

Homage to Andalusia

By Kerry Pechter Thu, Mar 1, 2018

Sevilla's residents radiated a comforting joie de vivre. That, along with the Andalusian sunshine, made my spouse and I think seriously about returning, if not retiring, to southern Spain.



In the tiny Pennsylvania borough where I live, you rarely see clusters of older people gathered outdoors in February—not unless it's "\$4 night" at our downtown movie house and a popular film is showing. Blockbuster, RedBox, Netflix and Amazon Prime have all failed to retire our 70-year-old Emmaus Theater.

But in Seville, Spain, where I spent part of January and February, you see lots of older people outside day and night. The sight of strolling elderly couples, of pensioners perched at pub tables outside the tapas bars, of matrons choosing bug-eyed langoustinos from beds of ice chips in La Mercado de Triana, made Seville seem like a convivial spot to grow old in.



Like illness, social isolation is a serious hazard of old age. In Pennsylvania, where cold weather can keep retirees housebound for months, the risk of a lonely old age feels very real. But no such problem seemed to exist in Andalusia, a sunny, arid region of southwestern Spain that has been ruled by successive waves of Tartessians, Carthaginians, Romans, Visigoths, and Moors before evolving into the Spain we know today.

It felt sometimes as if those foreign invaders never entirely left Seville, thanks to the palaces, churches and fortifications they left behind—and thanks to the ongoing invasion by tourists. Spain averages about 1.6 million tourists a week. Platoons of Chinese arrive by the busload. In the Barrio Santa Cruz, where the famous Alcazar Palace and Giralda Tower are located, the tourists (along with an army of attendant waiters, [street musicians](#), gypsies selling rosemary sprigs, and drivers of horse-drawn carriages) generate a kind of manufactured buzz that amplifies the local buzz.

But the tourist trade doesn't entirely explain the impression of an ongoing, entertaining circus of activity throughout the day and evening in Seville, a city of about 700,000. Across the Guadalquivir River (the name means "Big River" in transliterated Arabic) from the Barrio Santa Cruz, there's a busy middle-class neighborhood called Triana. Local residents of all ages fill the pedestrian malls and the outdoor tables of sidewalk restaurants there. North of Barrio Santa Cruz, there's a large open space called the Alameda de Hercules that's lined with cafes. Outside one of them, a couple of dozen people in their 20s were swing-dancing to Big Band music. That was in the middle of a weekday.



Seville's festivity doesn't stop the inevitable consequences of old age, of course. While exploring one of the narrow stone-paved alleys (where old granite millwheels or "botarruedas" still reinforce the lower walls of villas, hostels and hotels), I saw a sign that said, *Centro de Mayores*, or Senior Center. Visible through a plate glass window was a group of pale, slow-moving, white-haired men and women in grey gowns. A few grasped the handles of walkers or slumped in wheelchairs. Their dayroom was clean and bright with garish fluorescent light. My request to enter and look around was politely denied.

A desire to research Spain's retirement system for *RIJ* was my initial inspiration for visiting Seville. What I learned helped explain what I saw on the streets. For the past few decades at least, a typical male average-income worker in Spain could expect to retire at age 65 on a pension that replaces about 80% of his final or near-to-final income. After Greece, Spain has had the most generous national pension in the European Union.

The pension (along with the national health care system) is funded by a payroll tax of about 30%, of which

employers pay 25%. This system isn't quite as secure as it might sound: Housewives, as well as the owners and employees of Spain's many small businesses, can fall outside of pension coverage. But the ample pension may explain the lack of anxiety that many people in Seville seemed to enjoy. As I reported a few weeks ago, however, the Spanish social security system is running an annual deficit of about \$18 billion.

As for the young swing-dancers and buskers that made Seville's streetscape so lively—their presence might have been a symptom Spain's unemployment crisis. Nationally, the jobless rate is about 18%, down from about 25% during the Eurozone's 2010 financial crisis. To achieve even an 18% rate, Spanish workers had to accept an across-the-board pay cut of up to 15%. Spain has succeeded in attracting tourists and foreign investment precisely because of that humbling “internal devaluation.”

A cynic might attribute Seville's charms to a tourist's illusions—a sunglasses-tinted view of a first-world society that is, frankly, enduring hard times. Still, the city's residents radiated a modest, comforting *joie de vivre* (and an implicit desire to be in each other's company) that I rarely feel back in Emmaus, Pa. It satisfied my inner hunger for the presence of lots of other people and the potential to know them. That, along with the reliable Andalusian sunshine, made me and my spouse think seriously about returning, if not retiring, to Seville.

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