



**American Flyers Motorcycle Club
Viva España – Viva Portugal – 2022**

Orchestrated by:

Skip & Kaz of MotorDiscovery & Kazoom

By Rich Marin (edited by Steve Larsen)

Editor's note:

Rich Marin's daily blog stories are the foundation of this chronicling of the Flyer's Trip to Spain, Portugal, Andorra, and the Pyrenees, in the fall of 2022. Ruthlessly butchered by this editor, who abandoned author Marin's fun-to-read narratives with beginnings, middles, and ends, they now are solely focused on the events making up this ride. Some exceedingly minor grammatical edits were made by Rob as his Dad was an English teacher and it appears Maggie had the day off...

September 25, 2022

A Mandarin Lemon

We have been riding the European motorcycle circuit with Skip and Kaz for over twenty years now. While many of their clients are rough and ready and prefer economy accommodations on their trips, they know that our gang enjoys a more upscale experience. This trip through Spain and Portugal over these few weeks has a wonderful array of hotels that read like a who's who of the Iberian hospitality industry. The biggest urban center we are visiting is right here in Barcelona, the center of the Principality of Catalonia, a state that, viewed in the events of Spanish history, has always wanted to be its independent province. What is arguably the best hotel in Barcelona is the Mandarin Oriental Barcelona, a hotel Google gives €€€€ in reference to its pricing.

The Mandarin Oriental Barcelona is central in its location in this lovely city. That means that it is set in an old and ornate Catalonian building that has been thoroughly and stylishly modernized inside in the best of Alta-moda European fashion. It is all very sleek and stylish. That carries through to the guest rooms as well as the common spaces. The rooms are blonde hardwood floors (no LVT here!) with an area rug under the bed. The furniture and wardrobes are matching and the blend of smoked opaque and clear glass that separates the bathroom area (which runs the length of the room) all seem to be well-matched. Earth tones abound with not a pastel or vibrant flair of color to be seen. The electronic fittings are first-class and plentiful, so, in essence, the room is very nicely appointed.

However, the rooms are small. Not anywhere near as small as the JFK TWA Hotel rooms, which are the subject of much humor among those of us who have stayed there, but these are efficient small rooms for a double room in the most luxurious hotel in Barcelona. here is a decent-sized toiled cubicle, which is just fine. But everything else in the room is undersized by our big American people's standards. I am not suggesting that this is like the rooms in Tokyo where you rent a hole-in-the-wall to sleep in. Nor is it even like a single room in Zurich where the Swiss pride themselves in efficiently making the smallest beds known to mankind. But this is too damn small for two big motorcyclists and their gear.

The Mandarin Oriental Barcelona is certainly stylish. It is also very high-grade in terms of service (they clean the room twice per day, which is very unusual by today's standards) and everyone from the restaurant to the lobby staff is very genteel and polite. But the room is simply too damn small for the price we are paying. We are staying here for three nights (one night down, two to go), so we will make do. I did inquire about a bigger room and since we are heading into the weekend, I suspect I will hear crickets on that front. It's OK. Our friend Steve (Larsen) thinks this is the best hotel he has ever stayed in. My seeding his doubt on that front does not seem to sway him and there are lots to commend the joint. Steve does not want me to offend Skip and Kaz by denigrating their choice of hotels for our upscale visit and I do not. I would have, a priori, chosen it too based on reputation, but I'm just saying, at €€€€ prices, they should add a few square meters to the rooms (not gonna happen at this point).

September 26, 2022

Gaudí or Gaudy?

Yesterday we toured Barcelona and it is impossible to do so without spending an inordinate amount of time seeing and contemplating the works of Antoni Gaudí, the Catalan architect who seems to have almost single-handedly defined this most trendy city on the European continent. We are staying in the most central location of the city on the Passeig de Gracia, where several of Gaudí's earlier buildings are located. The style, to me, is a combination of art nouveau and eccentric crazy man. As we all know, lunacy and genius are first cousins and Gaudí, who lived from 1852 to 1926 was somewhere between the two. After this visit, learning about the symbolism and derivation of his work as well as the methods he embodied in his grand scheme for his most enduring and monumental work, the basilica of Sagrada Familia, I am convinced that there was very little about him that was crazy other than his willingness to buck convention and pursue his vision.

The first thing most people (including me) wonder is whether the derivation of the word gaudy comes from the work of Antoni Gaudí. As much as that thought offends etymologists, who point out that the word gaudy has been in active usage since the Sixteenth Century and comes from Middle English, it is not an entirely illogical thought. The term, as used by everyone including William Shakespeare, means excessively ornate and tastelessly showy. There is a judgment embedded in the word that implies a degree of crassness. It is clear in the history of art and architecture that the art nouveau period was a moment that diverged from traditionalism and came into favor with a degree of passion only to be quickly out of fashion and looked down upon for another moment as sort of a "what were we thinking" sentiment. When you first see the work of Antoni Gaudí, it is hard not to see the sort of whimsy that one can easily imagine going out of style in a heartbeat. His style might even seem childlike to some. The universe was certainly playing games with Mr. Gaudí when it embedded in his mind the thoughts and capabilities to create such works that many might well define as gaudy by nature.

That last sentence is packed with lots of relevant commentaries because besides being whimsical, Gaudí was also deeply holistic and strove to incorporate nature into all of his work. That might seem like a thematic issue, but it is so much more. He rethought the principles of architecture and structural engineering and looked to nature for better solutions to the problem of building the megastructure that is still becoming his landmark basilica of Sagrada Familia. He makes one aware of this naturalistic connection right at the front door with ornaments showing everything from turtles to man's inhumanity to man (unfortunately, an all too natural phenomenon that repeats itself in the human condition over and over again). The painted bronze leaves on the doors give no room for missing the linkage of the project to the realm of nature. But it is the embedded structure inside the basilica that amazes with its consistency with nature and its heralding that what God has wrought easily outdoes anything man has thought an expedient to a comfortable sheltered life.

Squared lines and solid structure give way in the Sagrada Familia to what may look like whimsy but is genuinely a hidden yet obvious mastery of natural science. The columns are the key. They are the trees that use the parabolic skyward arch of nature as they reach for the heavens to bear the weight of the grandeur of the vaulted basilica.

Where Medieval architecture codified the use of arches, buttresses, and keystones, Gaudí set all of that aside in favor of what he thought was a better way that made the walls of the basilica merely ornamental while the real work of the structure was effortlessly embedded in the lofty columns. Those then incorporate the recognition of the value of the spiral and the new concept that things like the deep fluting of the columns, which becomes a vertical star-shaped extrusion that twists its way upward would add strength without bulk. The subtlety of the design and the clarity of the engineering wisdom is nothing short of amazing. And that is merely the undergarment of the Sagrada Familia. The really special aspect of the Basilica, which is still very much under construction and not expected to be complete for another decade or so (assuming some of the remaining and still puzzling scientific challenges can be met) is what happens visually when a pilgrim enters into the adoration of the space. I am not a particularly religious person, but it is hard not to feel the presence of God in this place of worship. That happens through two phenomena that are equally spectacular.

The first and most obvious one is the extreme use of light inside the basilica. Gaudí designed the place to make maximum usage of light and oriented the structure to maximize the impact and strength of the rising and setting sun to blast sunlight through colored or stained glass in a most extraordinary manner. The blue and green hues of the spectrum face the East and the yellow and red hues of the spectrum face the West. The result is a kaleidoscopic effect of colored light that gets shed onto the very structure of those fascinating columns that draw your eye skyward to the heavens and the presumed visage of the sacred glory of our creator. The day starts fresh, green and verdant and ends mellow, calming and yet dramatically sanguine. It seems to tell us to start each day with fervor and end each day with hope for the next day. And lest we forget our purpose, the windows far up the vaulted copse of the North end are triangular reminders of what Don McLean liked to call the three men he admired most, the father, son, and the Holy Ghost.

