

Report 1691: A Journey to Spain

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By Paula G. Cullison from Arizona, Summer 2009



Madrid Cafe - Bulls Galore (Paula & Pamela)

It has been thirty years since my last trip to Spain, so I thought that it was about time to return. I decided to include Portugal, since I had never been there (see Portugal Trip Report in Resources section). In preparing for the trip, I brushed up on my Spanish and read some travel books. Our Portuguese was limited to the basic, but important phrases. My daughter and I used our respective frequent flier miles to reserve tickets, albeit on different airlines.

We flew into Madrid and returned from Lisbon. As per usual, I used the Internet to snag what looked like and turned out to be fabulous hotel deals; all in excellent locations.

Passionate about international travel, I have found that pre-planning always pays off. I planned our three weeks in Spain as follows: six nights in Madrid; five nights in Barcelona (with day trips to Montserrat and the Pyrenees; three nights on the Costa Brava for some beach time; six nights in Andalucia (three in Seville, one in Cordoba and two in Granada). This was followed by one week in Portugal: one night in Faro in the Algarve with a boat ride to an uninhabited island and six nights in Lisbon with a day trip to Sintra). I am proud to say that the plan worked.

So, I encourage you to go to Spain and Portugal to experience history, great art, beautiful architecture, enchanting palaces, fine wine, delicious tapas, passionate flamenco dancing, and gracious hosts. See yourself as a traveler and not a tourist, and you will have a wonderful time. Speak a few sentences in Spanish (and Portuguese) and you will receive the royal treatment.

Although we traveled in June, late spring, early summer and early fall are the best times for a journey into the heart of Catalonia, Castile, Andalucia and along the coasts. During your trip, you may find yourself soaking your feet in both the Mediterranean and Atlantic Oceans.

From the Costa Brava to the Costa del Sol thousands of miles of beach await you. We selected the Costa Brava, since it was about an hour train ride from Barcelona.

We found that the main cities of Madrid, Barcelona and Seville are equipped with excellent public transit systems and connected by a fine railway network. Commercial bus companies fill in the gaps for connections to smaller cities and in many instances are more convenient than the trains. We used the buses (all air-conditioned coach) when traveling from Seville to Cordoba then to Granada and back to Seville. Getting around Spain is no problem, just pack lightly and carry a big smile. Low cost flights also connect the major cities. I found a great deal on a flight from Barcelona to Seville on line. Both the Madrid and Barcelona airports are accessible by Metro.





Retiro Park

Madrid is home to three great museums in its "golden triangle of art" all near the tree lined Paseo del Prado; namely, the Prado (Spanish art), Thyssen-Bornemisza (European Impressionism), and Reina Sofia (modern art and home to Picasso's Guernica). My avocation is art history, so I was in art heaven. Close to the museums is the real heart of Madrid; namely, Retiro Park. If a city's greatness can be measured by the quality of its public parks, then this one is a gem. Something for everyone lies within its extensive boundaries - once the playground for the royal families. We happened upon a classical music concert with a 20 minute elaborate fireworks display in celebration of Retiro Park's 100th anniversary. Talk about being in the right place at the right time!



Gaudi's fanciful Guell Park with city view

Barcelona is resplendent with the creative architecture of Antonio Gaudi. Many of his buildings are in the most fashionable section of Barcelona known as Eixample. Gaudi's delightful Guell Park with its colorful tile work and undulating benches offers a great view of the city. La Sagrada Familia, his yet unfinished mammoth cathedral, offers visitors insight into Gaudi's visionary architecture. We stayed near the Placa di Catalunya with his lovely fountain, sculptures and small population of pigeons. It is one of the meeting and greeting areas in the city, as many of the Metro lines converge below. Just north and south of it are the pedestrian friendly areas of Rambla de Catalunya and Las Ramblas respectively. Here outdoor cafes and shops abound. There is no better place to relax and people watch, as one enjoys tapas and wine. We did so every night.



Pyrenees - Vall di Nuria

Heading north out of Barcelona, we took a day trip on the (Cremellera) rack-train which travels up Spain's awe-inspiring mountainside coast. There you will discover Valle de Nuria in the snow capped Pyrenees. Gorgeous vistas, a small lake, and waterfall, as well as marked hiking trails await you at an elevation of 6,500 feet. The sanctuary offers lodging, if you decide to spend a night or two contemplating the beauty of your surroundings.

