

Spain Email Diary

April 17 - May 14, 2015

April 17
Hola from Espana

Hi friends,

Boy — are we tired!

We got 8 hours sleep — but it took two nights to get it. I'm surprised we're making it until 9 pm tonight, but our strategy today was to stay up until a reasonable hour and then get 10 hours sleep and be over (more-or-less) eight time zone changes. It helped that we had a bulk-head seat last night over the ocean and could stretch out our legs. I don't envy astronauts that plan to spend a year getting to Mars in something the size of a Class C camper.

Anyway, we arrived in Madrid this morning after more than 28 hours (by the clock) of travel, and immediately picked up our rental car and headed north to Segovia. I have that marked on my schedule as "REST DAY" and we sort of did, but not really. Once we checked in we walked a few blocks into town to marvel at the 1st-century Roman aqueduct which we're told (and believe) is the best Roman aqueduct remaining in the world. Very impressive. There are 166 arches and it is almost 100 ft high at highest where it crosses a valley. The thousands of granite blocks fit together without mortar and have held up for 1900 years. Again — most impressive. That and a walk around old town to window-shop in light rain within the ancient city walls consumed most of our remaining energy. Then to trouble-shoot Apple problems with our hoped-for navigation system on Barbara's iPad (nope!) — that consumed the last. I have just enough to send this in anticipation of about 9 hours sleep.

Tomorrow we continue north toward the Bay of Biscay with a stop in Burgos. I guess we'll rest when we're dead.

- John



April 18

Spain – distant relatives (very)

Hello all,

Everyone who travels likes to meet the relatives in the Old Country, and we're no exception. We don't have any from recent times in Spain, but Lucy takes us back away (about 3 million years) and a bit farther south. This model of her makes her look rather happy — which we hope she was. The excellent Museum of Human Evolution in Burgos was our afternoon activity on the way north.

Now we're not far from the Bay of Biscay in a tiny medieval town that doesn't allow cars but does allow tourists. Tourists leave in the evening but we get to stay. For the next four nights we'll be in a stone home from the 1700s that was converted into a small boutique hotel with 12 rooms, and Barbara is enchanted with our balcony. This will be our base for exploring

Cantabria and the Basque country before heading south. We visualize a pretty slow pace and I've budgeted for espressos in the sidewalk cafes.

Dinner tonight included baby eels salad (Barbara) and pork cheek (me). The ham here is wonderful — who knew they have perfected so many ways to prepare it. Heidi would love it.

To our surprise after almost two whole days here we think we're largely over jet-lag. Staying up until bedtime the arrival day is the trick.

- John (& Barbara)





April 19

Cuevas con Arte Prehistorico

Buenos Dias, Amigos,

Today we accomplished one of our major goals in traveling to Spain — we visited a cave (actually two) with ice age paintings. We've tracked down Anasazi petroglyphs all over the southwest, and they're at most 2,000 years old, and although they are called "art" we think they're not much more than graffiti and gang symbols. But in northern Spain there are paintings of bison, bulls, horses, and reindeer that are up to 40,000 years old and that are definitely art. Plus puzzling symbols that defy interpretation and the many hand prints that perhaps just say "I was here."

Anyway, we visited two caves on small guided tours in Spanish of up to 15 people each that lasted 45 minutes and took us a few hundred yards into each cave. The floor was paved but often wet and slippery with many steps but no handrails, so I found it a bit of a challenge but with Barbara's hand maintained my dignity. No photos were allowed but I took a snap of a photo of a panel we'd just seen. They're still excavating the entrance and have found 150,000 years of habitation, three-quarters of it Neanderthal. So it was a good day.

Famous Altamira cave is 2 km away and we'll go there Tuesday. The cave is closed to the public but we understand the museum is first rate.

Then we walked around our little medieval town which is 2 x 3 blocks plus a bit. Most houses were built in the 15th-18th centuries and the church dates to the late 1100s (photo). No cars are allowed and it's a very touristy place and apparently well known, but we passed up all the souvenirs with the name of the town (Santillana del Mar) on them.

We discovered that NO restaurants open for dinner before 8 pm, but we were both too tired and too hungry to wait, so our dinner on our little balcony was deer sausage, French bread, anchovies, pudding, and fruit — stuff that looked good at a local deli. We'll have to adjust to the local hours, go hungry, or snack. You'd think a fast-food joint would be open in a tourist town at "dinner time", but no.

Tomorrow is a day off — all museums are closed Mondays.

- John (& Barbara)



April 20
Bay of Biscay

Hi all,

Not much exciting today, which was a rest day largely because everything is closed Mondays. We drove along the coast of the Bay of Biscay, stopping at overlooks and to walk along break-waters and in general take in the scenery at a leisurely pace.

We're defeated by Spanish meal hours, so we were sure to have lunch before restaurants close at 3:00, not to open until 8 or later, and had a nice meal overlooking the beach just beyond where Barbara is standing. With a big lunch at 2:30, "dinner" will be a light snack in our room. You gotta go with the flow, especially when there are no other choices. We were so used to being able to find food at any time of the day or night back home — but not here.

In the early evening we walked around town again, appreciating that we have a hotel in a tiny medieval town that is a tourist attraction. Many people come to visit it and marvel at it, but it's our home for four days. I shot a snap of a guided tour from a tourist bus in the main square. Note that the buildings at left and center date from the 1300s; most of the rest are from the 1400s and 1500s. Our hotel is relatively new, being from the 1700s. No stores or restaurants were open — everything was shut tight, including the Museum of Medieval Torture.

Tomorrow another slow day.

- John (& Barbara)



April 21
Altamira

Hi Friends,

The most famous Spanish cave with prehistoric art is Altamira. At one time more than 100,000 visitors a year were allowed through; their breath began to destroy the paintings and now entrance is limited to 5 people per week selected by lottery. The other 999,750 people tour the “New Cave” which more-or-less is a reproduction of the original. We were in an actual cave just two days ago so the reproduction lacked authenticity, but that’s OK — it gave the idea and was worth 15 minutes. It featured an excavation in progress. But we spent 2 hours in the adjacent museum, which is a mix of artifacts and dioramas. The snap was shot thru a display showing how they made stone blades at left and atlatl dart points from deer antlers at right while Barbara looks at a display showing how they used the darts to bring down a deer. We could have given the New Cave a miss but the museum was well-worth the time. We were impressed again (as in the museum in Burgos a few days ago) that they show full-frontal nudity in dioramas and videos and no one seems shocked; you’d never see that in the USA. But, then, even evolution is controversial back home — and cave people didn’t exist.

The rest of the day was spent enjoying our quiet medieval town and hotel. Dinner was at 2, and it included wine, as usual, plus squid for me. So far we’ve been served a glass of local red wine each and I help Barbara with hers; today they served a full bottle, which I enjoyed. Barbara helped me navigate the cobbles on the way back to our hotel.

