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OFF TO THE RACES

Pamplona's Festival of Saint Fermin is a nonstop, nine-day party

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Sunday, June 16, 2002

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(06-16) 04:00 PDT Pamplona, Spain -- A picture I took last year in Spain shows me and five other people dressed almost identically in white shirts and pants, with red handkerchiefs around our necks and red sashes around our hips. All grins, we huddled next to each other and hoisted sangrias to the camera. Aside from my one travel buddy, Maynard, the others were complete strangers.

But that night, we all caroused in that noisy tavern in Pamplona - smoking cigarettes, sloshing down drinks and dancing to Spanish tunes old and new. It was five days into the nine-day Fiestas of San Fermin, which begin July 6 every year and feature around-the-clock revelry, bullfights in the afternoon and the infamous running of the bulls every morning.

We were backpacking through Europe. Perhaps we were drawn by the chance to experience the chaos; perhaps we heard one too many backpacker before us boast of his brush with the bulls. Mostly, it just sounded like fun. What able-bodied American traveler -wouldn't run with the bulls during a summer vacation in Europe. At 28, it seemed like a natural thing to do. Ernest Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises" said it all.

More than 70 years later, the book reads like a script. Despite its reputation as a tourist magnet, the celebration stays true to its bacchanalian tradition.

We rented a sedan in Barcelona, drove all night and got to Pamplona at about 7 a.m. We -weren't exactly ready to take the town by the horns.

Some streets along the half-mile running route -aren't much wider than a Fiat. But elsewhere in the city of about 184,000 residents are tall apartment complexes, noisy buses and spacious traffic circles. Pamplona is much grittier than the coastal town of San Sebastian, 50 miles north, but nowhere near as hectic as Barcelona, some 270 miles southeast - except during the fiestas.

When we arrived, it seemed everyone was in bed and near dead. Nicer hotels are booked months in advance, and we tried five hostels and pensions before finding a room deep downtown, just off the Plaza la Paz. If you have to look for a room during the festival, mornings are best; you can slip in as someone else checks out. About \$40 got us a room with two beds, a TV and use of a bathroom shared by everyone else on our floor.

Our two days in Pamplona were filled with blissful abandon, instant camaraderie and moments during the run when the craving for a rush conquered fear and good sense.

The 400-year-old festival takes its name from the son of a local official who lived back when Pamplona was under Roman rule. Fermin grew up to become a preacher and was beheaded for proselytizing in Amiens, France. The observance of his martyrdom is anything but solemn; the passionate and fun-loving Spaniards party nonstop for nine days.

The encierro, or running of the bulls, is said to have started in 1591 for the simple purpose of moving the bulls into the arena. Few townspeople ran with the slobbering, unpredictable beasts back then. More than four centuries later, they still say most of the red-sashed participants running - or getting gored and trampled - are tourists.

I always thought the run through the old city center was over when it reached the bullfighting stadium. It -isn't. Runners who make it inside the stadium scatter and dodge more bulls, hours before the professional bullfighters appear.

The morning we arrived in Pamplona, a chubby-cheeked teenager from California who had run for three days straight gave us an adrenaline-charged account of the route. Above all, he told us, "You have to make it into the ring before they shut the doors."

The half-mile route begins on a ramping stretch of cobblestone called Santo Domingo, where runners pray to San Fermin and wag rolled-up tabloids at his statue in a niche in the wall.

The rest of the route is a gantlet. At a sharp bend called Estafeta, the bulls slip and pile up, often becoming disoriented and charging blindly. As if it -weren't difficult enough for the 1,300-pound beasts to run on smooth cobblestone, race agents hose down that area, making it more slippery.

In a corridor beyond Estafeta, runners -don't have so much as a doorway to duck into. But perhaps the most dangerous spot is the Callej-n, a boxy bottleneck leading into the bull-fighting arena where many runners are gored or trampled as the bulls plow through from behind.

In the morning, we staked out our spot an hour and a half before the run. Men, women and boys stretched their calves and swapped anxious glances.

At exactly 8 a.m., the deep boom of a rocket shooting into the air signaled the opening of the bull

pen. Thirty seconds later, another boom announced that the bulls were out on the streets.

Seasoned runners probably start farther along the route, in Mercaderes or in the alley of Estafeta, to maximize their time scurrying along the streets with the bulls. What's scarier, they and the bulls tend to reach the bottleneck at about the same time.

But we were rookies, and anywhere along the route would suffice. I posted up where I happened to be standing when we reached the old-town area that morning - only about 100 feet away from the bull pen.

I waited until I could see the bulls before I took off. What I saw was a wall of screaming runners rounding the first bend. Just behind them, six bulls split the crowd effortlessly.

With stomachs knotted, Maynard and I turned and sprinted, the thundering of the hooves quickly getting louder behind us. It was five seconds of complete horror.

At the end of Santo Domingo, I reached a wooden fence and leaped up like a rodeo circus clown, perched on locked elbows, my legs dangling. Cocking my head back, I saw the bulls fill the lane and rumble on.

I dropped back down, pale, eyes bulging and jaw hanging. Some men were crying. Others had collapsed on the street, trembling in a fetal crouch. Maynard was nowhere in sight.

For many thrill-seekers, the rush of running alongside the bulls on the streets is enough. But the animals had blown past us in a flash, and the thrill was gone. Trying to keep up, I jumped a gate up ahead as a route agent swung it shut. My challenge now was less about running with the bulls and more about running after the bulls.

