

The running of the bulls

By : RAFAEL HERNANDEZ COLON

Volume: 33 | No: 30

Page : 21

Issued : 08/04/2005

They came from Australia, China, the U.S., the Caribbean, Central and South America, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Africa to put their lives at risk, running ahead of the bulls through the streets of Pamplona, Spain. The yearly festivities honoring San Fermín, the patron saint of the Pamplona diocese, have gained international renown. Three hundred foreign journalists were accredited this year by municipal authorities. Television news around the globe covered the event.

From city hall, my wife Nelsa; Erwin and Hans, two of my grandchildren; my nephew José Alberto; and I witnessed the *encierro*, as the event is called. We were in Pamplona visiting the University of Navarra, where my nephew will begin studies next September. The university is top-of-the-line in Spanish higher education. The first-class research & development being conducted by the university medical sciences faculty provides a useful model for Puerto Rico not only in terms of quality, but integration of university research and funding from private-sector companies.

At the behest of the university rector, the mayor was kind enough to invite us as her guests to city hall for the festivities' most exhilarating moments. These began July 7, at noon, with the *chupinazo*, a big bang from fireworks shot into the sky from city hall.

Pamplona has a population of 200,000 people. For the weeklong festivities, visitors swell that number by the hundreds of thousands. Of course, the vast majority of these people aren't runners. They are people who come to enjoy the fiesta. The morning the festivities begin, the crowds turn out dressed in white with red sashes around their waist. When the *chupinazo* goes off, they tie red scarves around their necks. They wear these throughout the festivities, where color, music, dance, and wine in abundance lift the spirits of young and old as they commemorate San Fermín.

During the week of festivities, *pamplonenses* and visitors, dressed in white with the red adornments, will be having a good or perhaps a rather wild time. There are bull runs each morning and bullfights each evening, rock and other concerts well into the night, and people everywhere, on crowded streets, in plazas, cafés, and bars. To enjoy the event, you can't be afraid of crowds.

The fiesta for the patron saint has been going on forever, but it received international attention when Ernest Hemingway began to visit and wrote about it in the fifties. The mystique of Hemingway's passing through events or places is still powerful. Many others and I have visited Harry's bar in Venice, just because Hemingway spent his nights there drinking, conversing, and basking in the magic of the gondoliers and the canals. I have followed Hemingway's tracks to La Floridita in Havana, which he made his home for many years. His bronze bust is exhibited in a corner near La Floridita bar, and you feel his

presence when you take in a daiquiri. The Hemingway mystique is so powerful that a restaurant in Madrid near El Arco de Cuchilleros has a sign on its front door stating, tongue in cheek, “Hemmingway never ate here.”

Nonetheless, Hemingway wasn't the only one to write about the running of the bulls in Pamplona. James Michener also wrote about the fiesta in his book on Spain, spreading interest about this thrilling encounter of hundreds of runners with the majestic beasts. The event's attraction continues to attract literary giants. This year, Mario Vargas Llosa was there, just as excited as the rest of us at city hall as we awaited the rocket blast that signaled the release of the bulls upon the narrow cobblestone streets.

Perched upon one of the balconies of the 18th-century baroque city hall, Nelsa, the children, and I watched the narrow street below, which was crowded with hundreds of nervous runners, who were clad in white and red, awaiting the rocket blast. They were young and old, mostly men but some were women. Nelsa, who is filled with wonder at the mystery of life, was as excited as a child going to the circus for the first time. Vibrations of courage and fear emanated from the street. The rocket blast went off—the fiesta exploded—and the bulls came charging around the corner like horses off and running on a racetrack. The hundreds of nervous runners who filled the street below darted ahead, desperately running to reach the bullring just a few blocks away or trying to ply themselves into some doorway or nook or cranny in the walls to avoid being gored by the charging beasts.

In seconds, the bulls were running below us and instantly went by. The good runners were running with the bulls, some were ahead running from them, and others behind them. It was chaos. Right in front of us, a runner fell to the street but didn't panic; he just laid flat as the bull ahead of the herd ran over him, spilling blood from his head on the cobblestones. He continued to lay still while the rest of the herd ran over him. Fortunately, no bull stopped to pay attention to him and he finally got up as they all passed, suffering no serious injury from the bulls' horns. Others throughout the years haven't been so lucky. Runners have been gored and some have lost their lives, but no serious injury occurred at the event we witnessed.

What drives the runners from all continents to Pamplona? They don't come with the spirit of the matador to kill in the arena, but are aware they may be killed in the narrow cobbled streets when the bulls charge forward. They come to risk their lives, for the satisfaction of a fleeting and thrilling encounter, eye-to-eye with a majestic animal that, at the turn of his powerful torso, can gore the life out of them. The fiesta is a celebration of fear overcome with determination. It commemorates San Fermín, but it also celebrates courage with gusto.