Tomorrow is a long driving day south to Merida to see Roman ruins on Thursday.

- John (& Barbara)



April 22
Driving to Merida

Hi all,

Today was a driving day (7 hours including a short lunch stop) and Barbara drove the whole way while I rode shotgun-navigator. We saw in the distance in northern Spain some snow-covered (not snow-capped) mountains much higher and more rugged than anything I'd expected in Spain.

I thought I'd have nothing to report and would skip an email, but we arrived in town in time to walk around a bit — and it is interesting.

Merida was an important Roman town. We walked the l-o-n-g bridge built in 25 BC — almost a half-mile and very impressive — and then window-shopped along what was once the principle Roman road and is now closed to traffic and lined with shops. I bought some sausage in a ham shop with pig legs hanging in the windows (and from the ceiling inside) for dinner — even in a small city every shop including the local Burger King is shut tight from 3:30-8:00 or 8:30. Can't figure it out! Barbara didn't want dinner at 9 and so snacks again it is.

Our hotel is awfully fancy by our standards — part of the building dates to the 1500s while the lobby is from a once-adjacent building from 1802, and it faces the main plaza. I'm

writing from one of the tables in the lobby. Guests have included Queen Elizabeth II, etc. Fancy — but terrible wi-fi. Go figure again.

Tomorrow we take in the many Roman ruins.

- John (& Barbara)





April 23
Roman Merida

Hi friends,

We had a busy, full day touring Merida, which has more intact Roman ruins than any other city in Spain and for that reason is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. After walking thru them for seven hours we believe it — it was all quite remarkable.

Highlights were the racetrack, amphitheater, and theater, although the aqueduct we saw today and the bridge yesterday were remarkable too. I'll just send a few snaps and let them tell the story. If you want more, I shot a lot (it's hard to walk past an intact Roman ruin and leave your camera in your pocket).

The theater with its classical dramas by famous Greek playwrights was adjacent to the amphitheater where men killed each other. Both were closed by the early Christians who disapproved of both violence (much of it against them) and learning.

Tomorrow we wrap up a few last ruins and then drive two hours to Seville.

- John (& Barbara)

PS — some random things we've noticed: (1) we've not found salt & pepper shakers on our dinner table, but generally a bottle of olive oil; (2) so far no sidewalks are cement — they're tiles of various sorts; (3) all Spaniards smoke (perhaps some don't but all the ones we've seen do); (4) prosciutto ham is ubiquitous, and very good; often they carve it off the leg in front of you; (5) you can't buy restaurant or cafe food between 3 and 8 in the afternoon, other than ice cream and occasionally small snack food — it seems to be the law; stores close roughly then too; (6) no showers have grab bars and are death traps for me; maybe half the stairways have handrails; (7) coffee is served very strong, and I'm beginning to like it.

Pics in order:

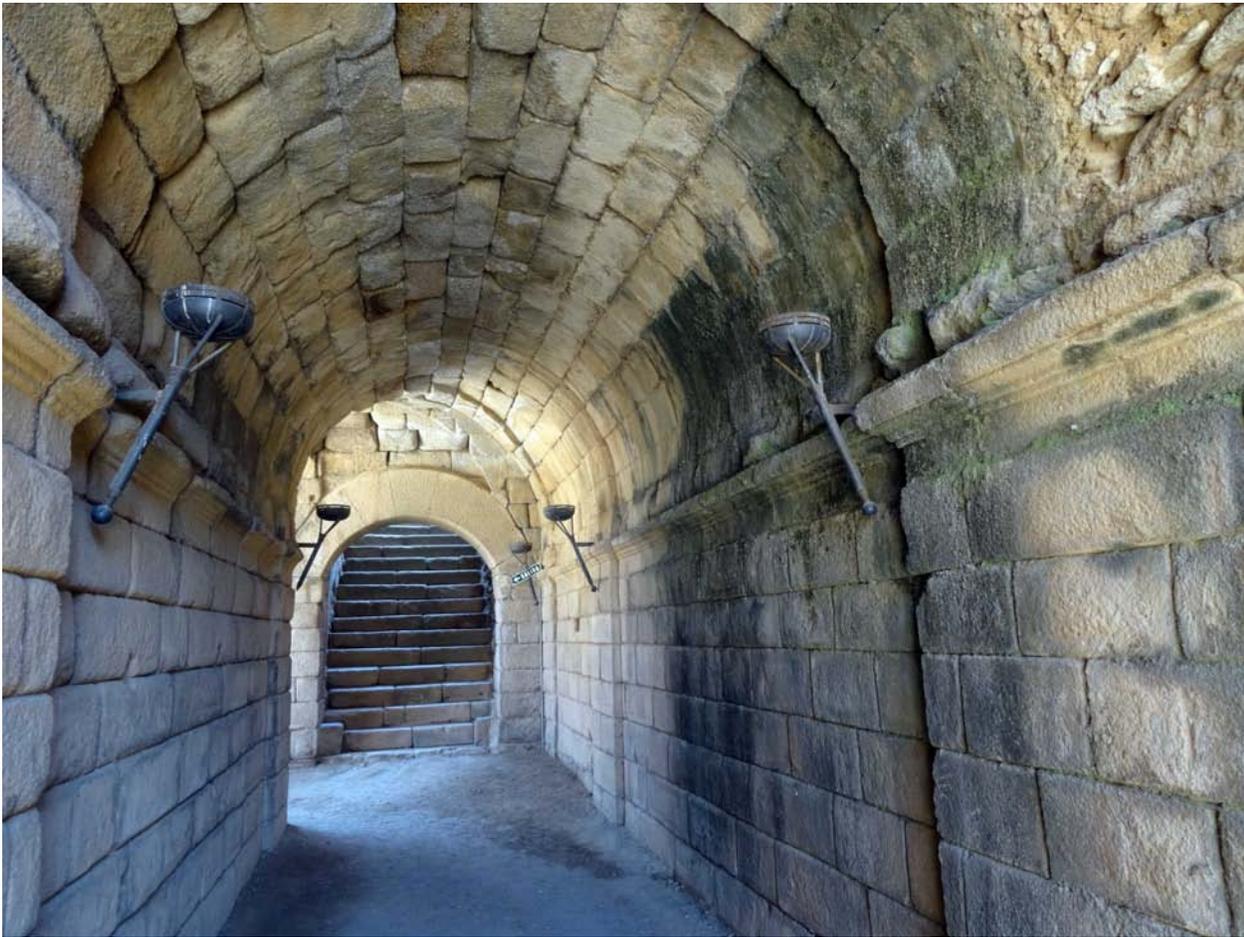
Circus - seated 30,000 and featured chariot races.

Barbara on the combat floor of the amphitheater.

The Theater (somewhat rebuilt).

A tunnel to seats in the theater.





April 24
Arriving in Seville

Hi friends,

Quite a day!

