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p. 55

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ON WHEELS

If you think you're not a bus traveller, trust us: you will be after you read this. From the country gardens of bonnie England to the marble-lined canals of Venice – and Lisbon's riotously coloured *bairros* – we're rolling around Europe on the next generation of coach tours. The first one takes us to Portugal and Spain, on a journey that defies one skeptic's expectations (p. 19). Next, we check out three amazing specialty tours (p. 28), cover the pros and cons of four money-carrying options for travellers (p. 30) and bust a few timeworn myths about bus travel (p. 34). In Italy, we learn how family-oriented coach tours offer the trip of a lifetime – without the usual planning headaches (p. 33). Off we go!



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Walls surround the medieval village of Monsaraz, Portugal; (below) accordion players entertain passersby in the historical heart of Evora, Portugal.

Slow Your ROLL

A coach tour of Spain and Portugal defies expectation

BY CATHERINE ROSCOE BARR



Our coach is zipping south, along a cobbled boulevard lined with jacaranda trees, to Lisbon's waterfront highway, where the mouth of the Tagus River meets the Atlantic Ocean. Handsome driver Helder is at the wheel, and feisty local tour guide Laura is narrating up front, in her elegant Portuguese lilt. She

points out the window at the cobblestones, squared chunks of limestone and basalt that are painstakingly set by hand. "Look, these stones are characteristic of Portugal," she says, her voice coming through crisply over the sound system.

Why just see Europe when you can feel and experience it like a local? There's a coach tour for every traveller type. AMATravel.ca/Coach



(clockwise from top left); Lisbon's Monument to the Discoveries pays homage to Portuguese explorers such as Vasco da Gama; chili, orange and polenta accompany venison medallions at Frade dos Mares restaurant in Lisbon; Andalusian pig farmer and ham producer Manolo Eíriz poses with his herd; visitors explore the medieval heart of Evora on bicycles; writer Catherine Roscoe Barr smiles pretty; decked-out horses await tourists in Seville; Evora hotel M'AR de AR Aqueduto juxtaposes a modern lobby with a building that was once a 16th-century palace.

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We're beginning a tour of Lisbon's 100-kilometre Golden Triangle: the metropolitan area, the coastal town of Cascais and the lush, hilltop municipality of Sintra. It's the first day of my week-long Insight Vacations tour of the Iberian Peninsula, and we'll be travelling from Lisbon, through southern Portugal and into Spain – staying in Lisbon, Evora and Seville for two nights each.

When I decided to make this journey, I wasn't entirely sure what to expect. After all, I'd be covering 500 km on a coach with a group of strangers, and I hadn't really travelled by bus since my high school days of claustrophobic tours with my marching band and basketball team. Admittedly, I'd also been influenced by a few negative things I'd heard about coach tours. I worried I wouldn't get an authentic feel for the places we were going to visit, that I might be cramped or bored, or that I wouldn't have anything in common with my travelling companions. But this trip dispels all of those myths, one after the other.

Myth #1, Disproven off the Bat: **Coach touring is uncomfortable.**

Insight distinguishes between "coach" and "bus," and I can see why we've been discouraged from using the B-word when talking about our ride: it's seriously spacious. At 5' 9", I'm usually uncomfortable on buses, my knees crushed against the seat in front of me. But my legs are stretched out nearly straight. And I have elbow room to spare as I use the complimentary onboard Wi-Fi to Instagram a picture of Belém Tower, Lisbon's 500-year-old limestone edifice on the water, which we've just visited, along with the Monument to the Discoveries, the statue honouring Portugal's Renaissance-era explorers. Insight limits its groups to 40 passengers, which allows for the spacious seating. The coach's massive windows with minimal frames offer unencumbered views of the fishing boats bobbing around Cascais harbour and, later, Sintra's striking pink-and-yellow architecture.



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Vacation Cost Smackdown

Think you can't afford a coach tour in Europe? Well, we compared the cost of taking a family of four to Europe with that of taking the same crew to Disney World – and learned the price gap isn't as big as we thought.



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Hotel tips and restaurant gratuities	Included	\$125
Travel director and driver	Included	–
	\$10,000	\$8,600

*Based on Trafalgar Tours' "Gladiators, Gondolas and Gold"; travel dates of July 10-19, 2015.
 **Based on a family with two adults and two children aged 10 and 12; U.S. exchange rate of 1.25.

