

## In Southern Portugal and Southern Spain OAT's Backroads of Iberia

I truly enjoyed OAT's "Backroads of Iberia" itinerary and delighted to be able to squeeze the trip in between Halloween and Thanksgiving. It turned out to be a wonderful, high quality adventure. The program is well designed and well paced, the food is amazing, and the scenery stunning.



I arrived in Lisbon four days early mostly to try to get my internal clock to adjust to local time. I don't enjoy getting off the plane sleepy-eyed and starting a tour right away but admire people who can do this. I arranged some touring services thru ecoTours Portugal and was impressed they

sent a licensed guide to do my airport transfer.

My all day tour before the start of the OAT trip to Obidos, Nazare, Batalha and Fatima was very good. I have been to Fatima before so in addition to seeing the "cave" where Mary appeared, I wanted to explore the area a bit more. Obidos, Nazare and Batalha are lovely small towns that I would love to return to. In Obidos, I had my first encounter with cobblestones -- which I found very difficult to walk on. Batalha was a visit to a large church and Nazare is a lovely fishing town that we viewed from an overlook. On a day tour, it is more of a look-see rather than in-depth exploration. I would get that later on the OAT trip.



With Valle, overlooking the city of Toledo.

We all know that the guide makes the trip, and I was lucky to be able to travel with Valle Lopez, a well-experienced, knowledgeable, friendly, energetic and helpful guide. She is a native of Spain, and thru her lectures on the bus, her numerous walking tours and orientations, and stories of growing up, she did a wonderful job of acculturating us to the country. This woman is tireless -- she has worked for Grand Circle/OAT for 20 years and she has maintained her enthusiasm and energy.

One of the reasons I like to visit a Spanish-speaking country about once a year is to keep up my language skills. I probably understand 80% of native speakers or news on TV (they speak very fast!), but I speak "Spanglish" as my vocabulary is so poor. Valle is so kind, often being my walking dictionary as many a time I would ask "how to you say....."



I had Cell 201 in the attic of a former convent, with its quirky bathroom but nice view of the nearby Cathedral

Our accommodations are in historic properties called Pousadas in Portugal and Paradors in Spain. I love heritage properties and always try to stay in them when possible. India is the motherlode for this type of accommodation, but properties in Portugal and Spain can hold their own. These former castles, monasteries, convents, palaces, civic buildings, medieval hospitals, fortresses, and other historic buildings are owned by the government. All have had extensive restoration and are now luxury hotels kept to a high standard.

We stayed in a former convent (Evora), a Moorish fortress (Carmona), a municipal building (Ronda) and finally in a Renaissance palace (Ubeda). Our hotels in Lisbon at the beginning of the trip and Madrid at the end were international-standard, well-located, well-run properties.



I have to admit that my favorite Parador was in Ubeda as the entire property was furnished with antiques, even the rooms. My room had a 4-poster bed and a great view of the main square including El Salvador Church.



Our group didn't just sightsee in old towns; OAT is known for traveling close to the ground and providing "experiences" so we had lots of hands-on activities including: painting a ceramic tile, wine tastings (several!), cooking class, cheese-making, olive oil tasting, tapas demo and tasting, Flamenco and guitar demo, talking with University students and even a home-hosted dinner.

The historic towns we stayed in (some are UNESCO sites) are beloved by locals too and well-visited, especially on weekends. A popular way of sightseeing is taking the little tourist train, which I used to consider very hokey and only for "tourists" and not "travelers." But my guide Maggie Reeves in Sardinia and Corsica used these for orientations and now I find I love using them when available.



In Carmona, the ride gave me the lay of the land, so I could return on foot to explore the city museum, town square and city gate; and in Ubeda (where I turned out to be the only passenger), I sat next to the driver and tried to keep up with his Spanish all the while being able to ask as many questions as I wanted.

As for favorite activities, it has to be walking around these medieval and renaissance-era walled cities, visiting museums, which are often in former mansions, so the building itself is interesting, and enjoying some of the quirky restaurants we visited.



Pedro Romero Restaurant, named after the famous bullfighter who was born in Ronda, is my favorite. It is on the main street, across from the bull ring, with walls covered in memorabilia. The place was a Hemingway and Orson Welles favorite, especially on bullfight days, and they have the photographs to prove it. Food is good too!



