

Catalunya

16-26 May 2003

Friday 16

Up at 4.30 am, taxi at 5. Not surprisingly, the traffic is light, so the journey is quick. Heathrow itself is bulging a bit, and the check-in queues are quite long. However, since we were last here, they've installed self-service check-in machines (that work for all passengers, not just hand-baggage-only), and there are no queues for these. Curiously, after putting our tickets through the machine, we then have to go to a desk for our luggage to be processed in exactly the same way as normal. The only difference is that because everybody's standing in the conventional check-in queues, there is nobody in front of us at the other desks.

We change some money into Euros and pick up a bottle of cognac in the Duty-Free. Alas and alack, they don't seem to be selling Camus XO any more, so after much humming and hawing, we pick Hennessy XO as an alternative.

A cup of coffee and an almond croissant to sustain us, then off to the gate.

We board on time. We sit for a bit. Nothing happens. Then an announcement: one of the baggage containers is labelled as having one more bag than the computer printout says it should have. They'll have to open it and check the contents, which will cause a delay.

They don't find an extra bag in the container, but the flight can't leave until the discrepancy is resolved, so every single bag is going to have to be offloaded and re-checked against the manifest. This will cause a rather longer delay...

They give us our breakfast while still on the ground, allow us to use our mobile phones again, and reconnect the jetway so that people can get off if the delay will render their trip pointless because of missed meetings or whatever. The rest of us sit and wait. And wait... We call Inntavel so they can speak to the Spanish taxi driver to tell him we will be late. S picks up a work voicemail and calls in. And still we wait. And wait... The flight crew aren't sitting twiddling their thumbs though – apparently they're in constant negotiation with ATC because we're going to need a takeoff slot and we'd rather not have one several hours after we're ready to go.

Finally we are told that the problem has been sorted, we've got a decent slot and will be off shortly. We're leaving two hours late, but the Captain tells us they've also negotiated a faster route with Brussels and Paris ATC so we'll be able to make up half an hour or so on the flight.

Barcelona airport was a beneficiary of the city's 1992 Olympic makeover and looks very slick and smart. To allow us to best appreciate it, they've thoughtfully ensured that the gates and baggage carousels are separated by a kilometre of shops. It takes forever to get there, but we've done well out of the baggage hassle – our bags are virtually the first of the very first batch on the carousel.

We find the Metro station and use our first ever Euros to buy our tickets to Barcelona Sants. As the train leaves the station, two girls start jabbering away loudly in (presumably) Catalan. It could be Mongolian or Martian, we'd still understand perfectly: "Ladies and gentlemen, we beg your indulgence. We are here to entertain you with our playing and singing, and hope that you will see fit to reward our humble efforts with coin of the realm."

What they lack in subtlety they make up in enthusiasm, but their offerings don't really justify giving them €2, the only coin we have, and they're not pretty enough for S to want to flirt with them.

At Sants we have to change trains to catch the mainline service to Figueres. We know a train goes in 10 minutes and after 5 minutes of faff we figure out the platform and how to get there. We climb aboard the Catalunya Express and are soon on our way. The train is clean and comfortable but the Express train takes nearly 2 hours so we wonder how long the non-express train takes¹. Outside Figueres the train comes to a halt and apart from moving about a metre or two a couple of times here we stay for 25 mins. We see no reason why we are stuck here and even though we probably wouldn't understand it, no announcement is made. Eventually we trundle the remaining couple of hundred metres and we're there, with our taxi waiting.

Half an hour later we are at Can Xiquet, our hotel for the next 3 nights. The hotel is lovely and the room and terrace superb. After resting for 2 hours with a couple of beers from our free (yes, free!) minibar and long leisurely baths we are clean and refreshed and feel a million times better. We have a glass of wine in the lounge and then go in for dinner. We seem to be the only people here, although we thought we'd seen others earlier.

For starters, A has a wonderful warm salad of prawns and asparagus; S raw tuna lasagne – unusual and excellent. For mains, A has suckling pig (called pick on the English translation of the menu) with puy lentils. S has a dish described as confit of lamb, but in fact more like a rack of lamb. Both are nevertheless good. We have a bottle of a local wine made from a blend of garnatxa and syrah; it's quite tannic and stalky but goes well with the rich food.

We finish with a local speciality, crispy bread with chocolate and ice cream. Sounds odd but it tastes yummy.

Finally, we retire to bed and just have the energy for a small examination of the Hennessy approach to Cognac. Camus is still the favourite, but this stuff is not at all unacceptable...

Saturday 17

Get up, have brekkie, no major excitements. Ask about bicycles and wander round pool for a few moments until bicycle man comes to take us to bicycles. Very shiny and new looking they are too! Two more bicycles await bicyclists; we wonder for a moment what this might signify, but if it is God's will, we shall learn in time: *insha'alla*.

A couple of times round the block to familiarise ourselves and it's back to the room to sort out our bits. We are going to visit Castell de Requesens, about 6km away, which our Inntavel notes tell us is what we should do with a spare day.

¹ Later, we learn that "Express" in this context is essentially just a two-syllable noise.

The first part of the journey is downhill into Cantallops (“wolf song”, no less), but into such a strong headwind that we actually ride quite slowly. We go straight through the village, and find that the “road” to Requesens is now a dirt track. It’s uphill too, so it’s not long before we’re pushing the bikes instead of riding them.

Unfortunately, at our first stop, when S tries to stand his bike on its kick-down support, he finds that a part of it has come loose and fallen off somewhere! No joy finding it, so we simply have to press on.

It’s not *too* steep; the sky is partly clouded, so it’s neither too hot nor too cold most of the time; there’s no traffic and the scenery is good, so we don’t feel too stressed by the climb. Most of the way we are completely on our own, but we do meet one other cyclist coming in the opposite direction. He looks like a serious sort – we don’t think he’d be such a wimp on the uphill stretches.

