

Anne and Dave's Christmas Letter for 2017

D. Spain and UAE, October 2017

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Madrid day 1 – Madrid local walk: The day started very early in Porto to catch a flight to Lisbon and then another to Madrid – all very tiresome and so by the time we had arrived in Madrid we were all tired and grumpy. Our guide Isobel met us and we were taken by bus to our hotel – the Gran Melia Palacio de Los Duques – quite luxurious and nicely situated near to the centre of the city. Our very enthusiastic guide knew a lot about Spanish history and all places of importance, including knowing the best restaurants to visit! Her almost boundless energy and enthusiasm carried us through our short but very enjoyable time in Madrid.

On the day that we arrived Isobel offered to take us for a short walk to the nearby area so that we could start to get to know our way around and see some of the local places of interest. Anne declined as she was still very tired but Dave managed to join the group and saw many good things. Our first stop was at the Teatro Real (Opera House) located very close to the hotel at the bottom of our road.



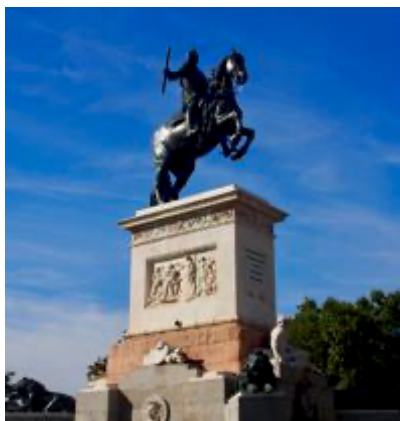
Our hotel the Gran Melia Palacio de Los Duques on the Cuesta de Santo Domingo (left), and the Teatro Real (Opera House) on the Plaza Isabel II (right)

From here we proceeded to the Plaza de Oriente, a set of formal gardens in front of the Royal Palace of Madrid. Some of the statues were originally intended for the palace roof but Queen Isabel II decreed that they should be placed in the gardens.

After seeing the Palace, we walked along the pedestrian mall of the Calle del Arenal, looked at the bookshop near the famous Chocolateria of San Gines, and on the corner of the Calle Major we saw a picturesque sign for a precious metals or jewellers shop.

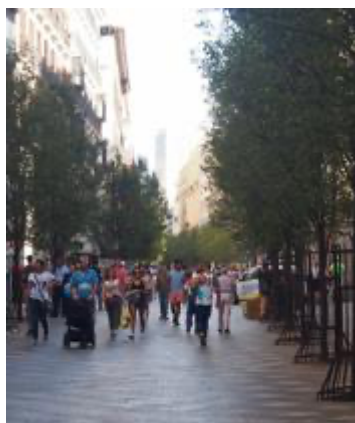


Plaza de Oriente with Royal Palace behind (left), and Royal Palace from the Plaza de Oriente (right)



Plaza de Oriente: statue of Philip IV of Spain (left),
and an example of the many statues around the gardens (right)

From here we found our way to the Plaza Mayor (very like the one in Salamanca) and of course we couldn't resist seeing one of the many flamenco dress shops and finally seeing the produce market (the Mercado de San Miguel).



Calle del Arenal pedestrian mall (upper left), bookstall on Pasadizo de San Gines (upper middle),
corner of Calle Mayor with sign for precious metals shop (upper right),
the Plaza Mayor (lower left), flamenco dress shop (lower middle),
and the Mercado de San Miguel (produce market) (lower right)

By this stage we were all ready to head back to the hotel for a rest before dinner, so we bade farewell to Isobel and found our own way back with a little navigational assistance.

Madrid day 2 – Bus tour and Prado Museum: This day took us by bus to the main bull-fighting stadium, the Plaza de Toros de Las Ventas, in the northern part of Madrid. The building is quite an imposing structure as it seats over 23,000 people. We particularly liked the sculptures of the bulls, matadors and even Dr Fleming (who probably saved lots of bull-fighter lives).



