

A Wedding in Portugal

I know no better way to start a trip than with a wedding, especially one like that of Antoinette Carline and Nicolas de Wolff of Los Angeles. Nicholas is the son of Harold and Julie de Wolff, very good, very old friends, in Harold's case for 50 years, starting with being roommates at Georgetown for three years.

It was a story-book event (the wedding, not living with Harold), spread over three days at delightful places in and around Cascais, on the Atlantic coast west of Lisbon. The logistics were formidable, with dozens of guests arriving on three different days from six different continents, to grace three main events: a welcoming dinner, the ceremony itself followed by a reception, luncheon and party, and then a farewell brunch. But the de Wolffs are master planners, and whatever the reality, all seemed smooth, serene and seamless to the guests.

The ceremony was held in Lisbon's Chapel of St. Sebastian, an intimate, tile- roofed architectural gem. Its porch was strewn with rosemary, lavender and hydrangea blossoms for the occasion, its interior walls were adorned with blue and white antique Portuguese tiles depicting the death of the saint and other less grisly events, and from the choir loft, some of the Lisbon symphony's principal musicians held forth gloriously.

The reception, lunch and party were back at Harold and Julie's "estate," Chacara Dos Lobos (Orchard of the Two Wolves), whose old orchard and farmhouse have been tastefully modernized and expanded over the past 15 or so years by the two de Wolffs. The action started at noon, with cocktails on the veranda overlooking the sea, with an accordionist-percussionist (taps) entertaining, (sounds corny but was perfect); followed by a buffet of great quality, variety

and proportions; followed by swing, samba and other dancing, which at times got quite enthusiastic. There were several pretenders to the title of Premier Danseur, including, briefly, even your humble servant, but in truth, no one came even close to the groom; Beth, with equal assurance, took distaff honors (she hates this term), and watching the two together almost made me jealous. Things began quieting down sometime after 7 pm.

The next day, the boards groaned only slightly less for the farewell brunch. The burning question was the location of the honeymoon, for which Nicholas supplied no useful information whatever. Various islands were mentioned; he would neither confirm nor deny.

Benito and Helga Prieto, old friends from Madrid also arrived, having driven to Lisbon the day before. By mid-afternoon, we had wished our best wishes, said our goodbyes, returned our rental car, packed everything into the cavernous trunk of Benito's red Chrysler 300 and headed north.

P.S. Of all the interesting and delightful guests assembled, our favorite was Ellen, Harold's older sister, aka Sister Vera Marie, O. We stayed in the same house for a few days before the wedding, and thus had time for excursions and conversations on many subjects. In 1951, the year before I met Harold at Georgetown, this beautiful person became a nun, joining the cloistered Ursuline order, so I had never met her. Then after 22 years of prayer, work and contemplation, came the Second Vatican Council in 1973 and, as she said, "everything changed," e.g., cloisters were opened, habits became sensible clothing, and lives expanded to include much more service to others. Ellen, with a degree from New Rochelle College in New York, became a teacher and eventually Mother Superior of one of the Ursulines' most

important schools in Austria. But, alas, the new rules, instead of attracting more young women, had the opposite effect- many of the best ones left, and there were fewer replacements.

Travels with Benito and Helga in the Northwest quadrant of Spain.

Benito Prieto is a brilliant, restless entrepreneur I somehow met at a *Clinton for President* fundraiser in Phoenix around 1980. He has business interests all over the world, and a few houses to match, including Madrid and Marbella, on Spain's South coast. However, his main asset is Helga, his lovely, patient and good-humored Bavarian wife, who speaks excellent English, along with German, Spanish and French. They have three handsome, successful sons, one of whom, Tomas, is a professional pilot, who became a good friend some years back while doing flight training in Phoenix.

