

The Pamplona Bull Run

by Dolph Hatfield

Ernest Hemingway did it in 1924, along with his writer pals John Dos Passos and Don Stewart. In 2004, Dennis Rodman, actress Rosario Dawson, and a handful of European soccer stars were among the many who braved the annual “Running of the Bulls” Hemingway made famous in *The Sun Also Rises*. And then there are the thousands of thrill-seekers, adrenalin-junkies, or just plain curious who flock to Pamplona each July for the San Fermin Fiesta.

The Fiesta occurs every July 7-14. The “Running of the Bulls,” known as the “encierro” in Spain, is the major event of the Fiesta and takes place on each of these days. The origin of Pamplona’s present-day encierro dates from 1867, but some records suggest that it began in the sixteenth century. Initially, it served as a means of transporting the bulls from the outskirts of town through the city streets to the Plaza del Castillo, where the bullfights were held. Legend has it that the bulls were herded by horseback to the bullring, accompanied by several men running alongside. When those who ran were not injured, the locals thanked San Fermin, the patron saint of Pamplona, for protecting the runners from harm. Even today, participants ask San Fermin to watch over and spare them from injury during the event. Other cities in Spain and France have their own bull runs, but none can claim the popularity of the annual San Fermin event.

The San Fermin Fiesta is a sea of red and white, as the bull runners, along with many of the spectators, wear red scarves and sashes with white shirts and pants. The run commences each morning when the clock on the San Saturnino Church strikes 8:00. A rocket is launched to announce the opening of the gate releasing the six bulls from the corral where they are kept during the previous night. About a half-dozen steers also exit the holding pen at the same time. A second rocket is launched shortly after the first to let the runners know that the large mass of beef is now in the street, rapidly advancing up the course. Once they leave the corral, the bulls usually take between two and three minutes to reach the stadium. A third rocket is launched to signal that the bulls have entered the bullring. A fourth and final rocket informs everyone that the bulls are safely in their holding pens within the stadium. The six bulls in each day’s run will meet their demise in the bullring on that same evening. These are huge animals weighing between 1,000-1,200 pounds, bred only for bull fighting.

The course

On Wednesday morning, July 7, 2004, Brad Carlson, my traveling companion, and I, met up with our friend, Javier Martin-Romero, at the Madrid Airport. We drove 395 km north to Pamplona and checked into our hotel. That evening we walked the course of the bull run. Though the distance from the holding pen to the bullring is only about 800 meters, the course winds through Pamplona’s streets and plazas. The only paved section is the first part, the Cuesta de Santo Domingo that proceeds uphill for 280 meters before passing through the Plaza Consistorial where the Town Hall is located. The course then turns to cobblestone, twisting to the left onto a short street, Calle de Mercaderes, before abruptly turning 90 degrees to the right onto Calle Estafeta, the longest and straightest portion of the run. The course then enters the section known as the Telefonos. Here the route widens and then narrows into a funnel-shaped, gentle downhill slope called the Callejon, which sweeps bulls and bull runners alike into the bullring.

The streets are about 25 feet wide, for the most part, and are lined by small businesses and storefronts, or by a double fence put up each morning. The first and second fences, which consist of horizontal railings, are separated by several feet. The spectators sit on the top of the second fence, while the small open area between is left largely vacant during the run except for the medical-aid teams, police and marshals. Runners can dart quickly into these “open” spaces to avoid the oncoming bulls.

Running with the bulls

The next morning, Brad and I decided to run, while Javier wanted to photograph the event from the relative safety of the fences. Runners do not have to register, but are advised to arrive at the course no later than 7:30 AM to participate. Brad and I entered the crowded course at the Plaza Consistorial at about 7:00 AM and waited shoulder to shoulder with the other participants as they began singing a homily to the statue of San Fermin. The song goes “A San Fermin pedimos, por ser nuestro patron, nos guie en el encierro dandonos su bendicion,” which in English means “We ask Saint Fermin, as our Patron, to guide us through the bull run giving us his blessing.”

