

SPAIN DIARY

October 15, 1995 through October 25, 1995

Sunday, October 15

Well, we got up at 4:15 and were on our way to the airport at 4:45. When we got to the American counter at 5:30 there were already a lot of people checking in for flight 1626 to Dallas.

We got to dallas on schedule, but while we were waiting for flight 1940 to Miami, there was an announcement that 1940 was canceled because of mechanical problems.

We thought, "Oh oh, there goes our connection in Miami."

But there was a further announcement that all Madrid passengers were to report to the desk at the gate. We were sent to another gate, where we were put on another flight to Miami leaving Dallas an hour later.

The flight to Madrid left late as it turned out.

Monday, October 16

We landed in Madrid about 9:30. Hertz had a car for us. It was a tiny Peugeot with a five-speed transmission.

Finding the Road out of Madrid to Segovia was not easy. We went back and forth once before we got headed in the right direction.

The freeways are in excellent condition, and the signing is quite good. But you do have to know the nearby towns, because a pair of signs will indicate the same route number on either side of the gore but with a town name instead of cardinal directions to indicate which way goes north and which goes south.

Freeway speed limit is usually 120 kph, but the average auto speed in the left lanes seems to be about 140 kph.

About half way to Segovia we stopped at a little roadside restaurant that had several cars and a tour bus in its parking lot. The food was not very good. Lunch was a choice of Sopa de Castellan or White Beans, Fried Meat, French Fries, Bread, Red Wine.

We got to Segovia about 2:00. It turned out to be a charming old town with narrow winding streets.

Found the where Jane booked us a room in the Hostal Plaza which was right in the center of the old town near the Plaza Mayor. The desk clerk guided me to the garage which was about 300 yards from the hotel in a straight line, but we drove about a mile through zig-zagging streets and alleys to get there.

The parking spaces were unbelievably tight. As small as the car was, I had to maneuver the rear view mirrors around posts. And the only way I could squeeze out of the car door was to leave the car halfway out of the stall.

When I got back to the hotel and went looking for the room, I found the hotel to be as much a maze as the town. Little hallways wind around and up and down till you're totally turned around.

Our little room has an alcove in one corner with an amoire stuck in the back of it. There is a tiny desk and a chair that cannot be pulled out far enough to sit in it

because the foot of the bed is in the way. We have a full bath - tub, hand douche, bidet, washbasin - all in about Tx 4'. In other words, the typical European hotel.

We went out and walked around town very briefly. The Cathedral, the Alcazar, and other buildings were built of a bright yellow sandstone that took on a golden glow in the afternoon sunlight.

I got the car and we drove to the heights across the river looking for a view of the city. The best view was that of the Alcazar from Cuesta de los Hoyos.

We put the car back in the garage, Jane rested while I walked down to the Alcazar and watched the sun set behind it.

I went back for Jane to find her totally rejuvenated and ready to walk. We walked all through the pedestrian zones where there were mobs of people of all ages. All the significant buildings and the aqueduct were illuminated. Very nice.

We stopped in a little bar for a coffee, and we talked to a couple from Texas who were doing Spain on their own, having started in Lisbon. They had given up on killing time until 9:00 when the restaurants open and were eating in the bar.

We looked at lost of menus, but ended up eating in the restaurant next door to our hotel.

Tuesday, October 17

We got up at 7:00 and went out for a walk to the Alcazar and back. Morning light on sandstone of Alcazar and Cathedral was dramatic.

Breakfast was in a little cafeteria on the opposite side of the hotel from where we had dinner.

I went for the car. Driving back from the garage was an experience. The streets that I had used before were blocked with

delivery trucks, so I tried other streets. At one point I was squeezing through such a narrow street that the mirrors on both sides folded in..

The drive to La Granja de San Ildefonso was pleasant enough. The palace is in the hills.

We decided not to take the inside tour, which required going in a group with a Spanish speaking guide. But we did tour the extensive gardens with their fifty-or-so fountains. The gardens were mostly under repair, and only a couple of the fountains were working.

The palace is styled after Versailles.

At 11:30 we left for El Escorial. An hour of driving on curving mountain roads through pine forests got us to Escorial, but the curvy roads left Jane woozy.

We passed a large ski area with several chair lifts. It is hard to believe that it can snow someplace where October 17 is summer weather. Temperatures today ranged from about 60 at night to about 85 at midday.

At one point we saw workmen dragging pine logs out of the forest with mules whose collars were inner tubes.

When we got to Escorial, we were lucky enough to find a parking place in the little town which I think was San Lorenzo de El Escorial. We shopped in a market, and had a picnic in the plaza, accompanied by the tune of jackhammers working in the streets.

