Viva San Fermin!

Works Cited

Full text
It kept up day and night for seven days. The dancing kept up, the drinking kept up, the noise went on. The things that happened could only have happened during a fiesta. Everything became quite unreal finally and it seemed as though nothing could have any consequences. It seemed out of place to think of consequences during the fiesta.

Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*

The fiesta of San Fermin in Pamplona, Spain, is still just as Ernest Hemingway described it in 1926, only more so-more dancing, more drinking, and much more noise, thanks to giant stereophonic speakers. When Hemingway first visited in 1923, Pamplona was a small, obscure town, and he and his friends were the only foreigners there. Now the city has grown to 184,000, and its population doubles every July 6 for the weeklong fiesta. Most of the revelers are still Spanish, but today visitors arrive from all over the world. Many things haven't changed, though. Thousands of brave souls still flock to San Fermin each year to run with the bulls through the city's narrow streets.

I had read Hemingway and James Michener on Pamplona, and had traveled in Spain. None of it prepared me for Sanfermines, as the locals call the fiesta that honors San Fermin, the martyr and patron saint of Pamplona.

When I stepped onto my balcony on the first morning of the fiesta, the streets were transformed by streams of people. They all wore the uniform of Sanfermines-white pants and shirt, red waist-sash and neckerchief. Many of them carried champagne, wine, or musical instruments. They were hurrying toward the town hall square, called the Ayuntamiento, where the fiesta would officially begin at noon.

At the stroke of 12, a rocket boomed overhead. The crowd roared, in Spanish and Basque, "Viva San Fermin! Goa San Fermin!"

And then the celebration exploded. Brass bands struck up music. Cheap fiesta champagne sprayed all over the square, mixing occasionally with a rain of red wine—the fiesta's traditional baptism.

Like its cousin, the Roman Saturnalia, Sanfermines suspends the usual rules and norms of behavior and gives everyone a license to excess. People drink too much. The music blasting from the bars is far too loud and stops for only an hour or two after dawn. The streets quickly pile up with discarded plastic cups, sandwich wrappers, beer bottles, and other trash. (The heroic municipal workers manage to sweep things up once a day or so.) People swirl and reel through the streets, which are often clogged with bodies. It all contributes to a feeling that anything can happen—anything goes.
It's no place for the anxious, the prim, or the faint of heart. Late on the first night, when the fiesta was careening along at full crank, I bumped into a Texan I'd met earlier in the day. "I'm leaving tomorrow on an early bus," he said earnestly. "This is chaos. I have to get out of here."

On the other hand, some people build their summers around Pamplona. Steve Ibarra, for instance, an American flight attendant from Miami, FL, has returned to run in Pamplona for 13 years, and now comes with a handful of friends. He has been to Carnaval in Rio de Janeiro, Mardi Gras in New Orleans, and Oktoberfest in Vienna. "This is by far the best," he says.

The Epicenter of Celebration

The whole town pulses and shakes, but the fiesta's epicenter is the old city, where a maze of narrow cobblestone streets radiates from numerous squares. The most important of these is the wide Plaza del Castillo. With its wraparound arcade, shops, and open-air bars, the plaza is the best place to view the passing carnival. But prime real estate also means higher prices. The bars here sell the most expensive beer and wine at the fiesta. (In general, prices at least double during this week, but wine, beer, and sandwiches are still inexpensive in the many small stores throughout town.)
Originally a Basque settlement, Pamplona was conquered and rebuilt in 68 B.C. by the Romans.
Every night at 11, the live music on the plaza is interrupted by 15 or 20 minutes of spectacular fireworks. It's a short walk to the park where the fireworks take place, though they're also visible from the plaza.

