

“Mediterranean Mishap”

by Nancy Martin

In the fall of 2005 our calendar included a date on a Mediterranean cruise ship scheduled to sail out of Barcelona, Spain. It was common for us to travel for the winery during much of each year to promote our California wines in the US and abroad. Arriving in Madrid in September, we sweated through a few almost unbearably scorching hot days, the extreme heat foiling our plans to explore the historic capital city of Spain. Staying mostly indoors, we went out in the evenings for tapas and entertainment. When the sun went down offering more moderate temperatures, the population came out, bringing their children to play in the lovely city parks under a huge Spanish moon.

A few days later we rented a car and made our way from Madrid to the architecturally renowned and much cooler port city of Barcelona, down to the docks where our multistoried cruise ship was waiting. This excursion turned out to be a big mix-up from start to finish. When we boarded, the cruise line did not have either the winery or my husband’s name listed on their

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schedule as a wine presenter. Later, when they finally took us to a conference room where we viewed myriad bottles of wine on display, we learned that only very few bottles of the wines we were representing had been delivered to the ship. Someone had not followed through and my husband was both embarrassed and infuriated. Neither of us was fond of large cruise ships and we sincerely regretted having made this travel agreement. But, finding ourselves sailing in comfort out in the Mediterranean we made the best of it with our winemaker presentation finally successfully ensuing. The weather was glorious and we signed up for various interesting and fun excursions dining and shopping at ports along the way in France and Spain.

When our ship returned to the port of Barcelona, we disembarked with absolutely no plans at all. Inquiring about local day trips at the car rental kiosk, we learned that the favored tourist destination would be a stop at Gibraltar, located at the southern end of the Iberian peninsula, where many travelers went for nightlife and the social scene. The opposite direction along the Costa Brava, ultimately led to the French border.

Deciding to wander the more serene Costa Brava route we hugged the coast road passing through numerous small, quaint Spanish towns and villages. Along the seashore at a tiny, rustic fisherman’s café we stopped to eat — savory sardines pulled fresh from the sea and grilled over an open wood fire — a plain and simple meal so deliciously succulent, the memory of which caused us to salivate for many years to come. Having no idea, and not really caring where we were going or would end up, I suggested that we continue to follow the coastline.

Immediately upon entering the delightfully picturesque village of Tossa de Mar, we instinctively knew that this was where we wanted to stop for the night. Entering a modest hotel that looked promising we secured a room and for the next few days thought that we had died and gone to heaven. In the cool and peaceful mornings I spent hours walking in the Old Town

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exploring the village on my own, navigating a maze of ancient cobblestone streets. Hanging above charming shops offering brightly colored wares of every imaginable variety, a profusion of lipstick-red geraniums spilling out of hand-painted flower boxes adorned apartments topping the old stone buildings. Every morning we watched men and women scrubbing down their sidewalks, windows, walkways and storefronts until they sparkled. It was evident that the Spanish people were exceptionally clean and industrious. Our small hotel was immaculate, the weather was balmy and the Spanish food - divine.

This was undoubtedly the friendliest country we had yet visited. Both the local people and tourists we encountered were welcoming and eager to chat. Sharing metal tables on the street with interesting people from all over the world, we drank cappuccino and ate freshly baked mollete bread (think tender English muffins) drizzled with local olive oil and topped with lightly salted, locally grown sliced tomatoes - sweet as sugar. Staying on for a few days we were reluctant to depart and when finally deciding to continue, we made a decision to follow the exquisite Costa Brava. This northeastern stretch of the Mediterranean is absolutely unparalleled in its natural beauty, a constant irresistible photo op. The colors of the foaming sea ranged in vivid shades of aquamarine and topaz to the deepest cobalt blues: with water so clear and pure that when standing on a cliff looking down, the ocean floor was visible. Behind us, The Pyrenees towered majestically between Spain and France. Framed between the mountains and the ocean, the awesome beauty of Catalonia took our breath away. We were enchanted.

Almost to the French border we reversed our direction and drove back to meet our flight home to San Francisco, scheduled to fly out of an airport near Gibraltar. With my husband leading the way we passed through the scanning device, placing our shoes, passports and the contents of pockets, etc., on the belt, which rolled to the other side. When I went through and

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collected my things, it was apparent that my passport was not in the tray. Glancing around I noticed that my husband was nowhere to be seen. He had hurried off to the terminal, leaving me to fend for myself. Attempting to communicate with the evasive customs people was fruitless, as my Spanish is not good. Quite shaken I finally found a kind lady behind a help counter who spoke both English and Spanish. Sensing my near-panic, she returned with me to the customs point. Questioning the officials there she determined that one of them did indeed have my passport. She thought that perhaps the man had intended to steal it and then resell it. Then this helpful woman guided me quickly to the correct terminal where our plane was already completely boarded waiting for me - *with the engines running*. Rushing on to the plane, I saw my thoughtless husband seated and laughing hysterically at my obvious distress. No one else on the plane was laughing. He had been ready to fly off, leaving me alone, unable to communicate and without a passport in a foreign country.

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