

Sunday, 28 March

Noticed the United pilots picketing outside when we finally got into the correct line for Aer Lingus (three tries). Turns out these pilots were pissed at our very own flight, because it initiated a United/Aer Lingus alliance in which, basically, United subcontracts with Aer Lingus for this Dulles-Madrid route. The pilots don't like that. And they were out there because this was the inaugural flight for the route and the alliance itself. Twinges of guilt for crossing a picket line, but we had no idea when we purchased the bottom-of-the-barrel priced inaugural tickets, way back in October.

Nice surprise at our gate, though: employees not picketing had prepared balloons, cake, and free drinks (non-alcoholic) for this inaugural occasion. Champagne on the flight. The girls loved Aer Lingus cause each seat has a TV -- not satellite like on JetBlue, but they do offer free movies, free tv shows, and loads of free games/programming for kids. Needless to say, the kids slept not at all. Scott did, snoring loudly.

Monday, 29 March

Dark still when we got into Madrid at about 7:30am. Customs was pretty easy, and we walked walked walked to the metro station under the airport. The Madrid metro is really wonderful. Second largest in Europe (behind London), and is clean, has train arrivals often (even at non-peak, you only wait about 4-5 minutes), goes all over the city, and costs just €1 per person per trip (going to the airport is a supplemental euro, but that's it).

Close to 9:30 by the time we got downtown and walked to the apartment rental office, dragging our luggage. Waited for someone in the hallway, and that someone came in, obviously miffed that we were there so early. We shrugged it off while others arrived and they all ran around trying to figure out what to do with us. Finally, we decided to leave our bags there and go get something to eat and walk around until our apartment was ready.

Fast forward: we don't understand why it took another five hours to get the apartment ready because it was pretty obvious when we got into the rooms that no one had been there for a while.

Anyway, we walked walked walked through the Chueca neighborhood, down Calle de Alcalá, admiring the ultra cool architecture (Banco de

Espana, Palacio de Buenavista, Puerta de Alcalá, and the Fuente de la Cibeles). Ended up on the Paseo de Recoletos -- no map yet -- but





we didn't really get lost on Scott's mission to find a decent exchange rate for dollars to euros (turned out we got a really good rate at the airport). Had a couple of snacks here and there, and then finally got word that our place was ready so we went back to the rental agency, collected the luggage, and walked the 15 minutes or so over to our apartment, which is right at Puerta del Sol, the center of the city. The guy was late meeting us with the keys: by the time he got there, we just wanted to hit the beds. Unfortunately, it was right after he left that

we found out sheets were missing for the pull-out couch (Mo's bed). So I went down to the plaza for a pay phone to call the rental agency. Also needed to get: the leaky bathroom sink fixed, more towels, the internet going, and a method for preventing the apartment's power from constantly bouncing off at the breaker. I was really pleased to have figured out the payphone and explained all the problems in my halting Spanish. We crashed for a few hours after that. Nice.

When we woke up around 8:30 pm, it was cool and rainy and getting dark. Out to the metro (the girls didn't feel like walking in the rain), but we were re-routed when Scott realized that immediately across from our apartment (it was a pedestrian street about 50 meters off the plaza) was a store called the Museo del Jamon (or, as he calls it, the jamonateria). We promised he could go in later, and headed the couple of stops to the La Latina section, which I had heard was filled with many tapas places. We ended up finding a decent, smoky hole in the wall that had yummy sangria (Scott and my drink of choice the entire week) and food I



don't remember. They did have cheese for Mo. I think we walked back to the apartment and all fell asleep by 1:00 am.

Tuesday, 30 March

Before coming to Madrid, Maria Roche, who now lives there, warned us that lunch doesn't start until 2ish and dinner at 9ish. No problem! We adjusted really quickly to Madrid time. Usually slept until about 11am or noon, and went to sleep at 1 or 2am. Worked perfectly!

