

Bragg July 2019 Trip to Spain: Across the Pyrenees

The last time I was in Spain was in 1977 when I and two college roommates, Leslie and Lucy, backpacked around Europe the summer after we graduated. Leslie happened to be of Basque heritage and so our first stop in Spain was Pamplona where we stayed with some of her relatives for a few days during the *Running of the Bulls*. After Pamplona we visited the cities of Madrid and Barcelona where we stayed in youth hostels and ate on very limited budgets. I have some wonderful memories of that time in Spain and looked forward to revisiting those while also making new ones when Steve and I decided to join a Mountain Travel Sobek (MTS) *Across the Pyrenees* hiking trip. The trip would be Steve's first visit to Spain.

The Pyrenees mountain range in northeast Spain forms a natural nearly 270 mile long border between France and Spain. While the MTS trip would start in the city of Bilbao, on the north coast of Spain, we knew we wanted to have time to get over the jet lag/8 hour time difference between Denver and Spain so we first spent a few days in Madrid.

Madrid

Madrid is both the capital of Spain and its most populous city with over 3.3 million inhabitants. After our 2 flight, roughly 19 hour door-to-door journey, we were happy to check into the lovely *Gran Melia Palacio de los Duques* hotel, formerly a 19th century palace. The artwork throughout the hotel is inspired by the art of the renowned Spanish painter Diego Velazquez. One of his paintings, the 1659 *Infanta Margarita Teresa in a Pink Dress*, serves as a kind of logo for the hotel, albeit a colorized version.



Me in Spain, July 1977



Diego Velazquez' Infanta Margarita Teresa in a Pink Dress,



Gran Melia Palacio de los Duques Hotel Room

After a bit of settling into our room, we headed out to stretch our legs in the *Old Town* area, also known *Habsburg Madrid* or the *Madrid of the Austrians*. This area of Madrid was built during the reign of the Habsburg Dynasty (1516-1700), known in Spain as *Casa de Austria*. Madrid became a “capital” city relatively late in terms of European standards – it wasn’t until 1561 when Phillip II moved his court there that it began its mostly-uninterrupted reign as the country’s capital city.

As we circled back to the hotel along one of Madrid’s pedestrian shopping streets, we stopped to admire the brave souls getting strapped into “chairs” in the window of the Samsung store – they had paid for the privilege of taking a 3 minute virtual reality simulation ride ... neither one of us was tempted to give it a try but it was fun to watch.

While Madrid wasn’t the epicenter of the ongoing European heatwave of the summer, it was certainly quite warm. We celebrated our arrival in Spain with a pre-dinner drink on the hotel’s rooftop (where the swimming pool is located) before enjoying an alfresco dinner at a café across the street from the hotel. Steve chose a Spanish “tortilla” for his dinner (i.e., a thick egg, potato and onion omelet). A friendly fellow diner, a female retired university professor who had spent quite a bit of time in the states, informed us that there are basically 2 types of tortillas: those made with *crispy* potatoes & onions and those not so they’re much “mushier” ... that evening’s was the mushier type which didn’t appeal particularly to either one of us.

The next morning we met up with Carmen, a “Tours by Local” guide, for a walking tour of the Old Town area. She was a wealth of information on the history of the city as well as its current happenings. It was the Muslims who put the Madrid area on the map in 860 by building a fortress to protect their kingdom of Al-Andalus from Christian raiders. Medieval Spain (5th – 15th centuries) was the scene of almost constant warfare between Muslims and Christians. By 1250, nearly all of the Iberian Peninsula (of which present day Spain and Portugal make up its majority in size) was back under Christian rule. The monarchs Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand (of Christopher Columbus and 1492 fame) oversaw the final conquest of Iberian territory from the Moors (Muslim inhabitants of the area) with the conquest of Granada and the Canary Islands. Their reign was also marked by the period known as the *Spanish Inquisition*, a period of religious intolerance during which Muslims and Jews were either forced to convert to Christianity or be expelled. During the 16th and first half of the 17th century, the *Spanish Empire* was the world's most powerful empire, reaching its maximum extension in the 18th century. During this time, Spain controlled a huge overseas territory in the New World and the Asian archipelago of the Philippines in addition to territories in Europe, Africa and Oceania.

As the country’s capital city, Madrid was the recipient of much of the power and prestige and its buildings on the old town area reflect this. Just beyond the *Teatro Real* (or Royal Theater, Madrid’s major opera house opened in 1850), is the *Plaza de Oriente*. This large square gardens and sculptures, including a 17th century bronze equestrian statue of King Phillip IV by the Italian sculptor Pietro Tacca using scientific advice from Galileo Galilei -- yes, that Galileo – he helped the sculptor

figure out how to support the massive weight of the rearing horse via rods within the horse’s tail.



Phillip IV Equestrian Statue



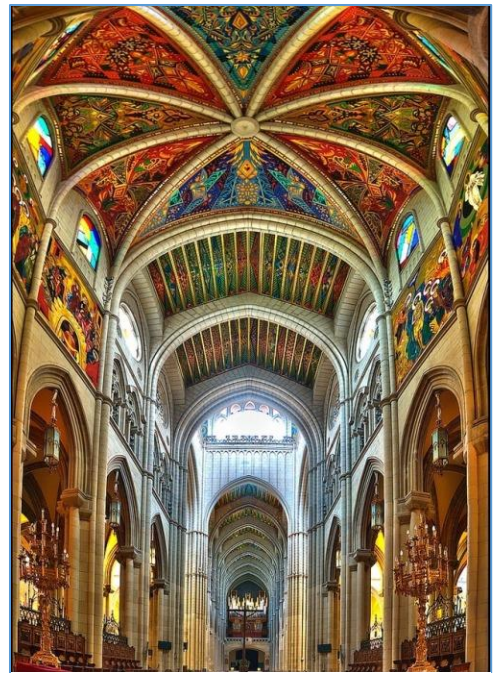
Plaza de Oriente in front of Royal Palace

At the *Royal Palace*, which sits behind the Plaza de Oriente, we watched the twice weekly changing of the guard involving 4 sentries (2 walking and two mounted on horses), accompanied by a piper and a drummer (a

much larger changing of the guard happens just once a month). The *Plaza de la Armeria* separates the Royal Palace from the *Almudena Cathedral*, the seat of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Madrid. The cathedral is built on the site of old Arabic fortifications; its construction began in 1879 and was not completed until 1993 (it was consecrated by Pope John Paul II at that time). The cathedral's Neo-Gothic interior is uniquely modern, with chapels and statues by contemporary artists, in mixed styles, from historical revival to "pop-art" décor – definitely not the "typical" cathedral décor.

