

An Inward Journey

An 80-day odyssey by camper
van through the forgotten
heart of Spain

Fran Zabaleta

Translated by Amanda Witan

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*For all of you who travelled with me, hidden in the
folds of Lagartija's skin.*

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Written by Fran Zabaleta

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PROLOGUE

How a book gave rise to a journey

In March 2017 a book touched me to the core. It was completely unexpected, as so often happens with books, you pick one up because you are attracted by the cover or the synopsis, or perhaps you choose it because you are looking for something different. You start to read without any great expectations and suddenly it turns out to be the one which really grips you and you can't put down.

The author was very well-known; John Steinbeck, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. I read two of his books in my twenties, when, in my naivety I believed that in order to be erudite I had to devour all the classics. They were *The Grapes of Wrath* and *The Pearl*, and I still remember them with reverence, but since then his work had not crossed my path again.

Until that moment.

I decided to read it because it was not a novel, but a travel book. I suppose there is a moment in life for everything and this was the moment for me for travelogues. They had never interested me that much until, a few months before, while I was researching for a novel, I read *Journey through the West Indies* by Patrick Leigh Fermor which introduced me to the genre and started me on my obsessive passion for travel writing.

The title of Steinbeck's book was *Travels with Charley* and chronicled the author's road trip through the USA in a specially converted

pickup truck. The prospect of touring the United States from end to end, with someone as interesting as Steinbeck as my guide, and of seeing the country through his eyes, seemed very appealing. Steinbeck was a person with a tremendous social awareness, which is what attracted me to him. Added to this, the book recounted a journey in a camper van, so I opened the book and let myself be transported.

I had no idea of the effect that reading this book was to have on my life.

In the first chapter, while I was still trying to accommodate my body to the voyage that I was undertaking, I stumbled on the following paragraph:

My plan was clear, concise and reasonable, I think. For many years I have travelled in many parts of the world. In America I live in New York, or dip into Chicago or San Francisco. But New York is no more America than Paris is France, or London is England. Thus, I discovered that I did not know my own country. I, an American writer, writing about America, was working from memory, and the memory is at best a faulty, warpy reservoir. I had not heard the speech of America, smelled the grass and trees and sewage, seen its hills and water, its colour and quality of light. I knew the changes only from books and newspapers. But more than this, I had not felt the country for twenty-five years.

I left the book on my lap and gazed at the view out of the window. I was in San Andrés, a little village in Tenerife not far from the capital, which still managed to remain faithful to its origins as a fishing port. The waters of the Atlantic Ocean glistened in the intense light of the Canary Islands.

To my left, the massif of Anaga, an impressive volcanic mountain range broken up by deep ravines and carpeted by the intense green of the vegetation, rose magnificently above the village. It was a beautiful and relaxing view, but at that moment my mind was very far from there.

I had just realised that I too, like Steinbeck, was a writer... and I too knew virtually nothing about my country.

Yes, I had visited many places. I had toured Galicia from top to bottom and back. I was accustomed to enjoying long stays in the Canary Islands and had explored the Cantabrian, Levantine and Andalusian coa-

st on various occasions. In general, the outer regions of the Peninsula were familiar to me, but the interior was an immense black hole, pierced here and there by the lights of some city.

Soria, Palencia, Ciudad Real, Jaén, Badajoz, Guadalajara, Cuenca, Teruel, Álava and so many other places, were just names. Cities appear every so often in the press or news bulletins, but small towns and villages are rarely featured and when they are it is usually not for the best of reasons. They remain on the margins, as if they existed in a parallel and unchanging universe, as if they were lands frozen in the imagination. I had been hearing these names since my school days, and I could still recite from memory all the rivers and mountain ranges which ran through them or list the main points of each area's history, not just because I studied Geography and History at university, but also because for decades I had worked as an editor of school texts and had to deal with many changes in regional status when they became autonomous. But that was it. Just names, with no life blood. I had never wandered through their archaeological sites, or admired their monuments, or explored their nature reserves, their mountains and their villages. Like Steinbeck, I had never "heard the speech" of my country, nor "smelled the grass and trees and sewage, seen its hills and water, its colour and quality of light."

That spring day in San Andrés, as I marvelled at the intense blue of the sea, I realised for the first time that I knew almost nothing of my country, and I felt a tremendous desire to rectify that defect.

A country called Spain

My head was throbbing. It was no longer just the thought that I did not know this or that location in the central part of the country, but had become something more deeply troubling, a confusion looming up from the past, provoked by what I had read: the sensation that I did not understand my country. The very concept of Spain had always seemed strange to me, as though it were something unknowable and elusive, that was beyond my reach. The newspapers are full of pundits who claim to have a deep understanding of the country, of its particular customs, its obsessions and idiosyncrasies. But for me it has always seemed tremendously complex and different. Sometimes, indeed, it provokes

conflicting emotions in me. At one moment, it seems no more than a sum of culturally disparate regions that are held together against their will and can never succeed as a united country. At other times, I am convinced that in spite of its many differences, Spain has a very definite personality, if such a thing can be said of a country. And on this point, we should consider the claim made by James A. Michener, the author of *Iberia*:

For just as this forbidding peninsula physically juts into the Atlantic and stands isolated, so philosophically the concept of Spain intrudes into the imagination, creating effects and raising questions unlike those evoked by other nations.

I feel as though this essential key to understanding my country has eluded me all my life. Perhaps because I was born in Vigo and I spend most of the year there, on the outermost western edge of the Peninsula, remaining faithful to the same stretch of coastline. To live on the coast is to exist between two worlds, constantly mesmerized by the immensity of the ocean and forced to turn your back on the land behind. Also, of course, I am Galician, a nation with a character, history, language and traditions of its own, all of which are very different from those of the rest of Spain. I remember that, as a child growing up during the early years of the transition to democracy after Franco, when, at school, they spoke of the conquest of America or we were studying the literary movement of the Generation of '98, sooner or later the supposed frank and direct nature of the Spaniard would be mentioned. That did not seem to ring true to my experience. I looked around me and nowhere could I see these people that the books evoked. Where could that candidness be seen in the irony and convoluted subtlety of the Galicians around me?

It took me a while to grasp the reality, that all of us that live in Spain try to deny, but in the end are forced to accept; that this country is much larger and more varied than many people imagine. To appreciate that Spain is, in fact, more like a continent, so diverse that it cannot be reduced to a few simplistic stereotypes.

Far more complex, in any case, than we were led to believe by the curriculum of the late Franco period, which continued to cling to the nationalist motto "Una, Grande y Libre (United, Great and Free)" when

even foreigners know today that Spain is anything but a homogeneous territory.

And this has been so for many years. As far back as 1845, Richard Ford, who became renowned for his travel writing on Spain, made it clear in his book, *A Handbook for travellers in Spain, and readers at home*:

The general comprehensive term 'Spain,' which is convenient for geographers and politicians, is calculated to mislead the traveller. Nothing can be more vague or inaccurate than to predicate any single thing of Spain or Spaniards which will be equally applicable to all its heterogeneous component parts. [...] It will therefore be more convenient to the traveller to take each province by itself and treat it in detail, pointing out those peculiarities, those social and natural characteristics which particularly belong to each region.

As I read *Travels with Charley* and journeyed around the United States with Steinbeck, I decided that this was what I wanted to do: to calmly tour my country, treating it as a voyage of exploration. I wished to acquaint myself with the interior of Spain, which for me was the great unknown, to familiarize myself with its landscapes and monuments, its nature and its art. But I also wanted to try to find out how it survived, how it breathed and what it felt like to live so far from the sea. Was it true that the centre was virtually a human desert? For this is what I had been led to believe in the brilliant works of Sergio del Molino, *La España vacía*, or Paco Cerdá, *Los últimos. Voces de la Laponia española*. I needed to discover what daily life was like in these wintry climes, a life which had always seemed impossible to me, coming as I do from the warm and benign coastal region.