Plaza de Toros de Las Ventas: outside wall of stadium (left), and tower at main entrance (right)



Sculptures at Plaza de Toros de Las Ventas: bull and flying matador (left), parade of the bulls (upper right), matador saluting Dr Fleming (lower mid-left), matador saluting the crowd (lower mid-right), and close-up of a bull statue (lower far-right)



New style office building (left), and Real Madrid Football Stadium (right)

Returning to the centre of the city we passed some interesting new buildings and, of course, stopped at the Real Madrid football stadium. We returned to the city centre for another look at the Royal Palace and the Plaza de Oriente.



Royal Palace with St Teresa and St Joseph's church in background (left),
and close-up of dome of St Teresa and St Joseph's church (right)



Sculptures on roof of the Royal Palace

In the afternoon, we headed off to the Prado Museum, probably the highlight of our Madrid experience. We had an exceptional guide at the Prado who treated us to an exploration of art through the 16th, 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, looking at colours, textures, perspective, symbolism, etc. and how these changed through time. Our guide, although suffering from the flu at the time, was able to use a few key paintings by renowned artists to explain his statements. It was quite an exceptional experience which we all benefitted from. Sadly, we have no photographs of this part of our trip.



Plaza de Cibeles: "Welcome to Refugees" banner on the central post office building (left),
and the Cibeles fountain including lion-drawn chariot (right)

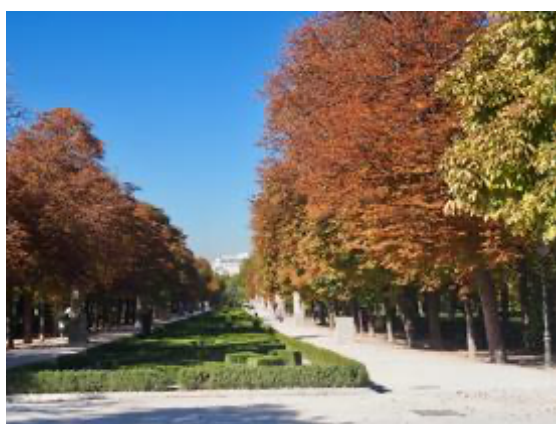
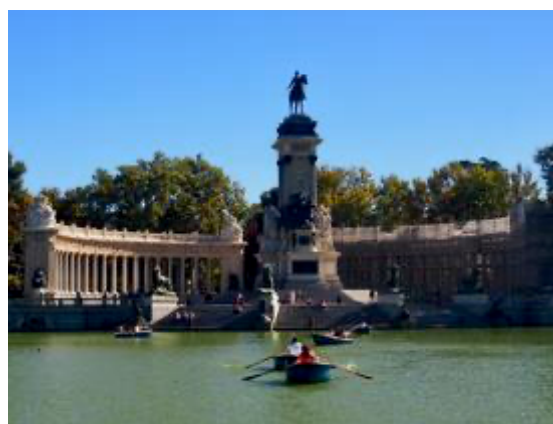


Rooftop sculptures around the Plaza de Cibeles

On our return trip from the Prado Museum we went past a number of important locations in Madrid, including the Plaza de Cibeles with the “Welcome to Refugees” banner on the central post office building, the central fountain including lion-drawn chariot, and many roof-top sculptures around the very busy traffic area. These sculptures appear on many buildings throughout the older parts of Madrid.

We asked the friendly doorman at the hotel for a good place to have dinner and following his advice we ate at the Parrilla just up the road – it took a little finding but well worth the effort!

Madrid day 3 – Retiro park, Royal Palace and dinner at Café de Oriente: Today we took the Metro to the El Retiro Park, a place of beautiful and extensive gardens with sculptures, monuments, interesting buildings and gates. We entered the park from the Plaza Independencia with the imposing Puerta de Alcalá gate at its centre.



El Retiro Park: Puerta de Alcalá through El Retiro Park entrance (upper left), monument to Alfonso XII in the Estanque grande del Retiro (upper right), avenue of autumn coloured trees (lower left), and peaceful walkway (lower right)

One of the most interesting buildings in the park is the Palacio de Cristal (Crystal Palace) which is commonly used for art exhibitions. The nearby lake with its resident tortoises, lovely trees and water features help to make this spot a very popular place to visit.



