

## Fiesta

"The things that happened could only have happened during a fiesta. Everything became quite unreal finally and it seemed as though nothing could have any consequences. It seemed out of place to think of consequences during the fiesta."

-Ernest Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises*

I sat on the station waiting for the train to arrive. Looking around, there was no mistaking where this particular train was heading. Either we were a poorly dressed sports team or we were going to Pamplona to celebrate San Fermín. Surrounding me, already wearing the white and red, was a group of four girls and a much larger group of guys. One member in particular stood out among the group of guys, the man wearing the cow costume and who they had blindfolded.

Not soon after the train departed, I donned my white attire. Will had given me his white shirt and pants, along with the red neck and waist scarf. I asked the girls next to me the best way to tie the waist scarf. "Like a belt", they said. After this introduction, we shot the breeze for a little while. I learned that they were meeting up with some friends at Pamplona, that they were staying until Sunday, and that one of their friends had a place in the city that they were staying. Seeing that these girls were insiders, I asked them what I should know about the festival. "No corres y disfruta", they said--don't run and enjoy.

When my cell phone rang, I knew it could only mean one thing, Sebastian had arrived. About 10 minutes later my train reached the station. When we left the station it was about 11pm. For the next 12 hours I would immerse myself in the biggest party in Spain.

Right as we left the station, the fireworks began, our grand welcoming. Despite the obstructed view we watched with amazement, following the directions Will had given. Sebi assumed the role of photography. The fireworks continued during the entire walk. Not two minutes away from the train station, we smelled someone smoking weed. That didn't take long we mused. Will's directions proved to be spot on, and after about 15 minutes, we passed the carnival, crossed the bridge, and arrived at the magic elevator.

There was a line, but it was short. As we waited, I asked a group if there was a place to buy a bottle of coke inside the city. They offered us their garbage coke bottle. Not sure if we would find a better offer, we took it just in case.

The magic elevator ride lasts 2 minutes. When we got off, it was like we had entered another world. The center of Pamplona is pueblo, built for a small rural community. It reminded me of the Moorish district in Granada. The streets are narrow and cobblestone and the whole city has a rustic feel. Cars look out of place and are not welcome on most of the streets. 51 other weeks of the year it would have been just like any other pueblo, but this week tranquil was out and fiesta was on.

Leaving the elevator, we were greeted by the sounds of the party. The real giveaway though was the clothing. We were surrounded in a sea of white, with streaks of red coming from belts and scarfs. The street was full of people talking, drinking, and enjoying the atmosphere. I think it must be the largest themed party in the world. A look of disbelief was painted across my face.

Right next to the entrance was a tienda, so we ditched the garbage coke and bought a 2 liter of coke and some plastic cups. We had brought two bottle of wine and some rum, and the plan was to start with coke and wine, kerimocho. We walked down one of the main streets, trying to acclimate ourselves to our surroundings and atmosphere. I knew from Will, Carlos, and

Jackson, that there was a large park in the city where everyone chilled, so I figured we could wander until we found it.

As we wandered, we passed a group of kids drumming to an enthusiastic crowd. We found a set of benches. Here, we decided would be a good place to make our first drinks. Sebastian had brought wine, but no opener. He planned on using the shoe method. Luckily though, right as he began some of our fellow partiers told him to just go ask one of the bars to open the bottle. He did, and the bar obliged. After we both had drinks, we felt much more comfortable, and despite having no sense of the city, we strolled confidently along the streets. Our initial shock over the presence of a city wide party faded quickly.

Finding the park proved to be easy. It's large open spaced stood out amongst all the curved dense streets. Right in the center there was a stage set up for a concert. Over at one side is the Cafe Iruña, right out Hemingway's novel. Will had told me about that there were concerts and said they are a perfect thing to do if you want to rest. There were also more benches here, so we set down briefly to refill our drinks. I asked our neighbors what time the concert began. Midnight they said, which was only about 5 minutes away. Sebastian and I decided that we might as well stay and hear some music before traveling on.

At midnight Spanish time, the band arrived on stage. Drummer followed bassist followed by singer/guitarist. The last man on stage was the accordion player. I thought it was awesome that there was an accordion player. The band open with a upbeat rock song, all in Spanish. After it was over, the guitarist introduced the band, and in typical spanish custom, humbly thanked the group for the honor and opportunity to play at this festival. We stayed and listened for three more songs, the last of which featured harmonica solos by the singer/guitarist. When the harmonica ended, we both were ready to do some more exploring. Using our senses as guides, we continued down the park away from the plaza.

