

Spain to Toronto Via Croatia, Part 1

By Murray “Indiana” Forbes

Folk dancers and fearless travellers Murray Forbes and his wife, Lavinia, live in the town of Órgiva in southern Spain, whence they retired from Canada in 2009.

Normally when I plan our trips there is a moment in time when all the pieces seem to fall more or less into place. Not that we necessarily follow our plan, especially since retirement has eliminated the time-and-timing constraint, but there are typically certain fixed events that have to be planned around, and the cost of air travel varies so wildly that I normally try to tie this down at an early stage.

The fixed events on this trip were a Serbian village dance workshop in the beautiful medieval village of Bale on the Istrian peninsula at the Slovenian side of Croatia, and a family-intensive trip to Toronto in Canada which included our four-yearly clan gathering – this year [2011], roughly 130 relatives spanning four generations.

From the outset, this trip was not normal. I spent months on the Internet hunting for rational and irrational flights to find some reasonable passage both in terms of cost and routing to take in these two fixtures. Nothing fell into place at any stage. In despair, I gazed at the map of Europe and, basing this on our experience in North America, reckoned that we could probably drive through it in about three days. Whereas we did more or less drive from the south of Spain to Croatia in three days, it was not at all like crossing the USA. I tend to lock my car into cruise control at the speed limit, thus rarely having to overtake anything, and pass many relaxing hours merely concentrating on not hitting things until the tank needs to be filled up again. For some unaccountable reason, however, in Europe every other car is involved in some sort of racing event in which speed limits play no role, and driving here is not relaxing at all. I guess, with America being so big, most people have worked out that the few hours saved on a multi-day trip do not compensate for the high blood pressure and energy expended in trying to out-drive everyone else.

Caving in to the wheel still left many planning issues – tolls versus non-tolls, Germany and Austria versus Italy and Slovenia, and so on. In the end we decided that if we were prepared to dole out

large sums in road tolls we could follow the Mediterranean highways and cross Italy to the Adriatic easily in three days. Then, on the day before departure, we were more or less ready and waiting, and decided instead to leave that afternoon and join the Mediterranean highways the next day at Barcelona so as to spend a night in Aranjuez, which we have always wanted to visit.

Aranjuez is unique in Spain as being the only town we have ever visited that has been easy to get into and easy to get out of, and we were even able to park on the street right in front of our hotel. It was very hot, and after some debate which my wife won decisively, we rushed into the Summer palace just before closing to admire nymphs and cherubs and gawk at how the rich once lived their luxurious lives. It always amazes me how the French, having cut off the heads of all their aristocrats, go to no end of effort to admire their magnificent lifestyle. In fact the palace is quite exquisite in a rather French sort of way, and one can travel the world from room to room without ever having to leave Spain. We also wandered around the gardens and the town and searched in vain for somewhere we both wanted to eat. It was so hot that I thought perhaps we could just drop a couple of eggs on the sidewalk and scoop them up with some bread, but Lavinia is a fussy eater and we finally ended up at a reasonable Italian restaurant right next door to our hotel – serendipity at its highest.

However easy Aranjuez was to get into, Girona wasn't. The chaos was enhanced by some major road works that sent our GPS into eternal recurrence until I took control and made a wild guess at the direction of the old part. Not a hope of a parking spot, and eventually we found an underground parking lot not too far away. I had booked a bed-and-breakfast in an historic building right in the old part, which sounded agreeable, if pricey. Once we found the building it was, indeed, magnificent, and my arms are now at least two inches longer from carting the luggage up three flights of ancient stairs. The young

proprietor was helpful in the extreme and totally appalled that we were paying for parking. With the aid of a map he carefully outlined how, by driving up to the railway tracks, we could park for free. The décor was modern minimalist style, and we had the only room with a bathroom en suite. At this point we discovered that, except for the price, everything in this establishment was extremely minimalist – the comfort, the breakfast, the convenience and so on. Our room had strange black tramlines around the edge of the ceiling and the bathroom was unromantically situated at one end of the room with no divide or door or curtain separating it. The strange-looking chairs were agony to sit in, and I am surprised that no chiropractor has agreed on a joint venture.

