

## Travels in Spain

By Peter Dale

Hello all,

Herewith the saga in first part of the travels of the Dales in Spain.

Our last visit to Spain was in the early seventies and had been fleeting. Franco was in power and Sam was a baby. We didn't like the look of the Guardia Civil, not to mention their hats. Besides that our tires were down to the canvas and the nearest replacements in France to which we returned vowing to have another crack some day. Thirty years later we arrived in stark contrast by Business Class, so exhausting, Darling, getting all those canapés down you not to mention the glass of champagne on departure from Frankfurt at 0600.

Off by taxi to the house of Geoff Ward, best man at our wedding and now Ambassador to Spain. . His Excellency resides in a rather beautiful apartment overlooking the city to the South and a rustic large olive and orchard grove six stories below, reputedly the campsite for Napoleon during the siege of Madrid in 18 something. Suffice to say that our quarters, not to mention the gracious hospitality were of the highest quality. A gazpacho had been prepared for us by Eugenia the maid whose English is utterly unavailable but who looked after us in exquisite sign language, helped by Ady's rapidly improving Spanish.

Subsequent days were taken up visiting the galleries we had been so so much anticipating. Travel is easy and cheap on the Metro, the best I have ever come across. It is also fun but one must keep one's hand on one's wallet as slippery little hands can steal very quickly, with personal experience attesting how close it can come.

Before you die, any of you, visit these galleries. We visited the Prado and the Thyssen von Bornemiza or similar, (some of its works came to Godzone a few years ago,) but if you have never seen Goya in the flesh, so to speak, save your euros and make the effort. So too for Velasquez not to mention impressionists and cubists (although not normally in the same sentence.) All those galleries we visited in the early seventies were great but somehow a little dollop of age, perhaps even of wisdom, certainly of weight, made this visit more satisfying. Goya does wrinkles rather well, and when you have a few yourself it seems more meaningful.

Another thing about galleries is that the floors are hard and there is nowhere to sit down, so repairing to the nearest tapas bar is an imperative whereupon beer is sipped at the rate of a half-litre per hour or less accompanied by tidbits of total indulgence at a price that makes you wonder how these people make a living.

Not only is Madrid easy to get around, the tapas bars are at forty foot centers especially near the plazas, the greatest of which is the Plaza Mayor completely enclosed with gates and the works, beautiful squares with cobblestones and rather expensive outdoor cafes. Also the site of former good stuff like burnings at the stake (steak?), bullfights, and in the late thirties some bloody reprisals by friend Franco of the first paragraph. We had a great guidebook of the inner city and time taken to wander tiny crooked cobblestone streets will pay dividends in your later dreams. The guide book also leads to shopping areas and leather shoes, the joys of which will probably take a letter on its own to describe and in another hand.

With the weekend looming Geoff arranged for a trip into the hinterland. Setting off bright and early at 10am we surged in a sumptuous Audi A5 through the myriad labyrinth of the Madrid motorway mesh, ( a little bit of fun there with the m's), not too hard to get out of, but, as we would later discover, very difficult indeed to remember how to get back into just the right bit of a very large city indeed. My face glued to the tourist map, we headed for Avila, with a b.

All v's are pronounced bh or b. All Spanish words beginning with Al are Moorish words. It is said in some circles that King Carlos the Somethingth spoke little Spanish as he ruled on high from the Low Countries and visited his kingdom only rarely. When he did pop in for a quick purge he thpoke with a lithp and ath a rethult the whole court followed thuit, and that is why today, Dear Reader, the Spanish lithp tho much. Geoff does a passing fine rendition of lithping and should win an award. In return his forename is so utterly unpronounceable in Spanish that the nation just calls him Excellency.

But I digress. Along the way Geoff goes very quiet and then says something like, (ladies block your eyes,) Oh My Goodness! I have forgotten to bring the details of the hotel we are to stay in. Oh Gosh How Silly of Me, or words to that effect. Not a good look, as he was only mildly sure of the name of the village we were to stay in. Nevertheless, and to his eternal credit as a Real Man, he did not turn back for the directions. Oh No! We forged on into the unknown and ultimately into beautiful mountain scenery and a tiny village of Candelaria with narrow streets just wide enough for a donkey, with walls leaning in on each other, people working and living there, having children's birthday parties whilst down below tourists wandered around quietly enjoying what these people saw every day and probably could not wait to get out of.

We saw hams hanging down from the rafters in the hundreds. The Spanish sure love their jamon, and this village has just the right cool air to dry them. We finally arrived in our village of Al Alberca (remember the Al?) a divine mountain village which held an unknown but expectant hotel for the Ambassadorial visit. We pulled into the first likely looking hotel whereupon Geoff went inside to humiliate himself by making enquiries with a high level of likelihood that it was to do with the whereabouts of a competitor. The chap at the desk, a double of Antonio Bandererras resplendent in knee length white socks, embroidered breeches and dazzling white silk shirt, and taller than Geoff, (an achievement in itself,) listened to our hero's tale of inadequacy, smiled a diplomatic smile borne of a thousand years of practice, and said, "Senor, I think you have come to the right place!" Just then a wedding procession marched past with fife and drum and we were whisked away to a mountain chalet retreat of great virtuosity and comfort, built out of enormous blocks of stone with the upper floors being made of wattle and daub, and all brand new.