On the final approach to the castle, we’re overtaken by a 4WD vehicle – the only sensible way to travel this road, really – raising the number of people seen on the road in the last couple of hours to two.

At the castle, a man leaves off cleaning his car to go and sit in the ticket booth for us. Tickets are €2 each – hope he’s not on a commission-only package as there isn’t exactly a queue to get in.

The place itself is absolutely fascinating, and we have it entirely to ourselves. It’s mediaeval in origin, with substantial works dating from the 18th century, but it’s not clear how long it’s been derelict. Most of it is still structurally sound, but even the most optimistic of estate agents would have to concede that it needs some work. It’s like a maze – sometimes a passage leads to a bricked-up dead end, sometimes to a sheer drop over a curtain wall, but more often you suddenly find yourself in yet another curious gallery. Add to this the tremendous views down and across the plain of the Alt Empordà as far as the sea and we’re well impressed.

Going down is *much* more fun than going up!

We meet a couple of cars now; the second stops and asks us how far it is to the castle. Three, maybe four, km we say (later realising it’s definitely nearer the latter than the former) which doesn’t sound much, but remember: this is a rocky single-track road where passing or turning round is well-nigh impossible; where an ordinary car’s suspension probably feels like it’s shaking to bits; where a miscalculation could send you tumbling over a precipice. They are maybe one-fifth of the way, with the worst still to come.

Two hours up, twenty minutes down! The other side of Cantallops is uphill again, but it’s a proper metalled road which is much less effort to cycle on.

Back at our room, a bath and a glass or two of wine seems an excellent idea but sadly the wine doesn’t want to cooperate. We’d brought two bottles of 1990 claret, but had been aware that it was a bit of a gamble; they were bought from a shed at Sheffield Park where the quality of cellaring was distinctly iffy.

Well, both bottles are well past it². Boo hoo!

² There was a *lot* of wine in that shed, some quite expensive, and probably most of it ruined if it was more than a couple of years old. Why?!

To be fair, we’re both a bit too knackered for a serious drinking session – a flop and a bath is about our limit.

So to dinner. Two couples are sitting in the lounge as we pass through, chatting in distinctly Home Counties English. Seems they’re also with Inntravel, but are walking, not cycling. One of them had spotted us earlier with our bikes and thought we looked dead professional. Obviously needs new glasses, poor love.

We have a glass of cava, then go down to the restaurant.

A has foie gras to start, S has beef carpaccio with grated cheese, and we share “lobster with rice” – a Catalan version of paella – as our main course. This is absolutely yummy but A gets pissed off by the little towelettes provided instead of a finger bowl.

Pud for A is a gooey little chocolate cake with ice cream, while S has “yoghurt and chocolate”. Well maybe it’s yoghurt, Jim, but not as we know it – more like a sort of tangy zabaglione with chocolate sauce swirled into it. Nice anyway!

Apart from the aforementioned walkers, the only other guests are two Irish women – or at least, two women who talk incessantly in Irish accents. It could be they’re local Catalan girls learning their lines for an adaptation of *Finnegan’s Wake*, but we decide to go with the obvious explanation for now.

Finally, back to our room for a little cognac and bed...

Sunday 18

First off: cards and presents for the birthday girl! Then brekkie and we book a fancy table for dinner [on our previous nights, we’d noticed that a few people got special tables screened off by the picture windows looking out over the Empordà, and covered with rose petals. It wasn’t clear exactly how one achieved this status, but asking for it seems to work!]

From our bedroom window, what do we spy but the Irish and the other bikes! Aha! We presume that they’re doing the same trip as us, so we’ll bump into them again on the trail.

So to our own cycling: our first ‘proper’ trip with notes and everything! A bit of faffing with the bikes first, swapping their little bags for our bigger ones and adjusting A’s gears, then we’re off. Back down the road to Cantallops, but just before entering the village, we divert off onto a dirt track which will take us to Capmany. A few minutes down this track, we’re overtaken by a small flock of quad-bikes – another couple from the hotel being taken on a more motorised tour or something.

We cycle through a mixture of cultivated fields and natural scrubland, full of gorse bushes, poppies, pine trees and other stuff we can’t name so readily! The road is fairly rough, but it’s rarely steep and overall it’s a lot easier than yesterday’s trip. Before too long we find ourselves in Capmany.

We have a little cycle round, but there’s not a huge amount to see. The “*Piedre dels Sacrificis*” is supposedly a short ride out of town, but after what seems a very long ride, we give up looking and return to the town centre for a beer.

The second half of the journey takes us through some slightly more open country on a much busier road. Easily half a dozen cars use this road in the space of an hour, and we are even overtaken by another pair of much more serious-looking cyclists.

Apart from the scenery itself, the main sight on this leg is a herd of cows on the move, the occasional moo almost drowned out by the constant ‘clonk’ of their bells.

The way now leads through some more foresty bits with trees and big rocks. We find a suitable rock for a little snack stop, and shortly after that we’re back on the ‘main’ road. The roadside verges have the usual grasses and wild flowers, but we’re suddenly taken aback by the sight of a giant mutant dandelion! At least it looks exactly like a dandelion seed head, but it’s easily ten times the size. Even our vast wealth of horticultural expertise is inadequate to identify it further...

Cycling up the hotel drive, A spots something glinting in the road. It’s the missing bike stand bit! It appears none the worse for its night on the streets, so it’s returned to its rightful place and bolted up *tight*.

Back at the room, we unwrap some Lindor choccie we have been saving. At this point we realise that carrying it around in 30+ degrees³ hasn’t been such a good idea as it’s gone a bit squishy. We stick it in the fridge for a bit and it tastes fine, even if it has lost its architectural integrity and no longer has a distinct inside and outside.

Diner: cava aperitifs (Kir Real?) on the terrace, then to our rose-petal-strewn table. prawn carpaccio, prawn/asparagus salad. Main course is a shared “suquet of poissons” – a sort of fish casserole. For pud, biscuit glacé for A and pears in wine with catalan cream for S. Wine is a bottle of Cava Masia Serra.

