

There's a Serenading Croatian at my Door (12 January)

Down to breakfast in the youth hostel and my thoughts cause me trouble. I've just been thinking, 'this will be uncomfortable; breakfast alone at a communal table'. Sometimes it's preferable to sit alone. 'Alone' happens for less than 60 seconds before the radar of a stockily-built, grey-haired man in his late 50s homes in on me, and the origin of the radar sits down opposite with his breakfast tray.

He smiles at me but doesn't immediately break into either Spanish or English. There are a zillion other empty tables so I assume he intends speaking to me. To break the ice, I ask if he's French, using my best aeons-ago schoolgirl French.

"No, are you?" He responds in French.

Having set the record straight about languages, I discover he's Croatian, his name's Davor, and he's a professional chess player now living in Valencia. He tells me he travels extensively to chess tournaments, and wherever he goes he takes his guitar and laptop with him. He tells me all this in English, preferring to speak English with me though he says his Spanish is 'perfect'. Oh great, I think, and inwardly groan: the old 'let me practise my English on you' routine. In fact, as we talk, I discover his main method of communication is Spanglish.

Davor's a randy blighter. Within minutes he's trying to ascertain my movements for this morning, but I tell him I'm going to the Archive of the Indies to do research. A blatant lie. He doesn't understand the word 'archive' in either language, so I explain.

"Documents. Historical documents." He seems unimpressed but out of his depth at the same time.

"So, is that your job? I mean, are you historian?" He leaves out the articles.

"No, I'm doing research. I'm a writer."

"Do you get paid?" The words mingle with the food he's constantly shovelling in.

"No, not yet." He finds this enormously funny, then quickly moves on to my lunchtime plans.

"There's Chinese restaurant down road with two-course lunch just costing 10E (\$17)." This man needs serious lessons in dating etiquette. Asking out a woman he's known for less than five minutes to a restaurant frequented by university students, openly admitting to being a skinflint, and not even offering to buy her lunch. Davor,

who didn't make much of an impression to begin with, is fast losing his chances entirely.

"I'm at the end of my time in Spain, and I'm reducing expenses." This too he finds enormously funny, repeating it several times, though he still doesn't offer to buy me lunch.

"I have a lot of work to do at the archive. I'll be there all day."

In his Spanglish, I make out something about 'woman' and 'tonight', and I'm really not sure if he's being so blatant as to say that he wants a woman for the night. His next words come through loud and clear, "After chess match."

To be on the safe side, I decide to take his advances as a joke. I laugh, tell him he's a dangerous man, and say that I'll see him tomorrow at breakfast.

Between eating and talking he barely stops for breath, and simultaneously keeps twisting his head this way and that to scan the room and the doorway, as if on the lookout for the secret police. Or perhaps a better proposition than a researcher/writer. It's disconcerting.

Jumping crazily between English and Spanish, he now says something bizarre about bulls jumping fences and losing their balls. Then he points to himself, laughs, and says he's castrated too. I've no idea what he's getting at; perhaps he means he's had a vasectomy? Is he trying to reassure me he won't try it on with me ... or that if he does I don't have to fear bearing his offspring?? Thrillingly romantic stuff.

"So when will I see you again?" This man gets top marks for persistence.

I repeat slowly. "At – breakfast – tomorrow."

I can't wait to flee from this maniac, and when I can do so without appearing too obviously rude, I stupidly tell him my room number in response to his asking for it. Was I given a truth serum at birth or something? Asked a direct question, I give a direct answer. While he's stashing his breakfast tray, I make a dash up the stairs to my room and swiftly close the door behind me.

No more than ten minutes go by before I hear the strains of guitar music outside, followed soon after by a knock at my door. I was married to a Spaniard for almost 30 years, but it takes a crazed Croatian to serenade me!

"I'm busy!" I call out, and after another couple of songs the strains waft away down the hallway as Davor retreats.

