



SOMETHING TO WRITE HOME ABOUT
Inspired by Ernest Hemingway's travels throughout Spain, Mark Piggott decided to follow in the great author's footsteps.

‘There are no other countries like Spain,’ said the hero of *For Whom The Bell Tolls*, Robert Jordan. The country fascinated Hemingway and several of his novels were set there, including *The Sun Also Rises*, which documents the revelry of Pamplona’s running of the bulls. In the hope that some of Hemingway’s spirit would rub off, I decided to explore the country for myself.

Thursday, 16th

Bilbao looks rather industrial, so we decide to head west towards Santander on the spectacular A8 coast road. Every now and then a glimpse of a fishing village, or a coastal resort, between green mountains.

Then we turn inland, rising through Alpine pastures, almost like Switzerland except when you pass through the *pueblos*, which are unmistakably Spanish. There’s men with donkeys and early morning bars full of men smoking, drinking and arguing- the women, of course, are all at work.

Burgos is a small, hot *ciudad*. At its heart stands the immense 13th Century cathedral. There is also a statue of the legendary 11th century warrior El Cid, who is buried locally, and an Irish bar, presumably to replenish the pilgrims.

This is Rioja country, where a range of great wines are on sale for less than €2. Hemingway

drank his *vino* from goatskins, but that sounds rather unhygienic and the supermarket doesn’t sell them. To line the stomach we eat a soft cheese called Bio Tierno with crusty bread and tomatoes the size of roasting apples.

Friday, 17th

Hemingway often travelled by horse. I may share a surname with a famous jockey, but horses don’t really do it for me. Besides, a Renault Clio is so much more convenient, with air conditioning and a radio.

When Hemingway travelled through Spain by road, they were as rough and ramshackle as the buses and cars he was travelling in, but a lot’s changed. The A1 towards Madrid is smooth and quiet, passing through blank pastures and mediaeval towns, punctuated occasionally by enormous iron bulls which rear up out of emptiness. Not, as you’d think, advertising bullfights, but the sherry and brandy of the Osborne company.

Finally we leave the *autopista* for a smaller road which rises slowly through passes which remind me of Scotland in an almighty rainstorm. Into Segovia, a world heritage sight, mainly because of the enormous 2,000 year old aqueduct which straddles the clean and laid-back old town. Segovia is mentioned many times in *For Whom The Bell Tolls*, usually as a target for fascist planes, but the aqueduct still stands and may be there for another 2,000 years.

Saturday, 18th

The *Renfe* train to Madrid is on time, almost empty, and a pleasant way of arriving in the capital. It’s also cheap: a day return from Segovia, two hours each way, is only €8.5 each. I remember that Hemingway story where he travels by train from Spain to Paris with his wife. Another passenger says how obvious it is that he and his wife are in love. The story ends back in Paris, where the narrator and his wife take separate apartments.

Madrid is a small city, easily traversed on foot, with few attractions apart from the usual fountains and embassies. The royal palace is spectacular, if fading at the edges, but there are plenty of cheap cafes and three Irish bars in

Chueca alone. Back in Segovia, the streets are full of families in their best clothes parading along the *playas* and *ruas*, and two English people in sweaty shorts with a carrier bag full of Rioja and eyes full of fatigue.

Sunday, 19th

North-east to Soria, a small town in Castilla y Leon whose churches are capped with the enormous nests of white storks and their broods. I've been struck down with a combination of sun stroke and a heavy cold, and insist we stay in a pension with cramped toilets, a bar, TV and two soft beds.

Hemingway would have jumped out of bed and wrestled a bear, or shot a fascist. I just lie and groan, allowing Lynda occasionally to dab at my brow with a damp cloth as I wait for the paracetamol to work. Hemingway would have taken a goat skin of wine to recover. I take Ibuprofen.

Monday, 20th

On to Pamplona, the high plateau all sand and meadow, heather and vineyard, with a wild scattering of bloody orchid at the roadside. We've finally made it to the setting for Fiesta, these days a harsh looking cluster of concrete and spires, and suddenly I don't fancy the idea of being chased by a ton of horned flesh through narrow alleyways, so we drive on.

San Sebastian is stunning, its old quarter in Parte Vieja all German bierkellers and French patisseries about a cute fishing harbour and dwarfed by the Monte Urgull and its statue of Christ.

Tuesday, 21st

We rashly hike up Monte Urgull, where we disturb some wild cats sunning themselves after the rain. Later we find a radio station which plays a mix of English, Spanish and American, and drink several litres of Castillo de Olite (Union de Bodegas Artesanas) and eat cold *chorizo*.

The Holloway Hemingway? Perhaps not. On reflection, I'm not Ernest trekking through strange lands in search of adventure; I'm Rolf Harris, circa 1957, touring Europe with his wife

in an old car. And, I conclude, I'm quite happy with that.

FACT FILE

When camping, bear in mind that nights can be very cold, especially inland, so take plenty of blankets. Try to pick up some basic phrases before you go- locals away from the coast still regard foreigners as if from another dimension. In the Basque Country around San Sebastian, nationalists often spray paint over Spanish road signs, so you may also want to take a Basque phrase book.

Driving in Spain is a pleasure, especially away from the towns. The roads are good and empty, and fuel is a third cheaper than in Britain. However, it's four times the size of Britain, so be prepared for a long drive between towns. Spanish campsites tend to be much better quality than British ones.

Food in Spain tends to be good quality, but not much variety. You can drink the water, even in Majorca.

Finally, if you have transport, it's well worth stocking up on alcohol and cigarettes on the way home. They're extremely cheap, especially the hypermarkets, and you're now allowed to bring as much as you like into the UK- though you may be asked if it's for personal consumption.

Ends

