



Pamplona and the Fiesta de San Fermín by Frank Murray

PAMPLONA, Spain – Since 1591 the annual Fiesta of San Fermin has been all about running with the bulls but these days bulls and tourists alike need guides to navigate that “party on the run.”

Feb. 19, 2009 - [PRLog](#) -- “The Sun Also Rises” elevated San Fermín’s encierro to an international hot spot but Ernest Hemingway himself advised 81 years ago to seek a spot to watch the run by 5:30 a.m. These days only laggards wait so long to begin getting into place.

“It’s bulls before breakfast every day,” said Philip Ross, who first ran here himself in 1972, joining Navy buddy Wayne Batchelor who was already a Pamplona veteran. They slept in parks then. Now Ross and his wife Rogene tailor pricey individualized packages for American clients and stay in fine hotels, thank you very much.

Each morning from July 7-14 Ross gets clients close enough to smell the tension if not the bulls, and to join the crowd at 7:57 a.m. in singing the emotional prayer to Saint Fermin for protection. At 8 a.m. a final rocket launches the half-mile dash to Plaza de Toros where the bulls will fight to certain death in the afternoon. This daily street theater is the centerpiece of the fiesta even though the runs that have become such tourist-magnets last an average of just under four minutes, a bit longer when bulls lose their way and spread havoc. Whether visitors run or watch, San Fermin is not for those who are faint of heart or faint of wallet.

Bulls in Pamplona have always had shepherds -- and a few tame steers -- to help them follow their one-way road to the bullring. Now humans need shepherds as well, and they find them via the Internet. One such pastore is Philip Ross of Iberian Traveler (www.iberiantraveler.com).

Papa Hemingway first encountered Pamplona in 1923 when it had but 30,000 residents. Although he visited eight more times, he could not have expected the 21st Century scene his legendary tale produces. Now swarms of fiesta-goers willing to sleep in faraway hotels or city parks -- if they sleep at all -- swell a modern city that itself is seven times larger than Hemingway knew. But San Fermin is far more than “the running of the bulls.” Religious and cultural traditions date to the 1196 observance marking the return of Fermin’s remains to his native Pamplona some 900 years after martyrdom in France.

The opening day procession of religious and political figures with a large statue of the saint through downtown follows the Chupinazo ceremony in town hall square. There are daily “Gigante” parades of dancers wearing huge colorful papier-mâché costumed heads, professional concerts staged in Plaza del Castillo, all-night drinking parties, and endless gatherings of street bands or marching peñas that are matador fan clubs on their way to or from the bullring. Amateur bullfights follow the run and cheap daytime shows at the bullring also are open.

Twelve years have passed since a fatal goring [note: American Matthew P. Tasio, 22] but this year came close when a vengeful bull named Universal wrote himself into San Fermin’s history book on July 12 by goring seven persons. Universal punctuated that feat by spearing two Ohio brothers simultaneously.

But it is the morning ritual run, not the afternoon bullfight, that remains the hallmark of an event whose

current form is little changed since 1591 when Pamplona shifted the saint's day and bullfight festival from October to July for better weather.

Barriers first defined the encierro route in 1776, and were doubled after runaway bulls panicked the crowd in 1939. In 1856 the encierro route was realigned to where it is today, when about half its length was moved to the narrow and gritty Estafeta Street. In 1867, city officials despaired of banning the increasingly dangerous festival and chose instead to regulate it. They do that with a zeal that leads nearly all Pamplona residents not directly involved to take vacation.

City workers constantly clean parks and streets around the clock to keep bottles and other debris from underfoot, or under sleeping bag. Police do much the same for those who revel too long. Squads of police reinforced from all of Spain are largely tolerant, but insure that runners are sober, over 18, and not carrying items that endanger others. This year a local man was fined and lost visitation rights for taking his 10-year-old son to run before the horns. Taunting or touching a bull during the run also is a no-no that will earn a wrongdoer vigorous smacks from a shepherd's cane.

Advance arrangements by brokers well-connected with local tourism companies assure that those who come so far to see will not be shut out of the action. They deliver hotel rooms, transportation, bullring tickets, balcony vantage 10 feet above the drama, plus wine and food excursions through Basque country during or after fiesta.

Mikel Ollo and Nieves Mantero, partners in Ross's local link at Erreka Tourist Services, say their firm handles some business from other brokers and travel agents. "They come and go. They are not so special. Phil is special. He is very attentive," Ollo told us.

The relationship is so close that when Phil and Rogene married June 30 in a medieval church here Ollo was best man and Mantero was maid of honor. Ross truly is "attentive," even offering free advice to non-customers who contact his website or catch up to him in Pamplona. "They'll come back to me, as others have, when it's time to become a client," says Ross who marks his real success from 2002, after partnering with Rogene.

The competition for accommodations is easy to grasp: 200,000 visitors a day for eight days make 2,200 hotel rooms virtually unattainable. Some visitors become day-trippers from Basque-region paradores, or cities like Lagrono, 61 miles by country road, and Biarritz, France, 82 highway miles. Some tour-packagers bus the revelers in and out of the city from hotels in the Pyrenees foothills 50 miles away.

Iberian Traveler charged about \$4,500 this year for a typical four-night package for two including "standard" hotels within walking distance, encierro balcony, local guides and necessary hand-holding, plus that breakfast with the typical deep-fried churros and hot chocolate after bulls do their thing. Perhaps Ross's most memorable service was arranging delightfully casual lunches that require a full afternoon in restaurants where reservations are virtually impossible without local help. Dinner after the bullfight is easier because Spaniards dine towards midnight, often too late for jet-lagged visitors.

International travel is arranged independently, generally by flight to Pamplona via Madrid or Barcelona, or by train from Madrid or Paris.

Bullfight tickets average \$450 per seat per day. The Plaza de Toros, with Hemingway's bust out front, seats 19,529 for each of eight corridas. Virtually every seat has been subscribed for years by local residents who pay an average \$100 per seat and resell through cartels or syndicates that up the toll four or five times as much – "my ticket Mafia," Ross calls it. Prices are particularly high on the shady side.

The 1844-vintage bullring is owned by the “Casa de Misericordia” (House of Mercy) which says it devotes it profits from subscribers to provide housing for the elderly.

By October Iberian Traveler already is selling packages for next year. “We always sell out everything for July 7th and 8th, usually by the middle of March, and decided two years ago to set aside balconies on these dates solely for our hotel-package clients,” Ross said. This year he filled 40 waiting-list orders for leftover balcony spots and bullfight tickets but, from now on, tickets are available only to those who purchase hotel packages. “Everyone else can deal with the scalpers, or their own hotel,” he says.

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Tour Operator offering custom tour packages in Spain, Portugal and southwest France. Specializing in the Fiesta de San Fermín, the running of the bulls in Pamplona, Spain.

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