Spain is noisy! Construction equipment and motorcycles without mufflers compete with the animated citizens speaking very loudly.

Jane asked a young lady to take our picture with our camera. The girl had trouble understanding Jane's Spanish. It turned out she was a Scot.

We went over to the monastery and spent two hours walking through it. Escorial was built in the 21 years from 1563 to 1584 by Philip II.

It has room after room of paintings by the renaissance masters - Titian, Veronese, Tintoretto, Van Dyck, Rubens, Ribera, etc.

The royal apartments are rooms 40 feet wide and 120 feet long. All with beautifully stuccoed and painted ceilings

The pantheons were incredibly elaborate. There are 26 marble and bronze sarcophagi in wall niches on each side of the chapel. Kings are on the left, queens on the right. All the Spanish monarchs since Emperor Charles V, with two exceptions, are entombed here.

The Infants Pantheon contains white alabaster sarcophagi with elaborate carvings. All the children of the kings and queens, including the mothers of children who did not become king, are buried here.

After leaving Escorial, we drove around looking for Philip II's Seat, from which there is supposed to be a good view of the monastery. It was not where the green guide said it would be, but we found it. There was a good view, but not a good photo opportunity.

The drive to Avila was across some great expanses of flat, open country with views to the southwest of some high mountains

Part of the way was rolling terrain, rocky with sparse stunted brush. Then the roadside turned to sugar beet fields. In one field there was a huge cutout silhouette of a bull.

Arriving in Avila, we were in a maze of narrow streets jammed with cars.

After asking directions a few times, we found the located in a small plaza in front of the Catedral.

We were told that no hotel inside the walls had parking. So we went looking for Hotel Don Carmelo about a mile outside the walls, but still in a busy part of the city.

The lady at the desk told me how to get into the garage, but stupid American me could not find it. So she came out and showed me.

It was not through the obvious door at the rear of the hotel, but entered by driving around cars parked on the sidewalk and into a little alleyway where the electronic key activated a door down the alleyway.

But after entering that door, I got totally lost. The door shut behind me and the garage was total darkness. With the headlights, I found a ramp that continued downward. But all the parking stalls had names on them.

Another car came down the ramp, and the man driving asked me if I was looking for the hotel parking. He said to go back to top floor and enter the door marked "Hotel Parking."

When I found the door marked "Garaje Hotel" and pushed the button to open it, I found that there was barely room to turn the little car into the door. It required backing and filling.

The car was finally parked in the right part of the garage. But when I turned the headlights off, I was in total darkness. I turned the headlights back on and looked for a light switch, or an elevator up to the hotel, or something. I managed to push a fire alarm button!

Very soon the outside door opened and Jane and the hotel clerk were there looking for me. The only way from the garage back to the hotel was through the two doors I had driven in through, each of which had to be operated with the electronic key (if you had any idea where the little electronic box was to insert the key).

Well after getting settled in our room, we went out for a walk.

Dinner was at a large restaurant decorated in classic Greek style and named "Olimpo." We were two of about six customers. We had a very good salad with nice red tomatoes, but the fish soup, although tasty, was kind of thin.

Wednesday, October 18

In the middle of the night, the phone rang. It was a woman in the U.S. desperately trying to reach her parents who she thought were in our hotel. She could not get anybody on the hotel staff who spoke English, so she asked to be connected to any Americans staying in the hotel.

I told her that I would try to have her parents phone her back. But there was nobody in the hotel by the name she gave.

Breakfast was in the hotel cafeteria.

We took a morning walk around the town. Kids were on their way to school. At one point mothers were delivering their children to day care and kindergarten. This caused a monumental traffic jam in the narrow medieval streets of the walled city.

We returned to the hotel and checked out about 11:00.

On our way to Salamanca we stopped in the small town of Peña. We went to a small market for bread, fruit, cheese, and wine. Then we parked near the rather dilapidated church and ate our lunch in the little plaza.

We arrived in Salamanca about 3:00. We found the Hotel Castellano III which had a garage, easy access, and a nice central location.

Walking around Salamanca we discovered lots of richly carved buildings of golden sandstone.

The Plaza Mayor was wonderful. We sat at a table for an hour watching the passing parade.

The weather was just perfect. We walked back to the hotel for sweaters, but we never needed them.

We had to wait until 9:00 for the Restorante Posada to open. We had the Menu de Casa. Jane's was trout, mine was chicken.

An American couple at the next table had driven from Toledo that day, and they said Toledo was very touristy with so many tour buses they just wanted to get away from there.

