

Other Countries, Earlier Lives Revisited

Dawn Smith

WHAT WILL HAPPEN ON this trip isn't clear. Changes are inevitable. Even on a tightly planned trip like the one I'm facing, there will be holes to fill, holes to fall into. Anticipation and dread take turns in my mind as I contemplate our travels. So much to look forward to, so many chances to confront chaos. The road will take me where it will. Time with old friends in old haunts worth the risk.

True to form, the planned version of this road diverges before it even starts. There will be no stay in the house on the fells above Kirby Lonsdale, where grazing sheep keep the grasses trimmed and other plants scarce. Early morning quiet on waking in the old stone house will not be mine. No sheep and their new lambs below the bedroom window. No matter, we will be able to spend time with these friends on the fells.

Our travels will take us to England, Belgium, The Netherlands, Spain, and Portugal by air and car, visiting folks from our previous life on that side of the pond, a tight agenda. Best to let go, wait for each new day, each new place to work its magic, good or bad.

Best not to dwell on times past, pre-911, when air travel was easier, when security was nearly non-existent. Get to the airport within an hour of a flight, go through a metal detector, and on to the gate. Planes rarely full, especially on night flights, where flight attendants encouraged passengers to stretch out

on the middle row seats for a reasonably comfortable sleep.

This time, my husband and I arrive at the airport several hours before our flights to Europe to get through passport control and security in time. Shoes and coats off, pockets and water bottles emptied, computers and phones out of their cases, we stand in our socks wondering when, if ever, the floors in this area get cleaned. We submit to the occasional frisking, breathe a sigh of relief when cleared, gather our things, reassemble ourselves, wander off to find sustenance while waiting for take-off.

With three flights totaling at least fifteen hours, including waiting in airports, behind us, we dive into the crowded confusion of England. Make our way to the Derbyshire of Jane Austin, each square foot of land plotted, owned by someone, some agency. Green. Tidy. Organized. Unlike the sparsely inhabited sprawl of our part of the southwestern US.

Time with his family chaotic at best. New faces, young children, pressure to be interested in these lives, so unlike ours. For a week we share a restored farm building, comfortable yet spacious enough for me to escape, to have time alone, to be free of the chatter of multiple voices that tire me out. We walk around a reservoir where walking trails, some repurposed old roads, draw crowds. The presence of so many people takes something away from being in the countryside. At least there are lambs in fields nearby, kicking up their back legs

side by side, celebrating with high thin bleats. I smile at their antics, much more comfortable with animals than people.

A last day hike on our own to the King's Seat, a rock formation high above the town. After a steep climb, then a mostly level pasture to navigate, we face the tricky maneuver of getting onto the chest high seat. On our temporary throne, the view opens out. Amid the lush greens of spring, the little villages and tiny lanes seem even tinier, a postcard view. Still, I'm ready to move on.

At last, we're on the high fells near Kirby Lonsdale, not as tightly allotted into discrete parcels. The feel of open land greets my eyes. My country girl soul is ready for these open spaces. I watch the sheep graze and nurse, taking no notice of our presence or absence, unaware of the toll time has taken on us. I take the hint, relax into "fell time." The animals move with the sure grace of belonging to their own rhythm, a lesson I am still learning, may never learn.

We will not stay the night, nor will there be a long hike over the higher ground this time. We are older, our friends even older. There are health issues. Instead, we wander the tiny lane that makes its way up and over the lower reaches of the fells, greet the few walkers we chance on, chat the way old friends chat, open to our changing lives, even the difficult changes. A quiet break in a hectic schedule, one we will savor for a long time.

The road diverges from fell to city. To Brussels, where the language is not my own,

a disconnect both good and bad. Good to be able to let go of some of the words swirling around me, bad to have to struggle to understand where to go, how to get there, what's happening. We stay with friends, deep in the city, their house's major drawback, several stories of steep, narrow stairs. At least my legs get a workout.

Wonderful get together with more old friends from our life here in Europe. We gather at a sidewalk table, drink beer and reminisce, savoring the first warm, sunny day of spring while catching up.