That is something you see a lot of in Spain. Brand new. In my life as a person I have never seen so many tower cranes. They are in every town, even small villages. Spain is on the move in a big way. The reason that you get to see so many cranes in so many towns and villages is that there are so many new roads and motorways, so that Spain moves rather well. Spaniards have taken to moving around so much that they all go to Avila with a b on Saturday, drink Rioja, known as bino tinto and infinitely acceptable. Then they all come home to Madrid on Sunday afternoon at exactly the same time. No motorway system in the world can cope with the jam. The expressway becomes a shuffle. The shuffle becomes a frustration, and I can attest that the side roads offer perhaps slower progress still. But I jump forward.

Before dinner at the Hotel Al Alberca we drove to the top of the Penne de Francia, the highest part for flaming miles and a grand view, but more to the point a monastery at the very top. At the very top of that is a very sacred Virgin made of wood who is paraded all around the region even as far as Salamanca. Very beautiful. The Monastic cells have been converted into a Hostale which, whilst being closed, looked to be a good eagle's nest for a stay. Back at the

Chalet we had a brandy, which in Spain is about the first thing you do at the end of the day as they make a lot of it and it is very good.

With practiced ease the next day Geoff took us to his town of Salamanca, seat of his recent language school, and put to great effect as he looks the part no end with his dark Hispanic good lookth and unuthual height.

Salamanca is a calm town. It is also old and has the oldest university in Europe, along with beautiful ancient churches built on top of even more beautiful older churches built on top of even older mosques built on top of Roman temples. This place has got age sewn up. It is also full of young people who flock here to drink, make merry all night, get away from their parents and do a little study. It is simple to get into and out of and I could live there very easily. Not that it was always thus, as apart from the Duke of Wellington, Salamanca was a hard nut to crack in siege terms. The walls are thick and people still live within them. As they do in the next town down the road Avila with a b which has a wall right around still 'entire' as we bull farmers say. Walled cities and castles abound giving the region its name Castilia, and perhaps the language as well which is Cathtilian.

All in all, the greatest spectating weekend in a lifetime of spectating came to a close with a visit to Segovia, home of the guitar player, and home to an alcazar (Moorish castle, remember the Al?) a church that can be seen for flaming miles, walled in by a width that defines thickness and... a Roman aqueduct that goes right over the town with cars and trucks and motor scooters dodging its walls hundreds of feet below. Those Romans loved their water.

**Subject:** FW: Spain Part Two

Dear Reader,

Herewith the Second Part of the Dales in Spain.

After a wonderful time we left the tender care of Geoff El Ambassador and Lithper Extraordinaire just in time to escape doing the dishes for a sit down banquet for twelve Spanish parliamentarians. Faced with such work we hit the road. Courtesy of Lonely Planet Guide accommodation recommendations we had booked ahead, unusual for the Dales. We leaped aboard the AVE fast train to Cordoba. Before we knew it we were there, and whisked off to our little hotel, modest to say the least, but in the part of town with narrow streets and tapas bars at forty foot centres, and a Roman ruin with twelve columns extant and upright in a very Roman way right across the road. Strangely enough we walked right past the columns a few nights later and got lost. Dime a dozen, these ruins.

Ah Andalucia! A lifetime ambition for what reason I have never really come to grips with. Maybe I was enthralled by Crusade stories, all that Ivanhoe stuff, Richard Coeur de Lion and the knights. Maybe it was stories of The Moors and scimitars, maybe it was The Dark Ages when Europe was plunged into them without knowing whilst Andalucia thrived in a golden age of buildings, science, cultural explosion, and orange groves. Dunno. Maybe it was Colleen McCullough's History of Rome Series, highly recommended at eight volumes of 1500 pages each; I would have pissed in at School Certificate Latin if only she had written them by then instead of the 10% I got for getting my name right and a world class essay on the sewers of Rome, even though a question on it was probably not asked. But anyway Cordoba reeks mystery, intrigue, and past splendiferousness.

In actual fact Cordoba just reeks. I think the drains have been there since Scipio Africanus spent a year there putting down the Carthaginians. I would say they were last repaired by the Caliph of Cordoba in 788 when a crocodile swam up the Guadalquivir River, got into the drains and ate three of his grandchildren. Reputedly. But they sure do smell. The drains that is.