The "Old City Hall" plaza (Plaza de la Villa) has buildings surrounding it from the 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. Not far from this plaza is a Spanish monastery, the *Monastery of Corpus Christi*, where cloistered nuns bake cookies (supposedly using ancient recipes dating back to the time of the Romans). If you are in the know, these cookies are available for sale, you just need to ...

1. Ring their front door bell -- after they check you out via a video camera they'll unlock the door for you
2. Walk forward about 20ft, make a left turn and in another few feet, on the left you'll see a small wooden door inset into the wall – open the door to find a wooden carousel-like device which allows the nuns to send out the cookies – there are several different versions (without being seen) and for you to give them your money (again, without any physical/visual contact).
3. Enjoy the cookies! They were quite tasty 😊



Interior of Almudena Cathedral



The *Plaza Mayor* (Main Square) is in the heart of old town Madrid and is one of the largest squares at 423 ft x 308 ft. In the 15th century, this area served as a town market area; it has seen much building and rebuilding over the centuries with 3 major fires, the last in 1790, being the primary cause of destruction and subsequent reconstruction. The current plaza has 237 balconies on the three-story buildings that face inward towards the Plaza, including the *Casa de la Panadería* (Bakery House), originally the city's main bakery and now a cultural and municipal building. The plaza's ground floor with its arched stone columnnade is now filled with gift shops and restaurants whose seating areas spill out into the plaza itself (restaurant seating is the only seating available in the plaza area).



Casa de la Panadería, Plaza Mayor

Scattered throughout the old town area are plaques inset into the sidewalks which highlight a particular historic place, such as the restaurant *Botin*, founded in 1725. According to the Guinness Book of Records it is the oldest restaurant continuously operating in the world. The artist Francisco de Goya worked in Cafe Botin as a waiter while waiting to get accepted into the Royal Academy of Fine Arts.

In addition to all the history in the area, some elements of present-day life were also on display ... a sign of protest against an Airbnb flat was not at all subtle.



Plaque commemorating Botin restaurant, founded 1725

The Spanish writer *Cervantes* and the American Writer *Ernest Hemingway* (known in Spain as "Don Ernesto") were favorites of our guide Carmen so they were both highlighted as we walked through various narrow-streeted neighborhoods/barrios. We stopped for refreshment (tapas and a beverage) at the café once frequented by Don Ernesto on a plaza sporting a statue of Cervantes. Hanging in the window of the café (and many others in Spain) were legs of Jamón ibérico ("Iberian ham") made from black Iberian pigs, or cross-bred pigs so long as they are at least 50% ibérico ... it is very tasty ham!



Clash of cultures – signs protesting an Airbnb flat

After saying gracias and adios to Carmen, we enjoyed a snack of the convent-made cookies in a park near Madrid's famous art museum, the *Museo de Prado*, celebrating its 200th anniversary this year. As we snacked, we listened to a nearby protest that was in full swing in support of the homeless – a homeless encampment was set up in the park where we were. Once in the Prado, we marveled at the still brilliant colors of Hieronymus Bosch's *Gardens of Earthly Delight* and its other-worldly depictions. The museum is huge and filled with work by artists Francisco



Legs of Jamón ibérico in café window

Goya, Diego Velazquez, El Greco, Titan, Rembrandt, Caravaggio and so many more. We were quite ready for some time away from the crowds by the time we caught a taxi back to the hotel where we shared a plate of Jamón ibérico and other offerings in the hotel's historic and peaceful garden area. Since a gelato was just the thing to complete the day, we headed to the very crowded nearby shopping area and relished a bowl of the cool, sweet stuff while marveling at the slightly creepy costumed "entertainers" dressed in large animal costumes (heat-stroke was a real possibility for those inside).

The next day we returned to the *Royal Palace*, but this time we visited its interior via a self-guided audio tour. The *Palacio de Rea de Madrid* stands on the site of the former Alcazar palace of the Spain Habsburgs which was destroyed by a fire on Christmas Eve 1734. Philip V, the first Bourbon king of Spain, commissioned the building of a new palace which was completed in 1764. Versailles has nothing on this place with its over-the-top crystal chandeliers, opulent fabrics and carpets, elaborate plaster moldings and ceilings, gilded furniture, frescos, etc. It even has a room which walls and ceiling are covered entirely in porcelain. We also visited the *Royal Armory* – filled with works of art in terms of metalcraft that unfortunately were also tools of war.

Next up was a visit to the cool (literally nice and cool) "crypts" at the Almudena Cathedral. Unlike the more modern décor of the cathedral, the crypts' 400 stone columns (each with a unique capital), stained glass windows and other decor are much more in line with traditional in Neo-Romanesque style. It has the same dimension as the cathedral above it and is considered the largest crypt in Spain.



Picasso's La Guernica

the museum's must see pieces. The painting's sheer size makes an immediate impression (it's approximately 11 feet tall and 25 feet wide) and it depicts the horrors of the Spanish Civil War in Picasso's signature geometric patterned style. Pieces by Salvador Dali are also featured. As neither Steve nor I am especially drawn to contemporary or modern art, much of what the Reina Sofia has to offer was lost on us.



Backside of "Koala" with battery-operated fans



The Porcelain Room in Royal Palace



Some of the 400 columns in the Crypts of Almudena Cathedral

A tapas lunch at a nearby place was just what we needed to recharge for an afternoon visit to the *Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia*, Spain's national museum of 20th-century art. Pablo Picasso's *La Guernica* is one of the

Our food tour late that afternoon with Maria, a young Spanish journalist, was much more to our liking! We met up in Madrid's *Chueca* neighborhood still festooned with rainbow banners & flags from the recent gay pride celebrations. At a local marketplace we sampled cold *Salmorejo* (cold tomato bread soup), various Spanish cheeses, different flavors of "couquetas" (aka coquettes) and other tasty items. A neighborhood bakery stop had us sampling traditional Spanish cookies while a visit to the aptly named "Oink" shop meant eating more yummy *Jamon Iberico*. We finished our time with Maria by visiting one of the few remaining bars in Madrid where you still get "free" tapas when you buy a beverage. Steve enjoyed the *paella* (Spanish rice dish with seafood) and we both enjoyed a delicious *tortilla* (this one made with crispy potatoes and onions) while sampling some Spanish wine.



While walking around Madrid, we did notice something we had never seen before ... gay friendly walk/don't walk signs. Apparently they were installed in 2017 when Madrid hosted the World Pride Festival.

Bilbao

The next morning we bid farewell to Madrid as we boarded a train bound for Bilbao which lies about 250 miles due north and just slightly east of Madrid – a journey of about 4 hours.