We had a long-standing invitation from the Prietos to come to Marbella, from where we could make leisurely visits to nearby Seville, Cordoba, Granada, etc., and also to their home in Madrid. However, I had a stubborn, even longer-standing desire to see Spain's Northwest quadrant (Galicia, Asturias, Leon, and parts of the Basque Country); Benito thought it ambitious for the time we had, but agreed and planned a magnificent trip. Nevertheless, the wisdom of their original suggestion became apparent as the trip wore on. (No pun intended.)

First stop Sunday evening was Guimaraes, near Porto, at the Pousada de Santa Margarita y Santa Maria de las Parturientes (Our Lady of Women Giving Birth), recommended by Harold (the pousada, not giving birth). The Pousada was a former convent attached to a church being restored, and also part of a government-owned chain of some 25 similar inns, all very comfortable and awash in history and charm. (Spain has a similar chain of over 50 *paradores* spread all over the country, and many Iberian travelers keep a map/guide in their car

and stay only at these popular inns, when they can get in. Quality, I am told is uniformly high; prices vary but are moderate to medium high.)

Pousadas and paradores also have a reputation for good restaurants, and we had the first of many memorable dinners in their dining room, bracketed with excellent Ports--dry white before and sweet red after--in the spacious, elegant bar. The bar's walls were hung with some really ugly, ill-painted portraits of characters who did seem to fit right in, as they all had some connection to the Pousada's distant past. The next morning Beth and I visited the church and made an exploratory jog/hike through the lush gardens and grounds, noting their developing sports center, including 2 large pools and several sports courts.

Our intended first stop in Spain on Monday was Santiago de Compostela, the fabled site of pilgrimages to the traditional final resting place of the apostle St. James. However, Benito could not get us in to his first (and only) hotel choice, a Parador called El Hostal de los Reyes Catolicos. So, we pushed on to the coast, lunching at a seaside terrace restaurant in Sanxenjo, a favorite of Julio Iglesias, which must be the seafood capital of Spain. Instead of the Port wine of Guimaraes, we started and ended our scrumptious meal with a clutch of several dozen oysters. We continued on to La Coruna, the most important city of Galicia, staying at the NH (Navarre Hotels), a chain well run by some friends of Benito's from his native province of Navarre.

Galicia and La Coruña. Galicia's Atlantic (west) and Biscay (north) coastlines consist of numerous large and small peninsulas, jutting into the sea, some separated by steep fiords and others by gentle bays with beaches. The city of La Coruna occupies one of these small peninsulas on the north coast with the deep, commercial port, warehouses and government offices on one side, a sweeping beach ringed by apartments, houses and retail business on the

other, and offices in between. At the tip is the Tower of Hercules, a lighthouse rebuilt on a Roman ruin. Before dinner, we took a pleasant tram ride around the entire perimeter from the port to the Tower to the beach, just a short walk from where we began. Lots of well-dressed folks out for an afternoon stroll looked prosperous and happy. Beth wondered how they must feel now with the pollution from the sunken oil tanker.

Galicia gave us the first, mild whiff of the continuing separatism in 21st century, somewhat unified Europe. In this far, northwest corner of the peninsula, lived the original Galicians, consisting of native Iberians (possibly Berbers from North Africa), mixed with later arriving Celts. Like the Bretons in NW France, they have a long history of resisting and then partially absorbing invaders, in this case, Romans, Visigoths and finally Moors. Their language is closer to Portuguese than Spanish, though geographic place names are completely recognizable. As a practical matter, we rarely heard anything but Spanish, one exception being a sermon in a church in Santiago. Until Helga enlightened me, I assumed I was not understanding anything because of bad acoustics or a sudden loss of vocabulary.

Spain has wisely granted linguistic and almost total local governmental autonomy to all its rambunctious provinces and it seems to be working in Galicia and Catalonia. At least they don't go around blowing up things and killing and kidnapping people like the Basques and the IRA in Ireland. More on this subject later.

