

# Our Trip to Spain



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*"Finding the Challenges" is an original column appearing every other Wednesday at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Verbal Vol. Verbal is a software engineer, college professor, corporate information officer, life long student, farmer, libertarian, literarian, student of computer science and self-ordering phenomena. Archived columns can be found here. FTC-only RSS feed available here.*

The last 4 weeks have been incomparable. In that time I have traveled more miles than a trip halfway around the Earth. We, my beautiful bride and I, went through 6 time zones, and then just as we were recovering, we reversed through those same 6 time zones. In an eleven day period we saw 8 airports and felt as though we had walked the entire distance between them, dragging carry-on bags. We ate some of the most expensive food, which nevertheless tasted pretty poorly. We had 6 different airline flights, for a total air time of 24 hours, and taxi time that seemed like 24 years. And nearly at the end of the trip we faced the humiliating reality of TSA.

The first reason I missed my publication date with this article is that I didn't want my musings to trigger a flag at NSA before I got through TSA coming back. I also didn't want to advertise to the world at large that I was away from home. Then, even though I had planned to write and save this column, for transmission when I got home, I miscalculated the effect that jet lag would have on my resolve. It took us three days to venture out from our lodging in Spain.

## **Traveling as Twain, Franklin, Jefferson**

We embarked on this great trip four weeks ago, from Kentucky to Marbella (mar-bayuh), Spain, on *la Costa del Sol*. As I was coming out of jet lag, I began to see how many new perceptions I was filtering through my acquaintances Mark Twain, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson (ie WWMTD?). I also formed the conceit of channeling a devil's advocate in the person of John Adams to travel as my sounding board. Mark Twain was a great world traveler, equipped with all the right opinions, in my view. Franklin, Jefferson, and Adams were among the first Americans to go to Europe with an American born POV - Franklin and Jefferson were tolerant (perhaps to an extreme in Ben's case), while John Adams appeared to be very task oriented and in a big hurry to go home, somewhat an unhappy traveler. So I

will use Twain and Jefferson for my observers, Franklin for my happy traveler, and I will invite in Adams as a cranky counterpoint.

Observation #1 - Americans have extremely unrealistic, corrupted views of the cosmos. An idea that sticks is this - as the American West was being subjugated by European exploiters, the dime novels being published in NYC and Boston were full of wild, uninformed speculation slightly beyond the Wizard of Oz. This is how the vast majority of Americans were brought up in school houses regarding the ways of the country and the ways of the world - rubbish, the blind leading the blind. As one example, I give you John Wesley Harding, true understanding of whom has been lost to the afterlife - villain, hero, lowlife? Why would we think that the vast majority of scribblers were any more honest today than they were in the 19th century?

After I had been in Spain for 24 hours I realized that I had not seen Don Quixote or Torquemada yet. Actually nothing more than airports, expressways, the Mediterranean, a registration desk, and a condo/villa. We put off our acclimatization with a hamburger and *penne arrabiata*, at the Resort restaurant. We spent the rest of the first day negotiating unfamiliar user interfaces, then collapsing - actually my lovely bride, Verbalette went straight for the collapse.

Day 2 - Sleep in until 3pm (1500 GMT-1). Our first venture out was to a *supermercado* for food and for a trial of my Pimsleur Spanish (Cas-tee-jano). All of our trips have involved early location of chain foodstores. Supermarkets are the interface by which 20th century cultures connect. I am not sure that I will ever travel to a place that is far from a Supermarket. I would love to do so but I would not think that my sweetheart would love for me to take her there. Since she is my nearly-lifelong best friend, that's how it's going to be. I'm probably more like John Adams in this respect, and she is a lot like Abigail. I used to look for bookstores and record stores, but those are off the table these days, thanks and no thanks to the Internet.

But I realized for the first time that we become adapted to a new locale by seeking out the market. Exchange is so endemic to humans that we cannot function in a new environment until we discover how we shall satisfy our most basic needs. And there are a huge number of rough cultural edges that get smoothed when we engage others in the process. It was here in the market that we gained a tremendous amount of information about how common or strange would be our lives for the next week.

We ate things from the market for our second meal, quiche and pizza. We edged up on European cuisine by eating European fare that has been highly domesticated in *Los Estados Unidos*. Exotic foodstuffs like ham-flavored potato chips were given a wide berth.

I took a walk on the beach near sundown of the third day. Also on that day, we did take

steps to force ourselves into the sunshine by the fourth day. We signed up for a tour to Gibraltar with the bus loading at 10:30 am, Spanish time, the next day.