I have spent years with my nose stuck in a book and have learnt a great deal about Spain, but I have never tried to bridge the gap between theory and practise, between what is read and what is experienced. I had never tried to check if my ideas about the country were even remotely close to the real Spain. I knew that, in the end, the only way to know a region is to explore it in depth, getting lost in its mountains and villages, talking with people and observing everything with that curiosity and fascination that you can only feel when you see something for the first time.

But I wasn't completely naïve. I knew that it was impossible to achieve all this with one simple journey, even if it lasted several months. I knew this, precisely because Spain is richer and more complicated than we were ever told and my ignorance far greater than I had ever admitted, but I had to start somewhere, and what better way to learn to swim than by jumping in at the deep end?

An uncharacteristic attack of common sense

"I am going to rent a campervan," I told my friend Ángel, a few days later, while we were having a beer, a stone's throw from the sea, on the terrace of La Negrita, in San Andrés. It was our usual haunt for lunch or late afternoons, or really, any time of day. So much so, that we called it 'the office'. Our life in Tenerife could not be described as stressful.

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, I'm going to rent a campervan to tour the island." I told him about *Travels with Charley* and explained, more or less, what I have just set out in the preceding pages.

I couldn't get that book out of my head. Throughout my life I have wanted to buy a campervan on many occasions, but it is an expensive indulgence that I could never afford, so I always ended up justifying my inaction with the usual lame procrastination: "I'll do it one day."

But this time it was different. Reading *Travels with Charley* had convinced me that now was the moment. At the age of fifty-two, time was running out and I didn't want to wait any more. Furthermore, by one of those strange cosmic coincidences, at this moment I could afford it. I was going to buy a camper and go on a tour of the interior of Spain to begin to fill in my mental map of the country.

Nevertheless, in an uncharacteristic attack of common sense, I decided that, prior to launching myself into the void, I would undertake a trial run to check if I really liked travelling in a camper, before I coughed up a fortune. I knew all too well that so often the worst thing that can happen to a dream is that it becomes a reality.

"Okay, I'm in," Ángel said, with a shrug.

I looked at him in astonishment. Ángel is like a brother to me, in fact, better than a brother because we chose each other. I met him short-

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ly after arriving in Tenerife, the first time I travelled to the island to escape the Galician winter, and from the first moment we connected. We are both of a similar age, we both prefer to be active and have a lot of free time, so we're always looking for new challenges.

All the same, this time, I wasn't expecting it. I had planned to tour the island by myself, specifically because having friends with you always makes life easier, and what I was trying to establish was how well I would cope with travelling on my own in a camper. But, how do you say no to your brother? So, I just smiled and changed the subject.

Twenty minutes later Juan turned up. He is ten years younger than us and is the third member of the McAndrew clan, made up of an exclusive group of friends living in San Andrés, Tenerife. The name, I'm afraid, is the unavoidable consequence of a trip we made together, to Scotland.

"Hey!" Ángel blurted out, all of a sudden, "Guess what! We're going to rent a camper to tour the island!"

Juan looked at us with a worrying twinkle in his eyes.

"That's cool! I'm up for it!"

I surrendered to the inevitable and shrugged. It seemed my dry run was going to be a joint venture, whether I liked it or not.

Two weeks later we had hired a dilapidated campervan and were touring the island, experiencing this twenty-first-century version of the nomadic life.

The idea of travelling with your house in tow and being able to stop wherever you fancy, has a seductive appeal to many people. And it's hardly surprising, although often we are unconscious of the real reasons behind its allure: there is something about it that takes us back to our origins, to forgotten times when we roamed the world carrying our meagre possessions on our backs, in search of food and shelter.

We were nomads for many thousands of years, a far greater period of time than we have been settled in towns and cities. In fact, the nomadic way of life spans more than 99% of the entire time our species has existed on Earth. We have disguised ten thousand years of sedentary living with a veneer of civilisation, yet our genes, which represent the memory of our species, continue to consider us as nomads, as creatures in constant movement.

If you are a parent, you are certainly already very aware of the fact that movement reassures and calms a baby down. Just rock them, take

them out in the pushchair or the car and they will stop crying and fall asleep. A current anthropological theory maintains that movement transmits a sensation of security because we carry in our genes the memory of the displacements of our ancestors, dating back to the dawn of the species: when the tribe was moving it was safe, but when it stopped it was at the mercy of predators.

An even more compelling argument: why do we need to exercise to stay in shape? If we were genetically adapted to lead a sedentary life, we would not need to work out to stay fit. Gyms would be nothing but torture chambers! (Ah, hang on, that's exactly what they are...)

It seems so natural to us that we don't even think about it, but a hedgehog, for example, does not need to move a great deal to remain healthy and he is not alone in this: there are many animals for whom agility is not an advantage. For some, staying still and mimicking the environment or using vivid colours to transmit danger to their predators, is a more effective strategy than running away. For the human race however, constant movement has been, for thousands of years, an excellent method of defence, not only to escape the clutches of this or that predator, but also to find sufficient food.

It is in our nature to be on the move and to run. Becoming sedentary was not an advantage, but a necessity and brought with it, contrary to what we tend to think, many negative consequences. The hunter-gatherer obtained food with far less effort than the farmer of crops or livestock. Yuval Noah Harari, in his highly recommended *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* provides us with some revealing data:

While people in today's affluent societies work an average of forty to forty-five hours a week, and people in the developing world work sixty and even eighty hours a week, hunter-gatherers living today in the most inhospitable of habitats (such as the Kalahari Desert) work on average for just thirty-five to forty-five hours a week. They hunt only one day out of three and gathering takes up just three to six hours daily. In normal times, this is enough to feed the band. It may well be that ancient hunter-gatherers living in zones more fertile than the Kalahari spent even less time obtaining food and raw materials. On top of that, foragers enjoyed a lighter load of household chores. They had no dishes to wash, no carpets to vacuum, no floors to polish, no nappies to change and no bills to pay.

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Not only did they have less work, but hunting, fishing and foraging allowed them to have a richer and more varied diet, which meant that human beings lived for longer. Harari explains it in the following way:

In most places and at most times, foraging provided ideal nutrition. That is hardly surprising – this had been the human diet for hundreds of thousands of years, and the human body was well adapted to it. Evidence from fossilised skeletons indicates that ancient foragers were less likely to suffer from starvation or malnutrition and were generally taller and healthier than their peasant descendants. Average life expectancy was apparently just thirty to forty years, but this was due largely to the high incidence of child mortality. Children who made it through the perilous first years had a good chance of reaching the age of sixty, and some even made it to their eighties. Among modern foragers, forty-five-year-old women can expect to live another twenty years, and about 5-8 per-cent of the population is over sixty.

Agriculture made it possible to amass stocks of food, certainly, but most of these surpluses could not be preserved, so they were wasted, and crops, as well as providing a very monotonous diet, were frequently destroyed by draught, floods and frost or attacked by insects, birds or fungal diseases. At the same time, living alongside domestic animals (and with rodents and insects in the house) encouraged many new ailments in humans such as influenza, chickenpox or measles. Not to mention other inconveniences which arrive from a settled existence, such as the emergence of social classes, the widening gap between rich and poor and the inevitable wars over territory.

No, a settled lifestyle wasn't as good an invention as we've been led to believe. People who wrote sacred books, such as the Jews, for instance, had first-hand knowledge of that, even if they were not aware of it. They were forced to abandon a nomadic way of life, which they now consider a lost paradise, and had no choice but to settle elsewhere. The biblical account of Adam and Eve's expulsion from the garden of Eden, is at heart the ancestral evocation of a time when human beings lived without the need to break their backs in order to extract a meagre sustenance from the land.

Perhaps it is for all these reasons that we are attracted to the idea of travel, and even more so if we can take our home with us. A home infinitely more comfortable than our ancestors would have had, of course, but as in nomadic times, reduced to the essentials: just what can be transported without becoming a burden.

