

SAN FERMÍN AND THE RUNNING OF THE BULLS

The annual fiesta in Pamplona, the San Fermín, goes back hundreds of years. Already in the 13th century there was an annual trade and bull fair in July, whereas the religious part in celebration of St Fermin, patron saint of Navarra, fell on the 10th October. However, fed up with always celebrating the fiesta in bad weather, the authorities moved the religious celebrations to coincide with the July fair. San Fermin was a Pamplona boy who was so impressed by the teachings of a French bishop that he followed him back to France and studied to become a bishop himself. He spent his life preaching Christianity in Amiens in France, where he was tortured and beheaded for his beliefs. This led to his elevation to sainthood.



The running of the bulls, 'el encierro', which is probably the most well known feature of this fiesta, was not originally confined to the San Fermín, but was simply a kind of game that developed when bulls were collected from the countryside to the bull ring in the centre of the city.

Ernest Hemingway made this fiesta world famous with his 1926 novel 'The Sun Also Rises' (aka 'Fiesta') and after its publication people flocked to Pamplona from all over the world every July to participate in the celebrations and, in some cases, the running of the bulls. It's fair to say than nowadays as many foreigners as Spanish participate in the fiesta.

Over the years many people have been killed or injured during this race, whose participants often have spent the previous night gathering some Dutch courage. The 'encierro' is shown live on Spanish TV every morning, and many people enjoy watching it over breakfast.

The festivities begin on the 6th of July at 12:00 noon. Thousands gather in the *Plaza de Ayuntamiento* (Town Hall Square) to await the beginning of the fiesta. The mayor of Pamplona then opens the Fiesta with a short speech followed by the firing of the *Txupinazo* (rocket). With this noisy signal, the Feria of San Fermín begins for another year. The crowd erupts in glee and the contents of hundreds of bottles of champagne are sprayed over everyone present.

The first *encierro* happens on the morning of July 7th, promptly at 8am. It consists largely of young men (although women may also run) who run in front of the bulls to lead them from their pen up and into the bull-ring. It usually lasts from two to three minutes - although if there are complications due to loose bulls it can last much longer.

With the first rays of light of the early morning the wooden fencing which lines the route is erected. Then the night-long revellers are gradually cleared from the streets by the local police. The street-cleaners then move in to mop up the accumulated rubbish and dirt caused by the night-long revelry.

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All spectators must stay behind the double-fencing along the route. Only first-aid teams can be found in the space between the double fencing. One practical reason for this is that the runners have the space to jump over the fence should they need to. Many runners who gather at the bottom of Santo Domingo, the start of the run, crowd together and sing a homily to the image of San Fermín which is placed in a niche on the wall decorated with the scarves of the *peñas*.

The song goes like this: "*A San Fermín pedimos, por ser nuestro patrón, nos guíe en el encierro dándonos su bendición...*" ("We ask San Fermín, as our Patron, to guide us through the Bull Run and give us his blessing"). A rocket goes off at the moment the bulls are let out into the street. A second rocket goes off to let everyone know that all the bulls are now in the street.

It seems clear that these mortalities have begun to increase at the same rate that the "*encierro*" has become an ever-bigger spectacle for an ever-greater number of people. The same macabre statistics can be seen for the number of injured which continue to increase year by year. By far the largest number are caused by contusions but serious injuries from goring seem to be increasing and some of can be mortal. Only the professionalism of the paramedic service keeps the mortality to a minimum.

By the end of the week-long celebrations the *Sanfermines* are just about partied out. Hundreds of tons of garbage have been collected in the streets, thousands upon thousands of litres of wine have been drunk and hopefully, none of the revellers have been hurt by the participating in the *encierro*. The insanity will resume again in another year at 12:00 midday on July 6th.