

## **The Accident of Transformation**

by Danielle Machotka

Nestled in my guidebook between two towns in the northern Spanish plains in the region of Navarra, the Monasterio de la Oliva's brief description ended with, "Today, the monks survive by selling their honey, cheese, and wine, and by accepting paying guests." Honey, cheese, wine, and an alternative to cheap hotels—the combination was too good to pass up. I stumbled through a reservation over the phone in Spanish, leaving my first name only, no credit card number, and my arrival time. The voice on the other end assured me it was more than enough information.

Clouds and rain accompanied me to the gates of the monastery, but something else sat with me as I awaited the arrival of someone who could show me to my room. As my eyes roamed the sitting-room walls, covered with paintings from the Bible, the tiniest morsel of misgiving announced its presence with the skip of a heartbeat.

The faint clanging of pots drifted into the room and receded. Not sure what to expect in the way of noises, I was nonetheless astounded by the silence. The caretaker had told me the monks were all in worship, but that someone would be with me soon. Had I disrupted the service? I cursed my rental car for not getting me to the church on time.

"Danielle?" A hot-cocoa voice said my name in a way that made me feel like a long-awaited relative. I turned to see Padre Ramon, with an expression as warm as his voice, striding towards me with his hand outstretched. His brown cassock was secured with a rope belt and his silent shoes made brief appearances with each step—he exuded humility, confidence, and complete trust.

"Buenos días," I smiled, accepting his handshake.

“Hello. Welcome.” He picked up one bag despite my protestations that it was *pesada*, a word I had mastered lugging my two bulging carry-ons around Spain. But he was out of the sitting room and through the door before I could figure out, “Wait for me!” in his language, and I scuttled to catch up.

Where I had been most recently? Had I come by car? The questions in Spanish flew by as quickly as the two dark hallways that led us to a large back entry with a sweeping staircase. Suppressing the urge to stop and ponder the colorful biblical scenes painted on the walls, I kept my eyes on the barely lit stairs and tried to formulate answers to his questions. He spoke in low tones. I responded in lower ones. My Spanish didn't seem so bad at that volume.

We turned down a long corridor with a row of anonymous doors on the right and large picture windows overlooking the courtyard on the left. Italian cypress lined the one side of the space, and a rectangle of lawn cradled a lone olive tree. Everything—walkway, lawn, trees—led to the gaping, multi-arched entrance to the cathedral.

At the end of the corridor, we turned into room #21. The window sat wide open in greeting, and I was brushed with a gust of air carrying unmistakable atoms of manure. The sources of both that odor and the basic ingredient for the monk's cheese were nowhere to be seen as I glanced out the window.

The modest room contained a bed, night table, desk and chair. Surprisingly, I had a bathroom of my own. A Bible and the rules of the monastery, both in Spanish, sat on the desk. I skimmed the dozen-or-so rules.

Breakfast at 8:30, lunch at 1:30, dinner at 8:00. From 4:30 in the morning to 9:30 at night there were seven services—attending the three before breakfast was an impossibility.

A mushroom cloud of discomfort was growing in my chest. In making my plans, I hadn't really considered that this was a place of spirituality and worship, not an agricultural cooperative or youth hostel. In my quest for the unusual, I had overlooked the obvious. I read further.

#7 was written in all caps.

“THE MONASTERY IS NOT A HOTEL. IT IS A PLACE FOR CONTEMPLATION, PRAYER, AND FELLOWSHIP.”

Caught in the act of thoughtless tourism.

My overactive-traveler approach—rising early, grabbing breakfast on the run, and sweeping through my surroundings, devouring as much as possible in a day—led me to imagine but a few moments of quiet while staying at the monastery. Perhaps a contemplative hour before dinner one night.

When the monks began to take in paying guests, they no doubt envisioned people in need of spiritual rejuvenation, wanting to spend a few days attending services, participating in philosophical and religious conversations with the brothers, and rejoicing in the community of faith in which they found themselves. I had, honestly, come with none of those intentions.

And I couldn't fabricate them now. My Spanish barely got me through ordering food and asking directions. Deep ecclesiastical conversations were out of the question. I grew up in a family of atheists and was seeking nothing from Jesus at the moment. Mute, heathen ignoramus.

