

Alden's Trip to Barcelona

5:35 p.m., February 20th: It must have been 85 degrees at the gate. The weather is pleasant outside, but the engineering staff at Dulles must have forgotten to adjust the heat accordingly. The Lufthansa staff then announces general boarding, which doesn't make a lot of sense, since there is a British Midlands flight also boarding across the way, and our plane is one of those Boeing two-level planes, so there's a crush of people trying to get to their respective flights and on board the plane.

8:00 p.m., February 20th: The flight crew announces that they will be serving dinner. I had never flown Lufthansa, so I'm looking forward to sampling German aircraft cuisine. Much to my surprise, what I got was a small portion of overcooked pasta and a generous helping of pickled vegetables. Apparently, the pickled vegetables are a German favorite, as every subsequent flight I take on Lufthansa has pickled vegetables as part of the meal.

I also discovered that the stereotypes people have about Germans—that they are detached and coolly efficient, bear a kernel of truth. For example, the man sitting in the row in front of me on the flight to Frankfurt mentioned that he is a vegetarian for religious reasons and couldn't have the meal being served to him. The German flight attendant answers, "Well, if you wanted a vegetarian meal, you should have ordered one before you got on board. I don't have any vegetarian meals for you."

10:00 a.m., February 21st: After twelve hours of flights and layovers, we finally touchdown at the El Prat de Llongebrat, Barcelona's airport. The airport is beautiful, with floor to ceiling windows offering a view of the tarmac and marble tiled floors in different shades of red, brown, and white. As we try to find our way to Barcelona's metro system, Steve and I get into trouble when we realize we haven't had our passports stamped. After spending an hour trying to get back into customs, someone informs us that once we are in the EU, we can travel freely throughout its member states. We then take a short cab to our hotel in Barri Gotic.

Noon, February 21st: Steve and I are staying in the Hotel Regencia Colon, a three-star tourist class hotel in Barri Gothic, or the gothic quarter. More precisely, our hotel is located on Cathedral Square, right across from the Barcelona Cathedral, a massive cathedral in the center of the Gothic quarter, with beautifully carved spires reaching for the sky. The hotel is in an amazing location in upper Barri Gotic. The neighborhood is labyrinthine, teeming with tiny curiosa shops, bakeries, and restaurants. It's really easy to get lost, especially at night, when it is commonly advised that you don't walk in Barri Gotic alone.

We begin to explore Barcelona by slowly making our way to the main thoroughfare in Barcelona, Las Ramblas. Las Ramblas is a street comprised of five smaller, interconnecting streets, beginning in the north with Placa de Catalunya (Catalunia Plaza) and heading southward towards the harbor. The sides of Las Ramblas are lined with

every kind of shop imaginable. Steve and I walk down the Ramblas to the harbor to see the Monument de Colom (Columbus Monument). Spaniards treat Christopher Columbus as if he were a Spaniard, and at the harbor there is a towering column in his honor. The funny thing about the column, however, is that Columbus is pointing to France, rather than the New World.

There's a bridge from the column to the center of the Barcelona Harbor, where there is a mall called Montumec. Steve and I go inside to look at the shops, and after an hour we decide to grab a quick meal. There are basically two choices in Montumec for quick eats: Pans and Company, an omnipresent Spanish sandwich restaurant, and the food court. We choose the latter.

The food court has what seems like food that you could find at your typical American food court, like fish and chips, hamburgers, and pizza. Steve and I decide to try a place that has a 'Texas chicken sandwich'.

Barcelona Revealed: The Texas Chicken Sandwich

Ingredients:

- One hamburger roll
- Iceberg lettuce
- One slice of tomato
- Two breaded chicken strips
- Two thick-sliced strips of bacon
- One half of a hard-boiled egg
- Barbecue Sauce
- Mayonnaise

Stack bottom of hamburger roll (coated with barbecue sauce and mayonnaise), iceberg lettuce, tomato slice, inside to-go Styrofoam container. Drop the two breaded chicken strips and bacon into the deep fry vat. After three minutes, Use tongs to retrieve chicken and bacon, put on top of stacked items in Styrofoam container. Place one half of a hard-boiled egg on top of other items, and complete by placing the top half of the hamburger roll on the top of everything else. Close Styrofoam container and hand to customer.

After our experience with the Texas chicken sandwich, we decide eat as the locals do (meaning Pans and Company).

We spend the rest of the first day wandering through Barri Gotic and up to the Placa de Catalunya, and then head back to the hotel to catch up on some sleep.

February 21, 8:30 a.m., Cathedral Square: Steve and I are setting out for our Gaudi exploration day. Antoni Gaudi, a turn of the century artist/architect who embraced the Modernist style and rendered the city as Europe's prime example of that architectural movement, is also its favorite son. The most famous example of his work is the Le Segrada Familia cathedral in the Eixample.



Our first goal this morning is to see the Le Segrada Familia. Since it is Barcelona's most famous landmark, we anticipate a huge crowd, even on a Sunday. We utilize Barcelona's subway system, which is similar to Washington's. The cathedral is adjacent to a metro stop so when we step out of the station we are greeted with a stunning view of it. With the intricate carving, it strikes me as sponge-like, and Steve says that it looked like it was carved out of a single stone.