About five minutes before the start, the police opened the municipal gate at the end of the Plaza Consistorial. This gate marks the starting line for the participants. Once the gate was opened, we slowly advanced up the track. When the first rocket went off at 8:00 AM, I began to walk and then run up the course for about 30 to 40 meters. The crowd was now running very quickly and I tucked myself into the first available doorway that was not

occupied, just as most of the bulls were passing. It proved difficult to pinpoint exactly when the bulls were coming due to the mass of people running in front of them. Brad had remained in the Plaza Consistorial and plastered himself against the fence near the Town Hall. Since the Plaza was the widest part of the course, Brad felt rather safe as the bulls were running at their fastest through this section and they quickly passed him. However, Brad and I had far more exposure to these rapidly charging animals than either of us had wanted. We learned on the first day that one way to avoid injury is never to stand along the sides of the course. There, participants are fully exposed to the passing bulls. If one prefers not to run, but wishes to be on the course and watch the bulls pass, the safest bet is to seek the protection of a doorway or climb under the fence and let the charging animals pass.

Although deaths are rare, 15 fatalities have been recorded since 1924, along with some 200 goring incidents. The local morning newspapers carry a complete account of the previous day's run, including the number of injuries. In 2004, there were 56 hospitalizations with 16 resulting from gorings. There are no firm data on the number of participants, but the locals say that there are more than a 1,000 runners each weekday and roughly double this figure on weekend days. Thus, the relative number of recorded injuries are not that high. But don't let this proportionally low number of wounded participants be deceiving as the vast majority of runners either stand along the course and are passed by the bulls, secure themselves in doorways or enter the stadium long before the bulls arrive. The more daring a participant is of course the higher probability of being injured.

Entering the bullring

On day two, we arrived at the course about 5:30 AM. Brad wanted to video the event and Javier wanted to find a good spot to install himself near the bullring to take more pictures. When the gates opened at the Plaza Consistorial, I hurried up the course and positioned myself about 30 meters outside the stadium. When the rocket sounded, the crowd yelled feverishly. After about two minutes, a wave of runners was moving up the track, but the fear level did not seem to be high enough among these runners for the bulls to be close. I waited next to the fence while a second group of runners came. The panicked look in their eyes suggested that the bulls were close behind, so I began to run. The adrenalin rush I felt carried me quickly into the stadium. The bulls followed several seconds later.

Once the bulls and steers entered the ring, the doors were closed. The bulls and steers were herded into a holding pen across the bullring floor from the entrance. A younger bull, weighing about 500 to 600 pounds, was then released from another pen to chase the participants and entertain the spectators in the stadium. The young bull remained in the ring for about an hour. A number of people were hit, and some very hard, by the young bull.

On our last day, Saturday, July 10, the Plaza Consistorial was much more crowded than on the previous two days. Attendance at the San Fermin Festival-and the number of runners-more than doubles on weekends. When the rocket went off, signaling the release of the bulls from the holding pens, we had already made our way up the route to about 25 meters before the entrance of the stadium. But as the crowd neared the stadium, we were forced along by the mass. Just before we entered the stadium, we waited along the right wall until a wave of fast moving runners arrived, joined this group and ran into the arena. The bulls arrived about 20 seconds later. The crowd on the bullring floor was enormous and the stadium was completely filled with spectators. The bulls were herded into the pens and the younger bull released. There were so many participants in the bullring that the young bull had no problem making contact with numerous runners. Brad and I stayed in the bullring for about another 30 minutes, keeping a safe distance from the young bull. We then climbed the fence and made our way out of the stadium to meet Javier.

Would we do this again? Dave Freeman's 100 Things to Do Before You Die: Travel Events You Can't Miss lists the Pamplona Running of the Bulls as a "must" experience, right up there with Carnival in Brazil, the Iditarod Sled Dog Race, and the Cannes Film Festival. Brad, Javier and I would have to agree- "Yes" we would do it again. Like Hemingway and all the countless others who have been felt the thrill of the wildest few minutes imaginable, we had a most wonderful experience and one that we shall always cherish. We hope that you will participate in this international event, enjoy yourself, run an intelligent race, and above all, be safe.

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