

History, Hearty Fare and a Hike Only an Hour Away

By Andrea Isiminger

I am from the generation of the "Sunday drive." How many of you remember piling in the car with no real purpose in mind, just a desire to wander aimlessly until it was time to stop for supper? Maybe we'd visit the forest preserve to see if the violets were in bloom or drive towards the farmer's fields to debate on whether the corn would be knee-high by the 4th of July or simply sit back and take in the fall colors. In those days, most of the restaurants in the Midwest were steakhouses dimly lit interiors of dark wood, the before-dinner cocktail and the complimentary relish tray. I don't remember my growth rate as pencil markings on Mom and Dad's doorframe, but rather as food phases for Sunday dinner. There was my fascination with shish-ka-bob, then came a long period of duck in orange sauce and finally chicken kiev and rice pilaf. Even though I enjoy cooking, I find that old habits die hard, and I am always looking for weekend excursions that will get us all out of the house and me out of the kitchen.

Time is a major factor for us in choosing a day trip. We have to arrive before the kids start chanting "Are we there yet?!" Therefore, perfect Sunday drives are about an hour long. If this also describes your family, you may enjoy visiting the 14th century monastery (Monasterio de El Paular) in Rascafria. After your excursion, you can relax and refuel with a hearty meal of cocido madrileño in nearby Lozoya at the rustic restaurant El Pajar de Fuente Hernando.

As the saying goes, boys will be boys, and mine were more interested in throwing rocks in the water and seeing who could find the best walking stick than in actually taking a hike. So I would be embarrassed to tell you how little we saw on our visit. But I did a quick search on the Internet to give you an idea of the area and to give me something to aspire to our next time out.

Brief History

King Enrique II de Trastamara wanted to compensate for having destroyed a convent during his battles with the French; therefore, after his death, his son (Juan I de Castilla) began construction of a monastery in accordance with the king's wishes. Work on the Carthusian monastery began in 1390. Throughout the centuries, the structure was constantly evolving by additions from a variety of famous architects (perhaps the most notable being by Juan Guas during the period of the Catholic kings). Like most monasteries of the time, it served many important business functions for the community, and its mill was said to have produced the paper used in the first part of the famous work *Don Quixote*. The 19th century brought about an anticlerical movement; numerous orders were executed or imprisoned and church lands were seized by the government. In 1836, the monks abandoned El Paular. Finally recognition for its historical significance came in 1876 when it was declared a national monument. In 1954 it once again became a working monastery for an order of Benedictine monks. They still use part of the monastery today and the other part has been turned into a hotel.

We just wandered about, but there are specific hours for guided tours and masses (e.g., Sundays at noon they have a mass with Gregorian chants). Take a peak at the website www.sierranorte.com/elpaular/ for a time schedule. Across the road from the monastery is the bridge of pardons



(Puente de Perdón) where those accused of crimes had the opportunity to appeal their sentence before a tribunal. Here is the point you can start your hike if you are really looking for some exercise. One site said that several of the trails are very well marked, but it also advised hikers that a stop at a visitor's center would provide information and maps more tailored to individual needs.

Highlights

You'll take in a great view of el Valle del Lozoya and can refresh tired feet in the falls (Cascadas del Purgatorio). With a little luck and a sharp eye, you might spot an eagle in flight or an ancient yew tree along the path. In summer, the river provides natural pools (Las Presillas) where you can cool off. In winter, skiing at Valdesquí-Puerto de Cotos is close by. If you've a mind to make a weekend of it, the number for the hotel Santa María del Paular is 91- 869-1011.

Restaurant Recommendation

El Pajar de Fuente Hernando (91-869-3194) cooks its cocido in earthenware pots that are placed directly in the wood burning fireplace. The 24-hour cooking process turns out the best broth I've ever tasted. The pot is brought directly to your table and there is enough for second helpings all around. Next comes the dish of tender beef (morcillo), chorizo, garbanzos, potatoes, cabbage and a bit of jamon. A sauce is provided to pour over the garbanzos, allowing you to capture all the slow-cooked flavor with pieces of crusty bread. You must call in advance to reserve your order of cocido. I would suggest a couple days ahead of time since the restaurant is small and the fire only so big. But if you forget, you can always enjoy other menu items such as roast lamb or a variety of fresh grilled meat from the sierra region. Cocido is by no means "lite fare," but we managed to save room for a very nice crepe in orange sauce for dessert. I guess there is always the unspoken promise to walk it off during next weekend's excursion.