Thursday, October 19

Again, breakfast was in the hotel cafeteria. This morning a sweet roll was added to the usual fair of bread, croissant, and coffee.

There were lots of well dressed ladies having breakfast and getting ready for business meetings. One group was sorting slides for a presentation. They looked to be in their forties, and they were all very attractive with nice figures and nice legs.

We walked around the town in amazement at all the beautiful buildings. At Patio de las Escuelas there was a beautiful plateresque carved entrance from 1534. We went to Catedral Nueva (1560) with its beautiful rose colored sandstone exterior all carved in the plateresque style.

The interior of the Catedral was breathtaking. An adjoining doorway took us into the Catedral Vieja (12C) which was also very impressive with many small chapels and a cloister.

Just up the street was the Convento de las Dueñas which had sandstone columns around its cloister. The capital of each column was carved with gargoyles. They were so well preserved we could not

believe that they had survived since the 16C.

Then we went to the Convento de San Esteban (16-17C) with perhaps the most ornate plateresque façade yet. The cloisters were especially nice with ornate vaulted ceilings all the way around.

We then went down to the Roman Bridge that crosses the Rio Tormes so I could take a photo similar to one I had seen in the Restaurante Posada.

While we were there, a high school teacher had her class out for P.E. in the park. The kids, to the annoyance of their teacher, were very interested in us and wanted to know where we were from. When we said "California," the boys all said, "Oh, Bay Watch!," and made signs for big bosomed girls.

We walked back from the south of town to the north of town though throngs of people of all ages all going the other way. Apparently many were attending conventions at the University, and the others were changing classes.

Up an alleyway, a group of young men in costume were singing and playing instruments.

At 4:00 we went back to the hotel where Jane took a nap while I went back to Plaza Mayor, had a beer, and watched the passing parade of children, college students, and old folks.

The sky clouded over and a cool breeze came up.

When I went back for Jane at 8:00 I made sure we both put on our sweaters before going back out.

At 9:00 we were back at the Posada for the menu of the day.

Friday, October 20

We drove to Alba de Tormes - a dumpy little town that looks like old Mexico - situated on a hill above the river with a 10 or 12 arch bridge crossing to it.

There were nice reflections in the water.

The countryside south of Alba changes to farmland with lots of planted groves of poplar trees.

Road N-30 to Bejar is all being replaced with a modern 2-lane highway with interchanges.

Bejar is a beautiful town high in mountains. We stopped for coffee and talked to some 8th graders who were out on a tour to Salamanca. The surrounding countryside is now very mountainous and forested.

The drive from Bejar to La Alberca is very pleasant, passing through cow pastures, mountains, and forests.

At one point the road crosses a stream in a mountain gorge, and there are two restaurants nestled down in the gorge.

We encountered practically no traffic.

But as we entered La Alberca we met a delivery truck coming at us in a narrow, one-way alley. The driver said we must back up and take the highway around to the other end of the town and enter there.

The town turned out to be incredibly primitive with half-timbered buildings hanging out over narrow cobbled streets.

We found the Hotel Paris right at the entrance to the town. The only hotel, and its excellent. Marble stairways, original oil paintings on the walls. Gold swan faucets in our bathroom.

In walking around the town, we came on people either riding burros or leading loaded burros. It seems the burros live in the downstairs of the buildings and the people live in the upstairs.

We asked what supported the local economy and were told that most of the people worked in the ham and sausage packing houses nearby.

There were three modestly large souvenir shops, but no customers and probably no employees.

Each family had its own garden on a small plot of land just outside the town.

Saturday, October 21

After a nice breakfast at the Hotel Paris which included freshly squeezed orange juice, we walked around the village for about half an hour.

The townspeople were heading out into the country riding burros and horses, or leading cows with big brass bells.

We left about 9:30 and drove back to Bejar to pick up the main highway to the south.

We stopped at the old Jewish community of Hervás. For being off the highway at the end of a country lane, it was surprisingly large and busy. There were people everywhere. In one group, the men were wearing military greens and boots like Fidel Castro - we did not find out what that was about.

We bought bread, fruit, cheese, and wine for a picnic in the large central park.

Leaving Hervás, we drove south to Plasencia where we stopped for a cafe Americano.

From Plasencia, we drove straight through in an easterly direction to Toledo. Most of the drive was on a modern freeway with very light traffic. The drive took three hours including another coffee stop.

We arrived in Toledo about 4:00. What a fabulous place! And what a terrifying town to drive in.

After entering the Puerta Nueva, we immediately found ourselves in a maze of steep, narrow, winding, one-way streets.