Girona is a very pretty old town and one can walk around the old city wall, which gives one an excellent view of the town and the surrounding countryside. Map notwithstanding, however, I was totally unable to find the railway tracks. We naturally had no idea where and in what direction we were facing when we got out of the underground parking, and so helplessly meandered from one corner of the town to the other. As I got more and more lost we did eventually find free parking but it turned out to be more or less on the outskirts and a massive hike through not-pleasant busy roads back to the old part.

On day three, we arrived without a hitch at one of the highlights of our trip. Even this had its traumas. In fact, our minimalist bed and breakfast being so uncomfortable and the lukewarm coffee with cellophane-packaged mini-muffins tasting of nothing but sugar did not detain us either, so that we arrived in Magagnosc (France) by late morning. We were to stay with good friends from Canada who'd retired back to their lovely old family home in these mountains just below the parc de Mercantour. GPS was able to steer us around the complicated maze of Grasse and deposit us in Magagnosc but had no clue as to the address of our friends. In fact, neither did Google Maps or MapQuest, and our friends sent us a French online map link that located them, but it was too complicated for me to follow. We tried phoning them but were cut off as they were in the mountains. It was Sunday and nothing was open and there was no sign of life anywhere. Eventually we located the road that we thought we needed to go up to get to

their house but after gyrating tortuously upwards at an alarming incline for a while we lost courage and struggled back down again.

At the bottom of this road was what looked like a roadside restaurant that was open. There was a party going on inside, and although late for eating in France, the owners assured us that we could eat there if we did not mind eating on the terrace. Then the menu arrived and we realized our mistake. This was very haute cuisine at very very haute prices and not at all the midday snack we were hoping to grab. The owner was charming and in no way made us feel like the cheapskates that we were as we made a hasty retreat. Lavinia then saw some sign of life at the far end of the village in the form of a lady carrying a filled shopping basket. She also had not heard of our friend's address but assured us that shops were open in the adjoining village and that the centre of Magagnosc was down a vertical track off the edge of the mountain where the one-track road between houses was ominously governed by a traffic light. We found the last parking spot by the church and then set off on foot to the next village. Here we found a first-class patisserie/boulangerie which had a few tables and we were able to have a very late but very good lunch there. The lady serving in the shop also had not heard of our friend's address. Later the baker himself came back and we asked him. He took great pains to point out to us that the address was in the adjoining village and so of course he had never heard of it. Some half an hour later he came up to us apologizing profusely for not being able to locate the address; he had apparently been diligently researching the issue to the exclusion of all other effort since we asked him, without any success.

Needless to say, we were eventually able to get through to our friends, and spent a very enjoyable afternoon and evening with them and exploring the rather highbrow neighbouring villages and mansion row facing the park, no doubt inhabited by the people eating at the restaurant that we fled from and probably playing golf in Antibes and sailing their yachts in Nice, all very close by.

Next day, having struggled across Italy on horrendous highways being harassed constantly by sports cars trying to drive us over the edge, descending on our bumper at least 200 kms/hr with arms flailing

and horns blowing, not to mention the lane slalom practised by the mega-trucks, we arrived at the Slovenian border without a toll ticket. I guess when I pulled off for fuel it must have been just before ticket dispensing, and when I pulled back on it, the toll authorities had not provided ticket dispensing. While the cars built up behind us in contented Italian phlegm a formidable tolls lady laboriously filled up form after form, and we were sure that we would be arrested on the spot. Fifty-nine euros later we were handed a lengthy document and told to surrender ourselves to some not-clearly-defined location further down the highway, and the document threatened that we would be pursued by the full might of the law and never allowed to drive in Italy again if we didn't.

