



Madrid and beyond

Friday, 30 Octubre-2 Noviembre

Here is the best part: I was with my sister. My sister Nora graced me with her company and we had splendid weather for a long holiday weekend. En Espana, El dia de los Muertos or All Souls Day is a time to honor those we have loved and buried. Some spaniards, particularly the young, have taken to our Halloween. So the very beautiful Plaza Mayor was filled with musicians and flamenco dancers and other hard working entrepreneurs like a threesome who had constructed a box they could sit inside of, that they had covered to look like a table, upon which sat their snarling, snapping, gruesome heads. They were so successful in pulling in the crowds and the dinero that the following night, by the light of the silvery and full moon, there were two more tables of heads. My sister commented that maybe they were franchises.

Despite being a large city, Madrid is easy to negotiate and a pleasure to walk. Wonderful architecture replete with buildings with winged angels on top, lovely city parks and great museums. We visited the Prado, Reina Sofia and Thyssen-Bornemisza. All are exceptional. The Reina Sofia, besides housing a diverse and thoughtful collection is an architectural achievement which respects the old and has added the new with a factor of wow. The Thyssen hosted a show "Lagrimas de Eros" and my sister and both agreed it was one of the finest exhibits we have had the privilege to see.

We enjoyed a day trip to Toledo on Monday as it is 30 minutes south by train. The museums of Spain close on Mondays so we were somewhat limited in what we could get

inside of but

the dramatic setting of the town along a winding river, a la the paintings of El Greco are reason enough to be fully sated.

Shortly after returning to Madrid, it was time for me to head back to Salamanca and begin preparing for midterm exams, which is why you have not heard from me in a while. So study, study, study, exams, exams, exams. My pleasures were closer to home during this period and included a meal in the piso of some of my chinese classmates and a walking tour of the literary monuments by my profesora de literatura. The cueva or cave of Salamanca was used by Cervantes as the setting for a fun and spirited play. Two very important pieces of literature La Celestina and Lazarillo de Tormes, Tormes being the river that runs alongside Salamanca were placed here. These works are important for many reasons but at the top of the list is that they created new literary genres where people of different and lower classes intermingle, all have virtues and flaws and all have voice. There is a very moving sculpture of Celestina, matchmaker of ill repute, with words quoting her from the novella that say something to the effect, that I was made by God and like all humans I have my good and my bad. Lazarillo is a poor, street smart, young boy, who is essentially given by his Mother to a blind beggar. This is the first in a series of jobs that the young Lazarillo endures in this novella of black humor. The word lazarillo is part of the spanish language and is the word for a seeing eye dog. These works and the poems of important, early, spanish mystics were all written by conversos or people of jewish heritage including the great Cervantes. It does not seem implausible to me to form a hypothesis that there is a real relationship between the onset of the Inquisition and the intolerance and blood letting that followed and perpetuated itself and possibly culminated in the civil war and the historical decline of Spain. As painful as the wounds of the civil war still are, many Spaniards are openly and honestly looking at their history and have much to teach the world about the profound violence of intolerance. You may recall that after the bombing of the train in Madrid, the Spanish president made a public association with Basque separatists and was immediately denounced by the general public and voted out of office. People here were not going to allow conjecture to create discord and possibly more violence. Evidence produced demonstrated his error. The pain of our seeming immobility and powerlessness as we and the world endured eight years of the Bush administration still haunt me. Anyway, despite the current economic mess in Spain, beauty and wisdom abound, beautiful cultural traditions like Tunas(check YouTube) continue and the arts are thriving.





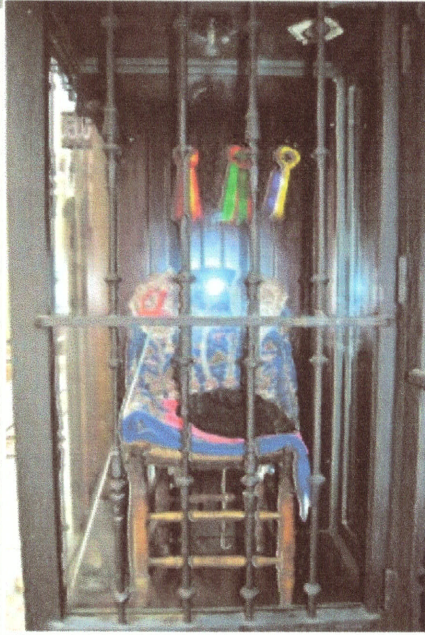
Ciudad Rodrigo

Sunday, 15 noviembre +

Ciudad Rodrigo is a nearby town, south west of Salamanca along the border with Portugal that I visited by default. I had intended to hop a bus to Avila, a renowned treasure and UNESCO Heritage site, but that bus was full and I had recalled two of my teachers referencing Ciudad Rodrigo with affection and that bus left in 5 minutes. Since the Salamanca bus station is a place to leave I figured I would take my chances.

