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Burgos Spain Oct 2, 2024

Grant drove me to SeaTac (actually I drove, because he knows I don't always like his driving). I had my Spot Saver, which saved me probably 45 minutes in the security line. My trekking poles made it through security. I got them for free through Medicare, and plan~~ed~~ to leave them in Sarria. If they hadn't gotten through security I would have had to buy some here. So I feel like I got a gift of \$50 or \$100! I was at the gate by 9:30 and flight didn't leave til noon, but better early than stressed.

Air Canada flight to Toronto lifted off at 12:15. I forgot to check SeatGuru when choosing my seat, and mine didn't recline due to exit row behind me. Flight was about 4.5 hours and my neck got sore watching the screen at the upright seat angle.

I had a comfortable two-hour layover in Toronto. No customs, just scan your passport. I'd brought a turkey sandwich for lunch, and had another for dinner at the airport. My ticket said the only meal would be breakfast, but they also served us dinner,

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which was - chicken! So it was a very poultry day for me. I slept most of the ~6 hour flight to Madrid. I had a comfortable neck pillow but my neck still got very sore.

Arrived in Madrid at 11:15. Customs was a quick breeze, and I had no checked bags. 74° here. I arrived at terminal 1 and the bus station is at terminal 4. Using a combination of signage (not very clear) and asking, I found the shuttle to terminal 4 and the sort of long walk from there to the terminal. It's self serve. A machine tells you when there are busses to your destination and you buy the ticket. Senior price (over 60) was 22,45 € for the 2.5 hour 235 km trip to Burgos. There was a bus at 1:15, so I only had to wait an hour. It felt great to brush my teeth at the station in the clean restroom.

I masked all the way, in airports, planes, and busses. I really don't want to get Covid!

Bus left 20 min late at 1:35 and arrived in Burgos at 4 pm.

Cloudy dark sky with rain the second half of the trip. Scenery of shorn, brown fields sprinkled with shrubs and low evergreen trees. Seems arid, despite the rain. Someone told me I missed torrential rain last week.

It's supposed to be sunny tomorrow.

I had two seats to myself on the bus. Ate plane food leftovers: roll with butter and cheese, and a square of cake. The two people in front of me were listening to their phones without headphones. I've seen a lot of that and I hope it's not the norm. Kind of surprising, when I think earbuds are common.

The mola hostel is right at the bus station. About 24 € per night. I've got a bottom bunk in a co-ed 4-bed dorm. Bright common area with lots of windows. Breakfast included. The dorm room is clean, but smells like dirty socks!

Got a nice grocery store salad with cheese, nuts, apple. 4 €. Rain stopped and I walked across the rain-swollen river to the cathedral area. Everything looks a bit gloomy with the gray sky and puddles. Plus it's a weeknight + shoulder season. Commuters queued for busses or walking home.

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Sun sets here about 8 pm, and it will get light around 8 am I think. It was windy in town & I hear this is a windy area. A belligerent panhandler backtalking two young cops. Their job did not look fun. The ground is littered with chestnuts.

Hostels are warrens of rooms & hallways. They can really pack in a lot of people. This one is very quiet - few people in the common areas.

The purpose of this trip is a 65th birthday retreat. I'm not sure what that will look like. Just staying open to what comes.

Thurs Oct 3

To bed at 9, up at 5, back to bed from 6 to 8. Breakfast is served from 7:30 to 9:30. Toast, cereal, muffins, juice. The only protein option is milk. Had cornflakes & milk, grabbed a handful of crackers for later, and bought a pint of mango kefir at the grocery. There's a lovely indoor market below the grocery (at street

level, with ^{raw} meats, cheeses, cured meats, produce. Stopped at the bus station to buy my bus ticket to León.

When I checked in to the hostel yesterday there was a woman about my age in front of me, wearing shorts & no raincoat or hat. She had been walking the camino and had sent her pack ahead to the hostel. It was a cold, windy, rainy day. She said she was from northern Canada and this was the coldest she'd ever been. Glad I didn't bring shorts. since she fell thru the ice on a lake near her house.

There is no light or plug next to each dorm bed and you can't use the overhead light b/c someone is usually sleeping. Glad for my rechargeable headlamp!

Chilly morning - 48° - but no rain. Walked to monasterio de las Huelgas, along the river and through a neighborhood with big beautiful homes. The monastery opened at 10 and there was a tour right away. 8 €. There were five of us. Tour in Spanish with bits of English & French. The place is amazing, built in the 1100s as a royal pantheon, and cloistered monastery, with ornate tombs, huge golden altarpieces, Christian and Moslem symbols intertwined

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(they lived together peacefully then), priceless paintings & tapestries, and ancient clothing. Highly recommended. The tour is an hour.

Then I walked up to the castle mirador for a view of the cathedral & city. Sun came out & it warmed up to 56° ! The castle itself is closed for renovation.

The hostel is in an excellent location, just steps from the cathedral. Grabbed bread, cheese, & carrots at the store and back to hostel for lunch break.

Senior ticket to Burgos cathedral was 9 €. I spent about 1.5 hours inside. Stunning altarpieces and carvings. Two dozen chapels each try to outdo their predecessor in opulence. Chapels were often paid for by wealthy families as burial places.

Blue sky & warm sun! After yesterday's rain I am so grateful. Decided to walk & enjoy being outside, rather than heading to another museum. Followed part of the camino west through town then came back along the river. So many nice green spaces

and pedestrian streets.

More smokers here than in Kirkland, and many of them young.

Big recycling bins on streets collect 5 or 6 different things.

Lots of pilgrims with backpacks, walking sticks, and scallop shells.

The city is much more alive in today's sunshine, although many places close during the afternoon.

Back to hostel at 5 with a caesar salad. Chatted with the Canadian lady, who is in remission from both cancer & lupus!

Museum of Human Evolution celebrates ancient hominid remains found at nearby Atapuerca. Entry free for 65+! It had a lot of interesting exhibits and a lot of school groups, even at 7 pm! Back to hostel before heading to cathedral for concert.

Caught the last 45 minutes of the concert. Turns out it started at 8, not 8:30, but there was a line out the door & it was full. As one person left they let another one in, my Canadian friend was there. She is ~58 and has 6 kids ages 34 to 14 (#6 was a surprise, or, as she puts it, a "surprise party") One of her kids is an opera singer. She's

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from Sudbury, Ontario. We were seated in the back, where it was hard to see, but the sound was great. University of Burgos orchestra & choir. Classical & modern religious music. Spine-tingling harmonies. Who knew there were so many variations on "Gloria" & "Amen"! Back to hostel at 9:30. 50° & dropping. High today 62°.

There were three guys in my dorm the first night and one the second. No snorers. No one said hello or chatted. For whatever reasons, we all wanted our space.

The bed was hard (I am spoiled by memory foam) and the pillow a bit thick & lumpy, but I slept fine.

Friday Oct 4

39 degrees! Long underwear today. But the sky is blue. Went for a brisk walk along the river before catching my bus to Leon. Overall impressions of Burgos: great place to spend a day or two, not compelling enough for a long visit. The old town is small and the neighborhoods don't appear that interesting. Population 180k, elevation 2800'. Cars really stop for pedestrians. Lots of bike paths.

Burgos

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Bus left on time at 10:30. 22.9€ senior ticket. An easy-to-use kiosk system let's you find schedules and buy tickets.

As we left Burgos & entered the meseta, a flat plain of farmland, the air filled with dust, like brown fog. Made me think of the lost topsoil of the Dustbowl days. Also made me glad I wasn't walking in it.

My dormmate, a young German guy, was on the same bus. After walking the Camino Primitivo he was looking for harvest work before heading to S. America.

The dust soon cleared and we floated along on good roads through farmlands of corn, sunflower, wheat, hay, and grains (the last three had been cut). Sunflower heads heavy & drooping. Mostly empty road with a few campers & farm equipment.

This was the milk run; 3.5 hours to go 100 miles. Lots of side roads through sleepy villages (everyone probably farming or in school). A sign in one said, "Pueblos vivos sin residuos" — Living villages without waste. Most of the towns had no one get on or off until Carrión de los Condes, where a handful of people got off & a half dozen peregrinos got on. One of them

was Jose, a recently-retired Intel engineer ~~from~~ from Silicon Valley. He came ~~here~~ to NY as a teen with his parents as war refugees from El Salvador. He worked with the government on plans for chip fabs in the US. They should be up & running in 3 years. Meanwhile Intel's stock is down b/c Wall Street doesn't like them spending money (i.e., investing for the future!). Jose chose the early retirement package they offered as part of the layoffs they're being forced to do. Interesting conversation. We both have an interest in death & dying. He may volunteer to teach elders about AI scam prevention. His knee hurt so he bussed to Sahagun. His wife didn't come - no interest. Second person I've met traveling w/o spouse, and I suspect there will be more.

The highway (Autovia) here is called the Camino de Santiago. The walking path here is right next to the road. Lots of pilgrims! More than I expected.

Crews are pollarding the trees in the towns, before the leaves turn brown.

Strange to see every bit of green being removed.

Léon

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Arrive at Léon bus station at 2 pm. Short walk to Quartier Léon hostel. Cute place in cute neighborhood! I drew top bunk in a 12-bed dorm, which I think is all women. The San Froilán medieval festival is happening this weekend, as luck would have it. I went out exploring. The hostel is right in the heart of the old town (inside the walls) and close to the Plaza Mayor & Cathedral.

