

# Discovering Spain

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Exterior of the church of Santa Maria, Taüll

## Enjoying Spain, off the beaten path

STORY AND PHOTOS BY NANCY MATTHEWS

Does waking up to cow bells and church bells sound appealing? How about enjoying an alternative to the crowds, noise and busyness of Spain's major cities?

Now, my husband, David, and I did enjoy many urban pleasures on our trip to Spain, but we particularly appreciated three off-the-beaten-path destinations and activities: visiting 12th-century churches in the Catalan Pyrenees; spending a week with free meals and accommodations while chatting in English with Spaniards;

and hiking in one of the “White Towns” of Andalusia – despite the rain.

I'd asked a friend from Barcelona where she liked to go in her corner of Spain. She sighed happily and replied, “Vall de Boí,” much as someone in Ontario might wistfully say “Muskoka.” But Vall de Boí is not cottage country; it's in the Pyrenees, where skiers flock in winter and hikers enjoy rugged paths the rest of the year.

However, the area is best known for its collection of 11th- and 12th-century Romanesque churches that were added to UNESCO's World Heritage List in 2000.

The solid, stone exteriors, many with imposing bell towers that you can climb, house colourful frescoes and wooden carvings. Over the past century, the original artwork was removed and preserved in Barcelona, but superb reproductions give modern visitors a taste of their medieval beauty.

Though tucked away, the Vall de Boí is not hard to reach. A train from Barcelona to Lleida delivered us to our rental car and off we went. A few hours later, we arrived in the village of Erill la Vall in the pouring rain, where we were warmly greeted by the owner of our Airbnb apartment. Although

her English and my Spanish were limited, David and I were soon settled in our gorgeous, third-floor flat with a view of the town and mountains beyond. In fact, we had our own 12th-century church tower literally outside our window.

Next door was also the interpretive centre for these Romanesque churches. There we learned how the buildings were influenced by the architecture of northern Italy and how the frescoes were created by medieval artisans who applied coloured pigments, diluted with water, to the still-fresh mortar, or mixed pigments with egg yolk, if applying to wood. Exhibits also explained how these murals were later removed using layers of cloth that had been soaked in water-soluble, organic glue.

Our tickets – 10 euros each – gained us entrance not only to the centre, but also to five churches in the valley. After touring the displays, we stopped into “our” church next door, whose sonorous bells had been serenading us on the quarter-hour. A wooden carving entitled “Descent from the Cross” dominated the interior, in contrast to the other churches where the biblical scenes were painted.

The large mural in Santa Maria de Taüll, for example, shows Mary and Jesus surrounded by Magi bearing gifts, all in strikingly bright colours. Taüll's other Romanesque church (Sant Climent) features an audio-visual projection of what its original, full-wall fresco might have looked like. We regretted that we hadn't made time for the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya while we were in Barcelona, where we could have seen the original frescoes. Nevertheless, the reproductions were stunning.

Had the weather co-operated, we would have walked from church to church. Instead, we only managed to trudge along one muddy path from our village to the next, skirting a pasture full of cows en route. Although we couldn't hike between the hamlets, having a car meant we could still visit them – just without the exercise.



Interior of the church of Santa Maria, Taüll



Sheep grazing in the mountains around Grazelema

When not checking out old churches, we explored our tiny, stone village. I was struck by how isolated this town was – you have to drive four kilometres just to buy a stamp! I gather it's more lively in ski season but we were there in spring, when only two small bars/restaurants were open.

This didn't pose a problem, as we thoroughly enjoyed cooking for ourselves and eating on our little balcony, with views of snowy peaks in the distance. So it was with heavy hearts that we left our idyllic retreat, but we had other adventures ahead.

Years ago, a friend sent us a clipping about Vaughan Town, a program for Spaniards who want to improve their conversational English.

While the Spanish participants each pay about 1,800 euros for the week, "Anglos" (native English speakers from around the world) are given free accommodation and meals – including wine – in exchange for chatting 10 to 12 hours a day. Intrigued, we applied and were accepted as volunteers.

Our group of 17 Anglos, 17 Spaniards, and two leaders rendezvoused in Madrid and travelled by bus to a four-star guest-

#### IF YOU GO

**Online guide:** andalucia.com  
 Centre del Romànic de la Vall de Boí (interpretive centre for Romanesque churches),  
**Erill la Vall:** centrromanico.com/en  
**Vaughan Town:** volunters.grupovaughan.com

house in the Gredos countryside, about an hour southwest of the city of Ávila.

We stayed in a classily converted wool-drying house from the 18th century that was a 30-minute walk from El Barco de Ávila, the nearest village.

Our orientation was like heading back to youth camp with our jokey, English emcee, Pete Brown, as "head counsellor." Pete ran through the rules and announcements, including: no Spanish to be spoken at any time during the week (even the hotel staff had to speak English to everyone); activities were not optional – we had to show up and be on time; meals would be on the Spanish schedule (breakfast at 9, lunch at 2, and dinner at 9, which was hunger-inducing for

the Anglos); and during these meals, there would be two Anglos and two Spaniards at each table, to facilitate conversation.

However, we were also told that "laughter is mandatory," so it wouldn't be all work and no play.

Carmen Villa, the Spanish leader, coordinated the schedules and assigned tasks. Each day was divided into 50-minute sessions, followed by 10-minute breaks. During these times, we Anglos (from Australia, United States, United Kingdom and Canada) were matched with Spaniards for various activities.