~

So, back to Tenerife. For five days, Ángel, Juan and I travelled around the island, slept on the beach, visited the villages and climbed the ravines, without worrying about schedules, bookings or plans.

The experience was a new one for all three of us, so we had to learn everything as we went along: to shower in a tiny cubicle, to share fifteen square meters in which we slept, cooked, ate, and washed the dishes, and which also served as a bathroom and toilet; to ration water, to search for areas to refill the storage tanks; to find where we could dispose of waste water, which consisted of grey water (from the shower and sink) and black water (from the toilet); to cope with the mechanics of a campervan which had already come of age when we were at college or to control our consumption of electricity, among other issues.

Five days later, having traversed the whole island, I had established that, in this instance, dreams could mirror reality: I loved that form of travel.

The moment had come to take the plunge.

The hunting season

For months, first in Tenerife and then back home in Galicia, I scoured forums and groups on the internet, visited dealers and specialist shops, I located second-hand businesses and local clubs, and asked friends of friends who were regular users of campervans. Gradually I formed a rough idea of what I wanted: not a motorhome which seemed too ostentatious, but a converted van, with sufficient headroom to stand up in (I am six foot three tall), with shower, toilet, heating (this was one of my non-negotiable requirements... which was just as well because it was crucial on the trip), solar panel, wide bed, kitchen, fridge...

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Oh yes, and of course, I wanted all this for as little as possible.

There is nothing like a good dose of optimism.

With my usual foresight and sense of timing, I set out to look for the perfect van in the spring, when the holiday season starts, which is the time of year when such offers are virtually non-existent: anyone who wants to sell a van has already done so in autumn, when the cold nights and bad weather dampen the desire to travel. Only through necessity or disaster would one sell in April or May, when any self-respecting globetrotter begins to yearn for the first rays of sun on his skin.

I came across vans here and there. Then I returned to Coruña and toured the dealers around Vigo, then I contacted private sellers to inspect their old bangers.

I found nothing. There were vans for sale, certainly, but they were all either too ancient (I wanted one that was less than ten years old), or lacking a shower or heating or a solar panel or with a ceiling that was too low or else they had everything but were way outside my price bracket.

I began to realise that this was going to be harder than I had thought.

However, I am not one to give up at the first hurdle, some would say I have an optimism which verges on the delusional, so I set to thinking about alternatives. If I could not find what I wanted ready-fitted, I could always buy a second-hand transport van and convert it into a travelling home myself. Well, I wouldn't actually do it myself, but employ professionals to do it for me. The idea was very tempting, since it enabled me to plan the interior to my own specification and in doing so, I would be able to set off in a shiny new van that no one else had owned. Suddenly my imagination was on fire with visions of my superb, new, perfectly designed, van.

I started to look for companies that specialised in van conversions. The first one I tracked down was in an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of Vigo. The guy I saw, a young lad of not much more than twenty, interrupted me before I had finished explaining what I wanted.

“What’s your budget?”

“Well, of course, that depends.” I didn't want to tell him up front because I assumed that he would then quote me accordingly and I was hoping to keep the price as low as possible.

“Yes, yes, but tell me, what is the maximum you are willing to spend?”

He didn't give up easily. In my head, I conceded defeat.

"Well, I don't know, around fifteen thousand euros..."

He stood looking at me with a slight smirk on his face.

"Forget it, mate. The starting price is twenty thousand, and that's if you provide the van."

"If I provide ...?" I didn't finish the sentence. Twenty thousand euros just for the conversion? Had he gone mad?

I left in disgust. But I was a long way from giving up. I visited two or three more places. I explained in detail what I wanted: it must have a shower, a solar panel, the bed here, the kitchen there...

"How much is that going to cost me?"

"Let me do some calculations and I'll let you know."

I spent a fortnight biting my nails, dying of impatience, wishing the quotes would hurry up and arrive.

At last they came.

The cheapest would get me everything I wanted, if I was prepared to forgo various secondary requirements, for around fifteen thousand euros. Well, that was better than the twenty thousand I was initially told.

But I still had to purchase the van myself, which meant at best, another six or seven thousand, and that would be a vehicle that had already been around a few years and had clocked up some mileage.

I was beginning to think that maybe they were right when they said I wouldn't get anything decent for fifteen thousand euros.

With my dreams of converting a van thoroughly shattered I was back to square one: I returned to the search for a second-hand campervan, convinced that if I looked long enough, sooner or later the right one would appear.

Months passed.

At first, I checked the trading forums every day, well actually several times a day, convinced that my van would appear at any moment and that if I wasn't on the ball someone else would steal it from under my nose.

Then I started to check them every two or three days.

Then once a week.

There was no way I was going to find anything at the price I wanted. I was going to have to increase my budget.

I was already resigned to pawn the family silver when I noticed an advert in *forgovw.org*, one of the most popular sites in this country for campers and motorhomes. I had already seen it some months earlier, at the start of my search, but I had rejected it because the van advertised was in Madrid, which meant a long journey which might be a waste of time, and also because the bed was only 1 metre 88, two centimetres shorter than me, so I had dismissed it as a possibility.

The advert had been running a couple of weeks before the summer, but then it had disappeared from the forum. It was now September and it had just reappeared. I had another look at the photos. The van looked in good shape. It had everything I wanted, including a solar panel, a shower and heating and better still, the conversion was quite recent, so a good deal of the equipment was still under guarantee. And the interior had been well looked after.

I phoned the owner, David, who turned out to be a very pleasant friendly guy, one of those people you trust from the minute you start talking to them because you sense they aren't going to rip you off.

"As the summer had arrived, we withdrew the ad and took the van to Germany. But now we want to sell it and buy a new one," he explained.

I raised my concerns about the bed, and he said that he had the same problem, being tall himself, but that with a pillow I wouldn't notice it. We carried on talking and I became more and more convinced... and more and more tense and excited. Even the price was within my reach. Had I at last found my campervan?

A week later, David and I were shaking hands in his house in Madrid. Having spent half my life dreaming of travelling the world in a camper, I now owned a van.

I had done it.

But, how are you going to manage? You're so hopeless at everything

"You're mad," my mother declared, shaking her head, when I told her that I was going to spend several months travelling in a campervan.

What if something happens to you? How are you going to cope on your own? You know how useless you are.”

My mother has a somewhat twisted way of showing her love for me, but she was right: I am pretty useless when it comes to practical stuff like hammering in a nail or unblocking a pipe.

I'm not exaggerating, I'm afraid. Once, I took the car to the garage because it was making a strange noise and told the mechanic, in an attempt to sound knowledgeable, that I thought it was the carburettor, that it must be dirty. Fortunately, Manolo has known me a long time. He responded with his habitual sarcasm, his face deadpan: “Yes, funny that, you don't often see it in a diesel.” I must have been standing there with “What are you talking about?” written on my face, because he rolled his eyes and unable to contain his laughter anymore said, “Fran, diesels don't have a carburettor!”

This is the level of ineptitude that I'm talking about. I blame my elder brothers, who are both very good with their hands. When I was little, if I ever tried to impress the world by fitting a plug or hanging a picture (in those days, before the world became idiotic, children would be expected to fit plugs or hang pictures), as soon as I got stuck into the task, one of my brothers would appear and snap “Leave that alone, you don't know what you're doing!” and that was that. So, I ended up convincing myself that I was incapable...and eventually taking advantage of it. Even today, whenever I have a domestic problem, I call them to come and fix it for me. It's very convenient.

That's why my mother was worried. What on earth was her impractical son going to do if he had a mechanical problem (or a domestic one, because the camper was also a home, with pipes, an electrical system, appliances, drains and all the other gadgets that make life comfortable), how would he fix stuff by himself?

I looked at her very seriously and replied:

“But, Mum, I'm fifty-three years old!”