About an hour later, ready to meet my mystery man again, and judging it to be safe to make a getaway, I quietly open the door and scan the hallway. Clear! Locking the

door as fast as I can, I hoof it down the stairs and inspect the reception area. Also clear. Secret agent stuff. No Davor waiting for me at the front door either. Breathing deeply with relief I brave the 7° air and confront a nippy wind. The sky is gloriously blue and sunny.

On my way to visit mystery man, I stop at the fantabulous Plaza de España (Spanish Square) for a second look. This has to be the most magnificent Plaza de España in the whole of Spain. (As far as I'm aware, every Spanish city has one.) The Spanish do GRAND very well. Tall towers at either end topped by intricate ceramic domes and spires adorn a brick building in a half ellipse shape. The brickwork is of various attractive earthy tones. Each region of Spain (as they were in 1929; many of the names and actual areas of the regions have since changed) is represented in ornate and superbly detailed ceramic tile-work bench seats surrounding the square. I snap a photo of Barcelona's, depicting a knight kneeling before his King and Queen and surrounded by courtiers and Indian slaves. Having spent so much time in Cádiz province I'd like to take a photo of the Cádiz bench. But it's occupied by a Japanese girl engrossed in a Spanish phrase book, speaking the phrases out loud; I haven't the heart to ask her to abandon her sunny spot.

A moat spanned by four bridges decorated in the same brick and ceramic style and a central fountain complete the stunning design of the square. Workmen in blue overalls bustle about restoring much of the square's tile work.

Gypsy women holding rosemary sprigs and red carnations try to thrust their flowers and prophecies upon me – for payment, of course. They don't pursue me when I say "*no gracias*", but I speak to one in passing, standing near a bridge in the sun.

"You've got a nice sunny spot there." She smiles and replies, just as well, earlier it was freezing. I wish her a nice day and she sends me on my way with a free blessing.

Now I've reached the little camera repair shop tucked into its corner of the fortress wall. I'm going inside. In my hand is clutched the envelope with its pale green letter. I push open the door and the tiny bell jangles. Any moment he will appear, peering at me over his long-vision glasses. I'm trying hard not to hyperventilate.

The man who comes down the small flight of stairs from the workshop into the shop is wearing glasses, but he's not peering over them and he isn't my mystery man.

At least I have a contingency plan. Without missing a beat I ask the interloper a photography-related question.

“Do you download from memory stick to CD?”

He responds “yes”, and I’m frantically thinking, should I nonchalantly ask about his business partner? But even as I’m thinking it I know I won’t. I’ll obey the signs; this is the second time I’ve come and been unsuccessful. It’s just not meant to be. The situation brings to mind a proverb quoted by a Dutch friend recently, *Van het concert des lewens krygt niem and een program*: ‘Of the concert of life nobody gets a programme.’ I could never have known how this would turn out, and hey, it was worth a shot!

The blow to my romantic crusade calls for two coffees, which I take in the atmospheric Café de Indias, decorated in the style of 19th century coffee-houses. I sit at a table, instead of at the bar, and am hit an extra 60 Euro cents (\$1) for the privilege. Putting mystery man out of my mind now for good, I focus on what I want to achieve today.

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From the Plaza de las Armas, I walk across the Cachorro Bridge to the site of the 1992 Universal Expo ...

An air of neglect now surrounds the site, which is fenced off. In the surrounding area, however, a sign indicates plenty of activity: a cinema, the International University of Andalucía, an Olympic stadium, a technological park and an amusement park, the Isla Magica (Magic Island). Magic Island and the technological park are built on parts of the former Expo site.

On my way to peer through the fence at the old Expo site, I’m startled by roaming dogs barking at me. Homeless people living in unroadworthy vans stare belligerently as I pass, reclining on fold-up chairs outside their vans. I mutter a greeting that I hope sounds friendly, and they lazily call their dogs to heel.