Tuesday we drove back to Santiago and checked into the Hostal de los Reyes Catolicos, the Guesthouse of the Catholic Kings (actually king and queen), an imposing, three-story rectangle, built around four separate courtyards, and sharing the town's main plaza with the Cathedral. According to Conchita, our English-speaking guide, the Hostal was begun in the late

1400's by Ferdinand and Isabella, and served as a hostel and hospital for pilgrims and locals for over 400 years until recently converted into a Posada. It is also beautifully furnished with originals and period reproductions and gives superb service. (Our room, overlooking a garden, had a 4-poster bed with a red velvet canopy; stretched out for a short rest, I felt like the pope; I also sent out some shirts and other laundry after 1 PM and had them back in a neat basket by 6pm. Benito was right to insist on staying there.)

Conchita gave us a little history. Santiago, of course is Saint James, or San Diego, or Jacobo or Jacob, or Saint Jacques, as in Tour Saint Jacques in Paris, where French pilgrims gathered for their journey, and also as in Coquilles Saint Jacques, whose white scallop shells with a distinctive red cross became a symbol worn by those who had completed the pilgrimage.

Tradition holds that St. James brought the Gospel to Spain in a first visit a few years after Christ's death. Though there is no evidence of his success or even his visit, he is said to have loved Spain and wanted to be buried there. So, after his death, two of his disciples brought his remains to Compostela in a stone boat, perhaps presaging our modern concrete hulls. This and other traditions have been recently challenged by the authentication of a stone ossuary found in Palestine and inscribed, "James, son of Joseph and brother of Jesus."

As Mark Williams tells us in his well-written *Story of Spain*, "Fundamental to Reconquest mythology was the legend of Santiago El Matamoros, St. James the Moor Slayer, and his shrine at Compostela. Following the destruction of the old church, the faithful began to rebuild. The magnificent Romanesque cathedral of today was embellished over centuries, including the incredible Portico de la Gloria by Master Mateo, perhaps the finest example of medieval carving in existence. Christian pilgrims once again flocked to Santiago de Compostela along a famous

route sprinkled with Benedictine monasteries. The faithful carried cockleshells-part of their penance involved swallowing a raw scallop-and camped out along the way or enjoyed the hospitality of monks. The Road to Compostela became the greatest pilgrimage of the middle ages and the site began to rival Jerusalem and Rome for importance."

Conchita first took us around the Hostel, describing some of the advanced medical treatments applied there, including leaches for the more rambunctious young monks. "A sort of anti-Viagra," she said. Then, out the front door of the Posada to the Plaza, where we could also see the Cathedral, and she began "reading the stones" of both facades, explaining the rich religious and allegorical meaning of some of the innumerable carved statues and patterns. But she spent most of the time telling us about and showing us the interior of the Cathedral, which, though beginning as Romanesque, evolved over the centuries into a mostly Baroque architectural masterpiece dominating both the town skyline and the Plaza.

Baroque architecture, in Spain at least, seems to abhor any blank space, and the surfaces of this entire church, inside and out, and especially the carved facade and altar screen, were swirling phantasmagoric creations in stone and wood, some enhanced by painting, of numerous human and geometric forms. If that is what God really wanted, he must be delighted with the Cathedral and like buildings in Santiago.

Near the end of our tour, Conchita mentioned a 200-year long tradition of making silver jewelry with jet, a carbon-based semiprecious stone abundant in the region, and pointed out a few of the shops known for it. Miraculously, at the end of our tour, Beth and Helga noted we were right in front of one of these, just reopening after siesta. It was really gorgeous stuff and soon Beth was eyeing a necklace and Helga a pendant. Benito stepped out to make a call on his

cell phone and then called Helga out to talk to whomever. Beth and I immediately began discussing buying the pendant for Helga, but we were interrupted by Benito, who had come in, quickly bought the pendant for cash, dropped it into his pocket, and went back

a little disappointment, looked at a few others not as nice, and then with a dismissive wave, indicated we should move on.

While Benito continued making phone calls, we ended the day by climbing up behind the main statue of St. James above the altar and giving him the traditional fuerte abrazo or big hug. We also visited the Bishops' enormous but vacant palace and the rich Cathedral Museum, and attended mass and vespers sung by the nuns in an adjoining Augustinian convent church, the one with the sermon in Gallego I didn't understand. Oh, by the way, that night at dinner, both ladies were resplendent in their silver and jet.