We never did find the building that we were meant to surrender ourselves to and are now fugitives from the law but we did in fact pay the full amount of the tolls across Italy so our conscience is clear even though our lives are under threat.

Slovenia has some of the cheapest gas in Europe and makes up for it by requiring one to buy about a month's worth of expensive vignette (toll ticket) in order to use its motorways. There is a way around this if one has steady nerves and clairvoyance. The lady organizing the workshop had sent us elaborate route details for staying off motorways, which we immediately invalidated by taking the road marked "Slovenia" as opposed to the one marked "commercial establishments." Our GPS had concluded that Europe ended in Italy and was of no help. We also managed to leave our book of maps at home. In Slovenia, every gas station is manned by incredibly helpful and patient people who speak English, certainly Italian, probably German, no doubt Serbo-Croat and Russian and maybe French and possibly also Slovenian. However, all roads lead to vignette-endangered motorways and staying off them requires great skill. Three or four gas stations later, we managed to get within sight of the Adriatic and by keeping that on our right limped across the border into Croatia.

At this stage, having vastly overdriven, I experienced one of those rare occasions where retirement and age come together in perfect harmony. It started with a casual inquiry from my wife as to what day exactly the workshop was meant to start. We arrived in Bale a day early. No problem, other than unleashing a wild outbreak of activity. We were

nicely accommodated where we were to stay for the next 10 days.

Serbian and some Macedonian dancing occurred every morning and a party for those still standing, every evening, leaving afternoons free. The dance classes were accompanied by two very talented young musicians and taught by a performance dancer from the Kolo national dance company of Serbia. It is very energetic stuff and there were many moments when we no longer felt young. The participants were mostly French, many of whom were members of an international dance club in Lyons. There was also a group of four women from the mountainous middle of Norway and one retired banker from Japan who was a great hit with the Croatians, largely because he was the only one apart from them who could take slivovitzes (a kind of lethal plum brandy good for removing paint, starting cars, etc.) neat for breakfast. He also had a highly idiosyncratic way of speaking English that caught on like wildfire and did wonders for Japo-Croatian relations.



Where the dancers stayed in Bale, Croatia.

Having the car, we were able to explore Istria far and wide, including the mountainous interior and its ancient towns and villages, some with varying degrees of tourist infrastructure to lure tourists from the beach and others unrevitalized with all their fading charm intact. We also strayed into Slovenia and on one of the days we played hooky and drove all the way to beautiful Ljubljana, avoiding the motorway with some difficulty. It is a most attractive part of the world. As a bonus, so many Italians visit Istria that when one can take no more of the solid meat-centric Croatian diet one can find first-class Italian food everywhere.

The next fixture on our plan was a visit to Toronto and this also did not in any way fall into place. It was impossible to find any reasonably priced flights. Finally I found one with a Ukrainian airline which offered to fly us two hours in the wrong direction from Budapest to Kiev in a tiny plane that one could not stand up in and then 10 hours packed like sardines with no distractions across Greenland to JFK airport in New York in a behemoth, and in theory back again.

After the workshop, somewhat worn out from the wonderful but highly energetic dancing, we managed to rent a holiday apartment in Zagreb for three days. Having now a good map and having studied in detail Google maps, I felt easily up to the challenge of arriving in Zagreb. All went beautifully until our designated route was blocked completely by road works, with no detour signage provided. Luckily, it was a national holiday and all Zagrebians were on the Adriatic, swimming, so that our tenuous and aimless meander through Zagreb, completely lost, did not cause any major outbreaks of road rage. Then, by some miracle we sort of bumped into a street that was on our route. This is a lovely laid-back sort of city, and our apartment was roughly within walking distance of the pretty old downtown (we could have taken a tram), and our vast communist-style apartment was comfortable and well-equipped, but in hindsight two days would have been ample.

