

TRAVEL

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No pain, no Spain: travelling by bike makes the tapas twice as sweet

NP SARAH TRELEAVEN, SPECIAL TO NATIONAL POST | March 10, 2016 6:29 PM ET

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When on vacation, I typically like to limit my exertion. I have little interest in major sightseeing, and the only research I engage in tends to be food related. “Roll me out of bed when cocktail hour begins,” is something I may have once said, even as the sun was dipping in a foreign land. The idea that travel is intimately connected with relaxation is not a perspective shared by everyone, but it is an attitude that I have embraced. That changed last year when, sick of my waning fitness and lack of mobility from a long winter, I needed a challenge. And so I decided to try a different kind of vacation: a cycling tour.

Accompanied by two friends, I embarked upon Exodus Travels’ Contrasts of Catalunya. It was a very low activity level (1 – leisurely), but it was self-guided and offered a mix of seascape and spectacular countryside. It was spring, so everything was in full bloom. Our circular route, just north of Barcelona, sent us through the beach at Calella de Palafrugell, the pretty village of Pals, the medieval town of Torroella de Montgri and the walled village of Ullastret. There were meadows full of horses and wildflowers, medieval villages atop hills, and impeccably dressed Spanish children eating gelato perched on the rocky shoreline.

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By day, we wandered towns to examine butcher shops and cotton dresses. We tried to figure out the proper hours to eat lunch and dinner, marvelling every time we slowly cycled through a town during late afternoon, as the siesta-effect created near ghost-towns. We stopped to eat anchovies bathed in oil atop toasted bread rubbed with garlic cloves and perfectly ripe tomatoes. We stopped for ice-cold Cokes in small ancient squares ringed by cafés, shops selling handwoven baskets, apartments with wooden and glass doors and pots full of pansies. We drank chilled rosé and then felt pangs of regret as soon as we were back on our bikes and a hill appeared on the horizon.

We stayed at Castel d’Emporda, a stunning 14th-century castle where the Dutch owner has a terrific obsession with tiny soldiers and the recreation of battle scenes. From there, we walked into La Bisbal to find that it was Sant Jordi’s day — “sort of like our Valentine’s day,” explained one local, as I took in the market scene. Stalls selling books and flowers were set up all over town. There were reckless free-range European children dancing largely unmonitored on a stage, and elderly men were pushed in wheelchairs with roses pinned to their sweaters. Church bells clanged in the near distance as we found our way around winding alleys, stepping into bakeries and fish shops.

We cycled on dirt trails and through ancient hamlets, the Pyrenees in the foreground and the midday sun on our backs. We found ourselves at unfamiliar forks, unsure of where to turn, often in disagreement and frequently relying on instinct. We turned off-course several times, once cycling for quite a while around a very orderly trailer park with no clearly marked exit. And we stopped to ask directions from construction workers and elderly locals, laughing as our

collective Spanish proved mostly futile. But every night, when we returned to our hotel, we would shower and commence with a program of cava and local potato chips (fried in olive oil and very satisfyingly salty) — all the more satisfying for having fulfilled our journey.

It felt wonderful to set an objective every day, to problem solve our way through occasionally mismatched written instructions and GPS coordinates, to stand on the edge of a field of wild poppies, a castle in the distance, and try to make our way home. Given that so many of us accomplish so little at home — what with so much great television to binge-watch and the challenges of simply remaining afloat — why not accomplish something on vacation?

In the end, my friends and I found our way to Barcelona — though this time it was the 1:23 p.m. train from Flaca station. As we hit the city’s streets, looking up to admire the elaborate details on even the most ordinary of buildings, the tapas crawl felt hard earned. I tucked into ham croquettes, salty anchovies and slivers of Manchego, and felt a sense of accomplishment that extended beyond the pleasure of fabulous food. And as I felt myself relax into a simple and hedonistic itinerary of ham and vermouth, I realized I was starting to miss my bike.

IF YOU GO

TOUR: Exodus Travels offers a range of active options if you feel like being ambitious with your next vacation. Self-guided Spanish cycling trips from \$1,675. [exodustravels.com](#)

STAY: Grand Hotel Central, a member of Design Hotels ([designhotels.com](#)), makes a comfortable and stylish base for exploring Barcelona. Nightly rates from 237 Euros.

FLY: Air Canada Rouge offers direct service from Toronto to Barcelona.