic and I decided against it.

We continued into the Jewish Quarter and stopped at the *Iglesia de Santo Tome* (St. Tome Church). Originally a converted mosque from the 11th or 12th century, this church was later reconstructed during the 1300s by aristocrat Gonzalo Ruiz de Toledo, better known as the Count of Orgaz. And while the building itself is an important 14th century landmark, it is actually famous for two things: a de Graaf pipe organ that is used for concerts and recitals, and a painting entitled *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* made by the famous Spanish Renaissance artist, El Greco. The painting now hangs in a separate vestibule of the church to accommodate the long line of tourists that visit daily. The theme depicts a legend surrounding the death of the Count of Orgaz. On the day of his burial, witnesses ‘claimed' they saw St. Stephen and St. Augustine descend from the Heavens to bury the count. The painting, which is pretty large, is divided into two sections; the lower portion depicts the burial of the count and those present, and the upper portion shows Heaven watching down on the proceedings. Art scholars have described the painting as a masterpiece of Western

and Late Renaissance (Mannerism) art, and one of El Greco's greatest works.

From here we walked into the heart of the Jewish Quarter, passing the ruins of a 14th century Jewish home (with an underground museum) called *Casa del Judio* (Jewish House). A short distance later we stopped to tour the inside of the Ibn Shoshan Synagogue, perhaps the oldest synagogue still standing in Europe today. Although the building serves as a museum now, this former synagogue dates back to at least the early 13th century. It is more popularly referred to by the confusing title of the Synagogue of St. Mary the White (*Sinagoga de Santa Maria La Blanca*). During the pogroms of 1391 – a wave of anti-Semitic violence that swept throughout the Iberian Peninsula – the synagogue was badly damaged and was later appropriated by the Catholic Church. In the early 1500s the building was officially converted into the St. Mary the White Church (the name referred to an effigy of Mary that was kept inside). Three small apses were added to the back of the building to serve as chapels.

The synagogue/church was badly damaged during the Napoleonic Wars when French soldiers used it as a military barracks and a stable for their horses. By the end of the 19th century it was designated a national memorial site and subsequently restored. The structure still retains its earlier Mudejar-style architecture. Its plain white interior walls, and the use of brick and pillars with Arabesque arches instead of columns, are symbolic of the architecture used during the time of the Almohad Dynasty. According to our guide, the synagogue is a clear symbol of the historic notion that Toledo was originally a city born of three cultures; it was a Jewish temple, but commissioned by a Christian king and built by Muslim architects from Cordoba.

We finished our tour of Toledo's old city in the plaza facing the Monastery of St John of the Monarchs (*Monasterio de San Juan de*

los Reyes). This structure was built in the late 15th century to commemorate the birth of Prince John, the son of the Catholic Monarchs, and the victory over the Portuguese King in the Battle of Toro (an inconclusive battle that nonetheless cemented the rule of the Spanish crown going forward). The church was designed in an Isabelline style (also known as Late Castilian Gothic) and has a grand cloister with a small garden. We continued walking southwest for a short distance before exiting the old city via the St Martin Bridge (*Puente de San Martin*), a stone pedestrian bridge from the 14th century that lies over the Tagus River. At the time of its construction the St Martin Bridge – with its five arches – was considered one of the longest bridges in the world. As we walked over the bridge people were zip lining across the river next to it. On the eastern side of the old city is another, older bridge called *Puente de Alcantara* that was built by the Romans. Both bridges still have their defensive towers and were heavily fortified back in the day.

By 1:00pm we boarded our bus (on the other side of the St Martin Bridge) and returned to Madrid. Our next stop was a scheduled tour of the famous Prado Museum. We entered the capital from the south, on roadway A-42, and drove by the *Puerta de Atocha* train station, Madrid's largest hub for underground, local and long-distance trains. In front of the station is a roundabout memorial dedicated to the victims of the terrorist train bombings that occurred on March 11, 2004, just three days prior to the country's general elections. A total of four trains en route to the Puerta de Atocha station were attacked that day, claiming 193 lives. Islamic terrorists believed to be associated with al-Qaeda – who were protesting Spain's involvement with the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq – carried out the bombings. From the train station we circled around and headed north along Alfonso XII Street, driving between the Royal Botanical Gardens on our left and the sprawling *El Retiro* public park on our right. We pulled up to the plaza where the Prado Museum is located along Felipe IV Street

around 2:00pm. Javier gave us an hour and a half for lunch and instructed us to rendesvous in front of the Goya Statue on the north side of the museum by 3:30pm.

I joined Nina, Pratima, Krish, Angela and Norman for lunch. We walked several blocks from the museum to an Indian restaurant Krish located on his cellphone. I ordered the spicy Chicken Marsala and we shared chips with three different types of chutney spreads. On the way back to the Prado Museum we stopped at *Turrones Vicens Prado* for some sweets. The Torrons Vicens Company is an iconic family-owned business that has been cranking our fine gourmet nougats and chocolates since 1775. This was their main store in Madrid. I didn't buy anything, mind you, but I took full advantage of the free samples they offered at the various counters. One suspicious saleswoman came up to me as I shoved the sixth 'sample' piece into my mouth and asked if I needed any help. I pointed at Pratima and Angela, who were busy paying for their purchases, and said, "I'm with them." Although, with all that tasty nougat crammed into my mouth, it sounded more like, "*Am wid dem*".

By 3:30pm we were all assembled in front of the Goya Statue and then proceeded to enter the Prado Museum through the main floor entrance directly across from the beautiful Church of San Jeronimo el Real, a 16th century Gothic structure that sits on top of a hill overlooking the museum. Once inside, Maria Jesus led us on a two-hour tour of some of the more important exhibition halls.

The Prado Museum (*Museo Nacional del Prado*) first opened its doors in 1819. Commissioned by King Ferdinand VII (and his art-loving queen), the museum had two purposes: to showcase the works of art belonging to the crown, and to demonstrate to the rest of Europe the merits and class of Spanish art. During the 19th and 20th centuries the building was renovated and expanded several times to accommodate not only the increasing amount of visitors

but also its growing selection of artworks. When it first opened, the museum contained approximately 1,500 works of art collected from the country's various royal residences. Today, there are over 15,000 paintings and drawings, almost 5,000 prints and roughly 1,000 statues, making the Prado the main national art museum of Spain. On any given day, among its more than 100 rooms and galleries, you'll find over 1,500 art pieces on permanent display, with thousands out on loan to other museums, and the rest in storage. Not only does it contain the single best collection of Spanish art, the Prado also has one of the best collections of European art dating from the 12th to the 20th centuries.

The founding pillar of the Prado's art collection centers on paintings of the colourist tradition highlighted by artworks from Titian, and the Venetians Tintoretto and Veronese, and also El Greco and the Flemish painters Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck. Perhaps the most famous of such paintings is the one by Diego Velasquez entitled *Las Meninas* (my personal favorite, too), the most visited artwork in the museum. It is an unusual (and mesmerizing) piece of artwork, depicting the view from the king and queen as they sit on their throne watching their young daughter playing with her ladies-in-waiting. The artist, Velasquez, is portrayed in the painting *doing* the actual painting, looking up from his canvass and presumably staring at the royal couple. This style of colourist tradition and the remarkable pictorial school it inspired was very big by the 17th century in Spain, with works from other notable artists like Murillo, Ribera and Zurbaran on display, as well. This form of painting culminated in the 18th and 19th centuries with the works of artists like Louis-Michel van Loo, Corrado Giaquinto and Goya. The Prado has the largest collection of Goya's artwork in the world and it is prominently displayed in several exhibition halls, including one section of depressing works referred to collectively as his Black Paintings, which were done at his home during a period in his life when he struggled with mental issues.

I am not an art historian, so I will not do justice to the art pieces I saw. Suffice it to say that if you love art museums do not miss the Prado in Madrid, it's *definitely* worth a visit. Maria Jesus took us up to the main galleries of the Villanueva Building. We saw classics from all the prominent Italian, Spanish and Flemish painters. The very first painting we stopped to view was entitled *Emperor Charles V on Horseback* by Venetian Renaissance artist Titian. He used a color known as Venetian red to bring out aspects of the portrait. From here we went on to see works by so many of the great artists of their time: Tintoretto, Veronese, Titian, Velasquez, Zurbaran, Rubens, Ribera, Murillo, Van Dyck, Rembrandt, Raphael, Poussin, Goya and even some by Picasso, just to name a limited few. Our tour ended around 5:30pm. Most of us re-boarded the bus, but I believe a few stayed behind to explore the museum further.

From the Prado Museum we did a short driving tour of Madrid. We drove north from the museum along a wide boulevard called Paseo del Prado and immediately passed the Neptune Fountain, a large neoclassical water fountain in the center of a roundabout that depicts Neptune on a shell-shaped chariot. Just beyond the fountain we came across an obelisk monument on our right dedicated to the fallen soldiers of the May 2nd, 1808 uprising against French troops. At the next roundabout we saw the Cibeles Fountain, another neoclassical water fountain from the 18th century with a statue of the goddess Cibeles on a chariot pulled by two lions. On the corners facing the fountain, within the Cibeles Plaza, are the 20th century Cibeles Palace (now home to Madrid's city hall) and the 19th century Palace of the Marquis of Linares (now an exhibition house showcasing the culture of Latin-American countries and their unique connection to Spain).

We continued north on Paseo de Recoletos, passing the Salamanca Palace, the former home of the marquis of Salamanca.

The palace is now part of Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria (BBVA), a large Spanish financial institution that uses the building for art exhibitions. At the next major intersection we drove by the National Library of Spain, a beautiful rectangular-shaped neoclassical structure completed on 1892 to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the 'founding' of the Americas. The main façade has a broad staircase leading up to it, with a Corinthian-style, square-fronted portico decorated with statues showing the Triumph of the Sciences and the Arts. Adjacent to the library, its entrance directly in back of the building, is the National Archaeological Museum.