Back in 1992 we were astounded at the size of the vast Expo car parks; it was always a mission, at the end of the day, to locate our parking spot. Most of these car parks are now vacant lots with grass growing up through cracks in the neglected concrete. Paradoxically, cars are mounted up on pavements and squeezed into any available space in the areas surrounding the car parks. I wonder at the short-sightedness of city council bureaucrats.

Hoping to find a pleasant place to walk and have lunch I go down to the river, but graffiti, broken beer bottles and piles of ash from night-time fires of the homeless spoil the promenade. These forsaken surroundings speak volumes. They are adjacent to the '92 Expo site, a proudly vibrant place swarming with hundreds of thousands of local and international visitors daily, yet today the feeling is like visiting an unkempt graveyard...

Despite the less than perfect spot, it's pleasant enough sitting on a stone bench watching the Guadalquivir River flow by below me. I tuck into my home-made sandwich. In broad daylight it's safe here – the Cachorro Bridge, packed with pedestrians and traffic, looms comfortingly close above me.

After lunch I cross the road to Triana, a suburb famous for producing ceramics and pottery. In the Andalusí era (13th to 17th centuries), tiles made in Seville were in great demand and the profession continues to flourish.

The usual way to reach Triana is across the Isabel II Bridge, also known as the Triana Bridge. That would have taken me directly to the Plaza del Altozano from which all the main streets of Triana branch out. But, in my contrary way, I want to seek out the ceramics workshops and make this an adventure of discovery. I find myself, instead of in the modern centre of Triana, in a poor area, eventually stumbling across the workshops with their retail outlets attached. All are closed for lunch, but I can see the wares and best of all the ornately decorated ceramic tile façades, in themselves works of art.

Cerámica Santa Ana takes the prize. The life-size Greek goddesses of Work and Prudence stand above beautifully tiled columns worked predominantly in blues and golds. In the Calle Alfarería there's Cerámica Santa Isabel, founded 1789, and Fábrica de Cerámica Artística M.G. Montalván. The building beside this belongs to the same owner. It's being gutted; an obsolete 'closed' sign hangs at one of its doors. I hope they retain the façade with its beautiful blue and white tiles. Close by, in the Calle Antillano Campos, is a sculptor's workshop located in an elaborate three-storey 1940's building. The ornate plasterwork of the façade is painted in terracotta tones, the undersides of the balconies decorated in blue and white tiling.

Walking out of the ceramics quarter I spy a short, narrow alleyway ending in an archway that leads to the river. It's ominously named Callejón de la Inquisición, Inquisition Alleyway. Even in the bright sunlight, I shiver. I read in the tourism publication 'The Tourist Seville' that this alleyway led to the "dismal and feared"

Castle of Triana, headquarters of Seville's infamous Inquisition Courts until the 18th century.

Down the Calle Castilla several buildings are undergoing restoration. A handsome banner hangs from one of them announcing "Programme of Conservation and Restoration of Our Heritage – Support for Private Restoration". It seems the local authorities provide a financial incentive to private homeowners to restore historically important buildings.

On the old wrought-iron balconies of these elegant buildings, I visualise beautiful 19th century señoritas with black hair and flashing eyes. Dressed in brightly-coloured flouncy Sevillana dresses and mantilla shawls, they gaze down upon their ardent, serenading young admirers.

Triana is home to many an illustrious flamenco artist. On the façade of a building in the street Clara de Jesús Montero, I read a tribute in ceramic tile work to one singer's "unforgettable and honeyed voice".

Back on the other side of the river I discover a pretty walk along the riverbank between the Cachorro and Triana bridges. People laze about sunning themselves. It would've been pleasant to eat lunch here; I'll know for next time! Returning to the riverside walk on Calle Arjona with its displays of affluence – sunning salons, Mercedes Benz concessionary, banks – I check the map and see it's a long, straight walk back to the hostel. Timing myself from the bus station at 4.15 p.m., I walk home in the glorious afternoon sunshine, taking it slowly; I'm tired now. Except for the coffee and lunch break, I've been walking all day.

