

BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

LA SIESTA

Madrid was still a very traditional city in the 1960s; very Old World. With splendid architecture and wide avenues that recalled the grand old days of empire. And narrow cobbled streets that evoked an earlier century and a slower way of life.

One essential component of the Spanish way of life has always been the siesta, the postprandial snooze that English-speakers call a nap. In the natural order of things, at this stage of the twentieth century, customs of various kinds were being edged aside to make way for the modern world—but not the siesta. Most shops closed at noon and the city was deserted, especially during the relentless heat of summer, for only “mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun,” as Noel Coward told us. The advertising agency where I worked was supposedly a trendy place, but we took a two-hour break at noon so that people could go home for lunch and a siesta. It’s how Spaniards had lived for generations and they saw no reason to change. They were horrified by the modern “American schedule,” which was considered uncivilized and inhuman, bordering on the barbaric. No, the siesta was sacred.

In the winter we worked from 9 to 1, then went home for lunch and a quick siesta. We came back at 3, refreshed and ready to put in another four hours. In the summer we were there from 8 to 3 on weekdays and 9 to 2 on Saturdays. The siesta was longer on those afternoons, when tradition insisted it was far too hot to work, because we stayed up later. Much later than the Anglo-Saxons who had dinner while it was still light and were in bed by 10. Barbaric I tell you!



Sometimes I would skip the summer siesta and instead have a long, lazy lunch with friends. A mixed salad—Spain’s signature *ensalada mixta*—is the perfect meal for a hot afternoon. Lettuce, tomato wedges, red onions, green olives, hard boiled eggs, canned tuna, canned corn, carrots, and white asparagus, lightly tossed with salt, pepper, vinegar, and olive oil. Washed down with ice-cold *sangría*, and then perhaps a coffee and a cognac. Perhaps a cigar. From there, the day could go anywhere.

On the particular afternoon I’m thinking of my lunch companion was Michael Crew, the American photographer, who had lived in Madrid since the mid-1950s and was quite at home with Spanish customs. Michael was a confirmed romantic, always in pursuit of some new love, and he sometimes confided in me about the ups and downs of his affairs. Sure enough, as we lit our cigars and puffed great clouds of smoke up into the trees overhead, he told me about Mary Jane, a young Englishwoman who was in town for the summer,

BACK IN TIME ...Continued

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

taking a course in Spanish art history. One of Michael's regular prowling grounds was the Prado Museum, where young women from all over the world could usually be found standing in doorways and galleries, guidebook in hand, staring wide-eyed at everything in sight. Around them circled a throng of young men (and some not so young) who fervently hoped that a love of art and the art of love might somehow become briefly intertwined. Quite early on a recent morning Michael spotted Mary Jane gazing at Goya's *Naked Maya* and was instantly smitten. He introduced himself, implied that he knew a great deal more about Goya's painting than he in fact did, and invited her to breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Mary Jane was young but quite worldly in her way and had a mischievous sense of humour. She was actually far more interested in Velázquez and had only been standing in front of the Goya by chance. She read Michael easily and decided he was harmless enough, so agreed to have breakfast with him. Michael was a good talker; he certainly had a way with the ladies, and later that day he and Mary Jane—in spite of herself—were having lunch at an outdoor place on the Castellana. As they were finishing their coffee, he very casually brought up the subject of the Spanish siesta, explaining that it was a tradition that had originally been introduced as a way for people to get to know each other better after having breakfast and lunch together.

“Nonsense!” said Mary Jane, positively snorting with laughter. “That’s so silly. If you don’t know the true origins of the siesta after living in Spain all these years, it makes me wonder about your sense of wonder. Very disappointing!” She drained her coffee cup and stood up. “If you can learn the real story by next Saturday morning, come and tell me about it. I’ll be at the Prado, looking at Velázquez.” And with that, she was gone.

“So now I need your help,” said Michael, looking across the table at me. “You grew up with the siesta tradition. How *did* it start?”

“Let’s ask Professor Cardozo,” I replied. “He’s an old friend and he knows everything. Come on, he’s always at the Café Gijón at this hour of the day. It’s not far; we can walk.”

Luis Alberto Cardozo, a retired history professor, was at his usual table against the wood-paneled wall on the far side of the room. He was writing in a notebook, and there was a cup of espresso and a little glass of water on the table in front of him. Every time he took a sip of coffee he added a few drops of water to the cup and that way it lasted the entire afternoon. Being on a fixed income had made him frugal and resourceful. He drew on his cigarette and squinted at Michael.



“So you want to know how the Spanish siesta originated? Yes, it’s a good story. We got it from the Romans, so you can see what an ancient custom it is. Of course, human beings

BACK IN TIME ...Continued

by Tony Beckwith
tony@tonybeckwith.com

have always taken naps when they feel sleepy after a meal. But the word siesta—listen to it!—is derived from the Latin *sexta hora*, which means the sixth hour. Why? Because the Roman day started at 6 o'clock in the morning: zero hour, when people woke up. Six hours later they were ready for a break and would take what they called a *sexta*. Over time *sexta* evolved into siesta, the word we use today. That's the story. Simple but charming, no?" Michael ordered three cognacs and we spent a very pleasant hour or so with the professor.

Two weeks later I ran into Michael at the Teatro Calderón. He was arm-in-arm with a very attractive young woman.

"I'm so glad to see you," he said, grinning hugely. "I'd like you to meet my friend Mary Jane."

SPECIAL INVITATION



*We invite you to take part in the 6th edition of the contest
 "This is the way we drink tea" on Saturday 6th Of October as from 10:00
 at the emblematic Evans House, Conchillas, Colonia Department.*

Organized by "Un sueño nos impulsa"