The countryside between Madrid and Bilbao is very similar to that of parts of California ... it's no wonder the Spanish felt so at home there. Due to an ongoing drought, the landscape was quite parched. As we passed by the Segovia area, we were treated to several colorful hot air balloons afloat (2 fellow Americans who boarded the train there said they were escaping the area for the weekend as a 2-day balloon festival was being held starting the next morning and huge crowds were anticipated). After a pleasant trip north, we disembarked at the Bilbao train station and were greeted by a stunning stained glass piece nearly 50 ft wide and over 30 ft high; made in 1948, it is composed of 301 pieces depicting activities typical of the area as well as important local places such as the *Basilica of Begoña*.



Stained glass in Bilbao Train Station

After checking into our hotel, we set out to explore the city of *Bilbao* on another quite warm afternoon (our “sun” umbrellas were getting a good workout on this trip). Bilbao, located on the banks of the Nervión River, is the largest city in the Basque region of Spain. During the 19th century, Bilbao became one of the biggest and most important manufacturing centers in Spain. The *Spanish Civil War* (1936-39) began in Bilbao with a series of small Nationalist uprisings, leading to a German bombing campaign in the summer of 1936. All the city's bridges were destroyed during the war but the city was rebuilt after the war and its industrial nature flourished until the 1980s when an economic crisis devastated the area. In the 1990s the city made a concerted effort to transform itself into a service-oriented city. As part of this effort, the Basque government in 1991 suggested to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation that it would fund a Guggenheim museum to be built in Bilbao's decrepit port area – the Frank Gehry designed museum opened in 1997 and has become the centerpiece of the revitalized city. (I won't even begin to discuss the Basque separatist movement, the ETA, which dominated the area during the period 1959 – 2011).



Bilbao Guggenheim Museum

While we didn't venture inside the museum, we did admire its unique and futuristic exterior form and the several fun sculptures along the river bank, including a 30 ft high metal spider by Louise Bourgeois named *Maman* (mom), a tribute to the artist's mother.

We followed the river walk until we came to a bridge that took us into the charming "Old Town" or *Casco Viejo* area, a medieval neighborhood that used to be the walled part of the town until the end of the 19th century. There we wandered the narrow streets, took in the Baroque architecture, and made our way to the neo-classical styled *Plaza Neuva* (New Plaza), built in 1821. We randomly



Just some of a selection of delicious pinchos



Bilbao's Old Town Plaza Nueva

selected one of the many cafes lining the plaza's sides and gladly enjoyed a repast of delicious *pintxos* (*pinchos*) and a cold drink. "Pintxo" is a Basque word that literally means a "spike" so in food terms we're talking *skewered* foods ("pincho" is how the word is spelled in Spanish). Pinchos often, but not always, have a foundation of bread. We gladly sampled several varieties – all fresh and tasty.

Besides its many restaurants, the Old Town area also has many shops. One hosiery shop was a throwback to memories of such stores in my youth – it contained shelf after shelf filled with boxes of stockings. Another shop was named the *American Store* and we got a good chuckle out of its offerings – all kinds of American brand “food” items – it made us proud to be Americans indeed!

Back at our hotel, we enjoyed a drink on its roof top overlooking the city, river, and hills beyond. On a recommendation from the concierge, we later headed out for an 8pm-ish dinner (late by our standards but not in Spain) at a nearby restaurant called *La Vina*. Our “early” arrival meant we were able to snag a table just before they got crazy busy. We had what was likely the best meal of the entire trip: we split an outstanding fresh mozzarella salad with candied tomatoes, pesto and pinenuts, a Jamon iberico risotto, pork cheeks and mashed potatoes, and a bottle of white wine – all for less than \$60.

Frankly, we had never heard of Bilbao, Spain before looking into the MTS *Across the Pyrenees* hiking trip ... we found the city to be a very pleasant and charming surprise and were very glad to have experienced a bit of it. The next morning the MTS trip got under way and we said farewell to Bilbao.

Across the Pyrenees Hiking Trip – Day 1: Meet Up

Our 8-day trip commenced with a 2 hr motor coach ride from Bilbao to the city of *Pamplona* in the foothills of the Pyrenees. Along the way, we began to become acquainted with our fellow hikers and our guides for the trip:

- Erik - lead guide, and veteran of many MTS trips, including *Across the Pyrenees*. A professional mountaineer and published historian, Erik shared his passion for the mountains and Spanish history with us throughout the trip.
- Martin - assistant guide, also a professional mountaineer and veteran of many MTS trips.
- Javier – coach driver and a veteran of many MTS trips.
- Emma - trip assistant, working on her mountain guide credentials, and Martin’s girlfriend
- Elaine, Hugh and Matthew – family from Long Island New York area. Elaine is in real estate finance and a marathon runner. Her husband Hugh, currently in produce distribution, is formerly an east coast “rocker” of some local reknown and still very active in the music business. Matthew had just graduated from high school and would be heading to college, Syracuse University, in the fall.
- Steve and Raimy – father and daughter from Reno, Nevada. Steve is an attorney and Raimy is a teacher. They were already acquainted with Elaine and Hugh having met a couple years earlier on an MTS *Tour de Mont Blanc* trip. Raimy was sporting a custom leg brace as she had torn an ACL just about 6 weeks prior to the trip (she planned to have knee surgery later in the fall).
- Sean and Patrick – father and son from DC area (McLean, VA). Sean is a heavy hitter at Deloitte Consulting. His son, Patrick, in between his junior and senior high school years, had just completed a 4 week Spanish language immersion program.



Chips Ahoy and Oreo O's Cereal?



Pyrenees Area – border of Spain & France

- Nancy – from Philadelphia, PA, oversees 2 historical cemeteries and had been on a previous MTS trip with Erik in Greece several years earlier.
- Beth – a massage therapist from Virginia, met Nancy on the same Greece trip and they have remained friends since. Due to bad weather in the east, Beth missed her initial flight to meet up with Nancy but fortunately was able to get out eventually ... Emma ended up picking her up separately at the Bilbao airport and meeting us in Pamplona.
- Jennifer – an elementary school counselor from North Carolina, knew Erik from a *Camino de Santiago* MTS trip the prior year. The same bad weather caused Jennifer to have flight issues with the result being a lost suitcase ... she was finally and joyously reunited with it on Day 4 of the trip!
- Mary - a physician and healthcare executive from the Boston, MA area.

Our group ranged in age from 17 to 75 with the majority of us in our 50's and 60's (pretty typical for an MTS trip).

Upon arrival in Pamplona, we walked some of the *running of the bulls* route through the old part of town – the wooden barricades were still there as the 2019 festival had finished up less than a week previously. When I was there in 1977, females were not allowed to “run” with the bulls ... not that I had any desire to do so!



