

Postcards from Spain (Vol. 2)

Saturday, October 27, 2007

12:15pm – Zarautz, Spain

First things first: our luggage arrived. Thanks for all your notes of good wishes. I'm happy to try to keep you apprised of at least a few of our activities here on tour. Currently sitting in a very smoky little café overlooking the ocean.

I may have previously mentioned that while we're here in Zarautz (our home base) all our meals are covered by the presenters (the people who hired us to perform). And if we are out of town performing, dinner is included in a local restaurant. Yesterday was a little different, because while our lunch was technically covered in Zarautz (at our hotel) we all chose as a group to go to our first performance town (Borja) a little earlier in order to take in the feel of the city. This is one of the things I deeply appreciate about my colleagues: always wanting to explore a city rather than just waiting around in the hotel all day.

So we twisted the arm of the bus driver to take us several hours earlier than planned, which proved to be one of the best things we could have done. One reason is because the trip was long. Well over three hours, actually, but what a scenic trip. As we began to head south, the sun appeared for the first time and never stopped all day. This mountainous region and the long stretches of narrow roads provided some of the best views of the valleys below, sprinkled with villages and long patches of pastures dotted with grazing sheep.

We passed through several small towns, each with its own magnificent church, prompting an automatic response from the group "Let's sing there!" We were greeted in our destination city of Borja by representatives of the festival (the *XXVII Jornadas Internacionales de Canto Coral en Aragón*) who promptly led us to the church to stow our things. Lunch in a restaurant next to the church immediately followed. Our hosts warned us that lunch would be 15 Euros each, which we of course agreed to (we later found out that this was slightly on the pricey side. Go figure). What followed none could have imagined. We were escorted downstairs to a cave-like portion of the restaurant where they had laid out a table that just begged for a culinary adventure.

1st course: paté served with a lovely red from the Borsao vineyard (it just so happens that Borsao is located in Borja and coincidentally, we served wine from this maker at our going away reception!). 2nd course: a lovely salad of fresh greens with long slivers of boucheron (goat, I believe) and fresh tomatoes. 3rd course: squares of the most melt-in-your-mouth *frittata*, featuring fresh zucchini and pimentos. (Oh yeah, there was a Barsao rosé in here as well.) 4th course: a sauté of fresh wild mushrooms and local eggs (the color of the yoke said it all.) 5th course: a crepe with a mixture of pork, rice and anise. 6th course (main course): choice of lamb chops, hake (lovely white fish), quail, calamari (big!), fish croquettes with fries, beef or pork (I'm sure I missed something else in there). 7th course (dessert): choice of whiskey cake, flan, chocolate truffles (a plate of four!), lemon sorbet or hazelnut cake (again, I'm sure I missed something in there).

Okay, just to remind you, that was lunch.

After the meal but still in the restaurant, the director of the festival paid us a special visit (he was quite excited because our performance marked the opening of the week of concerts). He expressed his gratitude to us for coming to perform and, as a token of his appreciation, announced that he would arrange to have City Hall pick up our lunch tab. To express *our* gratitude, we sang him "Hawai'i Aloha." He started to cry and left looking completely moved by the experience. It was truly moving for all of us as well.

Lunch ended around 5:30pm (!) and it was announced that we must make haste and walk briskly to the Borsao winery, where they were keeping the building open in order to provide us with a private tour. Next stop, the local museum; surprise, surprise, they kept it open in order to provide us with a special tour of the religious works collection.

Now why did we come to Borja? Oh yes, the concert! We sang our hearts out in the most beautiful 12th-century church of Santa Maria. The place was packed and the crowd was incredibly appreciative. I was presented by a city official a special crystal (heavy!) plaque with a personalized commemorative inscription and the audience stood to applaud us one last time. Post-concert, in the church sacristy, we were each given a special bottle of Borsao and I was given a HUGE bag of music that the director of the festival had edited. He clearly appreciated our choice of repertoire and seemed so proud to give me these scores. Can't wait to dig through everything after we return home.

Dinner in a local restaurant followed. More great wine, more lovely food, more city officials picking up the tab. After a sad goodbye to our dinner host, Maria-Angeles Martín Gómez, the bus rolled away at about 1:30am and we were safely back in our beds at the round ol' hour of 5:00am. Dear Lord.

Today is a free day, which is a good thing because I think the group is pretty exhausted. If we hadn't sung so well last night I would feel guilty for all the food and wine and private tours. That said, there is still a lot of work to do on the competition rep and I hope my distinguished colleagues are spending some time with their music.

Waking up this morning to the sound of children playing in the square below my window was a wonderful thing. But when the accordion player started just down the way and I began my morning walk through the narrow streets, I was reminded of how much I miss living in Europe. The way the pedestrian is king; the sleeping dog in the shop; the families strolling leisurely, stopping to talk; kids playing on the church steps; old men sharing a sip of spirits in an outdoor café; never, never, never being given the tab until *you* are ready to leave the restaurant...

Concert in Burgos tomorrow night. It's the former capital of ancient Castile and the home of the Las Huelgas convent, founded by Alfonso VIII and at one time home to over 100 noble nuns. Music from the manuscript, *Codex Las Huelgas* has been featured on our stage before, and I simply can't wait to see the town.