Meander off the Plaza del Castillo in any direction at any hour and you'll run into something interesting. Maybe a marching band followed by a crowd of dancers, or some uninhibited Australians diving off a fountain into their companions' arms, or a group of young people squirting wine into each others' mouths from wineskins. But beware. If a gypsy woman attempts to hand you a sprig of herbs, brush past her—she wants to read your palm and harangue you for a fee. (The fiesta is also a pickpocket's paradise, so take precautions.) If you walk north and east you'll soon reach the stone ramparts of the old city, with views across the Rio Arga to the hilly countryside of Navarre.

At some point, you will encounter the bulk of the Gothic cathedral, looking lonely during the fiesta. It was begun in the 14th century and finished in the 16th—but the fiesta is older. The first reference to the fiesta of San Fermin dates to 1324, when it was celebrated in October. Autumn temperatures in the foothills of the Pyrenees probably chilled the festivities. In 1591, the authorities moved Sanfermines to early July, when the fine weather made it pleasant to celebrate outdoors all day and all night. Pamplona itself is ancient. Originally a Basque settlement, the town was conquered and rebuilt in 68 B.C. by the sons of Pompey, the Roman general and political leader.

If You Fall, Don't Get Up

No one knows when the men of Pamplona began running with the bulls through the cobblestone streets. It's said that the town butchers started the tradition, running with the animals as they were driven to the bullring from their holding pens near the river. Yet, for hundreds of years, thousands have tested their courage by racing against fate and the bulls. Hemingway popularized the event in The Sun Also Rises, but despite his frequent visits to the fiesta, he never ran.

Over the years, it became a fad among young travelers "doing" Europe, and now the run is packed with daredevils—dangerously packed, say the veterans, who worry as much about the panicky crowd of "one-timers" as about the 1,100-pound (500 kilogram) bulls.
Every morning, the fiesta pauses for the running. Even most of the bars shut down briefly. The runners head toward the Ayuntamiento around 7:00. Police and municipal workers clear the route of sleeping drunks, bystanders, and dangerous trash. Some 200 medical personnel take their positions along the route. Spectators perch on the balconies above the route and behind the barricades that shut off the crossstreets. The bulls, unaware of all these preparations, wait in a pen at the bottom of town.

By 7:45, a pack of 1,000 to 3,000 runners crowds the Ayuntamiento, threatening to burst through a police line. Most of the runners are young men. Some are still tipsy and giddy from the night's partying. Veteran runners wear pads on their wrists, knees, and elbows, as protection against the cobblestones.

Some of the runners carry rolled up newspapers, the only "weapon" allowed. Women are no longer forbidden to run, but they're scarce.

A few minutes before 8:00, the police step aside for the runners, who quickly walk or jog to positions on the 0.75-mile (1.2-kilometer) route. Most head to Estafeta Street, the slim straightaway that spills out in front of the bullring. The more frightened runners sprint immediately to the ring, arriving long before the bulls. The Spaniards mockingly call these runners los valientes-the brave ones.

Precisely at 8:00, a rocket blasts into the air from the corral, signaling the opening of the gate. Another rocket follows, usually within 30 seconds, which means that all six untamed bulls-and the six steers that help to keep them on track-are now loose on the street. The next few minutes are a blur of adrenaline, terror, and pandemonium as men and wild beasts rush together along the narrow route, cheered on by the roaring crowd. I stood on the street and watched the chaos sweep within a few feet of me. Before I had a chance to be scared, it was over.

Naturally, there are injuries. Most are caused by the human throng, which pushes, trips, and piles up, inflicting cuts, bruises, broken bones, and skull fractures. The bulls regularly do damage as well. To escape them, experienced runners sometimes duck into doorways. But a handful of runners are gored every year. Since 1924, 13 people have been killed, most recently in 1995 when a young American made the fatal error of getting up after he had fallen, attracting the attention of a nearby raging bull. The one piece of advice that veterans always give is, "If you fall, don't get up until someone tells you it's O.K."