Wednesday was an easy day. We drove north to the Bay of Biscay and then eastward along the narrow coastal plain of the adjoining province of Asturias, through farms and orchards, stopping to take pictures of picturesque bays and beaches and windy, lonesome lighthouses on our left. We also admired the deep green, cloud-shrouded peaks of the Cordillera Cantabrica on our right.

We reached Oviedo, Asturias' pleasant mid-sized capital, early enough to walk around its historic area and plan something for the evening. We had just missed the first opera of the season but were able to get tickets to a benefit performance of Oviedo's very good, young and largely female symphony orchestra in its brand-new hall, built on Roman ruins.

Asturias played an important role in the beginning of Spain's modern history, for here in its wild mountains began the Reconquista, or re-conquest of the peninsula from the Moors.

Arabs and Berbers from the expanding Muslim empire of the Abbasids crossed the Straits of Gibraltar in 711 and within just nine years controlled most of every kingdom in the peninsula. But in Asturias, a character named Pelayo, leading a rag-tag band of guerilla fighters, whom we would probably call terrorists today, handed the Moors their first defeat. Surprisingly, they did not respond with their overwhelming military power to crush him, probably because of distractions from internal divisions among Arab tribal leaders and between them and their Berber allies. Pelayo meanwhile married his daughter to King Alfonso I and became his leading warrior, effectively launching the Reconquista, finally completed over seven centuries later in 1492.

In recognition of Asturias' role in Spain's history, the heir to the Spanish crown is given the title of Principe de Asturias, equivalent to the Prince of Wales in England.

Thursday, through the Basque country to Navarre, was the killer day, even by our ambitious standards-the cave paintings of Almeria, Santander, the new Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, San Sebastian, and finally ending in Olite, the historic capital of Navarre. I'll touch just a few of the high points.

"The Sistine Chapel of prehistoric art." A few miles east of Santander is Santillana, a beautifully preserved Medieval town of rustic architectural gems now, apparently mostly B&Bs and small inns and thronged with tourists.

However, its main attraction is art, prehistoric art, in the nearby cave paintings of Altamira. These polychrome paintings were done around 4-5000 BC on the some of the ceilings and walls of interlocking caverns, later sealed by rockfalls, to be finally rediscovered in the late 19th century. The paintings capture dozens of bison, deer, horses and goats(?) in different

poses and dramatic movements, similar to even older ones at Lascaux in France. The "how" is well documented, dated and placed in a broad context of Mesolithic culture displayed in the excellent adjoining museum. But the "why" remains a complete mystery. Picasso is supposed to have said that after Altamira, all art is decadence. If not really competition to the Vatican, they are surely one of the most remarkable works of early man.

Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum of Modern Art is also something of a puzzle. Right in the industrial center of this port city, surrounded by construction projects, is Frank Gehry's masterpiece. At first sight, it looks like half dozen or so aluminum ships of different sizes all trying to dock at the same time and place. Inside, however, it is very open, light, inviting, and pleasant to stroll through. The portions of the permanent collection on display, for my more traditional tastes, were not that great, even for modern art. For example, next to the expected slab of curved, rusty Corten steel by Richard Serra entitled "Wall," was a pile of randomly strewn remnants of pink felt, entitled "Pink Felt." However there was an interesting show entitled "Kandinsky in Context," with dozens of paintings by him and contemporaries, and an exhibit by Jennifer Upton (?) of vertical glass poles on which provocative words and phrases projected in Basque, Spanish and English continually rose from floor to ceiling and at least make you think. My first thought was, "Why Basque?"

