



Santiago de Compostela and the Apostle, St. James the Great

The sun was about to set when our buses parked in front of the Parador Hostal Reyes Catolicos right in the main square of Santiago de Compostela just to the right of the Cathedral itself. This was an exclusive area for cars and buses to enter only if their passengers are staying in the hotel. It was no wonder then that people were gawking at us when we alighted from the buses.



There was time to take a picture of the setting sun, then also enjoy the operatic voice of a singer in the street underneath an arched passage even consenting to a request for "Solo Mio". Then it was time for a late dinner in the "Comedor Real", a special reception area for dignitaries, where we were moved to from the regular dining room because of the size of the group. Other hotel guests were peeking at the ballroom wondering again who these noisy "VIPs" were. Oblivious of all these onlookers, the cruisers went on with their own agenda of just having fun and making the most out of this extraordinary treat.



Dining at the "Comedor Real" at the Parador Reis Catalicos

After a nice and restful sleep in luxurious comfort, it was time to have breakfast and get ready for the morning tour of the Cathedral of St. James and its immediate surroundings. It was surrounded by buildings and monuments of the major religious orders and even the School of Medicine of the University of Santiago. It was here that the body of St. James was buried after



The Cathedral of St. James and his tomb underneath the altar

having been floated off on a ship by his disciples following his execution by King Herod Agrippa in Jerusalem in AD 44 and was not allowed a burial. It took another 700 years for his casket to be found after a shining of lights (Compostela or "field of light") led his followers to its location. A shrine was eventually built that has become the destination of millions of pilgrims starting in the middle ages and continuing on to these days.

The main attraction was the elaborate altar and the giant censer, "botafumeiro", that was hanging from the dome at the crux of the transept that was used in the old days to fumigate the pilgrims who by then emitted a foul body odor after having walked hundreds of miles to get to Santiago. While the censer



The "Botafumeiro" or giant censer

was swung at the end of special masses, it could also be done on request for a small fee of E450 at the end of any mass. We were poised to collect the required amount but another group beat us to it (providence) and all we had to do was to make sure we ended our tour earlier so that we could sit at the transept to get a better look at the censer as it swung at 80 kph all most to the ceiling for 4 minutes.

There was time for lunch in the multiple restaurants behind the cathedral following the mass. Seafood was the order of the day, especially paella. Sharing multiple dishes, family style, gave us the opportunity to sample practically all the items in the



menu. The afternoon was free for all to do what pleased them. The city tour on a small train was very popular. Shopping for that special souvenir was next. Looking for the outfit to wear for



the costume party on the cruise ship was in everybody's mind. Exhausted but still excited at the end of the day, everybody was comparing notes as to the day's experience and productive exploration. The following morning was also a free time for that last minute shopping and photo op to go over what might have been missed the previous day. Alas, it was time to load our luggages again in the waiting buses as we said goodbye to the wonderful city of Santiago de Compostela, the final resting place of the apostle, St. James the Great. Next stop Vigo, Spain for lunch.

The Percebes Experience

Day 8, Friday. There was no rush getting up this morning since we still have a free morning to enjoy Santiago de Compostela. Breakfast was leisurely. There was time for last minute shopping picking up smaller items for "pasalubong" for families and friends.

Next stop was Vigo, the largest city in the southern area of the

Autonomous region of Galicia. It is the largest city in the region and is the fishing capital of the European Community. This is where our guides decided to stop for lunch. By the port where a Celebrity cruise ship was docked was the old city. It was a short walk across the street one block up the hill where rows of restaurants were found serving fresh Atlantic seafood of all kinds. It was a field day for fish lovers as octopus was on display like a table centerpiece flower arrangement.

What caught most everybody's attention was a weird looking soft shell fish that looked like the feet of a gargoyle with giant nails and wrinkled black skin. They are called *Percebes*. They



Percebes

are probably the most expensive item in the platter of seafood. They are attached to the rocks in the treacherous coast of the Atlantic that not uncommonly result in accidents and injuries to the fishermen when they harvest them. There is a trick in eating it that needed to be learned quickly from the waiters, just like eating crayfish in New Orleans. *Hold on to the "nail" with one hand and the "finger" with the other hand, then twist in opposite directions to sever the skin of the finger from the nail, then unsheathe the finger by peeling the skin from the tasty delicacy in the finger. Yummy! Creeeeepy for some!*

The road to Porto after crossing the Spain-Portugal border was hilly and very scenic. It was hard to stay awake after having had a very heavy seafood feast but all eyes were wide open as we crossed the Douro River to get to Vila Nova de Gaia where our cruise ship, the MS Gil Eanes (pronounced Jillianes), was moored and waiting. Porto here we come!



And some people, like Greg Lipat, even like it