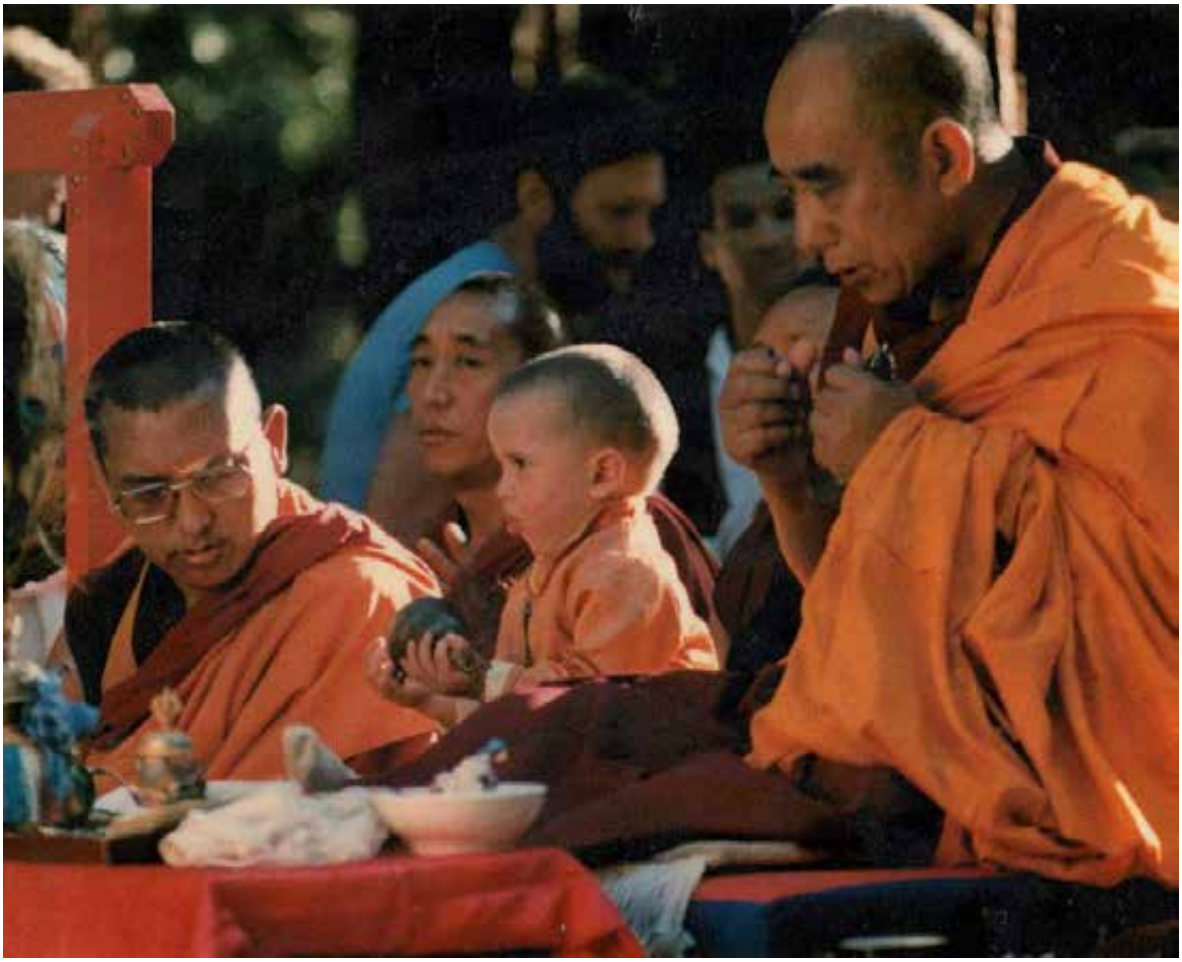
POSTCARD 27 FROM ROBINA: SPAIN, JUNE 26, 2012

Spain. I haven't been here since 2003. I like the place, the feel, the sky, the oldness. Of course, all of this earth is “old” but it’s a different feel when you see the physical evidence of cultures from 1,000+ years ago than in countries like the USA and Australia, where the evidence of earlier cultures, not represented by buildings, is virtually wiped out. The oldness of the red center of Australia is something to behold. . .

O.Sel.Ling, the remote FPMT retreat center, southeast of Granada, on Mulhacén, Spain's highest mountain, over 11,000 feet above sea level. "O.Sel.Ling is such a beautiful place," Lama Yeshe said. "It reminds me very much of the Himalayas." Photos O.Sel.Ling.

Maybe it's my imagination, but when I first came here in 1982 as one of the security guards for His Holiness during the visits to French, Spanish and Italian centers that Lama Yeshe sponsored, which I talked about in Postcard 8, it felt very holy somehow. Actually, His Holiness said that O.Sel.Ling, in the Sierra Nevada an hour southeast of Granada, reminded him of Tibet. It was His Holiness who named the place, which means Place of Clear Light. And, of course, it was after this place that Maria and Paco, the parents of the reincarnation of our Lama Yeshe, named their new son, born in the village down the mountain from there in 1985.