The streets are so lively here. I'm sure it helps that it's 71°! Saw Gaudi's Casa de Botines (not as fanciful as his Barcelona creations), wandered the medieval market (lots of crafts & food, & an Arab quartier where I bought a not-very-good pistachio baklava), ogled the cathedral exterior, strolled the Barrio Humedo (bars galore), admired the beautiful Plaza Mayor with its flower-façaded old town hall.

In the medieval market I sampled a type of "cheesecake" and chatted with ~~a~~ the nice proprietress, who wished me a good experience on my Camino.

This town is packed with lively, charming, car-free plazas. And those persistent Jehovah's Witnesses are everywhere.

Grabbed a caesar salad at a hidden

Carrefour grocery near the Cathedral.
It did not show up on a Google search for grocery stores, but the hostel desk told me about it.

Back to bus today: the seat numbers were small & hard to find, so when I saw people boarding the bus and looking up for numbers I would point to the little numbers. When Jose boarded I did this, and he was looking for #11, next to me. He said I was a "Camino Angel" for helping people find the numbers, which was high praise for what felt like common courtesy. But it shows that we can all be angels, and see angels, if we are open to it.

I can already tell I'm going to meet so many wonderful people. My tendency is to want to "collect" them all & keep in touch. But I can already tell that I'm learning to let them go, like lanterns floating down a river. Jose felt like a real kindred spirit, but I let him go. He said he is in the "4th quarter" of his life, and hopes he'll get to play overtime.

Traditional dancing in one of the squares tonight. It is called "jota". Colorful embroidered skirts, & aprons, flowered scarves, petticoats, necklaces like the African trade

beads I have. Cute kids in traditional dress, learning the dances. Drums (hand), dulzaina (like an oboe), accordion, single string something, castanets, singing. The oldest dancers were quite old: dancing keeps you young! At the end the audience joined in. I loved it. Ended about 8:30. I walked through the bar area (Barrio Humedo) to check out the scene. Friday night was just getting started, and it was already packed. Lots of teens hanging out.

Back to hostel at 9. The beds here have night lights & plugs, and upper bunk has a shelf!

Sat Oct 5

54° & cloudy. Nice warm shower (not truly hot, but good enough). The only lower beds available were far from the lockers so I decided to keep the upper bed. Getting down the ladder at night is easier if I wear sandals and face outward.

Breakfast options were limited: chocolate cereal, white bread, "nutella", jam, real butter, raw oats, unrefrigerated milk. I opted for raw oats & milk, which was surprisingly edible. Traveling always takes a while to adjust digestively. My tummy isn't quite right, but not too bad.

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Walked to nearby (everything's nearby) Plaza del Grano, aka Plaza de Santa María del Camino. It feels and looks medieval & was completely empty & quiet at 9 am.

En route to the Cathedral they were hosing, blowing (electric!), and sweeping the streets & plazas, strewn with the detritus of last night's partying: cigarette butts, beer bottles, broken plastic cups, and I don't want to know what else.

Entered the Cathedral right when it opened at 9:30. The audio guide is excellent & interesting. The cathedral is very different from Burgos. Darker inside, more ethereal, with hundreds of stained glass panels. Not as busy, so the elements stand out more. Truly magnificent.

For the first time I felt the grief of a mother losing her son, and saw the story of Jesus' life as a tragedy, even for non-religious folk like me. Even thinking about losing one of my kids buckles my knees.

The extensive museum has an incredible collection of ancient textiles. No photos allowed. I spent a little over

Léon

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an hour between the church, cloister, & museum.

A chilly, overcast day. Ran into German Daniel at Carrefour, where I grabbed some yogurt. Found seed roll (yay!) at a bakery. The town is getting a late start and many shops still closed at 1 pm.

After a lunch break at the hostel I visited San Isidro church & museum. There are parts of the old city walls, and a moving and lovely pantheon filled with royal tombs & a frescoed ceiling. Huge tour groups descending everywhere & the streets are packed.

Got cash at a BBVA ATM - 7€ fee!

Thank you BECU for refunding foreign transaction fees!

I couldn't find the giant puppet parade & even the policemen were no help. Just missed a wedding procession into the cathedral. Could see the beautifully-dressed attendees & hear the Bride's March just as the enormous wooden doors swung shut.

Starting to sprinkle & I ran out of energy, so I will skip the Palacio de los Guzmanes.

The hostel is very busy. I think some are locals, here for the festival. Three women arrived late last night all dressed up, and didn't return until early this morning.

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High today 66°

Leon has a population around 125k, with around 200k in the vicinity. Elevation 2700 feet.

Had a kebab from the medieval market for dinner. 7 €. Packed with lettuce, tomato, carrot, corn, pork. Had to eat it in two sessions because it was so big. Decided I wanted lots of protein & calories before my walk tomorrow. Sat at tables with stools covered in fabric, so they look like cushions. First chatted with some really nice locals, then with a couple from Mexico City.

They are bussing all over Portugal & Spain for 6 weeks. They also own a condo in Zihua that they rent to Canadians in the winter.

The local folks told me the weather can be very unpredictable here in Sept/Oct, but that late Sept. heat can happen.

The wrestling got moved to a covered stadium due to the rain. At 6 I went into the cathedral for mass. It was very cool to sit in the altar area. It was all lit up and the organ was playing. They tolled the bells for a solid 10 minutes to announce mass. The pews were exceedingly uncomfortable.

It occurred to me that the original purpose of incense may have been to hide the smell of the masses, which must have been overpowering.

I had to leave early to get to the parade. I felt bad b/c the guy had to let me out through a locked gate, where people were clamoring to get in.

The parade had just left the square. It was a large group of musicians in traditional clothing playing bagpipes & hand drums. I followed them for a while. The street was packed.

Heading back to the hostel was crowded streets, lots of already drunk people. Saturday night looks crazier than Friday! (This morning I saw the beginnings of a fist fight between two guys who appeared to still be drunk from the night before.) Women skimpily dressed in barely-there skirts, with bare legs, in the chilly rain.

Chatted with Ama at the front desk. She's finishing up her PhD in Art History. Her boyfriend is British. They haven't worked out the details of his visa situation. She said the hostel is completely full and they had to turn people away. Two French women had to go all the way to Astorga to find a room! 40 minutes by car -
34 miles.

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walking sticks basket: leave a pair, take a pair.

The hostel closes in January due to cold & snow.

I'm a bit nervous about my walk tomorrow, and getting lost. I'll be in airplane mode so I don't use my battery, and I hope the offline maps works.

Spanish women primping for a night out; at 8:30 hairdryers still roaring. They were getting ready for bed at 3:45 when I got up to go pee.

Day 5:1 Sunday Oct. 6

Up at 5:45. When I took my plugs out I heard a woman snoring, so it's not only men to beware of.

My first day of walking! I'm excited & nervous! It's supposed to rain. A friend sent me a quote from Bob Marley: "Some people feel the rain, others just get wet."

Leave hostel 7:45, still dark. A helpful & diminutive old lady showed me the way. She was on her way to mass. I was going the right way, but her assistance was reassuring. She was feisty! She would not leave me until she was sure I was safely launched out of town.

Day 1 León to Villar

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The ~~parador~~ ^{Parador} San Marcos is a beautiful 5-star hotel in a converted 12th-century convent. It has an ornately-decorated façade. In the plaza is a bronze statue of a pilgrim, sandals off, resting his feet.

By this time it was light. I crossed the river along with half a dozen other pilgrims and into the outskirts of León. Very quiet early Sunday morning after big festival, few cars or people. Mix of residential & light industrial. Not especially appealing, especially under a gray sky. The scallops, yellow arrows, and signs were easy to follow. 59° with a light breeze.

Picked up two pieces of advice from other pilgrims: leave early to see the sunrise; don't walk too fast and pound your body.

Along one street there were water bottles set outside each door. The seals were broken, so they had been refilled. I wonder why they were there.

Wine cellars dug into hillsides, with capped vents sticking out of the dirt tops. A passing gentleman told me they store peoples' wine from local grapes.

I keep telling myself to go at my own pace, and trust that there will be a place to sleep. It's not a race, and it's an exercise in letting go.

I see many women walking alone.

The recommended side route to La Virgen del Camino, to avoid the road, wasn't worth it. The road was empty anyway, and the side route had lots of litter and was confusing. Arrived 10:25 at the church. The sermon was about men and women being equal in the sight of god, and men should treat women well. I just listened for a few minutes. Had a snack and continued on.

I didn't want to buy something at a cafe in order to use a bathroom, so I waited until I'd left town, and there was a pilgrim gap behind me, and ducked behind a tree. (I did not leave my t.p. behind! I carry a little ziplock for that.)

In Oncina de la Valdoncina, a tiny hamlet with two albergues, I ate my bread and cheese. I'd come 13k in just under 3 hours. At first I didn't see any other pilgrims behind me, so I thought maybe I was the last one. But then came a group of two, and soon a group of three.

I took the alternative route, to Villar de Mazarife. It was out in the country instead of next to the highway.

Day 1 Leon to Villar

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The area is supposedly called páramo. It's flat, windswept farmland. So nice to finally be out in the country. Stunted oaks, little teardrop-shaped rose hips, lavender, scotch broom + thistle (invasive here?), thyme, magpies, crows. Dirt road with puddles. Hay stubble. Red soil.

My hat brim blows up in the wind; a stiffer one would have been good. I saw people with water bottles clipped in front so I tried clipping mine into my chest strap and it worked great. Easy access, and comfortable.