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Montserrat - view from Monastery

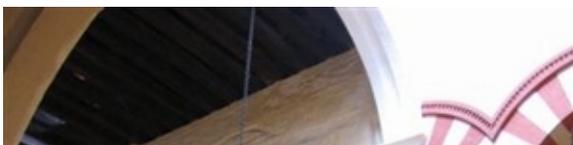
We again used the train as we headed for Montserrat, which turned out to be one of the highlights of our trip. Amidst the ragged cliffs of Montserrat stands the old Benedictine monastery, home to the venerated Virgin of Montserrat (Black Madonna) - the patron saint of Catalonia. The natural beauty surrounding the monastery is absolutely breathtaking. At about High Noon on Sundays, the lively and colorful Catalan Sardana folk dancers perform in the square. At one point they invited all to join in. And so I did, as my daughter took photos. It's amazing how dancing enables strangers to become friends. I shared a most memorable experience with my dance partner, a woman from Argentina.



Granada - Alhambra Courtyard

We found Andalusia filled with reminders of Spain's Moorish past when from 711 until 1492 the Arab and North African Muslims dominated this section of the Iberian peninsula. They gave the region an Arab name: al-Andalus. Seville, Cordoba and Granada stand as testaments to the grandeur of the era. Therefore, no visit to Spain would be complete without experiencing the Alhambra in Granada, the Mezquita in Cordoba and the Alcazar in Seville. We were fascinated!

I pre-purchased tickets for the Alhambra on the Internet. Admission is controlled, so each visitor can fully enjoy the experience; and we did. Constructed in the 14th century, the Alhambra was once the residence of the Muslim rulers of Granada and their court. Now it is one of Spain's major tourist attractions exhibiting the country's most famous Islamic architecture. We spent the entire day here at a true slow traveler's pace. It was awesome!





Cordoba - Mesquita

We learned that the Mezquita in Cordoba was originally built as the church of St Vincent in 600 AD. About two hundred years later it was turned into a mosque by the first Muslim Emir. At one time it was the second largest mosque in the Muslim world. Visitors can now see both church and mosque in this architectural masterpiece.



Seville - Alcazar

Originally a Moorish fort, the Alcázar Royal Palace built in 913 AD is one of the best remaining examples of mudéjar architecture. Home to numerous monarchs over the years, the upper levels of the Alcázar are still used by the royal family as the official Seville residence.

Famous for its flamenco dancing and delicious paella, Seville is also home to the Church of the Macarena, the Virgin of Hope and patron saint of the matadors. The popular Macarena dance is a reference to las macarenas, young women of that neighborhood in Seville. (Who knew?). Speaking of dancing, I was so pleasantly surprised to see impromptu dancing in the plazas of Seville and to the beat of local musicians and accompanying singers.

During our visit, there was a major religious celebration at the Cathedral for Corpus Christi.

It was filled with liturgical pageantry, singing and plenty of incense. This is where Christopher Columbus was finally laid to rest while Granada hosts the remains of King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella.

Filled with both passion and emotion, flamenco dance reflects the true soul of Andalucia. We enjoyed two performances, although I could have gone every night!





Enjoy Vino and Tapas

No matter where you go in Spain, take time to relax and enjoy some vino and tapas.

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Report 1702: Portugal: Land of Great Navigators, Royalty, Fine Wine, & Culinary Delights

<http://www.slowtrav.com/tr/tripreport.asp?tripid=1702>

By Paula G. Cullison from Arizona, Summer 2009

Trip Description: June 19 - June 27, 2009 Paula and her daughter spend about a week in Portugal, seeing the sights, enjoying the food, and getting to know the culture.

Destinations: Countries - Portugal

Categories: Hotels/B&Bs; Art Trip; Beach; Sightseeing; Independent Travel; 2 People





Portugal - The Port City of Faro Welcomes you

As an independent international traveler, I always use public transportation. By searching the Internet I discovered that I could easily get from Seville, Spain (see Spain Trip Report in Web Resources section) to Faro, Portugal and then onto Lisbon by bus (i.e., air-conditioned coach) both legs were about three hours in length. We found the bus fares throughout the Iberian peninsula to be relatively nominal.

When planning the trip, I decided to spend some time in Faro, which in the southern part of Portugal known as the Algarve. Blessed with sunshine filled days and a gorgeous coastline, I can fully appreciate why this is a popular summer retreat for many Europeans.

Off the coast of Faro is an uninhabited island in the Formosa Bay. We took a relaxing boat ride and visited the Ilha Deserta. The beach was awesome! We spotted several bird species, including cranes and a variety of terns. People are allowed to use the beach and enjoy the day, but must leave, as the island is a national refuge for birds. The fishermen who fish in the waters can keep their fishing gear in lockers, but they too must leave before nightfall.

Faro has managed to keep some of its old world charm. Walking around the old section of the city, we noticed storks standing guard over their respective nests. This was an unexpected surprise, as well as a great photo op.