The trip to Gibraltar was the highlight of the trip. On the way there, the guide on our bus, Paco, gave us a running narrative in revolving Spanish, English, German, and French – his English was excellent, and I speak *un poco* of the other three. But in this kind of situation I always marvel at how backward we humans are; we don't understand one another very well yet we attempt far more complicated propositions such as war as though we perfectly understand the consequences. At Gibraltar, we were confronted by the idea that the British still believe they have a 21st century claim on this bit of Spain from a battle that was fought in the 18th century, and more than 75 years before the formation of the USA. This reminds us that the world is still a checkerboard of the imperial urges. Nonetheless we still enjoyed our visit, particularly with the barbary macaque primates who mysteriously inhabit the Rock. Also enjoyable were St. Michael's caves. I believe someone said that "gibraltar" means rock with holes, but a later check with Wikipedia cast suspicion on that tale. We did see Africa dimly across the Strait, which made us appreciate what a huge and long lived role this outpost has played in human history (there is said to be evidence of Neanderthal Man having lived there).

Just about sundown, back in Marbella, we walked on the beach to a restaurant where I had my first authentic Spanish food – a *tortilla de patatas*, made with potato, onion, eggs, and olive oil as a slowly fried omelet. It was quite good but not too exciting. I had expected Spanish food to have a big spicy kick. The other dish I was anxious to try was *paiella*, but I would learn that *los restaurantes* only offered such fare to a minimum of two diners, at a minimum of 35 euros (about \$50). My partner had begun to veto that idea before we had left Kentucky. Verbalette stuck with lasagna. But I was obsessed with the idea of paiella – I had been hearing about it all my life and I am a big fan of similar Mediterranean-inspired seafood fare such as bouillabaisse, cioppino, and gumbo – so the next night at the supermercado I bought a frozen paiella dinner. Suffice it to say that there was one very bland food obsession laid to rest. The following night I tried an empanada with the outcome that I was jonesing badly for even mediocre Mexican food. Our culinary adventure was not yet over.

The last Castillian delight I was after was *Iberian jamon*, a salt-cured ham that I had falsely imagined to be like our wonderful Kentucky country ham, or at least the Italian prosciutto. Instead I was firmly reminded of something smoked with wet cardboard and made of rubber. So much for *la cucina español*. The last adventure in cuisine was in an airport hotel in Paris. On checking in, we grabbed the room service menu only to find a hamburger at 36 euros or a puff pastry filled with snails going for 40 euros. Verbalette had seen a snack shop in the lobby, so off we went. We got two chicken salad sandwiches, a bag of tater chips, and two soft drinks for 28 euros (about 40 bucks).

But back to Marbella for a bit. We ended up loving Marbella and Puerto Banus, and we spent our last two days exploring them. The best part was the *Museo de Bonsai* in a green belt of Marbella. Some of those trees had been started when Gibraltar had been taken from Spain - 400 years ago. It was the finest horticultural exhibit, with the possible exception of Buchart Gardens in Victoria, BC, that we have seen.

We both felt comfortable in Spain, since we would have overcome the food problem in another few days, and I was learning the language quite quickly. I even found myself thinking in Spanish on a few occasions. The only high profile presence of government seemed to be the parking meters. We had gone through Spanish customs twice, once on arriving at the airport in Malaga and once coming back from Gibraltar, and they didn't even look at our passports. We drove and rode many miles on the highways and expressways, for eight days, but only saw one motorist pulled over with flashing lights. This was in stark contrast to what we experienced returning to the States. In Detroit, we were herded about like cattle, yelled at and rushed/delayed in every way possible. There were at least three arms of the Federal government there to see that we were adequately processed. But the TSA was the 800-pound gorilla. Raising their voices, barking a bewildering barrage of do this and do that. Making us virtually unpack our luggage, take off our shoes, take off our belts, rub our stomachs while patting our heads - all of this while strafing us with conflicting orders and radiation. And we were the US residents. Who knows what indignities our foreign flightmates, funneled off elsewhere, might have undergone.

When we finally got back to the Bluegrass Airport and escaped the confines of air travel, there was a cop who had pulled over a motorist not 100 yards from the airport exit, and another a few miles up the road. A few days later, on Christmas day, I passed three different law enforcement representatives, laying in wait with radar, between our farm and the little burg where we buy supplies - on Christmas day! Happy holidays. Welcome home.