

STORIES DIARY OF A DIVA

The Great Escape

By Barbarella | Published Wednesday, Oct. 29, 2008

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Barbarella

Today, there are three kinds of people: the haves, the have-nots, and the have-not-paid-for-what-they-haves. — Earl Wilson



Six months ago, when I first felt the rippling effects of the subprime mortgage meltdown, I began systematically forfeiting that which was dear to me but which had proved too costly to maintain.

Facials were the first to go — a disappointing but not entirely heartbreaking separation, as I had only had a few appointments at the

diminutive Spa Velia, and things were not yet serious between us. The next to be sacrificed were my regular visits to Walter Todd salon — a sadder breakup, as I enjoyed sharing scandalous chitchat with Todd, and my follicles had grown fond of his conditioning rinse. I cut back on pedicures, looked to World Market instead of BevMo for wine, and I finally heeded my sister Jane's advice to replenish my wardrobe by shopping within the sensibly priced world of Target. David and I were not at risk of losing the home we'd bought just before the bubble burst. Our bills were getting paid and our life wasn't shabby, but it wasn't all champagne and diamonds either.

We were making do. That is until everything went to shit. The Dow Jones became a jar of lightning bugs randomly flashing SELL, BUY, BUY, SELL. The presidential election was soon as topsy-turvy as the economy — fear, hatred, and indignation bubbled to the surface and expelled their noxious gases. The headlines and heated conversations on every corner became a pillow pressed against my face with heavy hands. My man and I agreed we needed a breath of fresh air.

David and I had recently caught a couple of episodes of the new PBS food/travel show *Spain...On the Road Again*, featuring one of our favorite chefs, Mario Batali (bicoastal restaurateur and the Food Network's Iron Chef Italian); Gwyneth Paltrow (Madonna's buddy); Mark Bittman (a food writer for the New York Times); and Claudia Bassols (a Spanish actress). The program carried us along with the carefree foursome as they hurtled across the Spanish countryside hedonistically partaking of the food, wine, and luxury spa hotels.

One episode depicted the group's visit to the region of Rioja, celebrated for its ancient vineyards and wineries. Mario and pals stayed at Marqués de Riscal, a 150-year-old vineyard that boasts a new five-star hotel designed by Frank Gehry, the architect who is famous for his creation of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao (a two-hour drive from Rioja) and the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles.

"Now, *that's* what we need," David proclaimed.

“Sure does seem like politics and the economy are the farthest things from their minds,” I concurred.

History buffs sightsee at ancient temples and ruins. Art lovers ogle in museums and galleries. Catholics and Muslims go on pilgrimages to cathedrals and mosques. As unapologetic hedonists, David and I embark on sybaritic adventures. Rioja offered acclaimed food, wine, and an architecturally significant hotel, all set in a charming town surrounded by miles of rustic landscape. In denial of the dollar’s weakness and our own humbled bank accounts, we reserved a primo suite at the fancy-shmancy Marqués de Riscal Hotel.

The euro is treacherous for Americans, and I’m not just referring to the unfortunate exchange rate but also to the physical money itself and the dangers hiding within its polychromatic folds. For one, euros are not green. The color of grass is synonymous with cash in the States. If I have a wallet full of pink and blue, my eyes don’t transmit the message “hard-earned moola”; they impart “Monopoly money.” And though my brain knows better, I find it nearly impossible to shake the feeling that even if I lose a whole bunch of the pretty paper, it’s all a game anyway; so really, what’s the harm?

Then there’s the coin thing. Change in the States is always spare. David has actually thrown pennies in the trash (please don’t tell my frugal father; I’d never hear the end of it). But in Europe, one coin, the size of a quarter, is worth two whole euros. At the current exchange rate, that’s \$2.68, or more than ten quarters’ worth in one coin. Suddenly, loose change is not to be collected for the parking meter; it’s to be saved for buying breakfast.

