Wild nights and the running of the bulls 

Much against his better judgment, Adam Hopkins visits Pamplona for the fiesta and is rewarded

What about San Fermín and the running of the bulls? The great, eight-day Pamplona pilgrimage with death as an unlikely boogie-woogie—connected with Ernest Hemingway and which this July once again claimed a life, a young American?

Myself, I have avoided the festival for years, pretending I do not need to prove myself. As a result, I have somehow, somewhere deep inside me, probably a residual curiosity.

So this year, I popped Papa's Little novel in my pocket—Fiesta it is called, in case you have forgotten. Fiesta: The Sun Also Rises, first published in 1926, and pretty good when you read it again and headed Pamplona way, on my elbow, or, rather, me anxiously clutching my heart, accompanied by our good friend Maite, a Spaniard from the Basque country.

For Maite, the Sanfermines, as they are called in Spain, were a way of life two decades back, with a near-mystical significance, nothing to do with Hemingway at all. So making a return in middle life was taking a risk. What if it all gone to— or worse?

Arrival to our surprise, was a moment of almost transfigurational delight. Across the last miles before the city, through suburbs backed by sweeping wheat fields, and up on to the hill that houses the town, comes a group surprisingly calm, not to say somber, capital of Navarre, hundreds of young walkers were making their way as silently as possible into town, bright and animated, waving, laughing, crying, dressed everyday in gleaming whites with bright red sashes around their middles, San Fermín is a sight.

By now, however, it was nearly the moment of the cortes, the pocket set off from the town hall, now a place they that you are lifted off your feet, rushed hither and thither, douzed with champagne as if you were a grand prize winner and probably ducking, weaving, pushing pretty hard, she fights her way through town, tight in tow, into the more permanent headquarters of the festival, the café-patched, chair-lined, bandstand-centred Plaza del Castillo.

Miraculously, we find seats at a table in the Intelligentia, a restaurant for the characters in Hemingway as well.

Three hours of travel from Pamplona, just behind us, very friendly, short shorts and bare chests, the bocetos, fancy formal café. The young Australians in the street were already relaxing. Mr. James Headings of Oldham was in attendance. He had run the bulls three times, at the age of 23.

I stagger about, asking the foreigners why they have come here. To my astonishment, hardly anyone has heard of Hemingway, far less achieved an understanding of how a festival like this may actually be important to Spaniards.

No, they say, they have seen the Sanfermines back home on television, there are clips from the guides that this is the place. And so they come piling in, with no idea of what is all about. “No understand-

Old Matthew Tasso, student of electrical engineering, gored through kidney and liver, a main artery severed. He died, according to the Spanish commentator, because “having fallen asleep in a heap of foreigners, he got up just as the bulls were coming, instead of lying down and nothing would have done. Nor did we witness any of the other major spills.

But on each of the early days of the festival, from various vantage points—including, once, the television—we watched the encierro, becoming expert in the course, knowing the dangerous bends where the bulls may overcommit and hurtle into those along the edges, and the uphill stretch at the beginning with no protection at all for runners, not even a doorway to offer relief.

We saw political slogans go up and get painted over again—everyone as usual watching for some outrageously inventive from ETA, the movement associated with Basque terrorists. Finally, a slogan went up on the course of the encierro: “ETA does not fear Sanfermines” (ETA wishes you happy holidays) — and everyone breathed a little more easily.

We went down to the railways, the bull pens on the far side of the river, where for a modest fee, you can press your nose close to glass windows and see the great beasts, waiting, unwinding, on the festival, sleeping and slooshing in the straw, huge bumps of muscle on their necks, the horns, though stubby, looking as if they would go through you like butter.

After the encierro, which comes at 8pm, there is half an hour in the bullring where young cows, of the same breed, are released one by one, balls on their horns for safety, into a ring jam-packed with those who have come from far and wide to see.

The little cows dart about and to us, whatever they feel like in the air, and those who have just been thrown pick themselves up from the sand and make two flat, sand-kneeling gestures as if they have just scored a goal in an international. And the Spanish lads get cross with the foreigners for putting the cows’ tails and young Australians unfurl an Australian flag and are booted in the ring.

We saw this too and in the afternoon we went to the bullfight, paying outrageous prices to the tours.

“Ab”, says Maite, as a bullfighter runs by a nearby tar. “Look at that bull. Isn’t he beautiful? He makes me feel just like a cow. And los diagonales aren’t they, so elegant, so classical? No, I am getting my rewards, now I am glad I came.”

Adam Hopkins travelled from San Froºn to San Fermín on Navarra Ferries (tel: 0172-22322). An eight-day return for a car and passengers, costs from £340, with cabrest with an additional 10% extra outside Pamplona, at the Hotel El Toro, tel: 30-2201. (Code from UK 09 34 45). The hotel is good, rather expensive, for the country views, but an incovenience for those staying in town, virtually no parking available during the festival. In town, the top hotel is Los Picos Bienes (tel: 22-2000). The best restaurant is La Plancha del Picos Bienes, with excellent, and best of all, quiet, but would be central. Finding other evidence, I back it as the original of Hemingway’s Hotel Montoya.