



WEEKENDER

All things marine

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In
Spain
what is old is new

A traveler
sees links
to the
country's past
in the present

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Travel



Reflections of the past



In Seville, Santiago Calatrava designed the harp-like Almamillo Bridge, below, for its Expo '92; a counterpoint, above, is a symmetrical, stately bridge designed for the city's 1929 Ibero-American Exposition.



The graceful symmetry of the date palms in Elche, above left, seem to be reflected in Antoni Gaudi's columns, above, at Barcelona's Church of the Holy Family.

NEWSDAY PHOTOS / BRYN NELSON

A sojourner in Spain encounters timeless themes reinvented again . . . and again

BY BRYN NELSON
STAFF WRITER

With Valencia's fantastical city of the future laid out before me, I began to see much of Spain's remarkable past.

My traveling companion, Geoff, and I had just reveled in the beauty of Altea, a historic seaside village where white-washed homes set off the Mediterranean blue beyond.

Now, I was marveling at a radical reworking of the same theme, only this time the Spanish Mediterranean had been replaced by a shallow blue-green pool in a drained riverbed from which massive bleach-white buildings were rising like inscrutable fossils.

In Europe's largest cultural complex, a partially submerged eye holds an IMAX theater, a mysterious beast's immense skeleton hosts a science museum, and something akin to a partially peeled giant pistachio will boast an opera house

and performing arts center.

Valencia's breathtaking Cuitat de les Arts i les Ciències, or The City of Arts and Sciences, owes most of its iconic forms to Santiago Calatrava, the architect responsible for the crystal bird-like transit hub planned for New York's World Trade Center site. But even here, at one of the most modern sites in Spain, I realized how traditions had been continually passed down and successfully reinvented in this culturally proud country.

The rows of arches from the complex's stylish parking garage roof, L'Umbracle, may have resembled a half-buried Slinky or extended rib cage. But the promenade of palms beneath the arches appeared surprisingly similar to the one we had seen only two days before within the botanical garden of Elche, where a famous date palm forest is believed to have been planted by Muslim settlers about 1,000 years ago.

And the same motif is there in Madrid's remodeled 19th century Atocha Station, with its indoor

garden of lush palms and turtles basking in the sunshine streaming from a vaulted wrought iron and glass ceiling.

Recalling an art form dating back centuries, Calatrava even decorated some of his structures with tiles. But their shattered and reconstituted forms instead conjured up the modernist style of Barcelona's turn-of-the-century master, Antoni Gaudi, whose own creations we would see a few days later.

Tradition and reinvention. Along the stylized "V" that we traced in our travels from cosmopolitan Madrid to the seductive southern cities of Seville and Granada to the coastal exuberance of Valencia and Barcelona, we would see these themes converging around us again and again — though not always immediately recognized.

By the end of our two-week trip, however, our mini tour de Spain had become a cultural,



NEWSDAY / BRIGITTE ZIMMER

IF YOU GO

The "Rough Guide to Spain," the book we relied on the most, is spot-on with its descriptions and good with hotel recommendations but less reliable with its restaurant picks. We received several good recommendations from hotel concierges, however.

GETTING THERE: Continental Airlines flies direct from Newark to Madrid; Delta and Iberia Airlines fly direct from JFK. Round-trip restricted fares start at around \$500.

RESTAURANTS: Madrid's **Casa del Mingo**, virtually next door to the Ermita de San Antonio de la Florida at Paseo de la Florida no. 2, is a landmark that serves little more than roast chicken and alcoholic apple cider (sidra) but excels in both. About \$42 for food and drinks for two.

La Capella, hugging the back of a hilltop church in the seaside town of Altea (at San Pablo no. 1), serves exquisite seafood and salads. It cost about \$108, including drinks, for two. Call ahead or be prepared to wait for the steaming pans of paella.

Santa Companya, in Valencia's trendy Calle de Roteros (no. 21), stands out for its excellent Mediterranean food and wine list. The shrimp carpaccio is a knockout. Dinner for two, about \$55.

Irati, a well-appointed restaurant in Barcelona with a top-notch tapas bar, serves mouth-watering suckling pig and other dishes from Spain's Basque region. It's at Cardenal Casanyes no. 17; about \$120 for two.)

HOTELS: The small but chic rooms at Madrid's **NC Nacional Hotel** (www.nh-hotels.com) are an easy walk from major museums. Doubles start at about \$111.