Palacio de Cristal (Crystal Palace) at El Retiro Park: the palace and lake with fountain (upper left), view into the palace (upper right), and resident tortoises enjoying the bright sunshine (lower)



El Retiro Park: formal gardens of the Plaza Parterre (left), and view of the statue to Jacinto Benavente, the Calle de Alfonso XII gate and the Prado Museum (right)

We left the park by the Plaza Parterre at the Calle de Alfonso XII gate, heading towards the Prado Museum, through formal gardens and past the statue to Jacinto Benavente. We greatly enjoyed our tour of the El Retiro and could have easily spent more time exploring its many attractions.

After a delightful lunch at the hotel we again headed out this time for our visit to the Royal Palace. Once inside the gates visitors are greeted with a vast open square with the palace on the northern side. The visitors centre is located in the buildings on the eastern side while those on the western side are used to house special exhibitions. On the northern side outside the square is the grand Catedral de Santa Maria de Real de la Almudena. There is a large parkland area adjacent to the Royal Palace on its western side forming a beautiful area of green in the middle of Madrid (presumably this was originally for the private use of the royal family).



Royal Palace: in the Main Square (upper left), tower above palace entrance (upper right), the grand staircase (middle left), painted ceiling above the grand staircase (middle right), view over Campo del Moro gardens adjacent to the palace (lower left), and the Catedral de Santa María de Real de la Almudena, to the south of the palace (lower right)



Anne, Dave and the rest of our group at welcome/goodbye dinner at the Café de Oriente [Photos: Pam Laing]

We finished our Madrid ‘add-on’ tour with a delightful dinner at the Café de Oriente, one of the many places to eat and drink around the Plaza de Oriente. The food and wine were excellent, the service was great and the whole group seemed to have had a really good evening. This meal served as both welcome and farewell as this part of the tour was so short.

Many thanks to all of our group for making Lisbon so enjoyable and special thanks to Isobel for making every effort to make our trip memorable.

Madrid to Barcelona: After a (for a change) leisurely start we said goodbye to all and went by taxi to the Atocha train station to catch the high-speed train to Barcelona. Fortunately, we had left plenty of time as there were delays, including stopping traffic to wash the street in front of our hotel!

The high-speed AVE trains are very comfortable, smooth and quiet – the train normally travels at around 300 kms/hour but when it needs to slow down to 250 it seems quite slow!! Once on the train the trip to Barcelona was quite uneventful, however once we had disembarked we had to find a taxi to take us to our hotel – a bit of a scramble as the whole train was looking for transport. The taxi driver knew where to find our hotel and we got there quite quickly.

After arriving and finding our room we were able to relax and unpack enough for immediate needs before heading out to eat at a local restaurant – again with recommendation from the helpful hotel staff. Of course, we needed to eat much earlier than the time Spanish people normally eat so we had a very quiet but really good meal at La Gambeta.

After our meal, we returned to the hotel to try to organise medical assistance for the removal of the stitches from Dave's finger. Fortunately, we were able to organise for a doctor to visit us at the hotel – expensive but much more convenient.

We arrived in Barcelona in some trepidation because the Catalan independence activities had caused some disruptions to traffic and activities. It proved an unnecessary fear, although the demonstrators did seem to dog our progress walking through the old city, and at lunchtime we were surrounded by thousands of vocal flag-waving participants.

