

Andalusía

A dear friend, John Walker, came to dinner with his wife Eva one night and we confided our feelings to them. John said that we needed a change of environment, a long holiday, and that his mother, Sheila, had a farm in Andalusia, and that she would be delighted to have the Tunbridge family come and stay with her. He phoned his mother, and we spoke to her. So right then and there, we decided to sell or store everything that did not fit into a car, and to go to Spain.

We sold the house, and I introduced my business associates to another local graphic designer, who could step into my role at the agency. Within a couple of months, everything was arranged for our departure. We told everyone plainly what we were doing, but many disbelieved us. They thought it could not be true that we were just selling up and going to Spain because we felt like it. Some suspected that Shah had instructed us to do it, others thought I must have been offered a job by a multinational ad agency in Madrid or Barcelona. I got tired of people saying, "Oh, I wish we could do that." A secret I kept to myself was that I saw this trip as my chance to develop a series of paintings of consistent style. I wanted to stop doing commercial art, and start doing

fine art. I did not confide this to anyone, because the whole concept of ‘going to Spain to be an artist’ was such a platitude. We purchased an apple green Renault 5 and put our two boys, aged seven and three, in the back, and drove to Portsmouth to catch the ferry to Santander.

Our first stop when we drove off the ferry into Spain was the Paleolithic cave paintings at Altamira – about 30 km west of Santander. We arrived outside the reception building to find we were too early. The official guides told us that the day’s first busload of tourists was due in an hour’s time. Then, for no reason at all, the chief guide said, “Today your lucky day – you have private view – venga!” He led us along the timber walkways deep into the cave. We were luckier than we knew, because the number of visitors per day was strictly limited, due to the erosion of the artworks caused by the carbon dioxide exhalations of tourist’s breath. If we had not been granted a private view, we would not have seen the paintings at all. For the same reason – tourist’s breath – the Altamira cave was completely closed to the public in 1977, and only reopened for very limited access in 1982. When the paintings were first discovered in 1879 they were thought to be forgeries by experts, and the anthropologists waited until 1902 before acknowledging them as genuine. Accurate dating had to wait until 2012 to confirm that the oldest painting dated to 35,000 years ago, and that the rest had been completed over the following 20,000 years. ‘Cave people’ had been touching up the frescos and painting new ones for 200 centuries, and yet their hand prints on the walls were exactly like

my own. We did not know any of this at the time, and were simply gobsmacked by the quality of the art. Such delicacy! Such strength! Deep in the back of the cave where daylight never enters, there was a chamber that originally had been only a metre or so high from floor to ceiling. Modern trenches had been cut into the rock floor and electric spotlights installed, allowing tourists to stand upright and look up at the drawings above them. The guide pointed out how the ancient artists had used the contours and cracks in overhead rock to emphasise the anatomy of the animal subjects.

I asked the guide, “ This part of the cave would be pitch dark, and the artists would have had to lay on their backs and use a burning torch to see what they were doing. And anyone who wanted to see these paintings would have had to squirm in on their backs, holding a burning torch. So why are there no smoke marks on the paintings or ceiling?” The guide shrugged in a very Spanish way, “Nobody knows!” He said.

The Altamira visit was the very best way to start our Spanish ‘retreat’. Beautiful ‘modern art’ paintings were being done 20,000 years ago! Nobody knows anything! Mystery rules! Our faith in our own destiny and quest was restored. We drove on South with our boys in the back, all singing ‘Viva Espagna!’

We took our time driving south through the middle of Spain, using the national Parador hotel chain for overnight stays. At each town we participated in the ‘passeggiata’, when all the nicely-dressed families come

out in the evening to parade pleasantly up and down the main thoroughfare, greeting each other, stopping to have a chat and a glass of Montilla: a very civilised custom. Sometimes we would stop en route when we saw a ‘Piscina’ sign, and have a dip in the municipal pool. All had juke boxes, and I quickly learned how to get approving nods from the locals by selecting Paco de Lucia flamenco numbers. The only place we stayed for two nights was Madrid, and that was just to see the Goya, Bosche and Velasquez stuff in the Prado gallery. I felt a deep affinity for them all. They, too, had perforce worked for people with money: merchants, aristocrats and priests! They and all the classic Renaissance artists were just an underpaid ad agency for the royals, bankers, warlords and clergy – churning out pictures of Princes and Madonnas like photos of hamburgers! It made me feel much better, and by the time we arrived at Sheila’s finca I was overflowing with serenity.