Seville's **Casa Imperial** (casa-imperial.com) is both historical and beautiful, with amazing tile work and a well in the main patio. Rates from about \$239.

Elche's **Huerto del Cura**, (hotelhuertodelcura.com; from \$132) within Europe's only date palm forest, offers a splendid pool and garden, while Valencia's **Ad Hoc Monumental** (www.adhocoteles.com; from about \$114) is full of 18th century charm, with exposed beams and brick walls. (C.S.;) And **Hotel Romantic** (www.hotelromantic.com), in free-wheeling Sitges, offers a slice of local color. Rooms start at \$128.

— BRYN NELSON

See SPAIN on D10

NEWSDAY, SUNDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2005
www.newsday.com

Timeless works of Spain

Travel



Calatrava's Ciutat de las Arts i les Ciències, with bleach-white buildings surrounding a shallow pool, offers a radical update of Spain's seaside villages.

NEWSDAY PHOTOS / BRYN NELSON

SPAIN from D8

artistic and architectural tour de force.

Seville's alluring past

If Valencia's architectural wonders unexpectedly opened a door to Spain's artistic past, our brief stay in Seville at least cracked a window on the country's centuries of culture.

The day would begin with a sleek high-speed train departing from Madrid's palm-adorned Atocha station. It would end with an impromptu flamenco dance in one of Seville's riverside bars. In between, countless olive trees would speed by. A 16th century hotel filled with patios and colorful tiles — the exceptional Casa Imperial — would await us, as would a ride around the stately 1929 Plaza de Espana, courtesy of a beer-drinking horse-and-buggy driver.

It would be 106 degrees in the shade.

The city would seemingly thumb its nose at logical proportions or sensible navigation, with its ridiculously narrow streets and a truly colossal cathedral, the largest Gothic cathedral in the world.

I would have a meltdown, but be revived in true Spanish style with warm tapas, cold beer, ice cream and a siesta.

Here, too, azulejos (or tiles) adorn landmarks such as Casa Imperial or the 14th century Alcazar, the marvelous Moorish-influenced palace of a Spanish king. And they have seemingly inspired generations of artists like Manuel, the successful tile designer whose shop we visited the next morning.

Other azulejos decorate the facades and bridges of the Plaza de Espana, built for the 1929 Fair

of the Americas. For Seville's World Expo '92, Calatrava instead designed the city's soaring and ultramodern harp-shaped bridge named El Alamillo, another jewel that has placed the city on the map of modern architecture.

Granada's palace complex

Like Seville, Granada basks in the glow of international popularity, largely due to the jaw-dropping beauty of the Alhambra palace complex.

The Moorish masterpiece, which we first visited at night, is actually an interconnected series of masterpieces, each with its own attributes: particularly fine azulejos, or amazingly detailed columns and archways, or an incredible stalactite-vaulted ceiling or stunning symmetry reflected in serene pools.

Despite the lights accentuating the intricate walls, it was possible to see the moon rising over a central court. Swooping bats added a final touch to the exotic allure of a place where I almost sensed I was dreaming.

Cosmopolitan Madrid

Only the week before, we had begun our vacation in cosmopolitan Madrid, with its fascinating history tied to the Austrian Hapsburg dynasty. The Spanish capital has become a powerhouse on the international art scene with three major museums; we toured two of them on consecutive days.

At the first-rate, if overwhelming, Prado, we saw several aspiring artists copying works by the masters. And at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, we followed a veritable hall of fame for artists from the 14th century onward.

Madrid also is a powerhouse on the late-night scene, as we would learn courtesy of Carlos, the brother-in-law of our

friend Amaya. A Madrid native, Amaya just laughed at us when we asked, incredulously, "When do people sleep?"

The city's hidden treasure, however, proved to be a small chapel that Amaya had told us about, called Ermita de San Antonio de Florida. The chapel's ceiling frescoes by Goya only recently have been restored to their former glory. Scattered around the beautifully rendered scene are some of the hooded figures who apparently influenced Goya's striking "black" paintings we had seen the day before in the Prado.

Sun-baked Toledo

Another Prado master was waiting for us in the city of Toledo, an easy 50-minute bus

ride to the south. Toledo's location on a stark outcropping gives it an ancient sun-baked quality from a distance, an impression that only heightens once you enter its old walls. Heralded as a UNESCO World Heritage site, the city is often depicted in guidebooks as being overrun with tourists. One advantage of visiting on a sun-baked day in July, then, was that we had most of the city to ourselves.

