

The Western Mediterranean

When we last wrote (Friday March 3) we were just starting the docking process in Algiers on yet another sunny morning. We had some great views of the city from the ship and it, like Cagliari the day before, seemed to rise vertically from the port and was filled completely with buildings. The obvious French colonial section near the harbor had many large European style buildings whereas the Arabic section further up the hill contained much smaller homes and civic buildings.



Algeria's independence from France came in 1962 after an eight year war in which over a million lives were lost. Apparently, France had let go of Morocco and Tunisia quite peacefully but wanted to retain Algeria for its oil, so there is still a pocket of resentment in this country. However, French influence is everywhere: it's the second language, many streets still bear the French names and baguettes are as plentiful as on any street in Paris.

Our bus tour for the day – again with police escort; in fact we were not allowed to go ashore unescorted– took us to the Monument of the Martyrs, which is a huge structure on top of a hill to the east of the city center. It is shaped in the form of three giant palm leaves and bronze statues adorn each leaf at its base. It was dedicated in 1982 (the 20th anniversary of Independence) and is a major attraction for locals and tourists as well as a place where visiting dignitaries are ceremonially greeted.



The balance of the two hour tour took us through several main streets of Algiers and we saw most of the parliament and civic buildings, many beautiful mosques and, of course, the colonial additions to the Ara-

bic backdrop. It was a good tour and the guide spoke good English and gave us an explanation of what we were seeing but it was difficult to capture much of the city on film through narrow streets and a bus window. However, it was a good introduction to yet another North African country. In fact, Algeria is the largest country (by area) on the entire continent. Much of it is the Sahara Desert so 80% of the population lives in the major coastal cities.



The Mediterranean climate would seem to be ideal here although we were surprised to learn that Algiers had experienced a lot of rain and even snow this past winter. The country grows a large amount of wheat and a number of different fruits and vegetables – as well as being a major exporter of oil. There was little, if any, evidence of manufacturing in the area we covered today and we were told that many goods are imported from China.

On Saturday we docked in Valencia, Spain and what we saw when we were on our four hour ride and walk around the city was absolutely amazing. Valencia has been a city since Roman times but the areas we saw dated primarily from the 13th century (when the Moors were sent home) and more specifically from the early 19th century when Spain gained its independence from France. So, there is the Old Town (originally walled but with only two gates remaining today) and a very modern (late 20th century) new area between the port and the Old Town.

The modern part that we saw has a number of buildings and bridges across the river that were designed primarily by one architect (not Gaudi, but with some similarities) and they are striking and ultra-modern in concept. There is an opera house, a museum, an art gallery and an enormous Imax theater as well as some smaller but equally impressive buildings. The whole area is set along wide boulevards and has some beautiful flowers and trees lining the roadways. In all, it is comparable to cities like Lisbon, Barcelona or Madrid but on a somewhat smaller scale.



Impressed as we were with the new area, we were completely amazed when we reached the old town. Here the main streets and squares were once again spacious and grand – with some narrower areas to add character – but the buildings were superb. The predominant styles were representative of the past two centuries but with a number of older churches and civic buildings to enhance the “newer” classics.



It is difficult to pick out what was the more impressive but the Silk Exchange (Valencia had been important in the silk trade), the cathedral, the basilica and even the railway station and post office stood out. It is no exaggeration



to say that there were hundreds of build-

ings that would have been a major attraction in many other cities of the world, making Valencia one of the most memorable cities we have ever visited. Four hours certainly gave us a good overview but I suspect most on the tour are already planning a much longer stay in this wonderful city.



On Sunday we arrived in Barcelona and reached the end of our cruise. We had decided to stay in the city on our own for a couple of extra days before flying home on Wednesday (March 8).



We spent much of Monday using the city's Hop on/Hop off bus. We had been to Barcelona on two previous occasions so we didn't feel an obligation to "do" everything on this visit. The bus ride—with some stops—was an ideal way to refresh our memories of this very grand city. Most of the central part of the city has wide boulevards with magnificent 19th and 20th century buildings.

Most are typical of those found in other large European city but Barcelona is unique in that it has a large collection of "Modernista" (turn of the 20th century) structures unlike any others. The most famous architect of the era was Gaudi but there were many of the same school producing buildings with curved surfaces, ornate and colorful exteriors, and altogether "odd" shapes.

The most unusual and famous of these Modernista buildings is Gaudi's cathedral, the Sagrada Familia (below). We got off the bus here and spent about 30 minutes walking slowly around this most unusual church, which has now been under construction for over 100 years and, some say, will never be finished. We didn't take the time to go inside but we were able



to see some significant changes to the exterior since our last visit here probably 15 years ago. It is a fascinating creation and looks quite distorted in some aspects, as well as being unusually colorful and "un-church-like" in others. Some parts of the façade are more "normal" and grand, like many other cathedrals, but it is by no means a classical European cathedral.



As part of our tour we also saw the 1992 Olympic village and the sports venues near the waterfront, which apparently created a major revitalization of the city of Barcelona. Certainly the venue was magnificent and the area is now an upscale residential neighborhood transformed from run-down old mills and derelict buildings. We passed the FC Barcelona stadium (100,000 capacity), the main university and climbed to the edge of the hills that surround Barcelona for some great views of the city and Mediterranean Sea.

Today (Tuesday) we spent the entire day strolling La Rambla. This is a wide boulevard with a central pedestrian area that stretches from the port to the center of the city and is where locals and tourists alike spend much of their time. It was a somewhat lazy—but very relaxing—way to end a super two week visit to the Western Mediterranean.