

The Land beyond the Douro

"I think we're lost," I said. My friend steered the car to the side of the road. We looked at the map and then at the unmarked intersection. Our destination was Guadalupe, a small, isolated village in the mountain range of Sierra de Guadalupe.

We were heading into Spain's Extremadura— meaning “land beyond the Douro River”— a wild and remote area a good six-hour meandering drive southeast of Madrid on the border of Portugal. Spain is divided into regions so distinctive that some areas are characterized by their own local language and subculture, the result of a history rich with racial mingling. The folk of hard-times Extremadura do not have their own language like the Basque of the north, the Galician of the northwest or the Catalan of the northeast, but like the invading Romans who settled here for a couple of centuries, this region produced its own brand of conquerors: the conquistadors

We'd not long turned off a paved and signed, two lane inter-regional highway and driven our rental car onto a one lane, unpaved, unmarked local road. A weathered and bent farmer hand tilled the soil in a field just beyond. There was very little else about bar a couple of horizontal, heat-doped dogs chained to a fence railing.

It was late in the day, still feverish hot, and neither my companion nor I could make head or tail of the map. We decided to take a chance and turn left at the intersection. The car kicked up dust shrouding our rear view, focusing our attention ahead. Olive farms spread

across the immediate sierras creating a picture of perfect symmetry. Line after perfectly straight line of olive trees with their twisted green branches jutting out at odd angles from earth rich enough to produce a stable livelihood for these struggling mountain farmers.

We transitioned from mountain terrain into a contrasting lush, narrow valley. A creek ran beside the road feeding the greenness of overhanging trees and the roadside grasses. A picnic table covered with a fine embroidered cloth, utensils, food and wine sat unattended by a parked car.

The trees gave way and looming above was Guadalupe, awesome in the way it sat perched, fort-like, against the backdrop of a craggy mountain wall. The vision of the village was made all the more dramatic by the presence of Guadalupe's monastery. Breathtaking: All spires, towers and pinnacles pushing heavenward, it shot up like a scene from the pages of a dark, gothic novel.

With dusk setting in large groups of swallows appeared, flying about in formation while feeding on insects. Their eerie call echoed against a fading, azure sky summoning us to the end of our day. All at once they disappeared behind one of the monasteries towers just as we pulled up outside.

It came as a delightful surprise to find that we could stay at the monastery. Our room was on the second floor in a cloistered area overlooking a central courtyard. A patio ran the length of the Moorish cloister with guest rooms set back from a imposing balustrade

heavy with the weight of a series of stone lace, late gothic archways.

Later we walked to the village square, the gathering place in the evening for the villagers, and home to a 15th century fountain where in 1496 Columbus made a pilgrimage to baptize his two Native American servants, the first indigenous folk of the New World to be converted to Christianity. We sat facing the fountain at the outdoor seating arranged in front of one of the local bars eating locally grown olives and sipping on dry sherry while reading up on the history of the area.

It is said that in the 14th century a shepherd found a statue of the Virgin purportedly carved by a Saint, which might otherwise have been a discovery with no future had King Alfonso XI, who frequently hunted in this area, not heard of the find. Alfonso built a church to house the statue, then later a monastery.

By the 18th century it had become a point of pilgrimage, and by virtue of its position in the heartland of conquistador territory, Guadalupe's monastery also became a symbol of Spain's exploration into the New World. When Spain began to lose its territories in the 19th century, the monastery was abandoned for 70 years. It suffered from neglect, but during Spain's civil war the Franciscan brothers took it over restoring the monastery to its former glory.

Eager to learn and see more of Spain's former conquering culture, we headed east the following day, out of the mountains and onto the plains. There we encountered a village

built of imposing stone. Elevated above the surrounding flatland, Trujillo affords one a commanding 360-degree view. Within its center is a crumbling stronghold, once a Roman castle dating to before Christ.

As is the case in so many historic Spanish villages Trujillo has a Plaza Mayor, or Main Square, which on the day of our arrival was host to a cheese festival. Ripe cheese aroma of robust proportion choked the air, while noon hour shadows from a mighty bronze equestrian statue of the conquistador, Francisco Pizarro, fanned out over the plaza.

Pizarro was born in Trujillo, as were a number of other conquistadors who made their name in the New World. Illegitimate and illiterate, Pizarro nevertheless made history as a brutal warrior, subjugating Peru in the name of gold and silver. He never made it back to Trujillo; jealous compatriots murdered him in 1541 in Peru. But cast in bronze Pizarro stands forever an ominous reminder of the vanquishing power this region of Spain unleashed onto the New World.