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Biking the Camino del Norte in Spain

I'm in the tiny medieval town of Santillana del Mar, on the northern edge of Spain, where I've been bicycling with my wife Marty. We're riding from France to the western reaches of Spain, and are about 1/3 of the way there. The mourning doves woke me up this morning as they cooed in the apple tree just outside our terrace window, which overlooks the tiled roof of the patio below. Most of the buildings have been here since the middle ages, and many have been handed down in the same family for hundreds of years. Everything we see is made of stone.

Spain is a noisy country. It's a constant acoustical adventure for an inquiring mind and a professional ear. Most of the tiny villages have cobbled or paved streets and tiled walkways. Building construction is almost uniformly plastered bricks and stone, and these hard, acoustically reflective surfaces throw back all the racket created by people, motorcycles, cars, and equipment. Sound absorptive materials such as lawns and trees outside, or stuffed furniture, carpets, or drapes inside, are in short supply in these little villages. Here, inside the café where Marty and I are having breakfast, the owner/manager just finished a deafening cacophony of clattering plates and saucers as he cleaned up the first round of dishes. Marty had to stop talking until he finished, because it was impossible for me to hear her across a small table. The floor is tile, the walls are plastered stone, and the exposed wooden beams are highly polished. The concave bays between the ceiling beams are plastered. There are enough irregularities in the room's shapes to prevent a build-up of a high amount of reverb, so once the noise-making stops, the roar recedes fairly quickly. And then it starts again, from the dog outside, or the guy honking in the street, or the argument at the next table about the best way to drive to Santander, or the bartender washing more dishes.

Telephones, washing machines, radios and televisions, traffic noise, and people's chatter are amplified to a high degree as they combine through acoustical reflections and lack of absorption. In contrast, once we cycle out to the countryside, there is a beautifully subtle pallet of bird songs, cascading creeks and streams, wind sighing through the trees, and sometimes the distant ocean roar from far below the cliffs we ride. We hear gulls, sparrows, cows and horses, dogs, chickens and roosters. Much of our cycling route takes us away from the main thoroughfares, so we are able to enjoy the sounds of daily Spanish life from a forgiving distance. We love the murmur of the pavement beneath our wheels, or the crunch of fine gravel, or the pops and thunks from our tires bouncing over larger stones.

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Spain is also a very musical country, but you wouldn't know it from our experiences so far on this "camino del norte" (the northern route.) When we've traveled in the center, south and west of this fascinating peninsula, we've been struck by the quantity and quality of street musicians and performers. Some are Spanish, but many of them have come from eastern Europe or Russia, forced to abandon their own countries due to failing economies. In the streets and parks in these other parts of Spain, we've seen professional level singers and performers on violin, viola, clarinet, flute, and other concert instruments. We've also seen folk musicians playing guitar, accordion, flute, percussion, bagpipes, and other instruments I can't identify. The Spanish are generally quite appreciative of street performers, and there's a steady flow of coins into the open instrument cases or change boxes. But here in the north, we haven't seen as much public performance, possibly because of a different culture, and possibly because of efforts by law enforcement to reduce street performers. Another factor may be that we have been in only two large cities so far on our trip, and street performers tend to seek those out for their faster turnover of audiences. Perhaps we'll see more of them when we come to our next big city, Girona.

As a recording engineer and producer, I'm often tuned in to the acoustics of my surroundings. As we walked to the café this morning, church bells tolled nine o'clock (OK, we slept in today after a long ride yesterday). The nine clangs resounded noisily in the plaza and streets we were crossing, and I delighted in hearing their echoes bounce back to me from the different stone walls around us. I could use echo-location to find the church if they continued long enough, since the louder echoes were from closer surfaces and the quieter ones from farther ones.

As we head west, Marty and I will soon be entering a region called "Asturias," and just west of that, Galicia, our destination. The similarly-named Gaelic cultures of the British Isles are almost due north of Galicia, and the two have much in common. Both include bag pipes of different types and sizes, hand drums, flutes and whistles, and both enjoy marching and dancing music. I've met American musicians who have gone to Galicia to study the music, and if our timing works out, we may have dinner in Santiago with Bay Area musicians Sylvia Herold and Chuck Ervin.

The next time you listen to a bluegrass band, take a few moments to appreciate the acoustics of the setting, and think about how the physical properties of the location are affecting what you are hearing. And imagine yourself in a far-away place and time, with

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no electricity, playing or hearing music that is shaped by long traditions as well as by the physical environment and surroundings.

And keep your chain lubricated!

Joe Weed records acoustic music at his Highland Studios near Los Gatos, California. He has released six albums of his own, produced many projects for independent artists and labels, and does sound tracks for film, TV and museums. Joe is currently working on "Pa's Fiddle," a CD of music cited by Laura Ingalls Wilder in her "Little House" books. Reach Joe at joe@joeweet.com.