The original now historic part of town sits high on a hill surrounded by fortress walls. Inside the walls is a dirt path and praise be the first dirt I had encountered underfoot since I had come to Spain. I could actually feel the energy coming through my feet as I circumnavigated this ancient roman city. Along the path there are steps leading into town at various points. I can't tell you with words how restored I felt to look out far and wide and see golden quaking birch trees and a winding river below. Between the blessings of radiant blue skies above, dirt underfoot and TREES, trees, trees(Salamanca has hardly any trees)I felt confirmed as a pilgrim on the path. Low and behold I even encountered a sage. I can't tell you his name but we walked and talked for a considerable time. My guide was an 86 year old scholar of Greek who told me all about the Corinne of Lesbos who wrote poetry with Sappho as well as the history of Ciudad Rodrigo. After we parted I wandered the the streets and happened upon a small bar with a sign on the door that said "setas". Not only did they have wild mushroom tapas, they had wild mushroom desserts and the

biggest fresh mushroom on the counter I had ever seen. Besides being a very tasty spot, these were the friendliest people I had yet to meet. I worked off some of these delicious calories wandering some more and saw wonderful whimsies like faces on downspouts, beautiful public benches and a mid 12th century cathedral that was truly sacred. It occurred to me that I could live here and I hope to return. I later learned from my literature teacher that Ciudad Rodrigo hosts a reinvented 17th century summer theatre and from another that it is the place to be for a small town vibrant mardi gras dance in the Plaza Mayor. A window I will never forget was on a small side street. On display was the garb of a matador: hat, ballet like slippers, jacket with tiny pearls and real silver thread and prize ribbons above. I found my way to Avila on another weekend and it is incredible but on this day Ciudad Rodrigo offered me the restoration my soul sought and found and I will always hold this pueblo in my heart.



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Barcelona and Montserrat

5-8 diciembre 2009

I am cranking it out here folks as I had my last exam this am and it is time to clean up, pack up and head on out! Last weekend was a four day weekend for Espana with the back to back holidays of the The National Day of the Constitution and The Feast of the Assumption. After considerable consultation with the oracles I decided to head to Barcelona which was offering warmer weather and a candy house store of treasures from Gaudi architecture, the Miro museum and a l o n g must do list which included a side trip to the northwest town of Montserrat to balance the city with some mountains. Prior to my planning I had thought that the people of Catalonia had a different accent but in fact they have a different language which is a lyrical blend of spanish and french. It is the Paris of Spain: bold, elegant, sprawling, filled with culture, pride and beauty. It was wonderful to arrive by train at 7:30 am as the city was beginning to wake up. I headed down the nearly empty Ramblas for the coast. Everything was early morning fresh with gulls circling. My Grandmother, Corinne, told me several times that she hoped to come back as a seagull and I know she would have loved Barcelona. I circled back with a walk through the MOST awesome farmers market and found my welcoming hostel which is owned by two young sisters from Chicago. Suffice it to say I packed it in. I loved every single thing about Barcelona.

Montserrat is famous pilgrimage site set in a breathtaking landscape and includes a monastery from the 9th century and the Black Virgin. I accessed it by train from Barcelona

and then by ariel tram. The tram holds 33 people at one time and when we disembarked I took the road less traveled(not the path to the cathedral)and found a forest trail that circled the mountain with vistas to the right and altars honoring the Virgin and Child to my left. It was quiet, smelled forest good and the air was moist and fresh. I did circle back hours later and waited in line to go behind the altar to catch a glimpse of the Madonna. The path leading outside the church had a wall lined with light candles in bright red, blue and yellow jars.

I made my way back to Barcelona and visited the Caixa Forum which is a free museum funded by a not for profit bank that uses its money for social change. The exhibits were powerful and humbling.

Friday, I head south to Cordoba, Sevilla and Granada and then home on Christmas Day. I leave you with this photograph of a monument to Christopher Columbus, from the Barcelona harbor pointing your way and my way home.