We passed the National Library and made a u-turn around a large plaza that is home to the *Fernan Gomez Centro Cultural de la Villa*, a multiplex cultural exhibition center promoting the works of companies or individuals devoted to music, visual and the performing arts. In front of the center, suspended in mid-air, is the image of what appears to be a large, white female head. I'm not sure if it was a statue or some kind of optical illusion, but it was freaky to look at. We backtracked towards El Retiro Park along Calle de Serrano, coming upon the *Plaza de la Independencia* located on the northwestern corner of the park. The plaza contains a triumphal gate called the *Puerta de Alcala*; a neoclassical arched gate built in the late 1700s and decorated with carved ornamentations and fine sculptures. This is one of the remaining city gates from the 'walls of Philip IV'. Madrid had been surrounded by walls for much of its existence. The last great wall that enveloped the city was commissioned by King Philip IV in 1625 to replace the outdated walls of his grandfather, King Philip II. These were not defensive walls, per se, but used to control sanitation conditions, and for the purpose of collecting taxes and keeping an eye on who was entering and leaving the city.

We traveled west across the city for about 15 minutes on Gran Via Street, Maria Jesus pointing out the various architectural gems

along this elegant boulevard, and then we stopped for a photo-op at the Royal Palace of Madrid (*Palacio Real*). I don't think the palace was open to tourists since it was Easter Sunday. There were large crowds milling about, though. This is the largest royal palace in Europe, with approximately 1,450,000 square feet of space (135,000 sq meters) and over 3,400 rooms. The royal family no longer resides here, and the building is now used primarily for state functions. For a fee, visitors can tour the palace, which is known for its wealth of art, fine materials and exquisitely designed and decorated rooms. But the place is so big the walking tours are confined to only a small section of the palace, and the routes are changed periodically to avoid 'wear and tear'.

The original royal alcazar that existed on this site burned down in 1738, and the new palace we see today was initially constructed by 1755 in a Baroque and Classicism style. Over the ensuing centuries, several additions, renovations and restorations have been made, including the expansion of the Plaza de la Armeria in front of the main palace structure. Our bus left us off near the Plaza de Oriente, a rectangular park adjacent to the Plaza de la Armeria on its northern side. This plaza connects the eastern façade of the palace with the Royal Theater. In the center of the Plaza de Oriente is a large monumental equestrian statue of King Philip IV, which faces the Royal Theater across the street, and around the plaza's edges are rows of statues referred to as the Gothic Kings, a series of sculptures representing five Visigoth kings and fifteen rulers of Christian kingdoms during the *Reconquista* (the Christian Reconquest of the Iberian Peninsula).

Next to the Royal Palace on its south side is the *Santa Maria la Real de La Almudena*, or the Almuneda Cathedral, the seat of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Madrid. As far as cathedrals in Spain go, this one is pretty modern. It was constructed over a 110-year period beginning in 1883. The church was only consecrated in 1993 by Pope John Paul II. When the Spanish capital was moved

from Toledo to Madrid in 1561, the seat of the Catholic Church remained in Toledo because Madrid did not have a cathedral yet. A situation it did not rectify for hundreds of years. I read online that during the colonization of the Americas, Spain focused on building churches in the New World, and essentially put a hold on such constructions back home, which is one of the reasons it took so long to build this one. And it is a wonderful structure, a mix of neo-Classical, neo-Gothic and neo-Romanesque styles, with two large bell towers in front. The layout of the cathedral has a north-south orientation, which is unusual considering most Christian churches usually have an east-west orientation. It was built this way to integrate seamlessly with the Royal Palace next door.

With our included sightseeing tour completed for the day we returned to our hotel by 6:30pm. We said our 'goodbyes' to both Maria Jesus and our bus driver Hugo (we would be leaving for Barcelona by train the following morning). Throughout the day there was talk about one of our tour members who had been confined to her hotel room after coming down with respiratory issues. Javier confirmed to us that she had been diagnosed with Covid and could not continue with us to Barcelona; she would have to quarantine in Madrid until she could be cleared to return to the United States. This set off alarm bells for everyone because we now had to be tested for the virus before the tour could proceed. I was more than a tad apprehensive. The infected woman had been very cautious, wearing a face mask almost everywhere she went. In a tour group it's impossible to avoid close physical contact with other members; you're sharing the bus, walking tours and meals together on a daily basis. So the fear that others might be infected loomed large in our minds.

Javier contacted a Covid-testing agency in the area and they agreed to send over a technician. We had to pay 45 Euros (on our credit cards) for the service. Luckily, everyone else tested negative. But our collective sigh of relief was short-lived. We would all need

to retake the virus test in a few days prior to returning home and the new Covid variant was apparently running rampant throughout certain parts of Europe. I kept my fingers crossed. At 8:00pm we gathered in the lobby and walked down the street to an open-air restaurant called *Restuarante Meson 5 Jotas* for an included dinner. I don't recall what we ate but I thought the meal and the service was terrible, which only seemed fitting considering the specter of Covid now hanging over the group. I was back in my hotel room by 10:00pm. I wrote in my journal while intermittingly watching CNN International News on TV. An hour later I went to bed.

DAY TWELVE

I awoke at 4:30am and repacked my luggage. After going through my exercise routine I shaved, showered and got dressed. I reflected on the whole Covid thing during my morning meditation and decided to accept the inevitable and not spend any more time worrying about it. We still had three more days of sightseeing to do, and if I came down with the virus I'd simply have to deal with it like the woman on our tour was now doing. My anxiety did not revolve around catching the virus itself, I felt I was reasonably healthy and would be able to weather the more severe symptoms. What bugged me was this notion of being quarantined and unable to return to my *own* country until I was medically cleared to do so. Even if the reason might be just and only temporary, being barred from returning to your own homeland is a troubling prospect for any traveler.

I put my luggage in the hallway by 7:00am and went downstairs for breakfast. By 7:45am we departed for the Puerta de Atocha

Train Station. In the morning rush hour traffic it took us half an hour to get there, and when we arrived there were no porters so we had to grab our own luggage and proceed to our platform. I was surprised to discover a large tropical garden in the center of the train station's main terminus. You don't see *that* everyday. By 9:30am we were on a high-speed commuter train heading to Barcelona, which is located along the northeastern coastline of Spain facing the Mediterranean Sea. The trip took three and a half hours and covered approximately 650 kilometers (403 miles). I would love to describe the scenery but it was essentially nondescript; we passed farmlands and several valley towns and small cities with limited industrial centers. I sat next to Nina and we spent most of the trip talking. The time went by quickly.

We arrived at the Barcelona-Sants Train Station by 1:00pm. We grabbed our own luggage and hauled it outside, but once we exited the train station our new driver, Paco, took possession of our bags. When you pack for a two-week (or longer) tour, your main piece of luggage tends to be pretty hefty so it's a real treat to have someone else lugging it around. (And if you're wondering, I tip the drivers well). Before heading to our hotel we did a little driving tour of Barcelona, Javier enlightening us with some fun facts about the city.

Barcelona is the capital of the autonomous community of Catalonia. It is one of the largest cities along the Mediterranean Sea, and Spain's second largest city overall with 1.6 million inhabitants. It also has an extended satellite population of roughly 3.2 million people living in the neighboring communities within the Barcelona Province, making this the fifth largest urban center in the entire European Union. This is a beautiful city, ranked among the top cities to live in the world. Situated between the mouths of two rivers (the Llobregat and Besos), it is bordered on the west by the Serra de Collserola mountain range. The weather is a delight, at least for a Miami boy like me, a Mediterranean climate

of hot, dry summers (with some of the world's best beaches) and usually mild, wet winters.

Because of Barcelona's location along the coast it is a favorite destination of cruise ships. During the peak tourist season it feels as if foreigners overrun the city. In fact, this has become a major concern for local officials who worry about the stress that nearly 5.5 million visitors each year produce on the city's population. But on the flip side, Barcelona also enjoys being one of the richest regions per capita in Spain and one of the most economically powerful cities in the European Union. In addition to its tourism draw, the city is an important business hub in the country, with manufacturing making up one-fifth of the region's GDP, half of that concentrated in the energy, chemical and metallurgy industries. Since 1888, the city has hosted a number of world-class business conferences and expositions, and the city serves as the headquarters for the Union of the Mediterranean, an intergovernmental organization comprised of 43 member states from Europe and the Mediterranean Basin who work together to promote stability and socioeconomic integration in that part of the world.

One thing that becomes fairly evident to someone visiting Barcelona for the first time is the use of the Catalan language. Catalan is the official language of Andorra, a small, landlocked sovereign microstate on the Iberian Peninsula located in the eastern Pyrenees between France and Spain. Three autonomous communities of eastern Spain also speak the language. Because Barcelona is the capital of the autonomous community of Catalonia, the language is not only spoken here, but many signs are in Catalan, as well. I don't recall actually hearing the language in use while in the city – Spanish is still the main language spoken in Barcelona – but up to seventy-three percent of the local population is fluent in Catalan. I'm no linguist, but the language, at least in its written form, seems to have a strong similarity to French.

Another thing that becomes increasingly clear to the first time visitor to Barcelona is that this is a sports town, with numerous professional teams competing in different sporting areas such as soccer, basketball, Rugby, and ice hockey. The biggest club is the iconic FC Barcelona soccer team, considered one of the world's most successful soccer organizations. In 1982, parts of the FIFA World Cup were held in Barcelona, and in 1992 the city hosted the Summer Olympics. In fact, numerous international sporting events have been conducted in Barcelona over the past fifty years, highlighting the city's love of sports. During my travels I have noticed that certain cities give off a very positive, inviting aura. Barcelona is one of those cities; I knew immediately I would enjoy my stay here.

