

### Trail of Don Quixote Traverses the Imagination

*The People and 'Palaces' Of Spain's La Mancha Bring Literature to Life*

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**T**HE IDEA of meandering across Spain's Castilla de La Mancha region in the footsteps of Miguel de Cervantes's mythic hero, Don Quixote, came to me last year when a survey of the world's most acclaimed writers named the 17th century Spanish satire as the best work of fiction ever written.

Having read the book in English and not in its entirety, my pride suffered a competitive blow when my husband pointed out he had read it in Spanish, albeit 20 years ago. A weekend trip through La Mancha, I mused, was the inspiration I needed to re-read the novel.

Tracking the wanderings of a fictional character is dodgy at best, but it was becoming apparent that in the case of Don Quixote, whose wild adventures so often played out in his own mind, the hunt required more than a bit of creative imagining. It's made more difficult in that Cervantes included few specific place names in the novel, leaving fans and scholars to speculate exactly where the befuddled knight and his squire had roamed.

Cervantes often is credited with creating the first modern novel. But scholars say the story, written in two parts, reveals more than just narrative power; it transcends its own time to speak to every generation of readers. "On one level, it's a novel about how we perceive life, realistically or idealistically...through passionate eyes," says Roberto Véguez, a Spanish-language professor at Middlebury College in Vermont. "It also offers a point of reference, even in the modern world," he says, noting he recently received an e-mail message from a U.S. navy chaplain quoting Don Quixote's arms-and-letters speech, a stirring defense of soldiers protecting the freedom scholars so often take for granted.

I plot a likely route for my husband and myself. The fertile countryside quickly gives way to the harsh southern plateau, the vista broken by rows of scrubby vine stumps. Our first stop, the 15th century castle of Belmonte, proves a disappointment. Guidebooks sometimes mention the castle in connection with the book only because it sits on a hill and looks every bit like a backdrop for the Broadway musical "Man of La Mancha." But on this day, the massive wrought-iron gate is closed and the grounds are littered with cans and candy wrappers.

Racing westward toward El Toboso—home to Dulcinea, the woman in whose honor Don Quixote performed his many chivalrous deeds—we cheer up at the



Don Quixote, above, kneels before his heart-throb, Dulcinea, in the main square of El Toboso. Below, a windmill in La Mancha awaits another bold knight like Don Quixote.



Photo: Manuel del Moral/Periodistas Asociados

sight of seven pepper-pot windmills perched along a distant hilltop. Here is something that even those who had never read the novel could appreciate, a literary image recognized around the globe.

Arriving in the main square of El Toboso, we find Maria Teresa Rodriguez, a high-school teacher from northern Spain, dealing with her annual challenge of getting the themes of Don Quixote across to a class of 16-year-olds.

"Right from the start, they look at the book, which is huge and quite difficult to read, and reject it," Ms. Rodriguez says. "But once they get into the story and its characters, we find they really do enjoy it." Her group of 30 students is jostling to take pictures of their friends draped over a wrought-iron statue of the Don himself.

Dulcinea, a poor farm girl turned noblewoman in the deluded mind of the mad knight, is fictional, of course. But the town is more than happy to make believe—after all, she attracts business. During recent years, the town has marked the April 23 anniversary of Cervantes's death, offering a week of lectures, performances and exhibits.

Visitors can see Dulcinea's "house." Spruced up and sporting a few odd an-

tiques, it's unclear at first why Don Quixote's ladylove lived here rather than a few doors down. The portly old man at the ticket counter (bearing a remarkable resemblance to Sancho Panza, Don Quixote's companion) explains. "Book II, Chapter 9, that's where he comes into El Toboso," Ezequiel Sanchez says. He proudly quotes the lengthy passage from memory: "When Don Quixote and Sancho...entered into Toboso...the town was all hushed in silence: for its inhabitants were sound asleep...either my eyes deceive me, or that great, dark bulk we see yonder must be Dulcinea's palace." Mr. Sanchez recites. The story then takes the two companions past the church, down an alley and to the spot where we stand chatting, he notes.

What is it in the book that this old gentleman finds fascinating? "It's the idea that we imagine one thing and see another...the question of what is real and what isn't," he says. Caught up in his enthusiasm, we flip through our tattered copy of Quixote to the chapter on El Toboso, grinning like children at finding the appropriate passage. Suddenly, the trip is making sense—the fun is more about the characters we are meeting than the ones we had read about.

We head down a cobblestone street to our car and drive on to the nearby windmills of Campo de Criptana. The town boasts 10 whitewashed windmills, all that's left of the original 32 that were La Mancha's oldest surviving collection. At dusk, they offer a glorious sight, though somewhat damped by the raucous teenage motorcyclists zooming about the parking lot.

Predicting sightseeing overload, I book us a room at the luxurious Parador de Almagro, a superbly restored 17th century convent in the southern tip of La Mancha. The hotel offers excellent dining and comfortable accommodations. Our simple, snug room overlooks one of 14 arced

courtyards, its jasmine and honeysuckle flowers perfuming the night air.

The next day, we drive 45 minutes north to Puerto Lapice, one of the few places indisputably named in Cervantes's book. It was here that Don Quixote and Sancho spent the night at an inn that the old knight believed to be a castle. The Venta del Quixote claims to be the very place they bedded down. Its open courtyard and statue of Don Quixote—who, in the novel, persuades the innkeeper to knight him—draw the occasional tourist.

While Cervantes's hapless hero spends much of his life in and about La Mancha, his creator saw a far wider world. At age 19, he fled to Italy to escape a prison sentence for assault, and three years later he was wounded in the battle of Lepanto. In 1575, he hopped aboard a galley headed for Spain only to be captured and sold as a slave in Algiers. Escaping in 1580, he went on to write the great literary classic, first published in 1605. Indeed, it has been said that part of the power of the novel lies in the contrast between Quixote's own noble intentions and his failed life, a reflection in part of the author's own turbulent history.

Nearly 400 years later, the book continues to draw readers. Last month, fans of Don Quixote took part in a nonstop, 48-hour marathon reading of the novel, marking the anniversary of Cervantes's death. The yearly event attracts hundreds of participants to Madrid's Circulo de Bellas Artes hall—from prize-winning novelists, to ministers, to movie directors, to high-school students—each reading a short passage from the book in relay. The hall itself is crammed with hundreds of people who have stopped to listen for a few minutes or a few hours.

Our journey ends in Consuegra, at the site of a magnificent 13th century stone fortress that once belonged to the Knights of Malta. Flanked on either side by half-dozen whitewashed windmills, it is an extraordinary sight. That day, the enormous sails, silhouetted against the gray sky, creak in the blustery wind like the "monstrous giants" Don Quixote had battled against.

**INFORMATION:** For those looking for a more modern alternative to Cervantes's 900-odd-page odyssey, the Madrid book fair will be held May 30 through June 15. An open-air event held in the capital's Retiro Park, it is a combination of street fair—musicians, buskers and food sellers are all on hand—and a book-buying extravaganza. In the first few days, famous authors sign copies of their work at some of the nearly 400 book-stalls. But expect a crowd. Last year 800,000 people milled through the fair during the first weekend. For more information, go to [www.cwquijote.com](http://www.cwquijote.com), which details Don Quixote's travels in English and Spanish, or [www.castillalamancha.es](http://www.castillalamancha.es), for information on Castilla de La Mancha, in Spanish.