To avoid overdoing it, we limited ourselves to three landmarks. First up was the oddly named Mezquita del Cristo de la Luz, a small and little-visited but enchanting 10th century mosque that is one of Spain's oldest Moorish monuments. Built on a church's foundations, the mosque was eventually converted back to its Christian roots, leaving an intriguing blend of religious influences.

At the Iglesia de Santo Tome, we marveled at El Greco's famous masterpiece, "The Burial of Count Orgaz," with its saturated colors, elongated forms and pervasive sadness. Geoff had brought a pair of binoculars, which was great for spotting small details.

The grandeur of Toledo's nearby cathedral, which required more than 250 years to complete, was impossible to miss. The Gothic structure's embarrassment of riches includes nearly 20 paintings by El Greco, intricately carved wooden seats in the choir, a ridiculously extravagant altarpiece and a marble carving called the Transparente: a tableau of chubby cherubs and the Virgin Mary, with a skylight illuminating the whole scene.

Saving Barcelona for last

Despite the intervening centuries, the same bold exuberance seemed to appear again in the soaring heights of Gaudi's Temple Expiatori de la Sagrada Familia, or Church of

the Holy Family, in Barcelona.

We saved Barcelona for last, after two days of lounging in the free-spirited beach town of Sitges just to the south. The city certainly isn't lacking color, whether from the human statues, flowers and exotic birds of the famed Ramblas pedestrian mall or Boqueria produce market by day, or from the spectacularly lit Font Magica, or Magic Fountain, by night.

Gaudi literally towers over Barcelona with his daring but unfinished church, however. Some of his eccentric design elements appear in other creations, such as Casa Battlo, a building that features mask-like balconies and blue, purple and green roof tiles resembling dragon scales, or Parque Guell, with its odd-angled columns, giant ceramic lizards and undulating bench covered in smashed ceramics.

In a modern tribute to the master, the helmet-like rooftop vents atop his apartment building known as La Pedrera, or the Rock Pile, also appear in a recently completed facade of Sagrada Familia, this time as Roman centurions.

Even within this brash icon of modernism, I saw the grace of Granada's honeycombed Moorish ceilings and delicately carved columns, paired with the symmetry of Elche's date palms to produce the massive and organic-looking columns supporting Sagrada Familia's central roof.

On a blazing Saturday, we walked with Amaya and her sister through Barcelona's Barri Gotic, or Gothic Quarter, where we later stopped at the inner courtyard of the city's medieval cathedral to see the resident flock of white geese.

Here again, in a city's ancient core, we saw one final reminder of the country's continued reinvention: a spate of modern art galleries flourishing in the cathedral's very shadows.

Splendor at the Parador



Terrace with a view: the Alhambra's Generalife, as seen from the Parador de San Francisco.

The giddiness began shortly after we checked into the Parador de San Francisco, a converted 15th century convent that sits smack dab in the middle of Granada's Alhambra complex.

I felt so good, I wanted to laugh. Perhaps it was the prospect of seeing the Alhambra's enchanting Palacios Nazaries on a nighttime tour.

Maybe it was the wine. But it likely had to do with the fact that we had snagged a two-night reservation for the

four-star hotel through an online "what the heck" whim, and I was sitting on the terrace, sipping white wine and soaking in the late-afternoon view of a pink crepe myrtle framing the summer palace of the sultans and the whitewashed neighborhood of Albaicin below.

The expensive but perfectly situated parador (double occupancy rates start at \$295 a night), belongs to a government-run chain of 91 hotels created mainly by restoring and converting decaying castles, palaces and con-

vents. Granada's hilltop parador doesn't overwhelm with its extravagance. Rather, it brims with the quiet splendor of its private gardens, ponds, central patio and terrace.

And, of course, the views. By day, the parador's formal gardens form part of the official walking tour, seemingly framing each angle of the complex in a profusion of flowers.

At night, with a terrific six-course tasting menu before me, a glass of sangria in hand, and the Generalife's summer palace so close I could see its architectural details, I savored the moment and felt myself smiling all over again.

— BRYN NELSON

(Dinner and wine for two runs about \$145. For rates and reservations at Parador de San Francisco, see www.parador.es. For tickets to the Alhambra, see www.alhambra-patronato.es.)