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Pamplona: It's not all about the bulls

The festival Hemingway made famous is more than a run before horns



Runners are just inches from fighting bulls as they run through the streets of Pamplona, Spain, during the San Fermin Festival. Hundreds of runners are injured every year during the nine-day festival.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier



Fighting bulls that run in the streets during the San Fermin Festival in Pamplona, Spain, in the morning appear in the bullring each evening.

Courtesy of Katherine Rodeghier

**By Katherine Rodeghier
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Runners mill about the street below my balcony. Most wear the traditional costume: white pants and shirt, red sash or scarf. Nervous and fidgety, they jump up and down, stretch their legs, anxiously check their shoelaces.

At exactly 8 a.m. a rocket explodes, echoing off buildings on the narrow street, and all heads turn toward the tsunami of humans surging their way and the six fighting bulls at their heels. Runners pick up speed, leap to the side to avoid curved, pointed horns. Some stumble and fall. The wave passes below my feet, a blur of white and red and the black backs of the bulls. In a matter of seconds, they are gone.

The running of the bulls that Ernest Hemingway described in "The Sun Also Rises" lasts about three minutes, traveling half a mile from corral to bullring through the cordoned-off old-city streets of Pamplona, Spain.

That leaves a whole day and a night to fill.

All-ages fiesta

The festival of San Fermin takes over Pamplona for nine days every July, and the running of the bulls on eight of those mornings occupies just a line on a program of more than 200 folkloric activities.

Given the festival's reputation for drinking and carousing, it's surprising many activities are family-oriented.

Take, for example, the parades of the Giants and Big-Heads. Parents bring their children, some perched on dad's shoulders to see above the crowd. The giants, 13-foot papier-mâché figures, represent the kings and queens of

Europe, Asia, Africa and America. By tradition, toddlers give up their pacifiers to them -- like some U.S. tots gives theirs to Santa -- and by parade's end a giant may have 50 dangling from his wrist.

The Big-Heads circulate through the crowd for comic relief. Wearing oversized heads satirizing Spanish figures, they walk the parade route accompanied by men dressed as cartoon characters who bop paradegoers with Nerf balls. The kids squeal.

After the morning bull runs, all ages line up for churros still warm from the kettle at family-run La Manueta Churreria, a Pamplona institution since 1872. Because of her age, the grandmother who runs the operation now opens only during the festival, plus a few days in June and October. Her four adult children take time off from successful professional careers to slice coils of fried dough, run the cash register and man kettles of oil set over fires of axe-cut beechwood. Adults might nibble their churros between sips of apple liqueur, but all ages enjoy them with cups of thick, hot chocolate bought from street vendors.

Multigenerations often take breakfast or lunch under the umbrellas of restaurants ringing Plaza del Castillo, the square in the old city where bands and folk musicians perform. Cafe Iruna, the city's oldest, was Hemingway's hangout; a life-size statue of the author leans against a bar. Upstairs, a private club opens during the festival for dances, with all ages joining a conga line.

Early in his career, Hem had rooms at the now-closed Hotel Quintana, which he named the Hotel Montoya in his 1926 novel. After he made some money, he moved across the plaza to the [Gran Hotel La Perla](#) where he'd view the bull run from room 201. Celebrities still check in; Charlie Sheen arrived incognito during last year's festival but was soon spotted.

An elaborate firecracker display at City Hall marks the opening of San Fermin at noon every July 6, and fireworks draw crowds every night until its close on July 14. Now internationally famous thanks to Hemingway, the festival began in the Middle Ages as a simple religious fiesta dedicated to Pamplona's martyred third-century saint. He's honored every July 7 when his bejeweled figure is taken from its chapel and carried through the city. Kids and grown-ups along the parade route wear the festival costume, some claiming the white pants and shirt symbolize the saint's purity and the red scarf the blood of his decapitation. Others say it's the white apron and bloodstained towel of butchers who once ran with the bulls to judge the quality of their meat.

Drama in the bullring

The six bulls that run through the streets every morning die in the bullring every evening. While animal rights protests put an end to bullfights in some cities in Spain, they remain an essential part of Pamplona's festival, especially after the success of Hemingway's novel and its glamorization of bullfighting.

Three matadors take turns facing two bulls apiece. First, a bull's speed and agility are tested as it charges a large pink cape, then a picador on a blindfolded horse stabs the bull with a lance to weaken its neck muscle. Barbed spears are jabbed into the bull's shoulder muscles. Alone in the ring, the matador twirls a small, red cape before the weakened animal, taunting it to charge. The more skilled the matador, the closer the horns come to his body. Injuries are not uncommon. The bull dies when a sword is plunged into its heart. The whole process, by tradition, must take no more than 22 minutes.

Matadors are celebrities in Spain, resplendent in brightly colored uniforms embellished with gold thread and tightly fitted so a bull's horns can't snag loose fabric. If a matador performs well, one ear of the bull is cut off and presented to him, two if he exceptional, and he parades around the ring in a victory lap as the crowd cheers.

Spectators fall into two categories. Those seated in the shade are usually curious visitors or aficionados serious about bullfighting. Those in the sun are a raucous bunch of young partyers, neighborhood groups that come in costume waving banners and playing musical instruments. Like the bleacher bums at Wrigley Field, they may or may not pay attention to the action in the ring.

And the bull? His carcass is dragged off by a team of mules or horses and the meat is sold to butchers. It will appear in estofado de toro, bull stew, in cafes on Plaza del Castillo or in more exotic dishes in Pamplona's Michelin-starred restaurants Rodero and Europa.

Not everyone in Pamplona is pleased. A taxi driver, who ran with the bulls as a teen, told me he no longer goes to bullfights after seeing blood spurting from a bull when seated at close range and, aside from shuttling customers around, he doesn't participate in the festival. "We should not do that to animals," he said, shaking his head. "Hemingway should have stayed home."

• **Information for this article was gathered during a research trip sponsored by the Tourist Office of Spain.**

Pamplona's San Fermin Festival

Getting there: Iberia Airlines flies nonstop from Chicago to Madrid with connections to Pamplona

When to go: The San Fermin Festival is always July 6-14.

Where to stay:

- Gran Hotel La Perla: Five-star hotel on Plaza del Castillo where Hemingway stayed, granhotellaperla.com
- Hotel AC Ciudad de Pamplona: A Marriott property about a 10-minute drive from the hubbub of the festival, marriott.com/hotels/travel/pnaac-ac-hotel-ciudad-de-pamplona/

San Fermin Tours: Novotur offers guided tours and viewings of the running of the bulls from private balconies, novotur.com/english/

Details: Tourist Office of Spain, spain.info; City of Pamplona, pamplona.es