So, up and moving by noonish. Scott made a quicky visit to the jamonateria for eggs, cheese, a little fruit, and a few meat things for breakfast. We all left the apartment around 1:30 and walked west on Calle Arenal (our street) toward the Palacio Real. Passed the opera, Teatro Real, and Plaza de Oriente, and the gardens at the Palace before getting in line to enter.

We all loved different things about this place. Satch loved the ceilings, and pointed at them in



each room without fail; I loved the Tiepolo frescoes; Marxie loved the clocks, sometimes three to a room (talk about detailed); Scott loved the dining room with seating for 250+; and Mo loved the incredible main staircase.



We all really grooved on the Armory, which had tons of model horses and people fully armored, as well as weapons of individual destruction (jousts, guns, spears).

It was windy and chilly, but Marxie and Satch were set on a playground they had seen earlier. We stayed there a few minutes, and then went around the block to the crypt, part of the ancient wall that still remains from the original Moorish outpost which eventually became Madrid. At that point, we were all pretty cold, so we headed up Calle Mayor, hit a grocery store, and went back to the apartment for some lunch.



Rested up before metro-ing to the Museo de Arqueonacional Nacional. Mo was intent on this place because she needed some items from ancient Greece for her humongous Greekfest project in school, including a replica plate, vase, and a Demeter-like costume. The museum (free) was really interesting -- we all loved it -- but unfortunately, they didn't have a gift shop, so Mo was out of luck.



Walk walk walk back through an artsy section with lots of galleries, and also past the Supreme Court, and some shops with very pretty candy Easter eggs (Groucho!) but now it was dinner time.



Right spot ended up being a nice little tapas place (good sangria) with both locals and tourists at the adjoining tables. The Danish couple nearby asked where we were from, and Marx commented that we spoke English, but we weren't from England and you could tell that because if we were from England, we'd have better manners.

Wednesday, 31 March

We had reserved a car for 10am, but couldn't get ourselves moving until about 11:30. Scott went out earlier and found some food -- from San Miguel market, which has many different food stands under one roof. Fish, meat, cheese, pastries, bread, fruit, sushi (!), wine, etc. He bought some fruit and cheese and more meat.

Rode the Metro to Atocha Renfre train station, got to the Hertz counter, and the agent promptly asked for our passports, which we had of course left in the apartment. So Scott took the girls for a snack and I ran back to the apartment, got the passport, and returned within about 35 minutes. Funny (sad) thing is, Scott had remembered about the passport when we first went down into the metro at our stop, and we were both too lazy to return then....

Anyway, I was the fearless navigator and Scott the intrepid driver. No Hertz GPS because I would have killed it, but Scott decided we had to use the GPS on his phone which, while it was silent, still annoyed me. And, for the record, got us lost on the way back into Madrid through the tunnel of doom.

So about 30 minutes NW of Madrid, we had to pull over for Marx and Mo, but no one actually threw up (this trip was still not 'official'). A while later we got to San Lorenzo de El Escorial, a really

beautiful town, dominated by the King's historical hilltop residence. We parked and walked toward the royal residence/monastery, hitting a small outdoor market on the way, where Mo found the perfect Demeter outfit and earrings, and I found some cheapo cool earrings.

We had an English-speaking tour guide through the royal apartments and the crypt of the kings. Way awesome. Felipe II created this palace as thanks to God for a war win in 1557 and as a place to bury his parents; ended up making a special trip there to die himself. Decorated in a much simpler manner than the Palacio Real in Madrid, without all the ceiling paintings and tapestries in each room. Only beds and the barest furniture dotted the king's and queen's rooms. But they did have these incredible, carved wooden frames around the doors in the king's wing. The view from the royal rooms were of the labyrinthine shrubs and mountains beyond. King had a passageway directly to the basilica and could hear services if he didn't feel like getting out of bed.



Wow factor kicked in, though, when we went down into the mausoleum. Marble everywhere. In this one large circular room, caskets were set in the walls, all the way up to the ceiling. Burial place of all the kings and queens of Spain (with a few exceptions). This is where the current king is expected to be buried, but no one knows how, because they've run out of room!