In Chozas de Abajo, yellow arrows direct you to a cafe, then back to the Camino. Lots of pilgrims eating or having a coffee. I didn't need food or coffee + decided to continue on. Only 3.9 km to Mazarife. It was hard not to worry about finding a place to sleep. The 3 albergues are all private, which means they all take reservations, and I hoped they weren't full.

A bit of sun, blue sky, + light sprinkles on the last leg. Arrived at Albergue Jesús at 2 pm, after just over 6 hours, including two short stops.

The hostess is young, high energy, + super friendly. She told me if I dropped my pack + ran I could make it to the grocery store, which

closed at 2. But no luck. The albergue has a restaurant, however.

Sleepy town, albergue surrounded by fields. Has a lovely big garden, a place to wash clothes. Beds are 10€. I'm in an 8-bed room. Old-school wooden bunks. Can't sit up in bottom bunk. No lockers or place to put things. Currently one other person in the room, a 50-ish woman from London. ^{Sarah} She said she got exposed to a lot of sick pilgrims & is just now getting over being sick. I guess I've been lucky so far.

Rain starts at 3 pm. 63 degrees.

Sitting inside the bar/restaurant where it's warm and strong wifi, but a party of very loud Spaniards having a rollicking mid-day meal.

Thoughts from today... 12 miles felt easy. No aches or pains. No huge insights, but I think that's typical, from what I've heard. Mostly I'm just enjoying being alone, no trauma drama, not having to coordinate with or worry about anyone else. When I was towing Burgos & Leon I realized how much more you can pack into a day when you don't need to coordinate with or wait for anyone else.

Turns out that Sarah is in the same predicament as me, vis a vis her marriage.* We had a great chat. Dinner was a 3-course, 5-country feast. Pumpkin soup with pumpkins grown by the family, with cream & parmesan. Cod & potatoes, yogurt, which I'll keep for my breakfast tomorrow. And baguette for my lunch. 12€. Angela from ^{Berlin} Germany, Camille & Tula from OK, Paco from Spain, Sarah from England, Jean Michel from France. The albergue is owned by Jesus and run by his daughter Nerea. Dinner around 7.

This establishment is the local bar. The men play dominoes, the women play cards. Usually the men go walking in the afternoon, but it's raining today.

The women from OK are only 22, but Camille in particular was quite wise. Never underestimate the wisdom of young people. She commented that one reason it's so easy to open up to strangers is that they don't know anyone you know, so nothing you say can get back to them or cause awkwardness. All three of the young women are at a point of transition in their lives, with jobs, school, relationships. Angela's company is going bankrupt. During the process of finding a buyer, * She told me she has met many women on the Camino in the same struggle!

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she is on "garden leave" — on the payroll but can't do another job. Tula's boss got charged with tax fraud, sending her company into upheaval. Camille just graduated with a Latin Studies degree and isn't sure what she wants to do next. All three ate every scrap of their dinners, plus an ice cream. They said they are always hungry from all the walking.

Sarah told me she has decided to separate from her husband, and just needs a plan for how to tell him.

I think everyone on the Camino has something to teach you.

There were 6 of us in the 8-bed dorm. My top bunk was empty, giving me space to spread out.

Monday Oct. 7

Up 5:45. Slept great. Perfect temperature. No breakfast included. Had my yogurt with a small chunk of baguette + butter, and half an overripe banana given to me by a pilgrim.

Tasted chemically, couldn't gag down the rest...

Started walking in the dark at 7:30. Used my headlamp on the dark road. This little town has a few stores but closed this

Day 2 Puente de Orbigo

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early, and probably yesterday. I didn't even leave the hostel! (It was raining, so there's my excuse.)

53° + dry. Jean Michel passed me with his long legs + said, "Isn't this section boring?" It wasn't to me. I was enjoying the silhouettes of the corn fields + the cloud shapes as the sky lightened. The birds were starting to sing. There were few cars. Country road with narrow dirt shoulders. A quiet sunrise behind a veil of clouds. A few blue patches. Corn fields, sunflowers, + what I think were sugar beets.

Soon I was overtaken by the sound of pilgrims chattering in English. I slowed down to let them pass. Today it was hard to be alone on the path because there were so many people. My goal is to walk solo + be social at hostels.

I find myself thinking in Spanish.

Scenery vs. contemplation. Today wasn't terribly scenic, with lots of power lines, roads, cars, but it occurred to me that you don't really need scenery for contemplation. Quiet is good though.

Passed through sleepy Villavante at 10. The rose hips remind me of Christmas lights.

The Camino crosses over the N-120 highway.

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Rejoin the main route at Hospital de Orbigos. Sunshine! Cross over the beautiful medieval bridge into Puente Orbigos, a charming little town with stores, restaurants, albergues. Arrive at 11, albergues open at 12. Bought dried apricots at the store. Sat on a bench in the sun for a picnic of bread, cheese, carrots, and apricots. Chatted with a friendly older local woman. She asked if I was staying at the Parish hostel. I didn't even know there was one. It's not mentioned in Brierly's book. I had emailed an albergue for a spot, just in case. I hadn't yet heard back, but email doesn't work great without wifi. As I walked toward that hostel, a door to my right opened and a woman hung up the "Parish hostel" sign. Well, it seemed like a sign. I wanted to try one, so in I went. Flower-filled courtyards, friendly volunteers. I was the first pilgrim of the day. 8-bed room (4 bunks) and I chose a bottom, near the charging outlets. You get a disposable paper sheet + pillowcase plus a blanket. Pillows here in Spain are long. Once on wifi I saw a confirmation email from the other hostel, which I cancelled.

After unpacking I checked the kitchen free shelf. No good dinner food, but

Day 2 Puente de Orbigo

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there was a bag of ~~corn nuts~~ ^{corn nuts} mix!

Sitting on a sofa in the courtyard under cover journaling, chatting with the volunteers (from Hungary & Belgium), and watching pilgrims stream in.

I love hearing all the languages spoken. Volunteer Lucas says it rarely fills up. That reconfirms my desire to trust that I will find a place to sleep each night, and not make reservations. Well, except in Sarria & Santiago!

To my delight, Angela, Camille, & Tula walked by and saw me. They are so sweet and it was great to see them. They are continuing on.

Rain begins at 1:30. lol°. Put on long undies & buff, and got out down blanket.

I've decided not to buy a concha (shell) since I'm not doing the whole Camino.

No boots allowed in many albergue sleeping areas, due to the smell! This albergue is 200 years old.

The Los Angeles restaurant (only one on this side of the bridge) is closed from 3:30-7. I can't eat at 7, so I decided to do my big meal at 3.

The three-course pilgrim meal was 15€. I chose sopa de ajo, tortilla española, and flan. Everything was delicious. I saved most of the tortilla (frittata) for breakfast. A British couple sitting next to me was drinking wine & coffee, their heads bent together over a phone puzzle. I didn't interrupt

to say hello. After they left the proprietor came over to tell me that they had paid for my meal! I almost cried.

I will look for opportunities to do it for someone else. ^{I'll never know why they paid. There could be so many reasons.}

The restaurant was playing Beatles music. The woman was humming or singing quietly along. I wanted to tell her how much I enjoyed that. It made me want to organize a Beatles singalong!

This afternoon in the albergue kitchen a Spanish man was cooking garlic soup (sopa de ajo) for his granddaughter, who I think is walking the Camino. The smell was heavenly. Another Spanish guy said he recently visited his elderly grandmother and asked her what was her favorite smell. He thought she would say something like lavender, but she said picado, which is finely chopped garlic sauteeing for garlic soup! The soup is a flavorful broth (chicken) with garlic & sherry, often an egg stirred in, and bread. Great way to use stale bread, and it really warms you from the inside. I was a little chilled when I arrived. The owner told me there are more and more Americans on the Camino, and, more surprising, from middle America.

The sun came out & it got wonderfully warm & blue! On the bridge I ran into Amelia, a retired ^{history} special ed teacher from Chicago. She started in France and her blisters got so bad that she finally had to spend a week in Burgos recuperating. They told her her pack was too heavy, so she has been sending things ahead. ~~she~~ I told her the story of the people paying for my dinner. When I said they had been looking at their phone, she said something about it being a shame to be looking at a phone (instead of interacting with others?).

When I then said that they paid for my dinner, she was upset with herself for being judgmental. We then had a great talk about how hard it is to let go of judgments, and about the intense learning that takes place on the Camino. She liked my "lanterns floating downstream" analogy, and had the same experience of letting people go instead of trying to hang onto every wonderful person we meet. We had a lot in common!

I walked on a lovely path along the river in the warm sun. The solitude and sound of the water were delightful!

Each evening at 7 the priest blesses pilgrims in his small sanctuary. I was leery, but decided to go. There were three of us & it lasted

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30 minutes. He's a kindly older gentleman who's been the priest here for 30 years.

He said most Camino walkers are "turigrinos," here to walk and enjoy the culture + scenery. There's nothing wrong with that, but it's an opportunity to hear the call of god + perhaps dedicate our lives to helping the less fortunate.

It's interesting staying in a parish hostel, surrounded by bibles + religious symbolism.

The volunteers (hospitaleros) say that if someone is sick they will put them in a separate room. A guy at the other end of my dorm covered his mouth with his shirt when I came near his bed, and then slept all afternoon. He told the volunteers (who went to check on him) that he was just really tired. I hope that's the truth...

I am loving this combo down blanket/coat and am using it a lot!