We had a leisurely morning touring yet more Merida ruins which included a Moorish fort the 800s, built at a Roman gate and out of Roman stones, and an “underground city” from Roman and Visigothic times that was excavated — and then city office buildings were built on pylons over it to protect it. The one snap is Barbara ascending a long tunnel that leads down to a water supply when the Moorish fort was besieged; in olden days draft animals would haul carts of water up the steps (presumably then a ramp). Barbara says the tunnel was much darker than it looks in the Photoshopped photo.

That was all fine and dandy, and then we (Barbara) drove us two hours to Seville, once the most important city in Spain and now the 4th largest. All was well until we entered the city limits — and were mostly lost for the next half hour. The streets are based on the medieval (or earlier?) plan, and they’re narrow, crooked, and one-way. Only a few go more than 2 blocks before there is a sharp one-way turn in some other direction. What a maze! It took us a full half hour to navigate the last 2 miles to our hotel, Barbara trying not to hit anything and me trying to navigate. We closed in on our quarry once, only to be directed in another random direction and had to work our way back. We were both frazzled, but stayed good friends. BTW, some of the streets are so narrow that we folded in the rearview mirrors, and in one I could stand in the middle of the street and come within a foot of touching both walls. Plenty of pedestrians (no sidewalks) and cyclists to add to the drama.

By the time we got to our hotel we were wondering why we’d decided to come to such a place, but apparently there’s plenty to see.

After lunch we headed off toward a park just to stretch our legs — and got lost again. It didn’t help that Barbara’s GPS failed on us several times, both while driving and while walking, so we used a paper map. Many streets have no street signs, and it being the middle of the afternoon all the stores were closed, so we wandered a deserted downtown. It was almost a pointless walk but we do have the idea of what the place is like. There’s a million taxis if we give up.

Our hotel is like a Best Western with a big lounge and sun deck up top. Nothing fancy. An oddity — the double bed has one 4-foot long pillow.

Tomorrow we hit the main sights because it’s supposed to rain on Sunday and everything is closed on Mondays. So yet another full day ahead.

- John (& Barbara)



April 25
Seville

Hi all,

We played tourist today and visited three historic sites: the Cathedral, the Archives of the Indies, and the Alcazar palace.

The first photo is a typical city scene. We seem to only walk thru town when stores are closed.

We usually avoid churches and cathedrals (in one South American city our guide was scandalized when I refused to go in one) but this is the largest Gothic cathedral in the world and larger even than Istanbul's Hagia Sophia, so it was on our list — and I was blown away. Only in a few places was it obscenely over-decorated, but the scale of the building was beyond belief and I was floored its size and by the labor and skill that went into constructing it. Photos can't convey the feel for being inside it. Construction began in the early 1400s and lasted a century. We plan to return before we leave.

The Archives of the Indies is the archives of all Spanish documents relating to the exploration and conquest of the New World — 7 km of shelving. If you like libraries, this is a good one! But they don't let you check out anything — or even see much. On display were

facsimiles of famous maps and 1st editions of books such as Newton's Method of Fluxions, but the actual archives are tucked away underground and our Utah library cards didn't get us access.

The Alcazar was the palace of the Moorish rulers taken over and expanded by early kings of Spain with present construction going back to the 1300s atop earlier foundations. It wasn't for me — a series of over-decorated patios and gardens. I fear I might be equally underwhelmed by the Alhambra in Granada.

Some restaurants are actually open all day (gasp!) and we appreciate that.

- John (& Barbara)





April 26
Seville again

Hi friends,

Another walking tourist day in Seville.

Our first stop was the Plaza of San Francisco where the Inquisition conducted their first of many mass public burnings (auto-de-fé). it's a peaceful plaza now, but what a history.

We had planned to go inside the Cathedral again but it was closed until 1, so we photographed the incredible bell tower. The base is Roman stones plundered from nearby, but 3/4 of it is a Moorish minaret completed in 1198 with a Christian top that was put in place in the 1400s and rebuilt in the Renaissance. Its 343 feet tall; quite impressive.

Then a walk thru the adjacent Jewish Quarter with its very narrow streets. In some places you could actually touch both walls, but there was no vehicle traffic. It's still called the Jewish Quarter but the Catholics threw out the Jews immediately after they threw out the moors, so it's not been very Jewish for over 500 years. It was mostly Jews who were burned in the nearby Plaza San Francisco, by the way.

On to the Museo de Archaologia with many artifacts in glass cases, statues, mosaics, etc. from prehistory to 1000 years ago; a good activity for a day threatening rain. The mosaics were fascinating seen up close. How do they ever transport such huge mosaics to a museum?

John had oxtail for lunch. Not oxtail soup — just oxtail (with potatoes).

We had hoped to get into the Cathedral on the way back, but the line was very long so we'll return tomorrow; we'll be there when they open. It's about the only attraction open on Mondays and it'll be a challenge to find places to visit. Maybe a long walk along the river?

- John (& Barbara)

Photos: Plaza San Francisco, Cathedral and Bell Tower, Jewish Quarter, Archaeology Museum, paella dinner.







April 27
Seville - last day

Hi friends,

I really wanted to see the Cathedral again, so we were there before opening time — to find a line two blocks long! We walked to the "Aquario" instead and looked at fish for an hour while trying to hear ourselves think over the noise of "schools" of very young school kids in an enclosed space. It was a good use of an hour and we enjoyed the long walk there and back.

After a snack at a sidewalk cafe we stood in line at the Cathedral for only a half-hour and got to see inside a second time. Attached is a snap of the tomb of C. Columbus. We're told there's a very high probability that the few bones inside are actually his. Barbara climbed 20 stories to the observation deck of the bell tower while I examined its construction from below.

The liquor store across the street has a wider selection than any I've seen anywhere; they even have two brands of pisco from Peru. I picked up a Cuban rum — never had that before! And the prices match Costco's.

We finished our stay in Seville with dinner: clams for Barbara and seafood paella for me.

Tomorrow morning we head to a seaside resort on the Costa del Sol for a *complete* change of pace and a rest. No more schlepping around big cities as tourists for awhile. It's time to put our feet up and read a book on the beach.

- John (& Barbara)





April 28

Vacation within a vacation

Hi Friends,

We left Seville early — during rush hour actually — and navigated our way out of town and onto the right route. Barbara gets the highest possible marks for keeping her cool while tooling down narrow unfamiliar roads with the help of a navigator who's using an iPhone with intermittent GPS connection and complex multiple roundabouts.

We made one last tourist stop in the town of Ronda because we'd heard so much about it. It sits on a hilltop divided by a huge cleft which is spanned by an ancient and massive bridge. People come from all over to marvel at it and we too took a few photos.

Then a problem — the road south was closed due to construction, so we took the alternate "scenic route" which ended up being hours on 1-1/2 lane roads at 25mph that wound up and down and around the mountains and that was even unpaved for a stretch. We thought it would never end — although it was scenic — and that put us into our seaside resort as the office was closing. One consequence was that we didn't get our wi-fi code until the next morning so couldn't connect or send email Tuesday night; I wrote it but couldn't send it.

