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Travelogue Barcelona

High school soccer all-star selections came in for my senior season and, having gone 42 games unbeaten between my junior and senior year, my team had a few. Unexpectedly, as I had never been selected as an all-star before, with the selection came an invitation to a Eurosport trip to Barcelona. The Eurosport team would go to Barcelona and play games against local teams our age, and tour Catalonia. I threw the envelope on my kitchen counter thinking I’d never be able to afford to go. My mom picks it up, and next thing I know, fellow all-star Divante and I are on a bus to the Toronto airport.

The only other time I’d ever flown was before I can remember so, this was effectively my first flight. It was 20-some hours to Amsterdam, our layover, and another few to Barcelona. The flight to Amsterdam was uncomfortable, as I came to learn flights are. I watched The Wolf of Wall Street, and the stewardess walked over pretty much just when Leo DiCaprio was snorting something or banging a hooker. I got to sit next to Divante from Amsterdam to Barcelona, so I got to be the subject of his “Tito [his nickname for me ever since middle school Spanish class] we’re gonna die!” while he pulled the front of my jacket, as the plane went through some serious turbulence. I didn’t sleep for a second the entire day-long journey from Toronto to Barcelona, I was too excited to be overseas for the first time.

We stayed in the Olympic village, made for the 1992 Olympics (the dream team Olympics). The group of Hotels that made up the ‘village’ were all gorgeous. What were a bunch of high school athletes doing in a place that once housed Michael Jordan?

There were a few things that separated Divante and I from the rest of the team. One, we were not rich. We asked teachers and random people in town, and dipped significantly into our savings accounts/inheritances for money to help us go on the trip. We soon learned that most (if not all. I didn’t actually talk to anyone that was in our same financial situation) of the players on the trip were Europe frequenters. I heard someone say during the trip, “I think Venice was nicer than this”. Shut the fuck up and let me enjoy what little of Europe I can see. The other thing that separated Divante and I from the team was our ability to blend in. We both spoke nearly fluent Spanish, both dressed in styles that were common in the city, and were generally not loud and obnoxious, i.e. stereotypical tourists.

This fact gave us freedom. We roamed the streets of Barcelona in our downtime and got to see places that people who were seen as tourists may have had a different experience in. First stop roaming Barcelona of course, the beach lined with gift shops. Sometime in the first millennium, the Moors conquered Spain. This fact is relevant because every single gift shop was run by someone who must be decedent of the Moors, or an immigrant to Spain because of the Moors influence. This also led to my favorite quirk about Barcelona. It’s always important to sample local cuisine while traveling. For Barcelona, this means the famous Paella. Paella is good. Kebabs are better. The Moors/their cultural influence brought the greatest fast food ever to Barcelona. Every Kebab stop I went to did their kebabs differently. Burrito style, pita pocket, sub roll, different sauces, they had it all. I made it a point to try all the kebab shops in the area we were staying in and it was a good decision.

You walk in and everyone behind the counter not serving is looking at you. It’s greasy on every surface, the greasier the tabletop the better the kebab will be (I was going to say the greasier the doorknob but then remembered that because of the weather, most shops are open to the street). You have the same few options you have at every kebab stop, between a few types of meat, cabbage or lettuce, sauces, and somehow they’re all different. You order the meat and they turn and shave it right off an enormous rotating spit behind them. It must be processed somehow because they’re all the same size and shape (about the size of a small cow), despite the options including chicken. Everyone should experience a kebab stop in the tourism section of Barcelona.

Haggling prices with the middle eastern men in the gift shops yields significantly better results when done in Spanish than English. Stop two, cannabis café. Turns out, you need a membership to a cannabis café to buy weed in Spain, where conveniently, weed is legal. Inconveniently, the shortest membership was for a year. Being semi fluent in a language still provides a large barrier between us and native speakers. Buying weed, something I’ve never even done in English, is really hard in a language you’re not quite fluent in. Everything is slang. While our Spanish was good enough to get tee shirts for cheap, it was not good enough to not get charged the jacked-up tourist price for weed. The guy who sold it to us was a Moorish gift shop owner we had bought shirts from that same morning. Every gift shop person gets really personal while trying to sell you things. They’ll also see hundreds of people a day. He still remembered us somehow. He gave us free liters of water with our weed. This was nice of him because it was late spring and walking around Barcelona requires a water bottle on hand at all times.

