

Seeing Spain's old world charm

By HILA YOSAFI
The Tattoo

If only we could have the best of both worlds. While vacationing in Europe, at times I would think to myself, "Wow, I wish we could have it like this in the States."

But by the end of the trip, I was grateful to be heading back to a land I'm familiar with. This was mainly due to the eight-hour flight in the coach section, not Europe.

I went on a trip that only lucky teens — or those who work two jobs during the summer, like me — get a chance to go on.

Five girls from Bristol Eastern, along with our chaperone, Bristol Eastern High School Spanish teacher Roy Taylor, six boys from Fairfield Prep, and 13 teens from Massachusetts went on a nine day trip to Spain and Portugal during April vacation.

I have seen beauty throughout the cities and towns I've visited in Spain: Madrid, Toledo, Segovia, Salamanca; and in Portugal: Fatima and Lisbon.

I asked my friend why we can't have this kind of beauty where we live. She gave me a common sense answer that our country is not as old as Europe. "OK, this is our NEW cathedral," said our tour guide for Segovia, referring to a structure built in 1525.

There's a balance of city and country in the capital cities. Fountains every 10 meters (and not a

Every week, there is a bullfight in Madrid for the price of an American movie ticket.

eat tapas.

There is just so much for entertainment where I went. Night life is from midnight till the break of dawn, but there is plenty of shopping, bars, cafes, restaurants, movies (granted they are dubbed), and arcades. Granted, we have this in the States (maybe not in Bristol, but in the rest of the country), but every week, there is a bullfight in Madrid for the price of an American movie ticket.

Although natives take it for granted, the *corrida de torros* every Sunday in Madrid is the best tourist attraction, in my opinion. The entire group that came for the bullfight left in the beginning of the fight — all except me and a friend of mine.

Like Hemingway, I have become a lover of the bulls. Those who left claimed it was more disgusting and cruel than they had expected. They did not expect the bulls to get killed. Now, I am a vegetarian, but the fight was a thrill for me. It was sheer entertainment. Plus, the meat does not go to waste — it is eaten.

The bullfight I happened to attend may not have been a very clean one. At every fight, there are five rounds. The goal is to kill five bulls. Two of them just wouldn't die. Two of them injured the innocent horses that are used to transport the matadors. They dug their horns right into the horses' side.

The matadors must have these qualifications: athleticism, flexibility, speed, agility — and, equally as important — good looks.

Bullfighting is big business in Spain. Vendors make a lot of money off the tourists in just souvenirs. You can buy your own pair of spears, a program, and even personalized posters. And there's a guy walking around with a cooler, trying to sell us ice cold beer every

two minutes. Flamenco dancing is kind of like Irish dancing, with men and women, and live instruments. Women wear long, frilly dresses, while men wear blouses and pants. One must be in top physical condition to do this fast-paced dance.

Tapas, which are a variety of appetizers that make up a dinner. They are not for veggies, however. I lived on bread and Coca-Cola that night.

If you like rolls, you will get plenty of them at restaurants. They are crusty on the outside, yet soft in the inside. Unlike in America, there is no



Hila Yosafi / The Tattoo

A shop window displays Spanish flamenco dancing dresses and other goods.

penny in them — they don't throw away their money like Americans, pigeons everywhere (you can't miss those), beautifully carved Renaissance, Gothic and Baroque buildings. While there were lush greens and ancient buildings in Madrid and Lisbon, there were also subways.

Everyone was dressed nicely no matter where they were. There was not a pair of blue or baggy jeans in sight. Most people were in great shape probably because they walk everywhere. They were intelligent too. Most natives could speak more than one language.

Everyone I encountered was polite. I got lost through the snaky streets of Salamanca, twice. This was a great Spanish lesson for me. If I knew French, I could have gotten a French lesson as well because most of the natives could speak it. Each time I got lost, strangers took the time out to walk me all the way to the front of my hotel.

We got by the language barrier in Spain easier than we had expected. With four years of Spanish class and one week of Spanish camp under my belt, I got by nicely. I understood directions and signs for the most part. I even had several conversations with natives.