Google says there is no tipping in Spain - how refreshing. Hopefully restaurant workers get paid a living wage.

I got a mosquito bite in Villar de Mazarife, on my wrist. It's now swollen + itching like crazy. May have to take a benadryl tonight. I was dismayed to find

Day 3: Astorga

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two mosquitoes in the dorm room. I killed one (no blood) but couldn't get the other. Thankfully I didn't get bit. My permethrined sleep sack hopefully helps. There was one guy snoring, but I was able to fall asleep. The room was chilly but the blanket was thick & warm.

Tues Oct 8

Up at 6. The kitchen & bathrooms were busy, since everyone needs to be out by 8. I had my leftover frittata & a yogurt. They only sold 4-packs, but only 1€ for 4 small yogurts. No morning hot beverages for me, as it makes me have to pee too much. I left just before 8 and it was just starting to get light. 52° & dry.

Because you're walking west, the sun rises behind you. So I kept turning around to check the sky. Just a tinge of pink today.

There's a lot of graffiti on the Camino signs, some "poetic" & some not. Most signs have "Castilla y" effaced, leaving only "Leon" - some people would like to secede.

Occasional mini forests, the trees all planted in straight lines.

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When I reached Villares de Orbigo I saw

a cluster of pilgrims. Thinking they were on the Camino, I headed toward them and didn't see the yellow arrow going left, but they helped me!

There are occasional rest areas with benches & tables. Today I walked on farm roads under mostly blue sky with no rain. Perfect walking weather & no wind.

I was remembering the solo hike I did across the North Cascades in 1981, at age 22. Same distance - 100 miles - and number of days - 10 - as this Camino. But I was carrying 50 pounds & had no trekking poles!

Each pilgrim has their own pace. Some walk very fast. My comfortable, sustainable pace is about 2 miles per hour, with short stops for a snack, to pee, or taking notes on my phone. It's nice not having to slow someone else down when I stop, or vice versa.

Two storks flew over me! Heading south.

Tiny Valle de Iglesia was a hive of noisy activity, with construction, farm tractors, and a chainsaw all in symphony.

Cows waiting to be milked, a farmer tossing them hay.

High today 61°

PE 33

A man walked by listening to a radio talk show, not wearing earplugs! Jarring.

Stopped for a snack & to pee at 10. Sunny.

There are so many pilgrims! more than I expected. There are also a lot of power lines. Solo pilgrims don't seem to want to chat, which suits me.

The farmland today was beautiful, esp. the parts w/o power lines!

There are so many choices when greeting someone: hello, hola, hallo, buenos dias, etc. They all work for everyone, but it's to decide which one to use. It's interesting to see what pops out.

Surprising how many pilgrims are also smokers.

El Jardin del Alma was a surprise. 6 km before Astorga. I knew there'd be a cantina, but didn't realize it would be overflowing tables of fruit, vegetables, cheese, bread, yogurt, granola, coffee, and more — all by donation. The man who started it, 15 years ago, was given food on the Camino when he was hungry, and wanted to feed others. Now it is his friend who takes care of it. There is an open-sided tent with a wood stove and ukeleles and benches with pillows. There's a labyrinth. You aren't allowed to wash your own dishes. I had a slice of watermelon, a small cup of kefir & granola, and a sampling of healthy crackers.

There's no water or electricity, though it is accessible by vehicle for supplies.

There are two cats & a dog. You can sleep here if you have your own kit. There are places to leave things you don't want. I left my extra water bottle. It was tempting to eat a lot - there was so much amazing and healthy food! But I didn't need more food. I left a few euros. It was hard to leave there. I ~~was~~ left at 11. I'd gone a short way when I realized that it was the perfect way to give back after my gifted meal yesterday. So I walked back and put 10€ in the basket.

Soon there was a road crossing and car noise, after the peace of the countryside. A big cross looked down over Astorga below. Then it was downhill and into this town of 12 k people at 2850 feet. Clouds hid the mountains at the viewpoint.

As you enter town there's a fountain with a large sculpture of a pilgrim drinking water.

Graffiti: ~~the~~ plandemia. Planning sickness.

I spend a lot of my time thinking about my marriage. I want out, but can't bear the thought of going through another divorce, and of how devastated Grant would be.

Astorga

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I want to live alone, or to at least sleep alone. I'd love to host gatherings of women or musicians without Grant there. Is there a way I can do these things without moving out? Today I decided I will ask for a few nights a week in the guest bedroom.

Astorga sits on a hill and you can see the imposing cathedral from a distance.

I arrived at the Albergue de la Siervas de Maria at 12:50. This is yet another category - run by an association & volunteers. For 7€ I'm in a 20-bed room. They save bottom bunks for seniors! The volunteers are super friendly & work hard! There was a long line of people to check in.

I either has 6,20€ or 20€. The hostel needed ^{small money} ~~change~~. The guy behind me said "Here's a euro!" When I thanked him profusely he said, "It's the Camino!"

Nice terrace, plus kitchen, laundry, common rooms with tables. Very few toilets & sinks! Chilly. No blankets - hope I will be warm enough!

One pilgrim arrived with a little boy?!

Hostels seem to be very careful about bedbugs, providing mattress & pillow covers.

Astorga is a small city with many plazas, Roman walls, a Gaudí building, and the Cathedral. I opted not to tour the Gaudí building (museum). It's a neo-Gothic palace with tall pointed turrets.

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Very different from his Barcelona fancies, and it didn't do a lot for me. Beautiful town hall with a clock whose hours are struck by figures of a man and woman in traditional maragato (region) dress. Pilgrim price for Cathedral is 6 €. First you see the museum. The handheld audio guide is easy to use and interesting. A VR headset in one room flies you around inside & outside the Cathedral. Very cool but a bit blurry (maybe b/c I couldn't use my glasses). The museum has many beautiful objects, paintings, opulent religious attire, and shiny things made of silver and gold. The cathedral's glory is in the magnificent altarpieces, many completely covered in gold leaf!

I'm tired! I can't imagine the pilgrims who've been doing this for weeks.

Astorga is known for chocolate and is packed with chocolate shops.

The three girls from Villar are here! Said hi & they went off to eat. They were tired & took an extra day here. I also ran into Panda, from Martinique, who I'd met in Léon.

Grabbed granola, cheese, & a pear at the well-stocked grocery. Back to hostel at 5.

Still lots of people checking in! Bread, cheese, pear for dinner (I found a whole wheat roll at a bakery!).

Not a lot of camaraderie here, as there are so many people.

I am stiffening up! Lots of stretching. My bed is next to the door and the hallway is cold. I shut the door. Every few seconds someone opens it and creates a cold gust.

With 20 people in the room there's a lot of in and out. Blankets not included and I'm worried my down blanket won't be warm enough. I asked if they rent blankets and they said, "Don't you know you're supposed to bring a sleeping bag?" I didn't know. They grudgingly gave me a blanket. Turns out I didn't need it. The down blanket plus my sleep sack and long underwear kept me toasty warm. Heat from 20 bodies also warmed the room.

My phone battery has been fine and I haven't regretted not bringing the brick. [Wed Oct 9]

Everyone was up by around 6, magically changing into day clothes without any overexposure. Amazingly there were no lines for the toilets or sinks. At 7 they turned on a Gregorian chant recording. At first it sounded cool, but soon it made everyone want to pack up and get out of there.

Probably the intention.

Left at 7:50, wearing rain coat, rain pants, & poncho. Glad I have all three, cause it is pouring rain. It's also quite windy. My feet were soon wet. Lots of puddles. Many people seemed underprepared, with inadequate raingear, and in some cases wearing jeans.

In a covered shelter at a park in Murias de Rechivaldo I called ahead to Rabanal to find a bed. I did not want to arrive after walking 13 miles and not be able to find a place to sleep. According to my guide, there are not enough beds for all the pilgrims. The places that take reservations were either full or didn't answer.

I decided to take the alternate route to Castrillo de los Polvazares, which supposedly had a couple of little hotels, and hole up there until better weather tomorrow. The path was along an overgrown track with rivers running in the two tire ruts. The town itself is charming, with old stone houses and narrow streets typical of this part of Spain. Everything was closed, the hotel didn't answer, and I only saw three other souls, three women with umbrellas who

Santa Catalina

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(Turns out the town's only open weekends in season)

appeared to be Spaniards from out of town. I took shelter on the church porch before forging on.

I decided to go back to Astorga, but I didn't want to retrace the overgrown path. So I continued until I rejoined the main path. It was a beautiful section with no other people, just farmland & pine trees. I saw two deer. I loved the solitude. I was wet but warm. 58° today.

By the time I rejoined the main route I had decided to continue on to the next village and look for a room there. The rain slackened but there was a fierce headwind. I arrived in cute little Santa Catalina at 11:30. 50 people live here. There are two albergues, one donativo, and three restaurants. I called the number on the donativo door and they had a bed, but they don't open til 2. So I headed to a restaurant for a slice of frittata. It came with a slice of nice bread and olive oil. It really hit the spot. The old woman who owns it is Ofelia (Felicia), age 75. She's been here 20 years. She said there's a hurricane ~~to~~ in Galicia that's bringing the wind. I looked online & sure enough there are storm warnings for this part of Spain! The weather looks OK tomorrow, but crummy after that. I am now thinking of aborting & heading south.

It's 1 pm and the pilgrim parade has ended.