The Basque Country, an autonomous region with the provinces of Santander, Viscaya, Guipuzcoa, and northern Navarre, continues its long struggle for independence both violently and non-violently. The day before we arrived, the ETA, the illegal guerilla army, had assassinated the recently appointed regional head of the Guardia Civil or national police. At about the same time, the President of the official Regional Government proposed a plebiscite

on a status of "free association" with Spain within Europe, to take place within a year, with suspension of all violence in the meantime. One newspaper likened this to Puerto Rico and the US, but unlike P.R., the Basques point out that as an independent entity, they would have one of the higher standards of living in Europe.

Benito thinks the whole business is complete nonsense-the efforts of a few terrorists and politicians to improve their own positions. He says it is as likely to happen as California seceding from the US, and that most Basques know their economic success is partially due to their unfettered access to the Spanish market. Most of them don't even speak the Basque language, much less read and write it, in spite of years of compulsory schooling, and if there is a plebiscite on independence or "Free Association," it will fail.

We stopped briefly in San Sebastian, on a gorgeous bay and beach, flanked by peaks at both ends with an island in between, protecting numerous fishing and pleasure boats. Benito thinks it is one of the most beautiful spots in Europe if not the world, and has the highest prices for apartments to match, over \$400 per square foot.

After San Sebastian, our final destination that afternoon was Olite, the historic capital of the Kingdom of Navarre until it came under the Spanish crown in 15. Navarre is sort of a mini-Texas, whose proud natives are quick to brag about how great it is, usually citing superior production of something or other, e.g., the tastiest asparagus, the most beautiful women (or was it vice-versa?), the most brilliant scholars and writers, brave warriors, etc. A lot of extraordinary people besides Benito came from Navarre, including Henry of Navarre, who became King Henri IV of France.

The most elegant, erudite and crushing squelch I have ever personally witnessed occurred years ago in Barcelona, where Benito and I were discussing history and politics with a group of his Catalan friends, who were no pikers in the local pride department either. Somehow the subject of the Nobel Prizes came up, and Benito, after having listened a while with uncharacteristic patience, asked blandly, "How many Nobel Prize-winners have come from Catalonia?" Looks back and forth; silence; no one knew. "I know," said Benito. More silence. "Well, how many?" asked one of the biggest braggers. "None!" came Benito's answer. "However, Navarre has produced Santiago Ramon y Cajal Nobel Prize of Medicine year 1906". I have forgotten the details, but Benito supplied the number together with category and year.

But back to Olite. We arrived early enough for a very brief tour, starting with a piece of Roman wall which was also part of our hotel, then on to the impressive and picturesque castle-palace, medieval churches and towers, and finally the arrival of just-harvested grapes to the wine bodega for crushing and taste-testing to fix the price. But as I mentioned, Olite is also the site of Benito's family home, where his two sisters, Tere (Teresa) and Joaquina were waiting to welcome us with warm smiles and a marvelous dinner, as they were for Benito and me years ago.

Friday, we left early with enough extra food for the next two days and gratefully spent the afternoon in Madrid kicking back, with a leisurely lunch and relaxed conversations on the veranda, doing laundry and taking siestas. We had to recoup our energy for the evening, which included a drive into town where Benito miraculously found parking, and a stroll through Plaza Mayor, the ultimate gathering place, thronged with people both before and after dinner. Benito had organized a party at Esteban, a great traditional, Bistro-like restaurant in downtown

Madrid. Guests included Tomas and his wife Karina, with whom I had a warm reunion, Maria Ostiz, a friend of the Prieto's and a well-known singer, songwriter and guitarist, and Rodrigo Keller a partner with Ernst and Young and his wife, whom I had met years ago in connection with the University of Phoenix's international interests. All in all, a delightful evening, in the Madrid tradition of munching at midnight.

Sunday there were actually a few extra hours before we had to leave for the airport, so of course I immediately made plans to go back into town to visit the Prado and some of the other great museums. However, some mutinous murmurs made me back off rather quickly, and instead, I was forced to take the Sensible Travelers' Oath: "I swear I will not try to cram over 5 events into a single day, nor plan to spend less than two days in the same place." I tried hard to keep to this over the next two weeks in Italy, which I'll write about if I can remember enough to make it worthwhile.