A minute or two after the six bulls are released, a team of docile steers jogs the route to herd any bulls that may have strayed. My goal now was to get into the ring ahead of the steers, because the doors close as soon as they're in. I -wasn't sure why it was so important to get inside with the other runners who had made it onto the sandy circle, but the chubby-cheeked boy had made a big deal of it.

Moments later, the answer became clear. A bull, suddenly unleashed, bolted from its holding pen into the ring, scattering the runners and spiking our collective heart rate. During a rare instant of calm, I strutted through the crowd of about 200 runners as thousands of people watched from the stands. Here was a chance to make up for my earlier lack of fortitude.

One at a time, bulls - with horns blunted - were released over the next 15 minutes. Back on Santo Domingo, I was up a fence within seconds, but now I stayed in the ring and dodged bull after bull.

Their taped horns -didn't make me feel any safer. Runners who dared to grab the horns or wait

until the last second to jump out of the way were being tossed or trampled, then carried away.

In effect, we became amateur bullfighters, armed only with the red handkerchiefs around our necks. (The pros and their beefy adversaries -didn't enter the ring until the afternoon.)

As soon as each bull was ushered back into the pen, runners gathered in front of it, taunting in unison and waiting for another to be released. At first, I watched befuddled from a distance. Brash young men - older runners seemed to be skipping this ritual - kneeled a few feet from the door, shouting into the darkness where the next bull was no doubt snorting and pacing. They waved bundled-up newspapers that they would later use to swat the bull. The keepers, smiling and in plain clothes, let each of the six bulls out individually. By the third, I was kneeling with the rest of the wackos.

I managed not to get stomped, and afterward, as I walked out of the ring, Maynard and I found each other. So much had happened during that last hour that all we could do was shake our heads in silence.

Gradually, our attention was claimed by screams and laughter from Ciudadela Park near the city's center, where flashy carnival rides were set up. Food booths displayed mountains of greasy tapas and churros. Thousands of people in red and white, even little children, walked along streets lined with vendors selling shirts, scarves, sashes, sweaters and souvenirs.

Since Hemingway's novel was published in 1926, partially set against the backdrop of the fiestas, the number of people who journey to Pamplona every year has also risen.

So has the number of injured runners. The weekend before we arrived, a 29- year-old New Jersey woman landed in the hospital after a bull ripped a foot- long gash along her thigh. Yet such reports only boost the event's allure to adrenaline junkies. Since the 1920s, 13 runners have been killed and hundreds more injured.

Aside from a wild time, Pamplona offers a rich history. Streets are named after royalty. Ornate government buildings, churches and even the crumbling remnants of a 16th century city wall are reminders of a more glorious era when Pamplona was the capital of Spain's Navarre region.

Beyond the skyline loom the peaks of the Pyrenees. The somber, downward gaze of the Maria Blanca sculpture stands in the Taconera Gardens. The modern metal arch of El Puente de las Oblatas, a suspension bridge built in 1992, spans the Arga River.

As dusk approached, Conde Rodezno Square and Castillo Square - the town's largest plaza - teemed with vendors, entertainers and people-watchers. Tourists and families flocked to outdoor cafes and restaurants with tables that spill onto the plazas. Some watched the bullfight on TV while eating inexpensive steak dinners or the ubiquitous tortilla - a cheap baguette sandwich filled with

scrambled eggs and potatoes.

As night wore on, Hemingway's Pamplona awakened and euphoria ran rampant. People sang and danced in the street as they walked from one crowded tavern to the next, while locals taught goofy tourists the right words and the right moves.

"The things that happened could only have happened during the fiesta," Hemingway wrote.

"Everything became quite unreal finally and it seemed out of place to think of consequences during the fiesta."

If you go

-- **GETTING THERE:** RENFE trains run regularly between Pamplona and most cities, although there is no direct service south of Madrid. Buses and daily flights are also available, between Barcelona and Madrid only. There is a small airport at Noain, about four miles outside of Pamplona.

-- **WHERE TO STAY:** One-star hotels list rates starting around \$100 for double occupancy; luxury hotels can top \$300. Dozens of pensions around town, including in the historic city center, offer more affordable rates, starting at about \$18 per person. Rates can double or even triple during the fiestas. Many hotels are already booked, but locals often open up their homes to tourists. Check for vacancies during the mid-morning, when some travelers leave. The Pamplona municipal Web site, www.pamplona.net, has an extensive list of hotels and pensions.

-- **WHERE TO EAT:** Europa, near the city center, offers creative interpretations of regional recipes, including steaks and game meats such as venison and pheasant; local phone, 948-22-18-00. Entrees, \$20-\$40. Alhambra, on Calle Bergamin, 7, has a wide selection of local wines and uses local herbs and vegetables in its entrees, \$15-\$20. 948-24-50-07. Erburu, at Calle San Lorenzo, 19, serves simple favorites, \$5-\$15; fixed-price, \$9. 948-22-51-69.

-- **WHAT TO DO:** The fiestas begin at noon July 6 (the same date every year) with a large gathering in the Town Hall square. The religious procession is the following morning, and carnival rides and games are set up in Ciudadela Park, where a fireworks show is held every night. The running of the bulls begins at 8 a.m. every morning starting July 7.

-- **FOR MORE INFORMATION:** Tourist Office of Spain, 8383 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 956, Beverly Hills, CA 90211; phone, (323) 658-7188; Web, www.okspain.org. Two other Web sites are www.sanfermin.com and viva.sanfermin.com.

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