Later in the hot afternoon, the bulls will fight and die in the bullring. Tickets for the spectacle are sold long in advance, so if you decide to go at the last minute, plan to pay a scalper $30 to $40, at least twice the regular price. Unless you enjoy getting drenched with beer and wine, avoid the sections where the penas, or social clubs, sit and wreak happy havoc.
Left: A troupe of Basque dancers prepares for a performance.
Most of the penas have bands, and before the bullfight they raucously march to the ring, horns blaring, drums pounding, and banners swooping, as their bearers dance and dip. They usually wear the traditional red and white (heavily stained with wine), but sometimes an entire pena will dress as Vikings or wear Charlie Chaplin masks and carry canes. Inside the bullring, the peas sit together, taking up about a third of the space. They assault each other with sprays of beer and wine, and also with music, simultaneously playing different songs as loudly as possible.

Outside the bullring, there's a statue of Hemingway. Someone always puts a red neckerchief on it at the start of the fiesta. Inscribed on the statue are Hemingway's two most important credentials in Pamplona: winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, and "friend of our town and admirer of our fiestas."

A Brief Pause in the Action

After the running, people drift to the cafes for a morning brandy or thick hot chocolate to talk about how it went that day. It's a democracy, the rookies mixing with legends such as Julen Madina, one of the great Basque runners, or Joe Distler, a New Yorker who has run here for 31 years. Then people move off to get a leisurely big breakfast, or maybe just a bag of fresh churros, Pamplona's version of the donut, from the oldest chuchurria in town (on the Calle de la Manueta), where giant vats of oil boil furiously over blazing wood fires.

One morning after the run I went to breakfast with an American teacher and writer named Larry Mazlack, who has been running here for 20 years. On a quiet cobblestone street, we sat at long tables covered with paper. His Spanish friends there welcomed him to another year's fiesta and accepted me without hesitation. We started with small chorizos (spicy sausages) on bread, and moved on to ham, potatoes, and eggs with tomato sauce, accompanied by the good red wine of Spain.

Suddenly, a man sitting across from me began singing fortissimo, his neck veins bulging. His forceful, beautiful tenor filled the narrow street. His song was a traditional air about farmers going to work in the fields and coming home with flowers in their hair, for their women.

Over brandy and coffee, we ate and talked, interrupted occasionally by another passionate serenade from the tenor. Some of the men studied the newspaper pictures from yesterday's running, analyzing bulls, levels of courage, and errors. After two-and-a-half hours, the table split the bill, which came to about $10 per person. Afterwards, a brief siesta. It felt close to paradise.

Lamenting the End

Soon after the daily bullfight, the party begins to rise again toward its nightly crescendo. Securing a glass of beer or wine may entail dancing your way to the bar. Crowds jam the streets. Music blares louder and louder. Like the dueling pena bands, the side-by-side bars pump out loud rock and roll throughout the old city. I didn't truly appreciate the word cacophony until Sanfermines.

The fiesta of San Fermin isn't for everyone. Even some of the people who enjoy it can only bear it for a day or two before staggering away, exhausted. But for others, the fiesta ends too quickly. At midnight on July 14, thousands gather with candles to mourn the dying fiesta and sing the traditional lament:

Poor me! Poor me! How sad I am Now that the feria of San Fermin Has ended. Woe is me! CA
Visitors to the Cafe Iruna relax amid the debris of the festival. The Iruna was a favorite haunt of Ernest Hemingway.

*The Basques are a people of unknown origin who settled the area of northern Spain on the Bay of Biscay bordering France.

**Indexing (details)**

- Title: Kemper, Steve
- Compressed Air

**Volume**

- Issue
- Pages
- Number of pages
- Publication year
- Publication Date
- Year
- Publisher
- Place of Publication
- Country of Publication
- Engineering--Mechanical Engineering, Machinery
- ISSN
- CODEN
- Source type
- Language of Publication
- Document Type
- ProQuest Document ID
- http://search.proquest.com/docview/194412843?accountid=130366
- Copyright
- Last Updated

**Databases:**

- ABI/INFORM Complete, ABI/INFORM Trade & Industry