I'm sure that since Gaudí died when the Sagrada Familia was only a quarter built with only models and sample sections completed, people who see all that I saw today and have explained to them what I had explained by our well-informed local guide (who grew up literally in the shadow of the Sagrada Familia), think that many elements came together serendipitously to make this special place. But I think they would be wrong. Antoni Gaudí is my newest hero. He not only thought almost all of this out in advance and recorded all his conceptualizations but had the knowledge and insight to lay out what conventional science could accommodate by 1926. But beyond that, he also, astoundingly, had the foresight to declare that that which had no answers would be found in time to allow the basilica to be created in the scale and vision he had imagined. There is little I can imagine more praiseworthy and showing of his humanity than that he trusted his unidentified fellow man to find the answers he could not and confidently point the way to grace. Gaudí did that with a flair that can be and has been called gaudy, but which I declare quite confidently is pure genius.

September 27, 2022

Camera Obscura

In our 27 years of motorcycle group riding there have been three or four members that considered themselves good photographers (compared to the rest of us hacks). One of them was

Steve, who is on this trip with us here in Spain. Today, as we all wandered through various Gaudi homes on the Passeig de Gracia, Steve had his big old single-lens reflex (SLR) camera with him to record these unique architectural wonders. I have no idea what he was planning to do with the photographs, but I presume they were for general memorabilia purposes. We had a leisurely day planned, so we were just sitting on one of the benches in front of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel killing time until our group gathered to go off to find a lunch spot. Kim returned from a shopping errand getting me a small duffel bag to use for daily overnighting purposes rather than dragging the big duffel on and off the van each night. Meanwhile, Steve and Maggie decided their purchased lunch pizza was not worth eating and that they would join the group for lunch. Steve thought to take his SLR camera and sweater up to his room, but we were having enough of a challenge herding the group off for the lunch call, and it was getting later by the minute. I told Steve he could put the camera in my new duffel since I would keep it with me until we got back to the room after lunch. That struck him like a fine idea so he wrapped the camera in his sweater and placed it in my otherwise empty duffel and off we went to find a restaurant. We walked about one city block and found a cafe that served a modest sandwich and French fries lunch. It was a pleasant day and we had lots of time so we just sat there telling tall tales. The duffel sat next to me throughout the lunch in our little isolated outdoor seating area. It was not too busy, so we were in no rush. Then, when we finished, we wandered back over the cordoned-off block back to our hotel and went up the ramp into the lobby. There I casually handed Maggie the duffel and she opened it to extract Steve's things for him. She found the sweater, but there was no camera. We stood there looking at each other as we realized that we must have been pickpocketed (or whatever it's called when a bag gets unzipped and the contents extracted only to have the zipper then closed to avoid immediate detection). It had been perhaps 90 minutes since we had sat on the bench and placed the camera in the duffel. It had been with me 100% of the time. That meant someone had most likely come up behind me while I walked the empty block from our hotel to the cafe. I was pretty sure it had happened before lunch rather than after.

The funny thing was that while Steve and I sat on the bench as we sorted out our lunch plans, I had asked him about his camera, specifically wondering whether he would replace it today if something happened to it, given that his iPhone was likely as good as the SLR. Rather than answer that directly, he explained why he had it from his more active journalistic days. The subject was dropped, but it was freakishly omniscient when I reflect on it. After speaking with the Mandarin Oriental concierge, Steve determined that a trip to the central police station to file a report was simply not worth the trouble. Nor was it likely to yield any results, since the camera was a dozen years old at that point and dispossessed of most of its value. So, he would just give up his old but comfortably familiar camera technology to the gods and let it go. Therefore, his voyage from camera obscura to a dark place without even a pinhole of light was involuntary but all too real. Given the circumstances, I suspect that Steve will have to be very specific and not the least bit obscure about the events of the day with his insurance company.

September 28, 2022

Meanwhile, Back in the School Cafeteria

Sometimes an entire group of people can be in such a good mood that they lose themselves to a

situation and just have a great time in an odd circumstance. Today was the start of our motorcycle ride through the Pyrenees. We are going from Barcelona up into the Pyrenees and then up to the Basque Country to trek across the top of the Spanish coastline, called España Verde, to trace the famous Camino de Santiago as far west as Santiago de Compostela and then down to Porto, Portugal. This morning we all suited up and headed over to the rental bike place a few clicks from our hotel. There we waited in the parking lot where the bikes were positioned as the rental folks sorted themselves out (it was a Catalonian holiday today, so they were not otherwise open). We were all in good spirits since we all enjoy these adventures and getting geared up with brand new 2022 BMW R1250GS's is a pretty sweet deal.

The chase van was with us since many of the people had to suit up with their riding gear in the parking lot while we waited. The parking lot had that yard sale look about it as everyone was focused on getting their bikes properly geared up and loaded so as not to be the cause of any group delay. We all had to sign rental documents and then orient ourselves to our specific bikes, hoping that nothing was amiss, which it was not. Unfortunately, somewhere in the commotion a suspicious-looking woman wandered into the otherwise fairly remote parking lot and asked a few questions. Then, as we packed up for departure, team leader Skip realized he was missing his backpack. He went through the usual machinations of turning the van inside out twice with the help of several other people, then calling the hotel in the hopes that he had left it there. It dawned on us that for the second time in a day, our group had been victimized by the local larceny crowd. Skip's backpack with its passport, laptop, and several thousand dollars in cash had been stolen. These Spanish Light-Fingered Louies were getting the better of us.

Needless to say, this was not a great way to start the day. Skip has become a great friend to all of us over the years, so we hated to see this happen to the guy who helps us all out when we invariably need help during these trips. I suppose it could have been worse for the group dynamics if this had happened to another paying guest, but we still felt bad for Skip since this would involve an unscheduled return to Barcelona tomorrow for him in hopes that the U.S. Consulate would be able to get him a temporary passport on a same-day basis. Meanwhile, while Skip skedaddled to the hotel to make his emergency arrangements, we all followed Kaz like the little ducklings we become on these rides.

Our first stop was at the Monastery of Montserrat, which was a crowded place on a Catalonian holiday like today (La Mercè Festival). It was socrowded and we were all reeling from our victimizations, so I stayed with the bikes while the others checked out the monastery. I always say, "you've seen one monastery, you've seen them all" (actually, our buddy Bruce said that as he sat with me to smoke his Cohiba cigar).

From Montserrat, we headed due north into the lower Pyrenees. Kaz chose to stop for lunch in the town of Solsona. Given that it was a holiday, there were limited choices, but he picked what he could find open.

For the last twenty-seven years, whenever we have entered an eating establishment, we have caused some form of commotion. Even though we are, for the most part, genteel sorts, we are still bikers and therefore suspect. We got the withering stare from the locals who occupied almost all the tables. Then the head waitress came over and was all about finding room for us. She settled on giving us the upper level, which we had all to ourselves. We helped her move the tables around and the place had a look of a kindergarten with scattered tables and chairs and paper tablecloths.