It was a powerful argument, although it has never yet succeeded in convincing any mother, and certainly not one who, at eighty-eight, continues to be a real force of nature. Indeed, it did not reassure her in the slightest, but after all these years she knows that when I get an idea into my head, there is no stopping me. She is quite used to the fact that her useless son, who is also her rebellious son, always does what she re-

fers to as, and at this point she raises her eyes to the heavens for dramatic effect, “his crazy notions”. By this she means all the things I do that don’t conform to her idea of the way I should behave, “what normal people do” (such as dedicating myself to writing, not having children and not even having a stable relationship. As will become clear.)

However, although I would never dream of admitting it, my mother had hit the nail on the head: I would not have them with me. And that was another reason that I wanted to make the journey.

I will try to explain myself.

The title, *An Inward Journey*, was not chosen at random: this is a travel journal and as such you will find anecdotes, stories and commentaries on the places that I have visited. But you will also find something else.

Any journey is, to some extent, a voyage into the soul. Leaving our comfort zone forces us not only to examine the world outside but also to examine our inner self, so that we can try to orientate ourselves as we discover who we are. But self-discovery requires a deep introspection. To contemplate the myriad of things that, when we are at home, surrounded by family and friends and protected by the daily routine, we tend to let pass unnoticed.

I have always dreamed about travelling. I am not talking about taking a plane to spend a week in some exotic destination, but to devote myself to travel, like those adventurers who throw caution to the wind and set off to explore the world without looking back: like Richard Francis Burton, who undertook a pilgrimage to Mecca, travelling among the Muslims in disguise, or Patrick Leigh Fermor, who in 1933, when he was eighteen, walked all the way from the Hook of Holland to Istanbul.

At the same time, a part of me has always suspected that I haven’t got what it takes, that I am too comfortable, too attached to my routines. That, deep down, I am what Pierre Mac Orlan describes with amusing irony as a “passive adventurer” in his *Short Manual for the Perfect Adventurer...*

The passive adventurer clutches the arm of his chair like the captain of a cruise ship steadies himself on the railings of the bridge. The passive adventurer is sedentary. He detests all forms of turmoil, vulgar

violence, bloodshed, firearms and any kind of violent death. He hates these things if they involve him but adores allowing his imagination to soar when the hero is the swashbuckling adventurer. Installed in his comfortable house, all snug and cosy, the passive adventurer allows himself to be entertained by the exploits of the unknown hero, who is led by misfortune into the trials and tribulations of the story.

Put simply: I am a sucker for escapism ...of the literary kind. I'm the type who adores imagining voyages, adventures and distant lands from the comfort of my own home. Daniel Defoe believed that many English gentlemen were of that nature. A gentleman, he said, used his library of travel books to make himself...

[...] master of the geography of the universe, in the maps and atlases and measurements of our mathematicians. He may travel by land with the historian, by sea with the navigators. He may go around the globe with Dampier and Rogers and know a thousand times more in doing it than all those illiterate sailors. (Daniel Defoe, *Compleat English Gentleman*).

But the imagination is resilient, and for me the moment had come to test the distance between dreams and reality.

I had never travelled for more than a few days in a motorhome. I certainly had never spent eighty days in one, although I had imagined it many times. I was about to turn an old dream into reality...and I was all too aware that sometimes, when a dream comes true, it is not at all what we expected.

I wanted to see if I had become too set in my ways or if, on the contrary, I was still sufficiently adaptable to cope with discomfort, face the problems that would arise, resist loneliness and, also be able to overcome my fears (like, for instance, sleeping alone on some secluded mountain road). I didn't know whether the challenges would defeat me, and I would become fed up with the discomfort and the hardships, or conversely, I would enjoy the experience so much that I would be inspired to travel by campervan though Patagonia. I had no idea what was going to happen, but I wanted to try, because I am convinced that it is necessary, if we are to really know ourselves, to escape from time to time, and give oneself the time to reflect, away from the daily routine.

There is a pearl of wisdom that circulates on the internet which sums this up beautifully: “We travel not to escape life, but for life not to escape us.”

At last the journey begins!

By the end of January 2018, at last I had everything ready. The campervan had passed its MOT and was ready to go. I christened it Lagartija, by the way, because it needs the sun to charge its batteries, and I must say, I do too! Lagartija, (the Iberian Wall Lizard) is a small, slender, very agile lizard that is found all over the Peninsula. My schedule for the next few months was drawn up and my objective was clear: I intended to explore the interior of Spain, avoiding cities and visiting the towns and places that I had heard and read so much about during my life.

I even had a map showing all the hundreds of locations that I had spent months selecting. All the interesting villages, castles and fortresses, national parks and reserves and archaeological sites to be found in the interior of the country. I did not expect to be able to visit them all, but I was sure the map would serve as a good guide to work from.

I intended to travel through Galicia towards the Via de la Plata (the Silver Route), which is a pilgrimage path which crosses the west of Spain from Asturias to Andalusia, and to start the journey by slowly descending through Zamora, Salamanca, and Caceres...

But there was no way I could set off.

Up until the middle of December, the weather had been exceptionally warm and dry, but since then it had not stopped raining and we had suffered severe cold snaps with alarming regularity. The idea of travelling in these conditions did not appeal to me. While temperatures on the coast were already very cold, the centre of Spain was experiencing historical lows. Lagartija did have heating (I didn't know if it worked properly as I had hardly tested it yet) but the water-pipes were fitted at the bottom of the van so the heating didn't reach them, (or not with the same intensity as in the cabin), so I was worried that at sub-zero temperatures, they would freeze and cause havoc.

However, I could not stand by forever with the van ready to go and nothing to do but wait for the weather to improve.

No, that was unthinkable, indeed, out of the question. That was not the way a true adventurer would behave.

Finally, I decided to leave on Monday, February 5th.

On Saturday the 3rd, the newspapers warned "Spain freezes up in the coldest blizzard of this winter". By the following week, they forecast, twenty-three provinces would be at extreme, important or moderate risk, due to snowfall, which would be strongest in Ourense, León, Zamora, Salamanca... Temperatures would plummet to reach ten or fifteen degrees below zero in many areas.

"You are not leaving on Monday," my mother declared on the phone, having heard the alarming predictions on the news. "You can't possibly set out in this weather!"

She was right, of course, but it's never a good idea to agree with my mother. What's more, I couldn't bear the thought of another week, sat on my hands, doing nothing.

"Between now and Monday things might still change."

By Sunday afternoon, things had indeed changed: reality had far exceeded expectations. The weather was truly evil, and it wasn't going to improve in a few days.

"Are you mad? You can't go in this weather! What difference would it make, to wait another week? What on earth are you going to do if something happens to you? You'll be on your own and you're completely useless. Do you want me to die of heart failure?" My mother, once again on the phone, was deploying all her rhetorical artillery to try to convince me not to go. I have to admit that the woman is persistent: she has used the same arguments all her life and they have never worked, but she doesn't give up.

I had spent the weekend vacillating between yes, I'll go, and no, I'd better wait. To help you to understand my reluctance, perhaps I should explain: I can't stand the rain or the cold. To such an extent that, for many years, once autumn arrives and it starts to rain, (and in Galicia, I assure you, that happens immediately), I pack my bags and take off for sunnier climes, until it's all over. That's why I have developed the habit of spending months in Tenerife.

But then I came up with an alternative.

I wasn't going to follow my original itinerary. I could not take the Via de la Plata because it was one of the areas most affected by the snow

Prologue

and blizzards. My first destination outside Galicia, where I had planned to sleep on Monday night, would be Puebla de Sanabria, and they had seen minimum temperatures of four or five degrees over the weekend with the situation forecast to get worse.

“I’m not going to take the Via de la Plata, Mum,” I told her “I’m going to leave that part to the end of the trip.”

“What are you going to do, then?”

“I’m going to travel through Portugal to get to Extremadura. The forecast is much better in that region.”

“You’re mad,” my mother declared, but her tone was beginning to lose its force.

“Don’t worry, I’ll call you.”

I was going to do it! On Monday I would descend through Portugal as far as Castelo Branco, a small town in the centre of the country, and from there I would cross over into Extremadura, on one of the most impressive bridges in Spain; the roman arch bridge at Alcantara.