Maybe fifty feet past the concert, we came upon a statue commemorating the encierro. Made from brass, it featured several bulls and people running from them, getting gored by them, and one poor brass soul getting trampled. The sign on the statue said not to climb it, but people ignored the sign and were all over it. Of course, I thought, the rules don't apply this week. So I climbed up it myself and Sebastian took a couple photos of me. One where I'm grabbing the bull by the horns and a second where I'm pretending to run away. Then I took some photos of Sebastian.

Hearing our English, an asian woman asked me to take some photos of her and her friends. Then I met a man from Canada. He told me that he had been here the entire week and had run one morning. He said he had a friend here he could stay with, but more often he would just sleep on the street because he didn't want to go home. I found it amazing that anyone could survive a week of this partying. I had been here for maybe two hours, but it felt like longer. Time seemed to slow down so the fiesta could go on.

After leaving the statue, we started looking for a store so Sebastian could buy proper attire. We found a nice open air shop with reasonable prices. Sebastian bought the scarf and an awesome shirt with a bull, a bunch of blood stains, whole where the bulls horn had pierced. I got a Pamplona scarf as a gift for one of my friends.

Upon leaving the store, we realized that it was right outside the plaza de toros. This was our first, wow moment of the night, one of those times when you just have to stop and marvel at the circumstances. Here we were feet from the most famous plaza de toros in the world, hours from the last encierro of the year. All I could do was smile and shake my head with astonishment.

Next, despite not realizing it, we began the walk around the city. We started by just continuing to walk around, again passing by the monument to the encierro. Along the way, we chatted with people we met, cheersing and sharing drinks. We even talked to cops. They were very friendly and didn't seem the least bit concerned with the drinks in our hands. The atmosphere was so strange that it no longer seemed strange to drink in public; given the circumstance it was the natural thing to do.

Continuing to walk, we eventually found the walls of the city. From beyond it, we could see out. So strange, I found it that there were lights on beyond the city. Evidence of life outside the festival. For me though, and for the thousands of people sharing this plateau, there was nothing more than the festival and what happened here tonight.

We let the walls guide our walk, following them as we enjoyed each others company, the rich unique atmosphere, and of course the drinks in our cups. Standing out among this section of our journey was walking past the pens where the bulls are kept. They seemed so innocuous and tame. "They have no idea what's coming", I said to Sebastian. "No idea of the hell that they are about to be put through."

As we continued around the city, we passed the magic elevator, which with each journey seemed to shuffle more and more people into the fantasy.

The natural end of our loop was the center park, but not before finding our way into a bar and sharing a shot. We figured that after such a long walk, sitting would do us no harm, so with our only criteria being a place that didn't smell, we settled on bench. After laying down our stuff, I went off to find a place to pee.

When I returned, I saw Sebastian talking animatedly in Spanish to someone our age. I sat back down and watched. Sebi filled me in. The guy was not only also from Colombia, but from the same city and the same section of the city. They shared an strong connection. The bond encouraged them to help each out, and our new friend went out of his way to do just that.

A calm, secluded spot is not easy to find in the middle of the world's largest party. But after wandering, we settled on some quite benches outside some museum.

We paused to respect the gift from our friend, and also to marvel at our circumstances. We were blessed by good fortune.

Our spot proved to be an oasis. For here we could step back briefly from the present and see the situation for what it was. It was absurd. We were only here for one night, but this brief glimpse showed a snapshot of what life is like when people live entirely in moment, without fear for what tomorrow brings. In a place without consequence, anything goes.

Now wanting to get too caught up in reflection, Sebi and I decided that it was time to step out of our bubble and rejoin the party. The only thing to do now was stumble around. That we did, and everyone we came upon we asked where the best place was to watch the encierro. With a level of progress that is only possible during a drunk walk, we slowly but surely made our way to our destination. Sebastian took the lead for this stage, I was too gone to do anything but follow.

The most helpful of all the people we met during this walk were two women, slightly older than us. In addition to describing to us the details about the race, they walked with us in the proper direction. When I found out that the they friends were from Pamplona, I asked the question that had been burning me all night: What is Pamplona like during the other weeks. "Tranquilo", she replied. I imagined that would be the reply, after all, the look of the pueblo is tranquil. But every piece of sensory information I had received up to that point had been, the opposite. It made it hard to imagine this place in its quiet state. I thought that the quiet

here would feel to artificial, as if it the only reason for the silence is a fear chaos would burst out with the slightest bit of noise.