Two-year-old Osel Rinpoche in 1986: consecrating the Lama Yeshe Enlightenment Stupa at Vajrapani Institute in the Santa Cruz mountains, where Lama was cremated, with Lama Zopa Rinpoche (left) and Geshe Sopa (right); photo Mark Gatter;

There is, of course, evidence everywhere of Spain's Catholic faith: statues, churches, the sound of church bells, little grottoes, monasteries. I like it. During his time in Spain, His Holiness visited some Catholic monasteries. I remember one for Carthushian monks, who spend most of their lives in silence and in prayer. I don't remember where it was, except that it was high up, but it makes sense that it was near Granada or Barcelona, where His Holiness gave public talks. Apparently the monks loved His Holiness, spending hours in intense conversation about meditation and the meaning of things – the five of us female guards weren't allowed in, so I didn't witness the meeting. They all came out at the end to say goodbye: they looked blissful, holding hands with His Holiness, beaming from ear to ear. I liked it up there in the dry, dusty hills. I lay on the orange earth, taking in the high blue sky, dozing off.

Mary holding Jesus in the Valley of the Fallen, Francisco Franco's controversial Spanish Civil War monument northwest of Madrid; photo Mike Gary. St Francis in Murcia in south-eastern Spain; photo Robert Bovington. Church bells ring in Zahara de la Sierra, the small town in the hills of Andalusia in the south; photo Jennifer Hattam. The blue skies and orange earth of Spain's southern Sierra Nevada. Photo Casa Ana.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama prays before an image of Christ on a cathedral altar; photos Tenzin Choejor. Below, with His Holiness, in Italy in October 1982. Lama requested several of us to serve as security guards on the FPMT-organized visit to various centers and venues in France, Italy and Spain.

This time, 30 years later, I landed at Madrid Airport: a vast, modern place. I like this, too: the design of it. So huge, you walk for a good 20 minutes from the gate to the exit. But you need to keep a sharp eye on the signs: you can easily misread them: the design of the signage was almost too minimalist. Although they were very helpful in giving you times it'd take you from here to there.

Terminal Four, the international terminal at Madrid Airport, one of world's largest, and most beautifully designed, airport terminals; and those subtle signs.

Alfredo from Nagarjuna Madrid picked me up in a taxi and took me into the city, a big, sprawling place: my kind of place. We had tea at an outside café.

I stayed the night with Begonia, one of Rinpoche's Spanish nuns, in the apartment in the city that her mother left her. She told me she'd been a seamstress with House of Balenciaga, following in her mother's footsteps, becoming an apprentice as a young girl. Amazing! It was her hands that helped make those extraordinary creations. Then she decided to work in a bank instead – quite a change of lifestyle! – eventually meeting the lamas and getting ordained.

Madrid, Spain's sprawling capital: Gran Via, the famous commercial street in the city center; photo marrygoround. Enjoying tea in Plaza Mayor, the 17th century square; photo Krzysztof Dydynski.

One of Balenciaga's creations, which Begonia used to sew: one of his pillbox hats, which he apparently created in 1958, inspired by the hats cardinals wear; photo Richard Avedon.

On Friday I took the train to Valencia, on the east coast, where my old friend from Osel Ling in 2003, Englishman Steve Milton, picked me up. He runs the center and his Mexican wife Karen translates for their resident Geshe Lamsang. Steve told me that he was volunteering at O.Sel.Ling when he met Karen 10 years ago. He wasn't looking for a girlfriend but suddenly one day he noticed her: it seems that karma took care, as Lama Yeshe would put it! That's where I met him.

Above, FPMT Valencia's Karen and Steve with Khandro-la: she is a lama and oracle who is based at His Holiness's temple in Dharamsala, and is a close student of Lama Zopa Rinpoche; the center's resident lama Geshe Lamsang, and Ven. Paloma, who runs Rinpoche's center in Alicante; photo Nagarjuna Valencia.

On Monday I was driven to the small town called Ontinyent, an hour southwest, where I stayed with the director Rafa and his family. Another ancient place, evidence everywhere of the Moors, too. And evidence of Tibetans Buddhism now: the Buddha's eyes on the little tower of their center are visible to everyone.

In most of southern Europe, in particular Spain, they don't start their evening classes till 8:30, even 9, which means you go home to your dinner at around 11, and if you're traditional, you'll eat your four courses: fruit first, followed by soup, then the main course, then cheese, and a dessert if you can squeeze it in. They start the weekend classes later in the morning and stop for lunch at 2. In the UK, US, Australia, India, you have your lunch at noon, even 11:30 a.m., and you're practically in bed by 9 p.m.