Tourists were everywhere, so you could drive no faster than the sightseers were walking. With a little four-cylinder engine and a worn clutch, it was almost impossible. At each stop, the car refused to get going again. The engine would either die, or the rear wheels would spin on the polished cobbles.

We had intended to go to Hotel Real, but somehow we missed it. Found an Hotel Isabelle, but it was full. After an hour or so, we managed to find a street that led out of the walls.

Once outside the walls, we consulted the map, determined where Hotel Real was, and entered the Puerta Nueva once again.

Jane registered while I double parked. When she came out, she said the garage would be hard to get to. At the time, we had no idea what an understatement that was to be.

We had to drive around inside the walls again until we could find a way out. Once outside the walls, we went to another gate where we entered a new maze of alleyways.

What followed was a nightmare. We went up one street so narrow that we had to fold the mirrors in only to come to a dead end from which we had to back down - the grade was about 20%!

Finally a boy about ten came to our rescue. He led us up another narrow alley and pointed to the little metal door that was the entrance to the Real's garage.

It was about 6 feet wide and at the top of about a 30% grade. There was a video camera over the door through which the desk clerk could see us. She opened the door, and then the fun began.

Time after time I revved up the tiny engine and let the clutch out. Each time

the engine died. Finally on about the twelfth attempt, I gave the little engine full throttle and with squealing tires the little car started fish-tailing up the incline toward the door.

But just as the car got to the door, the door slammed shut! Somehow I managed not to hit the door. But we were both trembling and exhausted.

Jane got out, found a button, and rang for the door to be opened.

After another dozen or so tries, the little car started fish-tailing up the incline toward the door. I knew there was no way in the world of missing the sides of the door, but somehow the little car straightened out just as it got to the door and went through without scraping.

But! Immediately inside the garage it was pitch black. I fumbled for the unfamiliar headlight switch and managed to get the lights on. There in the headlights right in front of the car still scrabbling up about a 30% slope was a huge concrete column. I spun the steering wheel and missed the column, but then there was another and another. The garage was the basement of the old hotel, and there were columns about every ten feet in both directions.

Finally, after dodging several columns, I came out onto a level floor. I parked the car and sat there, a glob of quivering jello. There was a strong smell of burning clutch and smoking tires.

The Hotel Real was nice, but worth the effort of parking?

After getting settled in and recovering from the ordeal, we went for a walk.

In a little shop we looked at some examples of damascene gold work on plates. Incredible.

We went to the Catedral, but it was cerrado. Walking back to the hotel we got totally turned around in the maze of twisting, narrow streets. We kept asking

directions, and finally got back on course. I should have taken my compass out of the car and used it for walking in Toledo.

At 9:00 we went to dinner at Restorante Aurelio. I had Perdiz and Jane had Sopa de Mariscos. My stewed partridge was delicious - it might have even been up to the standards Michener mentioned in *Iberia*.

At dinner the couple at the next table were from Texas. He was head of Electrical Engineering at Texas A & M so he knew some of the TTI staff that I had worked with before I retired.

After dinner we walked until 11:00 through crowds of people lots of whom were teenagers.

Sunday, October 22

Breakfast in the hotel cafeteria included freshly squeezed orange juice.

We walked to the El Greco Museo which was very nice. From there we went to the El Tránsito Synagogue. Then we went to Iglesia St. Tome to see El Greco's "The Burial of the Count of Orgaz." It was worth seeing, but we paid 150 pesetas each to see it.

We went to the Catedral which is huge and ornate. There is a skylight in the ambulatory surrounded by sculptured angels which throws light onto the back of the altar.

Lunch was in a little sidewalk cafe in an alley, where there were several American tourists.

We looked at several more Damascene plates and watched one artist making Damascene ear rings. Jane bought several pairs for gifts.

After walking through the Plaza de Zocodover where we encountered groups of

people in folk costumes, we walked around the entire perimeter of the walled city.

We returned to the hotel at 5:00 where Jane hopped into the tub and I went to the bar for a beer. When I returned to the room, Jane was still in the tub, so I went out and visited Puerta Vieja and Puerta Nueva.

Then we read and dozed until after 8:00 waiting for it to get late enough for the restaurants to open. At 9:00 we went into Los Cuatro Tiempos where we had Almond Soup and Venison Stew.

Returning to the hotel after dinner we got lost twice and had to ask directions. The streets are a complete maze!

Monday, October 23

Breakfast at 8:00 then we walked to the Tavera Hospital to see the wonderful courtyards with their columns and arches.

On the way back we went to Puerta Vieja because Jane had not yet seen it. An elderly man started explaining the history of the gate to us and how El Cid rode his horse through it in the 900s.