Ambled through other tomb rooms sprinkled with dead Bourbons and Hapsburgs, and then got to the Basilica, which was huge and pretty incredible. Much was closed for siesta when we finished, so we got into the car and headed to Avila, a walled city.



By this time, we were all hungry, and I had packed sandwiches for the girls, but of course forgot all about Scott and myself. Scott got frustrated because he was trying really hard to eat healthy (as long as healthy consisted of Iberian ham), and he was right. But it was still siesta, and there were only snacks to be had.

So we lumbered up and down the streets of this pretty cool city, and eventually got to the access points onto the wall. You're able to walk across the entire wall, up into the turrets,



and the view is incredible. Chilly wind grew more brisk as the sun went down, and then at least three of us were downright cold. Hurried back to the car and decided to drive back into Madrid, find a parking spot, and grab some dinner there.

Parking karma (thanks mom) got us a spot just behind our apartment, after our car crossed the pedestrian-only street in front of the policia and the stupid GPS got us lost in the never-ending tunnel. Dropped stuff off in the apartment, and we heard some loud drumming coming from the Puerta del Sol. You can hear stuff from the plaza suprisingly well (hmmm), even five floors up. Turned out to be a loong, sloooow Catholic procession. Lots of people lined up for this parade, and we had to explain to Mo how these guys were NOT the ku klux klan. Soon tired of the two steps per 30 second pace: off on the search for food.

Foraging for a while, we happened upon a non-descript tapas place that felt right. And it was. They had paella, they had meat, they had pasta for Mo and Satch, they had pulpa. And, por supuesto, they had sangria. Nice guys. Felt as if we hadn't eaten in a loong time (we actually hadn't), so we went to town. They kept bringing dishes and we kept eating them.

Scott had already inculcated the girls with our apartment's address (Satch learned it by saying Uncle Aaron-all (it was Calle Arenal)) and now he put them to the test -- find their way home. Each night, either Mo, Marxe, or Satch had to get us home from wherever we were. For the most part, they did really well. Scott's €1 incentive assisted.

Got back into the apartment around 11:30, and we all snuggled into our squeaky beds. Location of this apartment couldn't be beat, but there were a number of things we would have 'amended' if allowed. One of the top items: the squeak on the beds. You could hear each person turning over from anywhere in the apartment. Light sleeper alert. But the squeaks were nothing compared to the second parade of the evening, which started right about 1am, was as loud with drumming as the earlier one, and took as long to go alllll the way throughhhh the plaza and up the streeet. Boom boom boom, small STEP. Boom boom boom, small STEP. Over and over again and again. I seriously think this went on for two hours. Mo couldn't sleep, I couldn't sleep, Scott couldn't sleep. Didn't bother Marxe or Satch at all. They were out.

Anyway, we finally got to sleep around 3:00 I think.

Thursday, 1 April

Needless to say, we didn't even think about getting up out of bed until about 11 am. By up-and-at-them time, it made no sense to get into the car and head out of town. So we didn't!

Scott, Mo, and Marxe took a walk to San Miguel market, while Satch and I explored the neighborhood a bit. Turns out there was a HUGE store right behind our apartment called El Corte Ingles. An all over department store that has everything you could imagine, including a large supermarket in the basement. Reminded me of Harrods. Purchased fruit and drinks and met up with everyone back at the apartment.

Because Thursday and Good Friday are national holidays, we didn't have to feed the meter, so we left the car where it was, and took a walk. We were counting on much being closed because of the holiday, but we were wrong. Most everything was open, and the city was crowded and vibrant. People were everywhere. There were tourists, yes, but also many locals around. I could tell the local women/girls because they dressed in black leggings, a large tunic or sweater, jacket, and boots (reaching from mid-calf to above-knee). These Spanish women loved their boots. We saw some kids around, but not nearly as many as you'd see in Washington DC on a holiday. And for the most part, the people were very attractive. Men not so much as women, but most everyone was petite and fit.