Steve along Pamplona's running of the bulls route

After a multi-course lunch in the old town area, *Casco Viejo*, we walked to the nearby “Roman wall.” The city of Pamplona was founded in 74 BC by the Roman military and political leader, Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus, better known simply as Pompey. The city’s strategic location required it to be fortified from the beginning so over time, its walls were constantly being added to, modified, destroyed and reconstructed, to meet the growing needs of the city. In 1530, during the reign of Carlos V, it was ordered that the old medieval walls be completely renovated, and thus the current walls seen today were rebuilt (construction/renovation continued through the 18th century).



Casco Viejo, Old Town Pamplona



Roman Wall, Pamplona

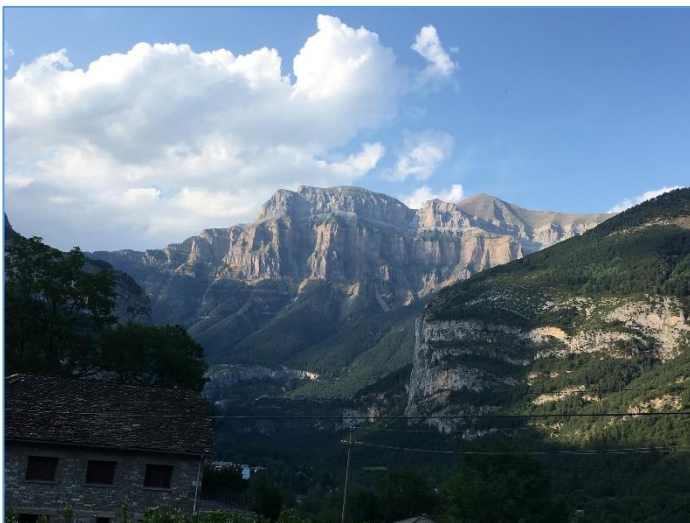
A coach ride of about 1 ½ hours brought us to our overnight hotel in the charming town of *Torla*, a small town of about 300 folks nestled in the Pyrenees at about 3,400'. The town serves as the gateway to *Parque Nacional de Ordesa* (Ordesa National Park), Spain's first national park founded in 1918. A Renaissance fair was being held in Torla so we wandered around its medieval streets and beautifully preserved buildings with beautiful corners and period houses built in stone, double-arched windows and noble shields on the facades.



Torla's Romanesque-style Church



Torla's medieval-era streets



Magnificent Mondarruego, 9,340', towers above Torla



Hiking gets underway!

Pyrenees – Day 2: Hike from Spain into France

The Pyrenean mountain range was formed between 80 and 20 million years ago as a result of the Iberian landmass (what is now Spain and Portugal) colliding with the much larger Eurasian landmass in the region of what is now southwestern France. The Pyrenees are older than the Alps (the highest and most extensive mountain range within Europe stretching about 750 miles versus less than 300 for the Pyrenees).

Today would be our first day of hiking in the Pyrenees or *Pirineos* as they are called in Spanish. A short ride away from our Torla hotel, we started hiking upwards along the banks of the Ara River through beech and pine forests under blue, sunny skies and mild temperatures (no jacket needed).

At about 7,500' we broke the tree line (as opposed to a tree line of about 12,000' at home in the Rockies). We used the hike to chat and become better acquainted with our fellow hikers – a couple of whom were feeling the combined effects of jet lag and the altitude (as most were coming from areas of low altitude).

With Assistant Guide Martin in the lead and Head Guide Erik encouraging those at the back of the pack, we steadily climbed upward along the well-marked trail through meadows and high pastures until at 7,920' we reached *Buharuelo Pass*, the border with France, and just like that we left Spain and entered France!



Atop Buharuelo Pass, heading into France



Wild iris covered slopes were quite the sight!



Cirque de Gavarnie with Gavarnie Falls, highest in France

A short descent through wild iris covered slopes (a very pleasant and lovely surprise) brought us to our picnic lunch spot not far from a waterfall-headed mountain stream. Our continued downward trek brought us to the *Cirque de Gavarnie* (a cirque is an amphitheater-like valley formed by glacial erosion). The *Gavarnie Falls* are the highest in France with an overall drop of 1,515'.

After hiking a total of about 10 miles we reach the French town of *Gavarnie* and a charming alpine hotel, our home for the night. As with all nights during the MTS trip, we enjoyed a multi-course dinner, albeit a late one ... the European habit of late dining was never one we really adjusted to – hard to go to sleep on a very full stomach ☺

Pyrenees – Day 3: Hike from France back into Spain

It was still dark when we arose and breakfasted on croissants, hard boiled eggs, sliced meats & cheeses, etc. set out special for our group at the early hour of 6am. As today would be our longest hike and most strenuous of the trip, some 12 miles with considerable elevation gain, 4,700'+ and loss, 4,000'+, Erik wanted us on the trail by 6:30am. The climb up from Gavarnie (elevation 4,550) to the first pass of the day at about 7,800' was quite pleasant as we climbed during the coolness of the morning listening to the sounds of sheep and cow bells clanging amidst the bleating and mooing of their wearers.

A couple of “music makers” along the trail





Elevation profile of hike from Gavarnie, France to Bielsa, Spain

A midmorning break at a mountain hut helped fuel us to the first pass of the day. There a 3rd guide, Tomas, a long-time mountain guide friend of Erik's met up with us to lend a hand as we navigated the first "down" portion of the day ... a field of scree (defined as a mass of small stones/rock that cover a slope). Using an amazing range of techniques, from giant strides and leaps by our group's youngsters, Patrick and Matthew, to more considered and careful foot placement by others, we all safely navigated the first loose and steep scree slope before once again hiking upward to the day's second pass, this the border with Spain. Here, we stopped for lunch accompanied by a very noisy marmot who "chirped" this displeasure at our invasion of his space!



Steve enjoying lunch in the Pyrenees

After lunch, the 12 of us (Raimy had fortunately taken Erik's recommendation to skip the day's hike and instead join Javier and Emma as they drove from Gavarnie, France to Bielsa, Spain) were split into 3 groups, 1 guide per group. Then the real "fun" began – endless downhill – first a long, long fairly steep scree slope followed by a still steep and very rocky trail which required attention to foot placement ... all under an unrelenting sunny day of very warm temperatures (mid-80's) and with heat radiating off the rocks under your feet as well. Needless to say, there were a few casualties in the sharp-rocks of the scree field – a cut hand, a battered knee, and bruised bums on several of us who went down at one time or another (of course, Steve merrily and easily avoided any such indignities being part mountain goat that he is!). It didn't take long for the groups to spread out ... Martin with the "fast" ones (Steve, Matthew, Patrick, and Sean) took the lead while our "guest guide" Tomas oversaw the middle group (Elain, Hugh, the other Steve, and myself) while Erik stewarded Beth, Mary, Jennifer, and Nancy.