I made the faux pas of telling Ofelia that I'm staying at the donativo - she owns a hotel! She says she ~~knows~~ doesn't like the donativos & other pilgrim hostels b/c they don't have to pay taxes. She says more & more hotels are closing b/c their costs are too high to stay in business. It would be interesting to hear the donativo side of the story.

I'm getting chilled sitting here (most places are unheated). A little tepid sun streaming in. Ordered a hot chocolate since I don't drink coffee. El Caminante restaurant.

Felia also said it's very hard to find blue collar ~~engineer~~ workers in Spain - everyone wants to be an engineer. Sound familiar?

About 1:30 I had a piece of Felia's home-made lemon cake, very tasty. Total cost for the frittata, bread, cocoa, & cake? Only \$7!

met a lovely young Swedish woman named Luisa at the cafe. She is also staying at the donativo. We walked over at 2 and there was a whole cluster waiting at the door, including two familiar faces.

The place is called La Boheme. It's owned by David, a French guy who now lives here.

The place is a total hippy house, with Buddha wall hangings, couches, a wood stove, musical instruments (incl. a guitar but no capo). We arranged our wet boots around the fire, and hung up our wet clothes. Initially I was in a room with 5 other women but a 6th arrived and didn't want to sleep alone, so he offered the adjacent private room to me. It has a double couch bed and lots of space. Also tarps on the ceiling that flap in the wind... The ceiling appears to be in progress.

I had a lovely hot shower. No wifi.

Raining on & off, cozy inside. There are about 15 people staying here, including a lot of French speakers.

Food is included and you pay by donation. Dinner was amazing: cous cous with garbanzos & broth. After we did music. I played half a dozen songs in English & then David played half a dozen in French. Everyone loved it! And to think I toyed with getting a solo hotel room tonight. I played "Revolution of Love" & the hostel owner absolutely loved it.

The room was cold but I slept warm & comfy.

At dinner I chatted with Christophe from Austria. Late 30s maybe? He had a bit of

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a breakdown after losing a company he bought (it failed) then losing a CEO job and his grandfather back to back.

His therapist suggested he do the Camino. She said he should do something that uses his body but not his mind. He's gone from wearing suits every day to outdoor gear & sweat. He's met two other guys & they are now all friends for life. This experience has utterly transformed him.

Caroline from Australia is doing her second Camino. She says there are 6 times as many pilgrims as there were 6 years ago, and the energy is more frantic. She said this hostel is the first place she's felt calm since she started walking.

Michelle from NZ said this hostel was the best place of her Camino so far.

Thurs Oct 10

David provided an amazing breakfast, with bread, granola, oat milk, fruit, coffee, & toppings galore. We all said our sad goodbyes (many will see each other again). I left a 25€ donativo. I hope it

was enough.

Chilly morning: 44 degrees. Glad for my gloves + buff. ~~last~~ I decided to return to Astorga + go to Salamanca. The stormy weather, crowded trail, and possible lack of beds, or stress about finding a bed, plus knowing that I would have to make reservations for Sarria + Santiago + commit to dates now (if I could even get reservations) were all factors in my decision.

As I left the hostel, I realized I wouldn't need my poles anymore, so I went back and told David I would leave them (or rather, asked if I could leave them). Laura, a darling young woman from France, who will be starting her first job as an urban planner (she just graduated) when she returns (her company encouraged her to take this trip, saying that she would learn a lot - wise company), looked at me wide-eyed and said, "Can I use them?!" She was so thrilled to have poles for the mountains. She gave me a big hug and said, "You are an angel!" I got tears in my eyes yet again! I think that has happened every day on my short Camino.

I walked out of the hostel feeling light as a feather. I headed east, back to Astorga, into the rising sun. There were already a few pilgrims

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walking toward me. I found myself walking faster without poles. I took the detour through Castrillo, this time on a dry trail. The stone houses glowed in the early sun. It's a charming town, marred for photos by cars + alarm signs! Saw one peregrina walking, and half a dozen bikes.

Walking the Camino backward is easy, you just walk toward all the pilgrims! Some of them look at you quizzically. There's eye contact, and more hellos than on the westward direction. In places it's not a 2-way track, so you have to shimmy past. I passed a group of 12 pilgrims! No contemplation for them...?

I feel a lightness of being, having made my decision to head south. And to spend this sunny ~~the~~ day walking is wonderful.

I got to Astorga early (around 10 I think). Checked train + bus schedules at the Tourist office + bus station, and decided to catch the 9 am bus to Salamanca tomorrow. Then I went to the Gaudi Episcopal Palace, built on commission of the Bishop. I believe it was one of his earlier works. Gorgeous elements inside.

Arrived at the Albergue San Javier at 11:30. I think I was the first arrival. 12 ewos, 8-bed dorm, I think all women. Lots of sinks,

toilets, showers. Lovely old building with lots of wood.

Walked to get groceries + soak up the warm sun in the plaza. Early dinner of pumpkin soup + rye bread. Made my hostel reservations for Salamanca, Seville, Ronda, Cordoba, + Madrid, plus a carpool to get me from Salamanca to Seville (good price + schedule).

Mild intestinal distress - I suspect the garbanzos.

Dorm mate Marilyn, from Texas, lived in Madrid 8 years, now in London. We went to a pastry shop so I could get a mantecada (local specialty, but nothing special - dry yellow cake) and she could get a truffle. We sat in the main square so she could have two glasses of red wine (2,50 €) each. We had a nice chat, and she got to see the Maragato clock. She said there isn't much time for sightseeing on the Camino. She's in her mid-70s. With her second glass of wine they brought a complimentary "pincho" (small hors d'oeuvre). Small square of pizza. She didn't want it so I ate it - delicious.

Five women in the dorm room, only one of them young. We chatted a bit about our kids and our Camino experiences. I cried when I talked about Colin moving away.

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Friday Oct. 11

It was a two-blanket night. 41° this morning. Left my long johns on!

The bus station is just steps from the hostel. Arrived at 8. Luckily they had open bathrooms, as I had a bout of diarrhea. Glad I packed loperamide.

Bus to Salamanca on time at 8:55.

18 euros. Only 1 other person on the bus. I got a front seat. Seats have usb ports & no screens (yay). Playing a station with news & music - Hey Jude. Gas prices around \$6/gallon. The bus stopped in Bañeza, Benavente, Zamora. Only two more people boarded. Empty roads, light rain, but blue patches of sky. Open, dry farmland. The road is called "Ruta de la Plata" (silver route). Not especially scenic. I kept nodding off with the motion & heat. Lots of roundabouts made a little seasick, so I took a motion pill. The roundabouts mean no traffic lights, which is nice.

Arrived at Salamanca bus station on time at 11:45 - just under three hours. Walked about 25 minutes to the hostel, but it doesn't open until 2, so I headed to the nearby tourist office. Turns out there

are no activities here tomorrow for Spain Day, only in Madrid. But all non-tourist businesses & shops will be closed. Sat in the stunning Plaza Mayor for a picnic, but then it started sprinkling. Ducked into a cafe for a tuna tostada (topped with cherry tomatoes & ~~sprinkled~~^{drizzled} with mayo & balsamic glaze. Tasty and only 3,20 euros. Most people in cafe speaking English.

Food in general seems cheap here, especially groceries.

I'm feeling sad to leave the force field of the Camino, but it seems like the best option.

I spent the afternoon wandering around and feeling lonely. All alone in a crowd. The city is a marvel of stone but it's almost too much, so packed together you can hardly appreciate it. Came back to the hotel about 5, after wandering down to the river trail. My heart wasn't in it.

I am having Camino withdrawals. Now I understand why people keep coming back, and have so much trouble coming back to their lives after.

It's kind of like a walking Burning Man, with shared experience & everyone taking care of each other. I thought about walking to Plaza Mayor to see the Saturday night scene, but my heart wasn't in that either. So I'm watching episodes of This Old House & texting my kids & Grant.

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Tomorrow will be a new day. For now, wandering around new cities alone has lost its lustre. I'm rethinking my trip to Colombia in February. I do not like being in a hotel room all alone. I feel so isolated. Maybe I don't want to live alone after all.

I'm staying at the Roomin Hostel. Good location, 5 min. walk from Plaza Mayor. Room is small & comfy. Small kitchen space upstairs. \$40 a night.

I'm regretting my decision to leave the Camino & wishing I had kept going. I think I'm having Camino withdrawal. It must be a thing.

Sat Oct 12

Today is a national holiday, Spain Day. Unfortunately it celebrates Columbus's arrival in America. But there's no celebrations here, just businesses closed & lots of people.

59° & raining hard. Depressing. I booked a walking tour. Thought it was in English but it's in Spanish. Oh well, good practice. Put on all my raingear & headed out at 9:30. The tour guide was Mady, an art history major. She took us on a 1.5

Salamanca

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hour tour of the major monuments (outsides only). I understood most of it & learned a lot. Everyone else gave her 10€ (it's a donation "free" tour) so I did as well. Tour 10:30 - noon.

The rain stopped about 11 and a little sun leaked out - yay! Walked to Plaza Mayor to find lunch & a bathroom. Ate at the same place as yesterday b/c it's cheap, portions are the right size for me, and I liked the friendly proprietress. Today I had a tostada with chicken, avocado, & tomato.

First I visited the old University, 4th oldest in Europe, founded in the early 1200s. 5€ senior price. It has a wonderful old library.

When I emerged there was sun! And crowds! Huge tour groups, streets & cafes packed.