It takes 45 minutes of unhurried walking to return to the hostel. When I pick up my room key I book in for another night. Taking Davor's lead I pay the single room rate of 16,50E (\$28). Being out of season it's unlikely I'll need to share with anyone. Davor said he's alone in a triple-bed room paying the single rate (OK, Davor's not the only miser!). Thinking about Davor, albeit not necessarily in a complimentary way, manifests the man himself. These troublesome thoughts of mine. On my way upstairs, I bump into a much-subdued Croatian. Does he feel silly about this morning's crooning? Or maybe he just has his afternoon chess game on his mind.

"I'm off to work now," he says, his mind clearly elsewhere. Somehow I don't think he'll be knocking on my door tonight. I breathe a premature sigh of relief.

Changing from sports shoes and jeans to heels and good pants, I wander down the road in search of a teashop; after a day spent walking, I richly deserve tea and cake.

The first place I find, noisy and hazy with cigarette smoke, is packed with students. But close by – down the road and around the corner – I find a tiny place with just two tables. It's empty of people but packed with yummy cakes, including one of my favourites, *mil hojas*, multiple layers of flaky pastry interspersed with meringue.

Few people in Spain drink tea English style. They generally drink it black, and except in classy joints they usually give you a glass with the teabag in it, not a teapot. If you ask for milk they give you hot milk. I'm the only patron at the moment so I school the young girl to give me a teapot, cup, jug of boiling water for an extra cup (the teapot is a little one), and a small jug of cold milk. She smiles at me indulgently.

Table service plus all this special treatment costs me no extra – only 1,60E (\$2.70) for tea and a pastry.

I'm content to return home to do some writing and turn in for an early night. I'd thought of returning to La Carbonería and taking in more flamenco atmosphere, but that doesn't start until 10 p.m. and I'm too weary. At 8.30 p.m. I turn out the light.

But my mind is too active and I toss and turn. At 9.30 p.m., a radar homes in on my wakefulness. A knock at the door, followed by Davor's voice.

"I just get back from chess game. I lose." He sounds forlorn.

"I'm sorry to hear it," I say through the door, "but I'm already in bed. I'll talk to you in the morning."

"I feel down. I need company. Come for coffee with me? I need talk with someone."

The rogue has sensed the sentimental streak in me. I don't have the heart to turn him down. A coffee can't take long, can it?

"OK, Davor. Give me 10 minutes and I'll come for a coffee with you. Only a coffee, OK?"

"Sure. I wait here for you." Sounds of guitar music begin in the hallway, reminiscent of this morning's solo performance.

In my half-asleep and none-too-enthusiastic state, it takes me longer than 10 minutes to get ready. Impatient, he knocks again.

"Are you coming?"

"Almost ready."

I don't bother with makeup but obviously make an impression on Davor anyway. When he sees me his face assumes the expression of an excited and mischievous puppy.

“Maybe we have something to eat, no? More than coffee, eh?” He chuckles.

Guitar strap slung over his shoulder, Davor strikes up a tune and begins crooning even before we’re through the doorway of the hostel. A tall, lean, miserable-looking businessman I noticed this morning at breakfast walks out at the same time. He looks at us longingly, seeking out company. I think about inviting him along, but he seems so wretchedly desperate I intuitively know my sentimental streak could have me doubly in trouble.

The next hour or two is spent in an inn down the road in the awkward company of a man who has no sense of the ridiculous. Between songs, sips of beer and cramming his mouth with little fried fish, he edges nearer to me on the pretext of “needing more space for my guitar”. Squished into a corner with no means of escape, I eye my watch and think to myself, “I’m giving this guy half an hour more, that’s it”. Finally, I can say it without appearing too rude.

At my door, bidding me goodnight, Davor makes a beeline for the mouth. I see his intention and deftly dodge, aborting his kiss and offering my cheek instead for a neutral goodnight. He looks disappointed but doesn’t insist, thank goodness.

Goodnight, Davor, you crazy Croatian.