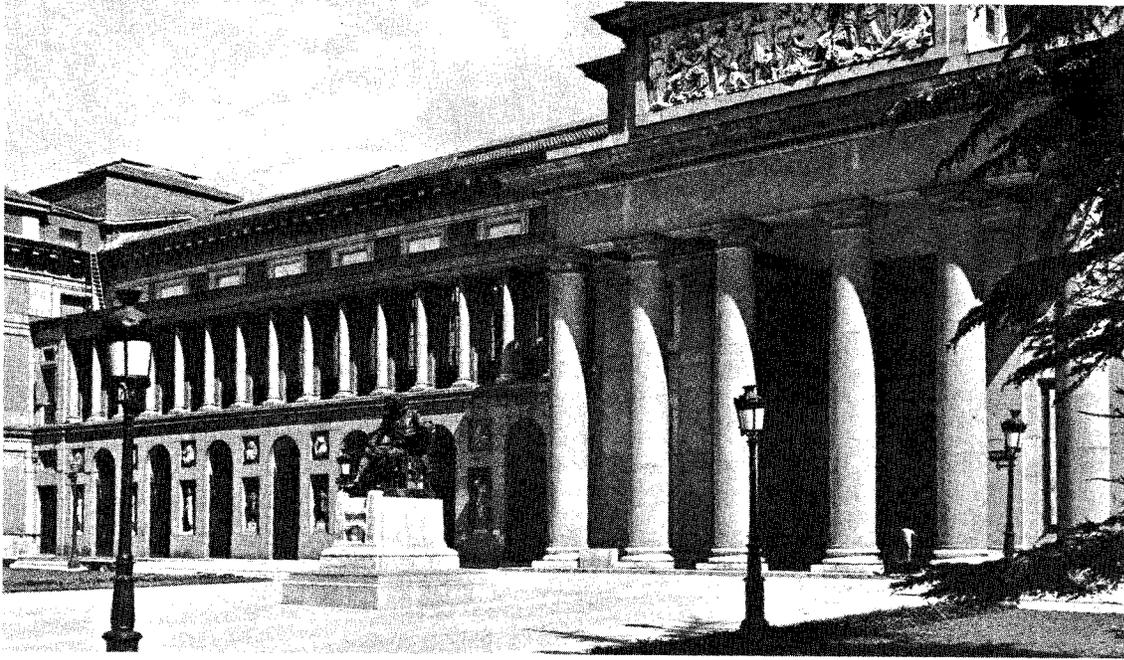


Spain is Different!

By

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"Spain is different!" That simple, yet common, expression has special meaning for this American serviceman after a three-year tour in Madrid. I ask myself, "What is it about Spain that makes it so different?"



The principal entrance to the *Prado* Museum in Madrid.

In search of an answer, I again scan the tour guides. They all seem to repeat that, "Spain is a fascinating kaleidoscope of cultural color, with Madrid at the focal point. Of course a full tour to examine the riches of the *Prado* Museum is a must . . . a visit to the *Palacio Real* . . . Franco's tomb near *El Escorial* . . . *Tasca* (bar) hopping in the *Plaza Mayor* . . . dine on roast suckling pig in Hemmingway's old haunt, *El Botin* , . . . and hear the strolling minstrels (*Tunas*) play." These are all delightful diversions, but they don't really demonstrate what makes Spain "different."

Spain is a country where contrast is found everywhere and in everything. Most obvious are the contrasts between "old" and "new." Old traditions are exposed to the modern world as Spain emerges from decades of isolation. Some observers comment that Spain is experiencing an identity crisis in the midst of this transition. For certain, however, today's Spanish culture is a true reflection of her contrasts. To understand this culture, you must understand "the difference."

Spanish history is different. It is more understatement than cliché to claim that Spanish culture is an outgrowth of Spain's history. Modern Spanish culture can be traced back to the Roman Empire. Aqueducts (in Segovia) and Coliseums (in Merida) survive almost intact. Subsequent centuries of Moorish rule brought internal stability along with the infusion of Arab art (the

Alhambra in Granada). The Catholic re-conquest by Isabella and Ferdinand ushered in the beginning of Spain's "Golden Age." Exploration and exploitation in the New World filled Spain with wealth which went directly to finance further adventures. During our American Revolution, Spanish naval support at the Battle of Yorktown was a key to the British surrender. Over a century later (long after the defeat of the great Spanish Armada), the Spanish American War witnessed the demise of the Spanish Empire. As an exception on the European continent, Spain remained out of reach from involvement in World Wars I and II. However, one of the bloodiest civil wars in world history brought Generalissimo Franco to power in the late 1930's. (American volunteer soldiers who formed the Lincoln Brigade fought on the losing side.) Spanish culture remained ultra-conservative and isolated until Franco's death in 1975. King Juan Carlos has kept the country unified during its first crucial decade of transition to democracy. Spain's once adventurous spirit has matured into a cautious conservatism.