Next I toured the old & new cathedrals. 9€ senior price. Included handheld audio guide. Perhaps because I've overdosed on cathedrals, these ~~one~~ didn't wow me as much as the other three.

I was more excited about the wedding in the old cathedral. Visitors could get close to the altar & see the bride & groom & their mothers all decked out.

Topped up on religious imagery & gold chapels, I paid 4€ to climb the Cathedral bell tower, called Jeronimus, for views of the

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city. A little bit scary but I did it.
Great views. You can see the river.

Just after I descended the newlyweds emerged from the church! They were greeted with confetti canons, flower petals, & fire crackers. Anyone can get married here but you have to reserve way in advance, possibly years.

The town looks much better in the sun. It's known for its homogenous use of golden sandstone.

Back to Plaza Mayor for a 4pm snack (probably in lieu of dinner). A croissant filled with pistachio cream! Huge, delicious, & not too sweet. A couple sat on the bench next to me & chatted in Spanish. They were very nice but I had trouble understanding them. I think they were developmentally disabled.

I found a seed baguette & headed back to the hostel to journal, charge my phone, and rest a bit before I head out again.

The town is very quiet outside the center. Lots of food delivery scooters.

Sitting at the desk in my room with the window open. It's 69° out! Sky is still a little overcast.

Headed out again around 5:30, rain gear in hand. Never needed it. In the Plaza Mayor a brass quartet drew a crowd. They were great. Selections included Dancing Queen, 1812 Overture, and a Pasodoble. It was really fun to listen while watching the parade of people go by. The plaza was packed, along with the surrounding streets. A Korean tour group strolled through. The guide, with her yellow flag, kept on going, but everyone else stopped to listen to the music. She finally turned around to look for them.

Walked down to the Roman wall. I feel frumpy in my Camino clothes. Lots of store signs say "Closing due to retirement."

I can see people up on the Roman wall, with a view of the river, but can't see a way up there except through the Nouveau Art museum.

Back to Plaza. Lots of police out, perhaps to keep an eye on the Saturday night scene. Some kind of parade/procession has been cancelled due to the rain forecast.

Guys in drag, each with a retinue. Bachelor parties. Girls in pink feathery cowboy hats, one in a white hat with a veil. Bachelorette parties.

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At 7 pm many restaurants are just setting up their outdoor tables.

I sit in the plaza and read or people watch. At 8:15 it is dark and suddenly the lights come on. Everyone cheers. The city hall is lit in red & gold like the Spanish flag. An older gentleman sits to chat. We have a nice chat in Spanish but I can see that he is "hopeful," so I wish him good night & head back to my room. It's 8:40. One thing the guy said is that Spaniards live life outside, despite the weather.

Sun Oct 13

52° this morning. My reflux has been bad, despite no late eating, big meals, or forbidden foods. Coughing at night, sore throat.

There's a tiny frog (toad) carved into the cathedral facade. It's perched on a skull & hard to see. If a student can spot it, it's supposed to help them do well on their exams.

Day before yesterday, walking on the river trail, I saw a cute little weasel.

Salamanca

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I walked down to the river trail. Few cars on the streets of old town, which is mostly pedestrian streets. Street sweepers and washers + garbage trucks are out + the streets are already glistening, no litter or cigarette butts, all the tables + chairs vanished.

9:15. Blue sky, bright sun! Walked trail on far side of river. Great views of the cathedral. Rental boats parked at a dammed pond, which makes a great cathedral reflecting pool. They're setting up for a 10k running race on the trail. Really nice to see a bit of nature, and green. Saw half a dozen feral cats along one section of trail.

Visited the public library balcony on the way back to the hostel, with a view of the Clericia tower across the street. Checkout time is noon. My ride isn't until 3:30.

Packed up and walked to Purisima church, to see the Napoleonic Baroque interior. Didn't wow me, but I didn't really know what I was looking at. 71° + very warm in the sun! It's much easier to travel with a backpack than a suitcase.

Walked up to Van Dyck street, which has a row of "blue collar" tapas eateries that have been discovered, so it's now a bit trendy. Looked for a place with wifi and a friendly vibe, with

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cheap food. Ended up at Laleo and had a piece of cheesecake for 3,50 €, Good, and not too sweet. If they'd had potato frittata I'd have gotten that. Restaurants charge more for terrace seating so I ate inside. They were playing Credence, which sounded great + made me miss my band.

At 2:30 I met my carpool at a gas station near town. Driver Miguel plus two other passengers. I found it on an app called Omio, which I heard about from the girls I met at the Villar albergue. 4.5 hour ride to Seville for \$32. Scenery dry scrub most of the way, like Eastern WA. Cows, windmills.

In Merida, after 2.5 hours, we dropped off one Laura + picked up another. The young people were on their phones with earbuds, and I dozed on + off. Castellano is a challenge for me to understand, plus my throat is sore, so I didn't feel up to trying to talk to the driver from the back seat. He got less than \$100 for a 4.5 hour drive, minus gas + other expenses. I don't know how he can make a living that way... Nice guy, mid-40s, good driver.

I think maybe I'm getting a cold...

Seville

55

45 minutes north of Sevilla there were forests of deciduous trees. I saw a sign that said "Ferry" & had Arabic writing. We entered Andalusia. There were cork trees.

The driver listened to electronic music at low volume. All I could hear was the same driving beat for 4.5 hours!

Arrived at the Sevilla Tower a little before 8. Walked 25 minutes, across & along the river, into town & my pension. 75° & humid! There's palm trees! The pension is charming. I asked for a private room, so I don't give anyone my germs, but none were available. I'm in a 10-bed room, tightly packed, no windows. 21 € per night. Roof terrace on the 4th floor. Includes breakfast.

Mon Oct. 14

Hugely relieved to have slept well, with no coughing, or congestion. Up about 7:40. They had decaf instant, which was heaven on my throat. Breakfast included corn flakes, whole wheat bread, lunch meat, cheese, tomato, real butter. I got a lot of mosquito bites... The room is crowded & stuffy, with little ventilation.

Raining heavily & I was still tired, so I napped until almost noon. Then I went for a wet walk in my poncho. A warm rain.

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Palm + orange trees line the streets.

Got a kit caesar at the Carrefour close by and ate at the hostel so I could charge my phone. Bites are itching like crazy so I got antihistamine ointment at a pharmacy. Cheapest I could find was 10€. Ring finger is so swollen I can't get my ring off.

Walked along the river trail to the bus station + bought a ticket to Ronda for wed. morning. 15€. At 4 pm the rain finally stopped, and it got muggy, and quite warm in the sun. Walked back on the river promenade. An American couple kayaking, crew boats practicing, river cruises + cargo ships going by. Seville's port is something like 60 miles inland.

Walked past the Golden Tower, built in the 12th century to guard the river. There is a ton of traffic outside the old city. Happily, Parque Maria Luisa was open. So nice to be in a green space. Plaza de España, built for an expo in 1929, is gorgeous and very Moorish. Invasive monk parakeets scream shrilly. They're a beautiful greenish yellow with long tail feathers. Vendors selling roasted chestnuts. I had them once + didn't like them. The park was busy-

Sewille

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I can't imagine it on a sunny weekend.

My bites not only itch, but are painful, as if they actually took a bite.

Walking back I saw an enormous fig-like tree & stopped to take a picture. A British woman with a baby stopped to ask directions to the park & we had a lovely chat. Her baby hadn't napped & was fussy. She said I had "calming energy" b/c the baby got happy.

Back to hostel at 5:30 for "dinner": my last yogurt plus the last of my granola & some prunes. Perhaps tomorrow I'll have a restaurant meal.

Sitting on the terrace. It's 74° & feels lovely. Tried to call Air Canada to get an earlier flight home but I can't get a signal. No one at the hostel is a native English speaker, so I'm feeling a bit lonely. It felt so wonderful to have a conversation with the British woman today.

Tues Oct. 15

Met an American couple at breakfast who bought a room on a small cruise ship. \$100k + \$3k per month for 15 years. You can rent or sell. It circumnavigates the world every 3.5

58

years or so. All inclusive. Their maiden voyage starts today. Villa Vie Residences.

I got more bites last night. Talked to the front desk. They'll check for bed bugs (they didn't find any, plus bed bugs usually bite in a pattern). They moved me to another room with only 3 single beds. There is one other woman in there.

The line at the Real de Alcazar was very long, so I decided to come back later. (Mistake! The whole day was sold out early.)

I went to Casa los Pilatos, a gorgeous palace with Islamic influence. Felt like Morocco. Loved getting off the main drag of shops & crowds, and into the narrow alleys & old buildings.

Paid 6€ extra (18€ total) for the tour of the second floor residence.

Walked to Las Setas, a modern architectural creation that soars overhead like mushrooms. Market underneath. Dos de Mayo restaurant (recommended by Pension) didn't open til 12:30 so I got a salad at Carrefour & went back to the pension for lunch & phone charge.

Back to Alcazar to find it sold out. Pistachio croissant at Carrefour & back to

Seville

59

pension for snack. It started raining. Don't feel like going out in the rain. Kind of counting the hours until I can leave. Feeling isolated. Too cold to sit on roof terrace. Had a shower. Lots of cleaning going on.

Castellano sounds like people have a mouth full of marbles. It's hard to understand, but I'm doing OK.

Headed out to get a real meal but it's deluging + I was instantly soaked, so I grabbed a microwavable spinach lasagna at Carrefour. It was actually quite good, with bechamel and goat cheese. Less than 3€!