So here we are in a condo in a seaside resort on the Mediterranean. At high tide I could pitch a baseball into the water from our patio, and we have a view that stretches from the nearby town of Estepona to the east to the Rock of Gibraltar and the African coast to the west. By leaving a window open we listen to the surf as we fall asleep. One of my goals when I set up this trip was to relax on the Mediterranean for at least a few days and soak up the ambiance. The resort has a restaurant and a cafe, a pool, jacuzzi, beach, lawn chairs, and our own elevated patio, so we plan to just enjoy being here on the seaside at Costa del Sol for a week with short day trips before jumping back into the fray.

- John (& Barbara)

PS — the Cuban rum is *great*.

PPS: Wed Morning: SEVERE email problems at the resort; slower than slow and barely connects. I'll try to send a photo separately but it will probably choke the system.

— — —

Vacation within a Vacation photo

I'll need to send photos separately one at a time — if I try more they choke the system and my email program locks up indefinitely. I had this problem twice in South America but didn't expect it in Spain. If I can send one at a time you'll see them in dribbles.

This is Ronda — one of the typical Andalusian white cliffside villages.



April 29
Rest Day #1

Hi all,

The short description of today's activities: we took the day off.

That was our plan. Some people go to the beach for their vacation, some to a resort, and we've come to a beach resort. It's been quite nice not having to plan where to go and what to see before it closes and figuring out how to get there, and to just kick back instead. And we're only 200 feet from the sea so the sound of the waves is always with us and we see boats at sea and Gibraltar is quite clear even though its 25 miles away. The coast of Africa is somewhat less clear. The weather is great — too hot to be in the sun and with a mild wind.

Big problem with email. Once the office opened and we got our wi-fi code I attempted to send yesterday's (Tuesday's) email with two photos — and it choked my computer and

brought things to a halt for more than an hour until I could delete all the attempts to save and send and zero things out. They have serious problems but are clueless on how to fix it.

I'll try to send a few snaps separately. Please DON'T return photos if you reply to anything — that could freeze things again. (Actually there's no need to ever return photos, which in any case we've already seen.)

Tomorrow more of the same — in camp taking it easy and enjoying the sound of the waves.

- John (& Barbara)

PS — severe email problems continue — couldn't connect at all yesterday (Wed) after about 10 a.m. and no guarantee we can for long today. Don't expect to hear much from us — we may be offline.

— — —

Hi again,

I'm at the office where the internet connection is "guaranteed" to work so I'll take advantage of that to try to send a few photos. We'll see ...

They are 1) view from our balcony to Gibraltar, 2) view of the resort with many balconies, 3) view as we wake up (add surf sounds), 4) dinner last night.

- John







April 30
Another rest day

Hi friends,

Not much to report other than our internet is working. We're using that to book our tour of Gibraltar in addition to keeping in touch and general entertainment.

We're eating breakfasts and lunches in our condo and dinner in the restaurant with its great view, so we went back to the grocery store across the street to pick up a few more supplies. Food prices are quite cheap in Spain, both groceries and eating out, ditto liqueur. A one-liter box of table wine goes for 65 cents US! Trader Joe's can't touch that price. A glass of house wine served at our nice restaurant is \$3. So we're eating well.

We added up how many days we've spent by the ocean the last 10 or 15 years, and it's a handful, so it's a novelty to be here.

Tomorrow is a big holiday and *everything* is closed so we're just as well off here. We had thought we'd make some day trips but won't other than Gibraltar; we'd rather just hang out by the sea.

- John (& Barbara)

May 1
May Day

Hi Friends,

'Tis May Day in Europe — Labor Day — and everything but everything is closed. Which makes it nice that we're at our resort where it doesn't matter.

It always takes five times longer than you would think to book a tour, but today we finally reserved a spot on a bus tour of Gibraltar for Monday. It'll cost us less than \$100 to go with a group, and this is our only group tour of the trip. I priced several private tours and they were about \$400 for the two of us! So on a bus it is. Actually the bus will just take us there — then it's a lot of walking. So Monday night we'll have a report and pictures.

In the meantime there's nothing new as we enjoy resort life on the seashore — sleeping in, reading, walking on the beach, soaking in the jacuzzi, watching the tide go in and out, reading some more, a late dinner at the resort's restaurant, and then a movie or documentary on our iPad & laptop. So I won't bore you with emails tomorrow or Sunday unless something unexpected happens.

We are now exactly half-way through our trip. After this "vacation within a vacation" it'll be back into the fray.

- John (& Barbara)

May 4
Gibraltar

Hi Friends,

The weekend was uneventful at our seaside resort — walking on the beach, reading (*Iberia* by James Michener on my Kindle for me; books from the resort library for Barbara), lounging, and taking it very easy. Not much to write home about. But we enjoyed it.

Today we went to Gibraltar. We signed up for a bus tour that our hotel said would be great — many stops on the rock itself with a bit of shopping at the end. So we took it across the border to Gibraltar — and found that it was exactly the opposite. It was a long shopping venture with brief visits to two spots, one partway up the rock, at the end. Barbara had to go for a stroll until I stopped saying "fuck" — this was exactly what I had planned hard and had asked all the questions to avoid. There was a taxi queue nearby and I quickly arranged for us to have a private (and expensive) tour of the rock during our 2-1/2 hour shopping time,

and that was great. We got up on the rock, saw the rock from the top, saw the galleries tunneled into the rock around 1800, and even had time for meat pies at a fish-and-chips shop before returning to our buses to begin the tour we had paid for. The rock tour we originally paid for was lame at best — and it was in French! (We had signed up for and paid for an English tour.) So the day was a total waste except for our very good 90-minute taxi tour which rescued it. And we got some photos.

The first is the rock from the highest point you can drive to. Africa is in the background and a tip of Spain is at extreme right.

Second — Barbara making friends with some Barbary Apes, actually monkeys. One was grooming the other intently until interrupted.

Third -- the siege tunnels built around 1800 when the English (yea) held on for years against the Spanish (boo, hiss). BTW, other natural tunnels in the rock had been inhabited by the last Neanderthals around 32,000 years ago — this was their last holdout against us.

One last walk on the beach in the morning, and then back into the fray as we head northeast.

- John (& Barbara)

PS — a happy Cinco de Mayo. It's not known here.





Hi again,

This morning I got around to retrieving and compressing this video from yesterday and think it's small enough to email.

We were watching one monkey groom another when a third jumped up from below and swiped at the groomer and ran off, causing some momentary confusion and monkey anger.

This is the only video I've shot this trip, it's 36 seconds long, and I'm pleased with it — although it would have been better if I'd known what was coming and zoomed out.

It's chilly and cloudy on the Costa del Sol (no sol today) so we're about to head on to our next stop.

