

A UNESCO Safari in Iberia or *In Search of a Yellow Tote*

I didn't think it would be so hard. It all started in Catania, Sicily, about 6 weeks ago where I saw it first. A butter-yellow purse, large enough to function as a tote, the perfect-size-three-in-one- with an inner bag that is so practical. A man at the open market around the corner from my hotel holds it up -- "15 Euro" he shouts. A good price. But you never take the asking price at a street market. "12" I shout back. He shakes his head "no", so I keep on walking..... and thinking about that tote.

It soon starts to sprinkle and vendors start packing up. I then decide that, yes, I want it. So I double back but he is already gone - along with the magnificent, must-have-yellow-tote.

In major cities of Europe it seems that African men (mostly from Senegal) seem to have dibs on selling purses and totes in street markets. Much of the goods are copies. And we all know that you can't buy a Louis Vuitton or Michael Kors on the street for 15 euro. But some of their products are fun pieces and aren't bad -- and make great tote-bags. They are well-designed, never leather, but "pleather" (leather looking plastic) and are fun to shop for, bargain (to the death, of course) and buy.

So at all our stops, I ask our drivers where the Africans with the purses hang out. They all know where they are.



I'm back in Spain and Portugal on a sightseeing trip along the same route I will do next fall when I walk the Portuguese Route of the Camino de Santiago. You may remember I did the "French Route" that started just over the Pyrenees at St. Jean Pied de Port a few years ago. That was a great experience, but there wasn't enough time for sightseeing, museum-going or window shopping. After a hard day walking, I just wanted to relax, prop my feet up and think about dinner.

So When Bill Ball, owner of Passport Travel, announced his itinerary for Northern Spain and Portugal, I was interested. And then he said our hotel in Santiago de Compostela was the Parador of Los Reyes Catholicos, accommodations built in 1499 by Ferdinand and Isabella to care for weary pilgrims and considered the oldest continuously running hotel in the world. Oh - and its a 5-star property now. I love the town, and I was sure I would love the hotel more. Staying there was important to me and the deal-breaker. I signed up.

I've posted reviews on tripadvisor on all our hotels, restaurants and some of the sites. Let me know if you'd like to see them, and I'll send the list.

I dubbed our trip the UNESCO Safari as we wove a trail thru every UNESCO site in our path. I'm sure I'm missing some on this list, but here they are with a few comments:

SPAIN

BARCELONA

Antoni Gaudi Sites (Modernist Style):

- Sagrada Familia Church I've been visiting this church since 1985. Progress is coming along, and it is due to be completed in 2028
- Park Guell

Park Guell is a wonderful spot to visit, I've visited twice, but until now, never had time to visit the house Gaudi lived in for several years. It entire house is a museum within the park and contains his furniture, sketches and personal effects.



- Casa Mila aka La Pedrata (done on own). If you go and the line is long, buy the Premium ticket 27euro (regular admission is 20.50 euro) for immediate entrance. It also includes a nice souvenir booklet with photos and quotes from Gaudi.
- Palau Guell (done on own) - This is the family home of Eusebi Guell, who commissioned Gaudi to develop several projects.



Though I must have had the teeniest room at the Gaudi Hotel, it had great views - on the left, the view of the roof of Palau Guell from my bathroom; and on the right, here I am on my terrace with Gaudi's magnificent and whimsical roof across the street.

The Royal Abbey of Santa Maria de Poblet - founded by the Cistercians in 1151, and one of the largest monasteries in Spain. Of special note, it has a great book shop and I found the English translation of the excellent "Roads to Santiago" by Julie Roux.

ZARAGOZA

- Basilica of Our Lady of El Pilar - late 17th century (one of the few churches that has "secret" toilets!)
- La Seo Cathedral - built in 1316 in Gothic-Mudejar style. I especially enjoyed visiting the tapestry museum on the top two levels. It was a bit of a climb, but worth it.

ORVIEDO



•Metropolitan Cathedral and Basilica of the Holy Saviour aka Cathedral of San Salvador Romanesque and Baroque style - 12th century. This cathedral houses some amazing treasures: part of the Crown of Thorns, a piece of the True Cross, the Rod of Moses, and the cloth that was wrapped around Jesus during the crucifixion. Yes, this is faith.

The Cathedral's Treasures Room.

Romanesque Churches of:

- San Julián de los Prados - 9th Century Church - noted for its murals.

We were very impressed with how kind the woman caretaker of San Julian Church was - she pointed out many of the details for us and drew our attention to sections of original frescoes and flooring.



- San Miguel de Lillo Church - 11th Century
- Santa María del Naranco Church 11th Century

If you ever visit these last two churches, BE SURE to buy your ticket beforehand or you will come up against a very cranky, rules-obsessed woman. Trust me on this. Also don't even think of taking a photo in the San Miguel de Lillo church or you will be thrown out!

•Tito Bastila Cave - Paleolithic Cave Art (dated to 14,000 years ago) It was discovered in 1968 by a group of young spelunkers and is considered one of the most important cave art discoveries in Europe. It is named for Tito Bastila, one of the men in the group who died tragically just weeks after the discovery. Access is very controlled. The museum was excellent.

BILBAO

• Vizcaya Bridge - built 1893 and probably the cheapest World Heritage site to visit -- only .40 to ride across the river!

SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA (one of my favorite cities in the world)

•Route of Santiago de Compostela



We crossed the pilgrim trail a few times - notably in Pamplona and Puente la Reina. We saw more and more pilgrims as we drove thru Sarria and Melide and neared Santiago de Compostela.

• Cathedral - where the bones of St. James reside (this is faith, but still a powerful destination)

• Old Town -mostly 10th and 11th Century Baroque style buildings

• Rajoy Palace - the Parliament building. It is directly across the plaza from the Cathedral.

• Monastery of San Martiño Pinario - 16th century, a former Benedictine monastery, now a seminary and residence hall.

• Hotel de los Reyes Catholicos - built in 1499 by Ferdinand and Isabella to care for the tired and often sick, pilgrims. We spent one night, then checked out early to do our touring, but I asked a woman at Reception if I could return in the afternoon to follow the "Discover History" trail shown on a brochure in my room. The inner part of this historic hotel, with its four courtyards, meeting rooms and chapel is not open to the public. When she said, "always consider this your home in Santiago," I got teary-eyed. I still do when I think about it.



It just looks like a large building from the outside, but just wait until you walk thru the 15th century portico and elaborately carved stone entrance.



Its a joy to explore each of its four colonnaded and landscaped courtyards ringed with historical markers, statuary, fountains and benches.

The main dining room used to be the stables. Now it is a gourmet restaurant with prix fixe dining.



There are lots of surprises in the courtyards - including this "screaming monk" gargoyle. Just keep your eyes open and be amazed.

The entrance to the parador resembles the entrance to a medieval church. The 16th century facade includes coats of arms, sculptures, and decorative carvings.





And I couldn't wait to find that last trail marker in front of the Cathedral and take this picture. Can you tell that being back in Santiago de Compostela was my favorite stop?

LUGO

- Roman City Walls - 3rd Century. Considered the best remaining example in Europe

LA CORUNIA

- Hercules Tower - First century and it is the only fully preserved and functioning Roman lighthouse in existence. There are 237 steps to the top -- and worth it.

PORTUGAL

LISBON

- Jeronimos Monastery (Cathedral)
- Belem Tower and the Convent - 16th Century, Manueline style. Built to commemorate Vasco da Gama's expedition
- Monastery of Alcobaca - 12th Century, Cistercian Gothic architecture
- Batalha Monastery and Square - 14th Century Dominican monastery, Gothic style. The final resting place of some of the Kings of Portugal.



Portugal has beautiful tilework everywhere.

TEMPLAR CASTLES (NEAR LISBON) 12th and 13th century (done on own)

- Tomar Castle aka Convent of Christ. A huge property, set on top a hill. It was an enclosed city, with not only the defensive part, but homes and orchards.



- we also visited Almourol Castle (pictured) - a small Templar stronghold, set in the middle of a river - not a UNESCO site, but part of the Templar history in the area.

SINTRA (done on own) with its Pena Palace and gardens.

ROMAN RUINS OF CONIMBRIGA - a beautiful site and huge property. It includes mosaics, fountains (for .50 you can turn them on!), an amphitheater, baths, and excellent museum.

The mosaics at Conimbriga are still colorful and in good shape. This floor is outdoors, open to the elements, yet still retains its vibrant color.



Even the sign to the toilets keep the mosaic motif.

COIMBRA

•Coimbra University

•Biblioteca Joanina the University's Library - 18th century and probably the most beautiful library in existence - and this is a librarian talking! It is still a working library, but materials in this old section are available to specialists and scholars only.

AVEIRO - with its old town, canals and lagoons.

PORTO

- Historic Center of Porto
- Palaco da Bolsa aka the Stock Exchange Building - 19th century Neoclassic style building, in use today as a cultural center
- San Francisco Church
- Cathedral - Romanesque style
- Sao Bento Train Station - built in the 1930's. Known for its tile work depicting battle scenes and transportation history

Hmmm.....what church is that? Iberian architecture is church architecture. I wish we had kept count of how many churches we visited. Maybe there were too many to count!



DUORO VALLEY

- Old Terraced Vinyards - wine has been produced here for 2000 years
- Coa Valley - Prehistoric Rock Sites (but due to rain limiting car access, we saw only a museum)

AZORES

- Pico Island's old vinyards with their volcanic rock fences protecting vines from the wind and seawater. We had hoped to visit a handicraft exhibition and whaling museum, but being Monday, museums were closed.



- City of Angra do Heroismo on Terceira Island- an important port of call in the 15th to 19th centuries

Pico Island is volcanic so all the older homes are made of this stone, resulting in a very picturesque island.

So.... 39 UNESCO sites -- surely a record for any trip! We visited other places, too: more churches, palaces and museums including the Olympic sites in Barcelona, Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Fatima, Casa de la Musica (Concert Hall) in Porto, etc.-- it was an active and full trip.

About the tote I looked for those Africans and thru markets and stores in Barcelona, Zaragoza (just missed one there!), Bilbao (where I met up with one of my favorite people -- Marta C.), Pamplona, Oviedo, Lugo Santiago de Compostela, Lisbon, Porto, Pico Island and..... in Angra do Heroismo on Terceira Island, in a small store, perched on a high shelf there it was. A perfect-size-three-in-one-butter-yellow purse roomy enough to be a tote! My trip was complete!



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