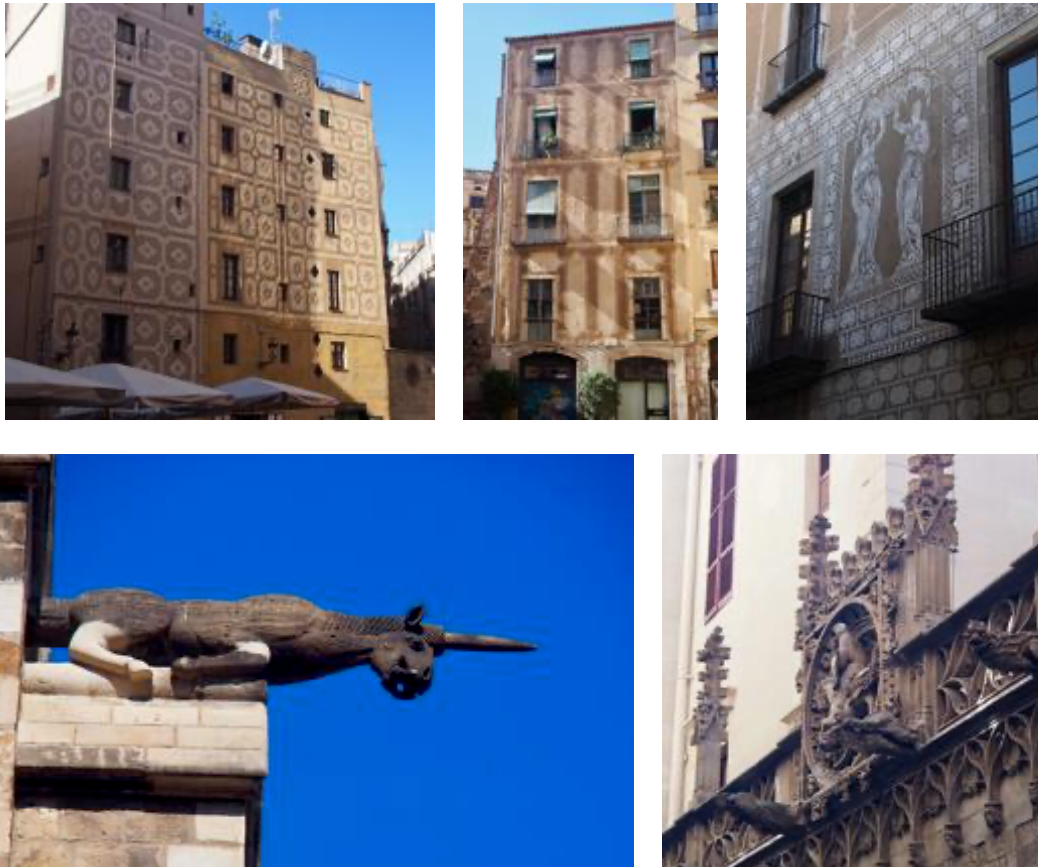
Barcelona day 1 – walk around the Gothic Quarter: On our first day in Barcelona we determined to explore as much as possible concentrating on the old part of the city, known as the Gothic Quarter, trying to keep out of the way of the unity demonstrators who were very numerous and vocal that day. The streets around the hotel were closed for a triathlon event and to keep vehicles away from the demonstrators.

Our hotel was situated just on the edge of the Gothic Quarter so we walked a short distance to find the El Born Cultural Centre (Centre de Cultura i Memòria) a lovely renovated market which we explored at length later in our stay. From here we wandered through several narrow streets full of interesting old buildings, little squares with outdoors eating, and of course lots of tourists.



Gothic Quarter: El Born Centre de Cultura i Memòria from the Plaça Comercial (above), narrow streets, outdoor eating in a small square and a quiet courtyard with archways (below)

Many of the larger buildings have been tiled and/or painted which together with the mix of architectural styles provide interesting city scapes for the tourist. There are also numerous examples of stone sculptures and metalwork designs.



Gothic Quarter: wall decorations (above) and sculptures (below)

Our explorations took us past a section of the Roman Wall and many of the major buildings near the Barcelona Cathedral. We had to divert several times to try to keep away from the demonstrators (sometimes not very successfully) and to find quieter locations that were not too overcrowded with tourists.

We headed towards the famous Las Ramblas, a major pedestrian mall with lots of tourist venues, restaurants and shops – it is easy why this spot has become popular with locals and tourists alike. We spotted a good place to eat lunch which didn't seem to be too noisy or busy but before long we discovered that all the demonstrators were going to walk down Las Ramblas right past our lunch table making plenty of noise and waving their enormous flags. This demonstration was on the side of keeping Catalonia within the Spanish Federation and hence they were carrying the bright red and yellow flags of Spain.





Unity demonstrators making their way down Las Ramblas, Barcelona

After our very pleasant lunch we wandered back passing through the Plaça Reial near Las Ramblas, a lovely quiet square with plenty of places to enjoy lunch (we wished that had we found it earlier).