The highway from Zagreb to Budapest is straightforward. The only issue occurred when, in pouring rain, we had to make our way right through the centre of the city in rush hour to the far-lying suburbs where our hotel lay in hiding. Of course we had no maps on the GPS and we were off our map and

the notes I took from Google Maps relied on one being able to read road names, which is generally impossible. Whereas Croatians and Slovenians generally speak some English, Hungarians do not, and no one other than Hungarians speak Hungarian. After a number of false turns and many reversals we found someone who spoke a few words of Spanish and in fact drove us right to our hotel, which we would never have found as it was completely camouflaged and off to the side across some disused tram tracks.

Kiev airport has got to be the worst on earth. People everywhere, and nowhere to sit, a queue round the block for the two functional ladies' toilets, two lots of James Bond-style security checks and some fumigation (no explanation; just step into the cubicle and surrender to some unidentified substance being blown at one). Disinfected and secured, we were then herd-packed cheek and jowl into a room to stand for



Lavinia Forbes, Nymph of the Lily-Pads, in a park in Zagreb, Croatia.

hours and try and synchronize breathing. We got talking to a young American who had been teaching film at a posh summer camp in Austria and was on his way home, which slightly helped pass the time.

By the time we arrived in New York with very little food (and that which was produced was totally inedible) and no other distractions other than half the plane being filled with children who ran around without pause and kicked seats to make sure that no one drifted off into wasteful sleep, we were in a state of living death. I had, however, rented a car to drive us to Toronto. This was yet another piece that did not fall into place. I had rented the car from an online agent, having misread the complicated Spanish flight itinerary and erroneously booked the pick-up for the morning following our arrival. When I discovered this, I tried to make the change online and was told that it would cost me an enormous premium to do so. As the rental car company was Budget I thought I would probably be better off arriving at their doorstep, as in North America car rental companies are quite keen to rent their cars. This is not, however, so easy at JFK, where one has to first get to and then work out in what direction to take the skytrain to where the car rental companies are located.

No problem about the car, of course, but although well after midnight European time it was the height of the rush period in New York, and at this crucial moment, with heavy cloud cover GPS refused to find any satellites. Wild guesswork in New York traffic got me stuck right in the midst of downtown Manhattan with nothing moving in any direction. A uniformed porter at a rather posh hotel allowed us to leave our car temporarily blocking its guests while the receptionist hastily printed out a MapQuest for us. However, once back into the car, not to be outdone by competing technology, our GPS sprang to life and decided that we ought to go in the opposite direction, which actually made some sense: heading up Harlem River Boulevard through the Bronx and other prime shootout locations. Our experience was further enhanced by the beloved boulevard being reduced to one lane by roadworks. Finally, without one holdup or shooting or anything other than lots of cars, we started getting out of New York. USA is the easiest place on earth to travel as wherever one goes there is an endless supply of roadside motels to stay at – that

is to say, other than anywhere near to New York. By about 4 a.m. Europe time we saw our first motel – a real gangster-movie special – where we collapsed into glorious sleep.

The route from New York to Toronto via Buffalo is very lovely, passing through the Catskill mountains and Finger Lakes, but we got to the border with some sense of adventure as GPS had it firmly in mind that we should have crossed Lake Ontario at Kingston, which is longer and not nearly as nice. Luckily we more or less knew our way but had important missions to complete before crossing the bridge. Firstly we had to fill up the car as fuel is much cheaper in the US but which is not easy to do once one gets to around Buffalo, and Lavinia had nostalgia for the sparse chain of American diners called Denny's where they have endeared themselves to us by defining "seniors" as anyone over 55, and we also wanted to find an outlet mall to buy some inexpensive US clothes. These missions involved a great deal of serious exploration around the Niagara Falls area. Language not being an issue, we nevertheless got many conflicting directions, including one to a Denny's that had closed down, and never did find the outlet malls that I know exist, but it was still early, and entering Toronto would have been no fun unless we waited for the rush hour to commence.

