

The Anesthesiologist and the Arts

Excerpts from “A Sabbatical in Madrid” (A Diary of Spain)

By Alex Macario, M.D.

Alex Macario, M.D., M.B.A., Associate Professor of Anesthesia and Health Research & Policy at Stanford University School of Medicine, presents excerpts from the first chapter of his book, A Sabbatical in Madrid: A Diary of Spain (Xlibris, 2003). Dr. Macario and his family lived in Madrid for ten months. As noted in the flyleaf, the reader “will live with them as expatriates during 9-11, and travel with them as they encounter dinero negro, settle in at Balear Dos, try to win El Gordo, examine the masterpiece Guernica, participate in Easter week in Sevilla, admire the last dance of the honorable bull Guitarrero, and learn to love fútbol and jamón ibérico. Facts and delightful personal observations carry the reader along on a story that promises emotional payoff—a genuine family travel memoir perfect for those wanting to learn about Spain.” The book is available at www.xlibris.com/ASabbaticalinMadrid.html and online booksellers.

—Audrey Shafer, M.D., Associate Editor

How It All Started

Why Madrid?

... Let me explain. It really started in 1996, the day I signed on as a Professor of Anesthesiology at Stanford University. I get one month paid sabbatical benefit for each year I work. This is a big perk. By 2001, I had accumulated five months of leave. To lengthen the time I could take, I requested and was approved for a ten-month sabbatical, at half pay.

The language and culture of Spain were a good fit for my family. The first four years of my life I lived in Argentina, so I know Spanish. Not well enough to do the crucigrama, the crossword puzzle, in the Madrid newspaper, but well enough to have a telephone conversation with the gas company, explaining how the gas oven doesn't work, and requesting someone to come inspect it.

Europe is also a good fit for me. I feel comfortable there, having lived in Sweden, France, and Italy, each for two years, between the ages of four and ten. My parents, laboratory researchers in biology, moved around to get better jobs.

Susan, my wife of ten years, took Spanish in high school, in Western New York, from Señora Cassidy, and maintained a good vocabulary.

The total immersion we wanted during sabbatical would have been impossible in Japan or Germany, because we know nothing of those languages. Just getting the

The Anesthesiologist and the Arts—Cont'd

apartment phone line ordered correctly in those countries would have been a terrific accomplishment.

My dream was for my kids, 8-year-old Samantha and 7-year-old Kevin, to learn to speak Spanish, well enough so they could talk to my 90-year-old grandmother, and communicate with the other 330 million Spanish speakers around the world. My grandmother lives in Argentina, speaks only Spanish, and has met her great grandchildren just once, when they were babies.

Arranging the sabbatical took all the problem solving persistence I inherited from my mother and the intellectual vision I got from my father. It would have been a lot easier if, magically, I had been handed an envelope whose contents were the name of the city affording the best sabbatical experience, and the address of Samantha and Kevin's new school. And, I wish I had had a friend at the sabbatical destination to help me open up a bank account and to rent a safe apartment.

At least the children were at a good age for an international experience, old enough not to require constant attention and diaper changes, young enough not to suffer from being away from their friends for a year.

Barcelona was the first city we considered. But the public schools, which I wanted my children to attend, teach in Catalan. Catalan is not a dialect of Spanish, but a completely separate language, only spoken by the three million inhabitants of Cataloña, the province occupying just 6% of Spain's territory. A symptom of Cataloña's desire for increased independence from Spain is that even the street signs in Barcelona are now in Catalan. The language was a big negative—a deal breaker.

"Madrid is one of the world's best-kept secrets," said David, an internist-researcher at the University of Michigan I met in the year 2000 at the annual conference of the Society of Pharmacoeconomics and Outcomes Research. David had just returned from his sabbatical in Madrid, the city his wife was born in.

In late summer of 2000, David put me in touch with Fernando, a Spanish pulmonologist, now at mid-career reinventing himself as a health economics investigator. Fernando was building a small consulting team, to do technology assessment and cost/benefit analyses in medicine.

Fernando answered my phone call of inquiry. I explained my situation.

"Encantado de la vida," delighted, he said, for me to join his group, as we finished the conversation. ...

Why Keep a Journal?

The Anesthesiologist and the Arts–Cont’d

I have never kept a journal before. No reason to. I would keep one in Palo Alto, where I live, but I am too busy living, too busy to notice what I notice and then to write it down.

I’m not complaining.

Now, when someone here asks me what I do I am tempted to answer, “I am a writer.” This sounds *cojonudo*, the nearest word to “cool” in the Spanish language. Being a writer is high prestige, even higher than when I say I am a doctor, the esteem perhaps due to the time in the Middle Ages when only one person in a town could read and write.

I also behave the way I imagine real writers behave. I try to put my strongest sentences at the beginning. And, when a fresh idea pops into my head, I rush to write it down, desperately searching for the nearest scrap of paper, worried the idea will evaporate before I find a pen.

Susan, a stay-at-home mom, says that on the days I edit the book I don’t engage with the kids. At meals at our kitchen table, I am too self-absorbed to initiate conversation. I have heard other writers’ spouses complain of this emotional unavailability.

I know you can’t get away from yourself by moving from one place to another, but you can notice different things. In Madrid, I acutely tuned into the little events natives take for normal.

As long as I can remember, I have wanted to study in detail how the world worked, to take the complexity and mystery out of what I saw.

I majored in sociology in Rochester, New York, to understand the relationships between socioeconomic class, education, and income.

