

Random Thoughts from Spain

Spain used to be one of the most conservative Catholic countries in the world. The Protestant Reformation didn't take root as it did in northern Europe. Today, Spain has become one of the most liberal secularized countries, with legal abortion, gay marriage, decriminalization of drugs, no death penalty, socialized or single payer healthcare system, etc. It only took 500 years from the height of the Inquisition. The Grand Inquisitor Torquemada is spinning in his grave.

Spain has one of the developed world's lowest fertility rates at 1.2 (This is according to the guide, but I've seen figures up to 1.45.) Spain's former colony, the Philippines, beats Spain's fertility by more than 150%. Representing both ends of the spectrum, they are facing a demographic time bomb. Spain has its declining and aging population, the Philippines not being able to provide enough opportunities, resulting in 10 million having to work overseas. That is like the entire population of Portugal leaving to look for jobs elsewhere.

Spain requires that at least 20% of its power be generated from renewable resources. Wind farms are usually found in the mountains but solar panels are everywhere. A solar farm outside Seville concentrates the heat to a tower circulating brine, raising the temp. to 400 C. Known as CSP for concentrating solar power, Spain leads the world in implementing this technology. The U.S. has CSP plants in California and Nevada. But Spain has more than two and a half times CSP generating capacity than the U.S. Too bad we couldn't come close to the towers, you could see the concentrated light beams, like a searchlight. I heard that birds flying through the field get fried. Then there are recycling bins on almost every block, for glass, plastic, organic etc. They haven't banned plastic bags yet, but you are charged for using them.

Spain is one of the cleanest countries I've visited. (The others are Singapore, Finland, Germany and Switzerland.) There are always cleaners present, even on Sundays. In small towns, they white wash the exteriors regularly. The villages look like white petals with orange roofs in a sea of olive green, sometimes brown earth. However, Spaniards let their dogs poop on the sidewalk, whether it is in the big cities or small towns.

According to the Spanish guides, the panhandlers, pickpockets and undesirables are Romanians and gypsies. A favorite trick is a pregnant woman holding an infant, going around and begging. However, one of our fellow travelers observed that she thought the young woman was not really pregnant, that she had padding under her dress. Our Madrid hotel was on the main drag of Gran Via, and we saw very young men with water and a squeegee attempting to clean windshields of drivers stopped at the traffic light. I've seen this activity just about everywhere. It is a specialty in Manila. Filipinos don't need Romanians to teach this trick. The gypsy technique is having women offer tourists a sprig of rosemary then asking for a donation. If you try to give a coin, they will badger you until you surrender a bill.

The Great Recession, as we call it, is referred to as the crisis (pronounced cree sees). Spain hasn't recovered like the U.S., with unemployment at 17%. In Madrid, there are young

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Spaniards holding cardboard signs with "*busco trabajo, tengo familia*" ("looking for work, have a family") or "*tengo hambre*" (I am hungry). Graffiti in Ronda stated "*pan, trabajo y techo*" (bread, work and a roof). Another one was "*banqueros ladrones*" (bankers are thieves).

Somehow, Europeans take some rather common cuisine, dream up an innovation and wind up with a unique product sold at outrageous prices. Spain has its Jamon Iberico, made from free ranging *patas negras* (black legs) pigs, having a diet of evergreen oak acorns. There is a Jamon Serrano, a different pig and diet. Between jamon iberico and serrano, I'll take the former. Serrano is drier and not as tender. Some of the priciest Iberico is even more expensive than Kobe beef. When we visited a Museo de Jamon, their top of the line iberico was 50 Euros a kilo. The top classification means that the only solid food the pigs have eaten is oak acorns. That's like \$30 a pound. No wonder they slice it very thin. One of these days we'll have to have a taste test of iberico vs. the Italian prosciutto, which is similarly cured.

Spain's oldest industry is probably olive oil. (The other candidate is wine.) They have over 300 million olive trees, some of them hundreds of years old. The oldest is about a millennia old. (Some trees in Israel are claimed to be 2,000 years old.) Spanish annual per capita consumption of olive oil is 3 ½ gallons. However, the export market is controlled by the Italians. As much as half of exported Italian olive oil is rebranded Spanish oil. Hmm, remember Don Vito Corleone? But between the olive oil and red wine, Spaniards live longer than Americans and there are very few obese people.

Like nearly all of Europe, the price of gas in Spain is quite high but it is even higher in Portugal. It comes out to \$7.50 in Spain and \$8.25 in Portugal for highest octane. On Monday, Nov. 10, the price of the lowest unleaded gas was down to \$2.65 in Fairfield. If I lived in Europe, I would dispense with the car. Their trains are fast, whether Spain or the rest of Europe. Val and I have traveled on the Eurostar, its the only way to go for intercity travel.

During a pre-show talk about flamenco, the dancer called her large shawl "manton de Manila." I had never heard of that term before. There was another Filipino American couple in our tour group and they hadn't heard of Manton either. It turns out that the manton did come from Manila during the galleon trade, but was quickly adopted by the Spaniards, somehow making its way to become de rigueur for flamenco. The manton went through an evolution, from China to Manila to Seville, getting larger, colorful and more elaborate.

There was a side street beside our hotel in Seville (Hotel Sevilla Center) called Calle Rogelio Vigil de Quinones, Heroe de Baler. This piqued my interest, since there is a town called Baler in the province of Quezon, northeast of Manila. When I asked our tour program director Antonio, who is as knowledgeable as they come, he didn't know where the street name came from. Well I happen to have known about the Siege of Baler for a long time, most recently from a book titled "Devil's Causeway." A quick internet search confirmed that Seville had named the street after a Spanish officer in Baler, the garrison's surgeon. The garrison held out against a vastly numerically superior Filipino revolutionary army for a year before

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capitulating. Barricaded inside the Baler church, battling hunger and disease, they refused to believe that the war was over for Spain, that the Spanish fleet had been destroyed by Admiral Dewey in Manila Bay. The then Philippine president, Emilio Aguinaldo, wrote them a glowing tribute. Today, it would be a rare Spaniard or Filipino who remembers the events at Baler.

Spain has one of the world's lowest incarceration rates. If we maintained the same rate, our inmates population would total about 330,000 instead of over 2 million. However, their homicide rate is one sixth of ours.

This has nothing to do with our trip, but Filipinos had to take Spanish names back in 1849. My father's surname came from a town in the northwest, my mother's from the southeast. But some wound up with somewhat non-conventional names. I have known a *Ciego* (blind), *Hambre* (hungry) and *Manso* (tame), even a *Pajarito* (little bird). A practical joke from the friars, maybe.

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