You could also tell tourists by their extra weight. Although a few people did ask me directions.... Scott says I looked like a gypsy most days. Gypsies fit in anywhere I guess. In Puerto del Sol, all the show people were out. Living statues that changed position when you threw in a coin, Jesus walking (standing) above the water, some mariachi players, a lonely organ grinder, a guy playing violin with a



karaoke machine, and some performers -- like one guy with his head through a box and a fake head on either side of him who emitted evil laughter.



The weirdest/scariest one was a guy who sat down on a chair and put a large backpack over himself, so it looked as if the backpack was sitting on the chair. From the front of the backpack, he stuck out a puppet that looked like an orange mutant monkey man. The mutant's growly chatter was more grunt than Spanish, and sometimes he played recorder. Scared a lot of little kids, but he was pretty amazing. We gave many of these people a few coins.



Then up we walked to the Parque del Buen Retiro, a Hyde Park/Central Park-size carpet of



greenery, fountains, ponds, and gardens in Madrid's eastern center.

Playgrounds, dance pavilions, the Palacio de Cristal, artists, musicians, jugglers, buskers, etc. On the Estanque, you can rent a rowboat, but the line was way too long. Mickey Mouse accosted us, pushing shaped balloons (he gave Marxe and Satch swords) into their arms, and gathering them in for a

picture. We smiled, said gracias, and started on our way, but then heard "Monito para Mickey, monito para Mickey" behind us. Stalker Mickey. We gave him a coin.



Farther into the park, the girls became completely enamoured with a man who painted, with his fingers, on small (4 X 6 inch) pieces of mirror.

They each purchased one of his paintings for €5. Then, however, they spied the ice cream: cue relentless requests. We finally said that as soon as they could tell us how to say ice cream in Spanish, they could have it. Spouted brand names until, finally, Marxe figured it out from a sign.

The Prado lies on the edge of the Retiro, and is free after 6pm on weekdays. In we went. The kids did amazingly well -- we were able to spend about 2 hours there before everyone started fading. Goya, Velazquez, Miro. I think Marxe and Mo

could have continued, but for Satch it was time to go.

Search for food again. Entered and sat down at a tapas place. We ordered drinks, and the waiter returned banging down our glasses, banging down the water bottles, growling at us in short, staccato bursts. Scott and I looked at each other, downed our sangrias in two swallows, put down some

money, got the kids up, and left. Fortunately, it was just around the corner from the place we had been the night before. They were happy to see us again, and the waiter played with Satch, saying “you you you you” back to her “you you you.” Each night as we left, they gave Scott and me a shot of a sort of limoncello.

Hit another parade on the way back to the apartment. This one lasted only a couple of hours, until about 2am.

Friday, 2 April



Toledo is beautiful, ancient. Parking on this holiday was difficult, but we found a place about a mile from the old city. Fortuitous,



because on the walk to the city, we passed the Ruinas del Circo Romana -- ruins of an old Roman racing track. The kids loved climbing over the rocks and running around the park.



To get to the old city, they now have an

elaborate

escalator system. Signs around town advertised a torture exhibit, which seemed made for Mo. We eventually got there, and we all found it really interesting. Focused mostly on the Spanish Inquisition (nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition). But then Mo started picturing the

torture happening to her instead of other people, and had to wait for the rest of us outside. I was actually a little pleased that Mo has renounced torture for the time being.



We walked through the Moorish trail of streets, stopping here and there to look at shops and interesting tidbits.



The Jewish quarter had some neat buildings, but the only synagogue we entered had been turned into a church and was hosting a modern Jewish art exhibition, filled with paintings and drawing that I could most definitely have done without.

Marx and Satch found a couple of small fans that they liked enough to spend some of their euros on (we had given each girl €25 to spend on souvenirs throughout the trip).



We tried to go to a grocery store leaving Toledo, but timing was off again -- 5:00 or 6:00. So back to Madrid and returning the car at Atocha Renfe. On the way into the station, a sidewalk stand grabbed our attention. Churros dipped in chocolate and yummy pastries. Ooooh they were good.