Plaça Reial with eating places and flowering palm trees

We then headed towards the Barcelona Cathedral (Cathedral of the Holy Cross and Saint Eulalia) which is one of the most popular tourist attractions and a magnificent building. The exterior is decorated with many sculptures and the unicorn gargoyle pictured earlier is on the rear of this building. The Gaudi Exhibition Centre is close to the Cathedral but sadly we did not have time to take a look inside.





Barcelona Cathedral (Cathedral of the Holy Cross and Saint Eulalia) from Placita de la Seu (above), the Cathedral and associated buildings from Plaça Nova (lower left), and the Gaudi Exhibition Centre near to the Cathedral (lower right)

We made our way back towards the hotel. We found navigation to be quite difficult as all the minor streets are curved and landmarks are hidden from view but the tourist friendly street signs did help. After a bit of relaxation and freshening up we headed out for dinner again – a good end to a most interesting day.

Barcelona day 2 – Pyrenees bus tour: On our second day in Barcelona we had a very early start taking the “Three countries in one day” bus tour offered by Explore Catalunya. We walked quickly from the hotel as we needed to be at the Palau de la Música Catalana, off Via Laietana, before 7 am!! Dave managed to snatch a quick coffee before the group set off on 2 small buses – we were lucky to get Henrique as our guide as he was very enthusiastic, knowledgeable and had a great sense of humour.

The beginning of our drive was out through the northern suburbs of Barcelona with heavy traffic mainly going in the opposite direction. Numerous road tunnels enabled us to make good progress. The main highlight on the way north was to pass by Montserrat – a steep-sided mountain range with the famous monastery on top of the highest peak called Sant Jeroni (Saint Jerome).

Our first stop was at Barga (Bagà), an old medieval town in the heart of Catalonia. A quick shop around for coffee and snacks helped us to appreciate the old town with its old architecture, steep streets and fabulous views of the mountains – the early autumn colours on the trees really enhanced the views and of course we had almost perfect weather!



Barga (Bagà), Catalonia: statue of Dom Galceran de Pinós (left), town houses and street scenes (above right and below left)

In the main old square, the Plaça Porxada, there is a statue to Dom Galceran de Pinòs – a medieval knight and leading light in the town – whose main claim to fame was to rescue all the women of the town who had been abducted by bandits!



Barga (Bagà), Catalonia: defensive tower and town wall (upper left), mountain views with early autumn colours on trees (upper right and lower left), and mountain views from town square (lower right)

We continued northwards across the Eastern Pyrenees into a part of France which is sometimes called French or Northern Catalonia (ceded to France by Spain through the signing of the Treaty of the Pyrenees in 1659).



Crossing the Western Pyrenees from Spain to France (above), and views of Northern Catalonia in France (below)

We arrived at our lunch spot at Ax-les-Thermes – which as the name suggests is a spa town with some famous hot springs. The town is beautifully situated in a steep-sided valley, the slopes of which were covered in early autumn colours.



Autumn colours on the hills near the town

The many sulphurous hot springs in the area are quite hot reaching 77°C and have been used since Roman times to cure such ailments as sciatica, rheumatism and certain respiratory diseases. The spa business still seems to be thriving with some large establishments in the area.



Ax-les-Thermes, France: Steam vents fountain in pedestrian area (above), our guide Henrique and some of our group at thermal pool (lower left), the Fountain of Cannons providing non-potable thermal water at 77°C (lower middle), and reflection of church tower in the "Lepers' Pond" (lower right)

One of the really nice features of the town is the presence of many colourful floral arrangements for which the town has been awarded one flower by the National Council of Towns and Villages in Bloom in the Competition of cities and villages in Bloom.

For lunch we were recommended to try a galette – a type of savoury pancake – at the Blue Oiseau. Very nice but we had to arrive spot on 12:30 or we would be late for our bus!