Our waitress was very pleasant and accommodating and told me to take a picture of the daily menu since they only served their blue-plate specials on special days like today. I did just that and then did my best to translate the menu for everyone at the table. There were several underlying problems with this plan. First of all, the menu was from a chalkboard and it was done in a very chalky way that was hard to decipher. There was also way too much information on the small board, so each item ran into the other with no clear delineation. Apparently, those items above an arbitrary line were a starter course and those below were a main course. Everything was Prix Fixe for €12. But then there was the fancy script lettering. They don't even teach script in U.S. schools anymore and the fancier they are the harder it is to read them. There is also the problem of both the language/vocabulary alongside the overall culinary knowledge gap that leaves me wondering what some perfectly logical local eater would know by virtue of it being a local dish.

This made ordering more than a little challenging (did I forget to mention the Catalonian country accent as well?). And then there are our eccentricities. If you know the reference, there are very few Harrys and lots of Sallys. All the Sallys want what they want and they want it on the side. None of that translates linguistically or culturally very well. Of particular note is the senior citizen ploy of splitting a dish between husband and wife. That simply doesn't work in the Prix Fixe world.

The next problem came with the ordering. It seems the waitress was expecting that for the nine of us we would order nine starters and nine entrees. Where could she have gotten that idea? When I couldn't get any of my team to play by anything close to the Prix Fixe handbook rules, I just filled out the list with random additions off the somewhat limited menu. I kept wanting to tell the waitress that none of this nonsense was reflecting badly on her, but that was somewhere beyond my subtle communication skills and her somewhat limited comprehension skills. It makes no never mind how much of it was attributed to either.

And then the food started coming and that's when it got even more interesting. Each plate held one item that was more or less unidentifiable. Was that tuna fish on the salad? Was the seafood pasta filled with shrimp? And mostly, what kind of meat exactly was on that skewer or just rolling around on the plate? We started squabbling like children, less about who wanted or got what but entirely based on what the hell was on each plate. The range of possibilities was broader than you think. At one point we didn't know if we were dealing with sausage, pork, shish-kebab, turkey, chicken, turkey, or beef (or maybe lamb). The term mystery meat sprang into my head as a reminder of my boarding school days. The mood was anything but upset. We had ample food to satisfy everyone's hunger if not their palate. We were all in a great mood so when I tried to get the table's attention by clapping, that unexpectedly set off a round of spontaneous applause. The joint was jumping and despite (or even perhaps because of) the weird array of unidentifiable meats, we were all having the best time while poor old Skip was hightailing it to the hotel to sort out his problem. He was in detention, and we were at lunch, but not just any lunch.

We had managed to find the noisiest and strangest place to eat imaginably. But our high spirits were not deterred in the least. We were at fourth-period lunch in junior high in the cafeteria. The only thing we didn't do was have a food fight. Maybe next time we are drunk on great roads, in nice cool weather and knee-scraping, we will follow through with a food fight as well.

September 30, 2022

End of the Trail

Ahhh, the lovely Pyrenees. I've been to Spain many times, but never to the Pyrenees or Basque Country. As for the Pyrenees, they seem to me to be a combination of bits of Switzerland, the Tyrol, the Dolomites, and the Maritime Alps all rolled into one. They are at once verdant and sweet valleys and craggy and dramatic rock outcroppings. The views at every turn are spectacular and I suspect we will see much more of them in the next two days. Yesterday, after doing the obligatory jaunt to Andorra to tick that travel box and do a little bit of Duty-Free shopping and buying one Andorra patch to add to Steve's impressive "I've Ridden the World" jacket, we headed into a short loop that was all Pyrenees. I'm reminded of our visit to the Dalmatian Coast when we left Dubrovnik and all its charm to sneak into Montenegro for a glimpse of Kotor. We may never go back to see Kotor or Andorra, but I'm glad we saw both. In some ways, both were ends of a trail in a very similar manner.

Tonight we will overnight in Bielsa, which is another obscure village in the Pyrenees, slightly to the northwest of here. We have to drive around several mountains to get there, so the views should be as or more spectacular than what we saw yesterday. That is one of the best arguments for point-to-point motorcycle riding rather than stay-and-loop programs. The former is more exciting while the latter is more comfortable. Speaking of comfort, I last rode the international motorcycling rails in 2019 when we all went to our Turkey extravaganza, also with Kaz and Skip. So that was three years ago. Going backward, we did Sicily in 2018, Greece in 2017, and a few years before that, Croatia (and Montenegro, Slovenia, the Dolomites, and Bosnia-Herzegovina). This morning I told Kim that I felt very comfortable on this ride so far (check in with me after another ten days of riding to see if that physical comfort still holds). In fact, I think I feel better and more fit to ride all day than I did at least as long ago as the Greece trip or five years ago. I suspect my back hillside workouts and losing 40 pounds over the past three years of retirement might have something to do with that. I don't think well in cause-and-effect terms when it comes to my own body, but I suspect I'm right about the basis of my relative feel good of the moment.

Today's ride has just further reinforced my commentary on the excellent infrastructure and socio-economic fabric of this country. We are in the equivalent of the Spanish Adirondacks and yet there are no signs of broken-down trailer parks with rusting cars in the yard and there are no destitute and aimless indigenous people wandering into the convenience store to buy their dinner with food stamps. Instead, there are neat and tidy villages connected by roads that are well-maintained and not pothole strewn. The road crew workmen are all dressed in hi-viz yellow and seem to know what they are doing and are doing it well. There are not twice as many flagmen as are needed and from the look of the recently completed work on these alpine roads that hug the craggy hillsides, and the extensive and well-lit tunnels at every turn, they have some significant civil engineering chops as well.

At one point we had to stop in a deep canyon beside a raging stream. The weather was so pleasant, it made for a nice break for twenty minutes. They seemed to be getting out ahead of their roadwork needs, building massive stone walls that looked like they would last a century or two. In the European timeframe context, that is par for the course. Everything here seems built of stone and made to last for many years. When we finally got our turn to go through the narrow

and under-construction canyon, the crew had gone for lunch at the very spot down the road where we stopped for our lunch. They all looked neat and clean and seemed to be welcomed by the local cafe. It reminded me of the old American depression-era Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s, which went around building public works like stone bridges and retaining walls. We got things done quickly and to last and gave decent wages to men who needed work. It was a good deal for everyone and not only got the short-run economy on its feet, but it made America strong by giving it a meaningful infrastructure base.

After lunch on a delightful terrace with views in every direction of the surrounding peaks, we headed up the road toward the French border. As the roads got narrower and the mountains seemed to close in tighter to us, I couldn't help but think about all those WWII movies like *The Great Escape*, where someone like James Coburn rides a bicycle from Paris down to the Spanish border and then hikes across the Pyrenees to freedom with the help of the Spanish resistance.

This is a very romantic place and riding it in crisp and clear early Fall weather is like a dream come true. We have waited COVID out for three years to do this ride and so far it has been worth every bit of the wait.

As we approached Bielsa, the area got more and more authentic feeling until finally we got stopped right in our tracks by a group of local shepherds bringing a flock of perhaps 500 sheep up the road presumably to another pasture. They were a mix of ewes and rams with about half of them with large brass bells and collars around their necks clanking as they walked. We aren't talking about little bells, but rather big cowbells that were as large as ten inches wide. They were being driven from the back by young shepherds and out front was the wizened old head shepherd with his two sheep dogs. These sheep acted like....sheep.... in that they plowed forward bumping into anything, including us, that was in their way. After the jostling, we got on our way and wound our way through the town of Bielsa to head up the long box canyon that looks at its top like a scene straight out of *The Sound of Music*. The Hotel Parador, where we are staying, has that Berchtesgaden look in a sort of secluded Eagles Nest look and feel.