We drove south from the Barcelona-Sants Train Station along a wide street called Carrer de Tarragona, passing the Parc Joan Miro, a large sandy, public park with rows of pine, holm oak and palm trees. Located within the park is a popular statue made of broken-tile mosaic called Woman and Bird that was donated to the city by Joan Miro, the famous Catalan artist. Adjacent to the park is the Las Arenas de Barcelona shopping mall. This circular structure was built in the year 1900 in a Moorish-style with a grand horseshoe-shaped entrance. It was typically used for sporting events and was later converted into a bull-fighting ring. After the death of Franco, and with democracy and respect for ethnic communities on the rise, the citizens of Barcelona – who were not big fans of this inherently Spanish tradition – did away with bullfighting and the building was converted into a huge, round shopping mall plaza. Today, it has six floors underneath a covered dome with over a hundred shops, bars and restaurants and a rooftop terrace that provides a 380-degree view of the city.

Across from the Las Arenas de Barcelona mall is the *Placa d'Espanya*, a roundabout plaza with a large monumental fountain

that forms a junction for several of the city's major thoroughfares. It was built for the 1929 Barcelona International Exposition. We went around the plaza and continued heading south through the 154-ft tall Venetian Towers that mark the entrance onto Queen Maria Cristina Avenue in what is referred to as the Fira de Barcelona, the exhibition district for the numerous trade shows and fairs the city hosts on a regular basis. We followed this wide avenue until it ended in front of the impressive Font de Montjuic (water fountain) at the foot of the Montjuic hill. This hillside was used for the 1929 Expo celebrations and the entire area – including other parts of the city – underwent extensive renovations by some of the most famous Catalan architects of the day, transforming Barcelona into something truly magical. In the plaza behind the Font de Montjuic are the replica of the Four Columns built by Catalan architect Josep Puig i Cadafalch in 1919. The Ionic columns represent the four stripes of the coat of arms of the Kingdom of Aragon, which became a symbol for Catalanism. During the 1920s, under the fascist dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera, the original columns were torn down. In 2010 these recreated Ionic columns were erected on the same spot in a nod to the Catalan community.

We turned right onto a perimeter road in front of the Font de Montjuic and followed that up the mountain to the *Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya* (the National Museum of Catalan Art, known more popularly by its initials, MNAC). The museum is housed in the Spanish Renaissance-inspired *Palau Nacional* (National Palace), the main site of the 1929 Expo. It became the home of the MNAC in 1934 and today showcases Catalan artwork and designs from the 19th and 20th centuries and also features an excellent collection of Romanesque church paintings. In front of the MNAC is a commanding view of the Montjuic hillside all the way down to the Font of Montjuic, with sweeping panoramic vistas of the city from different angles. We stopped here for a photo-op and then continued to the top of Montjuic hill and drove by the Lluis

Companys Olympic Stadium used during the 1992 Barcelona Olympics. It is now utilized for sporting and concert events. We made a U-turn at one point near the Joan Miro Foundation (a museum dedicated to the artist's surrealist colorful artwork) and drove back down the hill passing several parks, a botanical garden and several other museums along the way.

We returned to the Placa d' Espanya and headed northeast on a major avenue called Gran Via de les Corts Catalanes, traveling for more than 15 blocks through the heart of the city. We passed a campus of the University of Barcelona and soon after made a left turn onto Passeig de Gracia, driving north through the L'Eixample district. The word *L'Eixample* means 'expansion' in Catalan. The district was the result of a rural expansion carried out in the 19th and 20th centuries just to the northwest of the Old City (*Ciutat Vella*) of Barcelona. It encompasses six administrative neighborhoods organized in a strict gird-like pattern with streets crossed by wide avenues. The corner buildings on each street have a beveled edge, also known as a chamfered design, intended to create octagonal-like street block formations. The Spanish civil engineer Ildefons Cerda, considered to be the father of modern urban planning, designed the district. A number of the more famous structures within the L'Eixample were designed in a *Modernisme* style (also known as Catalan Modernism or Catalan Art Nouveau) by a litany of Barcelona's best architects, including Josep Puig i Cadafaich, Lluis Domenech i Montaner and perhaps the most famous, Antoni Gaudi. Over the following days we would have the opportunity of touring some of these amazing Modernisme buildings. One of the highlights of visiting Barcelona is witnessing this unique architectural style.

As we headed north along Passeig de Gracia we passed one street called the *Illa de la Discordia* (Block of Discord) with a concentration of homes and apartment buildings built in the Catalan Modernist style, all of which are now popular museums:

Casa Lleo Morera, Casa Mulleras, Casa Amatller, Casa Bonet and Casa Batllo. One could easily spend an entire day just visiting these gorgeously designed and wonderfully preserved Modernisme gems. The outrageous facades alone warrant a look because the shapes and designs of these structures are so unusual they make one stop and stare. Several blocks later we turned right onto Rossello Street and followed that for about five or six minutes until we reached our hotel, the Ayre Rosellon. We checked in by 2:45pm.

When I went up to my room I was pleasantly surprised when I drew the curtains to one side and found myself looking directly at the top of the *Basilica de la Sagrada Familia*, the famous landmark church designed by Antoni Gaudi; its tall spires resembling something out of a fairytale. I sat for several minutes on my bed just staring at this magnificent structure. We would tour the church the following morning. I have seen many beautiful and grand religious temples in my world travels, but *rarely* on the scale of La Sagrada Familia. One simply has to see it to believe it, and no trip to Barcelona would be complete without doing so.

I made a cup of coffee and unpacked the clothes I would be wearing for the remainder of the trip. At 3:30pm I met Nina, Krish and Pratima in the hotel's rooftop lounge (which had an even better view of La Sagrada Familia) for lunch. Dave, Sue and Katherine joined us. I ordered a hamburger with fries and a non-alcoholic beer. By 4:30pm, Nina, Krish, Pratima and I set out to visit the *Casa Mila* (Mila House), one of the spectacular residential buildings designed by Antoni Gaudi. Krish entered the location on his cellphone and we took off through the neat, organized streets of the L'Eixample district.

It took us twenty minutes on foot to reach the Casa Mila. The apartment building sits on the corner of Passeig de Gracia and Carrer de Provenca and is impossible to miss, even if you aren't

looking for it. The building is nicknamed *La Pedrera* (the stone quarry) because the structure was designed as a self-supporting stone façade, free of any load-bearing walls. This undulating stone facade curves continuously around the building and is connected to the internal structure via iron beams surrounding the perimeter of each floor. Adding another layer of peculiarity to the building are the twisting iron balconies in front of the numerous windows. When the structure was first built, its design was ridiculed and quickly became the brunt of jokes (this was when people started calling it La Pedrera). But in 1984, the building became a designated World Heritage Site (together with other Gaudi works) and is now hailed as a marvel of the *Modernisme* style. Several of its floors are open as a non-profit museum and during the tourist season you better buy the tickets online because they only allow so many visitors daily. Luckily for us it was the off-season and Krish was able to purchase our tickets with his cellphone.

The original owners of the Mila House were Roser Segimon (the wealthy widow of a former coffee plantation colonist) and her second husband, the flamboyant developer, Pere Mila. In 1905, shortly after marrying, they commissioned Gaudi to build them a new structure on an existing house lot with the main floor of the building to be used as their new home and numerous apartment units above that could be rented out for additional income. Working with Josep Maria Jujol (a Spanish architect who assisted Gaudi on many of his projects), the nine-story structure is actually two attached buildings that were constructed around two courtyards forming an assymetrical number 8. When the building was completed in 1912 it had a basement (to be used as an underground garage), a ground floor, a mezzanine, the main floor residence of the owners (measuring 1323 sq meters), four floors containing 20 apartment units and an attic used for laundry and as a drying area. In addition, the terraced roof offers another spectacular layer to the overall structure which I will describe shortly.

What makes the entire building such a unique work of art is Gaudi's penchant for mixing the elements of nature and geometry into his architectural designs. As a child, Gaudi was plagued with rheumatism and would often convalesce in a summer home where he spent a great deal of time outdoors. His deep appreciation for nature would later greatly influence his architectural style. In fact, the Mila House is billed as a 'masterpiece of nature'. After entering through the ground floor we were given listening devices with a recorded audio commentary for every floor we visited.

We began our self-guided tour in the open-air courtyard section. Gaudi combined several smaller patios into two larger ones providing an abundance of natural light throughout the structure. You can stand in the middle of this courtyard area and stare up at the sky surrounded by the curving walls of the interior facade. The courtyards have an intentional organic feel. The street level entrance resembled a cave opening, and the two staircases leading up to the main floor are reminiscent of the wings of some giant insect ready to take flight. The bright colors and use of plants were designed to give one the notion of being in a forest clearing. It was both beautiful and unusual at the same time.

When the audio commentary on the courtyards ended, we boarded an elevator and proceeded to the rooftop terrace. This was one wacky rooftop, as if Gaudi had dropped acid when he was creating it. The design of the roof bears no resemblance to the architectural styles of the era. I'm certain many visitors, upon seeing it for the first time, utter under their breaths, "What the f...?" The terrace wraps around the roof's edges in an undulating manner like the walls of the main façade, going up and down and flattening out like the floor of a carnival fun house. It is full of different elements that do not seem like they belong meshed together (at least not on top of a roof). You had skylights, staircases, ventilation towers and chimneys popping up all around the terrace,

each with its own symbolic shape (many of them open to your own personal interpretations) and finished or decorated with different materials like stone, glass, mirrors, marble and broken tile mosaics. It was both bizarre and fun to walk around the terrace, and the views of the surrounding L'Eixample district made it even more interesting.

After visiting the rooftop we walked down a stairwell leading to the attic, another mind-blowing experience. The attic was originally the laundry room (clothes were also hung up here to dry). I thought this was the most unique floor of the building. It consists of 273 flat brick, catenary arches aligned in a manner to resemble the interior of the Biblical whale that swallowed Jonah. I mean, it feels as if you're walking inside a dragon's ginormous ribcage. The windows along the walls are spaced in a way that when the sun begins to rise or fall it creates the illusion that the walls are moving (or breathing). *A creepily stunning effect*. The attic also contains an exhibition area devoted to the life and work of Gaudi, including one display of a series of upside-down hanging metal chains over a mirrored table that supposedly gave Gaudi his inspiration for the tower designs on the Basilica de la Sagrada Familia.