It costs eight euros (\$10.40) just to get in, but it is well worth it. Seeing it up close fills me with a sense of awe, I've never seen anything like it before. We paid two more euros each to ride an elevator up to one of the spires, and are treated a fantastic view of the city.

After exploring the cathedral, Steve and I go in search of three more Gaudi architectural treasures, the Casa Milla, the Parc Guell, and the Discorda. I foolishly suggest we walk to these different sites, which were spread throughout the Eixample neighborhood. The first site along the way, the Casa Milla, was built without using a straight line. It's interesting to look at, but by the time we arrive, there is a line of tourists that stretches down the block. We decide to skip the tour of Casa Milla and continue on to Parc Guell.

10:00 a.m., February 22nd, Parc Guell: Parc Guell is a one-hour walk, uphill, from Casa Milla. Upon seeing the park, I decide that it was worth the long and arduous hike. Set in the foothills around Barcelona, Parc Guell is part nature and part fantasy. It is teeming with people, excitedly exploring the fusion of man-made, fantastic elements incorporated into its natural surroundings. My favorite part of the park is the fountain at the entrance—a mosaic dragon with its mouth opens and water spilling out of it. The dragon seems to me to be Barcelona's mascot. You can't walk down the streets without

seeing merchandise incorporating the dragon and variations thereof. I love the dragon, it is so ugly that it is cute.



After spending an hour or so looking around the park, Steve and I walk all the way down Passeg de Gracia (the main avenue through the Eixample) to Placa de Catalunya. On the way, we pass the last major Gaudi site, the Discordia. The Discordia is a grouping of three buildings with completely different facades. They so different that it appears the buildings were just randomly placed, ergo the name, Discordia.

The rest of the afternoon is spent further exploring Las Ramblas looking for souvenirs. Besides the usual retail stores, Las Ramblas is littered with small souvenir stores, with hyper-aggressive sales people.

Barcelona Revealed: Scene from a souvenir store

Steve looks at a t-shirt. It's sort of cool, but he's unsure whether it's the right style/color/whatever. He decides that he's not going to buy the shirt.

Salesperson watches Steve

Salesperson: You like that shirt?

Steve: It's okay, but I don't think I'm going to buy it right now.

Salesperson: I give you special, seven euros.

Steve: That's alright. I might come back to get it.

Steve begins to walk away, the aggressive salesperson follows him.

Salesperson: You like, I give you. Six euros.

Steve gives Alden a look, like 'we gotta get outta here!'

Salesperson: Right now, I make you special, five euros!

Steve and Alden quickly exit the shop.

We conclude our day by stopping in a Pans and Company. Pans and Company is the McDonalds of Spain. But it's really, really good. The branch next to our hotel is always

packed with people. After having the Provencal (a grilled chicken and mushroom sandwich on an olive baguette) I'm exhausted, so I leave with Steve back to the Regencia Colon.

9:00 a.m., February 23rd, Las Ramblas, Caruso Coffee House: Coffee is really strong in Spain. The taste, to me, is somewhere between black coffee and espresso. Even though the portion is rather small (tea-cup sized) I can never get through an entire serving of the stuff either negro (black) or con leche (with milk). On the flip side, it's rather affordable also, at about 1.5 euros a cup. In Barcelona, the thing to have with coffee in the morning is pastas, or pastries. My favorite is the pastas con crema, or pastry filled with crème. It's usually a croissant style pastry with a custard style crème. Seriously, it's the best croissant I've ever had in my life. Like London, service is rather slow compared to American standards. So breakfast takes about an hour, even though Steve and I have just a cup of coffee and a crème pastry each.

After we get our bearings, we decide to explore another neighborhood in Barcelona, El Raval. El Raval is the 'seedy' part of Barcelona, where the prostitutes and other unsavory characters come out at night. Barcelona officials are working to clean up that image, and retail outfits are beginning to penetrate the neighborhood. The goal of our foray into El Raval is to go to a shop called 'G.I. Joe' to check out cool European military surplus and to visit a street market at the Placa de San Antoni. Both turn out to be less than what we expected. We blame the Barcelona tour guide published by Let's Go, as it tends to oversell the restaurants and stores featured in its book.

11:30 a.m., February 23rd, Palau Guell: After striking out at G.I. Joe and the street market, we head back towards Las Ramblas to see some minor attractions, the Palau Guell and the Picasso museum. Palau Guell is the home of the man who financed the Parc Guell, built by Gaudi. His home is at the edge of El Raval, adjacent to Las Ramblas. Much like the day before, we arrive to another long line of tourists. But this time we decide to stick it out and wait for a chance to get in. After about ten minutes of not knowing what was going on, we find out that there were no more tours of Palau Guell, and that we needed to come back the next day at ten. An hour and ten blocks later, we also discover that the Picasso museum is closed. A lot of things are closed on Mondays in Spain.

The latter half of the day was devoted to shopping. We go shopping for souvenirs, shopping for clothes, shopping for anything to fill up our suitcases. At the end of the day, we start to pack our suitcases. They are stuffed to the brim.

2:00 p.m., February 24th, Frankfurt Airport: We've just arrived for a long flight to Dulles. It's about nine hours to Washington from Germany. We're exhausted from our trip and sad to leave beautiful Spain.