Today's ride has taken us to a place just a stone's throw from the French border. I imagine that if we were inclined to hike up the mountain, we could cross the frontier like those freedom fighters of yore. This place is truly the end of the trail of the Pyrenees for us as we head down the mountain tomorrow and across the hilly midsection of the north country towards Pamplona and the start of southern Basque Country. Today we were caught in the Bielsa rush hour and the running of the sheep, so it seems only appropriate that tomorrow we may be imagining the running of the bulls through Pamplona.

P.S. No sheep were harmed in the making of this tale.

October 1, 2022

Living Large

Today was the sixth day of our Viva Espana tour and the fourth riding day. It was our transition day out of the dramatic Pyrenees Mountains and into the north-central part of the country.

Normally we would have probably gone to Pamplona whether the bulls were running or not, since it is a well-known spot. But our tour director, Kaz, does not settle for the ordinary very often and he found us a much better transition destination. The draw is the Hotel Marquis de Riscal, which is a hotel that was designed by the architect, Frank Gehry, who is considered the most impactful contemporary architect of his age and came to international fame through his Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain (which we will be touring on Sunday). One would not be wrong in saying that his iconic structure there put Bilbao on the global map. This hotel was built in 2006, almost ten years after the Bilbao Guggenheim opened. I'm sure the success of the Bilbao design led to the commissioning of this hotel. The spot where it is built, in the village of Elciego, is just a dot on the map that looks to be of no significance just as I'm sure Napa looks on the map of California.

As we left Bielsa with the frost almost on the pumpkin this morning, we all suited up for cold and rainy weather as best we could. I never bother to wear a rain suit, which is sometimes my undoing, but I always figure that GoreTex is more or less waterproof anyway even though it isn't. And the riding pants are particularly challenging for me since I brought the highly vented ones since they fit best and don't overheat me. The gap between my riding underwear and my riding high socks is just enough to send a chill up my spine if it dips below 50 F. Skip asked why I didn't pack some long underwear and I explained that was worse than a rain suit for discomfort and furthermore, vented pants would allow them to get soaking wet and truly make matters worse. So, I was counting on either less cold or less rain to get me through. I have ten pairs of gloves with me so I had my hands covered for any occasion but still turned on the heated grips since they feel so good. I found them a pleasant addition this morning. As for the temperature, it hovered between 50 and 60 for most of the day, so it wasn't too bad. And the rain came on in only light sprinkles, enough to wet my helmet visor, but not enough to get my gloves wet. It really wasn't an altogether unpleasant riding day.

The shift in the scenery was very dramatic. We went from steep alpine hillsides, craggy cliffs, and deep distant valleys of the Pyrenees to rolling hills of wheat, dotted with the occasional stand of green trees, a farmhouse, or even a small village or two on the higher ground. I was trying to remember what the scenery reminded me of. It was close to Tuscan in its look. But different. Then it hit me. These were the wheat-filled rolling hills of the farm owned by Maximus in Gladiator. Russel Crowe walking with his hands touching the grain stalks on his Spanish farm is a great bit of cinematography and a perfect match for the scenery we were driving through.

After a confusing lunch stop at a small restaurant where the owner's Spanish was some weird combination of Spanish, French, and Catalan and where we just ate whatever he brought us, we headed for the town of Olite. This nondescript village south of Pamplona and decidedly off the between trail, was much less obscure back in the Fourteenth Century. That was when the castle in Olite, known as the Palacio Real, was the seat of the king of Navarre, most notably Charles III, who most notably brought peace to both Spain and France by conceding to and mollifying his French brethren. His Palace is quite castle-like and shows the years of Moorish and Saracen influence on the architecture and lifestyle of Spain.

This Kingdom of Navarre's history is a likely contrast to what we will find in the Basque Country. From what I have heard of the Basques, mollification, and concession as not so likely in their playbook. After that brief stop and photo opportunity, we mounted up and headed for our last leg to Elciego.

I know I am sounding like a broken record by now, but I really must comment on the fantastic condition of the roads here in Spain. The only place where we can say they were not perfect was on the two-mile stretch back in the Pyrenees where we encountered a shepherd and his large mixed flock of sheep and goats. He seemed to use that stretch of road like it was his runway between pastures. The result was a road surface sprinkled with sheep urine and droppings. As we followed the flock for what seemed like an interminable time, our boots and tires got covered in sheep shit. What had seemed charming the day before seems a lot less charming under a coating of that foul-smelling green stuff. This shepherd has some kinda deal with the local government because everyone from local truck drivers to merchants along the way seemed to play ball with him and not complain. Either his brother is the mayor or local laws protect his shepherding rights...or perhaps he is paid to do just what he does to improve the ambiance, which it surely does in moderated quantities. Other than that, the roads were perfect again today.

As we approached Elciego there was a marked change in topography and the dead giveaway was the road sign that designated this as the Wine Trail. Yes, we had shifted from fields of wheat to rolling hills of grapes. There were wineries at every turn suddenly and we had gone in a day from the Adirondacks to the plains of Kansas and now to moderate climes of Napa and Sonoma.

And there, on one hill set amongst the vines, was a magnificent and shiny structure in silver and purple (presumably to extol the virtues of the vine). Our hotel is a marvel. It is not only beautiful to look at from a distance but also beautifully appointed in a mid-century style that makes you think Bridget Bardot will come out to play if you want her to. After getting into our room, Kim and I declared this hotel to be the winner of the Viva Espana Hospitality Excellence trophy, beating out the Mandarin Oriental hands down and even topping the two lovely Paradores we stayed in through the Pyrenees (both of which very much suited their environments).

Kim went off with the crowd for a tour of a 160-year-old wine cellar and vineyard that surrounded the hotel while I relaxed in the room and relished the warmth after a long day of cool riding.

Tomorrow we head up to see a 500-year-old salt mine, which should give us a fascinating glimpse into an unusually critical and interesting necessity of human and mammalian existence. Some might think that is more the province of wheat or wine, but the cognoscenti of history know it is all about salt. We are living large and ready to hold our heads up as we enter the much anticipated Basque Country tomorrow.

October 2, 2022

Storming the Storm

As we hope for no rain today, we make our way to the Atlantic coast at San Sebastián. We are reading and watching the devastation in Florida from Hurricane Ian. Thoughts of our Florida friends echo in my helmet as I ride the roads from Elciego to San Sebastián. It's either supposed to be cold or rainy or both today. We start with a visit to Bodega Ysios, which is a local winery that must be in competition with the Marques de Riscal winery where we stayed last night. It was built in 2001 and designed by famous Spanish architect Santiago Calatrava and looks like waves

of stainless steel, and is not unlike something that Frank Gehry might produce (I'm sure Gehry would take great exception with that characterization). It is our best guess that Gehry stepped in for the competition in Elciego to one-up their fancy-schmaltzy winery by putting up their hotel with the Gehry name attached. It doesn't much matter who was getting the better of whom, since they are both here in this relatively obscure region of Spain for our enjoyment as we wend our way north to the coast. I don't see any obvious meteorological risks looming, so maybe they have avoided the added insurance premium costs the rest of us are suffering.

From that brief photo op stop, we headed to the salt flats of Salinas de Anana, one of the oldest salt mines in the world with evidence that it has been used for over 6,500 years. This is our first real attraction in the Basque Country, having flirted near its edge at our hotel last night. The relationship between man and salt is a fascinating journey which I will not wander too far into but rather just say that had it not been so cold and rainy we might have stayed longer to hear more about this ancient reservoir of salt and even to perhaps swim in the salt pools (Bruce Rauner gave serious thought to this until he determined that it was nowhere near as warm as the 63 degrees touted).