Monday 19

Adéu Can Xiquet.

Our first ride with a practical purpose today, to the next hotel. We pick our bikes up from the shed and find another pusscat asleep on a hay egg. Pretty puss, and friendly too, so we give him/her a little stroke before leaving. Poly-like “I can squeak for Catalunya” puss not to be seen, but she got plenty of attention yesterday.

Retrace route to Capmany (almost but not quite spying giant Godzilla lizard en route), where we have small navigational glitch. Blame instructions!

To Llers, through small villages, fields and woods; pretty scenery, quite hot, but pleasant for cycling through, very rural and quiet.

But guess what? The bloody bike stand has come undone and fallen off again somewhere! It is definitely gone for good now, as we’re not going back for it.

Not a huge amount more to say about the journey itself until the final stage: basically, we’re feeling knackered and it’s up a steep hill in the midday sun. It’s not that far, but it really takes it out of us. Fortunately, at the top there’s a bar!

Dos Estrellas y dos zumos later, we’re feeling human again and ready to contemplate further travel. Although the notes recommend this village as a lunch stop, we realise it’s actually far more than half-way, so the remainder of the trip should be much easier.

While sitting at the bar, our lesbian leprechauns arrive in the square. They wave hello but disappear somewhere else.

We leave the bar and attempt to find a shop selling large bottles of water, but we’ve timed it badly and everything’s now closed for siesta. Not a major problem, as we’ve almost certainly got enough anyway. We bump into las irlandas again and have a brief chat; they are going to take the direct route to the hotel rather than the alternate option while we haven’t decided.

Another minor navigational infelicity on exit: again, it’s obviously poor instructions...

We reach Avinyonet, where the two route options diverge. We stop and ponder (and take pictures of whirly tree), and just as we’ve decided to take the extended route right, les not-so-jeunes filles appear from the left. “We thought you were taking the short route,” we cry. “Yes, but we think we took a wrong turning,” they reply. “But according to our notes, down that road was correct!” “Err, well...”

We tell them we’ve decided to take the longer route. They say perhaps they’ll follow us, but we warn them that we make absolutely no promises that we won’t cock it up!

We set off, but it doesn’t look like they’re following us after all. We reach Vilanant, where again the notes seem a bit sparse, but this time we’re prepared. We ride around the village trying to get a good view of its rather fine church, and then with the aid of map and compass, take the correct road out. To be honest, the instructions at this point are well-nigh useless on their own.

Finally, Mas Pau is upon us, or vice versa... We ride through some rather dull residential areas for a short while (although the lizard sculptures on one of the houses are rather good) until we reach the hotel.

Hotel girlie speaks decent English, which is good, because struggling to remain upright and simultaneously manage a foreign language can be tricky!

Room is excellent with bath/shower combo *and* heavy-duty shower! Much of the fertile soil of Catalunya is sacrificed to these twin gods of cleanliness :-)))

We take a short preprandial stroll, but in the relatively short time we’ve been utterly collapsed, the sun has gone and the wind has come up.

To dinner: *a comer*, as they say round here.

A glass of cava gets us in the mood. The Oirish are sitting in the lounge/bar when we arrive, and we exchange the basic pleasantries, but they don’t show any great desire to become our bosom buddies and that’s fine by us.

A moment’s confusion at dinner: the waiter presents a bottle of wine (Marques de Arienzo, 1998 Rioja) for our approval, but we haven’t yet ordered any! It turns out that the wine is pre-selected as part of our dinner, for which there is nothing so crude as a choice.

First course is a slice of vegetable terrine with (peanutty?) Catalan sauce; then lobster and salad; then a little salad of mushrooms with scallops; main is a fish stew – *rape con patatas*; and finally pud is *crema catalana*.

³ *Celcius* degrees, ok? I have no idea what the temperature is in °F other than F-ing hot!

A bit strange... After our main course is delivered, one of the Oirish lasses asks us what it is – apparently her friend is afraid it’s “horrible meat”. It’s not clear whether she’s a vegetarian, and therefore *all* meat is “horrible”, or whether she’s just worried about being served some bit of animal that we don’t normally consider edible back home...

Anyway, some coffee and fine petits fours later, we’re done. A bit of a storm has come up, so we have to borrow an umbrella but it’s obvious they’re accustomed to this as they have a little tub full of them. We fight our way back through the thunder and lightning for a little cognac and bed.

Tuesday 20

Breakfast is also a take-it-or-leave-it job but again, well worth taking. Nothing tremendously exotic, but nicely done.

The Sapphic Sisters of the Shamrock think they might take the Lladró option today, because they don’t fancy the Figueres excursion on roads with traffic. We’re still a bit undecided, but eventually conclude that we can see a lot more churches on other occasions, but there aren’t any more Teatro-Muséu Dalí sights on offer. Besides, we still get a monastery on this outing too.

The route turns out to be nothing like as bad as we feared. Yes, once we get into the town we have to contend with traffic, but it’s only a small part of the journey and not too stressful at that.

The biggest problem is that there are two outright errors in our directions, where right and left are swapped! Fortunately we realise quickly in both cases, but it doesn’t inspire confidence.

The Monasterio de Vilabertran is free because it’s a Tuesday, but we still get given nice tickets. It’s not the biggest or most impressive such place we’ve ever seen, but it’s attractive and certainly worth the stop.

Back into Figueres and *another* error in the instructions. This time it’s not so simple, and after trying various fruitless ways to reconcile the printed word with the evidence of geography, we end up cycling randomly until we spot an appropriate signpost.

We follow the road signs and soon reach the place without incident. From the outside it’s weird, but from the inside, several orders of magnitude weirder!

Slightly to our surprise, photography is allowed⁴. We use up quite a bit of film on things that are difficult to describe in words...

Post-Dalí, we’re a bit peckish. The first place we see looks nice but has no outside tables free, and after that we seem to pass into the sub-McDonalds zone. Beyond *that* things seem a bit more decent, and we find a pleasant enough place for a small snackette.

