Spain Diary

Anil K Rajvanshi
Email:anilrajvanshi@gmail.com

1. Spain is a very modern state with all round progress and development. The infrastructure, cleanliness and general level of living of its inhabitants puts it in the class of very advanced industrial societies.

2. We arrived in Madrid from Paris at the modern Barajas International Airport. From Madrid we took the train to Cordoba where the International Sunflower Conference was taking place. The road trip from airport to Atocha railway station (located in the center of town) was like passing through any major U.S. city. There were 4-lane freeways with excellent road signs, but very few billboards (unlike U.S.).

3. Atocha railway station, from where all the trains for southern part of Spain depart is a work of art. It is a huge station with a large atrium containing a mini tropical forest and state of the art shopping complex on the ground floor and general cleanliness which we found to be the hallmark of Spain.

4. The fast trains (called AVE) are one of the world's best and latest in transportation. From Madrid to Cordoba-a distance of 400 kms was traveled in 1 hour 40 minutes with the train speed sometimes clocking 300 km/hr. The train path together with its speed was displayed on monitors in all coaches. The trains left at dot on time and even the tourist class (the cheapest class) was better than the 1st class of Indian railways in terms of comfort and ambience. The train journey took us through the countryside with sprawling olive and orange gardens. Spain is the largest producer of olives and oranges in Europe. The landscape was also dotted with wind turbines and solar PV systems. Today Spain has one of the fastest growing renewable energy usages in the world.

5. This was my first visit to Spain and in over 10 days of stay both in Cordoba and Madrid and fleetingly in Seville we rarely saw any Indians. Somehow Spain visit is not on the itinerary of Indian tourists who prefer more touristic countries like France, Germany, U.K. etc.

6. Language is a big problem in Spain. Hardly anybody speaks English, though they all understand written English. For example at the train station when I wrote down in English the destination, time of my travel, train name etc. the clerk immediately understood the message and issued me the ticket. You get 10% off from the regular fare if you are traveling from and to an international destination. Similarly in taxi the written English address of the hotel or places to go was immediately understood by the drivers. This was much better than in China where one has to get a Chinese person to write the instructions in Mandarin. Nevertheless the taxi drivers in Spain are crooks and fleece the unsuspecting foreign tourists. This was not the case in China where I was always taken to my destination by the shortest route.

7. Smoking is rampant in Spain in almost all places. In my 10 days stay in Spain I must have inhaled more secondhand smoke than that in my entire life! It seems girls and women smoke more than men. Probably they believe that it helps them to remain slim. It was impossible to sit in any restaurant either inside or outside without being bothered by the smoking customers.

8. Cordoba is a very beautiful ancient city in southern part of Spain – called the Andalusia region. It has been inhabited from Roman times and in its golden period from 8th to 13th century A.D. it witnessed the construction of its most famous mosque called Mezquita. UNESCO has recognized Cordoba as World Heritage site. During its heydays in 9th or 10th century it was one of the three great cities of Europe – other two were Istanbul and Baghdad. At that time it boasted of vast areas and around 100,000 inhabitants. Today Cordoba's population is ~ 300,000.

9. The old part of city has tremendous Muslim influence regarding its architecture-with very narrow streets so that the balconies on walls across the lanes almost touch each other. All the houses have courtyards and during hot summer months they make the houses quite cool since most of them have gardens and fountains. In the month of May there is a national festival called Cardoban Patios in which all the houses in Cordoba are opened for visitors to appreciate the flowers and gardens of different courtyards.

10. Downtown Cordoba had very little pollution. The only jarring notes were the passage of automobiles and noisy two-wheelers driven by youngsters in narrow gullies and by lanes. We once saw an ambulance stuck in one of these narrows by lanes and after a great difficulty we could pass it to go to the other end. I did suggest to some high officials in Cordoba that they should use electric cycle rickshaws in these by lanes. Cordobians are now trying to use electric vehicles, but the experiment is still in its nascent stages.

11. The cleanliness of cities is really amazing. At night an army of municipal workers wash the streets and pavements with high-pressure water hoses. We were told that even in the worst drought this practice was continued. All the bathrooms in all public places including monuments were very clean. I always believe that the hallmark of a modern industrial society is very high level of general cleanliness.

12. Most people we met were courteous and helpful. Though we had been warned that there is rampant pick pocketing and stealing in public places, we never encountered anything like that. However, we were cautious and on our guard. We did see quite a number of beggars and homeless people near the mosques, cathedrals and other

monuments. On enquiring about who they were and why they were begging in a prosperous country like Spain, we were always told that they are from East European countries and also gypsies.

13. Spaniards love to eat and there is continuous eating during the whole day. Their breakfast (desayuno) is from 7-9 a.m. Then between 11-12 a.m. they have snacks (called tapas). The long drawn and elaborate lunch is from 2-4 p.m. After that is the siesta time. Then there are more tapas between 6-7 p.m. followed by dinner which is between 9-11 p.m. However, even after eating so much there is not too much obesity in Spain, though it is on the rise. Maybe because Spaniards like all Europeans walk a lot and also smoke a lot, hence they are still thin.

14. Spaniards eat huge amount of meat in all meals. It is mostly pork and fish, though in quite a few places there were preparations of beef also. Before the main meal endless numbers of starters are served mostly containing meats, though we did come across some preparations of dates and brinjals. There were hardly any vegetables or fruits in their diet. Generally, the starters are enough to fill you up, but they are followed by heavy main course. The whole meal is to be savored with the finest Spanish wine and beer which flows like water. These feasts were not meant for small eaters and teetotalers like us. Even the American participants in the conference found the food and helpings too much and thus the amount of food wastage we saw was really enormous.

15. Spain is a difficult country for pure vegetarians. Some Indian participants in the conference who were vegetarians had to survive on snacks they brought from India.

16. Because of globalization of culture very little of Spanish culture, dress or artifacts were seen. Practically everybody was dressed in jeans and tee shirts or dresses and skirts and the cities were dotted with huge shopping centers and malls selling international clothing and other goods. Cordoba is very well known for its pottery, leatherwork and silver jewelry. We did see few of the shops selling the local handicrafts (which obviously were very expensive), but most of shops carried modern goods.

17. In Cordoba we stayed in a very beautiful small hotel situated next to Mezquita which was reasonably priced and at a walking distance from most historical sites. It is an extremely old hotel recently refurbished and local folklore says that Columbus stayed in room 214 before starting his "flawed" journey to India which ended in America! We stayed in room 213 and felt like travelers from India discovering Spain!

18. Madrid is a lovely and a great European city. It has wonderful museums and huge beautiful parks. The visit to Madrid is not complete without visiting the two great museums-Prado and Sophia and the huge Retiro Park. We visited the Prado Museum which houses some of the finest paintings of Goya, Rembrandt,

Rubens, Titan, etc. Similarly Sophia museum of modern art carries classic paintings of Picasso and Salvador Dali. The Retiro Park is a green oasis of **130 hectares** in a busy bustling city. Such a thing would be unthinkable in India where such an area would have been immediately gobbled up by the builder-politician mafia. Such huge green spaces are nevertheless the hallmark of all great cities of the world.

19. The noise level on the roads was much more than we encountered in Cordoba. The plazas were full of people during the weekends and downtown have infinite number of eating and drinking places. One has to spend couple of weeks to explore this great city and our two days stay was inadequate to do so. We left the hotel for airport at 3 am on Sunday morning and the city was very much alive with large number of revelers returning from the bars and walking home. It seems Madrid never sleeps.

June 2008