Descending the first scree slope - not so bad



The 2nd seemingly never-ending scree slope down with our destination way down valley, around the bend and out of sight



My group amidst the scree

Eventually I made it to our day's destination, the *Parador Nacional de Bielsa* nestled in the *Circo de Pineta*. Steve met me with a much needed ice cold diet coke having already settled into our room nearly an hour earlier. Our home for 2 nights, the traditional architecture building made of local stone, is just one of many "paradores" owned by the Spanish government. These *paradores* (Spanish pronunciation: para' ðors, with *parar* meaning to stop, halt or stay), are a kind of luxury hotel, usually located in a converted historic building such as a monastery or castle, or in a modern building with a panoramic view of a historic place.

That evening, after rehydrating with copious amounts of fluid and enjoying a hot shower to remove all the trail dust, the group gathered before dinner to hear Erik lecture on various aspects of Spanish history – the first of many such gatherings which we always enjoyed.

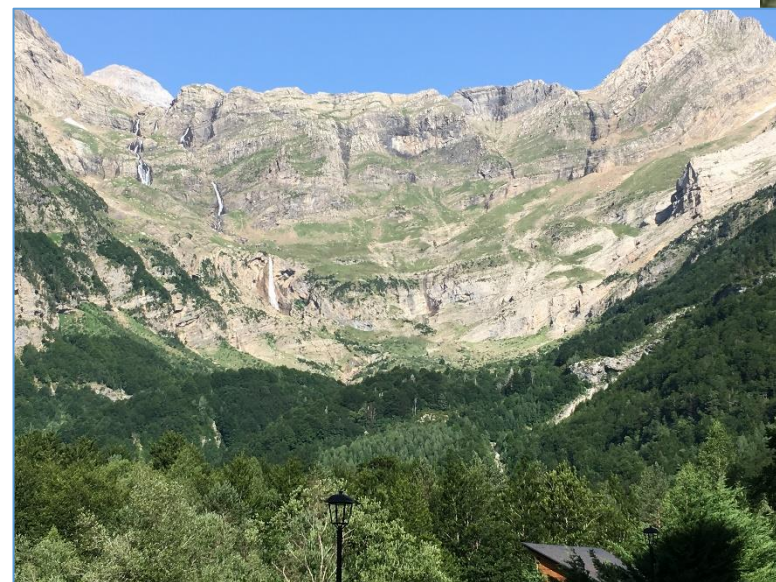
When we finally reached tree line, we certainly enjoyed some of the offered shade of the beech tree forest as it was an awfully dehydrating exposed trail above tree-line in the full sun and high temperatures. At one point Hugh started telling dirty jokes to help flagging spirits on the seemingly never-ending downhill. It was with great relief to my shaking quads when we finally reached relatively flat ground!



Beech tree forest



Parador Nacional de Bielsa



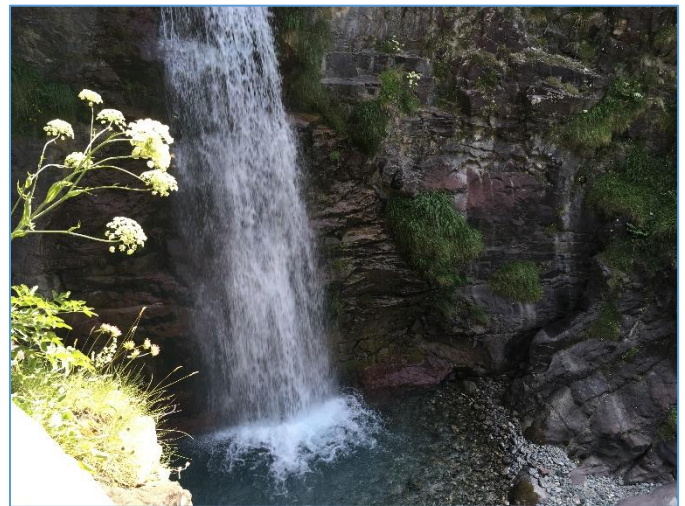
Circo de Pineta, Spain with multiple waterfalls

Pyrenees – Day 4: Explore the Circo de Pineta

Several options were available to us today: 1) an 8-mile round trip hike back up valley to the *Balcon de Pineta* (Balcony of Pineta) at 9,900' lead by Martin; 2) a 5-mile round trip hike to a small lake lead by Erik; or 3) our choice. Steve chose option 1) while I chose option 3) which allowed me to gingerly loosen my quads with a sedate 3-mile hike up and back to a nearby thundering waterfall. I met up with Erik's group for a delicious tapas lunch at the hotel while Steve and his group enjoyed a picnic lunch high above us on another very warm and sunny day.



Steve's group having lunch on the Balcon de Pineta



Lovely waterfall I hiked to

That evening, we all enjoyed a group dinner at the parador and finished with some absolutely outstanding almond *turrón helados* (ice cream). Turrón is a southern European nougat confection, typically made of honey, sugar, and egg white, with toasted almonds or other nuts, and usually shaped into either a rectangular tablet or a round cake. That evening Patrick had us in stitches gleefully guessing how much his laundry bill would be the next morning as he had just casually handed over the sack full of laundry to the parador's front desk without asking any questions despite his Dad's admonition to get pricing info (turned out to be nearly 300 Euros ... as Sean stated afterwards, Patrick would be doing several chores once back home to work off that debt!)

Pyrenees – Day 5: Hike Below Aneto

After a hearty breakfast we load ourselves and luggage in the coach and Javier transports us to the village of *Benasque* in *Maladeta Aneto National Park (Parque Natural Posets-Maladeta)*, a bit over an hour away. There we take a short coffee break and a short stroll through the charming old town areas with its Renaissance feel. A short drive out of town takes us to our home for the night, *Hotel Hospital de Benasque*, where we begin the day's hike, a 5 mile round trip to *Cascada Aigualluts*, in the lower meadow below *Aneto* Peak. While *Aneto* is the highest mountain in the Pyrenees reaching a height of 11,168', it is only Spain's third-highest mountain (Spain highest peak is Mount Teide, a 12,195' volcano located in Spain's Canary Islands).