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The southern route home

Friday, 18 diciembre-right now

Classes ended on the 16th but not before an all school party and talent show that included a film made by the cinema professor and students with footage of Franco giving a formal address but with the voice of a gringo. It was hilarious and will hopefully reappear on YouTube. I had a day to pack and clean and spent hours walking the streets and saying goodbye to Salamanca and reflecting on my time in Spain. My choice to share an apartment with other students had not been a good strategic move. They knew as much or less and Spanish than me so once I was out of class my conversational time was limited and this is the real laboratory that puts it all together. Living with Spaniards gives you that 24/7 opportunity to hear accurate Spanish all the time. I had lots of good reasons for opting for an apartment and but there were enough drawbacks to sharing an apartment that I would definitely opt for living with Spaniards the next time and encourage you to do the same.

I headed out early on the morning of the 18th and met another woman in the streets and we shared a cab to the bus station. She told me she was from Switzerland and had studied earlier in Salamanca in exactly the same program and like me she had shared an apartment with other students and had a similar experience and set of frustrations and had returned for another semester and had found an apartment with Spaniards and attended what she said was an excellent school for less money. I had already given considerable thought to my next Spanish adventure but this cemented it for me. Besides, I

never made it up to the northern parts of Spain that include the Basque region and Galicia which includes Santiago de Compostela. So there may be a part 2 to this blog site someday!

I headed to Madrid on the morning of the 18th to meet my wonderful friend Joel Sussman who was able to take a break from his excel spreadsheets and travel to the south with me. Our first stop was Cordoba which was the largest Roman city in Spain and later the Islamic empire of western Europe. What remains is an amazing building called the Mesquita or mosque, narrow winding streets, one of three surviving Jewish temples and a Sephardic museum. The museum hosted an evening performance of Flamenco which included classical guitar, a singer and a dancer. Since this was my first exposure to Flamenco, I have no idea if they were excellent or not. They were serious artists and I enjoyed their performance and the setting in a small beautiful courtyard with #40 people at 7 p.m. rather than a smokey restaurant at 11 p.m. for a lot more \$. Wandering the streets afterwards I went into a Catholic Church to have a look around and found that a small Renaissance orchestra and chorus were performing. It took only a few minutes to realize that this was an extraordinary opportunity and I went back out and beckoned Joel to come on in. This was a high point for me during our time in the south and I wish I had a recording. All of the music had been composed in Cordoba during the Renaissance for Christmas and it was stand up and cheer extraordinary, from the beat of the drum, the sound of the oboe, the voices in chorus and solo performances. Their joy and love of their music was radiant. I thanked several of them, including the director/conductor afterwards and told them that I was simply wandering and had no idea what was behind that church door when I opened it. Soy afortunada!

The following two days were spent in Seville which like most of the south was experiencing

torrential rain and flooding. No one, that I met in Spain questions the existence of global climate change. The Alcazar or royal palace is another example of fabulous Moorish architecture that we both enjoyed and would recommend your visiting. We had some good food and stayed in a nice hotel which was a real treat for me after my spartan apartment. Seville is much bigger than Cordoba so wandering meant often feeling lost and combining that with dark and raining well.....I am sure this contributed to our feeling like two days was enough.

We headed for Granada which is home to the Alhambra, the palace/fortress of sultans and the most visited site in Spain. It is a wow experience not just in its beautiful architecture but also in its gracious sprawling grounds. Think of Williamsburg set in the 11th-14th centuries, high on a hill top with mountains in the distance and Islamic architecture and gardens.

As breathtaking as the Alhambra is, it was a visit to the summer home of Federico Garcia Lorca in Granada that most deeply moved me. We had focused on his work in my literature class and one of the last days my teacher played a poem of Lorca's, sung by Amancio Prada, "Soneto de la Dulce Queja". Of the many poems that Lorca wrote, it is the only poem that speaks from the first person and speaks of his personal pain. Between the words and the glorious voice I sobbed uncontrollably, I think a first for my teacher, but she nodded to me with understanding. Lorca came from a wealthy family who owned large farms in the countryside outside of Granada and they had two homes in the city, one

Wishing all of you a healthy, safe, meaningful, joy filled/fun New Year and.....

I hope you will join me at my home on Saturday, 16 January @ 8 pm for Tapas!!(I need a little time to improve my spanish tortilla)

I am loading up my ipod with Paco de Lucia, Amancio Prada and Ana Belen!

247 Barren Hill Road Conshocken, PA 19428 267 216 7567 that means rsvp por favor

Corinne

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