From the attic we climbed down another staircase to view one of the residential apartments on the fourth floor level where a bourgeois family from early 20th century Barcelona would have lived. It is entirely recreated with the typical furniture and fixtures from that time and just as equally enchanting as everything we'd seen so far. The apartment also serves to showcase the building's interior layout and special ornamental features designed by Gaudi like handles, knobs, doors, moldings and his interesting use of different floor patterns (ranging from ceramic tiles to beautifully patterned parquet flooring). The apartment followed the curving nature of the building, the various rooms wrapping around an extended corridor, with several of the larger family rooms – like

the sitting and dining rooms – eventually converging. The rooms were all spacious with plenty of natural light, including the bathroom.

Our self-guided tour ended inside the apartment. Unfortunately we could not see the main floor residence of the original owners because it is used primarily for special exhibits and it was closed on that day. We exited the building and headed back to the hotel, running into Katherine who had just come from touring the Casa Batllo down the street, the other famous Gaudi-designed apartment building. We exchanged notes and it seemed as if the Casa Batllo was every bit as interesting as the Casa Mila.

We reached the hotel by 7:00pm. A half hour later we gathered in the lobby and walked ten minutes to a nearby restaurant called Casa Madre situated along Avenue de Gaudi, a pedestrian street that extends from the Basilica de la Sagrada Familia for several long blocks, lined with shops, restaurants and open-air cafes. This was an included dinner. We were immediately served different types of tapas. Squid (in ink) croquettes, ham croquettes, fried calamari, a fried egg and potato dish, tuna and tomato salad. My main course was veal with potatoes. It was a pretty good dinner. The conversation was lively, everyone detailing what they had done during their free time. Pratima, who had changed into an elegant outfit for dinner and looked quite stunning, left the group early because she was meeting some friends who lived in Barcelona, I think. The rest of us returned to the hotel shortly before 10:00pm. I was too exhausted to write in my journal and went straight to bed.

Day Thirteen

I was up at 5:00am. There was no coffee machine in the room, so once again I had to make instant coffee using hot tap water. After doing my exercise routine I showered and dressed and spent over an hour editing my photos and jotting down notes in my journal book. I also took stock of my remaining clean clothes and came to a puzzling realization: I had been throwing away quite a bit of my laundry – socks, underwear, T-shirts, buttoned shirts and polos – yet somehow my luggage seemed just as heavy as it did on Day One. *Hmmm*. Perhaps my luggage was ordering room service while I was out? By 8:30am I went downstairs for breakfast.

At 9:30am the group gathered in the lobby and met Anna, our local guide for the day. We donned our Whisper listening devices and followed her down the street to visit the Basilica de la Sagrada Familia. As we walked she spoke briefly about the L'Eixample district. She told us the area was developed from the mid-1800s on, in what was an unusual grid-like pattern for a European city. Seen from above, she said, the formation of the buildings appear like squares, parallel and perpendicular, with the beveled angles on each corner forming an octagon around the intersections, allowing for a wider vehicular pathway (not to mention more parking spaces around the street corners). Within minutes we had reached La Sagrada Familia and stopped in front of the Passion Façade, one of the three facades of this incredible church. Anna gave us a brief rundown on the history of the structure.

The story of La Familia Sagrada begins back in 1872 when a local bookseller, Joseph Maria Bocabella, took a trip to Italy and returned to Barcelona with the idea of building a church inspired by the basilica at Loreto. Donations to build the church were gathered and the apse crypt was begun in 1882. The original

architect was Francisco de Pauler del Villar who came up with a standard Gothic revival plan for the church. It was designed to be a great church, but not too fancy because, after all, the city already had an elegant Gothic cathedral – the medieval Cathedral of the Holy Cross and St. Eulalia, better known as the Cathedral of Barcelona – located in the Old City. But everything changed when Francisco de Pauler del Villar resigned from the project in 1883 and Antoni Gaudi took over as the new architect. A deeply religious man, Gaudi wanted to build something more elaborate than a simple church. He wanted to build a masterpiece unto God…*and he wasn't in a hurry, either*. Flash forward to 2022 and La Sagrada Familia, after 140 years, is still not completed.

The design that Gaudi came up with has been described as a mix of Spanish Late Gothic, Catalan Modernism and Art Nouveau styles. But Gaudi went far beyond these applications in terms of surface decorations. The two completed facades (the Passion and Nativity facades) are covered with religious sculptures, themes and images. Gaudi's design also called for a total of 18 spires which represent, in ascending order, the Twelve Apostles, the Virgin Mary, the Four Evangelists, and the tallest spire, Jesus Christ. As of this year, only eleven spires have been built. Each one has its own unique decorations. The Evangelists spires will be topped with the traditional symbols of the four Evangelists (an eagle for St. John, a winged lion for St. Mark, a winged man for St. Matthew, and a winged bull for St. Luke). The lower spires are surmountable with images of the Eucharist, like sheaves of wheat and chalices filled with grapes. The central spire of Jesus Christ will be topped with a giant cross. When all the spires are finally completed, La Familia Sagrada will become the tallest religious structure in the world.

The church is now roughly seventy percent constructed, and is slated to be finished by 2026. But due to the Covid pandemic, among other issues, I don't think this structure will be done by

then. In fact, it might take a lot longer. La Sagrada Familia has always conjured up mixed feelings within the city. While the building is beloved by millions, there are also a number of detractors. Catholic traditionalists feel it will unduly compete with the Barcelona Cathedral for the most important church in the city. Others argue about the design, some thinking that Gaudi's work goes too far and is a distraction, or, on the flip side, that his true plans (Gaudi died in 1926) have been compromised in recent years for the sake of expediency. Another hot issue, according to Anna, is the ongoing legal battle with the owners of an apartment complex across from the Glory façade. This façade is still under construction and architectural plans call for the partial demolition of the residential building. The city has not rendered a decision yet on the matter, but lawsuits will definitely follow. And, of course, funding is always an issue. At any rate, I don't see this thing being completed by 2026.

If you're wondering then if this unfinished church is even worth a visit, let me just say that not even the scaffolding or the various building cranes working on the newer spires can detract from the overwhelming feeling of awe one experiences upon gazing at La Sagrada Familia for the first time. This is, *as it stands now*, one of the most astonishing religious temples in the world.

We began our tour of La Sagrada Familia in front of the Passion façade, which is dedicated to the suffering Jesus endured during his crucifixion. This facade faces the setting sun, symbolic of Jesus' death, and is intentionally austere, resembling the bones of a skeleton. Six widely spaced pillars slant down from the building like strained muscles, and above that is a row of smaller columns that look like polished bones. To the sides and above the entrance are sculptures designed to portray the sins of man and the severity and brutality of Christ's sacrifice, including a dramatic stone statue of Jesus tied to a whipping post situated at ground level as you enter this side of the church. Gaudi's intent was to instill a sense of

fear and shame in the average onlooker. The Stations of the Cross are portrayed in sculptures. As are scenes from Jesus' last night before the crucifixion (including the Judas kiss) and the Calvary of Christ. The steeples of the Passion façade were completed in 1976, and the sculptures were added after 1987 in accordance to the suggestions and plans left behind by Gaudi.

From here we walked around the church, passing the yet-to-be-completed Glory façade along Carrer de Mallorca. When finished, this will be not only the main façade of the church (leading into the central nave) but also the grandest of the three designed by Gaudi. Construction began in 2002, and judging by all the unfinished pillars, rebar and cranes, it doesn't look like it will be completed any time soon. Blocking the view was a metal construction barrier. The Glory façade is dedicated to the Celestial Glory of God. Gaudi wanted to show the pathway to God; namely, Death, Final Judgment, and Glory. Hell and Purgatory will also be depicted in some rather gruesome or disturbing way, I'm imagining, to exemplify what happens to sinners and non-believers. Gaudi left behind a scale model of his design that was demolished in 1936. Fragments from that model were later reconstructed and today it serves as a guide to the architect's ultimate wishes concerning the Glory façade. When the main portico is completed there will be seven large columns showing the Seven Deadly Sins along the bottom and the Seven Heavenly Virtues along the top. The columns themselves will represent the Gifts of the Holy Spirit (there are seven), and the façade will have a total of seven doors marking the Seven Sacraments of the Catholic Church. That's a lot of *sevens*, folks. Again, much of this work is still to be completed so we moved on to the Nativity façade located on the northeast side of the church in front of the Placa de Gaudi (a small, well-landscaped public park with a tiny lake).

Facing the rising sun, the Nativity facade is dedicated to the birth of Jesus. Construction began in 1893 and was completed in

1936. Knowing he would not live to see his church fully built, Gaudi put a lot of effort into the Nativity façade and its elaborate decorations in order to set an example for future artistic and architectural additions. And unlike the austere Passion façade, this one was very pleasing to look at. It was Gaudi's way of drawing in the masses. The façade has three porticos each representing a theological virtue (Hope, Faith and Charity). A sculptural image of the Tree of Life rises above the Charity portico, and the entire section is filled with statues and images of elemental life and scenes from the bible. Gaudi's penchant for mixing natural elements into his work is evident on this façade, as well. Statues of turtles and tortoises (symbols of land and sea) and chameleons (symbols of change) can be seen on the façade. Anna told us that not too long ago the leg of a Roman soldier statue above one of the porticos fell off and crashed onto the sidewalk. Luckily, no one was injured, but the incident has shaken the church's caretakers because no one is certain why this happened. The entire façade is undergoing inspection to check for structural and environmental issues that could have preceded the incident.

We had to go through a security checkpoint next to the Nativity façade entrance before we could go inside. We spent about thirty minutes touring the interior while Anna pointed out the numerous highlights of this spectacular church. The layout is that of a Latin cross with five aisles. The transept has three aisles. The cavernous center of the church was made possible by placing the buttresses on the outside of the building, with the central nave vaults reaching a height of nearly 150 feet tall (45m) and the side nave vaults reaching 98 feet tall (30m). The massive columns supporting the ceiling branch out in an interconnecting series of geometric patterns designed to resemble trees in a forest.