Then he led us up an alleyway and through a courtyard and into his "factory."

What a treat! Men in blue coveralls were hard at work making ceremonial swords for the U.S. armed services. At the time we were there they were working on a run of U.S. Navy ceremonial swords, but they also made swords for the Marines, the Army, and the Air Force.

He took us to a display room where there were hundreds of swords in every shape and style imaginable.

We headed up the hill to old Toledo where we passed the Mosque of El Cristo de la Luz, a synagogue from the 900s and the oldest building in Toledo. Just as we got to the mosque, an old man was locking the gate on his way out.

We asked him if he would let us in, and he did. He told us the history of the mosque and how it had passed from Muslims to Visigoths to Christians.

We went into the shopping district where we bought a gold filigree Damascene dish. Jane would not pay the extra money for an Arabesque pattern, so we got a Renaissance pattern. One was \$150.00 and the other was \$70.00.

We walked back to the hotel, checked out, and got the car out of the garage. There was no difficulty leaving. We went down the narrow alleyways to the city gate, turned right, did a 270 at a round-about, and entered the freeway to Madrid.

About 12:00 noon we dropped the car off at the Madrid airport and took a taxi to the Hotel Moderno. We got into one cab, but Jane could not negotiate a reasonable price with him. So we got into another that was 500 pesetas less to go into town.

The hotel could not have been better located. It was just about halfway between the royal palace and the Prado museum.

Right after we checked in, we went to Burger King for Whoppers and beer. It was a great lunch!

We proceeded to the Royal Palace only to find that it would be closed until 3:00 because Juan Carlos was having an audience.

We walked to Plaza Mayor and had coffee at an outdoor cafe. Musicians were playing in the plaza, but the police ran them off.

At 3:30 we returned to the Royal Palace only to find it was still closed. We waited in line until 4:30 and finally got in.

We have been through lots of palaces, but this was the first time we had been in one that was still in use. What a difference!

This was not a restored museum; this was an actual operating palace.

Everything was perfect. Room after room with stucco ceilings covered with gold leaf. Huge crystal chandeliers, inlaid wood, mosaics, paintings, statues, china cabinets, desks, chairs, tables, beds - everything perfect.

And the building was huge. It's laid out in a big quadrangle with a courtyard in the middle.

There is a royal armory, a royal pharmacy, a royal carriage house.

At 6:00 we went back to the hotel pooped

At 8:30 we went down to the lobby and asked about a good restaurant. We were sent to the Restorante Pazo de Comodor. It proved expensive and pedestrian.

After dinner we went to the Plaza Mayor where many artists were displaying their work. Some were exceptionally good.

Jane bought a bullfight poster with Zene's name printed on it.

At 10:30 we were back in the room in bed. Very tired.

Tuesday, October 24

We had breakfast in the hotel cafeteria, then went up to the room to phone American Airlines to confirm our return flight reservation. The number given us in the U.S. did not work. Jane went down to the desk and asked; they gave her a different number which also proved to be a wrong number.

We went to a bank and cashed a traveler's check. Although we were the only customers in bank, it took about fifteen minutes.....

It started raining for the first time on the trip.

Back at the hotel we got another number for American Airlines. This time it worked, and Jane confirmed our reservations.

Finally we got started for the Museo del Prado. We spent two hours in the Prado - from 10:30 to 12:30 —just looking at the works of El Greco, Velazquez, and Goya.

Then we went to the Thyssen-Bornemisza museum where we first had lunch and then spent a couple of hours with impressionists and expressionists.

In the Park de Retiros we found the Crystal Palace surrounded by a construction fence. But in another building there was an exhibition by a Francisco Arango that was wonderful. The work was surrealist or perhaps cubist, but very well done.

We walked back through town. The rain had stopped but the sky was very dark. In Plaza Mayor there were no outdoor table patrons. We had coffee in a shop in the east arcade.

We went back to the hotel at 5:30 and read. At 8:45 we walked to Restorante Gallegas. We had the "menu" which was salad and paella.

Wednesday, October 25

I woke up at 6:45 and looked out. The sky was very dark. At 7:30 we had breakfast, and at 8:10 we got in a cab for the airport. At 9:40 we got in the end of one of several long lines checking in for AA69 scheduled to depart at 10:50.

In the duty-free, Jane bought T-shirts for everybody.

Lift off was at 11:30.

We landed at Miami at 3:20 local time. And I found that packing my Spanish phrase book in my luggage was a mistake. Try to buy a muffin in the Miami airport by speaking English!

Then it was Dallas for another change,
and on to Sacramento where we arrived
right on time at 11:20.