

Spanish Sojourn

BY MIRA TEMKIN

Explore wonders of the old world and those designed by nature with Maupintour

Like the setting of a Hemingway novel, Spain is overflowing with vivid colors, cultural treasures and dramatic landscapes.

Diverse as it is vast, Spain will envelope your senses, steal your breath. Come along on my 13-day sojourn with Maupintour and discover the indomitable spirit of this magnificent country.

My tour traveled from Barcelona to Madrid with stops at medieval towns and historic villages along the way. As a past guest of Maupintour, I expected deluxe accommodations, a fascinating itinerary and an opportunity to mingle with the locals. But Maupintour offered even more. A visit to a bodegas near Seville for wine-tasting as well as guided art tours in Toledo and Madrid painted a true portrait of Spain's many glorious facets.

Adding to our impressions was tour director, Lars Fath, who was extremely knowledgeable of Spanish history, culture and cuisine. Lars explained that Spain is divided into 53 provinces and nine regions, but each is known for its own distinct traditions. To create a real sense of Spain's heritage, he played tapes of Julio Iglesias and Pavarotti. Accompanied by "Granada" and "Man of La Mancha," we marveled at the changing landscape, from mountainous countryside to blossoming olive groves.

One thing I found interesting was that many of my companions had traveled with Maupintour on other itineraries. For one couple, this was their 10th tour with the company.

BUSTLING BARCELONA

Barcelona is a grandiose city, considered more European than Spanish, because of its cosmopolitan nature. Our hotel, Le Meridien, was just steps away from the lively Les Rambles, a pedestrian promenade packed with a literal cornucopia of street musicians, cafes and postcard stands. One can literally dine al fresco and hear the sounds of chirping from a nearby vendor selling parakeets.

A city tour provided an introduction to Barcelona, taking us to the Olympic Stadium, Montjuic (the city's mountain), Picasso Museum and Barcelona's Gothic Cathedral. The Picasso Museum is a work of art itself, constructed within two medieval palaces. On display are some 2,500 drawings, paintings and etchings of the artist's work.

The highlight of Barcelona was admiring the works of Antoni Gaudi, a 19th century architect whose vision gave the city its most distinctive buildings. Maupintour showed us his unfinished masterpiece, The Temple of La Sagrada Familia, as well as his apartments. The intricate balconies of Casa Mila depict Gaudi's concept of modernism, which duplicate the rounded, curved shapes of nature. The original "recycler," Gaudi incorporated leftover pieces of ceramic, glass and even china plates into his new creations.



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GRAND GRANADA

At the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains lies Granada, where Isabella and Columbus met before his voyage to the new world. Yet, the city's most recognized sight is the Alhambra, built by the Moors in the 13th century. This immense architectural complex, with its open-air rooms, lovely fountains and laced walls continues to impress. I could just imagine the sultan and his harem relaxing in the Generalife gardens. Later, I ventured up to the Albaicin, the old Arab quarter and was rewarded with a spectacular view of white-washed houses and exquisite piazzas.

En route, we stopped at Malaga's famous bullring where Lars explained the pageantry of this national sport. Originally, the bullfighter rode on horseback, but this tradition soon gave way to a matador waving a red cape. Lars also told us that Hemingway had been a bullfight aficionado. Hemingway believed that bullfighting was an art, amazingly choreographed with grace and cunning. His famous work, "Death in the Afternoon," celebrates this art. Afterwards, we climbed atop another Moorish fortress, Lars broke open a bottle of Sangria and we toasted to the bullring below.

STUNNING SEVILLE

Romance, flower-filled patios and orange trees come to life in the capital of Andalusia. A city tour took us to the impressive Plaza de Espana, built for the 1929 Exposition. Designed in an arc, this unique structure celebrates Spain welcoming the world and each province is represented with a colorful, ceramic tile mural.

One thing I came to appreciate throughout the tour was Lars' flexibility. Because Seville's famous Alcazar was closed the day we arrived, Lars arranged for us to visit first thing the next morning. This magnificent 14th century palace, filled with lush gardens and lovely courtyards, is still used for European royalty today. At night, we enjoyed a romantic carriage ride through Maria Luisa Park, followed by dinner at a local restaurant. Tapas were served, along with fresh salmon and flavorful paella. The evening ended with a colorful Flamenco show, an ardent display of passionate gypsy dancers, guitars and lively foot stomping. Visions of red danced in my head all night long.



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MONUMENTAL MADRID

Heading toward Madrid, panoramic views of Toledo, the ancient capital of Spain, beckoned us to stop. With its Roman walls and bridges, Toledo boasts an epic history of Jewish, Christian and Moorish influences. Even more impressive were El Greco's paintings and the 12th century Santa Maria Synagogue, with its arched columns and pillars.

A city of grandeur, Madrid is brimming with magnificent art, fountains galore and more than a few Hemingway "haunts." Our hotel, The Westin Palace, was indeed just that and perfectly situated across the street from the Prado. This world-class art museum is filled with over 12,000 objects; a true treasury of Spanish, Dutch, Italian and French works of art. Our local guide described some of the more famous pieces and gave us time to explore on our own. I was fascinated with the detailing of "Las Meninas" by Velazquez as well as humored by the artist who painted himself in the scene.

Our city tour also took us to the Royal Palace, now used only for state occasions. Featuring 2,000 rooms and 600 clocks, the palace is decorated with frescoes, carved wood, silk and ceramic walls. I was awestruck at the room full of Stradivarius violins, which can only be played in the palace. And, we equally admired another room filled with harps and other musical instruments. Outside the palace is the Real Pharmacia with its 17th century alchemy laboratory and porcelain jars of herbs and remedies.

Madrid is known as an international party city, where the evening starts late and stretches into the wee hours of the morn. Lars told us that Madrid claims over 28,000 restaurants and bars. The reason is that locals rarely entertain at home and prefer to go out in groups instead. Judging by the throngs we saw gathered in every plaza, Madrid nightlife sizzles!

No visit to Madrid is complete with a stop at the monument to Cervantes in Plaza de Espana. I gazed at the statues of Don Quixote with his sidekick, Sancho Panza and thought that my trip to Spain, too was almost like "the impossible dream." When it was time to return home, I reflected on the total experience Maupintour had created. Artistic splendor, coupled with fascinating culture had given me a true sense of Spain's proud heritage that would stay with me forever. ❖

For more information, contact Maupintour at 800.255.4266 or visit www.maupintour.com



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From the top left: An enthralling performance of Flamenco. Matador passes his cape to joust the bull. Casa Mila, with its unique chimneys and wrought-iron balconies. Paella, the traditional dish of Spain. Patio of Lions in the Alhambra. A panoramic view of Toledo, the fortress on the hill.