As you look around you notice something unusual, almost nothing in the interior is flat; everything is covered by some kind of elaborate ornamentation, with abstract shapes combining both

smooth and jagged edges. Even the choir staircase and the iron railings are twisted or curved. Thin or round stain glass windows rise along the walls bathing the visitor in a kaleidoscope of intersecting colors. Much of the church's decorations are covered with themes and symbols from Catholic liturgy. Anna told us that while the majority of La Familia Sagrada has been built along Gaudi's original designs, approximately thirty percent can be attributed to other architects who have made their own interpretations based on Gaudi's ideas and suggestions. As a result, art critics have been divided over whether the church is too eclectic or perhaps too elaborately outrageous for a religious structure. But today, six of Gaudi's buildings in Barcelona (including La Familia Sagrada) are now World Heritage Sites.

We exited through the Passion façade and walked around the church to Avenue de Gaudi, a pedestrian street with plenty of shops and restaurants. We continued along this street for four blocks until it ended in front of our next destination, the Hospital of the Holy Cross and St. Paul (*Hospital de la Santa Creu i Sant Pau*). This former hospital is now a World Heritage Site museum. Constructed between 1901 and 1930, this enormous complex – it has a total of 24 buildings (including 12 pavilions) within the equivalent of a nine city block area – was the mastermind of another of Barcelona's famous Modernisme architects, Lluis Domenech i Montaner. It was designed as a hospital village capable of looking after all the needs of its patients, from medical and mental treatments to hospice and convalescing care. Each of the pavilions are separate works of Modernisme art, with graceful sculptures, stain glass windows, spacious halls with plenty of windows, domed or vaulted ceilings and exquisite mosaic tiles throughout. Restored in recent years to its former self, this hospital museum is incredible, not just for its size – it forms its own architectural island within the city – but for its artistic details. It is considered the largest complex ever built in an Art Nouveau style.

We spent about 45-minutes walking through the main administrative building and several of the pavilions. Due to the time of year there weren't many visitors when we arrived so the hospital complex was relatively empty, allowing us to really appreciate the details that went into the facilities' overall planning. Not only was the layout aesthetically pleasing, each pavilion was designed with the intended purpose of benefiting the patients in ways that were truly revolutionary back in the early 1900s. New sciences (the use of x-rays and innovative medical equipment, some of which were on display) were utilized. Solariums provided plenty of sunshine; gardens of aromatic flowers like lavender were planted outside the pavilions to provide aromatherapy and induce relaxation. The hospital wards were large and airy, and there were plenty of outdoor, well-landscaped walking areas for exercise and tranquility. Both the kitchen and laundry rooms used the latest sterilization equipment to prevent the spread of diseases. There was even a library and a barbershop. The complex served as a fully functioning hospital until as recently as 2009 when a modern hospital was built next to it. The city decided to close the complex, restore the buildings and reopen the whole thing as a cultural museum in 2014. Walking through this place was just as impressive as anything Gaudi built, and it gives one a sense of the unique artistic gifts the Modernisme architects of the late 19th and early 20th centuries bestowed on this city. I enjoyed this stop immensely and whole-heartedly recommend it to anyone visiting Barcelona, especially since it's right down the street from La Sagrada Familia.

Our included morning tour ended here. It was 12:30pm. We left the Hospital of the Holy Cross and St Paul and walked back down Avenue de Gaudi to the metro train station on the corner of La Sagrada Familia. We bid 'goodbye' to Anna (she was a great guide and most of us tipped her well). The rest of the day was free for us to explore Barcelona on our own. Everyone in the group had planned on spending the day in the Les Rambles section of the city

– many of us also had tickets to tour the Picasso Museum located in the Gothic Quarter (*Barri Gotic*) neighborhood next to Les Rambles – and Javier agreed to take us there via the metro (he also purchased our fare, which was nice). He instructed us to be careful on the train with our belongings since Barcelona, like many of Europe's big touristy cities, has its share of pickpockets. The metro was clean and on time. We rode the purple L2 line for four stops, getting off at the Universitat Station in front of the University of Barcelona campus. From here we walked east for several blocks to a wide circular square called *Placa de Catalunya* (Catalonia Square) that generally marks the center of the city. Many of Barcelona's most important streets intersect at this plaza. Placa de Catalunya also forms the juncture where the Old City meets the newer L'Eixample district. And just to the south of the plaza is the beginning of the famous Les Rambles Street, perhaps the most visited section of the city.

As we stood in the Placa de Catalunya Javier gave us a brief rundown of the area. Les Rambles is a tree-lined pedestrian street that stretches for three-quarters of a mile (1.2 km) from the Placa de Catalunya in the north to the Christopher Columbus Monument at Port Vell in the south, next to the Mediterranean Sea. The street divides the two oldest neighborhoods in the city, *El Raval* (on the western side) and *Barri Gotic* (on the eastern side). Both of these neighborhoods are part of the district known as the Old City (or *Ciutat Vella*) and constitute the center of the historic quarter of Barcelona. Les Rambles itself is a continuous pedestrian pathway, with one-way vehicular traffic on either side of its wide pavement. This is the most popular area of the city for locals and tourists alike. Millions walk its path annually, frequenting the numerous pavement cafes and kiosks selling everything from flowers to birds to artworks. Old, elegant apartment buildings grace the street, with fancy iron balconies (some decorated with flowers) and old-fashioned metal street lamps on every corner. Restaurants, shops, historical buildings, open food markets and museums can be found

all over the area, making this one of the busiest sections of Barcelona on any given day of the week.

Javier led us down Les Rambles, pointing out various places of interests. We reached a large circular mosaic by artist Joan Miro inlaid into the pavement and turned left here on Carrer del Cardenal Casanas and headed into the historic *Barri Gotic* (Gothic Quarter) neighborhood. On the corner was another architectural gem called Casa Bruno Cuadros (but referred locally as the House of the Umbrellas). It is an eclectic Modernist house imagined by architect Joseph Vilaseca during the late 1800s. This was one of the early entries into Barcelona's homegrown Catalan Art Nouveau movement known as Modernisme. The building has unusual ornamental designs featuring colorful umbrellas and fans (the building originally contained an umbrella shop), with ornate balconies using Egyptian imagery, and outer walls embellished with intricate carpentry, embellished glass and Japanese-like prints. The most popular feature is the ornate Chinese dragon that adorns one corner of the façade. I'm not certain why this house was decorated with such oriental features, but the El Raval neighborhood on the opposite side of the street is nicknamed Barcelona's Chinatown, so perhaps this was a nod to the local community at the time.

It was now 1:45pm and we stopped at a popular local restaurant called the Irati Taverna Basca for a quick lunch break before proceeding to the Picasso Museum. The eatery, a traditional Basque restaurant designed in a rustic, chic surrounding, offered full service sit down dining in the back of the establishment. The front of the restaurant had a long bar and counter (much of it standing room only) with rows of innovative *pinxtos* to choose from. Pinxtos are considered the Basque Country's answer to the Spanish tapas. The Basque Country refers to the Basque Autonomous Community (or region) located in the northern part of the country bordering France. During the 1930s, the Basque people

came up with their own version of the centuries-old tapas, essentially topping small pieces of bread with any number of delicious concoctions. From ham and local cheeses with fried green peppers or figs, to potato salad or cod croquettes, or a Spanish omelet…*whatever* tasty combination you can possibly put on a small slice of bread will suffice. Pinxtos bars have become very popular in Spanish cities, especially for a quick (and economical) bite on the go. Pointy wooden sticks, a little bigger than a toothpick, are used to spear the pinxtos in place (the word *pinxtos* means 'stabbing' in the Basque language). These pinxtos bars offer numerous plates of different varieties. Customers walk up to the bar or counter and select the ones they want. They normally cost between 1 and 3 euros apiece and when its time to pay the bill, the cashier simply adds the number of sticks left on your plate. It's fast, cheap and delicious, perfect for lunchtime workers or hungry frugal tourists who do not have the time for a full sit down meal.

We sauntered up to the bar and began grabbing pinxtos left and right. I think I had five or six of them (um, they're not very big usually). Most of us ate standing up because the place was packed. Those who ordered a beer or a cider were delighted when the waitresses poured their drinks by holding the bottle above their heads and steadying the stream directly into a tall glass without spilling a drop. My bill came out to less than 9 euros. By 2:20pm we left the restaurant and Javier led us through the meandering streets and alleyways of the Old City to the Picasso Museum (*Museu Picasso*), located within the La Ribera neighborhood. We reached the museum just five minutes before the scheduled time printed on our entry tickets. Before leaving us for the day, Javier recommended several things we should see and do in the area. I grouped up with Nina, Pratima and Krish and we spent just under an hour and a half touring the museum.

The Picasso Museum is situated within a series of five connecting Gothic palaces dating back to medieval times. In fact, the entire street has been declared an art historical heritage site by the city and is worth exploring in its own right. The museum opened in 1963 when Picasso's secretary and friend, Jaime Sabates, donated an extensive collection of the artist's early works to the city. Over the years, other pieces have been acquired from various museums, including works donated by the artist himself. In 1982, Picasso's wife gave the museum a collection of 41 ceramics that are now on display, as well. And while there are over 4,200 pieces of artwork in the museum's permanent collection, this is not, by any means, the *definitive* Picasso artwork display. That distinction goes to the Picasso Museum in Paris. What you will see inside *this* museum are mostly samples from the artist's teen years and early twenties, before he developed his trademark cubism and surrealism styles. In essence, much of what is on exhibit is considered Picasso's 'art school work'. In his youth he studied art in Barcelona but left as a teenager and the museum basically showcases how the fledgling artist began developing his craft through those early years.