Leaving Figueres isn’t too bad, except when we get to the point where the instructions say, “Now just retrace your route to the hotel!”. This is easier said than done – naturally all the landmarks look different from this angle.

We realise we’ve gone wrong when we cross a shallow river. It may only be a few cm deep, but all the river crossings on the outward journey were completely dry.

Oh, well, we ride through the ford and back a few times so as to be able to take photos of ourselves. We backtrack and try a left turn, but it’s still not the right way, so we return to the ford and carry on. We reason that so long as we don’t cross the N-260, it is physically impossible to miss Mas Pau.

The logic is impeccable and wholly valid as far as it goes. Sadly it does not go as far as another river crossing which is far less inviting. S attempts to cycle across but fails dismally about half a metre in. We have to wade across pushing the bikes to stand any chance. It’s only a couple of metres of ankle-deep water – the SAS would probably not be impressed.

This does indeed lead us back to the hotel fairly shortly. But what has happened?! A marauding band of Huns has swept down from Gaul, complete with minibus, support vehicles and trailer holding a couple of dozen bikes!

They’re all in the middle of checking into their rooms, so we just run to ours and hide. A tries to have a bath, but the water is tepid at best and we blame the Visigoths and Vandals.

We go across to the restaurant block a little before eight, planning a preprandial glass of cava to sustain us till the kitchen opens. Poor girlie seems terrified that we might want to eat immediately no matter how much we explain that we’re not in any rush.

The Empreses of the Emerald Isle don’t appear for a drink, and they are already at their table when we ascend. They’re right at the far end of the room, so we don’t interrogate them regarding their movements today, but secretly we think that they’re complete wimps.

Food: obviously the *real* chef is on tonight...

Little crispy things (brown triangles, rolled up minty peas) and a spoon of something indescribable; potato cream with lobster; scallops and mushrooms, similar to yesterday but even nicer; fish mousse with more peas and tomato and a sort of pea-y fish soup and a few stalks of dried plant of unknown provenance; small fillet of unknown fish (sea bass?) with mange tout; pork fillet in orange and mozzarella sauce with a little apple cake; coffee and amaretto creams with apricot(?) syrup; coconut rice with mango. The same Marques de Arienzo as yesterday, but also a glass of sweet garnatxa wine with puds. Conclusion? *Seriously* yummy :-)))

Finally, the traditional diary-writing and cognac-drinking lead-in to sleep.

Wednesday 21

The Wehrmacht prepares to annexe the Sudetenland somewhat before dawn, so we don’t get to see our swarm of Teutonic caterpillars blossom into a beautiful flock of bicycling butterflies. The daughters of Erin seem to be in a hurry too – at a guess, they’re terrified they won’t reach Sant Pere Pescador before darkness sets in otherwise.

We stick to our normal schedule – I mean, do we want to be numbered with the completely pathetic or what?

A small but pleasant surprise is that our aperitifs and minibar consumption is all included, so there’s absolutely nothing extra to pay.

We take a few final pictures and ride out on the trail to Ol’ Fisherman Pete’s, as it’s probably not usually translated.

⁴ Without flash – lucky I’ve got my sexy Image Stabilised lens

We have a minor glitch at the “junction of six sandy tracks”. Either we’ve somehow managed to come in to the right place on the wrong road, or somebody can’t count, because we take the second left as directed and end up going through a farmyard; the notes claim this mistake would be the result of the *first* left. The farmer accosts us, but takes pity on our ignorance and waves us through. A little geographical guesswork gets us back on the correct route and all is well.

From now on we’re entirely on proper roads, but the hills are gentle and the traffic minimal. We pass through fields and villages at a nice unstressful pace. We don’t stop much: a brief detour to look at the church of San Miguel at Garrigas, shortly followed by a bit of gear-adjusting on A’s bike; then later we ride into Sant Miquel de Fluvià where there’s quite a good semi-ruined tower and some attractive narrow lanes. Here we finally eat the chocolates we were given on our arrival at Can Xiquet!

At St Pete’s, the instructions are again a little unclear, but we soon figure it out and quickly reach the hotel. Our room is a bit less luxurious than the previous two but it’s clean, spacious and has all the requirements.

We have a bit of a rest and soak in the tub for a few hours, then prepare to take a little stroll round town (after a little head-scratching as to where our money has gone – inside the hotel stationery folder is the answer!) It’s the towniest place we’ve been yet (apart from Figueres, but we didn’t actually stay there).

The River Fluvià is just a few minutes away, and we walk alongside it for a bit, watching a water-skier. There’s a big jump ramp in the middle of the river, but he keeps well clear of it. We don’t shout “Coward!”, but he’s failed to take the opportunity to impress us.

We think we might have a drink in the Plaça Major, but don’t find the perfect bar, so pass on by and return to the hotel. It doesn’t seem to have quite the perfect bar either, but there’s a terrace outside our room and some cava in the minibar, so we think we can probably improvise. There is nothing to sit on, though, so S goes in search of some furniture. On the next level up, he meets Katia and her friend, who are more sociable than the Emerald Islanders, but sadly lacking in chairs nonetheless. Ground level provides the necessary, in the form of plastic garden tables and chairs, of which we liberate two. We drink our cava in the last of the evening sunshine.

By now it’s getting to be dinner time, so dinnerwards we go. We’re the first, and for some time the only guests, but eventually the Paddettes turn up too.

The menu offers a straightforward choice of two items for each course; all of it sounds pretty decent, so we have one of each.

S: fish soup; grilled fish with oil and garlic (*dorada a la plantxa*, which sort of literally translates as “goldfish on a plate” but probably isn’t); vanilla and chocolate ice cream.

A: grilled goat’s cheese salad; confit of duck, which is tasty but a bit chewy; “flan”, aka crème caramel.

House wine is again included: we choose red, which is Floresta Negra 2001, a Tempranillo/Garnacha blend good for drinking young, or so the label says, and we can’t disagree.