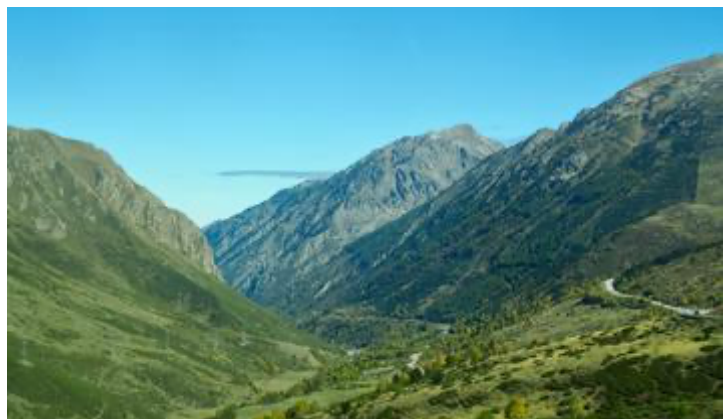


Ax-les-Thermes, France: flowers near steam vents in pedestrian area (upper left),
decorating bridge (upper right), and Le Teich Thermal Spa (lower)



Ax-les-Thermes, France: Le Crêperie L'Oiseau Bleu our lunch spot in a quiet side street (left),
view downstream (middle), and another quiet narrow street (right)

We then returned southwards to cross the border into Andorra at Pas de la Casa, a small border town high in the Pyrenees with spectacular views and steep roads with many hairpin bends.



Pas de la Casa, Andorra: on the way up (left), and looking back down the valley into France (right)



Pas de la Casa, Andorra: on the border looking down into France (upper left), on the top (upper right), and (below) panorama of the border with France to the left, Andorra to the right, and Pas de la Casa in between



Pas de la Casa, Andorra: ski resort at top of pass (left), and on the way down looking into an Andorran valley (right)

From the border at Pas de la Casa, we drove down into one of the high valleys of Andorra and stopped in Soldeu, a small village situated in a small pretty side valley. The scenery was very reminiscent of the higher Swiss valleys – complete with the sights and sounds of cow bells!





Soldeu, Andorra: cow with cow bell (upper left), lying around (upper right), and valley scenery (below left and right)

Andorra is a very small country mainly at high altitude set in spectacular scenery of the Pyrenees. There are 3 main industries in Andorra – farming, tourism including outdoor recreation and shopping as the country has tax-free status. All kinds of outdoor recreation are popular, specially skiing and mountaineering. The main road through Andorra is dominated by a series of towns which seem to be full of shopping centres and places for people to eat and sleep.



Andorra: towns and scenery



Spain on the road to Barcelona: coming out of the Pyrenees (left), and reservoir beside the road (right)

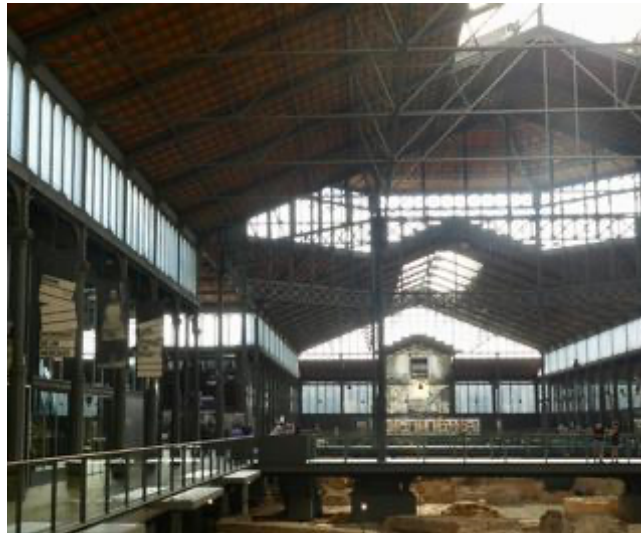
We spent some time in Andorra la Vella where we had coffee and a small bite to eat but, as we were quite tired by this stage in our very long day, we did not explore very much. Finally, we got back onto our bus for the run back across the border into Spain and back down to Barcelona. The bus dropped us off at the Plaça de Catalunya, at the centre of Barcelona – we took a taxi to the hotel, had a quiet supper of tapas and quickly fell asleep.

Many thanks to our guide Henrique and the team at Explore Catalunya for a really great day!

Barcelona day 3 – El Born and Palau de Música.: We started the day with a visit from the doctor to our hotel room. He cleaned the wound which had become infected, removed the stitches, prescribed antibiotics, dressed the wound and advised us to seek further attention when we reached our next destination, Dubai!