I tried to remind myself of all these things before arriving in Rioja. But as soon as we rounded the turn toward the small town of Elciego and I beheld Gehry’s glimmering waves of titanium amid endless vineyards of red, orange, and green, my practicality flew out the window of our rented Pepe car. I was in a magical world now, a place where any restrictions, regardless of sensibility, were not welcome.

For three nights and four days, David and I went on an opulence bender. Before we’d even checked in to the hotel, a smiling man presented us with cool, fragrant tea in clear glasses and a bowl of red and green grapes. In our suite, we were greeted by a bottle of red wine originating from the vines that could be seen outside the Seussian windows of our room.

We toured bodegas and sampled the same freshly grilled vegetables and regionally favored hake that had been eaten on the show. We walked up and down rows of vines, occasionally plucking and eating one of the surprisingly sweet, blue-colored Tempranillo grapes. Like Mario, David requested with our daily champagne breakfast an egg cooked, as the menu stated, to “exactly 65 degrees Celsius.” I opted for the fresh yogurt Gwyneth had tried and liked. While David roamed the grounds taking photographs, I indulged in a juicy grape facial at the Caudalíe Vinothérapie Spa. David, proving once again that he’s more of a diva than I, took advantage of the pillow menu, which offered a selection of ten different pillows of varying percentages of down and feather fill; there was even an option for a side sleeper pillow filled with “pure Hungarian goose down.” One evening we dined at the hotel’s restaurant and opted for the Michelin-starred chef’s 12-course tasting menu, paired with wine. It was grandeur at its most salacious, and we loved every minute of it.

By the third day, the binging and relaxing had begun to fog my brain. Returning from the extensive and impressive Museum of Wine Culture at Dinastía Vivanco, I was struck by the beauty of the scenery. “Just look at it, beh beh. Our timing was perfect to get here during harvest season, so we could see all of the colors of October,” I said, sounding halfway intelligent. I should have stopped there. “I mean, look at them all, all those...what are they called?”

“Wineries?” David offered.

“No, no, the...”

“Vineyards?” David tried again.

“No, the...the...wine bushes,” I said, finding the words at last.

David tore his gaze away from the road to shoot me a bemused look. “You mean the vines?” he said.

“Yeah, sorry, don’t know what’s wrong with my brain. Look at all those wine vines. It’s just beautiful.”

“Barb,” David said, now laughing at my sudden onset of senility, “they’re called grape vines. Wine comes from grapes, remember the tours?”

“Right,” I said, turning my head back to the window. “I was just kidding.” Then, eager to change the subject, I said, “I’m really sad about leaving. I don’t want to go.”

“We could never afford to stay,” David said. And there it was. A sullen heaviness settled over the car as we were reminded of the craziness that awaited us back at home. But I wasn’t ready to think about political frustration or economic alarm. The trip wasn’t over yet. In a few days, we’d have a hotel room overlooking the river and be touring the port caves in Porto. Sure, we faced months of canned soup and shopping at discount stores as penance for our irrational exuberance, but I wasn’t done escaping, and I didn’t want to think about returning to reality.

Using David’s step back to give myself a running start, I said, “You know, it’s funny. We’ve tasted the fruit of wine bushes in Provence, France; Montefalco, Italy; Valle de Guadalupe, Mexico; Rioja, Spain; and soon, in Porto, Portugal. And yet we’ve never taken the short drive up the coast to Sonoma or Napa.” David turned to give me a look that inspired more hope than Obama. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” I asked. David nodded. “Great, then it’s settled. After we get home...I mean, after we recover from this, and let’s not think about that part, but after that, we’re totally going to California wine country. Just think of how fun that’ll be!”

For the remainder of the drive, the car was silent and calm, as David and I gazed upon the landscape and thought only happy thoughts.

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COMMENTS

1.

I completely understand the play money thing. I saw those shoes you bought! When I was in Italy, I was walking in Rome and stopped for a