So, given that the rain didn't seem to want to let up just yet and our birthday boy, Steve, was inclined to get to the hotel, we opted for the slab to San Sebastián. I must say that I would rather ride the Spanish slab than many American secondary roads. It doesn't even feel like slab so much as nice divided highway ribbons of smooth asphalt. We wound our way through Montes Vascos to get to the coast at Donostia-San Sebastian, the resort town of the Basque Country with its fancy restaurants and hotels. We are staying in the best of the hotels in the Maria Cristina, which has graced this pretty harbor with its regal facade for 110 years.

By the time we got to town in the early afternoon, the rain had mostly passed and we think we may have dry riding from here on across the northern coastline as we track the Camino de Santiago (the path of the pilgrimage of St. James) across the country to Santiago de Compostela, where we should arrive in five days. We will start our trek by going to another Michelin 1-Star restaurant tonight (having lost our 3-star reservation over the last two years of cancellations due to COVID). I think it is fair to say that we stormed the storm and came through unscathed and are now ready for the contemplative chill of the Peregrino. The Way of St. James is said to be filled with "fervor, repentance, hospitality, art, and culture which speak to us eloquently of the spiritual roots of the Old Continent". From what we have seen of Spain so far, it will not disappoint.

October 3, 2022

Iconic Art and Wealth

I am sitting in my hotel room in Bilbao, Spain, looking out our window directly at the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. We arrived here after a short, but magnificent ride along the northern coast of the Basque Country, starting in Donostia – San Sebastian. That ride is a mere 160 km., but it bounced along the Cantabrian Sea, which is the southern part of the Bay of Biscay bounded by the north of the Iberian Peninsula and the western curve of France, from Bordeaux up the Cherbourg. The coastline is a mix of

beaches and craggy cliffs and the small, well-maintained road that hugs those cliffs is made for motorcycling...and bicycling, especially on a sunny Saturday morning, which seems to bring out all the Spanish cyclists en masse. We made our way and took an inland turn to Gernika, or as the Basques insist on calling it, Guernica. We stopped for lunch in Guernica to see a famous Basque town that was memorialized by Pablo Picasso in his 1937 painting, called Guernica, which is an abstract on the subject of the horror of war. The painting, which hangs in the Museo Reina Sofía in Madrid, is considered the most significant anti-war painting ever produced. It was painted by Pablo Picasso, considered by some as the most influential contemporary painter of the Twentieth Century and the leader of the Cubist Movement in art. While Picasso was not of Basque origin, he empathized with the Basques when, in 1937, the city of Guernica was bombed and largely destroyed by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in a show of support for the nationalist movement led by General Francisco Franco. Interestingly, we should visit the Picasso mural of Guernica in Guernica as we headed towards Bilbao and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. That museum is, of course, a museum of contemporary art as is the domain of its sponsoring Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. The Foundation was, coincidentally, set up by Solomon R. Guggenheim in 1937 and it has built the Guggenheim Museum in New York (A Frank Lloyd Wright iconic building), the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, Italy, and then this magnificent structure by Frank Gehry in Bilbao. Today we paid homage to Pablo Picasso and his 85-year-old anti-war painting.

Meanwhile, we ate a light lunch in Guernica where there was a festival underway. I'm not sure what that festival was (with some apparent lumberjack contests underway), but these fervent and earnest Basque people (men, women, and children) were dancing and singing in the street, clad in traditional Basque garb and playing traditional instruments like concertinas. Even those not performing were wearing red bandanas with their community's symbols and mottos and traditional black berets. It was all very festive and, based on the highlighting of the pictures of their destroyed town 85 years ago, it was a celebration of life after near death for the village. I'm sure somewhere along the way, they were paying their homage to Pablo Picasso for telling the world through his art of the town's hardship and need for assistance.

From there, we went to San Juan de Gaztelugatxe, which is an island connected to the mainland by a long 261-step staircase up to the Ermita de San Juan de Gaztelugatxe (a monastery). It was a bit of a zoo on a sunny Saturday and none of us made it out there, but at least we know it's there and that it is an impressive sight. Speaking of impressive sights, as we rolled down the hill from Bakio to Bilbao, we had to cross the Nervion River that flows through Bilbao. Puente la Salve crosses the river with a red set of stanchions and there, on the other side sits the impressive Gehry structure of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao. Whether you like Gehry or contemporary art for that matter, it is hard not to be impressed by the dramatic presentation that structure makes as one enters the center of this city. And just think, we get to admire this iconic art and benefit from this iconic wealth all on the same day.

October 4, 2022

Lightning Strikes Bilbao

Our Turkish tour guide Kaz, a well-educated and very enlightened man of the world sent us an article from The Guardian today on the subject of the twentieth anniversary of the Guggenheim Museum of Bilbao. Given the enlightened journalistic presence of The Guardian, that message reminds me that Kaz is a first-rate guru to follow, not only in his native land of Turkey (where

we last saw him), but almost anywhere he might guide us. The article discusses the very interesting aspects of the creation of the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, and how those elements came together quite uniquely to uplift the city and region by putting it on the map with a globally renowned architectural masterpiece that is both emblematic of this very bespoke setting and cultural identity, and just controversial enough to draw interest and attention from all quarters. The piece goes on to describe efforts by other cities or regions which have tried to recreate that success with similar standout projects.

Cities are institutions, and institutions are entities, and entities are like organisms, and organisms go through lifecycles as do all living things. When cities are young they struggle to gain scale and critical mass. They want to have all the resources that their citizenry needs to be competitive with their neighbors or the world (depending on the breadth of their outlook). They then go through the same stage of adolescence we as humans go through, which is best characterized as a search for identity. Adopting an identity has a cost. It might involve spending on features or services to the city and/or it might involve eschewing some while embracing others. Then a city goes about its adulthood as any of us do, seeking successes when and where available and accepting failures as inevitably it must. But then there comes a moment when a city is past its prime and looking to one of several paths. It may slowly and sadly slip into decline and obsolescence or it might rage against the dying of the light and seek redemption through some means.

Twenty years ago, Bilbao reached its moment of truth and stumbled (not without great good fortune and effort) into a profound and revitalizing place of grace. Now we all know Bilbao in a way that the city fathers of twenty years ago could only have dreamed of.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao was a matter of lightning striking a creative idea and leading to great and largely non-repeatable success. The London Eye was the same and worked well for London. Neither is easy to repeat because, unlike commercial innovation, the serendipity of creation is a spark that can only be spontaneously combusted and not artificially recreated to meet some elaborate and grand scheme. We have just toured the Guggenheim Bilbao and must say that it is certainly as great as its reputation implies.

October 5, 2022

It's All About Soul

This morning we are leaving Bilbao, where we have spent two nights and we are headed west along the coast of Spain going first to a Medieval town of Santillana de Mar, just beyond Santander. It's a quaint little cobblestoned village with shops and restaurants (one quaint one which we chose to stop in for lunch).

We were supposed to overnight there but had to change our route to go further to another little coastal fishing village of Luces/Llastres. We are now officially over the hump of the road trip, headed down the back slope to our finish line in Porto, Portugal.

These trips are like stories, they have a beginning, a middle, and an end and we are now finished with our mid-ride break, spent touring the Basque city of Bilbao and enjoying a leisurely non-riding day.