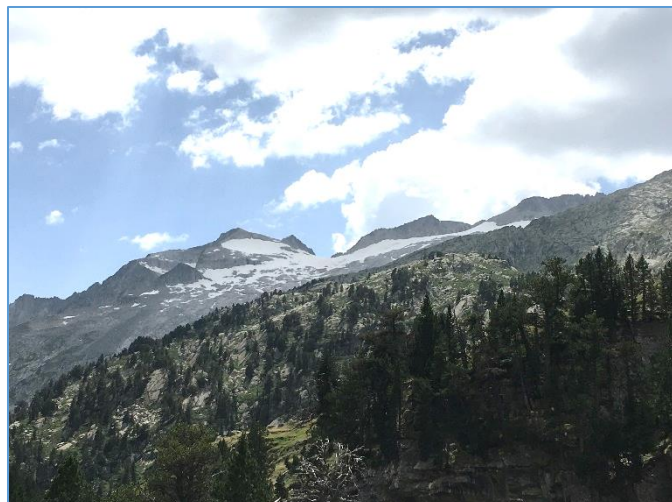
The hike up to *Cascada Aiguallut*, a superb waterfall fed by the *Aneto* glacier, is an easy one but on another quite warm afternoon. On the way there we enjoy a picnic lunch but hover in the shade offered by a rock wall. Once we reach the waterfall and gain the meadow above it my feet are quite happy to take a dip in the glacier-fed *Ésera* River. The *Aneto glacier* is 1 of only 3 glaciers remaining in the Pyrenees – all of which have seen considerable shrinkage in the past few years.



Steve & I in the narrow streets of old town Benasque



Cooling off my very warm feet in glacier-fed river



What's left of the Aneto glacier, 1 of 3 left in the Pyrenees

Not far from the waterfall's base is the *Forau de Aiguallut*, which means deep hole. Here the water disappears and becomes an underground river before reappearing nearly 2.5 miles later and 2000' lower on the other side of the mountains in France!



Nancy, Beth, me, Steve, Mary, Raimy, the other Steve and Jennifer with Mt. Aneto in the background

The lure of a refreshing shower and cold drink back at the hotel had us ripping back down the trail then road.

Pyrenees – Day 6: More Views of Aneto then down into Catalonia

Today's hike starts from the *Hotel Hospital de Benasque* after a hearty buffet breakfast. Under blue sunny skies we head towards the *Puerto de la Picada* (Port to Picada), a pass at nearly 8,200'. With views of *Aneto* and *Maladeta*, 10,866', there is beautiful scenery to keep us company as we hike an easy 10 miles with nearly 2,000' up and then 3,200' down into the *Vall d'Aran* (7,755') – we are now in the Catalan region of Spain. After guzzling a cold soda at the local hut, we load into a couple of taxi vans for the short ride to the village of *Arties* where we check into the *Parador Nacional De Arties*. On the way to the hotel, we pass through multiple small villages, all with Romanesque church towers and all supporting the area's multiple ski resorts.

The *Parador Nacional De Arties* hotel is one of the jewels of 14th and 15th-century Aragonese architecture. It is known as the House of Don Gaspar de Portolá, discoverer of California (Portolá expedition in 1769–1770).



Parador Nacional De Arties



Cow art in Arties, Spain



Steve and I enjoying the Pyrenees

After a refreshing late afternoon *Aperol Spritz* (a refreshing cocktail discovered in Europe a couple of years prior), I left Steve to his own diversions and enjoyed a much needed massage not far from the hotel. With grateful muscles, I was back in time to join the group for a short walk about the village of *Arties*, visiting its old church and enjoying some yummy *pinchos* at a local bar/restaurant before returning to the *Parador* for dinner.

Have I mentioned it was quite warm during our time in Spain? Just like many of the hotels here in the mountains of Colorado, the mountain hotels we stayed at in Spain did not have air conditioning. Normally this is not an issue – the temperatures usually cool down considerably overnight providing cool mountain air to sleep by. Despite opening the windows wide in our room in *Arties*, we figure the room temperature never dropped below 78 or so ... not a good recipe for a restful night.

Pyrenees – Day 7: Hike to Lagos de Gerver and then drive to Montserrat Area

It was slightly raining when we start today's hike atop a pass at 6,270' about 30 minutes from the village of Arties – just enough to put on our rain jackets. However, the rain doesn't last long as we take an easy 3 mile trail up to a series of three beautiful alpine lakes; the 3rd lake is *Lagos de Gerver* at 7,300'. After the return 3 mile trip, we gathered to enjoy a picnic before a 3-hour coach trip to the city of *Cardona*. The drive took us from the higher mountains down into the foothills. At times the road followed the *Noguera Pallaresa* river where we spotted several commercial rafting parties enjoying the sunny and warm day.

By midafternoon we arrived at our home for the night, the *Parador Nacional de Cardona*, a medieval castle standing high atop a promontory and watching over the charming town of Cardona. This 9th-century fortified site, also including the *Minyona Tower* and a lovely church, both dating from the 11th century. Joaquin had to back the coach up the narrow access road.



Lagos de Gerver

Great care was taken in turning the castle into a hotel to ensure its moats, towers, walls and gothic elements remain front and center. After doing some exploration on our own of the castle, the group gathered for some delicious sangria and tapas on an outdoor terrace before heading down to dinner in the wood-beamed, arched stone wall dining room.



Parador Nacional de Cardona



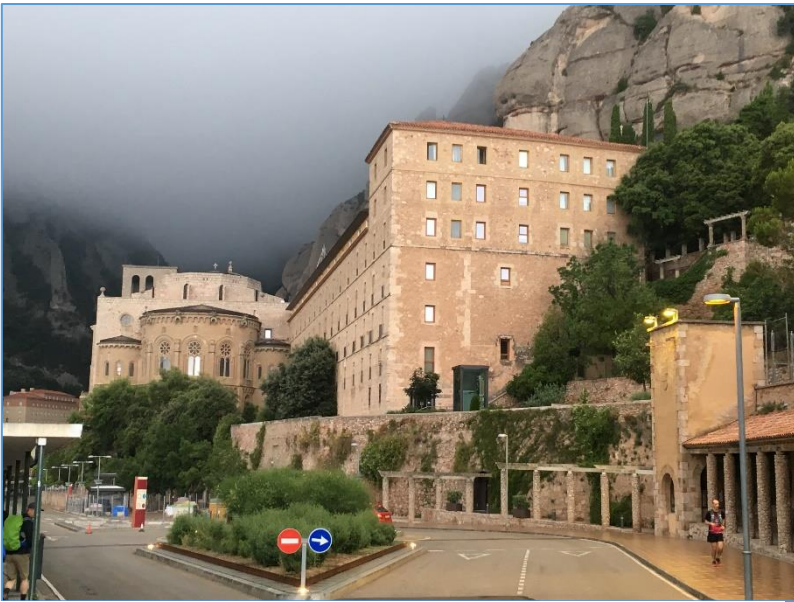
Dining room in the Castle Cardona



Atop the Minyona Tower with Cardona salt mines in background

Pyrenees – Day 8: Explore Montserrat then Onto Barcelona

We had about an hour drive from Cardona to *Montserrat*, a multi-peaked mountain range in which the *Montserrat Benedictine Monastery* has been built. Translated, *Montserrat* means jagged or serrated and they certainly are!