Like the room, the food is less fancy than we’ve had previously, but good and tasty.

As an aside, we note that the Celtic Kids seem to be complaining that the menu is the same as for lunch, which we deduce they had earlier. This seems to cause some consternation, and they look as though they end up with the *a la carte* menu instead.

We sit drinking our water for a while, and finally conclude, “No, we’re *not* going to be offered coffee!” Fair enough, it wasn’t on the menu...

At this point fatigue has set in; we say our goodnights and retire.

Back at our room, we try to find a weather forecast. The TV doesn’t have teletext, but we catch the end of a bulletin on one of the channels. It tells us that Saturday will be very rainy, and that tomorrow (Thursday) will be sunny in SW France – maybe it offered more useful info earlier...

So to the diary and cognac, and thence to sleep.

Thursday 22

Sunny in SW France, eh? Well that’s ok, ’cos it’s sunny here too.

Breakfast is like dinner: not quite up to previous standards but perfectly decent, with one exception: the butter (French!) is all out of date and one portion has started turning green... The Catalans are not great ones for butter themselves, so these little packages may have been coming out and going back unopened for months!

Immediately after breakfast, we pop out to the shops for some provisions for the day. We get some cherries and wine at one shop, but we want some nice biccies or suchlike which they don’t seem to have. Across the street, there appears to be another better-endowed establishment, but what we fail to realise is that it’s actually the town’s central gossip station, cunningly disguised as somewhere that sells things. All we want is a little tray of pastries for €1.80, but we have to wait while several omnibus editions of the local soap opera are played out before we can butt in. Perhaps the problem is that it’s S standing in the queue; everyone else in the shop is female (and of a certain age, too), and there’s a sort of subliminal buzz of, “A *man* shopping? Is there something *wrong* with his woman?”

Off on today’s voyage... to the Parc Natural dels Aiguamolls de l’Empordà, which is not the sort of thing you want to have to ask for directions to!

At first it’s easy – a few roads out of town with only minor instructional errors (one turn is near the beginning of the road, not at the end, and another road has obviously become no-entry very recently because the painted-out old markings can still be clearly seen), then a clear gravel track – but it soon starts to become rather wilder. Every so often we see the red and white stripes which mark the route painted on the side of a tree, but it’s getting to be a bit of a trackless waste. Although this is a proper waymarked route, it’s pretty obvious that most people get little further than the car park at the start.

We are able to confirm we’re not lost as the next scheduled landmark appears: a delightful⁵ concrete shell of a multi-storey apartment block. It seems that it’s part of an abandoned marina

⁵ For Americans and others poorly versed in the literary device known as irony: the word “delightful” is not to be taken as meaning “inspiring delight”.

project, but our notes don't go into further detail. We ride around this and reach a delightful⁶ beachside campsite.

The Costa Brava!

A bit windy, to say the least, but some brave souls are making the name fit. We don't take the theoretical option of swimming in the sea very seriously. Instead, we climb the lifesaver's lookout tower and decide not to save anyone's life.

We now head inland again, passing a bush which appears to be the butterfly equivalent of free sex'n'drugs'n'rock'n'roll, and on to the main wetland reserve. Where we were earlier beside the Fluvià is also part of the general Parc dels Aiguamolls area, but this is more the hardcore conservation zone.

Bird.

Actually quite a few birds. This is a major birdy kind of place, and we're just at the tail end of the spring peak. There are not that many other people around, but there's no mistaking the sort that have more than our three classifications (to wit: "**Big!**"; "*Pretty!*"; "*Boring!*"). As we're having our lunch (cafe und küchen with water and cherries instead of cafe) in one of the hides, a couple walk in. "*¡Hola! Buenos días!*" we say; "Hello" they say. They then proceed to discuss some bird they see: "Is it a greenfinch?" "I don't think so, look how much red it has"... and so forth. Quite frankly, we want to see the sort of bird that carried off Sinbad the Sailor, not some LBJ that might or might not be a greenfinch.

Still, there are enough birds to satisfy our Philistine tastes, and we don't have to engage anyone in seriously avian conversation. S's big lens and tripod probably look enough the business to allow us to pass as one of them.

A km or so before the entrance (I forgot to mention that we've been going *against* the "*itinerari*" signs all the way) there are some former grain silos, one of which has been converted into an observation tower. From the top, we can see right across the reserve to the tourist beaches and well out to sea. We can also spot our Gaelic Gels catching up with us at last.

The dark one, who does all the talking to strangers, emerges from the staircase. They got lost again. How? Although the path was very poor, it was never unclear. Apparently they were talking too much and not paying attention. Talking too much! Now there's a surprise! We'd already noticed that they'd not so much kissed the Blarney Stone as married it and had its babies.

(She mentions her husband but that's surely just an attempt to put us off the scent. Although it's also possible that they both have husbands who reach the point where they just have to send the noisy pair out of the country to be able to hear themselves think for a week or two.)

She descends: her mate who doesn't like horrible meat doesn't like confined spaces either, so hasn't been able to climb the spiral stairs.

Near the exit (entrance) is the storkery, including the pair nesting in the electricity pylon as mentioned in our notes. They seem quite happy to eschew the purpose-built luxury stork poles that the rest of their flock are using.

The rear wall of the visitors' centre is full of little holes, like gun ports on an old warship, except that birds fly out instead of cannon balls! There's also a sludgy pool with notices in four languages requesting, "Please do not throw ANYTHING into this pool, especially animals (eg, fish, crayfish) to avoid disturbing the delicate balance of the pond."

After the Parc, we head North to Castelló d'Empúries. Following the notes, we turn right, and after a few moments, here are our dubious damsels heading towards us. "Are you lost, or are you on your way back already?" we ask. Seems they're lost... Seems the notes have lied again... Somebody needs a refresher course on telling their *derecha* from their *izquierda*!