So, today we are suiting up again and it is this moment when you know just how much you like or are over these motorcycle trips. I can say unequivocally that I love these trips. There is something about being on the road that tugs at a primordial part of my cortex or perhaps my soul. I like the adventure, I like the forcing of myself out of the comfort zone of sitting around and reading, writing, and watching the world from a distance. It is all about soul.

We chose to take the longer, slower coastal road since we were in no hurry and it was forecasted to be a sunny and warm day. You never know when that sunny part is going to be, so we started off in the cooler, overcast coastal weather that promised to wear off soon, which it has now. The road this morning was a blend of rural mountains with terraced stone walls that look like a mix of the Ring of Kerry in Ireland and the Apennine Mountains in Italy. There are short glimpses of the sea here and there but is mostly mountainous or hilly terrain, fit less for farming and more for grazing sheep, cattle, and horses. It always amazes me how well-trimmed the pastures seem, which is a testament to the appetites of these graminivorous (herbivorous mammals).

As we approached Santillana de Mar, we seemed to cross a section of the Camino de Santiago. There are numerous paths that the Camino takes, all culminating in Santiago de Compostela at the feet of St. James. We could tell we were overlapping with the Camino because we started to see Peregrinos (pilgrims) walking by the side of the road, their knapsacks adorned with a single seashell, the symbol of the Camino. They were all trudging onward with real or imagined purpose.

We saw near the town, multiple hostels, and cafes that serve the Peregrino community. As we were leaving town after our lunch break, we passed one older gentleman Peregrino who we had seen walking before lunch. He had made some progress, but there was no mistaking the time it took to walk even a small part of The Way, as it is called. Pilgrims cover 12-15 miles of distance per day. That means that covering the 500 miles of the Camino takes pilgrims 35-40 days assuming they walk every day. That is dedication and THAT is truly all about the soul.

While everybody walks the Camino for their reasons, that highlights to me that soul is less about religion and more about what matters to you.

People like to say that these trips are less about the ride and more about the camaraderie and the people. I get that, but after 55 years of this overall and 27 with this particular group, I know that groups morph and people come and go. None of the original group members besides me ride anymore (at least not with the group). They have mostly aged out (one just faded away). Even the next generation has largely gone its own way. That does have an impact on my connection to the group, but luckily there are newer members I am now enjoying rides with. That all causes me to think that the soul of the matter is not the people or the group or even the motorcycle, but rather the motorcycling. The process of riding with friends and experiencing new places and doing it on two wheels means something to me. It is my soulful activity.

Right now I am sitting in a rest stop in the shade with a light breeze blowing up the hillside. The views from this lookout go back east along the coast near Santander. We are 50 miles from our hotel and the rest of the gang including Kim are already in what she tells me is another lovely

hotel. I am sitting here because Bruce had to make a call with his wife and her doctor and we in our motorcycle group are like the Marine Corps. We never leave a man behind, we never leave our wingman. I am comfortable riding in Europe and speak decent Spanish. I also have a fully functional GPS, so, logically, I should wait and guide Bruce into the barn. We've been here for 90 minutes so far, so I suspect his call will end soon. It's an important call and Bruce, like all our members, is important to us. The only cost to me of doing this is that I'm writing this story on my iPhone sitting on a rock rather than on my iPad on a chair in my hotel room. In other words, Bruce is doing me a favor. I get to spend more time enjoying the lovely Spanish countryside like all the Peregrinos. After all, we are all pilgrims and it is all about the soul.

October 6, 2022

Gastronomique Delight

This morning we're at the magnificent Relais & Chateaux hotel that meets or exceeds that international standard for excellence in hospitality. It is set in an obscure spot on a coastal hilltop near the fishing village of Llastres, which we rode through last night getting here. I say last night because Bruce and I didn't ride in here until almost 7 pm and thanks be to the celestial quirk of the region, it was still daylight.

As I have reported, Bruce and I hung back yesterday from the group and took several hours off in mid-afternoon for a call he needed to make. It may have been the best thing that has happened to me on this trip. That's because, thanks to my GPS and its "No Highways" toggle, it led us through 67 miles of the most magnificent countryside either of us can remember riding through.

To begin with, we went into some canyons in the Parque Nacional Picos de Europa that were as spectacular and then some of the canyons we ride in Utah every May. They were stunningly fun and curvy roads that were so smooth and so picturesque that the fact that they were vehicle-free was an amazement to us. We chicaned our way down the canyons looking up occasionally at what looked like a Spanish version of the Matterhorn. When we got through that and came out of the mountains near Langreo, we somehow managed (thanks again to the GPS I imagine) to take ourselves over another mountain with views of the Atlantic and alpine curves galore. When Bruce and I arrived at the hotel we were so exhilarated by our 90 minutes of hedonistic pleasure on the bikes that we hugged and gave each other high fives. The best afternoon of riding ever.

Bruce and I may have consistent taste in roads, but we are at opposite ends of the spectrum at the dinner table. Those differences have been on full display during this trip due to the Spanish fine cuisine palate. I am not sure if it is the hoity-toity nature of our accommodations and restaurant selection or just the nature of Spanish cuisine, but Bruce finds my palate somewhat childlike (he keeps accusing me of only liking macaroni and cheese and chicken McNuggets). He, on the other hand, finds that the weirder and more offensive the flavor of the item of ingestion, the better. As an example, for lunch yesterday he ordered squid in black ink and practically licked the plate. For dinner, he doubled down (as good Republicans are so good at these days) and ordered a squid starter and then an octopus entree. The octopus came under a glass dome filled with smoke and was adorned with a red piece of what looked like coral. Bruce was not prepared to let anything go to waste, so he popped the red coral-like thing into his mouth and declared it mostly devoid of any particular taste. This pattern has been

repeated over and over with Bruce favoring anything with a strong flavor or close to still being alive. His choice in animal protein is consistent. The less cooked the better. He says that this extends even to items like pork that are known historically to be best either avoided or at least very well cooked. Bruce says that he likes it if the pork oinks before he eats it.

Everywhere we have gone on this trip, including two Michelin 1-star restaurants, Bruce has been enamored with the menus and I have been appalled. I have had one dish in five dinners that I could stomach. I grant you, I am a picky eater (at least in terms of epicurean delicacies), but Bruce is amazing. He will eat anything it seems and has no fear of trying literally everything. The stronger the taste, the better for him. The gamier the game, the better. The rawer the meat, the better. And he certainly can pack it away. Basically, he has eaten 80% of my dinners for me...as a favor to me.

So today we rode back down into the Parque Nacional Picos de Europa, reversing the course Bruce and I took yesterday, and went even further into the park. It all started on a bad foot for me as I got a face full of gasoline from an unruly pump as I tried to fill my bike. Two bottles of water later for a self-administered eye lavage and I was OK to proceed, though I smelled of gas for the entire day.

We stopped for lunch in a lovely little town with a magnificent view of a wide mountain cirque. The first place would not serve us until 1 pm sharp. Then they would only sell us complete 4-course meals but everyone who sat had to get one. We found that unreasonable (especially since there were no other customers to give way to), so we left. Next door was a bar that had some small open-faced sandwiches. When I tried to buy three plus a Coke Zero, I was told that the little sandwiches were on allocation, one per drink. So I ordered two drinks and made do. Everyone else settled for drinks and one plus chips. Ten minutes later we saw the woman bring out lovely large pork and cheese sandwiches on baguettes. When I asked why she didn't tell me that was available, she simply said I hadn't asked. So went my day, including a tour of all the local scruffy neighborhoods with steep little streets while I tried to find our hotel. Despite all of my complaints about the gastronomic delights of the day and the week, it truly has been wonderful riding and camaraderie. We only have one soldier down as Maggie has managed to contract COVID (her first time) while so far, the rest of us are apparently fine. Onward to the statue of St. James at Santiago de Compostela.