We were lucky in Toronto to have been able to borrow the apartment of Lavinia's ex-sister-in-law and so had a roof and parking. This was particularly fortunate as my brother and his family (wife and two teenaged daughters) were staying at my mother's and so there was absolutely no room for us there. In spite of the fact that many Torontonians go out of town to their cottages in August this is a very busy city, made much worse by the fact that all the roads were being repaired at the same time.

We enjoyed time with our busy children, family and friends and the big family gathering but have no traces of nostalgia for our home of 39 years. It is busy, aggressive, hectic and now also expensive. Remarkably, we found that unlike just about everywhere else there is little or no sign of the worldwide economic collapse, and if anything there are now even more chi-chi restaurants in the place of

normal shops, and the noisier and more expensive they are, the better they seem to do.

At this point I have to mention that communications on this trip were a major issue. I had travelled without a computer as my iPod can handle e-mails, simple Internet searches and Skype telephoning as long as it can find unlocked wi-fi. The only free wi-fi access that I could find in Toronto was hovering outside of Starbucks (we dislike the coffee or else we would have hovered more comfortably inside over some coffee) or loitering on a street corner near one of the local libraries (when they had not switched their wi-fi off). The other library had wi-fi but blocked access to Gmail for some unknown reason. To increase the challenges, in at least two of the places we visited, no sooner did we get there than the landlines went dead. This happened to us in Toronto, and it took nearly a week before the repairman arrived and replaced part of the cable system.

In principle, our return should have been a day's drive to New York, a plane ride to Kiev (with enough time to have a brief look round), then on to Budapest and a four or five days' drive, avoiding toll roads and Italy, back to Orgiva. Not so dull for "Indiana" Forbes.

Following a pleasant and uneventful drive across New York state to the outskirts of New York City and on to JFK airport to return our rental car on Friday 26th August, the traffic going the other way seemed to be worse than usual but we just put this down to the Friday-evening exodus from New York City to escape the summer heat. Nevertheless, New York and the airport seemed to be in a state of excessive tension, and the driving was slow and rather frantic. Getting a hotel room was next to impossible and we finally found an expensive, extremely mediocre room whose sole merit was that it was within a free shuttle ride from the airport. It was in a kind of hotel ghetto without restaurants or any other infrastructure except awful indigestion: special pizzas delivered cold and eventually. The shuttle from the airport only went every hour, and we enjoyed pretty much the full hour's wait for ours. On arrival at the hotel there was a sign up to the effect that Hurricane Irene was

heading directly for New York, which was being evacuated, and that all flights and other transportation would cease at midday Saturday. There was no information about our flight, which was scheduled to leave at 12:35 p.m. Saturday, either on JFK or Aerosvit's websites.

After a worried and bad night's sleep we decided to take the early shuttle to the airport to see if we could find out what was happening, not knowing where or how to evacuate New York in any event. At the airport, nearly all flights had been cancelled (and our flight was not even listed), there was no information desk, and Aerosvit's desk was unmanned, with a note to the effect that no one would be there until 9 a.m. (which did not happen) and a telephone number. Our cellphone could not find a network and there was no available wi-fi for the iPod. We then decided that we had better get out of the airport and find some hotel somewhere and hope that we could avoid some of the horrors promised by all the news channels – being swept away by six-foot waves or our building being blown into orbit. All ground transportation had, however, by then closed down, including the skytrain. We returned to the terminal and determined that we needed to get out of New York by 'plane. Our options were not good. There was a flight to El Salvador embarking and one to Dubai and the last one out at 11:30 a.m. was to Port-of-Spain. We then, by some miracle and a great deal of help from the highly sympathetic Caribbean Airlines staff, managed to get the last two seats on the last flight



Photos by Murray Forbes

Our digs in Trinidad: a seaside condo belonging to cousins.

out of New York, which, needless to say, did not leave until 12:30, and made its bumpy way away from the storm along a longer-than-usual but safer flight path to Trinidad.