(FROM LEFT) TRAFALGAR, DISNEY



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Myth #2, Dispatched in Style:

The accommodation is generic.

My eyes pop open just before my alarm goes off. I allow myself one more minute under my king-size comforter before opening the room's electric blinds and stepping onto a private patio that faces a hedge-lined courtyard filled with lavender, and olive and orange trees. I roll out my yoga mat and set about energizing my heart, mind and muscles before breakfast.

We arrived in the city of Evora yesterday, after a 130-km journey east, across the Tagus River and into Portugal's south-central Alentejo region. The five-star M'AR de AR Aqueduto, a modernized 500-year-old palace in the heart of Evora's preserved medieval district, is a juxtaposition of chic design and regal



Ham hangs to cure at Jamones Eriz, an artisanal ham producer in Spain's Sierra Morena Mountains.

heritage. A row of tangerine-and-white Ero Aarnio Ball Chairs greet guests in the lobby and an ancient aqueduct and wrought iron gates frame its whitewashed walls. I can see why it's one of Insight's Signature Hotels, chosen for its distinct character, central location and choice amenities.

Next, it's time for my favourite part of the day: breakfast. Taking a seat in the hotel's dining room, I place a crisp white napkin across my lap and dig into a feast of baked beans, roast tomatoes, scrambled eggs, freshly baked bread and strong coffee from the complimentary buffet. Heaven.

SIMON BOUCHER-HARRIS/RENEGADE PHOTOGRAPHY

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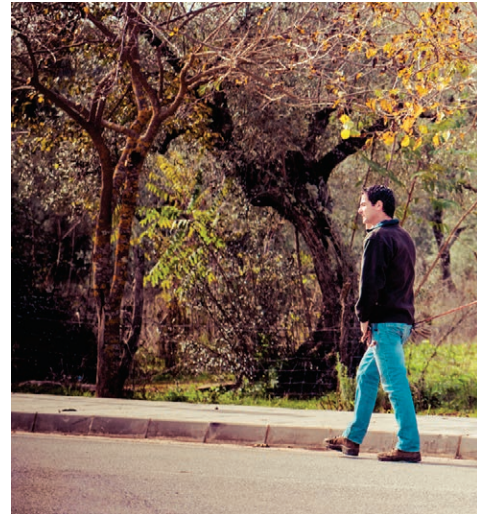
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A man leads a donkey along a road near the Sierra de Aracena, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in Spain's Sierra Morena Mountains.

Myth #3, Steamed Away in the Hotel Sauna:

You never have time to yourself.

As someone who alternates between outgoing and introverted, I'm happy for my group's conviviality, but I was also grateful to learn that our itinerary included plenty of personal time. I've become fast friends with Cyd, an easygoing beauty from L.A., and Carol, a vivacious Latina from New York. But I know exactly what I'm going to do with my two free hours before tonight's dinner: head to M'AR de AR Aqueduto's spa and its complimentary sauna and rain shower. I allow myself a luxurious hour of circulation-boosting bliss, alternating between 15 minutes in the delightfully hot sauna followed by 30-second icy blasts in the rain shower. Much needed, because this morning, before meeting the group at 9 a.m., I greeted the sunrise on a five-km jog around the medieval wall that borders Evora's central district (designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its 2,000 years of history shaped by Celtic, Roman and Moorish occupation).

Myth #4, Dispelled on a Free Range Pig Farm:

The excursions are standard tourist fare.

I hear Manolo Eiriz before I see him, singing a melodic refrain to his drove of black Iberian pigs as he swings a five-metre-long stick at the oak trees, knocking down omega-rich acorns for them to eat. We're standing in silence with his brother Domingo, about 20 metres away, so that we don't startle the shy creatures. The pigs spend their days freely roaming the green meadows and woodlands of the Sierra de



Aracena, a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in the westernmost range of Spain's Sierra Morena Mountains. The park borders the village of Cortezconcepción, where the Eíríz family has been making artisanal ham for five generations, since their company, Jamones Eíríz, was established in 1818.

As an ardent animal lover and what I like to call a "mindful meat eater," this is one of the most memorable experiences of the trip for me. I share gleeful sideways glances with the other group members as the happy pigs' curled little tails bounce past us toward Manolo and the tasty acorns falling around him.