The city chaos, the crush of people, exhausting but brief. Soon we're on our way to Middelburg, a small town, on the Dutch island of Zeeland, in the North Sea, where bikes seem to outnumber cars. It's quieter here but still too crowded, too tidy for me. I focus on enjoying the lush green, only to learn this year so far has been abnormally dry. Hard to comprehend when so many grasses, trees and flowers grow and bloom with abandon. Our land back home still barren and dry, the winter rains having failed to come.

Wonderful to be near an unruly ocean again, except for the winter chill that still blows in off the water. Hands and feet lose feeling, cheeks burn from wind and sun, as we wander to watch birds. I force myself to stay with the birds, not letting the temperature defeat me. Sometimes I fail, wishing I could leave, take a long hot bath. Or be home in the desert where the sun is strengthening. Until I catch sight of a skylark soaring



image credits



image credits

higher and higher, singing, wings aflutter, gracefully descending to rest before soaring again, a display that may earn him a mate. I glory at being privy to his show, then I wish him well.

Avid birders, my husband and I are thrilled to be sharing fresh territory with our friend who, new to birding, has taken it up with the same intensity he devotes to his work. This is a secondary joy of birding, sharing sightings, special moments with others who are passionate. Birding also being an excuse to be in wild places, to soothe my soul, and more than that, although I struggle to understand what that more is.

Sitting on the upper patio of the house in town, one with more steep, narrow stairs, we watch the activities of a pair of peregrine falcons who nest in the bell tower of the church nearby. The falcons come and go, sometimes carrying nesting material, sometimes nothing, perhaps lofting on the breeze simply to not be earthbound. While our friends work remotely, we enjoy a warm, peaceful day resting up for the next leg of our journey.

Again, that longing for the quiet of home, away from people, with hours of no voices other than birds, whose songs and calls delight, flares up in me. By the time we return, many of “our” birds will have quieted as they tend their nests, hidden in their silence among vicious plants with spines and other weapons.

A short, uneventful flight and we slide happily into Spanish life in Bilbao, sharing late dinners, late mornings over

coffee, *jamon y queso*, with close friends we think of as family. As I sip my coffee, I think I must have been Iberian in a previous life. It’s all so comfortably familiar, so comfortably comfortable. Backed by fields, their house sits at the edge of town. Farmers harvest hay beyond the gated complex, storks intently scavenging for insects and rodents in their wake. In the distance, a lone, white house, old and well-kept, draws my mind away from the town on the other side, bustling on the cusp of this Easter weekend.

Boats anchored close to shore, or docked at the marina, define the harbor. A small motorboat takes us out into the Bay of Biscay, much calmer and bluer than the North Sea, to an old lighthouse on a rocky island, home to a plethora of seabirds. Anglers scale its steep banks. One catches a fish. Even from so far below, we feel his excitement.

Human history, natural history, our guide knows the area well. And loves it, loves it enough to build structures for osprey to nest on. Back into the harbor and up the river we travel to find one nest occupied; three eggs have been seen on the remote camera. The guide hopes for male chicks, who will return to the area when mature. Females from here nest in France. He won’t see them again. Females from elsewhere, where we never thought to ask him, will settle in with the local males.

A sailboat in front of us skims the edge of the water, beating the night back to its mooring. We too turn back, motoring slowly, learning even more

from this one-man NGO making good environmental things happen.

Another day, at the end of a remote road, we feast on traditional local stew. This ancient village, hugging the hillside next to a river whose name I never learn, isolated except when visitors invade. Perhaps less crowded on non-holiday weeks, but even on this holiday weekend, it maintains its own place in time. I wonder what it's like here in winter; think I would enjoy it for a time. Though not a whole winter.

Conversation and gormandizing done, we stroll along a dirt lane by the river, digesting both meal and place. Near the village, the track is busy with others following the Spanish tradition of a walk after Sunday lunch. Soon the others turn back. We carry on until the lane meanders close to the river again. Time by the water, fission-fusion between the four of us, talk and silence, sounds of birds, water over rocks, views of an elusive bird, a dipper, diving and walking, yes walking, underwater.