Back we go in the right (left) direction, our progress now impeded by a flock of sheep on the road! Past that, we successfully negotiate the main road roundabout, assuming correctly that the road signposted to "Castello Nou" must be the "Carrer Nou" of the instructions. O'Pinky and O'Perky were ahead of us, but we overtake them again while they dither at a road marked as a cul-de-sac. ("Take the first right, which is a cul-de-sac" – it's hardly ambiguous.)

C d'E has a fine church, and a fine bar opposite where we contemplate Life, the Universe and Beer. An elderly English lady strikes up a conversation; she's with her son, but he's off taking photographs somewhere. When he appears, he looks very much like he still lives with his dear old Mum and has never had a girlfriend. He probably got into photography thinking he could get girls to model for him, but has so far been limited to scantily-clad maidens in the form of classical statues.

Another sight we see is an extraordinary bicycle saddle that appears to have been made from a stuffed polyester fur seal. It and its somewhat more conventional companion seem to be ridden by Americans. They are also the only people in town paranoid enough to chain their bikes to a drainpipe while they visit the church.

For the return journey, we have the option of a direct main road or retracing our route out. The latter seems too much like hard work, so we decide to take our chances with the traffic. Despite the warning that it can be quite busy, we find it not too bad at all – better than a typical Surrey road!

At the hotel, we clean up, do a bit of packing and catch the last of the sun with a glass of cava.

For dinner, A: meat croquettes; paella; caramelised apple tart thing. S: Escalivada (a sort of vegetable terrine with anchovies) to start, then the same. Wine as yesterday. Ordering the puds is slightly confused by S forgetting that apple is *manzana* and asking for *manzanilla* (a type of sherry!) instead.

Friday 23

We have to be ready for our taxi at about 10, so we're in no big rush. The ugly Nolan sisters have 51km to cycle, which they seem to interpret as needing a dawn start. Well, allowing for stops for elevenses (and probably tenses and twelveses), plus lunch, getting lost, and simply needing to top up their air supply for more talking, they're probably lucky to average much more than walking pace.

At ten to ten, our taxi is already waiting, but checkout is not an event that they like to hurry round these parts. Not that Mr Taxi Man seems in a rush either, and we've got plenty of time before our train.

⁶ See previous note.

We arrive at Figueres station at about 10:20, with our train scheduled for 10:56. However, all the trains seem a bit delayed, and there's a Talgo expected at about half-past which we can catch. We may have to pay a supplement for this train, but what the hell. Although our train isn't yet showing as delayed, who knows what could happen... A train at the platform is worth two at the signals, as the old proverb I've just invented goes.

The Talgo costs us €8 each extra, but it's fast and comfortable.

We reach Barcelona Passeig de Gracia. "Are you *sure* this isn't our stop?" asks A, "Everyone seems to be getting off here." "Yep, it's not ours, and I bet you it's not theirs either!" Sure enough, two minutes later, a large troop of Americans scramble back on board. Cue smug git mode!

At Barcelona Sants, the *correct* station, we quickly find a taxi to our hotel. Finding the hotel itself is a lot slower due to the gridlocked traffic. It then turns out that it's not even our hotel – we're in the less palatial sister hotel across the road.

The first room we're offered only has single beds and feels a bit insalubrious – A goes into major strop mode as her four-star luxury palace turns into a crumbling flea-pit before her eyes. We ask for a different room, but none will be ready until later, so we go for a walk (more of a fume really) around the nearby streets and cathedral square.

The cathedral is €4 each to get in (before 16:30), which seems a bit steep; perhaps that's why there's a policeman on the door! We reckon we'll go back later when it's free.

We have a drink and a bite to eat at a bar in the square. The beer is ok, but the house white is foul. Cheese and ham on toast is edible but not exactly the stuff of which Michelin stars are made.

The new room is much better. Not quite the Ritz, but a lot closer to it than a cardboard box under Waterloo Bridge. We have a wash and brush up and a bit of a rest before setting out again in rather better humour.

The cathedral square is full of human statues, which seems to have become a major industry in these parts.

Our plan is to drift slowly towards La Rambla, then down it with the intention of seeing if we can eat at Los Caracoles. Pity we start out in the wrong direction! We figure it out before too long, and soon are part of the early evening promenade crowd. Not entirely surprisingly, LC is pretty solid with people and we're told we'll have to wait at least an hour, so instead we make a booking for tomorrow night and look elsewhere.

Our plan B restaurant has vanished! Closed for refurbishment, it seems. Plan C is just to eat at the first half-decent looking place we find, and only a few doors down we find Can Culleretes, unbeknownst to us, the oldest restaurant in Barcelona and something of a local institution. We walk in and are given a table immediately, perhaps because we're still a touch on the early side for dinner by Spanish standards.

It's friendly, attractive-looking, the food is good and the prices extremely reasonable. Plan C has worked out well! We order a mixed fish and seafood platter consisting of half a dozen or so dishes, followed by "Black Forest Gateau" (*selva negra*) and coconut and pineapple flan. We're definitely getting into this cava business and have a bottle of Cordoniu Anna Brut.

We thought we were lucky to get a table, but all the while we're eating, a steady stream of people arrive and are sucked into some vast cavern somewhere behind us. This place must extend way beyond the dimensions implied by its frontage. Either there's some kind of Tardis machinery in operation, or some of the diners must be eating in the city's Roman catacombs!

Saturday 24

The hotel is presently undergoing renovation, and breakfast is being served at big bro' next door. Beyond the plush lobby area, a sign separates the sheep from the goats, and us poor relations are shuffled off into a self-service buffet. To be fair, it's not at all bad, and although we don't have personal attention from the proprietor, the food and drink are quite acceptable to start the day.

Our first mission is to figure out the Metro. S travelled on it a fair bit in the dim distant past, but one rather suspects there may have been changes since then. It turns out to be quite simple; a machine takes a €20 note and gives us two 10-journey tickets and some change. The biggest problem is that the turnstiles require you to insert your ticket on the left-hand side – the opposite of that in London, and of what is natural for a right-handed person.