October 7, 2022

Michelin Star

I don't think I have ever eaten at a restaurant with a Michelin rating before this week. That's pretty surprising given my business career as a senior manager on Wall Street for more than 35 years, especially given that I ran a global private banking business for six of those years, and those rich people do like their fancy and high-profile eateries. I've eaten in lots of fancy and expensive restaurants (most of which were largely wasted on me and my plebeian pallet), but while I have known about the Michelin star rating system, I simply couldn't care less about it. I suppose that makes me a Philistine in many people's eyes, but so be it. As I have written about at various times, I have never had a good relationship with food on any level, and that disdain

should not be considered a bad reflection on Michelin or even the great chefs that aspire to the accolades of stardom. Whatever the opposite of a foodie is, that's me.

So, imagine my surprise at being able to say that I have now eaten at three Michelin 1-star rated restaurants, all in Spain. No one is more surprised about this than I am. The first one was in Elciego in the Gehry-based hotel, then there was San Sebastián, a town known for its fru-fru design orientation, and tonight we added Oviedo. I had never visited any of these towns before this trip, which is surprising given how well-traveled I am, In fact, I really hadn't heard of Elciego and Oviedo at all before getting this itinerary.

Oviedo's claim to fame as best I can tell is that Woody Allen has declared it his favorite city in the world. That high praise has supposedly earned him a statue in town somewhere, not that any of us could find it...or even bothered to look for it. I love Woody and his body of film work (Kim not so much as she cannot get past his young womanizing ways). As I became more and more of a New Yorker over the years, my appreciation for his brand of humor just kept growing. I imagine Woody's appreciation for Oviedo must have begun with his making of Vicky Christina Barcelona when he was in his Scarlett Johansson phase. You can define Woody by using rings on a tree, Paula Prentiss, Louise Lasser, Ursula Andress, Janet Margolin, Diane Keaton (many rings), Mariel Hemingway, Mia Farrow (uh-oh), Bette Midler, Mira Sorvino, Sarah Jessica Parker, Tea Leoni, Penelope Cruz, Blake Lively, Kate Winslet, and Scarlett. Quite a history I would say, and not one that was underaged or related by law (unless you count all the Mia lawsuits against him).

Well, last night we went to dinner at Gloria, so let me, as a non-gourmet and more of a gourmand, defined as a person who simply eats too much rather than eating well, describe the meal. To begin with, the hostess/waitress/owner? was all over us in an uncharacteristic intensive smiley service fashion. She immediately realized I was the hard-to-please person in the group and she not only accepted my limited palette but embraced it. That resulted in a lovely ham croquette appetizer while others enjoyed eggplant (too slimy for me) and artichoke (too complicated for me). Without Bruce there (he had family calls to make), the main dishes went to tuna, scallops, and tomato salads, all of which are non-starters for me. I got a pork dish that was easily and hands-down the best food I have eaten this whole trip and probably the best pork of my life. I gave everyone a taste and got general buy-in to my opinion. It came with veggies but I asked for potatoes (what is a meat and potatoes guy without his potatoes?). I chose to test the Michelin limits by asking for ketchup and rather than look at me in horror, she suggested some mustard. She and I had truly bonded in a culinary place that is quite rare (and I don't mean undercooked).

What all of this did for my opinion of Gloria and her star was to think that she did Michelin proud. After all, a restaurant is a service business and she was nothing if not of service. I do not even think she smirked at me as we left, as one who panders to the crass might, instead basking in the glory of a round of applause from us and an extra €50 tip. Smart lady.

Today we are headed for Santiago de Compostela at the end of the Camino de Santiago. The breakfast at our hotel, Hotel Castillo del Bosque la Zoreda located well outside of Oviedo and on a forested hillside, outdid itself with the breakfast serving just as almost every hotel we have stayed at this trip has done. I find so much less variability in the breakfasts and the consistency of quality high enough that I tend to load up at breakfast with fried eggs, crispy bacon, wonderful

European rolls, and perhaps a pastry or two, just for good measure. I have come to realize that my breakfast may be the only good meal of the day for me, so I go all out. I sense that others have a similar strategy since there are always a lot of eggs being ordered every morning.

The topography of the ride today was about half mountainous and then half rolling plains. We stopped for lunch in a canyon above the El Salto Dam. The restaurant hugged the cliff and it was getting lots of play from the pilgrims walking up the hill as well as the motorcyclists like us. Unlike yesterday's lunch problems, today it was an embarrassment of riches with lots of sandwiches and French fries to go around. I'm not sure Michelin knows this place exists, but it hit the spot after a long morning of doing the mountain switchbacks.

We ran out the flats to Santiago, first on the local roads, and then, as the afternoon rolled by us, we hit the highway for the last 40 miles or so. It was a relatively long riding day of about 6.5 hours in the saddle with about 90 minutes of breaks for lunch and rest stops. We caught some rain at the end of the day, but not before having at least one harrowing encounter with a road racer cutting up through the canyons. He was coming at us so fast that he couldn't hold the curve and started to drift out over the line into our oncoming lane on one big sweeping curve. I have been riding sweeper or at the back of our pack so by the time he got to Bruce in front of me, Bruce got treated to his squealing tires as he tried to keep his car online. He was not too successful since by the time he got all the way back to my position, he was two feet into my lane, and given his racing speed (probably 80 mph) and my oncoming 60 mph speed, he passed within inches of my left leg at about 140 mph effective speed. I don't know if he brushed me or if it was use the wind foil he was creating, but I sure felt it on my knee and leg as he passed. I saw stars for a few miles and trust me, these were not Michelin stars.

October 9, 2022

The Ironbound

We're ending our Viva Espana /Viva Portugal motorcycle tour in Porto, with two of us (Bruce and Jim) flying out from Porto today and the rest of us getting to Lisbon tomorrow for departures on Sunday back to the States.

Our trip was really Viva Espana with a small taste of Portugal. It seems to be Portugal's lot to take the scraps off of Spain's Iberian plate, and after almost 980 years (Portugal was founded in 1143 by the Zamora's Treaty), it must be getting old. The boundary between Portugal and Spain is the world's longest unchanged national border (according to our pal Kaz, who is more historian than any of us), so the two countries have figured out how to coexist on this peninsula with meaningfully different languages if only slightly dissimilar cultures.

Yesterday we went out to what is supposed to be the most desirable rural area of the country, the Douro Valley, due East of Porto and the valley formed by the Douro River that runs to the sea through the city of Porto. The Douro Valley is best known for the grapes which are grown there and are the basis of the port wine that is made and aged in the twin cities of Porto and Gaia, all within the Porto District. This city of Porto is a UNESCO World Heritage Site as one of Europe's oldest

communities. It came into its own in the Fourteenth Century when Portugal and England bonded by virtue of a royal wedding in the City.

The English are no dopes, they recognized the value of the wine coming out of the Douro Valley through the Foz de Porto and they jumped on it in a commercial sense. To this day, the big vintners that can be seen on the Gaia side of the Douro river carry names like Taylors and Grahams. The Valley has remained solidly Portuguese with a number of local vineyards that source the valuable grapes and have created a Lake Como-like setting for the rich and famous to enjoy and build summer homes.

