Behind the scenes at a Madrid bullfighting arena

By Anja Hartwig

A red cape, swirling dust clouds and a tattoo of hooves. These are the essential features of any bullfight in Spain. A bullring, however, has a lot more to offer the visitor, as a tour around the Las Ventas arena in Madrid reveals.

Below the stands a high vaulted corridor leads around the ring of sand. Behind one of the doors is an emergency clinic, two operating rooms staffed with a total of eight doctors and a dormitory with eight beds. The facility is designed to ensure that any injuries sustained during the bullfighting spectacle can be swiftly attended to.

A recent patient here was well-known matador Julio Aparacio. He underwent an emergency appendectomy last May after receiving a goring. 'Fortunately something didn’t happen,' said Javier Bajo who works for the firm of Taurodeta which operates the arena. 'No matador has been killed here for a very long time.'

Usually it is the spectators who have to be treated here and not the toreros. 'There is capacity here for a crowd of 24,000 people and it is not uncommon for someone to feel dizzy or faint. Las Ventas is the world’s second-largest bullfighting venue in the world behind an arena in Venezuela.'

The sign on another door reads 'Toreros Chamber.' From this room the matadors can avoid the glare of the onlookers and marshal their thoughts in peace before going out to face the bull. Another place of contemplation is the chapel where the devotional items on the altar include a picture of the Virgin of La Paloma, a patron saint of the city.

At the foot of the altar are three cushions on which the torero can rest his knees before stepping into the lime-light. 'For most of the bullfighters going to the chapel is a ritual which has to be observed,' said Bajo. 'Naturally they ask the virgin to watch over them during the fight.'

Among the 400 staff at Las Ventas are 15 veterinary surgeons. In preparation for the fight on a Sunday the 500-kg, four-legs opponent.

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