

Travel

PAMPLONA, SPAIN

Seeking out Hemingway

HEATHER CONN

Contributing Writer

While seeking out Ernest Hemingway's favourite haunts in Pamplona, Spain, I felt like a groupie. Why should I care where a hard-drinking famous author, who was macho, petty and self-absorbed, liked to hang out? Yet the writer in me felt

drawn not only to the places he frequented in Spain, but also to his rebel soul that

disdained mundane journalism for a passion-filled life of irreverent adventure. Hemingway's great literature, skillfully crafted, added grit and guts to the otherwise snooty veneer of the land of American letters. His bylines came with a lot of

sweat and swagger; he was a man of the seas and the street — no starched white lapels for him.

So, when I strode across Pamplona's Plaza del Castillo, the large square that housed Hemingway's favourite hotel and café, it was easy to imagine the ex-patriate writer arm-wrestling over one of the many patio tables or downing too many absinthes or whiskeys in fading Spanish light. The wicker seats that once filled his haunt Café Iruña (Basque)

are gone, but the large, high-ceiling place with overhead fans and polished lights felt like a touch of Paris. In the adjoining bar stood a nearly life-size statue of him. Many framed black-and-white photos in the bar showed him in informal poses. In one, he's in the midst of making a cocktail; in another, he's laughing with friends.

I wasn't surprised to discover that Pamplona's tourist office supplies a free map of Hemingway-related sites. At Plaza de Toros, the bullfighting arena where he watched countless bloody scenes, there's a Paseo or street named after him. Next

to it, his bust appears atop a rectangular monument.

Besides notable folk like Charlie Chaplin and Orson Welles, Hemingway used to stay at the city's tall, elegant Hotel La Perla, where a small bust of him rests on a table in the lobby. Although this five-star "perfect combination of tradition, history and comfort" offers discounts for El Camino de Santiago pilgrims like I was, the atmosphere seemed staid and impersonal compared to the warmth and hospitality of the Camino albergues (hostels).

Hemingway had made a significant pilgrimage of his own to a basilica near a different Santiago in the southwest corner of his adopted home, Cuba. Was it superstition or humility that motivated him to leave his house near Havana and deposit his 1954 Nobel Prize in literature, a medalion, at the shrine of the Virgin of Charity (La Virgen de la Caridad), Cuba's patron saint?

In Pamplona, one of Hemingway's favourite hangouts, Bar Txoko, was empty when my husband Frank and I first looked in. Dominated by a wide counter that runs



In the bar at Café Iruña stands a near-life-size statue of Ernest Hemingway, who often frequented the popular restaurant.

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the full length of the establishment, it has a photo mural at one end. When we popped in later, the cozy joint was full of Spaniards drinking and talking after work, standing in huddles. "Hem" would have blended easily into this laid-back, intimate bar.

In daily life, he mucked about equally with glamorous matadors, illiterate fishermen and Hollywood stars, never wallowing in his celebrity status. I admired his willingness to join the International Brigades, risking his life to fight fascism in Spain's civil war.

I have toured Hemingway's home in Key West, Florida, with its tropical garden, many crew of six-foot cats and the salt-water pool that his second wife Pauline built for him and he never used. The image of his writing room there, with shelves of first editions, a typewriter, chaise lounge and mounted animal heads, has remained with me as a symbol of inspiration. I look forward to seeing his house

in Cuba and some of the island's local places that his fourth wife Mary writes of fondly in her 1976 autobiography *How It Was*.

In the book, she reveals not only Hemingway's meanness and spite but his tenderness and vulnerable need for loving reassurance. She documents his later descent into paranoia and struggle with mental illness. How could a man, formerly at home in vast landscapes, free on the rolling ocean and African plains, stay sane and contained within a locked, isolated room in an institution?

After walking the Camino, I reread Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, appreciating his description of the same areas and towns where I had walked. But while still in Pamplona, after seeing the token spots that had attracted Hemingway's boozey interest, I began to feel restless again. I was ready to leave the city and return to the open, rural paths of The Way. Like this far more famous writer, I craved unfamed space and adventure.