When the girls bid us farewell, we found ourselves back by the plaza de toros. Circling the plaza we saw people setting up for the running. Along the main streets, a large wooden fence was being constructed. For the first time, I noticed notices in the street where the fence would fit in. Many of the seats were already being reserved, including the ones right at the entrance to the plaza.

Here, Sebastian revealed his plan. We were going to get tickets and watch from inside the plaza, he explained. Though neither of us knew how to get tickets, this did not concern us. All in due time we thought. When we found a quite bench right by the plaza, we both agreed that it was again time to sit and digest.

It's hard to say anything about what time it was when we sat back down. The only hard times I have in my head from the night are that the concert began around 12 and that we walked inside the plaza de toros at around six. While I do recall the events in between, as so often happens when you're drunk, the chronological timeline is lost. For this night, I was on event time, not clock time.

Some time after, we began our search for tickets. As has been the case with all my Spanish searches, it was ask and ye shall find. To buy our tickets, we simply had to use the kiosks at the plaza and pay with a credit card. There were even people there to help us. Though I was skeptical, it was without warrant. After buying the tickets we did another lap before settling back our favorite bench to wait for the plaza to open.

When we noticed it was open, we presented our tickets and walked in. We talked to the ushers and discovered that it was seat yourself. They recommended section 6, which was right across from the entrance. After conducting our own survey, we settled on section 5, which still provided an excellent view of the entrance, the third row back.

When we sat down, the plaza was empty. By the time the bulls entered several hours later, it would be almost full, but for now most people were still partying. With the plaza almost to ourselves, we had another wow moment. Thinking about everything this night had been so far, and what was still left come, the moment felt surreal. I looked around and all the evidence told me I was in fact sitting inside the plaza de toros, in Pamplona, the morning of the last encierro. I couldn't have imagined anything more amazing. It was a wow moment, filled with awe and gratitude.

Slowly but surely, the crowd trickled in. By the time the day had broke, it was practically full. The plaza had the atmosphere of a Red Sox game. Despite the early hour, the mood was celebratory and people were cheering. The leader of a large crowd at the front our section tried several times to start the wave. This was the same man who I witnessed trade his watch for a single cigarette. In a different setting this might have turned more heads, but by that point I should have known, without consequences, expect anything.

The bulls are released at 8am, and as the time drew nearer the tension in the crowd began building. There are large screens inside the plaza and we watched crowded streets, full of people ready for the encierro. Almost immediately after the bulls were released, people started flowing into the plaza. The runners enter the same door as the bulls and come out on center stage. Some immediately head for the walls, but others stay and wait.

By the time the last bull crosses the gate, the center is full of people. I'm unsure whether they are genuinely brave, merely drunk, or simply stupid, but after the doors close these people in the center being playing with the bulls.

The goal seems to be get as close to the bull as possible, preferable touching the back of it. Some people get marred, but they always seem to me okay and the group of runners do a good job protecting those who are hurt. Get close to the bull or do something courageous, and in those moments you are a hero. The entire crowd cheers you on. Those people looks very happy with themselves after their moment of glory. In my mind though it's not worth it.

After watching this spectacle for about 40 minutes, Sebastian and I we ready to move on. Outside of the plaza, people are already partying again. It's clear to me, that the encierro is a side show; the run lasts only 5 minutes each morning but the party never stops. Mixed with the partiers, were the cleaning crew. Their strategy for cleaning such an impossible mess was just to spray down the streets with a hose and let the water carry it away. It seemed like the easiest way.

Our plan was to head back down towards the train station. As we walked, we saw the fiesta continuing; people were still drinking and a group of old timers were laying down the table for breakfast. Our breakfast was chocolate con churros, the best post party food in Spain. After we eat, it was time to say good-bye. My train left at 11:30 and Sebastian, who had a later train that was going to take him to Barcelona, wanted to sleep by the station. Rather than take the magic elevator out of the city, we walked down the slanted street. We saw street workers already working to dismantle the fence. Its demise would mean the end of the fiesta. By the time we reached the bottom of the hill, there was no evidence of a fiesta, only steady stream of water flowing serenely into a leftover plastic cup.