After a wonderful end-of-ride dinner arranged by Kaz and Skip at the Graham's Vintners site at their Port Lodge restaurant called Vinum, we reflected on port and Porto. I don't drink, so I can't appreciate the fine taste of the three types of port that were tasted (Ruby, Tawny, and White) and the very popular "Portonic" cocktail, but all the pageantry was not lost on me while we sat amongst the thirty and forty-year-old barrels of the stuff. We had a lovely meal and sang the praises of one another for another wonderful American Flyers Motorcycle Club ride arranged by MotoDiscovery and Kazoom, as prominently displayed on our matching grey and red team jackets. The prominent logo for the Viva Espana / Viva Portugal Tour is a charcoal-like drawing of Don Quixote astride a BMW R1250GS motorcycle. We, like the man of LaMancha, do our share of tilting at windmills and this trip was no exception.

Today we spent a warm morning shopping around the center of the town with great difficulty since the in-process subway excavations surround our hotel and all the major sites. Luckily, Kaz and Skip had organized a more pleasant way to spend the afternoon and we all boarded three Tuk-Tuk's for a tour of the City. These are a slightly bigger version of the all-electric three-wheeled vehicles you see in India. The idea and the vehicles were imported from Mumbai and retrofitted for the streets of Porto. We piled in for a very pleasant trip up to the top of the cathedral and the monastery over in Gaia. The Tuk-Tuks were the only way to do that without walking a lot of stairs and it was a grand way to travel. From the plaza overlooking the cities, where we could see the winding Douro River make its last few miles' way out to the Foz at the sea, we got a wonderful sense of the cities and their traditional buildings and hilly architecture.

There is a distinction to the Portuguese buildings in that they are mostly adorned with colorful ceramic tiles not unlike one sees in Mexico or Morocco. It creates a lovely, antiquated, and very global feeling to the City. We tried to go out to the Foz (the delta where the blue waters of the Atlantic meet the green waters of the Douro) but the river fog was thick as pea soup, so instead, we went back into the sunny part of the riverbank and took our break there to enjoy the cooling sea breezes on an otherwise warm Portuguese day.

The history of Portugal is very much like the history of England. It is a country of similar heritage and aspirations of global greatness. Portugal did not gain the breadth of presence that England did, but that said, its presence from Brazil to Angola to Mozambique, Goa, and Macau is significant. In the U.S., the Portuguese influence is more subtle given all the other immigrant waves that found their way to our shores. But go to the Ironbound and you will see that this small country has a strong culture that believes strongly in the value of what they have to offer. As for us, we are pleased to be here seeing all of this culture at the source.

October 10, 2022

Old White Couples

While we were in Barcelona or riding our motorcycles through the Pyrenees and then across the northern coast of Spain, we were very pleased to find that there were not scads of people everywhere. It was especially nice that the roads, which were truly exceptional in condition, were largely wide open with only occasional other vehicles, very often other motorcycles doing some version of the same tour that we were engaged in. That made the riding even more fun than normal, feeling like we had everything all to ourselves. Our tour organizer Kaz, who was responsible for selecting the hotels, booked us in nice, but typical Spanish hotels. Three of them were part of the Parador chain, which seemed to specialize in using retrofitted old estates that had the local charm but were updated with all the modern conveniences. We also stayed in an always-wonderful Relais & Chateaux hotel and a few Luxury Collection hotels. The common aspect of all of the lodgings was that they seemed less American and more European in demeanor and amenities. The same was more or less true for the clientele. None of them was overly crowded, which probably spoke more to the time of year, which seemed a bit past the high season. But those fellow lodgers we did encounter were a broad and diverse mix that simply did not look uniform or homogenized in any cultural way.

That was Spain and we were all duly impressed with everything about the country as a visitor destination. Then we rode into Portugal. Portugal seems to have become a top destination for Americans of late. To begin with, it's only five hours (as in time zones) from the East Coast of the U.S., like the U.K., and unlike the rest of the EU. It is a small country of only 10 million, but as an original EU member, it enjoys the power and backing of the European Community. It has decent universal healthcare, and seems to have all the modern technological conveniences we prize in the U.S. One of the things that is convenient is that there seem to be many Portuguese who speak English. This isn't an accident as it is mandatory in school for kids in Portugal to take English. After they have mastered English, they can choose to take Spanish or French. Like many Europeans, the Portuguese are mostly multi-lingual, and given that 70% of the population lives in the Lisbon or Porto urban areas, they seem quite cosmopolitan. The nightlife in both Lisbon and Porto is quite lively and upscale, both in its look and feel, but also in the number of restaurants and clubs.

For all those reasons and more, Portugal has become a major retirement location for Americans who either want the European lifestyle, or just want to live better on what they have than they feel they can in the U.S. As we wandered around both Porto and Lisbon in the evening, one thing became apparent, almost all of the people were one of two types, either young people of all sorts, or old white couples from the United States. Maybe I'm only seeing what I want to see, but it seems that in both of the hotels we've stayed in both Porto and Lisbon, the only clients, at least at this time of year, are white couples that look to be about our age (give or take a few years). And since I believe I have to start defining myself as "old", that would make them all old white couples. These are the retirees that have saved their money to be able to travel in their golden years. The Baby Boom generation is now aged 58 to 76, which means the midpoint of the cohort is 68, or exactly my age. Using Social Security Administration guidelines, I am two years into being retired, which means that is where my generational cohort sits as well.

I don't seem to be able to do anything these days without pondering it in the context of the wider world. When I see old white couples all gathering in a place to seek something that their home lives don't give them, it makes me wonder, What does travel give us that we cannot get at home?

I don't want to generalize, but for me it's not really about seeing things I haven't seen before or experiencing foreign cultures, those are both things I've done in abundance during my life since I've lived outside the U.S. for 11 of my 68 years (16%) on three different continents and have traveled extensively for business mostly, but also leisure to all six continents (just not Antarctica). About the only region I haven't traveled to yet is the area of Asia Minor and Central Asia where one finds the "Stans" around the Black and Caspian Seas and then Mongolia. I suppose if I had a Bucket List, those places should be on it at the top, but I've been to so many places, I don't keep a bucket list.

I enjoyed this trip for several reasons; the first is that it was a motorcycle adventure and that always keeps it extra interesting for me since I like the challenge and want to do it for as long as the flesh is willing to submit to the rigors on a safe basis. I like doing these trips with friends, as much as Kim and I truly enjoy one another's company, it's always better to travel with others for us. The other reason I am finding I enjoy it these days is that I am inordinately concerned about the state of the world and I find it enlightening and informative to see the state of the liberal democracy v. Autocracy state of play as well as the economic well-being of the places we travel to. It is rare to feel that our higher education is so relevant to what we are seeing in real-time in the world and yet I have always found that macroeconomics is not a theoretical discipline anymore, but rather a very real and active part of life. I see how Spain functions versus Portugal. I expect I will see the same again in Egypt versus Jordan. It so happens I was making those same observations thirty or more years ago in my business work and now it is more a matter of personal edification. I find the changes interesting and I tend to link them directly to the political cycles in the countries.

Because I ran a large retirement services business and wrote my first published book on the global pension crisis, I am always interested to see first-hand the demographic trends of retirement. Whether in Costa Rica, Portugal or some other new retirement haven, being half of an old white couple that is in the midst of retirement, is another professional and personal area of interest. It's why I enjoyed The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel, exploring retired life for old white British couples in India. I imagine that before I am done I will be learning about old white couples boarding an Elon Musk Space-X transport to Mars. Let's hope that is something only my children will have to contemplate