Sometimes we held one-on-one telephone sessions or group conference calls, where the Spaniards had the uncomfortable experience of talking with a foreigner without benefit of facial expressions or body language. Scenarios included dealing with an airline passenger who'd lost his luggage, and "ordering" pizzas with lots of toppings. Since numbers are often difficult for listeners to get right on the phone, we included fake addresses and credit card details. Anglos were told to "make the Spaniards suffer," but everyone still had fun along the way.

Best of all were the one-on-one conversations. For each session, we were assigned a different Spaniard and given an idiom and a verb phrase to discuss, before conversing about anything we liked.

I explained terms like "take off" (both airplanes and shoes) and "turn in" (to the police and to bed), plus "kill two birds with one stone" and "don't let the cat out of the bag." I also enjoyed introducing my own expressions like "hang in there" and "lead foot," the latter prompted by a 72-year-old Spaniard who gleefully announced she's driven faster than 160 km/hr!

We'd been told to avoid discussing politics, religion and football (soccer). I learned about people's jobs, families, travels, hobbies, political opinions – yes, we broke the rule – and even details about someone's recent wedding. There was a wide diversity of backgrounds, language skills and motivations for wanting to improve their spoken English.

I quickly learned Spaniards take their food very seriously. Over one meal, the merits of various Spanish extra-virgin olive oils were debated. "Liquid gold!" gushed one fellow, as I wrote down his favourite brand. Another time, during our group's afternoon walk to El Barco, my Spanish companion suddenly stopped and asked, "Do you smell that?" Then he dreamily sighed, "Jamón!" thus confirming what I'd read about the Spanish and their love of ham.

Tiny El Barco, with its storks and their impressive nests atop a castle, was refreshingly untouristy – there weren't even postcards for sale. Our mid-week outing was particularly appreciated because we were feeling rather tethered to our hotel. In fact, some laughingly called it our "beautiful prison!"

Everyone was also grateful for the 90-minute siesta period after lunch every day. That's when I checked email, hand-washed laundry and wrote in my journal. Given all the talking we did, it was nice to have this period of silence and rest.

Would I do it again? Since Vaughan Town programs run in numerous Spanish locations, I'd certainly consider returning. However, I learned that one of the

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Life-size statue of a bull near Grazalema town square



A quiet street in Grazalema

“Spaniards” in our group was actually Moroccan, and her husband was investigating opening a Vaughan Town program outside Fez. Sign me up!

**W**e had a less people-intensive time in one of the “Pueblos Blancos” (“White Towns”) of Andalusia in southern Spain. Many of these villages are not only photogenic, but also offer excellent hiking. However, a number of them are firmly on the tourist loop, so we opted to stay in Grazalema, a smaller village an hour west of Ronda.

We chose this town after reading about a guesthouse, La Mejorana, whose knowledgeable and enthusiastic owners are keen hikers. Andres Sanchez and Ana Vazquez not only oozed hospitality, but they also provided laminated hiking maps and great trail advice. In addition, many of the paths could be accessed outside our door.

To my surprise, Grazalema is also known for its annual running of the bulls. I’d thought that only happened in Pamplona. A life-size statue of a bull near Grazalema’s town square was the first clue. A pub also had a large bull’s head on the wall and a disconcerting picture of that particular bull when it was alive and well, among other historic photos. I later learned the Fiesta del Carmen, held in mid-July, culminates in Spain’s oldest bull-run in the streets. Bulls are released at 8 a.m., noon and 7 p.m. and, according to the tourist brochure, “The best views are to be had by putting on your trainers and running.” The lower, iron bars of the village’s flower-bedecked windows are apparently ideal for hauling oneself out of harm’s way.

If you prefer something less energetic, you might want to check out the still-functioning Roman fountains. These “heads with spouts” have been providing drinking water for the town for nearly 2,000 years, and offer a novel and picturesque way to quench your thirst.

Our purpose in coming here, however, was to get into the mountains. We’d been

warned that Grazalema was the wettest place in Spain and, unfortunately, we got to experience that first-hand.

On the most promising day, weather-wise, we headed toward the Puerto del Boyar lookout. En route we had great views down to the village and encountered delicate wildflowers and grazing sheep. Encouraged, we rashly decided to do the whole circular hike, rather than retrace our steps – bad decision.

Less than a half-hour later, we had to take refuge under a hanging rock. As we continued, we encountered further showers, but since we were well-prepared for rain – waterproof raincoats, pants, and backpack covers – we carried on. Then an ominously dark bank of clouds approached, and suddenly there was a clap of thunder and the heavens opened – so much for “waterproof.” Pelting hail, poor visibility and slippery rocks didn’t help matters.

We missed a turn and landed in a farmer’s yard, huddling under an ineffectual tree. Then the landowner appeared, exclaiming that this area was “privado” (private). Thankfully I remembered how to say I was lost (“perdido”), and he showed us the way back to the trail, just as the downpour resumed in earnest.

Now utterly drenched, we dragged ourselves back to our guesthouse. After wringing everything out, we decorated our room with clothing and cranked up the heat, in hopes our belongings would dry enough to pack.

Even though foul weather thwarted our plans, we had a fabulous time in Grazalema, and we’d go back in a heartbeat. We met a British couple who have been returning to this guesthouse for the past nine years. They stay for three weeks, so they’re almost guaranteed some good days to hike.

So, despite Barcelona’s gob-smacking architecture, Granada’s Alhambra, and Madrid’s art galleries, I found the most memorable spots were indeed off the beaten path – even if the rain in Spain falls mainly where we wanted to hike. 🌿

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