

## Homage to Catalonia

Spain has changed a lot since Orwell wrote about his experiences in the Spanish Civil War. Some traces remain but it is not, in general, widely talked about.

If you look at the holiday adverts in the Courier you will see walking holidays offered by a company called Preferred Travel Services. Their usual formula is three days guided walking, three days sightseeing, flights from local airports and seven nights half board in a good quality hotel. Last year I went with them to Mallorca.

This year I went on their Walking in Catalonia holiday. After a comfortable Sunday morning flight from Edinburgh to Barcelona there was a smiling rep waiting at the barrier to show us to our minibus for the hotel. The holiday was based at the Hotel Marvel in Coma Ruga, which is about half way between Barcelona and Tarragona. I thought that I had been allocated an excellent room with a balcony and sea view until I compared notes with others and found out that some of them had even plusher rooms. There were twelve of us on the walking holiday.

On the Monday we went on an organised trip to Tarragona. You can also make your own way there by train. We had a guided tour round the city, viewed some of the Roman remains and saw traces of the civil war. Tarragona was the leading Roman city in northern Spain and has an unspoilt walled city centre. The amphitheatre is still being excavated. There was the possibility of a lunch stop but there is just too much to see. The magnificent cathedral is also well worth a visit.

Our first serious walk was on the Tuesday. After a coach transfer to Bonastre we joined the GR92 long distance path. We walked through attractive countryside to the village of La Pobla del Montornes for a refreshment stop. Much of the countryside in Europe tends to be on the dry side but this area was green and attractive. Country lanes then took us on to Torredembarra for a late lunch. Torredembarra is an attractive coastal village and several members of the group returned there for a second visit later in the week. We returned by train. Spain still has a good train service with frequent, cheap trains. The local station for Coma Ruga is St Vicenc de Calders named after a nearby hilltop village. The station is described as a gentle ten-minute stroll from the hotel but none of our group of walkers managed it in less than fifteen.

On Wednesday we headed into Barcelona. There were insufficient numbers for an organised trip to run. This was not a problem to us but we did tend to organise our day more inefficiently. Take the trip if it is on offer! The train journey into Barcelona takes just under an hour and the express train costs the princely sum of eight euros return. A comparable journey in Scotland would cost three or four times that amount. Barcelona is magnificent and worthy of a short break just to explore it. Gaudi's famous cathedral, Sagrada Familia (temple of the sacred family) is absolutely spectacular. The pictures just do not do it justice. One member of the group did, however, pass the comment 'Is it a monument to God or Gaudi?' At the other end of the Avenue de Gaudi is the Hospital de la Santa Creu de Sant Pau. This was built in 1905 by one of Gaudi's rivals and is like a scene from Disneyland. Don't miss it if you visit Barcelona.

On Thursday the walk was to Foix Natural Park, the village of Castellet and the little modernist town of l'Arboc. The return journey was by train via the pretty town of El Vendrell.

Every holiday seems to have one day that is not over productive. It may have been the beers in the sunshine at l'Arboc, it might have been the excellent Torres brandy after dinner, it might even have been the over-indulgence in the superb food but for most of us Friday was a relatively quiet day.

Saturday started with a coach transfer to the unusual modernist sanctuary at Montferri. This is a small Gaudi-like church with magnificent views of the surrounding countryside. We then went to the village of Brafim. We passed the village washhouse. Apparently each village has one but I have certainly not noticed. It looked a bit like a scene from a Russell Flint painting but without the scantily clad ladies. A ford with stepping-stones presented no problems to our intrepid band of walkers. We headed for Vila-Rodana for lunch where there is a Roman Columbarium. This is a place where the Romans scattered the ashes of the dead. Our path crossed the River Gaia several times on narrow wooden footbridges. The bridges have loose cables attached so that they can be retrieved when they are washed away in bad weather. We reached Santes Creus, one of the great Catalan Monasteries. The cafe we stopped in had a fantastic view, which we enjoyed along with refreshments before taking a bus back.

Sunday was the flight back to Edinburgh. Probably the worst part of the rip was having to stand all the way back in the train from Haymarket.

All things considered it was a great holiday and excellent value for money.

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