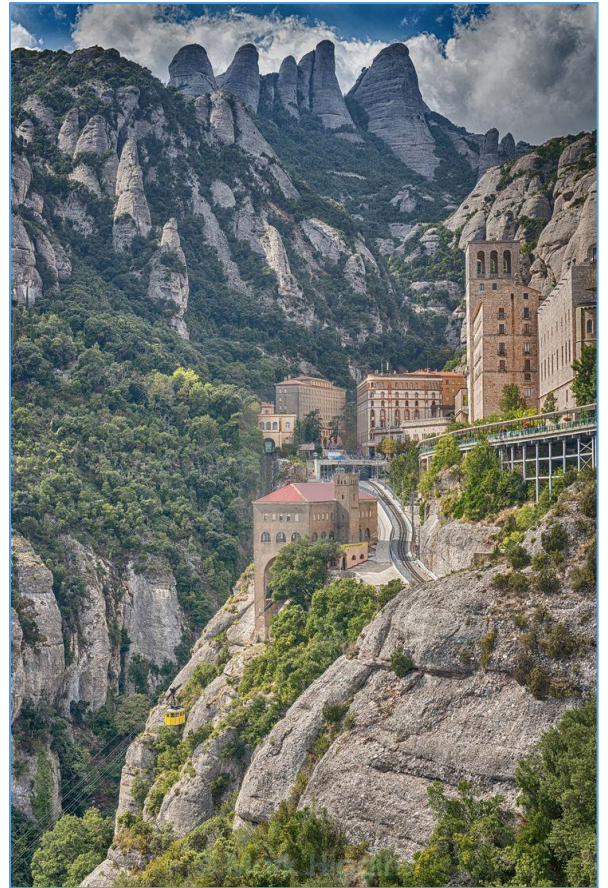
Low cloud level upon our Monserrat arrival

Just as we arrived at the parking area, it began to rain lightly. Rain jackets on, we headed to the *Sant Joan funicular* which takes one from the heart of the Montserrat Monastery up a 65 degree slope for nearly 500 feet to a viewpoint. The trip is taken via glass ceiling cars up the steep, narrow track. The rainy weather loosened a small rock overhead as we ascended which crashed quite loudly into the glass ceiling just above me, startling a good many of us.

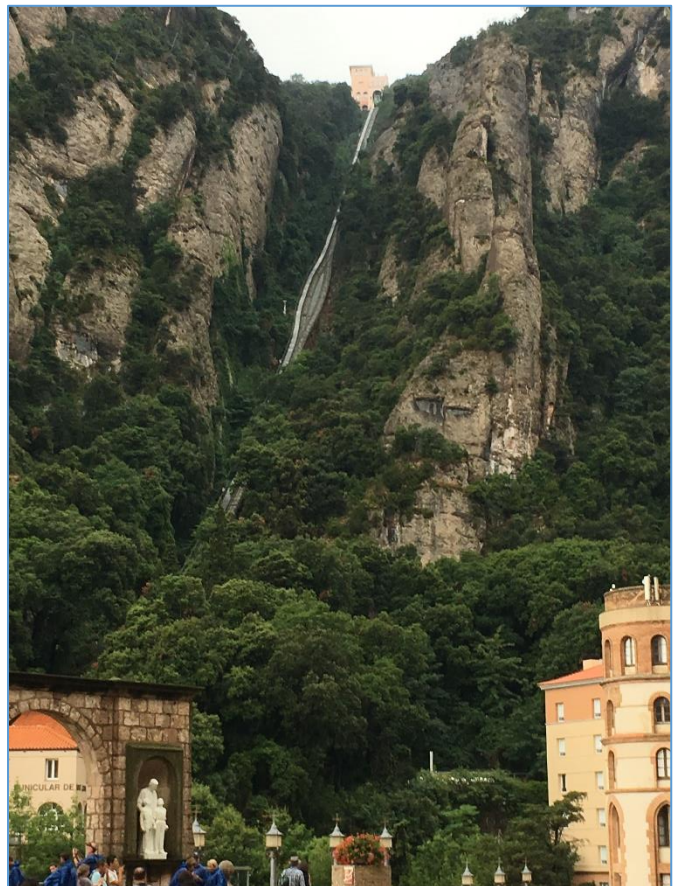


Sant Joan Funicular on a sunny day – which was NOT what we had

Normally, upon arriving at the top of the Sant Joan Funicular you get a bird's eye view of the entire Montserrat Monastery ... we were treated to a dense cloud layer. With Martin in the lead, our group set out for a hike. The original plan was to take



Montserrat, meaning serrated mountains



Looking up at the Sant Joan Funicular

a 5 mile hike out along the mountains and then back down to the Monastery. However, after about 15 minutes of hiking we encountered more falling rocks – one came screaming down the slope and passed right in front of Steve -- the decision was wisely made to retreat to the funicular and descend that way instead. While on the return funicular trip, the rain started in earnest and was a torrential downpour upon return to the station. From inside the station we watched torrents of water from above cascade down the mountain side in great waterfalls of muddy water turning the nearby steps and walkways into raging rivers.

Once the rain started to subside, we quickly headed over to the atrium of the *Basilica of Montserrat* and then into the Gothic church itself where a service was taking place in its very decorative naïve. After that with all of us a bit damp around the edges, the decision was made to quit Montserrat early and depart for Barcelona, about an hour away. Turns out Barcelona also got hit with the heavy rain but the sun was peeking out by the time we arrived at the *Gallery Hotel*. At the hotel we enjoyed a very filling, good and rather late lunch.

After lunch we piled back into our coach for a tour of *Antoni Gaudi's Park Guell* (built 1900-1914), a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 1984. I was first introduced to Gaudi in my senior year in college when I took an "Introduction to Art and Architecture" class. When I first visited Barcelona that summer after graduation in 1977, I have distinct memories of visiting his *Basilica de la Sagrada Familia* (more about this church below in Barcelona - Day 2).

For those not familiar with Gaudi's architectural genius it is difficult to describe. Gaudi (1852-1926), was a Barcelona-based Spanish architect who became a leader of a new architectural style called *Catalan Modernist*. He was part of an art movement that was an offshoot of



Gaudi-designed Porter's House at Park Guell



Gaudi-designed walkway below a viaduct at Park Guell

European Art Nouveau. His work is best described as free-flowing,

full of curving organic forms that are colorful and exuberant – all greatly influenced by nature. Fortunately, there are multiple examples of his work which have been preserved in Barcelona and are open to the public – seeing his work first hand is the only way to truly appreciate it.