Our table was under matador Pedro Romero's portrait as well as one of the 5558 bulls he fought.





These are old cities paved with cobblestones which created problems for me. I fell at Lisbon Airport on my arrival day, so had lots of bruising and pain. I used a cane most of the trip and kept my leg elevated on the bus! But I hobbled along as best I could, sometimes opting out of the more strenuous walks.

And we walked! Fellow participant Jo, as well as Valle had fit-bits and let me know daily totals. Total steps (for me) was: 128,922 - a total of 70 miles. I opted out of three activities due to my knee: the tour at the bull ranch, the hike down Ronda Gorge, and a walking tour to the Prado Museum, or it would have been much more.

Every turn offers a photo op. Here the Roman gate of Carmona.

I'm a museum person and love exploring them. My favorites on this trip were in Lisbon, Evora, Carmona and Madrid.

Museums in Spain are well designed, well organized and well visited. They offer discounts to children, students and senior citizens, and often have free days. I even received free entrance at a church museum, due to my using a cane to walk (handicapped discount)! Even if one paid full price, entrance fees are minimal - for example the excellent Archaeological Museum in Madrid is just 3 euro (\$3.50).

Last two times I was in Lisbon, the Archaeology Museum was closed for renovation. But, guess what, it is open now! It is part of the spectacular Jeronimos Monastery Complex which includes the magnificent Santa Maria de Belem Church (Vasco da Gama is buried there), monastery cloisters and the museum.



I got myself there early thinking the museum might be crowded as there is always a line for the church, but ended up having the museum all to myself. It is not that large, but nicely arranged. The best part is that I was having a problem distinguishing between the Alentejo and Algarve regions of southern Portugal, and one of the museum guards was kind enough to take me over to a large map and explain the different areas as well as the types of archaeological sites at each. Many of the guards are archaeology students and they know their history.



left: The Pregnant Mary statue in the Evora Cathedral; and above: the impressive 13th century triptych in the Cathedral Museum.

In Evora, another participant and I visited the Cathedral Museum. I'm not a fan of religious art, but I wanted to see the jewel-encrusted reliquary that contains a piece of the True Cross. (this is faith, as there are so many "true crosses" around, they would make a forest), and the 13th century ivory statue of Mary that opens up into a triptych with carved scenes of her life. The statue's glass case had been removed for repair, so Dianne and I were able to get quite close to the piece and view it directly.

An optional trip to Seville was on the schedule for our free day in Carmona. I had been to Seville several years ago so opted to stay in the little town. It was a Sunday and I leisurely enjoyed the extra-nice buffet breakfast then took the tourist train for a look-see around the town. It was wonderful. The guide did the tour bi-lingually as everyone else on the train spoke Spanish. He pointed out spots I could return to including a palace built in 1561 called "Casa Palacio de Carmona" which has a beautiful, intact library. He also showed me photos of the Roman Necropolis and suggested that my time would be better spent visiting the City Museum. It was a good call. The city museum is located close to the parador and has exhibits from Paleolithic to modern times as well as items found in the Necropolis. The building is an architectural jewel in itself - a 17th century palace with 6 interior patios.

Having visited the town of Guernica on OAT's Northern Spain trip and learned how it was brutally bombed in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War, I had to make a pilgrimage to the Reina



Sofia Museum just a block away from our hotel in Madrid to visit Picasso's famous anti-war painting. I had seen the painting at New York's Museum of Modern Art in the early 1980's, but didn't realize the history or significance. Now, having visited the town and done a little homework, I knew I had to visit the work again.



Picasso's Guernica, 1937

The Reina Sofia Museum is almost overwhelming and one that needs several hours to visit all the galleries. I didn't have that much time, so made a bee-line to Gallery 206 on the second level to view the work. Guernica is well protected, with security guards stationed at either side of the work and one at each door to the gallery. There is also a cord barrier that triggers an alarm if crossed. I especially liked that there were information sheets available and also a display of documents relating to the design of the paintings and its journey from France to New York to Madrid. As I looked at each section of the work, I sensed the horror that all Spain must have felt when this peasant, civilian city full of women and children was so brutally ravaged by bombs that only a few trees were left intact. Though fairly crowded, the gallery was silent the entire time I was there.