Our destination is Sagrada Familia. Pictures don't really do it justice and words are grossly inadequate. While the architecture seems utterly whimsical, almost frivolous, Gaudí was a devout Catholic and intended this building absolutely seriously. It's sort of Disney on a mediaeval scale without the icky cuteness. Looking up at the four towers of the façade, it's hard to comprehend that they too will be dwarfed by the central tower if and when it is built. Say what you like about Gaudí, he had vision!

The lift is out of order, so we have to climb the stairs if we want to ascend the towers. But look on the bright side – it saves us €2 each! The views from the top encompass the entire city; Barcelona is much less vertically built up than London, so from the few really high places there's absolutely nothing to block your vision.

There's a museum in the basement. Few of Gaudí's original drawings and models survive, but there's plenty of interest nevertheless. There are photos of the building at various stages, some dating back to when the streets were full of goats, not people!

One of the most fascinating items is a reproduction of one of Gaudí's catenary models, allowing him to design complex stone structures before computers. Masonry is enormously strong in compression but is poor at withstanding other types of stress (tension, shear, bending, torsion). The perfect stone building has only compressive forces, but it is very difficult to ensure this from drawings and scale models. Gaudí realised that a weighted network of thin chain or string, hanging under gravity, forms shapes which automatically ensure that all the forces are tensional – the exact opposite of what is required. Therefore, by making a model in which stone is replaced by string and hanging it *upside down*, one obtains the exact shapes needed to guarantee that all the stonework of the building itself will be in compression. This is no small achievement – the great mediaeval cathedral builders quite literally learnt by trial and error. Many of their buildings fell down, and others required festoons of buttresses to hold them up.

We get back on the Metro to Montjuïc. The funicular section turns out to be included within the standard Metro ticket which surprises us, but it turns out there's really nothing to see, so it would be difficult to make it a tourist attraction in its own right.

The final ascent to the castle at the top of the hill is different, though. There's a variety of ways to get there, but the most dramatic is definitely the cable car (*téleferic*). A decides this is not for her and starts walking; S decides the exact opposite!

The castle is mainly interesting for its views, although there is a military museum we don't bother with, and a cafeteria where we sit for a while having a drink. One curious feature is that some of the walls are made from random stone topped with a couple of square-dressed courses, yet somebody has stencilled lines of mortar on the lower part so that at first glance they appear to be regular courses too.

The castle also has several pussycats who, while not afraid of people, are sensibly cautious. None of them will *quite* come up for a stroke.

A walks, S rides back down, and after pondering our options, we decide to return to base via a small bite to eat.

We have a drink and a snack of bread and tomato with chorizo in Plaça del Rei. This is vastly superior to Bisbe yesterday!

Back to the hotel to clean up and rest for a couple of hours, then at about six, we hit the town again. Entry to the cathedral is now free, but there's a service in progress so much of it is out of bounds.

On emerging, a brass band seems to have sat itself on the steps and is brass banding away. A group of middle-aged women appear to have taken some stronger tabs of Ecstasy than they realised and are now holding hands and dancing in a ring around their handbags!

We're low on film, and it looked like there was a good shop near the Metro station, so we make our way back there. Unfortunately he doesn't have any Velvia or Reala, but he tells us that there's a shop at 40 Rambla that sells them. That's good, 'cos it's right on our way.

Actually they *don't* have our films – we need their professional division a couple of doors down. This turns out not to be another shop front, but a corridor leading to a lift serving four floors of photographic and video equipment and supplies. Films are on the fourth floor, where we find everything we want. A bit pricey, though – 4 Velvias and 2 Realas are about thirty quid, around twice what we pay from Speed Graphic, though probably about the same as in a UK High Street shop.

So to the Rambla del Mar and the wavy bridge. The bridge seems tremendously busy and we're not sure why until we realise there's a major shopping mall on the far side. Another cable car service runs between huge towers across the docks, but we can't get there from here. It looks like a fun ride for those not scared of heights!

It's starting to rain a little, so rather than hang about and maybe get soaked, we start back towards Los Caracoles for dinner. We're a bit early, but we use up the time in a ceramic and wine (!) shop nearby, although we don't buy anything.

The restaurant is a huge maze – if Can Culleretes was anything like this it explains how people could just keep coming in without being rejected. We're seated in an initially empty section, but it soon fills up.

A: snails (*caracoles especiales*) followed by lamb(?) ribs (*costillas de cabrito*) and strawberries; S: clams in green sauce (*almejas con salsa verdana*), roast kid (*cabrito asado*) and strawberries

too. Wine: Marqués de Riscal 1999 Reserva. Note that "*cabrito*" appears to have been translated as both "lamb" and "kid" – the latter seems etymologically more plausible as well as being in agreement with our phrase book.

Back to the hotel, just as it starts to rain a bit more heavily. We had thought we'd take some night-time pictures of the cathedral, but change our minds because of the weather.

Sunday 25

Wet. Blurgh...

The wet-weather plan, part I, is the Muséu Ciutat, mostly *under* the Plaça del Rei in the Roman excavations. Street level now is pretty much the Roman roof level, and it's surprising how much structure still remains. The excavations include a section of the city wall, a dyeing works, fish-salting works, winery, church and necropolis. Defence, clothing, food, drink, religion and a place to rest when you're dead – seems to cover most of the bases!

Some parts are closed for renovation, but there's still plenty to see, and we judge the plan a success.

It's not exactly raining, though it's not exactly dry. We balance the wet/dry outlook and conclude that we *shall* go to the ball, or at least La Pedrera, another of Gaudí's exotic concoctions.