Spanish language is different. It's still Spanish, but not the "South of the border" variety which Americans anticipate. Here it is called "Castilian" Spanish or *Castellana* and there is great variety in dialects and accents. For example, in southern regions the "s" acquires a "th" sound. (A popular myth holds that an ancient king suffered a speech impediment and decreed that his subjects were to speak with a lisp.) In contrast with the rest of Europe, very few Spaniards speak English, though British influence is evident in anglicized words such as *el tickete* and *el parking*. Latin Americans who visit here notice the difference in many word meanings. Here, a *taco* means any dirty word. Instead of "OK," Spaniards say *vale*. Instead of *Que tal?* (How are you?), Spaniards greet one another with *Que hay!* (What's happening!). *Manzana* is not only apple, but also means a city block. Of course, gestures with hands and arms are not absent from any Spanish dialogue, though many Spaniards prefer to grip the elbow of the listener (thus ensuring that he will not make a premature escape).

Spanish dining is different. The food is delicious, addictive, and fattening. It isn't hot or spicy, and a *tortilla* is an omelet. Olive oil is used for most cooking. A touch of garlic is always evident. It doesn't take long to acquire a taste for *Gazpacho* (cold vegetable soup). Madrid has some of the world's finest seafood (although it is located at the middle of the Iberian Peninsula). The beverage of choice with every meal is *Riojo* or *Valdepenas* burgundy (about one dollar per liter). Spanish white wines, however, are not remarkable. There is certainly truth in the Spanish rule that, "the best white wine is *tinto* (red)!"

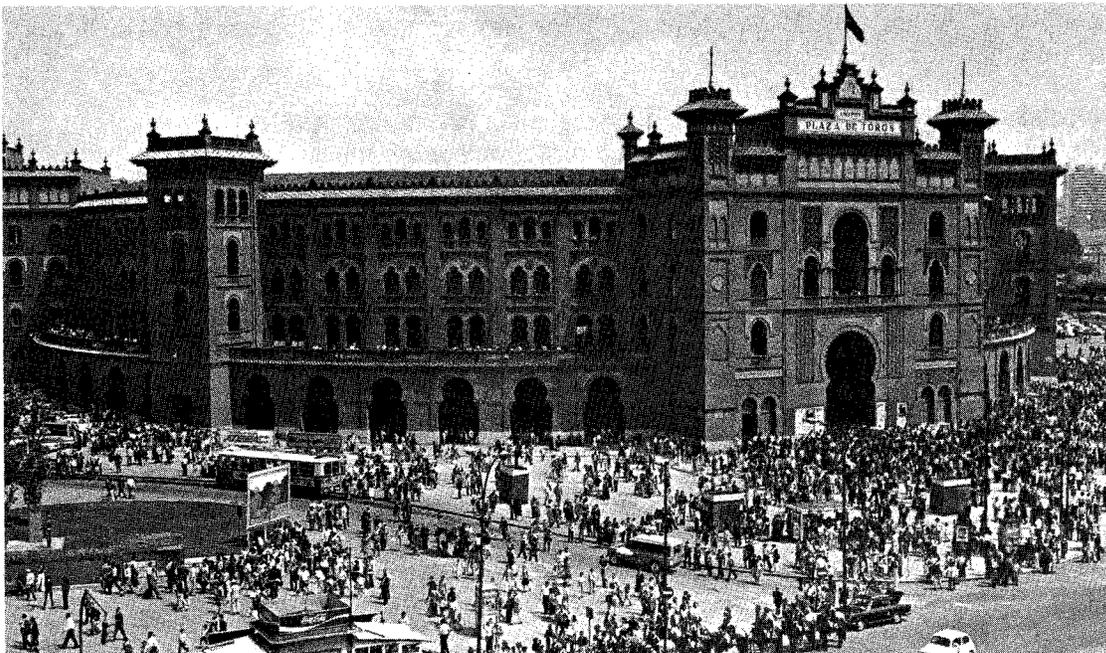
Spanish attitudes are different. Bearing little resemblance to a "manana land," this is a "live for today" society. Proof is found in the infectious *ambiente* (lively atmosphere) of a typical evening in Madrid. Restaurants do not open until nine o'clock in the evening, and the partying goes on until two or three in the morning. Spaniards take pride in the bohemian lifestyle. Furthermore, they truly believe in total non-attribution whenever error occurs, since inanimate objects always take the blame. (Using such a system, cars cause accidents and drinking glasses cause spills.)

Spanish manners are different. Chivalry is not dead here. Great effort is expended to demonstrate maximum courtesy and respect toward acquaintances (however, strangers beware!). A competition ensues at each portal to see who can most effectively defer to his fellows by insisting that all companions pass through the door first. Due to this custom, it can take several minutes for a pair of *caballeros* of equal status to sort out who will win in the contest to cross the threshold last! Such an activity, joke the Spanish, was responsible for the pair of unusually large 10 kilo (22 lb) twins recently delivered in Madrid . . . it took fourteen months of deferring to one another for the newborns to sort out who would come out last! A word of caution before attempting to imitate this chivalry: the doors in Spanish buildings are hinged backwards from what Americans are accustomed to; here, they push inwards. Once again, different.