Stop three was to a liquor store. I was only 17 and the drinking age was 18, but you won’t get carded if you have a beard. Just like gift shops, liquor prices also happened to be completely negotiable. We bought some Absinthe because we (wrongly) thought that it was illegal in America. It was horrible and we gave most of it away.

We played a game against a team whose keeper had recently emigrated from Morocco, who couldn’t speak a word of Spanish. According to the man who marked me for most of the game, that was pretty common. We then watched the girls team play, and went out to dinner as a team. It was a dinner of classic Spanish guitar and live (and crowd participatory) singing. One of the kids we gave absinthe to drank a lot of it during the girls’ game and while hallucinating, sang along with the leading man.

During our next game, I was kicked in the face. It didn’t hurt too badly, so when I saw the blood I tried to tell the one English speaker they had on the team that was escorting me to the medical shed ‘es un poco sangre, it’s just a little blood’. ‘No amigo, necicitas un hospital’. As luck would have it, a hospital was right across the street. My coach, bus driver for his translation skills, and I, walked to the hospital. I checked in without needing translation. I had to explain to my coach that the woman behind the desk had just asked me what kind of barbaric society would make you pay for getting kicked in the face, so please stop trying to give her my insurance card you’re embarrassing me, and yourself. We were not in Barcelona General, where I was told most of the surgeons go on weekends, so we had to wait while a man who had lost most of his skin in a motorcycle accident was sorted out. No big deal I couldn’t really feel it anyway. My coach called my mom and told her the situation, and surprisingly to my coach and not me, she was unfazed and simply requested I tell her all about it when I get home. My coach took a picture for me and it was really gross looking, and being squeamish, it was way worse to see than to feel. We waited for two hours, while my bus driver got really angry because I was (wasn’t anymore) bleeding from the face. He yelled at the receptionist, and it, believe it or not, did not change how fast you can treat a motorcycle accident victim.

“Davis, caja cuatro”. Beyond the waiting rooms, Spanish hospitals are pretty different from any American ones I’ve ever been in. They’re made up of sliding garage door-style walls. It seemed way more convenient than having set rooms. Everything was clean, despite most of the questions about my trip to the hospital afterward being about the state of the hospital, as if the askers expected it to be third world. The surgeon told me to talk to him while he gave the stitches because it would take my mind off them, and only when I started to tell him my story of how I got there did he realize I was a tourist. He spoke to me in English and I spoke in Spanish, so we could practice, he said. He didn’t like American football, but he liked baseball a lot. I told him I was a baseball fan, but I loved soccer above all. He found this odd, me being an American.

My stitches got me a cool Spanish soccer jersey. We had the opportunity to swap two shirts with the last team we played. I was picked because of my stitches, and Divante was picked because he was the best player on the field. I got the kit of a player whom I told reminded me of a ‘Xavi (Spanish midfield legend) piqueno’, and he was very flattered.

On a trip to an old Spanish beach town with narrow walk only streets forcing you to park outside of town, and a beautiful villa with castle walls, I got to fulfill a dream. Divante and I played beach soccer with four Spanish kids who did not speak a word of English. We set the game up, us two against the four of the about eleven-year-old kids. They passed and moved and spoke rapid Spanish while doing so. I scored a goal and danced around shouting “goalazo goalazo!” which they found very amusing. They beat us. After the game one boy who recognized my Manchester United shirt tried out some English, “My friend, we love. No. *he* love Manchester United. He love Wayne Rooney”. “Muy Bien Ingles!”. He was ecstatic and returned to his friends.

The rest of the trip was full of castles, monasteries, and Camp Nou, where I met other tourists. All richly dressed with expensive cameras and an air of someone who’d seen it all, much like most of my teammates.