Sheila’s home was a citrus fruit farm of about 5 acres, and her house a graceful two-story hacienda – by far the largest building in a tiny hamlet of about ten typical Andalusian cottages. The whole top floor was ours, a rustic paradise overlooking the fragrant carpet of orange and lemon trees outside. In the distance was the nearest town, Alora, a speckle of white houses over the top of a tall hill. The road to the town spiralled upward around the hill as if in a Dr Seuss book, and we told the boys that it must be where the Cat in the Hat lived. Just beyond the hill was the main highway going south – 70 km to Malaga and the Costa del Sol.

I got my Spanish name on our first shopping trip into Alora. The market was a row of stalls along one of the main streets, all managed by women. Tourists – *extranjeros* – rarely came to Alora, so we were something of a novelty. We nodded and smiled as the women fired questions at us – *Ingles? Americanos? Aleman?* – and complimented our boys – *Hermosos ninos!* We silently vowed to improve our Spanish, and looked for a butcher's stall – but there was none. Miming for the women, I asked them where we could buy a chicken. *Pollo! Pollo!* They cried, vastly amused by the mime, and pointed down the road to a residential street at the end. We went to the house indicated and knocked on the door. A Spanish lady opened it, and understood our apologetic request – *Pollo por favor muchas gracias* – and led us through the house to the back door, through which we could see several dozen chickens pecking at the ground outside. I confirmed to the lady that they were indeed chickens, as requested – *Si si, POLLO! Gracias senora* – not knowing what to do next. Then I noticed that the lady was smiling and politely offering me a big hatchet. I must have looked confused, because she went into the yard and pointed at a tree stump, which was stained black with the blood of many pollos, and charmingly mimed a chopping action with the hatchet. I don't remember how, but I eventually made her understand that I did not want to decapitate a chicken, so she led me to a large fridge which contained a couple of already headless and gutted and plucked pollos. Sheila told us later that the locals would never dream of buying a chicken they had not killed

themselves (how could you know it was fresh?) and that the ones in the lady's fridge were probably ready for her family's dinner that night. We returned to the market with our chickens in a bag, and Beverley wandered off with the boys to buy some vegetables. I noticed some green plum-like fruits on one of the stalls, and picked one up. "Hmm," I mused, "hairy plums?" I put it down, and resumed my walk, but then noticed that the women on the nearby stalls were staring at me. At the same time I felt a tingling in my fingers, so I raised them up for a close inspection, and brushed them off with my other hand. The tingling got worse. The more I brushed, the worse the prickling grew – and I could not see anything wrong with my fingers! My attention was distracted by a sudden outburst of laughter from the stall holders, and I turned to see what they were laughing at. They were all laughing at me! One of them pointed at me and shouted, "*El Chumbo! El Chumbo!*" Which made all the others laugh harder. Later, Sheila could not believe I was so stupid as to pick up a prickly pear (chumbo) with my bare hands.

Sheila introduced us to Pepe Rossa, the leader of Alora's flamenco group. Just about every village in Andalusia had a group, and all took part in an annual competition held at a big hotel in Marbella. Pepe's group was one of the best. He allowed us to attend a few rehearsals held in Alora's village hall. We sat at the back and watched the Spanish girls swirl and stamp and clap. I fell in love on the spot, and determined to paint a picture called 'Verdiales', which Pepe explained was the name of

the Malaga version of flamenco the girls were dancing. After that we became flamenco fans, and often travelled to whatever Fiesta was happening in the surrounding towns. Pepe introduced us to his mother, a formidable Spanish matriarch. With Pepe translating, she asked what my name was.

“Alan”, I replied

She frowned, disapprovingly. “What Saint’s name is that?” She barked.

“Alejandro!” I cried, quick as a flash.

She nodded, and offered out her hand, palm down, as Pepe shot me a doubtful glance.

The months passed. Life became very pleasant, and we could see no reason why it should not continue indefinitely. We explored the Costa del Sol from Malaga to Gibraltar in one-day tourist trips, and also went further afield for overnight stays in Granada, Cordoba and Seville. We visited little villages where donkeys provided transport, and millionaire resorts such as Marbella and Puerto Banus, where the harbour foreshore sparkled with Ferraris and private yachts. At the height of that summer we noticed that the local river had dried up. So just for the hell of it, we drove up the river bed into the mountains, up and up, jolting over gravel ridges and around boulders. I let the boys take turns at steering. After a while, we noticed little homesteads on top of the bank on either side. White painted wells with donkeys standing by. Women in black dresses, white aprons and strange hats, standing there staring at us. We waved and