I was starting my inward journey.

At last.

~

Note

If you would like to enhance your reading with photos from the trip, you will find them on my website: <https://franzabaleta.com>.

Across Portugal



1

I've dropped myself in it, yet again

Dizziness. As soon as I have said goodbye to family and friends, climbed into Lagartija, closed the door and put her into first gear, I am invaded by a sensation of vertigo. Silence covers me like a thick, sticky, claustrophobic carapace which distorts my perception of reality.

As I head up the road towards the Portuguese border, I ask myself what the devil I am doing.

“What the hell are you trying to prove, at this stage in your life?” It’s the same question that I have been asking myself all week, but now that I am on my way, the doubts are resurfacing with greater intensity.

This box on wheels, occupying barely ten square meters of space, has just become my home. Goodbye to my work desk, to my library, to my comfy sofa...

From now on I am going to have to monitor my consumption of water and replenish it regularly, empty the toilet receptacle, shower in a tiny cubicle, take care not to waste water when I wash the dishes, not let scraps of food go down the sink (which then would rot in the tank), worry about electricity consumption (and more importantly, only use 12 volts), look for sites to wash clothes, keep an eye on how much gas and electricity the fridge is using, cope with the cold, and solve day to day problems, which could leave me stranded, as and when they arise.

I know it’s not earth-shattering, it’s not as if I were embarking on an expedition to the Sahara or the jungles of Borneo, it’s just a relatively long tour of the interior of Spain. But it’s the time of year to stay safe and warm at home and suddenly Steinbeck’s voyage doesn’t seem so appealing. Neither does it now seem so urgent to get to know my country.

“What on earth possessed me to do this?”

I started to wonder if I hadn't once again fallen into a trap of my own making. It is a pattern that I know only too well: I get an idea into my head, usually with some literary or bohemian connection, you will soon understand that I am a sucker for such things. Before I know it, the idea has morphed into a scheme. I imagine it in every detail and for a time I can think of nothing else. At first it seems impossible, but then, little by little as I turn it over in my head, it strikes me as more achievable. I have an irresistible desire to launch myself into it. "I reckon it would be great, a whole new experience", I tell myself, and there I am, a character from one of my own books performing some valiant exploit. At that point I am hooked.

I will give you an example. I have always been attracted to alternative lifestyles, what are often called hippy communes: people who dare to escape the mediocrity of our lives as contemporary slaves, lives in which we are forced to kowtow to our bosses and submit ourselves to the daily grind and mindless, unrestrained consumerism. These people try to live a healthier, more eco-friendly existence outside the market economy, and to establish new communities and more open and collaborative relationships. You can't deny that the idea is tremendously compelling. The more practical aspects are another thing entirely: the coldness of a winter without any heating, the solitude of the mountains, the clashes between opposing egos... But never mind that, I am going off on a tangent. What I am trying to say is that it is a very bohemian and literary idea.

Just the sort of thing that enthrals me.

It can be a problem to have too much imagination, if you don't agree, just look at what happened to Don Quixote.

A few years ago, I decided that I wanted to see first-hand what it was like to live in one of these communes. I imagined myself giving everything up and dedicating myself to growing vegetables in some lost paradise.

I've never been that keen on eating vegetables, but that was a minor detail. The important thing was to live differently: to enjoy nature, to be able to read and to benefit from a community life, taking my time, with no daily grind... although it must be said that for years, the only daily grind has been that which I impose on myself. Another minor detail.

It was becoming increasingly clear to me: could anything be better than living surrounded by woods and feeling the rhythm of the seasons? As Henry David Thoreau wrote, in his *Walden, or Life in the Woods*:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, [...] and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life. Nor did I wish to practise resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life

After carrying out a cursory internet search, I decided that a lost paradise could be found in Tarifa in Cadiz, where I discovered a community that lived in the ravine of a river, in a corner where no tarmacked roads had reached. Of course, my lost paradise was situated in an area that was warm and saw very little rain. The image of a mountain village in the north, let's say in Cantabria or the Pyrenees, was far more rustic and idyllic, but I have always been conscious of my limitations.

I got in touch with them (they may not have roads, but they do have internet) and they agreed that we could meet up and I could come and live with them for a few days, so I got on a bus and headed south. I was happy and excited, and with good reason: at last I was going to fulfil a dream that I had harboured since I was fifteen or sixteen and I had learnt that there was a commune in the Suído mountains in the interior of the province of Pontevedra. I even remember meeting the hippies from the commune in Vigo once, they were so unorthodox and free, and they made me green with envy.

Finally, I was going to experience paradise from the inside.

The place was nestled on the edge of a river. It was a partially restored old stone mill with a brick outbuilding and a few wooden huts, surrounded by reeds that stuck their heads up out of the vegetation of the riverbank, located in an area of scrubland a stone's throw from the sea.

A paradise, indeed. About a dozen people lived there, although the number varied all the time: some were permanent residents, others

just passing through, like me. There were folk of all ages, from early twenties to late sixties and of diverse backgrounds, mainly from Spain and Argentina. They accepted me with open arms and before I knew it, I was integrated into their daily life.

Which, basically, consisted of working on the renovation of the mill, and building shelters. Physical labour had never been part of my vision of paradise, apart, perhaps, from cultivating a vegetable garden. For some reason in your dreams you never find yourself covered in sweat, being eaten by mosquitoes, with your whole body itching from the dust of the summer.

It soon became clear that the owner of the mill was using the people who were lured there by the dream of an alternative life, as a source of free labour. In exchange, he would allow them to stay in one of the half-built shacks scattered around the gorge, and organised sessions of meditation...or something similar. Sessions full of oms and healing chakras and faces of mystical concentration, that reminded me of the expression of St Teresa of Bernini in the extasy of full sexual climax.

Despite all this, I found the atmosphere enjoyable and some of the people I met seemed really interesting, with amazing life experiences: free spirits that meandered here and there, looking for who knows what; presumably to live life as fully as possible. And they succeeded in that, or so it seemed to me. They lived for the day, letting the wind take them, without worrying about the next day or the next month. Everything was done together, they shared food, personal experiences and everything in between. If one person had a bad day and complained about it that night during the daily group meeting, the others would take him under their wing and try to cheer him up. If he didn't feel like talking, they made him do it anyway, because they said his silence would affect the community and create a bad atmosphere.

Life in paradise wasn't easy. The electric generator was insufficient to meet the needs of the village and hardly served to recharge our mobiles, let alone allow us to use a laptop, so communication was out of the question. Drinking water was scarce, hot water was pure fantasy. It didn't matter much, as it was August...but in general, hygiene was at a minimum, as though the very idea of washing yourself was a bourgeois compulsion that we should endeavour to overcome. Any desire to eat

meat was met with a sea of pitying looks which ended in self-flagellation and admission of extreme weakness by the guilty party.

At the end of a week I was completely indifferent to the scurrying of the centipedes and other species that ran for cover whenever I opened the door of my cabin, but I yearned for a slice of ham, for a nice shower, for a cold beer, for ten minutes of privacy. I longed to do something, anything, that required the slightest amount of intellectual effort. I was bored.

I was bored in paradise.

The experience served to reduce, to a bearable level, my fascination for this type of alternative life. It converted it into a seductive idea... as long as it remained no more than an idea. I'm still attracted to that type of life, but I am now much more conscious of the difficulties involved. And I was only there for a few days, in summer, in the south. I can't imagine what it would be like to spend a winter in a remote village in the Pyrenees, for instance.

The amazing thing is that I still find it a seductive proposition...

While I drive Lagartija south through Portugal, I wonder whether I haven't, once again, fallen into the same trap. Whether I may have allowed myself to be enticed by the romantic aspect of the journey, to put it mildly. Whether it is really worth confronting the cold, the loneliness and the road for... for what?

Oh, yes, I forgot! So that life does not escape me...