A small price to pay for being in a town with a thousand thousand stories to be told, the first of which is the Mezquita Cathedrale, or mosque cum cathedral to you Inglesi. Many years ago, more than thirteen hundred to be precise, The Moors built a new empire based in Cordoba. Suffice to say it thrived, due in no small part to the Jewish artisans and builders who tagged along for the work and got on famously with The Moors right through until the Reyes Catholica, Ferdie and Izzy chased them out and stoked up the fires of the old Inquisition which lasted right up until 18 something. Being of trading disposition, The Moors bought a block of land from local people and built a mosque with beautiful dainty arches and a damned nice place to have a daily prayer in. Cordoba thrived some more and they bought another block of land with even more lovely arches and peace and quiet and coolness which is one of the most important things you can have in Cordoba as its temperature defines hot, even in October when it is not so. But Cordoba thrived even more until by the time the last Caliph had had his contribution built, the mosque could hold forty thousand on their knees at a time, all facing Mecca. Now that is a mass, even though it was not Catholic. The building even today is stunningly beautiful and light, as in airy, for there is in fact little light that gets in.

Anyway, The Moors got ousted at long last by the Christians who figure large in this part of the world beating The Moors, and the place went into a bit of a decline. Instead of pulling down the Mezquita, (and once the king had put an exit order on the Jews who left behind the

most exquisite Synagogue in the Juderia in old Cordoba and just up from the Mezquita itself,) he built a gothic cathedral right in the middle of the Mosque. The difference in styles, also repeated in Granada and Sevilla, is amazing. Solid soaring heavy handed architecture of the Christians versus the light and airy beauty of The Moors. Interesting.

Out in the courtyard where the forty thousand washed eighty thousand feet at a time, there is an ancient orange grove daintily fed by Roman irrigation, who sure loved their water.

Before you die, visit Cordoba. It handles its history very well. People still live in houses which have been there in one form or another for a seriously long time, and they like it so much that these same ancient houses, many of them wattle and daub upstairs, are also seriously expensive. A little hint for those among you who are tempted to buy a house in Cordoba from this little promo. Do not own a car! You will have to leave it somewhere out of town, for the roads are wide enough for only the narrowest of mini buses which go at explosive speeds. The word saunter is not a Spanish word as far as Cordoba's cobbles are concerned. Diving, leaping, retreating, are words very much in use and are learned by tourists very quickly. I would like to recruit some Cordoban bus drivers for Wellington as I am sure they would clean up Lambton Quay's black-suited women who saunter across the road whilst smoking telling the world to get stuffed. A week should do it.

Did I mention the food? No? Hard to believe for that is one of the best reasons for going there in the first place. Oxtail from real bulls is called raba in Cordoba and is fall off the bone stuff eaten hot or cold and a delicacy that is worthy of the name. It is laced with pimienta or roasted red capsicums which are in everything and are delicious. Also a tapas of great joy is a mixture of pimienta and tuna. Made in heaven and vying right up there with the tomato and basil mix. We ate very well at reasonable prices in restaurants that were probably there to soothe Scipio Africanus in the evenings when he was building the drains.

Did I say evening? Let me tell you, Dear Reader, about the Spanish and their utter disdain for European Time, which, without mincing words, they eschew. The shops open around 10am, and offices a little earlier and close at 1pm maybe 1.30. whereupon every one either goes home for a nap after lunch, or they have lunch in the restaurants and cafes and cervizarias (bars that sell lots of beer) and **then** they go home for a nap. Shops open around 3-5pm and stay open until 7-8pm whereupon people go to a tapas bar and graze on titbits until 10-10.30 pm when families go out for dinner or eat it at home, although their houses are very small. Little children are usually in bed by 2am and their parents a little later, and teenagers much later. Still everyone works, children go to school, and the Spanish get by in splendid order. They have got life nailed. Excitable but only to a point, polite at all times, doting on children, respectful of the elderly, imbibers of alcohol only with food in the main, with food to die for. However I think this life does explain the bags under the eyes of every Spaniard. Nevertheless, on the streets of Cordoba, or any other place in Andalucia, between 1-4pm the only people you will see will be the Inglesi, the Nueva Zealandisi, and of course the Alemani but then we all know the Germans are Teutonic about time.

There are some cultural pitfalls about this lifestyle when confronted with it. A few beers and binho tintos in tapas bars starting at 7pm can lead to physical imbalance on departing for the restaurant when they open at 10pm. The Spanish on the other hand sip their wine and can take half an hour to drink a five ounce glass of beer, and in the process scoff their own weight in free olives.

One thing The Moors left behind was the patio system whereby their houses were walled up from the street, if you could call it that, with a central courtyard shaded from the sun, usually with a little running water defining cool. Every year Cordobans have a patio competition and all are opened up for public scrutiny. Do not approach any of them with money in your hand

as you will assuredly buy one of them. They are beautiful. They are covered in flower gardens and hanging plants and shady spots just exactly right for flopping into for siesta.