For me, what was fascinating about these pieces was not the artwork itself – some of this stuff goes back to his preteens – but rather the glimpses one gets of how he began to develop his personal style as he enters early adulthood. Towards the back of the gallery are a few more definitive works from Picasso's later years when he was already world renown for his cubist artwork. My favorite gallery was one dedicated solely to 58 different versions Picasso made (during the summer of 1957) of Velasquez's 17th century masterpiece *Las Meninas* that we saw in the Prado Museum in Madrid. Perhaps it was a boring summer for Picasso, but he painted almost five-dozen versions of *Las Meninas* in an absurdly abstract fashion. Some were so silly-looking they appear as if children in a kindergarten class could have made them.

We exited the museum around 4:15pm and took a thirty-minute break at a nearby café to give our aching feet a respite. We then walked a good portion of the Gothic Quarter (*Barri Gotic*)) with Krish leading the way, using the navigational app on his smartphone to guide us to the more interesting sites in this historic district. During the 12th century, under the reign of King Jaume I of Aragon, Barcelona became a Mediterranean power. The original city extended from Les Rambles in the west to the waterfront in the east and was completely walled in. This section today is known as the Gothic Quarter (or simply the Old City). The area contains many important buildings and museums housed in medieval structures, and just admiring the architecture was worth getting lost in the twisting streets of the Old City. We reached the impressive Cathedral of Barcelona, a Gothic structure dating to the 13th century, and visited several historical squares in the vicinity of the church. Most of the plazas in the Gothic Quarter were built in front of churches, so we saw quite a few of them. At one point, along the narrow Bisbe Street, we walked underneath the Pont del Bisbe; an enclosed ornately decorated marble pedestrian bridge that connects two historical buildings. From here we went on to discover the 15th century Basilica de Santa Maria del Pi, another beautiful Gothic church surrounded by three pretty plazas.

We eventually left the Gothic Quarter and returned to Les Rambles and headed over to the famous *Mercat de Sant Josep de la Boqueria*, better known as La Boqueria, a large public marketplace just off Les Rambles in the district of El Raval. This is the largest, and most popular, of Barcelona's three dozen or so public markets. The site has been in use since medieval times when farmers from Raval would sell their produce to the inhabitants of the walled city. Today, the whole thing is enclosed underneath a metal-roofed structure, resembling a train station from a distance. As you approach the entrance you'll see a sidewalk mosaic created by Joan Miro. The market is considered a foodie's paradise. Inside, there are 2500 square meters jammed with hundreds of vendor

stalls divided into meat, fish and produce sections. Within this mix are numerous bakeries, spice and sandwich stalls, juice bars, confectionary stands and cafes. Oh, and people. Lots and lots of people. In addition to being a huge tourism draw, locals (including chefs) do their food shopping here. I read online that morning times were exceptionally busy as customers converge to get first pick of the best produce and seafood (which arrives fresh daily). We spent over thirty minutes here browsing and sampling. I purchased a small packet of saffron for my friend Pedro Dominguez back home who enjoys cooking.

We left La Boqueria and headed back towards the Catalunya Plaza, taking a breather on the benches situated on Les Rambles. We discussed our dinner plans and decided on an Indian restaurant called Rasoi located on Carrer de Londres about 2.5 kilometers north of us in the L'Eixample district. The establishment did not open for dinner until 7:30pm so we relaxed on Les Rambles until about a quarter past seven and then hailed a taxi. Dinner was definitely worth the wait as this was one of the best Indian restaurants in the city. I ordered the delicious (and spicy) chicken tandoori, and we shared garlic naan and chips with a variety of chutney sauces. It was a great meal and an excellent way to end a very satisfying but exhausting day. We took a taxi back to the hotel just before 10:00pm. I wrote as much as I could in my journal before sleep overcame me.

Days Fourteen and Fifteen

I was awake by 4:30am. I made instant coffee and finished entering the previous day's events in my journal before exercising and showering. At 7:00am I went downstairs to the lobby. Javier

had scheduled Covid tests for those of us who were returning to the United States the following day. The medical technician was already in the lobby when I arrived. Luckily, as far as I could tell, no one in the remaining group had tested positive. I received my Covid test results via email, which I would have to show the following morning at the airline ticket counter before I could board my flight back home. Although I was relieved, I had also awoken with a sore throat, and from past experiences I knew I was coming down with *something*. I kept my fingers crossed. At 7:30am I went to the hotel restaurant for breakfast.

By 8:30am we were on the bus for a daylong trip to visit two interesting sites, both located within the Catalonia Autonomous Community region of the country. The first was the Salvador Dali Theater Museum in the town of Figueres (where the artist was born) not far from the French border. The second stop was a walking tour of Girona, another of Spain's famous medieval cities. Our local guide for the day was a middle-aged woman named Monica. We drove north on highway AP-7 from Barcelona for two and a half hours before reaching Figueres (with one bathroom stop along the way). During the drive, Monica gave us a brief historical introduction into the Catalonia region.

Wedged into the northeastern corner of the country, just south of the Pyrenees mountain range that separates Spain and France, the Catalonia Autonomous Community consists of four provinces – Barcelona, Girona, Lleida and Tarragona – with Barcelona being the largest province and also the region's capital. The three official languages here are Catalan, Spanish and a relatively obscure French-based dialect called *Aranese* (spoken in a small section of the Lleida province bordering France). Human settlement in the Catalonia region dates back to the Middle Paleolithic period. The first permanent settlements began appearing around 5,000 BC. When the Romans defeated Carthage in 146 BC, the region became the first area to come under Roman rule as part of Hispania

(what the Romans called the Iberian Peninsula). After the fall of the Western Roman Empire the Catalonia region came under the control of the Visigoths (for two and a half centuries) and then was ruled by the Moors before Christian kingdoms further north reclaimed the area and made it a heavily militarized buffer zone to prevent further Moorish incursions into Europe. With the defeat of the last Muslim dynasty on the Iberian Peninsula in the late 1400s, Catalonia – like the rest of the country – became part of the newly united Kingdom of Spain.

Geographically, the Catalonia region is hemmed in by the Pyrenees Mountains in the north, which forms a depression just to the south of it that extends to the Mediterranean coastal area (the Costa Brava), creating a succession of plateaus that reach as high as 800 – 1,000 meters before tapering off towards the west. On our drive we passed several small communities and farming areas (including some very colorful canola fields), but much of what we saw was the natural beauty of this heavily forested region and the majestic peaks of its mountain ranges. It was an uneventful but pretty drive. We arrived in Figueres around 11:00am and headed straight to the Salvador Dali Theater Museum.

Figueres has a population of less than 50,000. And while it appears to be a quaint, unassuming little town, its name is of Visigoth origin, indicating that Figueres has existed for a very long time. I read online that its economy is based mainly on tourism. And what would attract tourists to this place? There are two popular historical structures here. The first is the St. Peter's Church, a gothic single nave affair with side chapels dating back to at least the 13th century, and the Sant Ferran Castle, a large, pentagonal-shaped military fortress perched on a hill that was built in 1753 to defend the area from French invasions. There are several interesting museums here, as well. The *Museu de l' Emporda* is famous for its artwork from the Catalan art scene, and the unusual *Museu Tecnica de l'Emporda* boasts a large collection

of early and rare typewriters (of all things). But what really brings in the tourists seems to be the Salvador Dali Theater Museum (*Teatre-Museu Gala Salvador Dali*). At least, that's why *we* visited Figueres, and judging by the crowds in front of the museum when we arrived, I don't think I'm wrong.

Salvador Domingo Felipe Jacinto Dali i Momenech (*whew, that's a mouthful*) was born in Figueres in 1904. He studied art in Madrid and was influenced early on by the Renaissance masters and the Impressionist painters of the 19th century before shifting to the new avant-garde movements such as Cubism and Surrealism that took hold of the European art scene during the first half of the 20th century. With his eccentricities, maniacal gazes and that trademark long, thin mustache, Dali was just as flamboyant and outrageous as anything he drew or painted. He was a controversial figure who avoided living in Spain during the Spanish Civil War but then later embraced the dictatorial regime of Franco during the 1940s, earning him the scorn and criticism (for a while) of many in the art world. Still, he would go on to become one of the greatest Surrealist artists of his generation, his more renowned artworks easily identifiable today.

Although Dali was born in Figueres, he actually left at an early age and didn't really live there again until the very end of his life. In 1919, when Dali was just a teenager, one of the first public exhibits of his artwork was done in the town's municipal theater. This must have had a lasting impression on the artist. The theater, dating back to 1848, was burned down during the Spanish Civil War and remained in a state of ruin for decades. During the 1960s, Dali convinced the town's city council to rebuild the theater as a museum for his artwork. It opened in 1974 and was later expanded to include courtyards and additional buildings adjacent to the old theater. The museum is extremely popular, drawing over one million visitors annually, and contains the largest and most diverse exhibit of Dali's artwork in the world, including the artist's

personal collection. (Note: In my research I discovered, to my surprise, there is also a Salvador Dali Museum in St. Petersburg, Florida, which I intend to check out in the future).

When we arrived at the site Monica informed us we would have to wait thirty minutes to enter due to larger than expected crowds that day. She took us on a short stroll through the town center not far from the museum. We were able to see the 13th century St. Peter's Church (which was located just around the corner from the museum). The area near the museum has pedestrian shopping streets and plenty of restaurants and cafes, underscoring not only the popularity of the site but also how important the museum is to the economic prosperity of the town. As we walked, Monica suggested some restaurants in the vicinity where we could have lunch later.

At 11:30am we entered the museum. I had decided, prior to entering, that I would separate myself from the group at one point and explore on my own. From past experiences, whenever I tour a museum with a guide I am limited to what I can see based on how long each guide takes in explaining the cherry-picked exhibits *they* want us to see. Normally, I wouldn't mind, since I am not an art historian and wouldn't be able to discern what makes a piece of art so special beyond my own personal preferences. But the Salvador Dali Theater Museum is different. This is, by far, one of the most *entertaining* museums I have ever visited, and one can have a blast just walking around and exploring the unusual mind of this phenomenal artist. We were given three hours to tour the site and have lunch on our own before meeting back at the bus, and I knew that if I wanted to see the whole museum within that time frame I would need to step lively...*and alone*.