We proceeded to the nearest chemist for the required medications and then to a street café for a desperately needed cup of coffee and snack. After satisfying these priorities we then continued our explorations with an extended visit to the El Born Centre de Cultura i Memòria (Born CCM) which we had seen but not entered on our first day in Barcelona.

The building of the Born CCM is a marvellous cast-iron and glass construction designed in 1876 by a Josep Fontserè. The building was originally a market for the local area but later served as a wholesale produce market up until it closed in 1971.



El Born Centre de Cultura i Memòria (Born CCM), Barcelona:
interior of the main hall (above), interior showing the exposed archaeological work (lower left),
and 1906 photograph of the interior of Born Market (lower right)



Examples of archaeological work at the El Born Centre de Cultura i Memòria (Born CCM), Barcelona

We went back to the Passeig de Picasso, the street on which our hotel was situated (nice and quiet when the road closures are in place) to explore the area up towards the Arc de Triomf (which we had first spotted from the taxi on the way to our hotel).

Parallel to the Passeig de Picasso is the wider boulevard of Passeig de Lluís Companys which has extensive pedestrian areas and plenty of people were out enjoying the scene. On the opposite side of the road to the hotel is the Parc de la Ciutadella, an extensive area of parks and gardens containing many government and parliament buildings.

The impressive monument to Francesc de Paula Rius i Taulet (lawyer, politician and mayor of Barcelona) stands at the park entrance. There are also many sculptures along the walkways and even the street lights are very ornate.



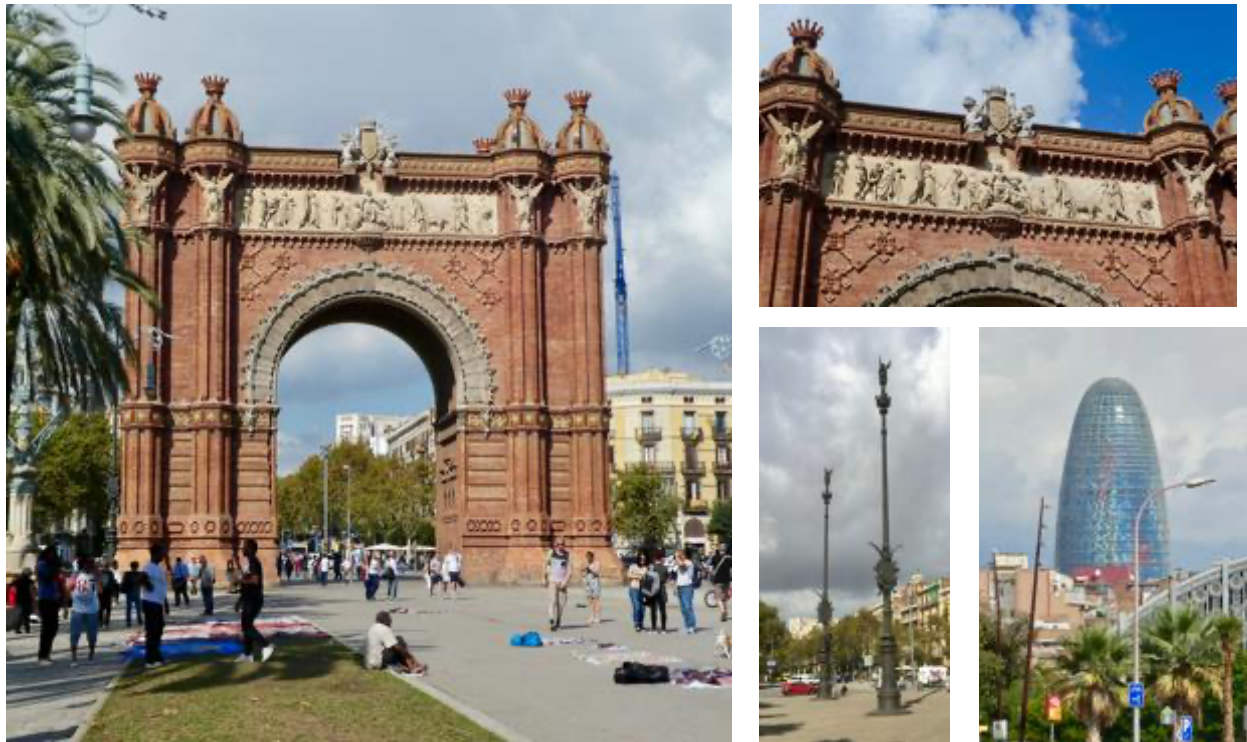
Passeig de Picasso, Barcelona: our hotel's side of the street (left), and the opposite side with the Parc de la Ciutadella behind (right)