The Archaeology Museum in Madrid is excellent. It has three levels and is stuffed with artifacts, including whole mosaic floors, Roman antiquities, and lots of computer screens for further information and even several movies. For children, there are exhibits that can be touched. A replica of the Altamira Cave is tucked away in the garden. Its cave paintings are estimated to be 36,000 years old. The exhibit includes a film and a video explication. I spent over two hours in the museum and loved every minute.

The Lady of Baza is one of my favorite exhibits in this museum. This member of nobility was buried with all her belongings in 4th century BC.



The strangest museum we visit as a group is a 16th century ossuary chapel decorated with bones and skulls. The chapel is part of the Royal Church of St. Francis in Evora and monks at the time thought it a good idea to remind residents of the inevitability of death. So they gathered bones from the cemeteries to decorate a church chapel.



Over the chapel entrance are the words: *Nos ossos que aqui estamos, pelos vossos esperamos.* (We bones are here, waiting for yours) Hmmmm.... something to think about.

On a happier note.....Beware -- seriously good food in Spain! ..... Wonderful, delicious and plentiful. We are introduced to a new way of eating on this trip. Dinner is the time for tapas, a salad or sandwich, but lunch is leisurely, consisting of several courses including multiple desserts and can start as late as 2pm and continue until 5:00-ish. This has got to be a more healthy way to eat, rather than a heavy meal in the evening.

Our included meals are a medley of dishes which include lots of local specialties, Meats are mainly fish and pork - both of which I love. In addition, Valle made sure we tried unique items like Pastéis de Belem (custard cupcakes) in Lisbon, empanadas (stuffed pastry) in Arraiolos, cookies made by cloistered nuns (at the Igreja de Nossa Senhora de la Merced in Ronda which also is the home of the holy relic of the hand of St. Teresa of Avila) and numerous regional snacks.



As for shopping, the big event in Portugal is cork: cork purses, cork shoes, cork umbrellas, cork clothes and even cork bikinis! I did find some lovely tiles in cork trivets, cork sandals that look like Birkenstocks and at Fatima, a statue of Santiago de Compostela. At the olive oil vinyard, factory and store where we spent the better part of a day, I was able to buy several containers of award-winning olive oil.

Of course, I visited every Ale-Hop store I could and bought stocking stuffers. But these countries are in the euro-zone and prices are not inexpensive.



You can even buy a cork bikini in Portugal; but I preferred to bring home award-winning olive oil from Spain.



Though I'm trying not to shop, there are some things I couldn't resist. My first find of the trip was in Fatima, my third day in Portugal - a gorgeous statue of Santiago (St. James). I have been wanting one for ages and even considered the one by Lladro, but that one never looked right to me. But there, in the enormous Centro Commercial - a huge gift shop/restaurant complex, I found Him. Alabaster white, dressed as a pilgrim and holding a walking stick, he looks like he is about to take the first step on a pilgrimage. The salesgirl took care to wrap him in several feet of bubble-wrap, then put him in a box that ended up taking half my suitcase. But I got him home, safe and sound.

Then in Ubeda (did I mention this was my favorite city?) --- an art-deco sterling silver bracelet. And as luck would have it, I even found a jeweler a few doors away who custom made an extra link for it within an hour so it would fit me better. Not only that, but I already have earrings that are a good match!

I will never forget many of the things I experienced on this trip:

The gorgeous narrow medieval streets of the walled towns we visited,







The lovely University students who were so patient with our questions. These well-educated women have such a bright future ahead!

It is difficult to decide to give up an included event like a home-hosted dinner, but on the advice of friends who had done the itinerary just a few weeks before (thanks Kathleen and Steve!), I chose to attend a concert instead.

That afternoon, I had a nice conversation with guitarist Paco Seco when I stopped by his studio to buy a ticket to his concert. He reserved a seat in the front row for me so I didn't miss a second of his wonderful music and could see his fingerwork. He is a master Spanish and Flamenco guitarist and it was a privilege to attend this small, intimate concert.



I can certainly see why people go crazy over Spain -- it has everything: lovely people, historic sites, interesting accommodations, excellent food, even good weather. And the rain in Spain stayed mainly on the plain and far away from us!

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