According to the map, Girona Metro station is quite close, and it's on the same line as the nearest station to our hotel. Accordingly, we catch a train to it. There are two exits signposted, and we take the nearest one without looking at the map. At street level, we do consult it, but none of the roads seem to match what the map says. However, the road we think we want leads northwest, and there is indeed a road going northwest, so that's what we take. The further we walk, the less sense the map seems to make, until suddenly we realise that the two Metro exits were not opposite sides of a plaça, but virtually opposite sides of town! By deduction, Girona station is either a mile or two in extent or it has an *extremely* long pedestrian tunnel...

So here we are. It's an apartment block – but not as we know it, Jim. The inside is just a bit fanciful, but it's the exterior, especially the roof, that has had the full-on weird treatment. Even the Spaniards have had to accept a compromise for the sake of safety and put up barriers to prevent careless sightseers plunging to their deaths. It spoils the purity of the roofline, but probably pays for itself several times over each week just by saving the costs of cleaning blood and mangled flesh off the atrium floor.

The weather continues to be a bit iffy. Should we go back, or should we go to Parc Güell? Ok, we'll take a chance. The book says it's a ten or fifteen minute walk from the nearest Metro station, so a taxi sounds a much better bet!

So what can one say about this, other than Gaudí does Capability Brown?! It's half park, half sculpture, half something not entirely comprehensible... As we suspected, the famous lizard is much better in real life than in tacky souvenir-shop reproductions, although finding a moment to photograph it without a million tourists draped across it takes patience.

At the top of the hill, outside the park itself, there's a stunning view of Barcelona in one direction and a hideous concrete affront to everything that architecture stands for in the other!

Aesthetically-minded terrorists would gain much sympathy for virtually any cause by blowing it up.

We get another taxi back to the cathedral square, and have a drink and a bite to eat at another of the cafe-bars. The victuals are fine, but blimey, it's twice the price of the bar in Plaça del Rei, no more than 30 seconds walk round the corner, but just off the main tourist drag.

A couple of hours cleaning up and having a bit of a rest back at the hotel and we're ready to start seeking out some dinner. We aren't sure what will be open on Sunday night, so we have formulated a plan. There are three places recommended in the book in a short circular route from here, so we will try each one in turn if necessary. Booking is advised for all of them, but we reckon that if we were unlucky at all of them, we'll just take our chances with whatever we can find.

Well, the first restaurant doesn't seem to exist, and the second two are closed. Pah!

We retrace our path, re-examining some of the less pretentious establishments we'd passed earlier. Several are found wanting, but one seems quite nice. It's rather studenty – there's a back room in which people have spread books out on a large table – but by no means unwelcoming to the more general public. Service is not the most spontaneous the world has ever known, but after we grab a waiter, it's easy enough. We order toast with ham and asparagus, *tortilla de patatas* and Caesar salad. The wine list is short and to the point: cava, still white, red or rosé, although they are specific named wines, not just 'house'. We choose the red, Torres Coronas, and it turns out to be very decent.

As we walk back, we suddenly see the first restaurant on our list, which somehow we missed completely before. It does look as though it is part of, or very closely associated with, an adjacent hotel; probably the first time we just assumed they were all one.

We do feel we'd appreciate a drop more wine back in our room, if we could find someone to sell us a bottle. It's now about nine o'clock, and most of the ordinary shops have shut, but dinner has revitalised us a bit, so we think we might as well have a little exploratory stroll. Apart from bars, the main shops still open are souvenir places, which gives us the idea of the arts, crafts and wine shop next to Los Caracoles. By now we're virtually there, so we investigate and find that it is indeed open.

Looking through their extensive range, we happen to find the wine we've just drunk this evening, and it's only a few euros cheaper – either this place is a total rip-off or Spanish bars mark up their wine a lot less than English ones!

A tempting thing is a tin decorated with a reproduction of the Güell dragon containing three bottles of cava. Very sad, but it's just a bit too bulky, and there's nothing obvious we can use the tin for back home. If they had a twin or single-bottle version, we'd buy it like a shot.

Nevertheless, we find some suitable wines, including a sweet red garnatxa, which we hope will be as good as the one that so impressed us at Mas Pau.

On the way back, A suddenly decides that some chocolate would be a fine thing, so we go via Plaça de la Angel where there is an excellent-looking sweetie shop that was definitely open earlier. It's definitely shut now. C'est a vie, está a vida and all that...

In our room, opening our chosen bottle causes a problem. A bigger, dedicated corkscrew would probably have been fine, but the short spiral on S's multifunction tool just breaks the cork. After much faffing, we end up pushing the remains of the cork into the bottle and having to clean cork

fragments out of the glasses when poured. Thankfully, there's absolutely nothing wrong with the wine itself.

Monday 26

We're a bit later for breakfast today, and whether it's because of this or just that they don't have enough Regencia guests to justify opening the second room, we're directed to the proper breakfast salon with all the posh people. To be honest, it's not hugely superior to the pleb version, but there's a bit more choice and the coffee is delivered to your table, not self-service.

Not a lot of action this morning. We don't really have time for proper sightseeing (well, not by *our* standards) before we need to be off, so A, having read all the books she brought, wanders down to the newsstands on La Rambla to find something in English, and S finally gets to read beyond page 5 of his first book.

The taxi is on time, and the trip to the airport uneventful. There's hardly any check-in queue, and no problems with our tickets or seats. Is this the lull before the storm...?

The shops at Barcelona airport proudly proclaim "City Centre Prices", which is clearly meant to be a *good* thing. Duty-Free? What's that? The "city centre" isn't London either, because even allowing for a more generous Euro conversion rate, most things look expensive compared to home. The only thing we do buy in the end is some saffron. Again, we could probably get it more cheaply by shopping around in the UK, but it is at least genuine Spanish saffron in a nice box.

The storm holds off – the flight leaves on time and arrives five minutes early! Landing is a bit rough, and A comes very close to being sick, but just manages to survive.

The closest thing to a glitch so far is that our luggage is almost the last to be unloaded, but it's all there and intact. The man from Claremont is waiting, and the ride back is one of the better ones. Everything on time and at a reasonable hour of the day! This has to have been our least stressful flight in years!

The End