2

A devastated country

Fortunately, my feelings of vertigo do not last long. Slowly but surely, as I progress towards the south, the tentacles that reach out from the routine of my life, stretch to breaking point, then, with a pop, the suction is released and, in its place, there comes a mounting expectation. "It's not such a big deal, after all," I tell myself "I'm only going to be on the road for two or three months, and there's loads of interesting things to see out there."

Or not, because I am travelling through a country so similar to my own, that, as always happens to me when I am in Portugal, I find it hard to believe that I have crossed the border.

So painfully familiar. Every time someone comments that Portugal is a beautiful country, I have to bite my tongue. Because what I see is in no way beautiful. There is no doubt that the Portuguese are a kind and cordial people, admirable for many reasons, not least that back in 1974 they were able to defeat, using carnations, one of the longest lasting dictatorships of the twentieth century, or that in these times of unrestrained neoliberalism they put their faith in one of the few socialist governments in Europe...and it works for them.

But the epidermis of the country has been ripped away. Torn to pieces. Annihilated by a devastating tsunami. For hundreds of miles, on both sides of the road, all I can see is eucalyptus trees. Mountains, valleys and plains, all invaded by low calibre cultivation of eucalyptus, so closely planted that they do not have room to grow, nor do they allow anything else to grow. Here, as in Galicia, in the last hundred years, a silent (or hushed up) ecological catastrophe has taken place, of a magnitude that we are not able to appreciate.

When I was young, back in the seventies, I used to spend the summer in the village of Vilasobroso in Pontevedra. Then, you could already see eucalyptus trees, but at that time they had not yet become the blight that they are today. I vividly remember the summer night skies, filled with stars. It was a world full of crickets, fireflies that twinkled nervously at dusk and stag beetles that frightened us with their erratic flight and the powerful jaws of the males which it was said could slice through your finger if you annoyed them. We never checked this out, just in case.

Today you no longer see stag beetles. I haven't seen them in decades. They live in oak forests, where they feed on decaying wood, and the females lay their larvae in the interior of dead trees.

But now there are no oak trees, neither live ones nor dead ones. The eucalyptus has eradicated them. And as a result, the entire ecosystem has been profoundly altered.

It is a ferociously prolific tree, which has spread far beyond reasonable limits. It arrived in Europe in 1774 with Captain Cook, or more precisely, the naturalist William Anderson, who joined Cook's third voyage, from 1776 to 1779 (although Anderson died before they returned to England). The *Eucalyptus globulus*, the most widespread species throughout Galicia and northern Portugal, was first observed in 1792 by a French botanist, Jacques-Julien Houton de Labillardière... the name *globulus*, refers to the similarity between its flowers and the small buttons which were in fashion at that time in France.

The popular belief, as yet unverified, is that it was a friar, Rosendo Salvado, who introduced it to Galicia, when, during a mission in Australia in the mid 19th century, he sent some seeds as a gift to his family, because he felt it was such a beautiful and majestic tree. Something similar occurred in Portugal: it is believed that the first eucalyptus trees were planted in Vila Nova in Gaia, near Porto, in 1829, but there is no evidence to confirm their presence on Portuguese soil until the middle of that century.

At first it was a passion of the rich, who planted it in the gardens of their stately homes because it was exotic and fragrant, but soon its other qualities became apparent. Professor Ángel I. Fernández of the University of Santiago tells us how the social perception of eucalyptus changed. In his blog, Galicia Agraria, he reproduces part of an article,

“*The eucalyptus in Spain*”, published in 1920 by the journalist Enrique González Fiol, in which we can see how the eucalyptus ceased to be simply an ornamental tree and started to be considered as a profitable crop, not just for the exploitation of its wood but also of its medicinal properties.

[...] facing up to economic hazards and supplementing with their intelligence the knowledge of agriculture, which the State should promulgate and has not done so, neither in the past or now, they set out to commercialise the eucalyptus, foreseeing that it could constitute a very important source of wealth. I cannot cite all those who merit recognition, lacking, as I do, their names [...] I will resign myself to giving but a few. The first tribute must, in fairness, go to that illustrious statesman [...] D. Eugenio Montero Ríos. The Illustrious Canonist, to use his archetypal epithet, created a vast eucalyptus plantation on his estate in Lourizán which has continued to develop and expand. Do not assume, however that the eucalyptus requires particular weather conditions to thrive. There are very few climates for which one of its many varieties will not be suitable.

From the end of the nineteenth century into the first half of the twentieth century, the eucalyptus sparked considerable enthusiasm. In addition to its widespread use for the construction of furniture, the manufacturing of crates, pit-props for the mining industry, and railway line sleepers, its medicinal properties started to be commercially exploited. The Catalan veterinarian Juan Rof Codina wrote, in 1914:

Some tree species secrete true antiseptic substances through their leaves; it has been found that the eucalyptus tree releases aromatic oils, of which the main one is eucalyptol, an agent that is destructive to microorganisms; hence its application as a tree that can purify the air in unhealthy environments.

Spas and sanatoriums began planting eucalyptus trees so that patients could walk underneath them and benefit from the alleged therapeutic virtues of breathing in the aroma. Eucalyptus fever spread rapidly. The practice was to inhale the steam, but the demand was such that a Catalan firm brought out a syrup for the common cold (which

won a gold medal at the Galician Regional Exhibition held in Santiago de Compostela in 1905) with a somewhat less attractive composition: Eucalyptus mixed with heroin.

But it was here, in Portugal, that it all went horribly wrong. The culprit was the discovery in 1923 of the technique to obtain wood pulp from the *Eucalyptus globulus*. The pulp is produced by separating the natural cellulose fibres by mechanical means (in a mill, for example) or by chemicals, that dissolve the lignin that holds the fibres together. The British-owned Caima Pulp Company, established close to Porto, was the first in the world to produce paper pulp by applying sulphites.

From that moment, the cultivation of eucalyptus trees exploded. In Spain the driving force came as a result of the Civil War, when the Franco dictatorship decided to transform northern Spain into the principal supplier of raw materials for the Spanish pulp and paper industry. In 1957 the Empresa Nacional de Celulosa built a factory in the Pontevedra estuary (the company was renamed ENCE, Energía y Celulosa S.A., after it was privatised and floated on the stock exchange in 1990).

It was the beginning of the end. As a result of the building of the new paper pulp factory, eucalyptus plantations spread throughout Galicia and became the new manna from heaven for a population of poor, small-holder farmers. You will seldom find a Galician that does not possess a *leira*, a farm, or a slice of mountain that he inherited from his parents and grandparents, often a simple strip of land, no more than a few dozen metres long. Many of these were located in oak forests and, until then, wood was only taken as a source of firewood when the trees were thinned out. Suddenly ENCE started to knock on doors of the surrounding residents with a very simple message: we will buy your trees. Many did not know what trees they were talking about, nor where these plots were located.

But they all sold. After felling the oaks, chestnuts, birch, cork oaks, ash and whatever else was there, eucalyptus trees were planted that would grow to maturity, and be ready to cut, in only ten years. Manna from heaven. And they didn't even have to do anything, the experts from ENCE or its subsidiary companies took care of everything. Just accept the offer, sign here, and receive the money. The woodland? "But I don't even know where it is!"

More than once I have argued over this with my mother. According to her (who, on several occasions has sold wood from property that she didn't even know she owned until they knocked on her door), the sale of the wood has brought great benefits to Galicia and has allowed many families to improve their standard of living. This may be true, although I am aware of many cases (that of my parents and uncles, without needing to look further afield) in which this extra money was not really needed.

But the price has been the ecological devastation of a country. According to Greenpeace, to date, one hundred and fifty years after the first eucalyptus tree was imported, Spain and Portugal have amassed 53% of the world's plantations of *Eucalyptus globulus*.

I am going to repeat that, because the figure is so huge that it is hard to take in: fifty three percent!

How have we allowed this to happen?

With the generous help of individuals, companies and governments that are committed to feeding our insatiable desire for paper products, these trees have adapted so well to their environment that they have managed to supplant the native vegetation, which they have annihilated in the same way an invading army ravages the villages it passes through.

