

Contemplating Silence in Catalonia: L'Avenc

BY JIMMY BURNS (OS 1971)

It is early morning in early Spring in Catalonia and I am walking on clouds, or so it seems. Heavy mist has gathered overnight down in the valley, and is now rising, turning the high ground into islands. The one I am on is the L'Avenc de Tavernet cliff which looks out of one of the most magnificent natural sceneries in southern Europe, southward across the Ter valley, the ridges and peaks of the Montseny mountains; to the east, where the river flows on its way, beyond Gerona, to the Mediterranean; to the west, past the small city of Vic, the very distant horizon, the jagged rocks of Montserrat, a place of Christian worship.

L'Avenc is part of the Collsacabra ridge, part of a natural landscape of fields and meadows interspersed with forest of beech and oak from where, looking northwards, you can see the snowy peaks of the Pyrenees.

Our rented self-catering stone and oak beamed cottage is part of a once abandoned medieval settlement lovingly restored in recent years by the journalist and author Matthew Parris, together with his sister Belinda, and her Catalan husband Quim. The couple, together with their children, now run the cottages and a tastefully designed adjacent building with bedrooms and heated indoor swimming pool.

At the heart of this rural retreat is a converted bishop's country house or Masia dating back to the thirteenth century. Matthew, the son of English expatriates who settled in this area of north east Catalonia in the 1970s, discovered the ruined site while mountain walking one Spring morning before buying the land and restoring the settlement.

His story and that of his family is beautifully told in his book *A Castle in Spain*, an absolute must-read for hispanist adventurers as well as Catalan cultural buffs. The project of restoration proved a huge challenge, with major bureaucratic obstacles and a legal battle with a local farmer having to be overcome before the Parris's could realise their dream of restoring L'Avenc's buildings and giving the area new life based on ecologically friendly cultural tourism and farming methods.

The atmosphere of L'Avenc is accurately described in its promotional literature as "Contemplating Silence", for a stay here is characterised by a mystical sense of well-being so intense at times as to move one to tears of sheer wonder and joy.

The sunsets are as special as its sunrises: Egyptian vultures and hawks gliding and buckling in the wind, the scenery above and below turned into a painter's palette - crimson and yellow, reds and purple - the valley once again a silent pink ocean, dark islands rising from it, as the sun gives way to the moon.

This area is not just one of nature's most beautiful reserves, it is also full of history. Two quiet medieval villages, Tavernet and Rupit, stand at the foot of this immense cliff system on either side, offering delicious country food and local wine. The valleys and mountain tracks all the way to France were used as hideaways and escape routes during the Spanish Civil War.

In his marvellous book which I never tire of rereading as a reference, Matthew writes movingly of how Catalan identity is rooted in the beauty of this landscape, its woods and mountains —and, I would add, the light of its Mediterranean coastline. The issue of nationalism has sadly been allowed all too often to be conflictive and divisive. But here in L'Avenc there is a sense of timelessness and one is beyond politics to the extent that this nature does not exclude, but embraces.

As Matthew puts it: "Catalans share with the English not just St George (Sant Jordi is their patron too) and football but the paradox of being a predominately urban people who, asked to paint a picture of their nationhood, would fill it with symbols of rural life: simple, bucolic and pastoral, and strikingly small-scale."

If my wife and I return there as often as we can when staying in our house near Barcelona, it is in part because of our enduring friendship with Belinda and Quim and their hugely welcoming dogs, but also because it is a necessary escape and deliverance from the noise, pollution, and stress of a busy urban life straddling the UK and Spain.

The cottages and rooms are reasonably priced. But this kind of alternative lifestyle among good and genuine people is priceless and recharges the spirit. **www.avenc.com**

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