Sadly we did not have a year to spend in Cordoba so we hit the road, this time by bus.

The next installment will see your intrepid Dales on the road to Granada.

I'm falling under your spell

And if you could speak what a fascinating tale you could tell

Of the days.....

### Part Three

Hello again Dearest Reader,

Getting to Granada is simple. You go to the bus station and get on a bus and four exhilarating hours later you are there. However you have to be in Spain to do that, actually and more precisely you have to be in Cordoba to do it.

The change from inside Cordoba to five miles out of Cordoba is to go to another land altogether. Dry comes to mind, along with arid, even sere which is a good word for a crossword ; rocky and dry, rocky and scorched is kind of up there as well. And yet things grow, mainly olives and crops that like dry. And bulls. Villages are few and far between and in any case built way up on the top of hills. Not for the view of course. Oh no! For protection from whomsoever was marauding at the time; i.e. The Moors; run of the mill brigands which were laying waste well into 18 something; or just Crusaders and knights, maybe just Gladys Pip and the Knights ( a little anachronism reversed for the conspiracists amongst you, and I know who you are!)

All villages in Andalucia are white. As a result they all look the same, as in beautiful, whilst stark also comes to mind. The earth however is orange to red.

The bus stops in a random number of these villages and towns and climbs ever higher. Then at long last we see the Sierra Nevada range which is just behind Granada with a bit of snow on the tops. Finally we look way down on a valley about a mile below and there is a plain. Dusty, hazy, maize laden and giving off so much heat that the valley floor shimmers sometimes there sometimes not. Being above the heat haze is rather nicer than being in it but at least there is some green around down below.

Granada has been around for a very long time, being one of Hannibal's hangouts with his cavorting Carthaginians and their dancing elephants. The Romans forced the Carthaginians to vacate so the same forts just had new owners. But the Romans Declined and Fell, and Visigoths vied for control of the mountain passes. At long last a decent band of Moors turned up and routed whomsoever was around at the time and set about building an Empire based right there in Granada. To make it quite clear to the local residency that they were in for the long haul a long line of Caliphs built an Alcazar to rule from and retire to when things got a little rough. Then they built a palace and some gardens to amuse themselves in. The walls go for twenty two kilometres and at the height of its influence housed many thousands of people within. That is, provided you were within them by sunset. If you were not inside the Great Gate you took your chances with jins and genies and dark knotty jerky things that garrotted strangers and you usually found yourself in an amphora of olive oil slowly marinating for ever.

Given that it was quite a large empire, there was a lot of traffic, with armies on the move, ox carts raising endless spirals of dust on the tracks, and Granada became a very large trading centre as well. Basically it is on the road from Malaga to Valencia, well it was in those days before the A91 was built. Now it is on the road to everywhere, probably even Mandalay.

But it is another song I have for you Dear Reader and here is its fullness.

Granada, I'm falling under your spell  
And if you could speak,  
What a fascinating tale you would tell  
Of an age the world has long forgotten

Of an age that weaves  
A silent magic in Granada today

The dawn in the sky  
Greets the day with a sigh for  
Granada  
For she can remember  
The splendour  
That once was  
Granada  
It still can be found  
In the hills all around  
As I wand'r along  
Entranced by the beauty before me  
Entranced by a land  
Full of sunshine  
And flowers and song

And when day is done  
And the sun starts to set in  
Granada  
I envy the blush of  
The snow-clad Sierra Nevada For soon it will welcome  
The star while a thousand guitars  
Play a soft habañera  
Then moonlit Granada  
Will live again  
The glory of yesterday  
Romantic and gay!!!

And there is a gay section in the Albuzain, the ancient town over the other side of the river running through Granada. Also worth visiting for narrow streets, kamikaze bus drivers with cheap tickets for the thrill of a lifetime. We liked it so much we did it three times. But I digress.

Because the song is not about Granada. Oh no! It is about the Alhambra Alcazar, the Nasrid Palaces and Generalife Gardens. Now basically these were built for the leisured Moorish classes ranking Emir and above, and their concubines, all the way up to Caliph. They lived there in such sumptuousness that even today the stars of the silver screen would be purple with envy. Diagalev once took his Ballet Russe there just for one concert in front of the pool. For more than seven hundred years The Moors lived here in relative peace and tranquility broken only by the odd skirmish, some of which the Caliph of Granada dreamed up just to keep his troops busy. He, like all of his kinsmen, was busy in any case as he had to pray five times a day, being a Muslim.