An army endowed with powerful weapons of mass destruction.

The allelopathic compounds which they produce, cineol and eucalyptol, prevent germination of the seeds of other species and destroy the bacterial and fungal flora of the soil, which becomes sterile.

Its deep roots and insatiable thirst (each eucalyptus consumes about twenty litres of water a day) reduce subsurface water and deplete underground springs.

As the flora of the undergrowth is impoverished, the eucalyptus plantations drive out the local fauna, like my beloved *vacaloura*, the stag beetle that I was speaking of earlier, and annihilate the pre-existing ecosystem.

As if that weren't enough, the eucalyptus army has an even more terrifying weapon, a natural flamethrower: it is a pyrophyte (fire-loving) plant, adapted to burn easily and to constantly regenerate and flourish after the fires are over. A very effective method to eliminate competition from other plant or animal species.

But I want to be fair: we certainly need paper pulp and, therefore, quite possibly, we need eucalyptus plantations, as we need wheat or tomato plantations. It's one more crop. The problem lies in its system of exploitation, or in the absence of it: in the unrestrained and systematic planting of vast expanses of land; in excessive felling of trees that erodes and impoverishes the soil; in the abandonment of many plantations (we can't call them forests, they are anything but forests) because of a lack of profitability as soon as wood prices fall, which causes the uncontrolled growth of thousands of small-calibre trees and the proliferation of fires; in the intentional burning to create a shortage...

The problem lies in the fact that it is not agriculture: it is pure, blind and uncontrolled despoliation. And with the connivance of the authorities.

3

A corpse crowned queen and a queen that 'reigned' for a single night

But I do not want to dwell on a subject that causes me so much pain, the destruction of my homeland, and as I drive, I start to think about what awaits me: the monastery of Alcobaça, where the remains of Inés de Castro and her lover Pedro (Peter I of Portugal) lie. Since I was a child, I've heard of Inés de Castro, the Galician woman who was crowned after she died.

Today the story is barely remembered outside Portugal or Galicia, but for centuries it was as well known in Europe as Tristan and Isolde or Romeo and Juliet: a love that challenges convention and transcends itself to become a legend. A tragic and impossible love that germinates in the age of the troubadours, then flourishes with Romanticism back in the nineteenth century, when our way of feeling was forged, and which left its imprint on a trail of literary works from the sixteenth century to the present day (Luís de Camões, Portugal's greatest poet, narrated the death of Inés in the third canto of the epic poem, *The Lusiades*) and in some twenty-nine operas, including an opera by Giuseppe Persiani, premiered in Naples in 1835, or a more recent work in 2006, by Andrea Lorenzo Scartazzini . There was even a television series, *Pedro e Inés*, produced by Radio and Television of Portugal in 2005.

There is something in these stories of tragic love that captivates us and catches our imagination, even those of us who think we are more rational: the illusion of perfection, the hope that out there, somewhere, it is possible to find that person who will banish loneliness and the fear of emptiness that we all carry embedded in the molecules of our body. Romances such as those of *The Lovers of Teruel* or those of Pedro I and

Inés de Castro are refuges in which to shelter when the rain beats against the window.

In reality, as in often the case, it is difficult to disentangle fact from fiction... and perhaps it's not wise to do so. Inés was part of the most powerful lineage of Galicia, the Castros, who were counts of Lemos and, for centuries, the true masters of Galicia, although she did not belong to the legitimate line: she was a bastard, the illegitimate daughter of Pedro Fernández de Castro, and she was born around 1325.

These were hard times, of unfettered ambitions and continuous wars between Castile and Portugal. To try to put a stop to them, the wedding was agreed between the *Infante* Pedro, son of King Alfonso IV of Portugal, and Constance of Castile, daughter of the prince of Villena, the true regent of Castile. The union was solemnized in 1339. Inés was a lady-in-waiting to Constance, and that was how she and Pedro met. According to the history books, the prince fell in love as soon as he saw her. And the attraction must have been mutual, for they both became lovers.

Which did not prevent the future king from fulfilling his marital duties. With such success (for him, at least) that his wife Constance died a few years later, in 1345, giving birth to their second child. Suddenly, fate had freed the lovers from their constraints. At that moment the future must have looked so bright.

But between them they weaved a complex tapestry. When Pedro decided to make Inés his wife, his father King Alfonso vehemently opposed it. The reasons were very pragmatic, indeed quite sensible: Inés belonged to the Castro lineage and the king's counsellors kept repeating to him that the Castros had too much influence, both in Castile and Portugal, and that they had to keep them in check. In addition, Alfonso feared that the alliance would drag Portugal into the civil war that the king was fighting with his half-brother Enrique de Trastámara, which at that time was bleeding Castile dry.

Prince Pedro did not listen to reason and was fed up with having to wait while his wife Constance was still living. He ignored his father's warnings and married Inés as well... but in secret, and the lovers started living together in Coímbra.

A king can hardly allow such a slight to his authority. Alfonso VI did not know how to react and was torn between his emotions. He wished

to protect the inheritance rights of his grandson Fernando, son of Constanza, who was a weak and sickly little boy, but at the same time he was repulsed by the idea of having Inés put to death, for she, after all, was not to blame.

Eventually, he decided to take action. In 1355, whilst his son was out hunting, he showed up at the *Quinta das lágrimas*, where the couple lived, accompanied by three knights: Pedro Coelho, Diego López and Álvaro Gonçalves.

Inés guessed his intentions. She went out to receive him surrounded by her sons, she had four by Pedro, and in a calm and dignified voice, through gentle persuasion and eloquent pleas, she managed to sooth the king's anger, who, after much hesitation, turned to leave.

But it was not to be. As he walked away from Inés, the knights who accompanied him insisted that he reconsider his position. He could not leave Inés alive; his son's affront and outright disobedience could not go unpunished. They urged him to allow them to wreak the necessary retribution.

And the king ended up agreeing to it.

The three culprits, Coelho, López and Gonçalves, returned to the Quinta, having demonstrated incontrovertibly, by the power of the sword, who was in control in Portugal.

It is said that when Pedro was told, he covered his face with a black veil so that no one could witness his grief. But he did not hide his anger: he rose up in arms against his father and his armies rampaged the countryside between the Duero and the Miño, devastating everything as they went, so that, once again, it was the poor who paid the price and were unjustly punished for the quarrels of the rich and powerful.

Two years later, in 1357, Alfonso IV died and Pedro, who was then known as "*el Justiciero*" (the Just), ascended to the throne.

The time for vengeance had come.

The killers took flight, but the king managed to capture two of them, Pedro Coelho and Álvaro Gonçalves, and ripped out their hearts. Literally. He then declared that he and Inés had been married. He had her remains exhumed and taken to Alcobaça, where he ordered that she should be dressed in royal robes, had her body placed on the throne and proceeded to crown her queen of Portugal, obliging his courtiers to kiss the hand of the corpse.

Or, at least, that's what the legend says, and we do love to believe a good story. What great love affair does not contain its commensurate elements of tragedy, revenge and atonement?

Afterwards, presumably in a calmer moment, the new king ordered a beautiful white marble tomb for Inés and another for him, and placed them facing each other, so that on the day of resurrection the first thing each of them saw was the face of their lover. I don't know if they will see each other, since no one has ever come back to tell us if there is any truth in this idea of resurrection (which has never stopped people claiming to know everything about that imaginary world after death), but the tombs are true works of art, full of ethereal figures and beautifully carved symbols. The physical proof of a love as tragic as it is immortal. Or just the opposite: frighteningly mortal.

Inés was not the only tragic queen of her family, or even of her generation. The story is less well-known, overshadowed by the sublime tragedy of the romance of Inés and Pedro. Inés had a legitimate sister, Juana de Castro, who, it seems, was as beautiful and desirable as Inés herself, but who had the misfortune to cross the path of another Pedro, this time Pedro de Castilla (Peter of Castile).