And medical school also trains the observational eye. My first day at the University of Rochester School of Medicine, the Dean told us that 90% of the information you need to make a diagnosis on a sick patient comes from properly interviewing to extract a good history, while only 10% comes from the hands-on physical examination.

And, to my surprise, just the act of writing, of typing into my sleek Toshiba Satellite laptop triggers new creativity. Sentences come out I didn’t know were there. Diary writing forced acquisition of in-depth knowledge about Spain.

Putting all the diary entries together into a book is overwhelming if you try to do it in one day. Microsoft Word, the Edit/Find command, and a spell and grammar

The Anesthesiologist and the Arts–Cont’d

checker sure are an advantage. I am certain I would not write if I had pen and paper only.

But, practically, the reason I kept a journal was to not have to write individual e-mails to our curious friends and family back home. I just e-mailed them a weekly diary entry.

What I wrote about was dictated by chance, triggered by what I saw, what I had direct contact with. ...

I include Spanish words, because more meaning, more satisfaction comes from the melody of the actual Spanish word.

The real challenge is to make the travelogue interesting enough so the reader will continue turning pages. ...

Getting There

On August 20th, 2001, I left for Spain with Susan, and Samantha and Kevin, our two children. Knowing we were coming back to Palo Alto, the best place I have ever been, made leaving easier.

We slept on the living room floor the night before, the rest of the house packed and spotless, ready for our departure, even the medical journal subscriptions suspended until our return.

“Thank you for driving us to the airport,” I tell Joyce. It is chilly at 5:30 AM, even though the noon temperature reached 92 degrees the previous day.

“You’re welcome!” replied Joyce. “You have a lot of bags!”

“Seventeen.”

“Eight carry-ons and nine to check in.”

I count them in my head. Four blue bags, four black ones, two grey shoulder tote bags, a brown garment bag, a burgundy/gold carpet bag, Samantha’s pink rolling carry-on, and four green nylon duffel bags, newly bought at the Redwood City Trading Post.

I load the luggage onto the open back-bed of Joyce’s black Ford F-250 pick-up, the vehicle bulked up like a football player on steroids.

“What are you flying?”

“American Airlines out of San Jose,” I reply, sitting in the back second row of seats. “I bought a thirty-day roundtrip ticket for us, even though we won’t use the

The Anesthesiologist and the Arts—Cont'd

return leg. This was less expensive than just buying a one-way fare to Madrid, or leaving the return open-ended.”

I had booked us to return September 12th. That flight never left Madrid, but we weren't going to be on it anyway.

Once at the airport, one of the upright expandable suitcases, with the retractable trolley handle and the inline skate wheels, was over the seventy-pound weight limit. We jostled some of our belongings into the other bags to make weight. This was before 9-11. They didn't charge us extra for the ninth check-in suitcase, only two being allowed per person.

As usual on international flights, the language of the destination country is predominantly spoken. I know if this same group was returning to the U.S., English, not Spanish, would be the flight's first language.

Samantha's frown tells me she realizes we are on our way, not to return for almost a year.

We arrive at Barajas Airport at 9:30 AM the next day, the 21st of August.

We need two taxis to carry the luggage, tied with twine onto the roofs of the white vehicles, to Antonio Arias 17, our address in the Retiro neighborhood. Susan and Kevin race ahead of us, southwest on highway N-II, one of six arteries pumping into Madrid, with N-I coming in from due north and then clockwise, N-II, N-III, ... N-VI.

“You work out of the airport?” I ask the cab driver, in Spanish.

“Yes. A lot of tourists come in via the airport,” explains the cabbie with a smile.

France has the most tourists of any country in the world, with seventy-seven million per year. Spain is second with almost fifty million, the United States third with forty-six million visitors, followed by Italy and China.

I roll down the car window.

“There's a lot of construction!” I say, stunned by the two dozen, thirty-story apartment buildings going up in every direction. Enormous cranes rise high into the sky.

“Dinero Negro,” Black Money, he says mysteriously.

“Excuse me?”

“Money that has not been declared. Money that has not been taxed,” he replies, as if explaining the obvious.

The Anesthesiologist and the Arts–Cont’d

“The construction is funded by pesetas not declared to the tax authorities,” I summarize.

“Exactly. Turnover of dinero negro has increased because we convert to the euro in January 2002. The euro is the common currency of the European Union. All pesetas need conversion by then.”

“Can’t the person with pesetas exchange them for euros at the bank?”

“Yes, but if a person exchanges more than 500,000 pesetas (about three thousand US dollars), the bank is required to report the transaction to the government. People with undeclared income don’t want to go the bank.”

The easiest method to launder this money is to buy new property, or build, or remodel...

As the clock on the Spanish peseta’s life winds down, lots of ten-thousand peseta notes, the largest bill, and the denomination favored by hoarders, stoke the economy. Restaurants are jammed at night, much like in the Bay Area during the Internet boom of 2000 when I couldn’t get a dinner reservation anywhere.

Spain is a much richer country than official national statistics suggest (one of the poorest in western Europe), because of the underground economy. Undocumented transactions make up a fifth of the legitimate marketplace.

At 10:30 AM, we pull into our cross street, Sáinz de Baranda, named in the early 1800s after the Alcalde de Madrid, Madrid’s mayor. The fare is four thousand pesetas per cab. We teach the kids the conversion, 180 pesetas per US dollar makes it twenty-two dollars.

It would be more than a month before I was in a car again.

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