Glad I didn't make a flamenco reservation, as I would have had to take a taxi to get there even semi dry! Ian + I went to a flamenco show in Granada, and once was enough for me. Interesting to see once for sure.

I'll spend the evening journaling, emailing Grant, watching This Old House season 43! Looking forward to leaving tomorrow.

My roommate is Daniela from Argentina, visiting her daughter in Bilbao + touring around. Very pretty + friendly + not much English so we got to speak Spanish. I found her easy to understand.

60

This new room is much nicer & not as humid, without the bathroom moisture. Took 2 benadryl for my itchy bites!

Wed Oct 16

Left the hostel a bit earlier than planned b/c the toaster set off the fire alarm! I was packed, so left at 8:30. No rain! 68° & a bit windy. Lottery vendors abound in Spain - lots of street kiosks.

Walked on the ~~the~~ river trail. Lots of skulls. Nice trail. Quieter than the noisy city. Seville has 700k people.

Lots of parakeets. Lots of graffiti. Yesterday I saw women giving people rosemary sprigs, something we were told to watch out for years ago. Some kind of pickpocket scam. Do people still fall for it?

42 bays at the bus station, but easy to navigate. Workers were actually mopping the ground in front of each bay!

The friendly driver talked to himself during the trip. It was kind of charming & alarming. The bus was pretty much full -

Ronda

50 61

an indication of Ronda's popularity...

Sprinkling of grey. Driver playing Nirvana, Layla, Metallica. Oleander blooming in road median. Countryside dry, brown, treeless. Agave. Then olive orchards. 50 km north of Ronda the scenery changed to rolling hills & trees - lovely! The town of Zahara looking enticing, a cluster of white perched on a hill. Eucalyptus trees along the road. Tantalizing bits of blue sky. The driver is seriously tailgating (I got a front row seat).

Arrived in Ronda at noon. The cafe had tortilla (potato frittata) that looked fresh (uncut) and I was hungry. Came with crunchy crustinis. 1,80€. Turned out to be a neighborhood cafe where the friendly proprietress seemed to know everyone. And it had a free bathroom (the bus station charged 50 cents). Did I mention that the tortillas are served room temp? I like them. No seasoning detectable, just potato & egg.

Staying at Hostal ~~del~~ Virgen del Rocio. \$40 a night. En suite bathroom! 2 twin beds. It's nice, quiet, lonely. Very close to the old bridge (main attraction). Carrefour Express (my friend) next door.

The town is absolutely mobbed. So many Asians! Walked a trail down to an amazing view of the bridge from below. Rain squall, so

62

I took refuge under an overhang & chatted with a British couple who are on a 3-month caravan tour. I'm craving conversation!

Walked to horrid pedestrian shopping street just to check it out. It's so nice to stroll without cars, but the endless shlock!

Had a caesar salad with chicken at El Puente restaurant on the corner. 12€.

Lots of shaved parmesan & buttery croutons. The place was empty, probably b/c they have no outdoor seating (or it was too early). They were playing good music - bossa nova versions of English language songs.

Walked around after the crowds dispersed but there was a chilly wind. The town is at 2500'.

Orson Wells loved it here and his ashes are buried on a friend's estate nearby. There's a plaque & bust of him near the bullring. He loved bullfighting...

Back to hotel about 7:30.

Ronda

63

Thurs Oct. 17

53°. Light at 8:15. The town is delightfully empty & quiet. Walked the periphery of the old town, along the walls. No rain! Beautiful views of gorge (El Tajo), countryside, and parts of the mountains. Wonderful walk, felt I had the old city all to myself.

Got to Casa Mondragon, an old house & museum, just as it opened at 9:30, and there were only two other visitors. 3€.

Lovely small garden with views and interesting archeological museum w/ dioramas. I especially liked the reproduction of the cave where they found paintings & burials.

At the Don Bosco house I bought a ticket for this evening's flamenco guitar concert. ^{20€} Beautiful house & gardens with stunning views of the gorge. Chatted with two women my age from Texas about stray cats (there were several in the garden).

Stopped at the hotel for water (such a great location) then visited the bullring, the oldest in Spain I think. Really interesting museum, videos, livery, and the ring itself is beautifully preserved. 9€. It's now a riding school w/ horse stables.

64

Cloudy & ~~57°~~^{60°} at 12:30. Bought a fresh seed roll, large slice of brie, and an apple for less than 3 € at Carrefour. Back to hotel for lunch, charge phone, grab backpack, and head out for a hike.

Huge tour groups in town - 50 or 60 people! They wear headsets so they can hear the guide. Looks like a herd of cattle...

Once you get away from the new bridge there are far fewer people.

It's sunny! I went to the Cuenca Garden, which has great views of the gorge and all three bridges. Stopped at the hamman to enquire about a massage, but a bathing suit is required. The wind is cold. Lots of fig trees. The small black birds with red bills & feet are red-billed choughs. They live in the cliffs.

A lovely arbor with chairs welcomed passersby to "have a little rest." There were clusters of sweet green grapes as well!

I sat in the warm sun on a stone wall in front of a shrine to Mary & ate my apple. It's so peaceful & quiet here. It's a narrow lane barely wide enough for one car. olives, almonds, grapes, shorn brown

Ronda

65

fields. There are wildflowers in the spring. The cliffs of Ronda soar above. I crossed the river on a narrow bridge.

Then the road began to twist & climb back up to the cliff top, past a riding school where a ferrier was noisily shoeing a horse. Then a dirt road through a pine forest, then a stony path along the cliff edge (fenced). This became paved & eventually connected to the promenade along the cliffs in the center of town. I got back around 4 and left town around 1 or so. My tracker thinks I walked 9.5 miles today, but that includes my morning walk.

Bought a pastry at Carrefour & sat in the warm sun, out of the wind, in Cuenca Park. Read my book & gazed at the beautiful view to the east of town. So many languages being spoken around me.

For dinner I had ^{whole wheat} rusks & kalamata hummus. Then walked to Casa Don Bosco for the concert. Included a free beverage so I had peach juice. It was sunny on the terrace but very cold b/c of the wind, so I waited inside.

The concert was from 7-8. The performer, Carlos Perez, is 26 & very accomplished. The music was a little boring, but I liked watching his techniques & fluidity - amazing.

66

Very cold outside, but I did stop to see the floodlit bridge & the full moon.

Tough night. Coughing. Had to sit up until cough gel kicked in. Finally slept at 11:30.

Fri Oct 18

Up at 8, feeling mildly wrecked but OK. 52°, no rain!

After breakfast (yogurt, granola, prunes) in my room I headed out. First to the old Arab baths, which were interesting, especially the excellent video. 3^e senior rate. As usual when I said I was a senior, the receptionist looked at me a smidge skeptically but didn't ask for ID.

Then I climbed up the Paseo Chefchuan, below the walls, its beauty sadly marred by lots of garbage. Does the city know about this? The rest of the city is so clean.

The church of Santa Maria la Mayor was built on the mosque destroyed by the Reconquista. I wanted to see the remaining piece, arches carved with Arab inscriptions. Turns out it's in the entrance hall and and I could have seen it w/o paying to

Ronda

67

see the church. The church had a hidden spiral staircase up to a narrow balcony where you could look down on the church interior. Cool & scary! 3€ senior rate (another skeptical look). I bought a charm bracelet for mom (9,50€) b/c it spoke to me & I thought she would like it. It has a Camino shell charm, among others. Later I saw a woman wearing one & thought it looked nice.

This town requires good mobility. Lots of stairs & slopes.

In the Plaza Alameda I ate half my lunch (rusks & brie). Two old men with canes & an old woman with a walker sat together in the sun, chatting idly. I would have loved to talk to them but knew I'd have trouble understanding them, so I just smiled & said hello. Restaurant workers were busy setting up chairs, tables, & umbrellas in the plaza, which required hauling them across a busy street from their restaurants. Later they would do the same with full & empty plates of food.

Overcast, chilly, 59°. Walked south, through an upscale, newer neighborhood, to the Tajo del Abanico trail. An older man with a cane passed me and said I was "guapa". I laughed and he was surprised I understood. He laughed too. I most certainly do not feel guapa in my

68

boots + old fleece! Walked on a quiet road for a few km, with beautiful views of the mountains when there were blue patches of sky. Signs said there were torrential rains here in 2018 that washed out parts of the road.

Although it was overcast, the bird song was cheery.

A small car drove by with what looked like eucalyptus branches tied on the roof. He turned into a steep drive and a horse and some sheep ran behind him as if excited by the prospect of a special snack?

Lots of oak trees. They have dark trunks, small leaves, and elongated acorns. Lots of olive trees too.

I came to a gate, clearly marked as the trail. A nice trail was partly cobbled (one website said medieval). Crumbly-looking sandstone cliffs towered above. Lovely walk. Came to a viewpoint. No sign of the cave. The trail continued but soon became narrow + a bit exposed, so I turned back. Saw a guy on the way back who couldn't find the cave either. Great walk though.

Back to town about 3. Bought a 4-pack

Ronda

69

of arroz con leche + ate three!

Blablacar turns out to be an actual carpool, not a ride service. That's why it's so cheap. The person is going anyway + this just gives them gas money. Anyway, my driver for tomorrow canceled. Only other option is train and it doesn't leave until 4:30 pm. I was feeling a bit despondent wondering how I'll fill another 24 hours here. So I went out walking again. Saw the one surviving mosque minaret. Such a shame that the main road goes through the center of town and across the iconic bridge.