Around 1353, two years before Inés' death, King Pedro I met Juana de Castro, who had just become a widow, and fell madly in love with her. But the king was married and Juana, who was no fool, refused to share the bed of a king who was notorious for his fickle and capricious attitude to love. Pedro persevered, but Joan's conditions were firm: she would only be lured into bed if Pedro first separated from his wife, Queen Blanche of Bourbon, and married her.

Pedro was obsessed with the idea of possessing the beautiful Juana and in his desperation, he was willing to do anything to get her. Using his influence as king, he got the bishops of Ávila and Salamanca to testify that his union with Blanche had never been consummated and to declare it null and void. In April 1354, in Cuéllar, Segovia, Pedro I of Castile and Juana de Castro were joined in marriage... only after the king agreed to give Juana the castles of Castrojeriz in Burgos and Dueñas in Palencia and the Alcázar de Jaén as a dowry. Or, perhaps you might say more accurately, as a bribe.

It must have been quite a wedding night, judging not only by the cost of the festivities, but also by its consequences, because Juana became pregnant and gave birth to a son, Juan de Castilla.

But in the morning, everything changed. His lust satisfied; Pedro disappeared. Literally. He abandoned the new queen and ran into the arms of his long-time lover, Maria de Padilla.

They never saw each other again.

Juana de Castro lived twenty more years, during which she declared herself Queen of Castile and León. Today, her sepulchre, although less beautiful than the tomb of her sister Inés, can be seen in the Chapel of Relics in the Royal Pantheon of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, another impressive site.

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There is no special parking area for campers in Alcobça, but the *Park4night* app, which I'll use throughout the trip, indicates a single parking space on the outskirts of town, in the Rúa Leiría, beside the San Francisco hospital. I leave Lagartija there and go for a stroll around the town enjoying the warmth of the late afternoon sun.

At first it strikes me as just one more Portuguese town, one of those calm and beautiful neighbourhoods that seem to yawn sleepily in the winter sun. But then, not far from where I parked, I come across the impressive stone mass of the monastery, which by the way, is a World Heritage site and contains, in addition to the tombs of Inés and Pedro, beautiful alcoves, exquisite cloisters, and immense vaulted rooms. I am amazed as I approach it because I had not researched it before coming and so did not have any image of it in my head.

In fact, I hadn't even planned to sleep here. I had taken a detour to Alcobça instead of heading to Castelo Branco, where I originally intended to stop today, because at the junction I checked the weather forecasts for Castelo and found that they had worsened and that night temperatures were expected to fall below zero. Alcobça, on the coast, not only offered me the possibility to visit the resting place of a character I have known as a child, but, being closer to the coast, the temperatures are somewhat milder. And that's one of the great advantages of travelling with your house in tow: you can change your plans at any time, without worrying about bookings or hotels.

I don't go into the monastery because it's late and I'd rather see it at a leisurely pace tomorrow. Instead I take a walk and stop to talk to a

charming character who earns his living, dressed up in the costume of Pedro I, promenading in the grounds of the monument. He's a very pleasant and friendly man, so I invite him for a beer. But he says no, because he's working. I chat to him for a while and he tells me that the financial crisis left him out of a job and that he was struggling until he came up with this, which is not great, but allows him to make ends meet.

After saying goodbye, I have my beer on a nearby terrace as the last rays of sunshine are rapidly disappearing. With the imposing mass of the monastery before me, I realize how much the way we travel has changed since Google Maps existed. Not so long ago, maybe ten or fifteen years, there was still scope for discovery, surprise and excitement. Travel was still a journey into the unknown. You knew nothing of where you were heading, beyond a few photos, some phrases taken from a brochure and the tips or descriptions given by travellers who had visited the place before you. When you arrived, you might be disappointed or enthralled, and both possibilities were part of the pleasure of travelling.

The Internet and Google Maps have done away with all that; with the uncertainty, with the astonishment and with the mystery. Of course, they are tremendously useful, formidable tools that eliminate upsets and discomforts. But they have also filled us with unrealistic expectations of glorious images and of an assured itinerary. If I had done an internet search, I could have seen this monastery, from Vigo. I could have known its history, and even strolled inside, discovered its cloisters and its galleries, I could have toured around it, and even seen the table at which I am sitting right now having a beer. Something unthinkable, literally unthinkable, only twenty years ago.

Amazing, but also, in some ways, disturbing. I wonder if there will come a time when, thanks to virtual reality, people give up travelling altogether.

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The night, my first night of the trip, passes without incident. I settle into bed with some trepidation, will someone come to disturb me, will I get a visit from the police, will I be too cold, but my fears are groundless. It is a very quiet spot and the heating works perfectly, maintaining the interior at a cosy eighteen degrees while outside the

temperature hovers around zero. In the morning, very early, with the sky still dark behind Lagartija's windows, I make myself my first breakfast of the voyage and sit in the driving seat, hugging a cup of coffee and watching the world wake up to the sound of roosters crowing.

At mid-day, after visiting the monastery, I set out on the road to Alcántara, in Extremadura, very close to the border. Although its cold, it's a sunny day and Lagartija's cabin is filled with light.

Suddenly the world turns black.

It is a harsh and frightening sight, although all too familiar, which brings to mind the tragic events of last summer, when Portugal suffered a devastating wave of forest fires that killed more than thirty people: legions of scorched eucalyptus trees, their emaciated corpses standing erect in the sun, as brazen and shameless as the stakes of Vlad the Impaler. For miles all is desolation, blackness and silence, surrounded by bare rocks, deprived of the protective cover of soil after the rains have dragged the earth into the rivers.

Miles and miles of devastation.

Until, all of a sudden, it's over. I feel as though I have taken a leap into space and have landed somewhere far away. It's not just that I have driven beyond the land that was burnt, even the vegetation has changed. Cork oaks and olive trees take the place of the remains of the eucalyptus and the world becomes green again. Life is reborn and I start to see herds of cattle grazing serenely in the sun, and horses that regard me with curiosity as I pass, and birds of prey, keeping a beady eye on Lagartija with a look of disdain intended to hide their frustration in the face of an unattainable prey. The beauty of the landscape fills me with intense nostalgia for the world that the eucalyptus has wiped out, those deciduous forests of Galicia that only fifty years ago seemed eternal.

I cross the border by passing over the Roman bridge of Segura. It spans the river Erjas, which serves as a dividing line between Spain and Portugal, until, a few miles further on, it flows into the Tagus and this takes on the role.

I am in Extremadura.

Now, indeed, my inward journey can, at last, begin.

Extremadura



So much more than just a bridge

Almost unexpectedly, fifteen kilometres after the border, the Roman bridge of Alcántara appears before me in all its splendour. I am already familiar with it, having visited it ten years ago during an unforgettable trip with some friends, but I am, yet again, impressed by the elegance of its silhouette, the solidity of its pillars, the immense span of its arches.

It is so imposing that it almost seems out of proportion, too majestic a bridge for such a slender river. But that is far from the reality: today it can give that impression, but only because, a thousand metres upriver — easily visible from the bridge — is the Alcántara dam, which holds 3,162 hm³ of water from the Tagus and its tributary the Alagón and floods a surface area of 10,400 ha along ninety-one kilometres. After the construction of the dam in 1969 there was very little left of the Tagus to justify such a formidable bridge.

I park at one end and walk over it, taking my time and enjoying the moment. Under the winter sun the river is diminished in appearance, no more than a minimalist black shadow of itself. Still, the area spanned by the bridge would be very difficult to cross without it.

We hardly notice bridges. We are so used to having them there, at our disposal, that we find it difficult to imagine the world when very few of them existed or they were so flimsy that getting across them meant taking a huge risk or when they could only be crossed if you paid the prevailing toll to the local landlord. But bridges are probably some of the constructions that have contributed most to human progress. Without them populations remain isolated, turned in on themselves and without contact with the outside, steeped in their ancient terrors, superstitions and inbreeding.