Anyway, in came the Reyes Catholica, our old friends Ferdy and Izzy who made a deal with the last Caliph in order not to have too great a battle, for they let him go with his army and gave him some land somewhere else to live on and they moved in and lived there in grand style for a time. They had a daughter who was called La Loca because she was mad. They sent away the Jews, as one did in those days, and brought the Inquisition and burnings of the steak. This was all in 1492 by the way. They sent Christeo Colon off to the New World and by the end of the year he had found it. A new continent and the end of Moorish Rule all in the one year! Now that's leadership for you. The Reconquista was completed just in time to convert the millions in Inca and Aztec land. The soldiers of Christ were called the ..... you got it... The Conquistadors. From 1492 until 18 something most of the residents of Granada

prayed a lot more than five times a day in order not to be caught by the Inquisition and burned as steak.

Funny then, given all this history, that in fact the Alhambra was not actually discovered until 1832 by an American, Washington Irving, who stumbled upon it whilst he was the American Ambassador to Spain. He liked it so much that he spent a year or so living in the ruins of the Alhambra, for verily Granada had fallen on hard times. That was because, once America was discovered, everyone who was anyone caught the next ox cart to Sevilla, about which the Fourth Part shall focus. Washington had a grand time in Granada and wrote about it, which is the sort of thing you can do if you are an Ambassador. He was A Romantic and described antiquity and stuff and walls and flowers and folk stories. This was a bit of stock in trade for him as he also wrote Rip Van Winkle who slept for twenty years which is about the period of nod I needed having read his book 'Tales of the Alhambra.' Which is famous.

Washington himself is revered in Granada because he was a one man tourism promotion extravaganza who caused The Romantics to visit the Alhambra, and since then Granada has had it made, apart from some dark days with Franco who didn't like Granadinos at all at all at all. If Wash were alive today he would be given the keys to the city. His book is compulsory in all the Granada schools and is available in over 40,000 languages. It is recited in a lithping kind of way in all the cafes. I found the one in English a little flowery. Perhaps I should have read the one in Sanskrit as it may have had more piquancy. The drawings and sketches however are worth buying the book for in any language. As a suggestion, when you do buy the book, as you assuredly will when you go there, buy one in Finnish as there were an embarrassing number left on the shelf at the Alhambra Bookstore. Clearly the travelling Finns are a) cheapskates, b) ashamed to be known as Finns (after all no-one at all in Europe or anywhere else for that matter speaks anything remotely like Finnish), c) illiterate, d) just plain unromantic. You choose. I go for d) myself as they are stodgy bastards in my experience.

Even if you **think** you might be dying you must visit the Alhambra as I do not have the words for it other than light, spacious, exquisite, lacework and lattices, baths, ceilings, shafts of light and pools of reflections such that you are not sure which way is up. Go there. Such gardens they have! Oy Vey.

When you do go you must stay at the Hotel Guadalupe which is **right across the road** and a very nice place to be with reasonable rates. The best thing about it is that it is at the top of the hill which has to be climbed or bussed to get into the Alhambra, because do not forget Dear Reader that these places are built high up on cliffs, and this place is one of the highest high uppy of them all.

Now getting in to the Alhambra is not easy as only a mere 6000 people a day are permitted to visit. You can book ahead, which, being a Dale was not contemplated until a few days before whence all tickets were sold. However, 1000 tickets are kept over for sale on the day with the ticket box opening at 8am. Being a clever little piggy I got up at 6.30 am and was the tenth person to the queue. By 8am there were gonna be some luckless people, Germans by the look of them, that were going to be exactly the first people to miss out. After that, well never mind come back tomorrow unless you happen to be flying back somewhere, in which case stiff Manchego, which is the name of the very very best sheep's cheese in Spain and probably the world.

At 0745, a man in a museum uniform, with gun, asked in very fast Spanish who was the first person there. Would-be queue jumpers, let's say they were Argentinean, thought about brazening it out but in the end some backpackers who had slept on the concrete all night stepped up, then a couple of totally mystified Japanese girls who did not really know where they were, then some Swedes and then me. Ady wandered down from our hotel **right across**

**the road** and we got our tickets in good order. The tickets are valid for half hour entry times so if you do not get through the gates of the Alhambra into the Nazrid Palace by the stipulated time you are through and you have come twenty thousand clicks just to walk around the gardens. Which, if that did happen, would be no bad thing as they are marvellous.

One of the things to do in a queue is to look at people. Here are the results of my survey of a thousand people in a queue at the Alhambra from 0645-0830. It has a margin of error of virtually nothing as I am a keen observer.

- most men in Europe are balding, especially the young ones. My friend JG O'Regan would look positively hirsute in Granada.
- all women smoke; I think all the time. Some smoke two at a time.
- There are no rollies in Spain. Cigarettes are too cheap for rollies which puts Spain one place ahead in my estimation as nothing stinks quite like a rollie.
- Only Australians wear shorts in Spain, usually denim. The men wear jandals as well, or jodhpur boots with grey socks. They are usually from Queensland where they wear their joddies to bed.
- The Dutch are the tallest people in the world, a fact confirmed by the WHO, as in Doctor.
- Nobody ever went to the Alhambra and wanted their money back.
- You could make a modest fortune if you sold coffee to the queuers. You would sell more than 1000 cups. That is 7000 cups a week, or 350,000 a year, with two weeks off for holidays, probably December. That is also 300 litres of water each day which would have to be carried some distance.  
This is why there is no itinerant coffee seller in the Alhambra queue.

