

Sandy Baker

¡No Problema!

Finally! After several years of planning, including four semesters of Spanish, we landed in Madrid on Good Friday. My brain was loaded with appropriate vocabulary though I could speak confidently in only the present tense. Surely they would understand me, I thought. I had made our hotel arrangements by phone, beginning in Spanish but inevitably switching to English when the clerk on the other end recognized me as American. Sigh . . .

Customs was a breeze as all Bud and I packed were warm-weather clothes and comfortable shoes. I carried makeup in my shoulder bag plus U.S. dollars, Spanish pesetas, our passports, and travelers' checks. This was pre-911—no shoeless feet, x-rays or pat-downs. No problem; the airport staff were friendly and helpful.

Next stop, the car rental counter. No problem—we had reserved a small car in advance, and it would be waiting for us. It wasn't. Little did we realize at the time, but the long and winding road through Spain began with this dinky rental car.

“Here's one just like it,” the Hertz clerk chirped in English. “It hasn't been cleaned, the fuel is below empty, but the gas station is at the end of the airport exit road.”

“Okay, we'll take it,” my husband agreed, anxious to leave the airport for Madrid. We were exhausted by the cross-U.S.-cross-Atlantic trip and listened to the clerk explain where the Fiat was parked.

“Oh, for cripes sakes,” I said, hands waving in exasperation. “How will we get it out of there?”

The car was smack against the concrete curb of a grass divider and blocked on three sides by other rental cars. It was like a valet parking garage with cars jammed in long rows—and only the valet can extract yours.

“We can do this,” said Bud after we’d stashed the luggage in the tiny trunk. “You stand there and guide me while I drive over the curb. No problem, and there’s the exit road.”

¡Claro! No problema, I thought, as he gently eased the car forward to jump it over the curb. But it rolled backwards. Again. And again. Exasperated, he gunned the engine and caused the car to go airborne and land on the other side onto the road.

“C’mon, c’mon, before the gas runs out,” Bud yelled. I jumped into the navigator’s seat of the rolling car. We jerked and lurched our way to the gas station where we rolled past the last pump, too far for the short hose to reach. Simple, just back up. No problem.

“I can’t get it into reverse,” he said, pushing, pulling, pressing, and twisting the floor gearshift. “It’s broken, it doesn’t work.” We’d driven Alfa Romeos and knew how to reverse a stick shift. Nada, not on this car.

It was early and not yet hot, but Bud was sweating, I was swearing. Frustrated. Not going anywhere. He waved a man over. Speaking English in a loud voice and using hand signals, Bud was able to convey that the car wouldn’t reverse.

The agreeable Spanish man smiled. Sitting in the driver’s seat, he lifted up a ring at the base of the shifter. The ring in turned raised the leather shift cover. Bingo. Reverse. Neither humorous nor logical, we could now back up for gas. Gracias, gracias.

Gas? Yay! No problem.

“How do you open the door to the gas tank?” Bud wondered aloud, as he did headstands outside and inside the car to find the magic release button. “There’s no handle, where’s the little icon?”

Too embarrassed to ask el hombre galante again, Bud lay upside down on the driver’s seat with his head angled beneath the wheel and ran his hand down along the steering column. He found a small lever tucked against the firewall and pulled. “Thwunk” went the little door.

After struggling with the pump and paying for our gas (not understanding liters or pesetas), we headed to our hotel in Madrid.

By now, it was about 11 a.m. We checked in and fell onto the bed asleep. Later, on a Grayline tour bus, the dour driver showed us highlights of the city. Lovely. Over-tired now, we returned to the hotel to nap again and later onto the street for some enticing food. It was about 9 p.m.—the perfect time to eat dinner in Spain. Because the streets were crowded from el paseo, Bud paced about six steps ahead of me to run interference.

I felt my arm being tugged and turned around to find three twenty-something dark, swarthy men yanking at my shoulder bag.

“Wha . . . let go!” I snapped, not realizing how dangerous the situation could be. “¡No way, Cabrón!”

People side-stepped to avoid our struggling scrum. As the men shoved me, I fought them and yelled for my husband who ran back, and in the melée, lost his glasses. Suddenly, one guy pulled out a knife and sliced the strap of my bag. The three scattered in different directions, one hanging tight to the purse. A well executed mugging, for sure.

“Socorro! ¡Ayuda me!” I screamed. “Socorro!”

Everyone ignored me—no involvement. No one bothered to stop the robbers. It would have been so easy—grab this one, trip that one, slam the other one. Nada. However, one person did find my husband's broken glasses, and another directed us to the Metro Policia. Just report it, he told us, no problema.

I explained the event in halting Spanish and hand gestures. They had me fill out a form describing the incident—my written Spanish was decent—made a copy, and sent us away. We had no money except what little Bud had in his wallet plus our now-compromised credit cards, no passports, no travelers' checks, no lipstick, no nothing, not even my CA driver's license. I didn't exist—no name, no country, no me.

Disheartened, we never ate dinner that evening. Back at the hotel, Bud made phone calls to our son to find bank phone numbers to cancel the credit cards. One bank with an office in London arranged a courier to hand-carry our new cards via plane to Madrid on Tuesday. The American Express office, advertised as open, was not; we couldn't cancel our traveler's checks. It was still Good Friday. That meant a three-day holiday with everything closed on Monday, including the American Embassy.

“Cheap” was how we operated the next three days—we walked and drove around, took pictures, ate street food, and strolled through parks and gardens. The museums were closed, of course, many with undated handwritten notes taped onto the doors indicating they might open next week. Might? Which next week?

After finding our way to the American Embassy on Tuesday, we snagged the one remaining parking space along the heavily trafficked Calle Serrano, a block from our destination. There were zero No Parking signs anywhere.

The embassy was intimidating! Somber-faced guards with assault weapons were planted on either side of the door—seeing them made me feel guilty of something. We paid the fees with the last of our cash, took photos in an antiquated carnival-style photo machine, filled out the forms, and would wait two weeks for temporary passports. We didn't exist—no documentation.

Frazzled and frustrated by now, we left the embassy and . . . no cars were parked along the street. In fact, a policeman and tow truck were about to haul away the last one—“Oh, crap, ours!”

Bud raced up the street, yelling “¡Alto, Alto!” with both arms flailing like The Wave at a baseball stadium.

The guarda, unshaven with a dark, smelly cigarette drooping from his lower lip, ignored us and completed the citation. He reeked as one who'd celebrated the Easter holiday by tossing back mucho rojo vino español—muy borracho! In excited, school Spanish, apparently incomprehensible to him, I explained what we'd lost in the mugging and why we visited the embassy. He was uninterested, with an arrogant attitude toward an American who didn't speak perfect Castilian Spanish. So, I speak Mexican Spanish. It works in California.

The one intelligent thing we did was to bring along the metro police report that outlined the mugging and our stolen property. He glanced at it, and shook his head, “¡Paciencia! Too bad.” A touch of sympathy?

“Señor, algunas pesetas para usted?” I asked.

“Gracias, perfecto,” he intoned, folding the bills into his shirt pocket as he rolled our car down the truck's tilted flatbed.

Back at the hotel, the British deliveryman arrived with our new credit cards, giving us the financial freedom to leave this jinxed city. “Thank you, thank you!”

“No problem,” he said.

Next morning, we pulled away in our little putt-putt for our long and winding road trip through Spain. The rest of our traveling was near perfect, especially our overnights in los paradores. Oh . . . except the day our Fiat overheated and died in nowheresville Spain, and Hertz had to replace it. No problema. They did.