That night, we had dinner in the La Latina section, which was filled with tons of people. Almost 10:00 before we found a place that had seating: the five of us squished into a two-person table, ate a few good dishes, and split quickly because the smoke in there was pretty bad. We all noticed how much more smoking there was in Spain than at home -- in between our calming words, Mo complained about her degrading lungs. She had a point, but there was nothing we could do.

The girls got helado on the way back, which was more like gelato -- very good.

No drumming that night, but loads of noise and partying in the plaza downstairs.

Saturday, 3 April

We slept a long time. Eventually we roused ourselves and walked toward the Centro de Arte Reina Sofia (the MOMA of Madrid). On the way, we found a no-frills indoor market smelling ripe with fish. Scott and the kids went into a pet store that upset Marxer because they didn't understand how lizards and other animals should be housed.

Ate at an outdoor cafe, and then got to the museum just after free hours started (on Saturdays, from 2:30). Love that tradition. Again, the kids were wonderful and really enjoyed the art. We sat in front of "Guernica" for a while, saw many other Picassos, Dalis, and enjoyed the surrealists.



One very cool exhibit had clear tubing circling through many branches to out of/into a pump, which pushed clear liquid through in a raspy, no-tempo manner. Doesn't look like much in this photo, but it was mesmerizing. Marxer explained her



interpretation to a few people standing by.



No Spanish surrealist exhibit would be complete without Buñuel (my favorite all-time filmmaker). Had to stop to watch his second short, *L'Age Dor*. The girls realized how

funny he can be, and were laughing with me. But we were the only ones....

After a nap, we walked to the San Miguel market around dinner time. It was packed with locals, and everyone was eating. Scott and I got sangria at one stand and pinchas at a few other stands; Marxe got some meat thing; Mo had udon from the sushi stand; and Satch ate a bunch of veggie croquetas. Dessert was had by all.

To the apartment via Plaza Mayor. Another night, another parade. Street performers galore. Satch showed the three-headed guy how to really evil laugh. Fun night.

Sunday, 4 April

I wanted to get a semi-early start so we wouldn't miss El Rastro, *the* flea market in Madrid. We actually left the apartment by 11am, and walked the 15 minutes or so to El Rastro.

Like flea markets everywhere, this had the homey and craft booths next to the made-in-China stands lined up one after another, with t-shirts, cheapo earrings, tschokes. Massive. Went through streets and side streets and side streets past those streets. On and on and on. Also had some really interesting items and emptying-the-house stands, with silverware, hardware, jewelry, clothes (Mo saw a mantilla that we thought was very pretty, until the lady behind the table snarled dos cientos (€200) at us). We ended up finding a mantilla for Mo later for €4. A couple of times we tried bargaining, but we found Madrid and environs to be not bargain-happy. Anyway, Marxe got some earrings, Mo also got



a bandana, Satch got a dog-shaped purse. We passed a small store, which had baguettes and a slicer so Scott and Marxe got ham, me and Mo and Satch had cheese.



We were going to try to get up to Conde Duque (a cultural arts center), but everyone seemed more prepared to simply hang out, so we did. First in Plaza Mayor, where we saw Mickey Mouse and then another Mickey and another. Scott decided to capture as many Mickeys as he could in pictures. As soon as one approached us, we shook our heads no no no. One was pretty persistent, but we turned our back on him and walked away.





Naps at the apartment, and then we hung out in Puerta del Sol. Marx's belly was acting up, so we stayed close to a bathroom. It was really nice just sitting at the fountain,



watching people while the late afternoon sun beat down on us.

We had our last Madrid dinner at our favorite tapas place off Puerta del Sol.

Marx had really stopped eating, until we went to the ice cream place, but even then she didn't finish. Sleep by 1:30.



Monday, 5 April

Had to get up way early --7:30am. Metro to airport, and all was well, except they had an extra check at the gate itself in which they separated us into men's and women's lines, which I didn't like at all. Only other event of note: Satch made the trip official (twice) on the flight home. But it was all contained within the throw-up bag! She's a pro.