- John

[Macaque video too large to insert here]

May 5
Granada

Hi friends,

We left our restful seaside resort on a chilly morning and drove northeast to Granada, the last Moorish city to fall to the Spanish reconquest in 1492. (Anything here more recent than 1492 is labeled "modern".) Our hotel is about as central to the old downtown area as any place can be — so much that the taxi could take us only to within half a block because beyond that the streets are too narrow for vehicles (and private vehicles like rental cars are prohibited — we had to park some distance away and take a taxi to our hotel). The exact date of our "Palacio" isn't known, but the faded mural in the lobby dates from 1520 (and hence is "modern".) I don't think they could grasp the concept that our community of St. George was founded in 1860; the dirt on the rooftops here is older than that.

The first shot is our hotel lobby (note the mural) and the second our room, both from their website. Our room is special and they feature it at their website. I'm working from laptop on the green table.

What makes it special is the view. We're on the 4th floor, and to the left and right we look across tile rooftops to taller equally-ancient buildings — but straight ahead we're looking up to the Alhambra! That snap is *not* zoomed in. Incredible. I almost cried when I looked out our window the first time — what a view! We can't quite wave to the tourists up there, but we can see them looking down. And that's pretty much what we see when we lie in bed.

So this afternoon and evening we walked around the old quarters where everything is old and streets are narrow. We were on one street so narrow I could almost touch both walls with my shoulders. The next shot shows the river (the Alhambra is up to the left), and that particular street is wide enough for taxis and busses (pedestrians step into doorways). We had a big late lunch at a sidewalk cafe looking up at the Alhambra, just enjoying life. It's about 80°.

The last snap is one of the Moorish public baths, built in the 1000s. It was a series of connected rooms — most interesting. Somehow I ended up in a photo — must not have been paying attention. The white spots are small holes in the ceiling.

Tomorrow the Alhambra.

- John (& Barbara)







This just in. It's 10 pm here and they've lit the Alhambra. This is what we see as we lie in bed, somewhat zoomed in. Unbelievable. Did I book a good hotel room or what! - John



May 6
Alhambra

Hi Friends,

Another red-letter day! We spent over six hours touring the Alhambra, wore ourselves out, and thoroughly enjoyed it. What a place! We agree that it deserves the reputation it has, and it's certainly a world-class site and a must-see.

Words fail me in attempting to describe it, but that's no loss because others have done it better. Suffice it to say that we were impressed, amazed, and thrilled to be there and to be able to wander slowly and try to take it all in (impossible — there's far too much). (Barbara wondered if we could get a two-day pass.) And we were tired when we got back to the hotel — to begin sorting thru more photos than I've taken in one day in as long as I can remember. Others have photographed it better too, so my photos will be as superfluous as my words.

Actually it'll be hard to get them to you. Last night our internet virtually shut down at sunset and tonight the same, although it's good in the morning. So I'll send my 200 best photos at breakfast time when they might get thru. Look for them tomorrow.

We had little energy this evening — just a nice dinner out (gazpacho, shish-kabob and cons-cous) while street musicians serenaded us.

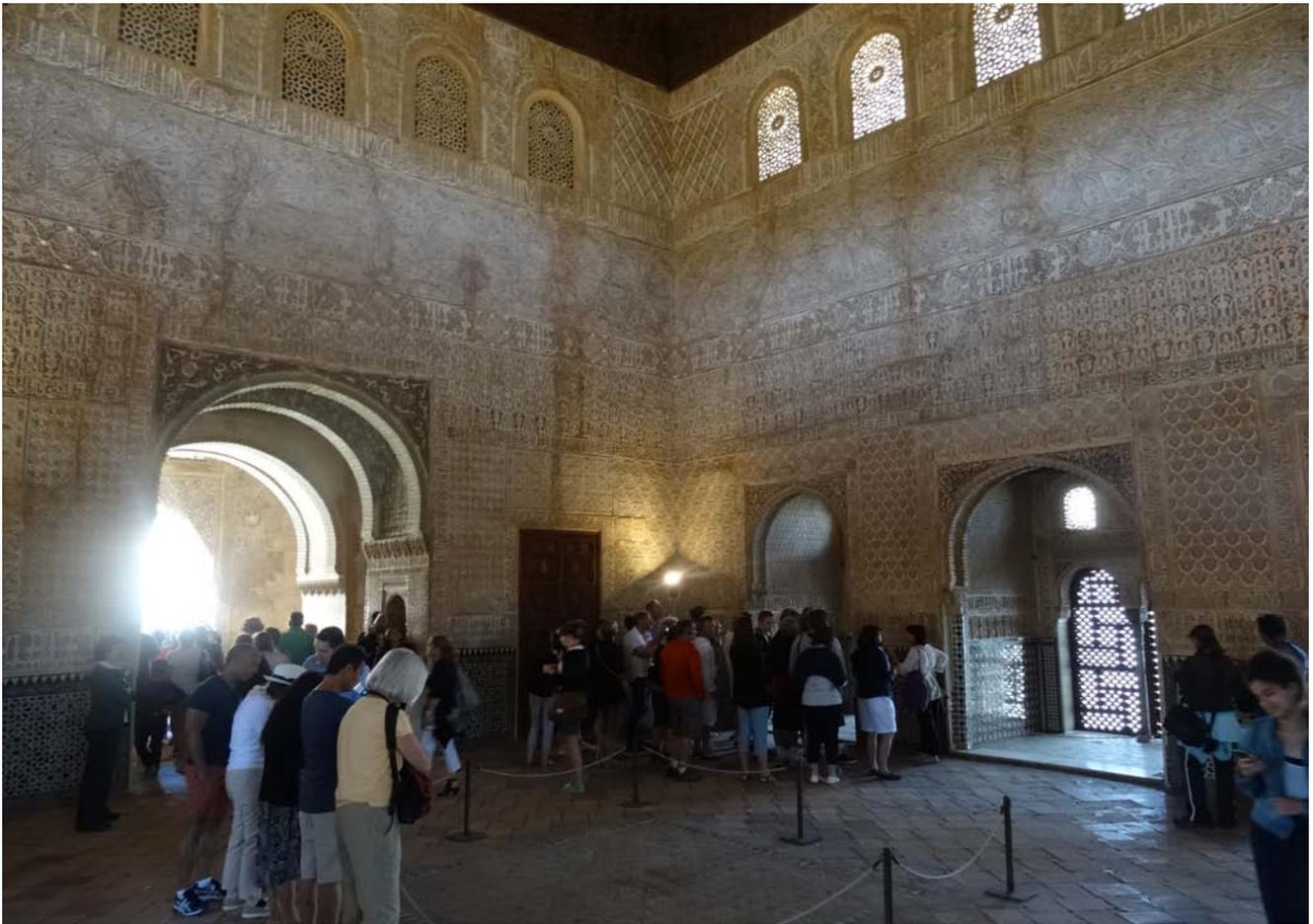
- John (& Barbara)

As far as I can tell the text went thru last night but not the photo, so I'll try again this morning.