To fully appreciate the Salvador Dali Theater Museum one has to start with the exterior. Although Dali was not the architect he worked closely with them in setting up his museum. The roof of

the structure has an enormous geodesic cupola, which has become an iconic symbol in Figueres. Dali was obsessed with the sciences and academic art, and the building pays homage to those themes. Along the edges of the roof are golden mannequins, some in ballet poses, others holding up the image of a hydrogen atom. You'll also see a series of large egg sculptures along one side of the building (which looks pretty bizarre). For Dali, the egg symbolized birth. In fact, anything edible is fundamental to his work. "Beauty will be edible or it will not be beauty", Dali once stated. In the square in front of the entrance is a monumental statue dedicated to the Catalan philosopher Francesc Pujols, who is portrayed wrapped in a white robe with a large golden egg instead of a head that is tilted to the side as if it were contemplating the meaning of life. On the balcony above the entrance is a mannequin of an old-fashioned deep sea diver, Dali's symbolic way of letting visitors know they will soon be 'immersed into the depth of the subconscious'. I'm not sure if I reached the depth of my subconscious, but I was definitely blown away, intrigued and definitely entertained by most of what I saw inside.

Upon entering the museum is a vestibule intended to initiate the visitors with the influences that shaped Dali's artistic mind view. There is a nod to the artists – great painters, sculptors and architects – who inspired Dali. In addition, the visitor gets to see painted examples of what are referred to as *Dalinian* symbols. Throughout Dali's works are similar objects or images reflecting the surrealist's psychological viewpoint (influenced by Freud and his followers), which is that individuals often develop hard exteriors to protect their softer (and vulnerable) inner psyche. This notion of 'hard and soft' is a persistent theme in his artwork. Images of ants, snails, bread, urchins and crutches are examples of these Dalinian symbols he often included in his art pieces. The vestibule also contains references to mythology, and to his wife and muse, Gala, whom he painted and drew many times.

After the vestibule you enter the open courtyard. It is here where one gets a preview of the over-the-top concepts that lie ahead. Dali wanted visitors to his museum to experience ‘a sensation of having a theatrical dream'. To that end, the open courtyard was built in what was the original sitting section of the old theater. Niches along the walls (the former sitting stalls) are filled with golden faceless Art Deco-style mannequins (with ivy growing on the walls around them). The courtyard is decorated with such things as a column made from rubber tires, a series of sculpted monster fountains, and a replica of a wooden boat suspended in the air atop large crutches. And in the middle of all this is a reconstructed version of Dali’s *Rainy Taxi*, a three-dimensional artwork using a real 1938 Cadillac with a male mannequin driver and a female mannequin passenger in the back seat. As if this wasn’t bizarre enough, the car has a system of pipes that produce a steady rainfall *inside* the vehicle, with plants growing all over the interior. Attached to the hood of the Cadillac is a large, bosomy bronze sculpture by Ernst Fuchs entitled *The Great Esther*. Again, all of what I just described is simply an inkling of what’s in store.

Facing the courtyard on one side is a giant wall of glass panels that look into the former stage of the old theater. This is also known as the cupola room because the dome is directly above it, illuminating the entire section in daylight. From the courtyard we walked into this former stage area. The main wall, which is framed by a theatrical red curtain, has a reproduction of a painted backdrop that Dali did for his 1941 ballet entitled *Labyrinth*. The painting – a surrealistic depiction of a sleeping, shirtless bald man with a crack running along the top of his skull – is massive, measuring 29 feet tall (8.8m) by 42 feet wide (13m). This room also contains the tomb of Salvador Dali and several prints and paintings along the walls, including a mesmerizing digital piece of art called: *Gala nude looking at the sea which at 18 meters appears as President Lincoln.* This unusually named artwork is

considered the first example in painting of the use of digitalization of an image, in this case the face of Abraham Lincoln. When you first see the piece it appears blurry, with the faint backside view of a nude woman (his wife, Gala) looking out over the ocean, but as you move further away from it, the painting becomes a clear image of the former president. *Very clever stuff.*

As Monica was explaining the artwork around the stage area I took my leave from the group and began exploring the museum on my own. Over the next two and a half hours I managed to see the entire museum. On either side of the stage area were corridors (all lined with paintings, drawings, sculptures and any number of surprises) leading to individually named gallery rooms containing different collections of similarly themed artwork. The museum has five levels: the courtyard and stage, a ground floor and a section below the stage, and three upper floors. As I wandered through the different galleries I felt like a child visiting an amusement park for the first time; everything seemed to excite me.

I cannot describe all of the exhibits I saw, but the full spectrum of Dali's work is on display, including one of his most famous pieces, *The Persistence of Memory* (1931), a surrealist image of soft, melting pocket watches intended to convey the notion that time is neither rigid nor deterministic. The museum contains a broad representative collection of all the various art movements of the early 20th century that influenced the artist at one time or another such as Cubism, Dada, Futurism, and Surrealism (to name a few). And while some of the exhibition rooms were more notable than others, *all* were a delight to view. The Treasure Room near the stage has a personal collection of Dali paintings he considered among his best works. The walls of this room were upholstered in red velvet, and on those walls were some classic paintings such as *The Bread and the Basket* (1945), *The Specter of Sex-Appeal* (1934) and several paintings of his wife, Gala. The Fishmonger Room on the ground floor has two central display cabinets

featuring examples of an art form called *stereoscopy*, a form of three-dimensional art using binocular vision to enhance the illusion of depth of a particular image.

One of the more popular rooms is the Mae West Room on the first floor. The main exhibit here is entitled *Face of Mae West which may be Used as a Surrealist Apartment* (1934-35). This art piece entails a red wall background, two paintings on the wall with a nose-shaped cabinet between them and a small lip-shaped red sofa in front of the cabinet. A large blond wig frames this living room setting. Dali placed a circular reducing lens several feet back from the exhibit, and when you peer into it the overall effect is that you see the face of Mae West. Also on the first floor is the Palace of the Wind Room where Dali gave the first public exhibition of his works back in 1919. The room is named after the unusual painting that runs the length of the ceiling. It is an image of two sets of enormous feet with attached legs that disappear into the clouds. When you stand underneath it and look up, it feels as if you're about to be stomped by giants. In addition to his paintings, drawings and sculptures, there are rooms devoted to furniture, optical illusions and jewelry that he created, as well.

Not all of the artwork belongs to Dali; the museum has permanent exhibits from other artists, too. The entire second floor, for example, is devoted to the works of Antoni Pitxot, a Catalan painter who became a longtime friend and collaborator of Dali. On the third floor is the Masterpieces Room featuring oil paintings that Dali collected over the years. These include works by El Greco, Gerard Dou, Marcel Duchamp, Meissonier, Fortuny, Urgell and Bouguereau. By 2:00pm I had seen all of the exhibition rooms and exited the building through the gift shop (I purchased a photo guidebook of the museum as a souvenir). I love visiting museums in general, but this one was really special. I wholeheartedly recommend this place to anyone who happens to be in this area of Spain. Um, your subconscious will thank you.

In the plaza in front of the museum I ran into Katherine, Angela and Norman. We headed over to one of the restaurants that Monica had recommended earlier and grabbed a quick lunch of sandwiches and soft drinks before returning to the bus by 2:30pm. We left Figueres and drove south on Highway AP-7 towards our next destination, the city of Girona. During the drive, Monica was on the bus mic giving us some background information on this interesting city.

Girona was a citadel city founded on a hill by the Romans some 2,000 years ago. But human settlement can be traced back even further. It was strategically located near the confluence of four different rivers – the Onyar, Galligants, Ter and Gruell rivers – which made the city a target of many conquerors who coveted its defensive position and trade. In fact, just since the 8th century alone the city has been besieged 25 times, and has repeatedly changed dynastic hands since the fall of the Roman Empire. Situated within the Catalonia region, Girona is the capital of its own province, and is sometimes described as Barcelona's laidback cousin. The city is more compact and slower-paced than Barcelona, yet still offers up a good mix of sophisticated cosmopolitan life together with an 'old city' that features Roman ruins and a *well-preserved* medieval quarter. As a result, the city is a popular stop on the tourism circuit.

It was 3:00pm when we arrived in Girona. The sky was overcast, and we experienced intermittent light rain, which I'm certain worsened my sore throat. Our itinerary included a walking tour of the historic old town, but due to the time of day (and our long drive back to Barcelona) we bypassed the new city located on the west bank of the Onyar River and made a beeline to the medieval quarter just to the east of the river. Eleven bridges span the Onyar River, connecting the new city to the old town, and along the riverbanks tourists are treated to rows of colorful old residential buildings that give the city a Mediterranean feel. The

incredibly intact medieval quarter offers up some amazing structures and we were able to see some of the more important sites during our visit.

Like every medieval city we'd visited thus far in Spain, the streets here twisted and turned in a labyrinthine fashion, making it impossible for me to map out the *exact* path we took. After crossing one of the pedestrian bridges into the old town we meandered through the cobblestone streets and slowly made our way to the Cathedral of Girona, the centerpiece of the city. Along the way we saw many interesting sites. The Romans built a fortification wall around the old city during the 1st century BC that was later gradually extended. It was thoroughly reconstructed and strengthened during the 14th century. The new defensive walls were built over the foundation of the older Roman walls and one can see many examples of this as you walk along the old town. By the 16th century, these fortification walls were no longer really needed as a defensive measure, and they slowly became integrated with the city, deteriorating and disappearing as newer constructions took place. Today, one can walk sections of the preserved walls and towers for nice panoramic views of the city and surrounding countryside.