Portugal - Folk Arts shop with Roosters

We found Lisbon to be a vibrant city with a population of 500,000. The wider metropolitan area is home to about three million. Numerous plazas, most with imposing sculptures of historical figures, can be found throughout this rather hilly city. A network of old time cable cars shuttles locals and visitors alike up and down the hills and out to the waterfront area of Belen. From there a view of the Tagus River and the expansive 25th of April Bridge (often compared to the San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge as both were built by the same company) were awe-inspiring.



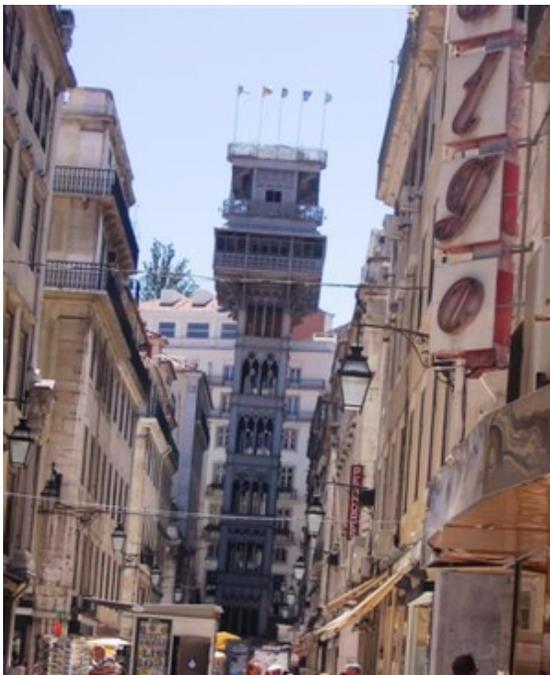


Homage to the explorers of old, like Vasco de Gama, reminded us of the prowess of the Portuguese navigators. The old castle is also a testament to those times



Lisbon - Folk Festival in Belem

On a Sunday afternoon in Belem, we happened upon a special traditional folk festival featuring costumed singers and dancers from all regions in Portugal. The festival also included local arts and crafts, as well as antique dealers. There we also stopped for a delightful energy boost at a pastry shop of noted historical fame.





Lisbon - Elevador di Santa Justa (from Baixa to Bairro Alto)

One of the unique experiences in Lisbon is a ride in the 105 ft French designed Neo-Gothic iron Elevador de Santa Justa, which takes passengers from the Baixa area to the Alto Barrio neighborhood. This old section of town is charming with its outdoor cafes and artists. I purchased a small watercolor painting, as a memento of this trip. The artist was a jovial man who informed us, in the few words of English, which he knew, that his daughter was studying dance in the US. Yes, it's a small world ... after all!



Lisbon - Laundry with a view

A visit to the near by Castle St George (Castelo de Sao Jorge) transported us back to the 12th century and the recapture of Lisbon from the Moors. Walking along the castle walls, I wondered what stories they would tell of times gone by. The panoramic views of the city from the castle are excellent.

Another gem in Lisbon is the Gulbenkian Museum named for the Turkish born Armenia oil magnet who sought political refuge in Portugal during WW II and subsequently left his extensive art collection to the city.



Portugal - Palace de Pena in Sintra

We decided on a trip to the magical city and hill top town of Sintra, which is a 40 minutes train ride from Lisbon. A favorite summer retreat for the many kings of Portugal, Sintra has been designated a UNESCO World heritage site. The featured sites are all accessible by way of a shuttle bus service. How clever! The Palacio National, Moorish Castle, and the Palacio da Pena.

The Parque da Pena is a lovely wooded area, a nice respite from the summer sun. The Palacio da Pena was constructed on the site of a former monastery. It was designed by a German architect in the style of a Bavarian castle. The castle is a combination of Arabesque, German and Portuguese architecture. I found it all rather enchanting, something like being in Disneyland.





Lisbon - at Cafe Brasileira with poet Fernando Pessoa

We enjoyed the cuisine of Portugal, which is especially proud of the quality of their olive oil and their wines. You have to love that EVOO! Here the wine is cheaper than water, the beer is cold, the coffee is strong, the vegetables are delicious, the fish (loved that grilled *Dourada*) and seafood (great octopus - *pulpo*) are 'off the boat' fresh, and the pastries are 'to die for'. Life is good! For authenticity, seek out the less touristy spots. Eat, drink and be merry with the locals. Don't forget to sit a while at the Cafe Brasileira in Lisbon where poet Fernando Pessoa spent many a day with the intellectuals of his time.

Portugal offers a wide variety of experiences, friendly people, great food and wine, and *fado* music. Travel with an open mind and be adaptable. And of course it's always the people you met along the journey that make the real difference.