

A CALL IN LA CORUNA

By Richard H. Wagner

La Coruna is not high on many people's bucket list. Nonetheless, it is a pleasant stopping off point on cruises from Britain to the Mediterranean and other points south.

Located at the very northwest tip of the Iberian Peninsula in the autonomous region of Galicia, La Coruna is unlike the rest of Spain. Cut off from the rest of Spain and Portugal by mountains, the often wet climate is more akin to Britain than to sunny Spain. Clouds can roll in off the Atlantic and produce a sudden shower. "Dolts Drench" is what the locals call the drizzle. However, at the same time, the rain makes the area the greenest in Spain. When the sun appears, the deep color contrast is quite appealing.

The people too are different. They are of mostly Celtic origin. Consequently, bagpipes and dances that resemble Scottish reels are part of the Gallacian culture.

Other peoples have come to La Coruna and left their mark. The 431-foot Torre de Hercules is a lighthouse, which according to legend was one of the labors of Hercules. It was actually built by the Romans during the reign of the Emperor Trajan in the Second Century A.D. The outer skin dates from 1791 but the interior remains Roman. Updated over the centuries, it is still in operation today and is one of La Coruna's most prominent attractions.

It stands on the coast some ten minutes by car from the town center.

The biggest attraction in the area is Santiago de Compostela. Located some 40 miles away from La Coruna, the cathedral houses the tomb of St. James, one of the Apostles. Consequently, it has been a popular pilgrimage destination since medieval times.

But one does not have to leave La Coruna itself to find something interesting to do. Cruise ships arriving in the port usually dock in the heart of the town. As a result, the majority of the town's attractions are within walking distance. However, be aware that there are some uneven surfaces, particularly in the old town (Ciudad Vieja or the Groyne).

Adjoining the cruise ship terminal are two large modern buildings one of which is a shopping plaza and the other a convention center. Walking between these two buildings, you come to a park that surrounds a yacht basin. On the landward side of the park, is Avenida de la Marina, which is lined with glass-faced buildings. At first glance, these buildings resemble miniature versions of the glass box skyscrapers that one sees in New York and other urban centers. However, they are actually glass enclosed balconies of late 19th Century residential buildings. Called "gallerias" these enclosed balconies insulate the residences against the Atlantic weather while at

the same time preserving the light and the view. Because of its abundance of such buildings, La Coruna is called the “Crystal City.”

The galleria that you see on Aviando de la Marina are actually at the back of the buildings. On the front side, the buildings face La Coruna's large main square. There you will find La Coruna's impressive city hall (Ayuntamiento), built in the early 20th Century. You will also find the statue of Maria Pita, for whom the square is named.

Maria Pita was a local woman who won fame when La Coruna was besieged by the English under Sir Francis Drake in 1589. La Coruna had been used as a staging area by the Spanish Armada in its ill-fated attempt to invade England in 1588. After the Armada failed, Drake, often referred to as “Drake the Pirate” by locals, came to La Coruna to make sure that it was never used for such a purpose again. During the siege, Maria Pita broke through the English lines and killed the English standard bearer. Seeing their banner fall, the English fell into a state of confusion. The Spanish were inspired by the same sight and attacked. Consequently, Drake's attempt to capture La Coruna failed.

While the English are remembered as the villains of that episode, the British are remembered as heroes in a later episode of La Coruna's history. During the Napoleonic Wars, Britain sent an army to Spain in order to help the Spanish resist the French invasion and Napoleon's attempt to place his brother on the throne of Spain in 1808. The Allies, however, were no match for Napoleon, who took personal command of the French forces in this part of the Peninsular War. Therefore, the British were forced into a 250-mile retreat to La Coruna, where they were to be evacuated by sea. The British commander, Sir John Moore, was victorious over the French Marshall Soult in a rearguard action that took place just outside

of La Corunain 1809. This allowed 15,000 men of the British army to escape and eventually return to Spain, defeating the French in 1814. But, Sir John Moore was killed in the battle. His tomb is in the San Carlos Garden in the old town.

Also of interest in the old town are the churches and religious buildings. The most important of these is the Colegita de Santa Maria del Campo. It was begun in 1210 and finished in the 1400s. Although not elaborately decorated, it has some interesting statuary, Romanesque tombs, and a solid silver alter piece. Its dark precincts transport you back to medieval times. Along the same lines are the 12th Century Romanesque Iglesia de Santiago, the city's oldest church and the Convento de Santa Barbara (1613).

Beyond its points of interest, the old town is interesting to explore just for the atmosphere. Situated on a hill, its narrow cobble stone streets twist and turn and go up hill and down. Ancient buildings line the sides. Just when you think that it has not changed in centuries, a car clatters down the street and squeezes by.

The old town is the area originally enclosed by the city walls. This was where the more well-to-do residents lived. Others were allowed to build outside the walls in La Pescarderia. Today, this newer area is where most of the shops are as well as sidewalk cafes and tapas bars.

La Coruna also has some museums including an archeological museum in the Castillo de San Anton and the Museo de Bellas Artes (Fine Arts Museum), which has works by Goya and Ruebens. There are also beaches within walking distance of the cruise port.