However, Portugal was a different story. Most of us could make out a few similarities with Spanish. Thankfully, most of the natives there spoke some English as well.

Life seemed so much more relaxing there. Sure, I was on vacation, but in the Spanish culture, there is a siesta time every afternoon, where all shops close so families could eat together. So they don't have our excuse for lack of family values — no time.

It seemed to me that there were family values, however. There were many families gathered at in the city's beautiful parks.

Our main tour guide, Sean, a graduate of Oxford University in England, and speaker of six languages, said while in Spain you have to see a bullfight (I strongly agree), flamenco dancing, and



Hila Yosafi / The Tattoo

At the bullfight, or *corrida de torros*, in Madrid, a procession of horses entertains the crowd between fights.

butter on the table. And in most restaurants, the tip is included, something I didn't find out until later. And if you order steak, order it a little more cooked than you'd prefer because the Spanish idea of "well done" is different than ours.

In the restaurants we went to we were entertained with "tuna" players. These are men in tight, elaborate costumes, singing and playing stringed instruments. They walked from table to table, selling their cd's and collecting tips.

As for food, even with all the bulls being killed, beef is not big there. However, veal was served. But even more popular were pork chops and shellfish. Being a vegetarian, I lived on bread, omelets, lettuce, and asparagus. A friend of mine had to miss our day in Toledo to throw up in bed all day due to runny eggs. Apparently there aren't too many vegetarians in Spain,



Tattoo photo

La Fuente de Neptuno is an example of one of the many beautiful fountains in Spain.

Although most European tap water is safe to drink, there is bottled mineral water everywhere in restaurants and even in vending machines. When you order water, it comes bottled (so they can charge you for it) unless you specifically ask for tap water, which, again, I didn't learn until the end of the trip.

The legal drinking age in Spain and Portugal is 16. You can order a beer with your value meal in McDonalds, or buy one from the many vending machines.

Although I didn't see too many teens chugging a beer, many were smoking. They still have cigarette vending machines there. There's hardly a place where smoking is banned, except of course cathedrals, palaces, and museums.

These places are the sights that cannot compare to any that I've seen in America. We toured amazing, humongous cathedrals, palaces with more than 1,000 rooms, and the famous Museo Del Prado.

In El Escorial there is a room where one could whisper to the walls in one corner, and it could be heard by someone standing in the opposite corner. Everyone got a kick out of this. There are rooms full of elaborate caskets of deceased royalty — some are even reserved for future kings and queens.

Flash photography is not allowed in many of these tourist attractions. We were told to buy postcards instead.

We got the opportunity to visit the sword factory in Toledo, a city famous for its steel. Many students bought swords there, which did go through customs easily. One student bought four different weapons in Spain: a sword, ball and chain, knife, and spears, and still got through customs without a problem.

Europe as a whole is Americanized in some ways, though. There are McDonalds and Dunkin' Donuts everywhere. While the prices are about the same as here, the look is not.

McDonalds in Europe is palatial; marble floors, ceilings, and walls, three floors, and PACKED during dinner time, which is typically around 10 p.m.

While the counter girl at the Dunkin' Donuts in Madrid had never heard of a Coffee Coolatta, they did serve freshly squeezed orange juice, which they squeezed right in front of you. And if you were eating and drinking there, they served you with porcelain.

There was porn everywhere and sex shops on many corners — obscene magazines filling an entire side of the newsstands, prostitutes, and porn on every other channel.

Girls had to watch out, because there were guys leering on practically every street corner. We were told to ignore them. However, a couple of girls from Massachusetts foolishly responded to the calls. The men followed them for a little while, but luckily the girls were in a large group.

There are street vendors, similar to New York City. When I was interested in a beaded vest, the vendor was so desperate, he put it on over my head for me.

Hotel rooms are different than ones in America. There are no alarm clocks in any of the rooms. You have to depend on the wake-up calls. There aren't any Bibles in the drawers either. The key to the rooms is a card, which is very useful because the electricity only runs when you have the card in a slot.