My best offering was to alter my plans for the weekend. I could see Tudela and Olite, nearby villages, in an afternoon and a morning. The rest of the weekend I'd stay put, writing in my journal, contemplating, going to services. Vespers sounded soothing. But first, lunch.

I joined a dozen other guests in the communal dining room. Fortunately, everyone else knew what to do, jumping up to the kitchen window to pick up each course as it came, clearing the dishes, folding their checkered cloth napkins and leaving them in the cubby neatly labeled with their room

number. I watched, smiled, tried out my Spanish. While everyone appeared to be on retreat, no one showed any signs of expecting the same from me. Perhaps they could imagine no other reason for my presence. Perhaps they were less concerned about it than I was letting myself believe.

The food was remarkably good. A first course of soup, with fresh vegetables and herbs undoubtedly from the lovingly tended monastery garden. Fish with a light tomato sauce and green peppers followed. We crunched on salad and sipped wine. All of it except for the fish was the fruit of the monks' labor. On the other hand, we were in the middle of a rock-filled plain, and getting that fish might have required some effort.

A Frenchman two chairs away leaned over and confided that he was a foreigner, too; he offered to speak French with me. Jean-Jacques and his wife, Carmen, were my saviors that weekend. He translated the conversations at meals, she showed me what to do during the services, and they always shared their holy water with me—dipping their fingers in it and giving me a “high two,” so that I ended up with some of the water on my fingers for crossing myself. Never having been baptized and unfamiliar with the customs, I was too intimidated to reach into the basin myself. We talked about literature, faith, politics, and travel. Not religion particularly, but the communion fed my soul and gave purpose to my stay.

Vespers, the 6:30 p.m. service, began with the cathedral in darkness except for a faint light that struggled in through the high windows—just enough to help us find our seats. Fifteen or twenty worshippers spread out in the pews. We were too few for this Gothic edifice, meant to show reverence by being filled with the faithful, raising their voices above the walls that reached for the sky. A lone bell sounded, rung by a brother standing in one of the aisles and grasping a long rope that extended to the belfry. As the lights came up, a line of monks filed in singing. They didn't stop their *a cappella* chants for the entire half hour. Twenty or so peaceful, berobed monks—some who,

coming from the kitchen or garden, were taking off aprons and work coats as they entered the church—joined in song with varying degrees of sweet harmony and grating atonality. I tried in vain to follow the prayer booklet given to me, but gave up, closed my eyes, and just felt the music.

At the end of the chants, the lights went out again. No one moved. With a click, on came a spotlight, illuminating a small alabaster statue of Mary and Jesus, mounted high behind the altar. I was stunned by the simple beauty of the two serene figures lit up in the enormous dark cavern of the church. As I stared, a feeling of faith arose unexpectedly in the same place that morsel of misgiving had first appeared. It was an emotion completely free of labels like Catholic or Christian, one filled with generosity of spirit and revelation, populated by open hearts and hands. I had the sense that the world was a good and gentle place, and realized that there was room for me here, too. Here in this building, here at the monastery, here on earth.

[sidebar]

## IF YOU GO

A peaceful and simple alternative to other lodging in Spain, monasteries offer a rich opportunity to meet people and to share in a sense of community that is all too rare when traveling. Nonetheless, their primary *raison d'être* is not to house tourists; due respect should be given to the ongoing monastic activities. A stay in a monastery is generally quite inexpensive—I paid about \$20 a day for room and full board—but requires advance reservations by phone or in writing. The level of English spoken will vary according to the individual monks; it's safe to expect to speak Spanish.

Meal times are generally set, and you may be asked to tidy your room at the end of your stay. At the Monasterio de la Oliva, guests are asked to change the sheets before leaving. Note that some monasteries restrict lodging to men or women only.

The Tourist Office of Spain has a brochure listing of monasteries in Spain that accept overnight guests. There are four regional Tourist Offices: New York (212) 265-8822, Miami (305) 358-1992, Chicago (312) 642-1992, and Los Angeles (323) 658-7188. Their Web site contains further contact details and general information on travel in Spain. <http://www.okspain.org/>