The Alhambra is one of the places I would like to go back to, and all of the one thousand lucky ticket getters would agree, excluding the unlucky Germans who were first to miss out but then, how would they know? They would like to go back for the first time and purchase their tickets a year in advance, or at least get up early. Here is a fact of life. Someone has to be the first to miss out. So far it has not been me.

Granada is also a university town, and there are Halls of Residence with choirs which compete to be Top C for the year. They practise at cafes and restaurants whilst drinking beer and eating tapas. If you are sitting at an open cafe you can listen to them. It is a good thing to do and in any case you do not have much of a say. Drinking bino tinto in the evening air watching the bats but not quite seeing them is something you simply must do. The evening sun reflects on the high walls of the Alcazar and splashes the white of Andalusia houses into a deep orange. Follow this up with a sizeable cognac in a street corner bar and you are supremely ready for the sack.

Let us have a reality check about age.

About 130BC Scipio Africanus, on the 12 July ( nice little anachronism there and a bottle of good red to the person who can explain it) whopped the Carthaginians and sent them back across the Med. The Cathaginians, namely Hannibal and Hamilcar and their lot had been in Granada for about 500 years, and before them the Phoenicians held the fort there to protect the road from Malaga to Valencia. The Moors arrived on 14 July 781 or thereabouts and stayed until early in 1492. The Reyes Catholica stayed there for a few years and then moved to Sevilla to be closer to America. Then the Alhambra languished for 340 years until it was discovered by an American. In the last 173 years Granada has flourished, and has had a hit record which has been copied by just about every baritone and tenor including Enrico Caruso who nearly broke his clack valve reaching the high note.

In Godzone in the period of the Carthaginians we had eagles, moas and bats. No people.  
None, nil, rien, nada.

In the sixteen hundred year period of the Romans, until they Declined and Fell we had the same. Nobody.

In the time of The Moors we had the same.

In England when the Alhambra was flourishing, the locals painted themselves with wode. They did not know it but they were in the middle of the Dark Ages. The Moors were in their Golden Age and thought it would last forever.

Around the time Columbus got to USA there were a few people in Godzone, but scattered. Moas were on their way out.

In 1832 when Wash discovered the Alhambra for the first time, Belinghausen sailed through the Cook Strait and was observed from Kapiti Island by Te Rauparaha. Two years later Raha chartered the Elizabeth, a whaling vessel, and sailed down to Akaroa on a hunting trip where he slaughtered the populace and took several hundred bodies for butchering back to Kapiti.

The oldest building in Godzone was built in 1835. It was a grocer's shop.

Our biggest hit record was Ten Guitars.

In Auckland, buildings are erected to last two years.

In Granada 2000 years is not unusual and 1400 is de rigueur.

Of all the places in the world to go to before you die, choose Granada.

I hasten to add, do not however die **in** Granada. You have yet to visit Sevilla.

My Dearest Reader,  
How I have missed you.

There was a sense of the homeward journey as we departed Granada.

Just to spice things up a bit we had another quick run on the kamikaze express that is the shuttle bus trip around the Albuzain. God how I would love those drivers in Wellington. Cycle couriers (who are dead people, they just don't know it yet) would either become extinct or models of civil behaviour. Pedestrians waiting indolently on the white line in the middle of the road would have their ears removed by the wing mirrors of busses. Zebra Crossings with lazy walkers would be killing fields.

And yet in Spain traffic flows and pedestrians survive with remarkably little dispute. Police, as is the case of the whole of Spain, are conspicuous by their absence, leaving traffic largely to sort itself out, which it does rather well. For all their machismo Spanish drivers are remarkably tolerant, and in the face of a narrow road filled with a narrow bus travelling at high speed they display a commendable nonchalance and restraint. The Police of course solve crimes, restrain jealous lovers, shake down cervicerias for coffee, and maintain law and order. One thing you can say about the Spanish Police is that you do not mess with them. They are nice up to a point, and the populace stays way short of approaching that. In return, the Police do not use speed cameras, or hide behind bushes to catch people without their registration or their diesel tax up to date. Given the chance I would not only bring the bus drivers to Wellington, I would bring four hundred police from Spain to help Harry Quinn clean our town up. You don't mess with Harry either. I would like him to be the new Commissioner of Police.

But there does come a time in any travel that you just know that you are on your way home on the last leg. Perhaps it is after you have visited somewhere special, as in the Alhambra. Maybe it is the cognac that seemed to be such a good idea during the night. Maybe it is the Kiwi 'been there done that'. All the same it was with regret that we arrived at the bus station and got out of town. We were heading for Seville. Known as Sevilla, pronounced Seveeya to you uninitiated Inglesi.