- John



This is the sort of detail you see throughout. I'm not sure how much has been restored (most?) but the rooms themselves are authentic and at least some of the decorations are. Photographing an Alhambra wall is like photographing grass — there's semi-infinite detail and file sizes are huge, even after compression.



This is the largest room (built around 1300) in the sultan's palace and apparently it was his throne room. Later it was used by Ferdinand and Isabella as their reception room. According to Wikipedia, it was here that Columbus made his final pitch to them to fund his trip west and received their permission (although not funding — that came from elsewhere). Rather a historic room, no?



A good part of the Alhambra is gardens and fountains and pools. Granada is at the same latitude as St. George and is about as dry, so the Moors did well with their irrigation systems (which the Spanish conquerors managed poorly). This room looks out on gardens. The bright colors at far left come from a stained-glass ceiling.



The Alhambra was originally a fortress, and this is the original part which was rebuilt and expanded around 1100 (and recently heavily reconstructed). Palaces and gardens up on the same hill were added later and the fortress expanded around them



The last photo is of the Albayzín neighborhood as seen from the fortress. Once the fortress defended the town; now it and palaces and gardens make a LOT of money for the merchants in the town below.



Our hotel is between two cypress trees as you can see in the inset, and our windows are the 2nd and 3rd from left.

May 7
Granada Final Day

Hi Friends,

We booked a second full day in Granada just to be able to walk around town and take in the remaining sights, and that's what we did today. More tired feet by dinner time. Im sipping more Cuban rum (quite good) and can see the Alhambra lit up over my shoulder as I type on the green table in our room.

Five highlights were:

The caravanserai, where merchants traveling the silk road rested their camels - really! 1st photo. That's what our guidebook and the wall plaque said — I didn't know that. But that's why you travel. Granada exported silk, and the silk market site is still here, now blocks of Arab-speaking souvenir shops (2nd photo). The caravanserai burned last century and was rebuilt to the 13th-century plan and there are no camels now. The souvenir shops on streets almost too narrow for a bicycle all sell the same junk (with a few exceptions) and if you've seen four stalls you've seen them all. Reminds me of Mexican border towns. We liked the Spaniards vs. Moors chess sets. It's a preview of what we'll see in Morocco.

The Cathedral, built on the site of the big mosque (most churches in Granada are built on the sites of mosques). Again, I'm awed with thinking what it took to construct such tall and massive buildings, especially with the technology of the time. One photo that didn't turn out was a huge brass panel of a Spaniard trampling a Moor — might that be seen as politically incorrect these days!

The Real Capilla where Ferdinand and Isabella are buried. They're the central figures of Spanish history and their plain lead coffins are on display beneath ornate monuments.

The view of the Alhambra from San Nicolas viewpoint. Our guidebook says that Bill Clinton took his family there while he was President because it was his favorite spot. The photo is a detailed panorama — please zoom in for best effect.

Walking around old town. BTW, this is not just any “old town” — it’s on the UNESCO World Heritage List. That walk above the river (photo from two days ago) is in the guide-books as a must-do, and we’ve done it numerous times, four times just today. We and our hotel really are in a marvelous medieval setting below the Alhambra. Barbara and I high-five each other on our good fortune to be here. It’s almost unreal.

Dinner was something different — durums (like gyros) at Shwarma King, which is the North African equivalent of Burger King, in the Moorish area. They were excellent, and we ate them at a table on the sidewalk and people-watched. No prosciutto or paella for a change.

Now to plan tomorrow’s trip and activity (mostly just getting there — we’re off to Toledo after breakfast).

An aside: there are so many little things to notice, like the “asparagus marmalade” served at breakfast (!) and the prosciutto-flavored potato chips I bought because I couldn’t resist them. (I did resist the marmalade — had orange instead. But now I feel bad for not trying it. Mañana.)

- John (& Barbara)

PS — I’ll risk sending all these photos at once in the hope that the email simply takes a half-hour to transmit.





May 8
Arriving in Toledo (two-LAY-doh)

Hi friends,

We spent half the day driving north to Toledo, moved in to our hotel, and walked around a bit. Our hotel, like the others, is in an old building and it's centrally located. We're at the base of city walls which are in front of my face and only about 40 feet away me as I type and look out the window (1st photo) and a bit farther from one of the city gates out the side window. A big negative is that we're on a busy street so it's awfully noisy.

One plus: our room has an actual shower, and it has a flat floor, so I felt safe showering for the first time in Spain. All previous showers have been in tubs with rounded floors and no grab bars and I've felt at enormous risk. Tubs are dangerous places!

After checking in we walked around and planned tomorrow -- which will be a day of walking around. Big debate — should we visit the torture museum or not? Barbara votes no — even though it's authentic — this is the home of the Spanish Inquisition, after all. But it does seem like we've seen all this before and the novelty of yet another Spanish medieval city has worn off, even if it's a walled city on a hill that used to be the capital of Spain. It's time to do something else and we're both grateful for our vacation on the Costa del Sol less than a week ago. I'd like to find a quiet place to read tomorrow but that's not going to happen.

But enough of Toledo!

The drive north was through more groves of olive trees than I've ever seen in my life. Much of Spain is rolling hills and cultivated, but there are far more mountains than I'd imagined. The second snap (with terrible color balance I can't improve) is a fairly typical scene in central Spain; note the watch tower to the left of the distant white town. We've enjoyed the driving — there's always something to see.

The third snap was taken at an authentic truck stop. It's all olive oil from me to the right end; olives to the left. Why a truck stop would have so much olive oil and in such large containers is beyond us; ditto the olives which you can buy in 2-gallon (roughly) jars. Are these particular oils a specialty of the region? But there are so many varieties. Another mystery.

- John (& Barbara)

PS — we did try the asparagus marmalade this morning, and it tastes exactly like what you would imagine it would. Another mystery — why bother?





May 9
Toledo

Hi Friends,

We're both definitely overdosed on walking around medieval Spanish cities, but we did it two last times today. Toledo preserves the ancient street plan, so the streets are narrow, twisty, and short, and you need a map to navigate. And steep — the town is built atop a hill with steep sides. Buildings are generally four stories and for the most part relatively “new” although they follow the old designs, and its quite different than say Granada where the building themselves are medieval. But Toledo-town is a UNESCO site. It's Saturday and the streets were very crowded; we're told mostly by tourists from Madrid which is a half-hour away by high-speed train. Barbara's crowd-aversion kicked in big-time. Five hours of wandering around was enough. Now we're saving our energy for tomorrow.

I did tour the torture museum while Barbara had a coke at a sidewalk cafe. What better place to see the enhanced interrogation instruments of the Inquisition than the very place where they were tested and perfected? I can't say that I have any favorites, and I didn't take any photos. (Sorry — just the outside. Go to <http://www.torturamuseum.com> if you need to know.)