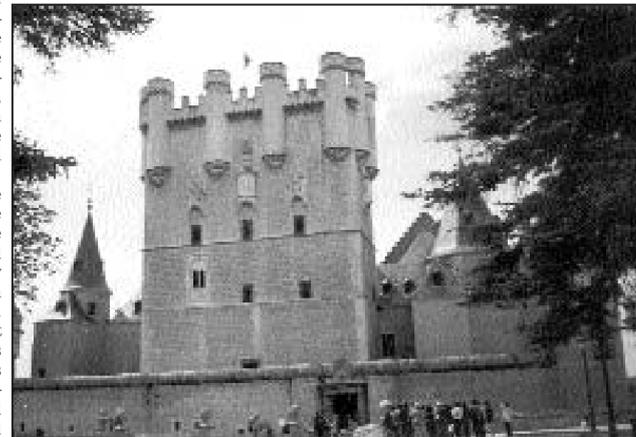
Bathrooms there are different. There's a bidet in each one in the hotels and even in some public facilities (we had to explain to one of our roommates three times what a bidet is). There is no

water pressure in the shower. The city streets are crowded yet clean. With all the smokers, I was surprised that there weren't even cigarette butts littering the streets. That's because there are trash cans about every 10 meters that say, "Madrid, limpio y verde" (for those of you aren't bilingual, that means, "Madrid, clean and green.")

However, there is a lot of graffiti. Much of it is of a political nature, directed at voters.

Once you get to the small towns, the streets are very narrow with cobblestone roads, and no sidewalks. You have to watch your back or you might get run over.

There are also musicians on every corner, playing for money.



Hila Yosafi / The Tattoo

El Alcazar de Segovia, a Spanish castle, offered one of the country's most impressive sights.

At a strip of night clubs and bars in Lisbon, a woman was handing out red AIDS ribbons — for a small fee.

The subway systems in Spain and Portugal are cleaner and easier to use than the ones in New York City.

Don't get me wrong. There are your typical big city crimes. There are homeless in the big cities, just like in any other big city. Two women were mugged early in the trip one night in Madrid. A teenage boy took all their money and passports.

Another student got "groped" on the metro. A mugger was trying to steal his wallet out of his back pocket.

To keep in touch, I used the Internet cafes in the big cities. It was just a few dollars for a half hour of use. This was much more economical than \$10 for a four-minute phone call to Connecticut.

With this trip, I witnessed a different culture. Although it was costly, it was well worth the expense to have experiences I couldn't get in America.

About the writer

The student who wrote this page, 17-year-old Hila Yosafi, has been an active member of The Tattoo's staff since 1996.

Yosafi, a senior at Bristol Eastern High School, has tackled stories over the years on everything from beauty pageants to teen suicide.

Last spring, she won a first-place award from the Connecticut Society of Professional Journalists for an opinion piece she wrote supporting the Miss Mum pageant. She also shared in an honorable mention from the group for in-depth coverage of Bristol schools.

Yosafi is one of only five high school writers ever to win in the annual contest for professional reporters and editors. All the high school winners wrote for The Tattoo.

In addition, Yosafi captured a National Gold Key award this year from the Quill and Scroll Society and National Newspaper Association for a piece she helped write about a local teen's suicide.

Yosafi hopes to attend the University of Connecticut next fall.

The Tattoo is a page published on occasional Mondays in The Bristol Press, written by and for teenagers. Volunteer staff writers, like Yosafi, are mostly from local high schools.

The teens work under the direction of Press staff writers, Jackie Majerus and Steve Collins, who donate their time to the group. Anyone with questions, comments, story tips or interest in joining The Tattoo can call Majerus or Collins at 523-9632 or e-mail them at SteveJackie@prodigy.net.

Archives are on the web: http://ourworld.com/serve.com/homepages/majerus_collins



Tattoo photo

Hila Yosafi stops for a snapshot before entering the stadium in Madrid where the bullfights are held.