Next, we tour the site's ham production facility – poking fun at one another's hairnets and blue, elfin shoe covers. We arrive in a bright interior courtyard to discover tables set with a dizzying selection of rosemary-flavoured hard cheese and fortified wine, as well as, of course, the entire array of Eíríz ham. Afterward, we link arms and walk back to the coach, grinning from ear to ear.

Myth #5, Proven Deliciously Wrong:
The food sucks.

It's day five – Seville – and 10 of us are huddled around a table on the terrace at Casa Robles, a fine-dining restaurant that serves traditional Andalusian cuisine. We laugh, pouring Tempranillo wine and passing plates of silky Iberian ham, pescaito frito (fried fish), boquerones (anchovies), chipironcitos a la plancha (grilled baby squid) and bread. We arrived in town late this afternoon, after making the 75-minute drive southwest from the mountains.

Our collective Spanish is rusty at best, with the exception of Carol, a Spanish-speaking, Dominican-born New Yorker who did a fabulous job of ordering the spread now before us. This kind of dining, it seems, is typical of



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A flamenco dancer performs at El Patio Sevillano, a well-known *tablaó*, or flamenco theatre, near the Guadalquivir River in Seville.

Insight's tours, with restaurants handpicked by the company's savvy tour directors. On each tour, one night is reserved for what the company calls Dine-Around, when the main group breaks into three, based on a trio of restaurant options selected by the tour director. But all of our meals on this trip have been incredible, from the Lagareiro-style (baked, then grilled), garlic-crusted octopus we had in a tiny, candlelit bistro in Lisbon to the crispy-fried cod and pomegranate salad we ate at rustic Sem-Fim Restaurant in Monsaraz, overlooking pastures and olive groves.

Myth #6, Drowned in Wine and Laughter:

You don't have meaningful experiences.

Our fleet of horse-drawn carriages is making its way through Seville's Maria Luisa Park – 40 hectares of botanical gardens, bowers, ponds, tiled Moorish fountains, pavilions and stone monuments along the Guadalquivir River. We wheel slowly past soaring palms, Seville orange trees and fragrant jasmine blossoms. As we turn into the Plaza de España – the park's centrepiece, a massive, semi-circular plaza bordered by a neo-Moorish brick pavilion and 500-metre canal – the sun is just dipping beneath the building's spires.

We exit the park and continue along the Paseo de las Delicias, the waterfront boulevard, past Seville's famed bullfighting ring, the Plaza de Toros. Our carriages come to a stop in front of El Patio Sevillano, a well-known *tablaó*, or flamenco theatre, where we're shown to our seats and offered sangria.

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The 90-minute show is charged with such raw passion: the musicians, keeping the beat, also keep their eyes locked on the feet of the dancers, who stomp and sashay across the stage, brows furrowed, castanets chattering and colourful skirts trailing behind them.

The coach picks us up and delivers us to dinner in a private room at El Rinconcillo, an ornately tiled and wood-panelled tapas restaurant, in a circa 1670 building, whose walls are lined with sherry bottles and hung with bundles of sausage and ham haunches. As a parade of fried eggplant, spinach and chickpeas, wild asparagus omelette and fresh tuna salad marches onto my fork, Cyd, Carol, Vivian from Toronto, Paul from London, Simon from Guernsey and I make sure we're all connected on Facebook so we can keep in touch.

There's no shortage of Ribera del Duero Tinto Fino wine to toast our hosts and one another, but our little group of fast friends finds we can't yet say goodbye, so sets out in search of a nightclub to continue our glass-raising and reminiscing about the trip.

A five-minute stroll through the old quarter brings us to the Metropol Parasol, a 30-metre-tall, 150-metre-long wooden canopy whose underbelly resembles the gills of a mushroom. The structure houses an underground museum and farmers' market – now closed – along with restaurants and bars, which are aglow and humming with music and conversation. We step inside Moss Lounge Bar, a jungle of tropical plants and gorgeous locals. Pausing, I think back to my initial reservations about coming on a coach trip – and can't help but smile. At this point, they've completely evaporated, and I'm already looking forward to my next tour. But for now, we make our way into the crowd to find ourselves a table and order another round. **W**

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