We reluctantly head back, walk through the now nearly empty streets, thrown into the present when we reach the car. We're quiet on the way home, talked out, savoring our shared hours. In the morning, we leave, sorry to end our time together, to end the least stressful part of our trip.

The road now leads to eastern Portugal, on the Spanish border, where friends from the UK have settled. A tiny village with many deserted properties, and a

mostly aging population. As in Spain, there are fewer obvious small plots of land, despite the reality that every inch is owned. Here, another issue comes into play. When landowners die, the property is divided among their children. Over time, what looks like a significant parcel may have multiple owners. Our friends, attempting to purchase a slip of land between one parcel of theirs and another, are stymied by a feud between adult inheritors. One happy to sell, the other, out of spite if the first is to be believed, refuses to entertain the offer.

In old wells on the property, frogs make a living. No roads for them, just a vertical world from dry to wet, or wet to dry. One sports a lime green stripe down the middle of his back from nose to tail, brilliant contrast to the mottled brown of the rest of his body. Walking on, we nearly step on a strange gray immature grasshopper motionless in the open field, perhaps cold-stunned, soaking up heat?

As construction occupies much of our friends' time, we navigate the tensions between them over the always frustrating process of home creation. Escape when we can, relieved to spend our nights on our own in a cottage in town, simply furnished, but cold from an extended lack of occupants. Postcard patio where we warm ourselves in the morning sun overlooks a field where tiny white, multi-petaled dandelion-like flowers open. At dusk, they close, leaving the field green until morning.

We explore the region with him

while she supervises the construction. Rain taints several days. An anomaly on this trip: there is rain in Spain and Portugal, but none in England. World truly turning upside down. One of those days, just before the sun appears out of showers, a train of eagles, vultures, and the odd black stork cross the sky. Quiet, quiet, quiet. Rio Teju dominates, flowing wide and steady, always nearby.

Griffon vultures, much more handsome in their fine tan ruffs than the black and turkey vultures of the US, guard nests full of wobbly-headed chicks. Great and little bustards flush out of fields hip deep in grasses and flowers. Trees already in full leaf, some showing their flowers, line the sides of the fields. At another site, my balance, not as stable as it once was, I stop to take a deep breath, tamp down my terror, then slowly make my way up the steep cliff-side rocks and uneven stone steps to a watchtower at eye level with the vultures. I smile, pleased to be tougher than I thought. At another site, more vultures, we guess at least fifty, take turns feeding on a dead animal we don't get close enough to identify, leaving them to their feast. Cow approaches, sniffs the dead animal, possibly kin. She turns away, returning once more before leaving for good.

Along a creek in the town where we lunch, a kingfisher hides his brilliant blues and greens in the shade of trees. We learn that the short cobblestone sections of roads, deep in villages in the remote areas we travel through, denote wealthy neighborhoods. The rest of the village roads,

where everyone else lives, are tarmac, like the roads connecting the towns of the area.

Our last lunch together at the only restaurant in the village. Power goes out. Locals at another table instantly on their cell phones, eager to share information. All of Europe affected, power out for three to five days, cyber-attack. We look at each other, wonder what it will mean for the last days of our trip, and our journey home. It will be what it will be.

Reality: power restored in about six hours, only Portugal and parts of Spain affected, cause—aging infrastructure. Ministry of Disinformation rules the world. Not even in this rural area can we escape it.

We cross back into Spain, spend our last two days in Monfrague National Park. On our own again, my shoulders begin to relax, I begin to believe in survival. Despite the exhaustion of continuous human contact, worn out, eyes glazed, social skills tested to the limit, I find my restless pen in hand, restless mind too long diverted into speaking, looking, now longing to run wild on the page.

My mind, diving back into the month as I write, savors the camaraderie of these enduring friendships, so different from newer, growing friendships. Thinks with some regret that we are not likely to return to Europe. But time with these far away friends, delving into the ways of their countries, reminders of previous experiences shared, and openness to other thoughts, other ways of being, a refreshing break from the anger and angst of present-day USA. *