The second shot is our hotel; our windows are on the second floor. You can see why it's noisy. In contrast to most of the places we've stayed it's not a historic building.

The third shot is a surprisingly busy street. Note that the rear view mirrors are folded in. I think it was one-way.

Tomorrow another travel day, including a short flight to a new continent (new to us, not geologically new).

- John (& Barbara)





May 10
Arriving in Marrakech

Bonjour amis; nous sommes en Moroc,

We're both tired and somewhat overwhelmed, so just the highlights.

We're in a "riad" — a former home with interior courtyard turned into a 9-room hotel, in the heart of the old city (yet again). Arrived around 4:00, rested from the trip, and set out on a 3-hour walking tour. Barbara eventually overdosed from the intense crowds, but it is

fascinating. We're in Africa! So much to see. Lots of tourists and we feel safe. Great variety of dress style from young European girls with bare shoulders to burkas (just a few) and many robes. It's 90° so I'm in shorts and knit shirt; Barbara the same.

I bought some fancy nuts to snack on, but a problem is that if you glance at any merchandise the vendor pops out, grabs you by the arm (nicely) and walks you in to his shop, so it's best to avoid eye contact or to slow down. The street food looks and smells wonderful, but we don't dare.

It's hard to imagine the sounds. And the call to prayer from several minarets simultaneously is new to us.

I hadn't realized that I'd be needing French on our trip to Spain, but it's the second language here and Spanish is no good. I'm desperately trying to recall my one year of high-school French; c'est difficile.

I feel conspicuous taking photos and have missed some excellent ones.

Candle-light dinner was in our riad; novel and quite nice (and very un-Spanish).

- John (& Barbara)







May 11
Atlas Mountains

Hi Friends,

Where to start ...

Today we took a 7-hour "guided" tour into the Atlas Mountains. We were expecting a tour bus; to our surprise we were the only tourists in a small van. The tour would have been great had our Berber guide spoken English, but he was limited to Arabic and French while Barbara and I are only good at English and Spanish, so there wasn't much overlap. My 400-word French vocabulary and his 400-word English vocabulary didn't get us far, so we traveled mostly in silence — a huge shame because there was so much we could have learned. We had many questions but couldn't ask them and wouldn't have understood the answers.

We drove up out of the hot plains up a river valley flanked by timeless Berber villages and to perhaps 4,000 feet. The vegetation went from Southern California desert (palm trees and

cacti) to Colorado Plateau (short trees and comparatively green) — and in the distance were the snow-covered peaks. We hadn't appreciated that the Atlas are almost as high as the Alps (they're in Africa, after all) but they looked very Alpine. They remained in the distance.

A highlight was a visit into a typical Berber home where we were served sweet tea for a tip (it's part of the tour). Straight out of the late Middle Ages. A few photos can speak for themselves. That's a fire of twigs in a clay oven built into the wall.

Anyway — it could have been a wonderful tour, but even so it was a great drive with too much to see — donkey carts, people riding donkeys (side-saddle), kids herding sheep, and little villages that can't have changed much in the last few hundred years other than the satellite dish on each roof.

Then a long loop walk thru the apparently endless souks (markets). I bought a camel-leather belt, my only souvenir of Spain and Morocco; we bartered and I'm sure he got the best of me but it was a bit less than I would have paid in the USA for cow-leather, so we're both happy.

The weather report says its 104° here which might explain why we arrived back at our road sweaty and tired. It was a quiet evening in. Lunch was so big we snacked on items bought in the souk and apples carried from Spain.

More Marrakech tomorrow.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos: I'll send a bunch even though the several pics I send last night took a full half-hour to transmit. I'm compressing these more.

I'll save for tomorrow the best of the dozens of photos I took in the souk (market). That's a whole 'nother world.



First is the weather report. How is that the ladies in long black head-to-toe robes don't die inside? Yet another mystery



Then a street scene in downtown Marrakech (while waiting for our tour guide).



Next the living room and kitchen of a “typical Berber home” — dating from an unknown century. That’s Barbara and our Berber guide.



From the rooftop of the home we watched three men ride past on donkeys. A few minutes later a woman in robes herded a small flock of sheep down the road.



Next the Atlas Mountains (highly compressed pan) from some distance.



A typical hillside village. Paths but not roads lead to many.



And a man with a loaded donkey.

May 12
Marrakech

Hi Friends,

Today was a guided tour of the town, and once again we were the only two people in our van. That, we learned, is because we're in the off-season. It was 107 degrees today and now it all fits together! We tipped our English-speaking guide heavily at the end and were hugged and kissed on both cheeks — I don't remember the last time I was hugged and kissed by a man.

We did enjoy the tour, even though most of it was to palaces and gardens and tombs of historic people we don't know and couldn't relate to. But we did have the sort of running commentary that we so badly missed yesterday, and we learned a lot. Mehdi, our guide, spent some time trying to convince us that Islam is a religion of peace (we hadn't asked him about it, but we were in Moslem places). He did stress that in Morocco the religion is controlled by an enlightened government that keeps a lid on things, and that people are very free. (Something we learned: the gallows-looking structure atop mosques is not a gallows, not a threat to the unfaithful. A white flag is flown there so those without hearing will know that it is time to pray. The just need a watch to know when to look up at it.) There are few religious rules and you're free to ignore them, which explains why we see the locals wear everything from full burkas to casual clothes (and some tourists even less) and no one seems to care — "do as you like and leave others alone" is the motto, our guide says. He seems to be right for Marrakech and it would be great if the rest of the Islamic world was so enlightened.

Lunch was huge, and in contrast to Spanish meals, which are meat and starch and ultra-light on salad and vegetables, our lunch was a huge "salad" followed by a beef and egg dish. Another difference: Spanish meals are bland — virtually no seasoning at all — while the Moroccans learned a lot from the French occupation and food is tasty here. We ate in a restaurant that resembled the Alhambra with live musicians on drums and guitar-like instruments — very exotic.

We ended up in the souks (markets) which extend literally for miles, and our guide helped us barter for a woven basket which you will see hold fruit if you're at our house. I think I might have got a better deal on my own and actually went over my "final price" but the guide insisted that was as low as we would go so I deferred to him. So \$11 instead of \$10 for a basket. Souvenir #2.

About an hour of walking the souks in 107° heat was enough! Our little room is air-conditioned so we rested there for a few hours to re-hydrate and escape the sun.

Once the temperature dropped to the mid-90s we headed out again for a few hours and to have a small dinner of couscous (we're in Morocco!). We paused to chat with a few of the vendors who in general seemed happy just to say hi and who let us go without a struggle.

Barbara bought nuts to snack on. The souk was still strong and noisy at 10:15, when I came down from the rooftop patio.

I shot a fair bit of video in the souk which could be quite good, but don't know when I'll get to review and edit it. On the flight home?

Another out-of-town excursion tomorrow.

