

Postcards from Spain (Vol. 3)

Sunday, October 29, 2007

on the road to and from Burgos, Spain

Daylight Savings Time kicked in last night, which I was particularly happy about. The town square (the one just outside my window) started buzzing with activity at about 9:00pm and didn't stop until about 4:00am this morning. *Dios mio*. I also learned that the residents of the town of Zarautz are a singing people – and do so with great conviction, regardless of the time or place. Perhaps that is enough to say.

Breakfast was simple and divine: café con leche and warm, honey-topped croissants. The sun was incredibly lovely this morning as we left the hotel, and it stayed with us for the entire bus trip to Burgos. We are travelling southwest today to the region of Castile (as opposed to Borja, where we sang the other day, which is in the region of Aragón) and our eyes this time are attracted upwards toward the brilliant mountains on either side of the road. From time to time, we ourselves travel upwards and become covered in massive blankets of fog, only to swoop down again into the sunlight. It's magical to see the acres and acres of vineyards and olive groves. Olive trees are so lovely when planted in neat rows, and the grapevines are all now turning brilliant fall colors of orange and red.

I find myself thinking about the Txakoli Mark and I had at lunch yesterday in the neighboring village of Getaria. It's a dry white wine similar to the Portuguese Vinho Verde: slightly (and naturally) effervescent and incredibly refreshing. Txakoli is served in any kind of glass and is poured in a small stream, holding the bottle high above the glass. When the wine hits its destination (which, for the beginner, can be rather messy) it makes the most lovely fzzzzzz, just begging you to enjoy. I've got to talk to Paul and Katrina at the Wine Thief about carrying this...

Our early arrival in Burgos was made possible again by twisting the arm of the bus company, and we're all very grateful for this. The town of Burgos itself is a spectacular city, but as I mentioned in my previous entry, the Las Huelgas Convent was the main reason for our wanting to spend some time in the city before our concert. Las Huelgas holds a special place in my heart as it houses a music manuscript from the 12th century called *Codex Las Huelgas* which I've studied a fair amount. Additionally, as I mentioned in a previous entry, this royal convent was founded by Alfonso VIII (his wife was Eleanor of England, daughter of Richard II) and was an incredibly important institution for centuries. The complex itself is outstanding, with bold chapels and hallways, many of which are lined with the tombs of scores of children of the former monarchs. These tiny (and often very plainly decorated) stone coffins demonstrate how truly fragile life was and how common it was to lose even a royal child.

The symbols of the kingdoms of the medieval Spanish royalty could be found throughout the convent grounds. It didn't matter if it was a painting or a doorway or an altarpiece, the castle with three towers (Castile) and the great lion (León) were everywhere – and always symmetrically placed. I was happy to have most of the ensemble with me on this visit, as it put a lot of things into perspective for them (especially their better understanding of the kingdoms inherited by

Alfonso X, 'el Sabio', who is responsible for the creation of the collection of music and manuscripts now known as the *Cantigas de Santa Maria*). We were disappointed to learn that *Codex Las Huelgas* is not available for public viewing, but when the tour guide told us that she had been working there for 20 years and still hadn't seen it, I got the distinct impression that the nuns still cloistered there are just a little protective of their treasure. And rightly so.

The rest of Burgos is somewhat of a sleepy little town, but utterly beautiful. Complete with typical narrow streets and a magnificent *Plaza Mayor* (Town Square), the residents have access to the most gorgeous promenade that hugs the river (Rio Aranzón). It's a remarkably long, car-free zone that's lined with stunning sycamore trees that create a magically arched canopy. The autumn leaves seemed to fall in slow motion as we strolled along in the shade from the late afternoon sun – it was all just too beautiful. I have to laugh, because a couple of people told us it is only ever cloudy and windy in Burgos. But our day featured only the calmest breeze and a bright blue sky.

We were able to take about 45 minutes to pass through the Cathedral of Burgos, a magnificent medieval structure filled with enough art to stock two museums. I was in heaven, passing from chapel to chapel, admiring the various altarpieces, paintings, chalices and carved choir stalls. It was sensory overload for me. Even the main sacristy was a feast for the eyes; Kris and John stood there and just chuckled at how incredible it all was.

Our concert this evening was presented by a cultural center that seemed to house both a museum and a bank. It's called the Casa del Cordón and we performed in what they refer to as the "patio." This patio is a massive room built in 1485, which just so happens to be the exact place where Ferdinand and Isabella received Christopher Columbus (back from his second journey to the Americas) in 1497. Huge columns surround the perimeter of the room, making it feel almost like a Roman courtyard, but the ATM machines flashing in the back of the space were (understandably) cause for a few chuckles in the green room during intermission. We had an audience of 600+ people (with many standing in the back) and they smiled widely at us during much of the concert. I think we sang well this evening. The room's acoustics were a little dry once all those people came in, but we were able to put out a considerable amount of volume without sacrificing intonation. There was really nothing in the concert programs (which were beautifully printed, by the way) that said which country we are from. Given the Slavic repertoire, I think several people thought we were from Poland or Russia. Those audience members who did speak with us after the concert were rather surprised that we are from the US.

The organizers of the concert insisted that we not sell CDs (saying it was forbidden to sell anything in a bank) and turned out not to know anything about having to feed us dinner. We took it all in stride, thanking them for having us and strolling a few blocks away to a little café where we were able to find a decent bottle of Rioja for just 6.50 Euros, along with various plates of sea bass, fresh cheese and wine-soaked chorizo. Bus picked us up at 11:30pm and we arrived safely back in Zarautz at the ripe ol' hour of 2:30am.

Tomorrow we perform in San Sebastian and I'll try to write on the way home after the concert.