One of the first buildings we stopped to see was St. Peter of the Galligants (*Sant Pere de Galligants*), a Benedictine abbey dating back to 992. It has a Romanesque-style church that was added in the 12th century. Today, this national monument houses a branch of the Archeological Museum of Catalonia (*Museu d'Arqueologia d*e *Catalunya*). I recently read an online article about how Europeans can spot American tourists in a crowd. Apart from our clothes and 'loud' personalities, one of the people interviewed said that Americans tended to be amazed by the age of Europe's historical structures. All I can say is, "*Guilty as charged "*. Perhaps because we are a relatively young nation, the idea of standing inside a church or building constructed nearly a thousand years ago *is* a

remarkable thing for most North Americans. But it should also be a remarkable thing for Europeans, who might take this all for granted. These historical buildings – *wherever* they may be located in the world – are a collective part of humankind's heritage, to be preserved and admired not only for their place in history, but also for their role in the development of human beliefs, customs and practices.

We walked to the *Placa dels Jurats*, a plaza next to a very well preserved Romanesque bathhouse called *Els Banya Arabs*. Despite the Arab reference, this bathhouse was actually built in 1194, almost two centuries after the Moors had been kicked out of Girona. While not a large site it offers a rare example of medieval civic architecture. It's interesting to note that several outdoor scenes for the Game of Thrones series were filmed in Girona due to its intact medieval quarter, including this plaza. The old town has a lot of atmosphere, with its winding cobblestone streets, ancient staircases, old fortresses and churches all surrounded by fortified walls and towers, it makes one feel like you've been transported back in time.

We saw the *Basilica de Sant Feliu* (the Basilica of St. Felix, also referred to as the Collegiate Church of St. Felix). St. Felix was a Catalan saint martyred in Girona in the year 304. The church dedicated to him took several hundred years to be completed (from the 12th to the 17th centuries) and displays various architectural styles ranging from Romanesque to Gothic to Baroque. The Basilica de Sant Feliu is notable for containing several Roman and early Christian sarcophagi from the 3rd and 4th centuries. The large plaza in front of the church (*Placa de Sant Feliu*) is a very popular meeting point for locals. We also walked along a section of the *Passeig Arqueologic,* a pathway that runs along the fortress walls and towers just north of the Cathedral of Girona.

At one point – although, I'm not exactly sure when, due to the meandering streets – we trekked through the narrow alleyways and covered stone staircases of the Jewish Quarter (also referred to as the Jewish Call). During Girona's medieval heyday, the city was quite prosperous due in large part to its thriving Jewish community, which could trace their origins in the city to at least the 9th century. Following the expulsion of Jews from Spain in the late 1400s, the Jewish community left Girona, but the neighborhood has nonetheless been remarkably maintained over the centuries and is today considered one of the best-preserved Jewish Quarters in Europe.

We walked by the *Museu d'art de Girona,* an art museum featuring Catalan art from the 12th to the 20th centuries, housed in the elegant 10th century Episcopal Palace (*Palau Episcopal*). A few minutes later, along Carrer de la Forca (street) we reached the *Placa de la Catedral de Girona*, the square in front of the Cathedral. Well, in 'front of' is a bit misleading. The Cathedral was built atop a hill and the plaza is actually situated at the bottom of this hill. Connecting the two is a staircase consisting of 89 *steep* steps. That's right, if you want to worship here you better make sure your glutes and hamstrings are up to speed! Thankfully, Monica knew a hack – (and, as far as I was concerned, definitely earned her tip with it) – leading us up a winding pathway adjacent to the hillside that took us to the top without making us feel like we just climbed Mt Everest.

We were now standing in front of the cathedral looking down at the plaza below. From this vantage point we could also see other notable buildings of the old town in the distance, or at least their rooftops and spires. The official name of the cathedral is the Cathedral of St Mary of Girona. When the Franks, under King Charlemagne, conquered the city from the Moors in 785, a primitive church that had existed on this spot was reconsecrated. But by the 11th century, the poor condition of the original church

necessitated building a new one. The cathedral and its cloister were built by 1064 in a Romanesque-style, with the bell tower (dedicated to Charlemagne) completed in 1117. During the 13th and 14th centuries the church underwent a Gothic-inspired revision, and over the next three centuries another bell tower, a Baroque main facade and that daunting staircase were added. With its eclectic mix of architectural styles, this 958-year old medieval monument is nothing short of a historical marvel.

When we entered the cathedral I was immediately blown away by its size. The nave has a width of 75 feet (23m) making it the widest Gothic nave in the world. The vault elevation reaches an equally impressive 115 feet (35m). The single nave is surmounted by a series of cross vaults supported by Gothic buttresses, with multi-shaped stain glass windows placed high on its stone block walls, lending the interior a dark and somber ambience. There are multiple chapels, some displaying paintings of saints, or a Gothic sarcophagus; the high altar (dating back to the 11th century) is made from white marble.

After touring the interior we walked around the cloister, a Romanesque masterpiece dating back to the original cathedral. On the pathway around its arcade are numerous tombs and sarcophagi of important and long-deceased members of the clergy. The most notable part of this section is the sculpted columns that run the length of the cloister. They contain images of biblical scenes (including images of sexual debauchery), fantastical figures, animals and vegetable motifs.

From the cloister we toured the Cathedral Treasury and Museum. Inside is a rare, well-preserved 11th century tapestry entitled *Tapestry of Creation*, considered to be a masterpiece of Romanesque tapestry from that era, a depiction of the Garden of Eden that includes humans and animals and, surprisingly, portraits of Girona citizens including prominent members of the city's

Jewish community. Hmmm, go figure. Another gem you'll find in the Treasury Museum is the *Codex del Beatus*, a 10th century illustrated manuscript on the Book of the Apocalypse. (Yeah, always a fun read). In addition, there is a collection of decorated wooden chests or caskets (which were donated to the church by wealthy parishioners), and some jewelry and religious icons.

From the cathedral we backtracked through the Jewish Quarter, stopping for a twenty-minute bathroom and snack break at a local bakery/café where I tried a local Catalan dessert delicacy called *xuixo* (enthusiastically endorsed by Dave and Sue between mouthfuls). This heavenly pastry is a deep-fried, sugar-coated cylindrical delight filled with a delicious vanilla, orange and lemony crème. Um, I purchased two. Afterwards, we exited the old town and returned to our bus for the ride back to Barcelona.

I was damp and cold from the weather, and my throat was aching big time. On top of that, my nose began to drip like a leaky faucet, which meant that my sinuses would soon be congested. The only silver lining here was that the tour was essentially over, I would be heading back home early the next morning. I managed to dose off for most of the drive back to Barcelona. We reached our hotel around 6:00pm, bidding 'goodbye' to Monica and our driver. In the lobby, everyone handed in their Whisper listening devices to Javier. Up in my room I washed up and put on a dry shirt, and then wrote all the day's events into my journal. At 7:45pm we gathered in the lobby again. Javier led us on a 10-minute walk to a popular local restaurant called La Cupula where we had our farewell dinner. They served us six different tapas before the entrée, which in my case was seafood paella.

Dinner was fun and lively, the food was plentiful and tasty. But my lingering cold/flu/Covid took some of the joy out of it. We got back to the hotel around 10:00pm. Many of us said our farewells in the lobby, hugging and exchanging emails and phone numbers

with promises to keep in touch. I also gave Javier his tip and thanked him for a great tour. Back in my room I re-packed, setting aside the clothes I would be wearing for the long trip home and then promptly went to bed.

My return flight to the U.S. (with one stop in Lisbon) was departing at 6:00am. My car service to the airport was scheduled to pick me up at 2:45am in front of the hotel. Since I had booked my own flights for this trip, I was the only one going back home this early, which meant I would be leaving for the airport by myself. I had set my cellphone alarm for 1:15am. When it went off I felt terrible. My throat was painful and my sinuses were producing a steady flow of mucous that required me to wipe my nose continuously. I took a quick hot shower, dressed and did my final packing, heading down to the lobby by 2:30am. The car service was 15-minutes late, but it didn't matter. The streets were deserted at that hour of the morning and we arrived at the Barcelona airport in no time. In fact, the ticket counter for TAP (Air Portugal) didn't even open for another hour.

The flight to Lisbon took just under an hour, which normally is a good thing, but as we were landing my sinus infection seemed to spread rapidly to my ears by the descending cabin pressure. I lost a good portion of my hearing because I couldn't get my ears to pop. At an airport pharmacy in Lisbon I purchased throat lozenges and a nasal decongestant spray. My connecting flight back to Miami was delayed 30 minutes due to the Covid re-entry protocols issued by the U.S. government. Each passenger had to fill out a locator form, a statement form attesting they did not have Covid, and show a Covid vaccine card and a negative PCR test before being allowed into the boarding area. The line – yeah, there was only *one* line for hundreds of passengers – was as long as anything you can imagine

at Disney World. Once on board the plane I was able to relax a little bit because nobody sat next to me in the middle seat. I took a Xanax pill after they served lunch and managed to sleep for a few hours. The flight went by quickly, but the congestion in my sinuses and the pressure in my ears only got worse. Days after I arrived home I was still half deaf and feeling miserable from what turned out to be a very bad cold. I visited my doctor for some medication and stayed in bed for a week.

And so my first post-Covid trip was finally over. It was a wonderful tour, with a good group of seasoned travelers. If the situation had been different, I probably would have included a little more time in Portugal (to see Porto), but other than that, I felt the itinerary lived up to its 'heritage' billing: over the course of 14 days we were able to visit some of the key Iberian cities and towns that have shaped modern day Portugal and Spain. I would be willing to go back to either country in the future to explore some more.

I would like to thank our guide Javier and all of my fellow travelers for their companionship. Often times, a tour is only special because of the company you keep. This was a fun group. At my age, the only time I get to feel like a kid again is when I travel. Every country I've visited allows me to be amazed or enthralled or enlightened by the newness of what I am experiencing, and it helps immensely if the entire tour group is on the same wonderment page. So, again, thank you all for a great time.

Happy trails and may all your *tapas* be tasty…

Richard C. Rodriguez, the Traveling (retired) Mailman

(My trip to Portugal and Spain was from April 7th to April 21, 2022)