It was rainy season in Trinidad but we had family there and in fact I was born there. My Trinidadian aunt died recently, leaving her magnificent seaside condominium to her six daughters, and it was vacant. We survived our exile in great comfort, therefore, which luckily relieved some of the pressure to try and get back to Europe.

Comfort aside, Trinidad was in a state of emergency, with nightly curfews to try and curb the large number of daily murders. We lived in peace and tranquillity in a safe part of town with an armed guard at the gate, behind prison-style multiple locked doors and massive burglar bars on each window. It is an enclave of elderly white Trinidadians where everyone knows everyone and their ancestors and, of course, their affairs. Outside of our ghetto it seemed safe enough. There are very few white people left and the real tension is between Indian and African Trinidadians, and most of the murders are drug-related. It is, however, not calm or tranquil with bedlam reigning on the streets, where too many cars vie with each other for too few roads and many a driver's licence has been bought rather than awarded. In general, there is quite widely held wealth in Trinidad, partly from the oil that has been found there and partly as a result of its proximity to Venezuela and as entrepôt for the illegal drug trade.

Ironically my cousins had only just got back from Toronto, where they also participated in the large family event, and it was really strange to be seeing them so soon again in this very different context. We greatly enjoyed visiting Trinidad, where we were last at least 25 years prior. We went with my cousins swimming at two different beaches, and up into the mountains to a bird watchers' nature reserve. We also went on a boat trip to the Caroni saltwater swamps, which are also a bird sanctuary and where we got to see some boa constrictors and four-eyed fish and feed the mosquitoes in addition to the real purpose of the tour: to see the brilliant red ibis flying into their

sleeping ground for the night. This was totally spectacular. We totally indulged all our favourite Trinidadian foods. I was even able to meet up with an old school friend from my school days in Cambridge, England, who lives in Trinidad.

It was indeed providential that we were not pressed for time to get out of Trinidad. As in Toronto, the telephones decided to pack up the moment we arrived at my aunt's house, and there was also no wi-fi there. Our first attempt at going to a travel agent was thwarted by an all-day power outage. Our next attempt, as with everything in Trinidad, required about an hour in line and then, in the very fullness of time, with my persistent prompting because I had already done the research on my cousin's computer, we were assured that we could fly to Frankfurt by a charter flight out of Tobago on Monday and that there were still ferry tickets left to Tobago for Sunday although nothing before. We took it immediately and were assured that the confirmation would be e-mailed to us within half an hour. Three telephone calls later and the end of the day and no e-mails had arrived.



In the mountains of eastern Trinidad.

Naturally, the following day was Independence Day and the next Id-ul-Fitri, both holidays in Trinidad. On Friday we descended again on the travel agent with determination and attitude with my Trinidadian cousins, and after much discussion and playing on the computer eventually a confirmation was produced but with next-to-no information such as which terminal in Frankfurt airport and why the plane number changed in Barbados.

We had a most enjoyable Saturday walking around the savanna and visiting the eastern mountains to see where some people had been held up at gunpoint the day before, and at the crack of dawn on Sunday we were on a smooth three-hour ferry ride half-way around the coast of Trinidad and on to Tobago. Tobago is a very attractive and low-key holiday resort island, and we stayed in a local hotel near both the airport and what is reputed to be the best beach on the island. It was very hot and humid, and swimming in the sea is not particularly refreshing, in my opinion. We ate local food from the food vendors and the next day wheeled our luggage right into the terminal. At the restaurant on the way in we shared a table with an Austrian couple who were also on their way to Frankfurt. They have been sailing every summer for the last umpteen years in a 62-foot yacht around the world, doing two or three months at a time. If I got the story right, this last hop was from Greenland to Tobago.