That evening we all enjoyed a group farewell dinner of *paella* (and much more at a pier-based restaurant where Barcelona meets the Mediterranean Sea. They were kind enough to make me a chicken paella since the traditional version incorporates many different kinds of seafood which I don't eat. While the MTS *Across the Pyrenees* trip was coming to a close, Steve and I still had a couple more days in Barcelona before we returned home.

Barcelona – Day 1: Wine & Cava Country

Barcelona is one of the most visited cities in Europe (#4 on the list) and in 2018 had over 32 million visitors, far out numbering its 1.6 million residents. We happened to be there in July, one of the most popular months to visit, and we happened to be there on a Sunday which means both locals and visitors are out and about. Our solution: head out of town! We had arranged for a “Tours by Locals” guide, David, to pick us up at the hotel and take us, via his private car, to the *Penedes Wine Region*, less than an hour south of Barcelona. This region is best-known for its Cava production, a sparkling Spanish wine which has had its own *Denominació d'Origen* (part of a regulatory classification system or appellation used in Spain for wines) since 1991. It was a blue sky day, just perfect to be out and about in the countryside.



Penedes Wine Region with Montserrat mountains in background



Grape vines at Llopart Vineyard

We first visited/toured the *Llopart* vineyards/winery which has documentation showing a relationship between Llopart del Penedès and viticulture started in 1385 and has remained uninterrupted to the present day. After learning lots about the process of making Cava, we had the opportunity to sample several different types of Cava – yum! We ended up having a couple of mixed cases arranged to be shipped back to Denver ☺

Next up was the small nearby organic family winery where 10 generations had been farming. We tasted several but weren't overly impressed but enjoyed seeing the operations, including several antiques about the property.

To help soak up all the alcohol we'd been drinking, it was time for a tapas lunch at the nearby local café, *La Botiga Verda*. There the

owner and chef kept sending out more & more plates of delicious tapas of all sorts until we declared “no mas.” David was a wealth of information on the region and its products but I'm afraid both Steve and I were in food & wine comas as he drove us back to the city so we missed out on much of his knowledge at this point.



Where we enjoyed an outstanding tapas lunch in the Penedes Wine Region

Fortunately we had some time to emerge from our comas before we joined an 8pm tour of Gaudí's *La Pedrera* back in Barcelona. Also, known as *Casa Mila*, *La Pedrera* translates into "the stone quarry", a reference to its unconventional rough-hewn appearance. It was the last private residence designed by Gaudí and was built between 1906 and 1912 (it is also part of the UNESCO World Heritage sites along with several other Gaudí buildings in Barcelona). While still a private residence for a few, since 2013 most of the building has been home to the *Catalunya La Pedrera Foundation* which organizes public tours such as the one we took. Besides viewing parts of this amazing building (the attic space is a work of art itself), the tour includes a multi-media light show on the building's roof.



Gaudí's La Pedrera (Casa Mila)



*Chimney structures of La Pedrera – remind you on anything?
(hint: think Star Wars)*



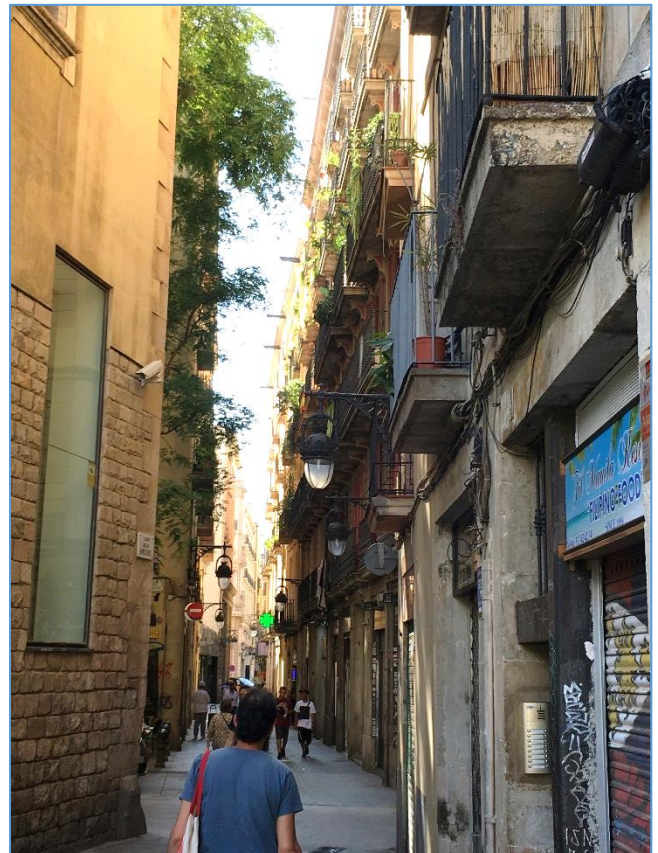
Light show atop La Pedrera

Barcelona – Day 2: Old Town and More Gaudí

This morning we met up with local guide Tea for a walking tour of Barcelona's *Old Town*. The *Ciutat Vella* (Catalan for "Old City") is made up of four districts – we toured the *Barri Gòtic* (Gothic District) where Barcelona's history began. Its many narrow and winding alleys dominate the area and offer lots of fascinating history including the archeological dig of the early Roman settlement and the cathedral of Barcelona.



Beautiful door hardware in Old Town Barcelona



Gothic district of Old Town Barcelona

We spent the afternoon taking in more Gaudi buildings including the eye-popping and colorful *Casa Batlló* (1904), along one of Barcelona's main shopping streets (i.e., lots of designer shops and absolutely stuffed with people). A short taxi ride away is Gaudi's masterpiece, the *Basilica de la Sagrada Família* (Church of the Holy Family). Begun in 1882 (with another architect though Gaudi took over in 1883), it is still under construction although it officially opened in late 2010. The current plan is to have it completed by the 100th anniversary of Gaudi's death in 2026. The serrated *Montserrat* mountains served as Gaudi's inspiration for his design.



Gaudi's Casa Batllo - must be seen to really appreciate!

When I visited *Sagrada Família* in the summer of 1977, only a relatively small portion of the church was finished and we certainly couldn't go inside. Fortunately, this time around we could not only view the out-of-this world exterior but its extraordinary light and color-filled interior with its tree-trunk-shaped columns supporting its roof and 200' high ceiling vaults. It is an absolutely incredible space that must be visited to at all understand.



Gaudi's La Sagrada Família – only about 70% complete

Just a small sampling of the gorgeous stained glass



The next day it was 2 flights back to Denver and lots of jetlag to slowly get over. We highly recommend travel to Spain and hiking in the Pyrenees ... just try to avoid the heat and large numbers of tourists during the summer months!