



Viva Espana

Much to her surprise, **Julietta Jameson** discovers the pleasures of the bus on a highlights trip to Spain.

When I leave stylish Madrid in early morning sunshine on our big jolly bus marked Insight Tours across its sides for all the world to see. I can't believe I'm not embarrassed.

Daniel, our tour director, is sharing his thoughts on Spanish history: "El Cid just went along with whomever was paying the most money. People romanticise El Cid but ..."

Already he's reaching past the safe patter I had been expecting from a person in charge of some 35 bus-tour customers from around the world. We're not even out of the first city and he's taking a pot shot at a Spanish sacred cow, or bull as the case might be.

I thought I was not a bus person; nor a tour person. I was that person with the well-used *Lonely Planet* in the bag, a map at the ready, a phrase book in the back pocket.

But here I am with the next eight days organised for me, settling enthusiastically into my sizeable coach seat, my eyes eating up the passing landscapes and my ears devouring Daniel's stories, optimistic that I am going to enjoy what lies ahead very much.

This is Insight's 10-day Highlights of Spain tour and I have agreed to it because a) it's Spain and b) a great deal of the travelling public chooses to go this way. I suspect they may be on to something.

We are on our way east from the capital in the centre of Spain heading for Barcelona on the Mediterranean, an all-day drive. Two nights there and we will head south-west to Valencia. A night in Valencia and it's on around the coast to Granada. A night there and it's inland again for two nights in Seville. And back to Madrid for the last couple of nights.

"You're not on a holiday, you're on a tour," says Daniel, explaining that this is not a lie-by-the-pot kind of experience.

The point of the action-packed schedule is to introduce us to the country's best and hopefully inspire us to come back and spend more time, he says.

It's a comforting spin for the non-bus person. I settle in just that little bit more.

I arrived in Madrid two nights before the tour began and fell easily in love with the city. (What's not to love about the liveliest capital of a Latin country in Europe?) I was initially sad to leave. But as we piled into the bus the bonhomie and

bubbly get-to-know-you chit-chat had inspired a school-excursion kind of excitement. And then the unexpectedly diverse range of people I was travelling with won me over further.

They included two wealthy middle-aged couples from Istanbul, twentysomething couples from the US and Johannesburg; an older man from Ireland, two 50-year-old gals from British Columbia, and a delightful mother and daughter from Montreal as well as solo-travelling Australian women and some more Americans.

There's the landscape outside and the social landscape – observations, themes and running jokes – inside the coach and if you're willing to let it, I discover, the latter can provide as much joy as the former.

The outside landscape softens as we come into Catalonia. The Pyrenees, the soft blue sky, cypress trees and suddenly rising hills topped with watchtowers, churches, monasteries or castles inspire Daniel to wax lyrical.

"Every time I come back to Barcelona it becomes more modern and exciting," says the London-based guide. "Ask people where they want to live and they say Barcelona. The style is fantastic there, a mix of France and Italy."

I am realising that the key to a great tour is a great guide.

When we get to Barcelona, as with all places we visit, Insight gives us choices. There are half and full-day tours included in the price of the overall trip and optionals which are an additional expense.

Some travellers just use the coach, hotel and luggage transportation facilities and don't do any of the group activities, like the South African couple who mostly opt for romantic time alone. We later find out they got engaged during the trip.

In Barcelona I take all tours and, though I enjoy going to Montserrat for a half day to see the Black Madonna, when I leave the city I feel I haven't got to know it properly. I regret going to one dinner in the replica Spanish Village, built for the Expo in 1929 and now just visited by tourists.

You can understand why the meal was held there. Insight needs to organise meals in places that will feed their customers in a big group and at Anglo dinnertime rather than the Spanish evening meal hour of 9.30pm at the earliest. The meal was delicious and fun. But my experience (not everyone's) would have been better served by dinner with locals somewhere.

The landscape leaving Barcelona for Valencia is flat, an endless stream of orange and olive



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groves interrupted by ugly industrial estates and the nasty architecture of the Costas that have been inundated with Brits. You know that off the highway there will be more charm but that's not the point.

This is a highlights tour and getting from one highlight to the next in the shortest amount of bus time is the aim. And anyway, just when you think it's getting monotonous, an hour-and-a-half out of Valencia the landscape becomes hilly and forested and the farming is done on terraces. It's gorgeous.

When we arrive in Valencia we have a free half-day. It's an easily walked city and we all come back with different stories of our afternoons: of climbing the belltower or the amazing architecture of Santiago Calatrava or walking along the old river bed that is now a park. The Holy Grail in the cathedral is a big talking point.

We reach Granada and the pace slows. It's an emotional low in any tour, says Daniel, the just







► TRIP NOTES

- **Getting there** Insight Vacations' Highlights of Spain tour runs from November to March and is priced from \$2325 (land only). Price includes accommodation in good hotels, many meals, smaller group sizes limited to 40 passengers and the benefit of Insight Vacations' expert tour directors and guides. The Insight Vacations' coach has extra leg room and comfy seats. For details on this and other Insight Vacations escorted holidays which visit Spain see www.insightvacations.com or your travel agent.
- **More information** Lonely Planet's *Spain* is a great companion resource to take along.

Pleasure and Spain ... (from far left) an olive grove with a view to Limones in the province of Granada; traditional costume; a street scene from Barrio Santa Cruz in Seville; the Dona Lina tapas bar in the Santa Cruz area of Seville.

Photos: Corbis, Photolibrary.com

past half-way point. "You've been doing a lot. Just be aware that you could be a bit tired."

After a late afternoon tour of the magnificent Alhambra, we have dinner in the hotel. I decide to not do the tour the next morning and I am so glad, because I get to do what I really love: walk the streets of Granada, discovering this small and perfectly formed beauty for myself.

I am in Seville the same day as a flea market. I love European flea markets so I pass on another included tour to find my own way to this one. "We encourage that," says the Insight rep. "It's important that you get the experience you want to have."

I go with the group to see some flamenco that night and, though it's only our lot and some Japanese tourists in the audience, it's great. A group goes out afterward and finds the good times in a Seville bar or two.

Back in the bus on the way to Madrid we share stories of wonderful Seville and the remarkable

late-night stamina of the Spanish we encountered there.

"They've been partying since Franco died," Daniel says. "Sure, maybe the party's gone on a bit long ..."

Back in Madrid and I take advantage of the included tour to the Prado, one of the greatest art galleries in the world. It's an advantage indeed. Go with the right tour operator and you find yourself led straight in at 9am, with a guide who knows exactly where to go to see the greatest hits before the hordes descend. It's just us in front of

some of Valasquez's finest work. We are on free time in the gallery by the time the crowd is 10-deep in front of some of the pieces.

I attend a rollicking optional farewell dinner that includes a guitar band and much singing along to some Spanish classics.

And instead of doing a final day optional tour, I decide to

walk around Madrid some more: see if I love it



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as much as I did days earlier.

I do. And when the day comes to leave Madrid again, this time for Australia, I'm sad all over again. But I'm sad for a number of reasons: I'm leaving this amazing city. And I'm also saying farewell to the friends I've made on the bus.

Daniel succeeded in giving me a taste of Spain that has me yearning to return. I'm also thinking another bus tour somewhere else might be a fun thing to do. Success all round.

The point of the packed schedule is to introduce us to the country's best.