We had no very clear idea of how we would get from Frankfurt airport to Budapest. I had found on the Internet a low-cost Polish airline that ran flights out of Frankfurt Hahn airport but was unable to book online on my cousin's computer because they would not accept my Spanish Visa card. Neither Frankfurt International nor Hahn airport websites had any information as how to get between the two airports. An e-mail to the Hahn airport authority, however, penetrated the secret and its schedule. Naturally we arrived at Terminal 1 and the shuttle left from Terminal 2, but there was also a skytrain between the two terminals. If this all worked out we ought to arrive at Frankfurt Hahn airport just in time to get a ticket on Wizz Air [a Hungarian low-cost airline—Ed.] if there were any seats left. Our alternatives were not good and would probably have required either an all-night

bus ride or an expensive KLM flight with a plane change in Amsterdam. Luckily Germany is a very orderly place and everything does what it says it does, and we actually arrived safe and sound in Budapest in time to get a taxi to our hotel and reunite with our car which was intact and still on its wheels and to eat an excellent dinner at the restaurant recommended by our taxi driver.

It was a long, disagreeable drive from Budapest to Wiesbaden but we greatly enjoyed our destination. The hotel that we got online, ominously called Motel One, was very comfortable even though in the minimalist style. Wiesbaden is a grand old spa town with all the appearance of a prosperous past and present. Lavinia had lived there for a year when she was much younger. It is very charming and beautifully preserved. We enjoyed it so much that we decided to spend the next morning exploring there as well.

Once in France we told GPS to avoid tolls, which resulted in a lengthy and slow descent to Spain with many high-quality traffic jams, road works, enormous detours, and some long patches of traffic chaos. However, since an expensive crackdown on speeding, French drivers are now about the sanest in Europe, and the last high-speed chase occurred north of the border in Germany, where speed limits either do not exist or are totally ignored.

On the first night we reached Auxerre, which is an attractive little river town. We totally succumbed to French cuisine and pastries and wandered around the old city remembering what ambulation felt like. We found a charming hotel room behind a restaurant with a great view of the cathedral.

GPS then found the dullest route to the Pyrenees that one could imagine, carefully avoiding the beautiful Perigord and the Massif Central. We brought our next day to an end at Agen not having managed to cover as much ground as we had hoped because of the traffic issues. In Agen, the tourist information centre was still open and they managed to put us into a very comfortable hotel apartment right in the old part. It is an attractive town with a superb market, where we indulged the next morning.

Then GPS took us along some tortuous route in order to plunk us on the pay highway running towards the coast, so we sacked it and made our own way over the most spectacular road along the historic Tour de France bicycle route. It was a magnificent day for crossing the Pyrenees and definitely one of the other highlights of the trip. We had our gourmet picnic lunch high in the mountains feeding off the spoils from the market and patisserie in brilliant sunshine – superb.

Over in Spain we switched back to GPS but soon realized that it was going to send us along the boring Mediterranean pay highway into the high-theft areas of Valencia and Allicante, so sacked it again and took a lovely route from the *autovia* at Teruel towards Cuenca and then on towards Albacete and Jaen, stopping the night at the sleepy little town of Requena. Unfortunately, there was a wedding going on in the old part of Requena and not a hotel room to be found, but we found something uncharming but adequate in the new part and were able to stumble home by early afternoon (Spanish lunchtime). However, our security-minded friends had placed a padlock on our gate in response to some terrorism notes left on our front porch, probably written by children, judging from the handwriting. But we were back home, and wandering over to the neighbours we got to borrow a phone and then track down the key and then walk to the key and have coffee and a chat with our friends before facing up to almonds and figs to be picked and other traumas of rural life – not to mention the influence of our trip to Tobago on our banana sucker, which has sprouted its first-ever bunch of bananas.

All in all, this was not a normal trip and athwart with many challenges, and eccentric enough to take in Spain, France, Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Hungary, Ukraine, USA, Canada, Austria, Germany and back through France and Spain. Add an evacuation from a hurricane to Trinidad and Tobago, and it has to have been the strangest trip that we have done yet.



First-ever bunch of fruit (still too green to eat) on our banana sucker in Órgiva, which sprouted while we were (naturally) away.