Passeig de Lluís Companys, Barcelona:
monument to Francesc de Paula Rius i Taulet at entrance to Parc de la Ciutadella (left),
example of sculpture on pedestrian area (upper right),
and ornate street lights along the boulevard (with palm trees and the Justice Department building) (lower right)

At the northern end of the Passeig de Lluís Companys is the Arc de Triomf (or Arco de Triunfo), a triumphal arch built for the exhibition of 1888. It is a very popular spot with locals and tourists. This area is full of grand old buildings many of which have been well restored. We caught a

glimpse of the Torre Glòries (formerly Torre Agbar), an impressive glass tower in the new technology area of Barcelona nearby to the north east of the arch.



Arc de Triomf (Arco de Triunfo) on the Passeig de Lluís Companys: the triumphal arch built for the exhibition of 1888 (left), detail on the arch (above right), street decorations just to the north of the arch (lower middle), and a distant view of the Torre Glòries (formerly Torre Agbar) in the new technology area of Barcelona (lower right)

We then returned to the Palau de la Música Catalana, seen briefly at the start of day 2, a beautifully restored old music hall venue tucked away in the back street of Carrer Sant Pere Més Alt, off Via Laietana. Unfortunately, we could not explore the interior as it looked to be a most interesting place.



Palau de la Música Catalana: front (left), side (middle left), entrance (middle right), and the narrow Carrer Sant Pere Més Alt (right)

We ended our explorations with a lunch of three types of marinated fish in a small tapas bar just opposite the Palau – very different and just right. We then went back to our hotel for a rest, packed for the next part of our journey and then went out to another good local restaurant.

We left Barcelona on the following morning to fly to Dubai. We had been concerned that taxis would not be able to operate and possibly the street in front of the hotel and even the airport would be closed, however it was unwarranted as our hotel had a special arrangement with a taxi who drove us away before more demonstrations could take place. We arrived at the airport with plenty of time to spare.

Dubai: Our arrival in Dubai was delayed, consequently we walked for miles through the airport labyrinth to get to customs and immigration as they had closed all the lifts and trains! Fortunately, our driver was able to wait for us. We eventually arrived at our small hotel in the back streets of Dubai and collapsed for a good night's sleep which only commenced well after 1 am.

The next day we visited a local clinic to seek further medical attention for Dave's finger – the clinic's largely Indian staff were very helpful, efficient and professional. We spent most of the day resting and bravely ventured forth for dinner in the evening which turned out to be quite good.

After a good night's sleep, we did some rearranging of our luggage for our final flight to Australia and in the afternoon took a cab to the Burj Khalifa. This is currently the tallest building in the world but very soon it will be dwarfed by another which is already planned. We had booked a view from the top as we had not managed to take this tour on previous trips to Dubai.

Sadly the 180-degree sunset view was in quite smoggy air and we could not see as much as we had hoped. The trip up and down the Burj is surprisingly quick and the organisation is very efficient – their procedures enable a large number of people to enjoy the experience without excessive overcrowding. We have been to Dubai several times now; it is an interesting place but we probably do not need to return there again.



Burj Khalifa, Dubai: early evening views from the top (upper row and lower left), and sunset view from the top (lower right)

On the final morning we were driven back to the airport and enjoyed a much more peaceful experience checking in and getting ready for our flight home. The flight was thankfully uneventful and it was a great relief to be met at Sydney Airport by Dave's daughter Alex and breathe fresh air for a change and enjoy a good coffee.

All together our holiday was a great success although we could have done without Dave's close encounter with the cobbles of Porto.