- John (& Barbara)

Photos: last night's batch went in only 10 minutes so I'll try more tonight.



John buying a camel-leather belt. They cut it to length and then punched holes. John had the vendor assure him that the camel was gentle and that camels are not an endangered species.



“Salad” as 1st course at lunch — chopped up green things. Never saw anything like this in Spain, and it was very good. Everything is seasoned!



Vendor of cold fresh-squeezed orange juice — we’ve bought several. A full glass is 40¢ in a glass or 50¢ in a plastic cup. The theory is that they don’t wash the glasses between customers so we opt for the plastic cup. Cheap insurance.



For a dollar the monkey will climb on you while the guy takes your photo with your camera. Maybe next time.



Snake charmers. You should hear the music! We assume the cobras are safe but didn't test it. Again a dollar gets a photo of a snake around your neck. Maybe next time.



The main square (medina) as darkness falls. Busy and noisy until late — a real circus. Terrorists blew up the restaurant at far right four years ago and killed a roomful of French diners, but nobody claimed credit. Since rebuilt.



The souk at night from our upstairs restaurant. We have no idea when it closes down.

May 13

Kasbah at the edge of the Sahara

Hi Friends,

Today's trip took us across the Atlas Mountains (over a pass at 7,000 ft) and down to the edge of the Sahara (but not quite to the Sahara itself) to a historic kasbah that is a UNESCO heritage site. This is a big caravanserai — actually a fortified village -- from the 11th century where camels coming north from Timbuktu stopped and the cargo was transferred to donkeys (and mules?) to continue north over the Atlas Mountains to Marrakech. Does that sound romantic or what! Nine families still live in it, as caretakers, while a town has grown up across the wadi to serve tourists.

The actual kasbah was fascinating; a maintained ruin last used about 60 years ago and now a tourist attraction, but it can't have changed hardly at all in the last 900 years, and it looked as old as it is. A berber guide walked us through it and I took a bunch of snaps (we are tourists, after all). Another highlight of the trip. (Google Ait Ben Haddou.)

A big lunch (I had skewers of meat, another local specialty), and then on to a disappointment, the oasis of Ouarzazate. It's heavily billed as a tourist attraction and you see pictures of it everywhere, but it's just a big series of backdrops made for the movie industry, which built the town. Nothing historic or authentic, although it looks it of course. We didn't even get out of the car, to our guide's amazement.

Then a long drive back over the mountains. That was interesting both ways as we passed many small villages that looked as old as the kasbah and probably are with tiny terraced fields between ... [I'm in the rooftop garden of our riad again and the final call to prayer is blasting from all directions at once — quite a sound] ... and people harvesting by hand with scythes, women in robes leading little flocks of sheep or goats, donkey carts, etc. Just what we came for! But it was 6 hours sitting in the car and that left us rather tired.

BTW, we noticed that in the mountain villages the men are 50/50 modern jeans and shirts vs. robes while the women are 100% in robes.

It was over 100° when we got home so Barbara took a long shower and packed for the trip home while I hit the souks and risked street food — soup and more skewers of meat. Ninety minutes later I still feel fine, so maybe it wasn't a bad idea.

Tomorrow: cooking class

- John (& Barbara)

Photos:



Scene along the road over the Atlas Mountains. Note the Coke sign. Barbara is happy that she can sometimes find Pepsi. The trick is finding either cold.



The kasbah from across the wadi (stream).



The kasbah from upper levels.



Abandoned living rooms inside. Our guide said the ceiling wood was original and ancient and we can't dispute him.



“Exit thru the gift shop.”



Washing clothes in the wadi.

May 14

Cooking Class
Hi friends,

First a correction and addition from yesterday: We were in the car 10 hours, not 6 (out of 11.5 total), and the impossible happened — we had a tour guide whose accent (English) was worse than my French accent. He self-taught himself English as a camel driver (for tourists) and although his vocabulary might have been adequate he might as well have been speaking Arabic for all we understood. Thick, thick accent. And every question I asked (slowly) had the same response “what?” Example: “When did they stop using this caravansary?” (after a few “whats”) “Yes it last stop Timbuktu.” “In what year did the last camel caravan come here?” “Yes - camels come here from Timbuktu.” “In what year did they no longer use this place; when did it close?” Yes, camel come here many years.” We eventually gave up.

Also I learned that they don’t make belts out of camel leather.

Today I got us lost on the way to La Maison Arabe for Barbara’s cooking class and a 25-minute walk in the “cool” of the morning (around 90°) turned into an 80-minute sweaty scenic tour. I’ll make it up to her somehow. Originally she was going to take the class while I walked around one last time, but it was too hot so I signed up as an observer (one meal, two people; I was her photographer).

On the way over I asked shopkeepers for directions several times and everybody was courteous and helpful. We’re impressed with the locals — nice people, very friendly, and we have always felt entirely safe. Much of my direction-asking was in French, which is coming back remarkably quickly. We’re also impressed that so many shopkeepers were sweeping and washing down the area in front of their spaces — very clean, and cleaner than in an equivalent US city. We don’t know the rest of Africa to compare, but we highly recommend Marrakech. It’s about as exotic a place as I can imagine being able to walk around and feel safe. We’re very glad we came.

The cooking class was great — and surreal in that here was my girl from Kansas taking a cooking class in Africa! There were nine of us (plus me to the side) in a modern demo kitchen. We “helped” bake flat bread in a domed oven, chopped a salad with many ingredients, and cooked chicken tajine, each person at his/her own station. Tajine is the national way to cook and we had a variety of tajine several times in restaurants — quite good. Everything is cooked together in a shallow glazed ceramic bowl with a chimney on top and served on the table in the same bowl; you spoon it to your plate -- or if individual size -- eat from the bowl. We ate our lunch and then had a short graduation ceremony. They gave us a small tajine as a gift and now Barbara has two carry-ons for the flight home.

The photos are self-explanatory. The tajine is the red clay pot with the conical lid.

Now we're at the Marrakech airport where I'm making use of the time waiting for our flight back to Madrid. I'll email this from our hotel near the airport this evening. Early tomorrow we fly to New Jersey (the opposite of Marrakech on the exotic scale) then Denver and then home at about midnight. We're NOT looking forward to so many hours cramped in tiny seats, but so it goes. Saturday morning we'll wake up in our own bed.

Our next adventures are a weekend in Pasadena to attend the annual Skeptics conference (and have dinner with Richard Dawkins), and then a raft trip down the Colorado through the Grand Canyon. Then immediately off to our summer camping home in northern Idaho. We're almost starting to think about another overseas trip in the fall.

I hope you enjoyed these emails. They're also serving as our diary. In a week I'll post the whole thing — all 30 days — as one pdf file at our travel website — and you can relive it all over again.

Over and out.

- John (& Barbara)

PS: our Madrid hotel boasted "free wi-fi" — which didn't work. I'm sending this from the first place I can connect — the Denver airport.





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