Spanish status symbols are different. Spaniards are very status conscious. Owning a large dog is a common status symbol. Owning a very large dog confers great status, so almost all Spaniards own several. (City sidewalks stay well fertilized!) Smoking might also be regarded as a status symbol. All Spaniards smoke, except for those who own cats, and I don't know any cat-lovers here.

Spanish holidays are different. Of course, they are all sacred to Spaniards. Whether the holiday taker is devout has no real bearing on the sanctity of a religious holiday. The Spanish try to arrange for holidays to fall on Thursdays so that they can "take a *punte*"; that is, automatically "bridge" the day off through Friday to the weekend. Of course *Semana Santa* (Holy Week at Easter) is an entire week of holidays and it is often stretched into a two-week holiday. Each *pueblo* (town) celebrates its own patron saint day. Every Spaniard celebrates the birthday of his personal patron saint also. The entire month of August is a holiday in Spain, since that is when everyone goes to the *playa* (beach) or the Sierra (mountains). Madrid is closed for business during August. (Many Spaniards get a head start and begin August in mid-July.) A complete counting of all of the holidays, *puentes*, and vacations to which a Spaniard is legally entitled leaves about 190 working days per year.

Spanish festivals are different. In my town on the edge of Madrid, each year's festival is more elaborate than the last. Well-known entertainment artists perform (e.g., Mocedades), and gypsies bring in carnival rides and sell shish-ke-babs (*pinchos*) and beer. (The gypsies are truly a unique group living on the fringe of Spanish society.) The town council arranges an *encierro*, which is the running of the bulls (a la Pomplona fashion) to the *plaza de toros* (bullfighting ring). Our town generally uses old bulls which are not so difficult to outrun. Of course, a formal program of events is published in the town bulletin (mainly to impress neighboring townships). Last year, we went to the *encierro*, scheduled to begin at nine o'clock. Walking into town at ten o'clock we found it deserted except for a streetsweeper. He matter-of-factly explained that, "They only listed it that way so as to have some events to print in the morning part of the program, since everyone knows that nothing begins until about one o'clock." So much for punctuality, and credibility of the printed schedule.



The Monumental *Plaza de Toros* (Bullfighting Ring) in Madrid.

Spanish sporting events are different. They cannot identify with baseball here, and football really means soccer in Spanish. Bullfighting is the traditional passion (soccer, of course, is the modern passion). The bull is the adversary, so mortal man conquering the invincible beast is the rational objective. Most impressive are the bullfights performed entirely from horseback by *Rejoneadores* (instead of *Matadores*). The horse actually seems to fight the bull.

Spanish highway driving is different. Driving techniques are a clear reflection of the Spanish bullfighting spirit, only more aggressive. Mario Andretti would have a big challenge here. Self-esteem and pride in one's own driving skills mandate the degree of risk taking. Personal egos are at stake when you enter a Spanish highway; to be overtaken by another vehicle is to become "a person of lesser consequence." Spanish drivers seem unconcerned with Newton's Third Law as they drive bumper to bumper at speeds of 160 kph (95 mph). Incredible dexterity is shown as a driver impatiently flashes his headlamps on and off while simultaneously gesturing with both hands at the driver ahead whom he wishes to pass. Thus, Spanish driving theory instructs that "any car which I can get behind me cannot cause me to have an accident." Very respectful of some laws, drivers here faithfully fasten their seatbelts whenever they enter the super highway (*autospista*). They also ceremoniously unfasten the seatbelt immediately upon exiting the *autospista*. A neighbor who is an insurance company owner explained the rationale for raising legal speed limits from 100 to 120 mph: in theory such a measure will reduce the highway accident rate since cars will arrive at their destinations sooner and fewer cars on the highway will reduce congestion. Sounds simple. Actually, the real speed limit is as fast as your car can go with the gas pedal pushed all the way down.

Spanish city driving is different. Two important rules apply to driving in Madrid: "nose position" and "keep your options." In slow traffic, the car whose bumper nudges farthest ahead wins the right-of-way. Also, straddling the lane-lines enables a driver not to commit to either lane of traffic (especially useful just prior to executing the "four-lane-sweep-to-turn-left" maneuver.) Using turn signals reveals your intentions and invites being cut off by other cars competing for "nose position." Other unique features of city driving: Spaniards go one better than double-parking; they triple-park. Pollution levels are kept "down" because diesel truck exhaust pipes do not point upwards. Instead, they are aimed sideways, directly at the window level of most passenger cars. Finally, it is true that the shortest unit of time is "the interval between the signal light turning green and the driver behind you honking his horn" (i.e., Spanish nano second).

Finally, revelation and true insight from a Madrid taxi driver: It was midnight as we sat in an impossibly snarled traffic jam at a plaza. (Since cars inside a traffic circle must yield to those entering, such situations are not rare.) Many drivers had dismounted, and they jokingly honked their horns in the face of this unsolvable dilemma. Wondering at such futility, I asked the taxi driver in the car next to me for some explanation. A broad smile spread across his bearded face. With a tone of amused pride, he raised his arms and shouted:

Porque somos Espanoles!

Translation: Because we're Spanish!

Interpretation: Because Spain is different.