Spanish busses are cool. They have toilets, and comfortable seats. They carry a lot of passengers who are basically nice to each other. During the four hour trip to Sevilla the only person who used the toilet was a New Zealander who could not close the door afterwards. We disinherited him for his crass failure to cope without disclosing our own nationality. As a result the door flapped for two hundred kilometres and forty people crossed their legs forcing themselves to look at the scenery.

Which is impressive. The road is dry. The fields are parched. The rocks are red. The towns are white. Everything is old. Antequerra, meaning ancient, was named by the Romans around 300 BC, indicating that it was seriously old even by then. It is a fortress town whose walls and houses fuse with the rocks in a here you see it here you don't kind of way. If the houses were not so white you would not see the town. It is a frying pan of a place, and I can say without fear of contradiction that you could scramble eggs on a car bonnet even at night. People lived in Antequerra around 12,000 years ago in caves and spent their time painting on the walls. The name of the tribe was the Grafitti Tribe. I would think that a paint company could make a fortune from selling Andy White. It would have a free pair of sunglasses with every ten litres.

At long last the outskirts of Sevilla loom up. You can see the beginning of the town from a long way away. Sadly it takes lot longer to actually get into Sevilla as it is a spread out kind of town in a way that most Spanish cities are not. All the same as you come into the old part

of the city the blood starts to heat up. Once you get out of the bus you know why. It is hot. It is humid. If Granada is the jewel in the crown of Andalucia, and Antequerra its frying pan, then Sevilla is its sultry mistress. In every way. I will tell you some of them in due course if you will only show a little patience.

We stayed at Hotel Puerta Triana, or Hotel Gate of Triana, which is comfortable, gracious and seedily genteel. It is very close to the most important thing about Sevilla, its river, Rio Guadalquivir, which we last saw bisecting Cordoba, a few hundred clicks upstream. The river has given Sevilla its life.

The Phoenecians built a town here more than 2500 years ago and called it Tartessus. At the time its Tourism Board gave it a by-line 'Gateway to Inland Spain.' Situated about 100 clicks from the sea, it was where the river narrowed and could be controlled by walls and towers and stuff. The Romans, headed by our dear friend Scipio Africanus, finally got rid of the Carthaginians here in 207 BC in the Second Punic War. At the end of the war he built a special town to house his wounded veterans just a few miles out, called Italica. It prospered over the years and was said to have more than twenty different RSAs to visit. The town was built on a sloping hill, so its residents were called Italics. In later years the town rewarded the Roman Empire with two emperors from Italica, first Trajan, and then another Sevilla Grammar Old Boy, Hadrian, who did a bang up job on walls in the North of England where he put up Hadrian's Wall and called it the Pale. Anybody over the other side of it, namely Picts and Celts, and Presbyterians, were thought to be **Beyond the Pale**. And so they were. And are to this day, for you can fool history. Oh yes! God knows, you have been reading plenty of it recently. But, Dear Reader, you simply cannot fool geography. The Kernohans for example, dear friends and Gold Medal Award winning makers of fine Gladstone pinot noir that they are, are from Beyond the Pale. On reflection so are most of us. Perhaps our good friend and Sevillano Hadrian, built his wall to keep the Inglesi in! But I digress.

As they did in those times, the Romans Declined and Fell, and it was not until 711 AD that we pick up the story with the arrival of The Moors, who spent several hundred years building a city of light and culture. The Mesquita, or mosque to you Inglesi, is simply enormous. They built gorgeous orange groves where the faithful washed their feet, and the glorious tower, The Giralda, which deserves a paragraph on its own.

The Giralda.

There you have it. To find out more about it you must visit. For the lazy amongst you I will provide you with a crib sheet. Read on. It is a tower of lightness and beauty. It is a long way up. Ady knows this as she has climbed it. It is just as well she did this on a Sunday when there were no horses around for the way up the Giralda Tower was wide enough for horses to gallop up, with little alcoves to reverse into if you were coming down to allow the upcoming horses right of way. Gives a whole new meaning to the word clatter. This is how the mountain driving etiquette came about. Always give way to the uphill traveler.

When Fernando III routed The Moors in 12 something he just turned the Mesquita into a Cathedrale, and concentrated on trading and wealth, which was a good thing to do as even in those pre-American days Sevilla was a wealthy city. A few hundred years later, and before Christeo Colon departed from Sevilla's Platform 12 for The New World there was an earthquake which shattered the town and the mosque with it. The king of the time decided he would rebuild the place, starting with a seriously gigantic cathedral. Indeed newspapers of the time quoted Hymie Fernandeth, a local banker, who said, and I quote, 'We are gonna build such a cathedral, the mind will boggle already, and people who gaze on it in the future will believe we were mad.'