Sat in a plaza, seeking a warm place to read. Saw a woman my age who appeared to be solo but I couldn't figure out a way to say hi, if she even spoke English. I'm going to start saying "hello" instead of "hola" when I greet tourists, so anyone who's feeling like chatting will know I speak English.

Sat in the Posada hotel lobby + read for a while out of the wind. Back to hotel at 5:30 to eat. Dinner was rusks + the rest of the hummus. It made a nice meal. Rusks are great travel food b/c unlike bread they don't go stale or moldy!

Wondering if I have Covid, due to coughing and breathing feeling weird.

70

One TV channel is ~~just~~ commercial-free, with PBS-like content: cooking, nature, travel, books, movies. Great Spanish practice.

Ann texted to say hi, and when I said I was lonely suggested a WhatsApp call. We talked for an hour, which really cheered me up!

This unexpectedly lonely trip has really got me thinking that maybe I am glad I don't live alone, that I have a husband to come home to. Maybe it's time to stop wishing I'd never married or had children, and to firmly close that door w/ no regret. I also think my next solo trip should maybe be a tour...

Sat Oct 19

No coughing last night! Shower, breakfast, pack. No fridge available so I kept yogurt & cheese on the exterior windowsill.

Watched part of a TV show about headaches & learned a lot of new vocabulary. Checked out at 10:15 by dropping my key in the box. Beautiful blue sky, my weather

app says it's raining!

There's a religious parade today in the barrio near Plaza Almocábar to celebrate 450 years of something. People hanging banners off their balconies. A huge shrine on wheels parked in the church garage. Setting up chairs in the plaza.

The water here doesn't taste very good. Between that & not wanting to have to find bathrooms, I'm not drinking as much as I should.

The walk to Ermita de la Virgen de la Cabeza was on a lovely country road. I think it took about an hour. Warm, sunny day with no wind. The church was closed but you could see the cave entrance. The cave has been in use since the 9th century. Saw four other walkers and two people galloping on horseback.

On the way back I sat in the Almocábar Plaza to eat the second half of my lunch.

Lots of dads bringing their kids to the playground.

Up at the Plaza Duquesa I listened to a fabulous guitar player and watched fabulously dressed women mincing along the cobblestones in stiletto heels. Many beautiful thin young women with paunchy older men.

In Alameda Park there was a craft fair & a woman was playing harp at the mirador.

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beautiful. In another plaza was another phenomenal guitar player. Musicians everywhere on a Saturday! It was like going to outdoor concerts.

The music store was closed (no guitar playing for me) so I headed to the train station two hours early. Very quiet until about 3:30, when folks arrived for the two trains of the day - one heading south at 4:20 & mine heading north at 4:40. I bought the ticket through Omio, not realizing that they pad the price. Better to buy on the train company website.

Saw a sky full of a dozen paragliders. Scenery was fine, like Ronda but w/o mountains. Train ride supposed to be two hours but arrived 30 min. late, at 7:05, due to an incident of some sort. Cordoba station big & busy.

Easy walk to the hostel, called Libere. No reception, it's digital only. A bit pricey at € 32 per night, but brand new with nice amenities. 8-bed all female dorm. Beds have light, two outlets, and hanging cubby. Six other women, all young & super friendly. Israel, Japan, Holland, US. All traveling alone. Fun to listen in on their conversations. Hard not to give advice

Cordoba

73

as they discuss smoking cigarettes & weed, getting tattoos, drinking too much. They all went out for a late dinner.

Sun Oct 20

Out the door at 8:15 on a quiet cool Sunday morning. Wandered toward the tourist office, past Roman columns & through a little garden, where people were walking their dogs. There are Arab arches everywhere in the architecture.

Halloween is a thing here. Many stores selling decorations.

The Mezquita-Cathedral is amazing. A forest of red & white ~~is~~ striped arches (supposedly to evoke fan palms), interspersed with cathedral elements. The center was destroyed to build a cathedral but thank goodness they left most of the mosque standing. I wish I could have seen it in its pure form. It had more natural light than too.

The experience was marred by the price I paid for my ticket, thinking it was the official site. They added 16€ to what should have been a 14€ ticket.

On the Roman bridge I listened to a wonderful singer songwriter guitar player. Pablo Carrascal.

74

Walked a bit on the trail on the other side but no river view.

Super hungry, probably from all the walking & reduced rations. Got a shawarma wrap at Pasillo Oriental in the Jewish Quarter.

Delicious, especially the chopped pickle!

9€ and came with fries, which I have been craving, and devoured. They were playing nice Arab music.

The streets in this part of town are narrow & crazy crowded with huge tour groups.

Back to hostel to pee and charge phone.

Jazz concert in courtyard next door. Too loud in person but sounds great from hostel courtyard.

Wandered around a bit more. The tourist streets are crowded, the other streets are too quiet. Lots of painted chairs tied to balconies with ribbons. No info on Google.

Viana Palace Patios was 8€ to wander around 12 patios (8 more to see the house) so I passed. The Alcazar Cristianos garden was closed. 80 degrees. So nice to walk under shady trees along the river. Tired of wandering and this city doesn't really grab me. Hummus & yogurt at Carrefour then back to hostel to sit in cool courtyard. Looking forward to train to

Córdoba

75

Madrid tomorrow. Two of the dorm gals invited me to dinner at 8:30, a bit late for me. I might have gone along just to hang out, but I'm not feeling 100% and am actually kind of losing my voice from this sore throat/cough.

Evelin texted me and we had a nice chat on WhatsApp, since we're actually on the same time zone. Bagi is now 12 and her son is 6 and still quite a handful. She and her husband both work long hours.

Mon, Oct. 21

60 degrees at 7:30. Granola & Greek yogurt breakfast (so much better than the regular). Chatted with an interesting Spanish man named Nicolas. He told me that I look like I could be Robert Redford's daughter (my mom always says that Dad looked like Redford). Nicolas told me that Córdoba is the only city (in Europe?) with four UNESCO World Heritage designations.

Nice to walk early in the quiet, pre-tourist coolness. People heading to work, parents leading uniformed kids to school. Walked in the park across the Roman bridge. Quiet, green, birdsong, but also graffiti. Runners, dog walkers. Busses

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disgorge tourists on this side of the bridge.

Blue sky no clouds.

Back at hostel 10:30 to pack. Chat with lovely Resica, a nurse (post partum) from Georgia, who's planning to go to med school. I of course put in a plug for geriatrics!

A young woman at the hostel posed a question she'd seen in a meme: If you're a young woman walking alone in the woods, would you rather see a bear or a man? The point of course being that men can often be more dangerous to women than bears!

Easy walk to train station. Arrive 1.5 hrs early at 1:10. Sit & read. Train leaves at 2:45. Nice seats, mine facing backward. 57 euros. Max speed 270 kph. Supposed to take 2 hrs but we arrived 20 min. early. Scenery: rocky hills, olive trees, low Mediterranean shrubs.

Metro station in train station. Helpful workers. One ride to airport 4,50 €. Two transfers. Destination Barajas. Took 45 min. Short walk (10 min) to Hostelfly. 31,50 € per night. Quite nice, with terrace, kitchen. Beds have curtains, lights, power, lockers. I'm in a 10-bed. Quiet neighborhood.

Madrid

77

Grabbed a small grilled chicken sandwich at a little cafe around the corner. 4€. Tasty. Arrived hostel 5:40. 75° feels perfect.

Nicolas today told me there is "dry Spain" & "green Spain." I think Madrid~~o~~ is part of the dry.

Tues Oct 22

Up early & ready to go at 7 so went ahead & walked to airport in case it took a while. Turned out to be a close & easy walk. 5 hours early! Walking, reading, tai chi, & a bag of cornuts. Airport prices shocking: \$6 for a tiny cup of fruit (which I did not buy). Hard, uncomfortable chairs. Wifi disconnects frequently.

No boarding call announcements. Separate lanes to line up for each zone. Nice system - lower stress & quieter.

Flight seemed long. Not tired so could only doze a bit. Finished a book. Watched an interesting documentary series. Two good meals: teriyaki chicken & a ~~chili~~ mushroom stroganoff pastry. I've only seen one other person wearing a mask. Mine is on except when eating.

At Toronto airport went through baggage

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security & US passport control. The airport plays nice music. Three hour wait after getting to gate. Landed about 3:30 & took about an hour to get through checks & to gate.

Traveling through time zones I lose track of when to eat. Grabbed a muffin, figuring they wouldn't feed us on the flight to Seattle. No quiet place to sit - everywhere had overlapping music, people talking on phones, or listening to phones w/o ear buds. Finally put in my ear plugs.

Boarded plane, which was due to leave at 8:10 (15 min. late). At 8:20 they said they were fixing a minor thing and it would be another 15 min. 15 min. later they said it would be another 15 min. Then they announced that they couldn't fix the problem & our flight was grounded. They would look for another plane. I figured that was unlikely & resigned myself to spending the night. 5 min. later they said they had a plane & it would leave as soon as we could transfer. We all shuffled off, back into the terminal, two gates down, and we were in the air at 10:37 Toronto time. They said it was going

Toronto

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to be a 4.5 hour flight, but it must have been closer to 5, as we landed in SEA at 12:37. I slept most of the flight. No blankets, so I was glad I had my down blanket!

In SEA the train was down! They shuttled us from S gate to B. Grant was waiting on the empty departures drive. Home & in bed at 2, slept til 8. No cars on the drive home, and no rain either.