

Juan Lalaguna's A Traveller's History of Spain. Required Reading for the Informed Tourist

Travelling abroad offers a wide array of benefits. By exposing ourselves to other cultures, we garner a firsthand knowledge and appreciation for the customs, beliefs, and history of people different from ourselves, which cannot be attained otherwise. Yet, intercontinental travel can be a hectic and nerve-wracking experience. Hence, anyone who has traveled abroad is apt to extol the values of a good guidebook. Publishers, having realized the potential earnings that can be derived from the guidebook market, have responded diligently to this need, flooding the market with thousands of books about travel. Whereas once those persons intrepid enough to explore the foreign shores and inlands of faraway places had to rely primarily on the inconsistent, and often exaggerated, interpretations of their fellow travelers, today the book industry provides a fairly accurate and up-to-date resource for those individuals who are willing to leave their homelands in search of a contrast to their familiar surroundings. Undoubtedly, travel journals have come a long way since the days of Marco Polo.

Most of these travel resources, however, focus solely on the immediate, practical needs of the buyer. Hotel and restaurant listings, currency conversion rates, useful expressions and summary descriptions of significant political and historical events generally provide the bulk of content for the vast majority of travel books. As in any genre, the quality of texts varies and some guides are more thorough than others. Regardless, for those who would like to learn more about a country before actually going to visit it, there still exists a need for better resources.

Helping to fill this gap is a series of books offered by Interlink Publishing Group, Inc. known as the Traveller's History Collection. Recently, I ran across this series while visiting a local bookstore. While scanning the somewhat disorderly shelves, I happened to spy a red cover containing Goya's Portrait of the Marquise de Santa Cruz. Clutching a fan in her left hand with her shoulders thrust back almost contemptuously, the Marquise is pictured smiling somewhat coyly while gazing at the viewer with the hard-set eyes that Goya so adeptly captured. Having visited the Prado this spring and having been fascinated by Goya's rendition of Saturn Eating His Children, my attention was immediately seized. Below the Marquise, the word "Spain" appeared in large white lettering. (The designers of the cover, when developing their marketing strategy, apparently had a keen grasp of Lao Tsu's Art of War and had taken into consideration the philosopher's comments regarding the efficacy of simplicity.) Disregarding the budget crises that my last trip had precipitated, I quickly grabbed the book and, after a brief skim of its contents, found myself at the cashier's counter, facing an attractive, young woman who cheerfully rang my purchase.

Once home I immediately threw myself on my worn but cozy couch and began reading the fifth edition of Juan Lalaguna's A Traveller's History of Spain. The book contains a preface by Dennis Judd who writes, "It is one of the achievements of this well-researched and thorough book that no important part of Spain's history is neglected. ...this book will serve an invaluable double function: for those who know little of Spain's past it will provide necessary illumination and entertainment; for those who think they know a good deal already it will provide further stimulation and, I suspect, many revelations." Mr. Judd is entirely correct.

The book is a well-organized, meticulously detailed account of the social, political and economic forces that have shaped Spanish culture. Beginning at the beginning, Lalaguna carefully documents every relevant aspect of the country's rich and, often turbulent, history. Unlike many Spanish histories, however, The Traveller's History of Spain does not devote itself almost wholly to the precursors and outcomes of the Spanish Civil War. Instead, only one of the eight chapters that comprise the book's contents focuses on this period of the country's past.

After a brief, encyclopedic summary of the country's main characteristics, the book follows an evenly paced, chronological progression that does not assume any foreknowledge on the reader's part. Having only a vague sense of Spain's evolution from a pre-Roman amalgam of Iberian tribes to a modern member of the European community, I was quite impressed by the book's orderly procession. Lalaguna demonstrates expert knowledge of his subject without overwhelming the novice student who may not have any previous understanding of the country's significant political Events. Although at times the book provides copious background information concerning Spain's economic development that may become tiresome for some readers, it is understood that this material plays an essential role in the country's growth and is therefore required content for any work that intends to provide the profound insight that Lalaguna's work offers.

Although empirical, Lalaguna's book is by no means entirely objective. Instead, confident of his staggering knowledge of Spanish history, Lalaguna alternately criticizes and praises those rulers and other historical figures whom he describes. For example, when describing the rule of Fernando VII during the early 1800s, Lalaguna writes,

The twenty years that followed surely stand as the darkest period in Spanish history. Aided and abetted by an ever-changing caucus of disreputable characters, corrupt politicians, and arrogant and ignorant senior officers, he sustained a comprehensive policy of repression and terror to eradicate even the shadow of opposition to his ignominious rule. For a short while in 1820, when an important section of the army urged him to govern as a constitutional ruler, he had no qualms in quickly accepting a situation which negated his entire past record or in 1823 helping finance a French army to restore Spain to his oppressive and autocratic tyranny, which after that reached unprecedented depths. (135)

That Lalaguna reserves this type of language for Fernando VII rather than Franco (who receives substantial, though not equivalent, abuse) shows Lalaguna's keen ability to assess all of the major cultural ramifications of each successive rule without being unduly swayed by the proximity of any particular period of time to that of our own. In this manner, Lalaguna exhibits a decidedly robust talent to use individual subjective appraisals to create a work that, when judged as a whole, maintains a clearly unbiased tone. As a result, the book provides an impressive and colorful description of the history of Spain.

In addition to the prose, the book's structure contributes to its readability. Each chapter is broken into neatly organized subheadings about every other page. This arrangement offers the reader the opportunity to revisit the book at intervals without feeling obliged to finish long, unwieldy chapters. Moreover, the book contains a series of maps detailing the political organization of the country during different stages of its development. These maps are supplemented by a concise chronology of major events, a chronological list of rulers and monarchs, a glossary of important terms and a compilation of suggested readings. It would seem that the editors have left nothing for the reader's imagination.

Having visited Spain on several occasions without the aid of this work, I feel this book has substantially enhanced my appreciation of the country's unique characteristics. Consequently, I would like to thank Mr. Lalaguna for the painstaking effort he has made researching and documenting his work. Anyone planning to visit the nation ought to consider making this purchase before leaving home. It is well worth the cover price. Incidentally, the book is part of a series that Interlink has produced. The publishers offer similar works for several other countries throughout the world. Not having read any of these works, I can make no claims regarding their contents. I will, however, be sure to purchase the appropriate title the next time I plan another trip. Clearly, I encourage the reader to do the same. A little historical research will undoubtedly better the traveler's understanding of his or her surroundings, which, in turn, will allow for a more enjoyable stay. Ergo, Lalaguna's work enables one helluva' good time.