He was prescient. That is exactly what they say. This cathedral is a biggie. It has buttresses that fly on other buttresses to hold up the walls. It has got 82.9% of the world's pigeons shitting all over it. It is in the centre of town and surrounded by tapas bars selling Cruzcampo beer where weary travellers can while away whetting their whistles winsomely whilst waiting for the bloody place to open. I believe the tapas bars are all owned by the church. Probably Cruzcampo brewery as well—there is something holy about this beautiful beer. The cathedral is the second largest in Europe after St Peters. Such a beauty. So huge. The Treasury is worth a visit in its own right and would give any banker palpitations, such is its wealth.

And how did this wealth come about, I can hear you asking? Why, from America. Christeo Colon has a good rap in this town for it was he who discovered the mother lode that was Inca and Aztecland, and most of it reached Sevilla, well the bits that Francis Drake and co did not pick through, or Captain Blood the Pirate, or the weather, which was probably the major cause of booty not reaching Sevilla if the truth be known. Of course the first people that you pay off on the list is The Church, and they did that fulsomely. There are treasures there that defy description in terms of just what extravagance you can go to with rubies and emeralds. You must go there to see for yourself. There is a throne of solid silver covered in rubies and emeralds in a lurid way but which was the height of cool back in 1512 when it was given to the Diocese of Sevilla. I would say it would be in the super heavy weight division in the Treasure Stakes at around 800kg. Plus the silver.

By the way, the king who rebuilt the city was called Pedro the Cruel. A nice ring to it. He was called that by people who did not like his way of going about things. To the people who admired him he was called Pedro the Just, which has a nicely retributive air about it. Personally I go for the Cruel. What would you go for?

Here are some facts about Sevilla.

- There are more shoe shops per head of population in Sevilla than there are hairs on a hairy haired dog.
- Shoe shops sell outstanding quality shoes in order to be able to sell anything at all for the Sevillanos know their shoes.
- Shoes are cheap, well made, and are sold in every street.
- Sevillanos and their wives, well, mostly their wives, are required by statute to buy 208 pairs of shoes each a year.
- Sevillanos observe siesta scrupulously.
- They dress up for the promenade which goes from 7pm to 9pm when they go for dinner. They are well dressed and the couples walk arm in arm.
- When you look out for this phenomenon, look down, for Sevillanos are short.
- Sevillanos do not go to bed on Saturday or Sunday nights. Put simply, they party in a very sultry way.
- All ugly Sevillana women have to leave town before dusk. There are none left by 8pm. Many of them go to live permanently in Huddersfield, England, where they are highly regarded for their beauty.
- Sevilla's cobblestones are especially designed for the uninitiated to force your ankle to go over on itself. This is a fact. It happened to me.

Did I say sultry, without referring to the essential thing about Sevilla?

Flamenco.

Say no more.

We went to a local flamenco show, a far cry from the commercial variety. It was intense. There were wailing sounds which would bring out the city council noise police in Wellington. There was a stamping of feet that, in a child, would have made the world's most outstanding tantrum. In this case it was passion personified. There was a snapping and clicking of fingers unattainable by any non-Gypsy. The guitar was melancholia itself. There was sweat. It dripped in a free flowing way. It took on a life of its own. Flamenco is a combination of all these things. God only knows what it was about but it was, well, magnificent. I found myself holding my breath, hoping that the stage would not collapse, trying to see everything at once through widened eyes and yet fascinated by the sweat all at the same time. It was an experience. The crowd went wild and threw their hats in the air. We had the only bad wine in Spain. It is especially reserved for the occasion to make you feel bad along with the singers.

With flamenco who needs bullfights. We didn't, so we didn't.

My advice is to go to a local flamenco show. Drink bad wine. Then go to a few tapas bars and eat your own weight in olives, followed by a nice restaurant nearby. Finish that off with a Spanish Brandy served in a bucket glass, and you will not hear the carousing Sevillanos at all. The Brandy is called Osborne El Veteran. It is reputedly made from cojones of Los Torros. It tastes magnificent. Walk along the wrought iron balconied streets, and admire the beautiful screens separating the patios from the streets. Even the rain splashes with panache.

Savour these things.

We do not have these experiences in Wellington. Sadly we never will. We will consume our time worrying about how not to build a motorway. We will worry about the death of Cuba Mall a mere eighty years old with shops that define tawdry. We worry about the location of the next New World Grocery store but we will knock down any half way decent historical building to buy our lattes there. We are a nation of grocers. Not lovers. The Spanish are lovers of everything. Of life. Of strife. I love them for it.

We, on the other hand are frightened of life. Of strife. We worry more about not saying 'crippled people' than we care for the differently abled. We have got political correctness nailed, which is described as trying to pick up a turd by the clean end. Go to Spain before you die. It will be worth it. Espana esta muy bien!  
Adios amigos.