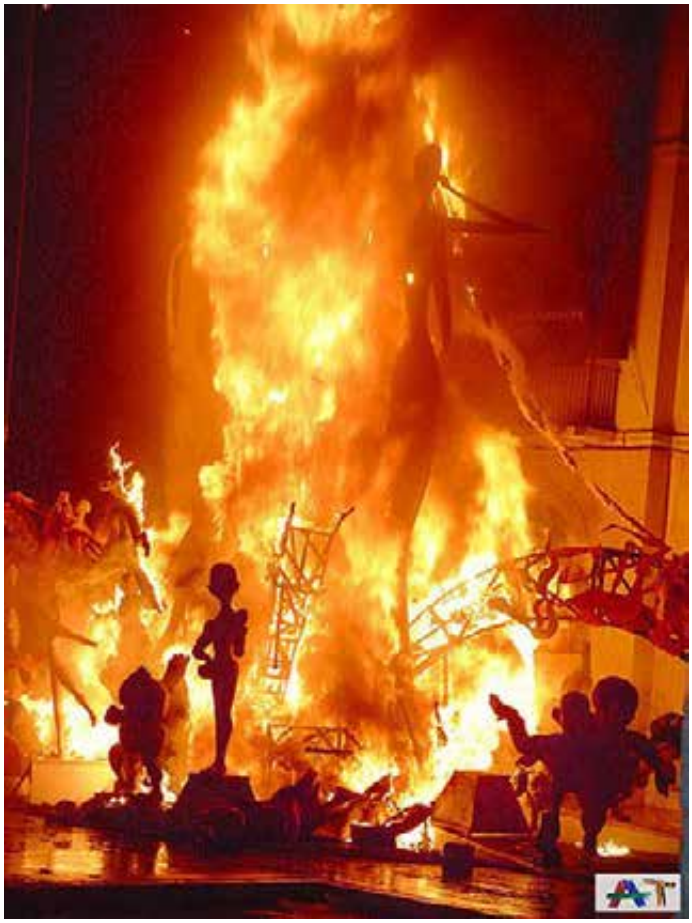
And another stark difference: in southern Europe they love their siestas! When I spent a year in Greece 20 years ago, the students of Rinpoche's in Athens who worked with me to develop the center simply didn't believe me when I told them that even though the summers in most of Australia are southern European in intensity, we'd never heard of such a thing as an afternoon sleep. We, the white Australian progeny

of the British, obviously had adopted the habits of our ancestors. What a waste of a precious bit of sun, so rare to find, to spend the time in bed! After the Second World War, the poor Greek and Italian immigrants who landed on Australia's sunny shores must have struggled to adapt to such a strange habit – no going home from the office or school for a leisurely lunch cooked by Mama followed by an hour's heavenly sleep. But they happily continued one of their habits: growing their vegetables and their fruit and olive trees in the back – and front – yards of their new homes, something the British never did.

Actually, it wasn't just the southern Europeans; the eastern ones as well. My mother's sister Robina Bliss married Stasys Arkusauskas, a Lithuanian who'd been a policeman in Germany during the Second World War. He never said so, but it seemed to us that he must have been at least a Nazi sympathizer. Anyway, the doors to Australia were opened to him, as they were to so many Europeans after the war – Australia desperately needed more inhabitants. He moved to the bush when he got older and he loved his massive vegetable garden. And even though he'd kill the ducks in the duck season, the quails in the quail season, and catch fish and rabbits and eels, he never used insecticide in the garden: "The insects can enjoy the vegetables too," he'd say.

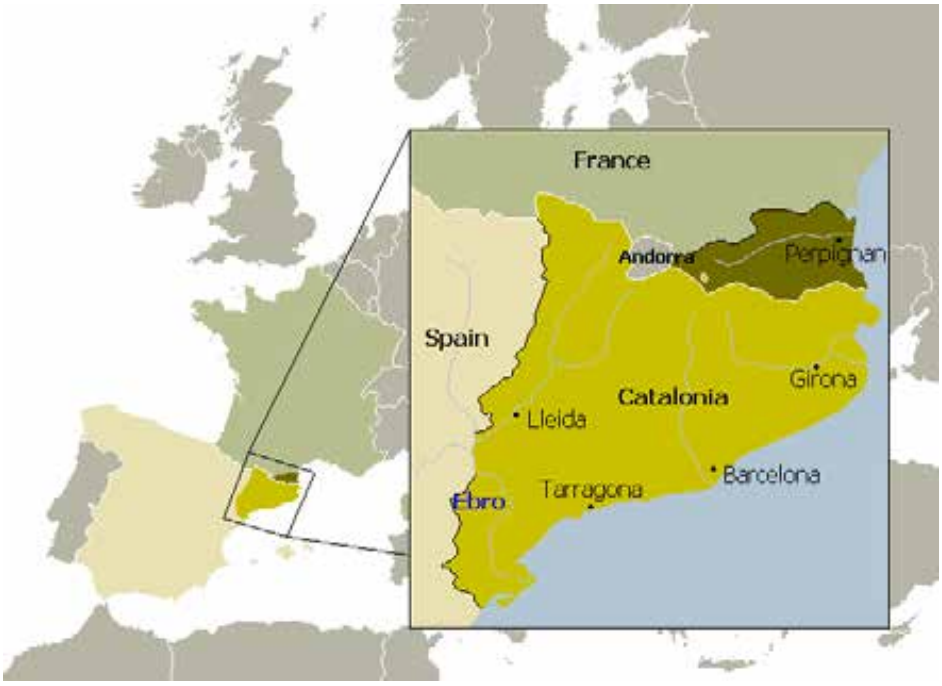
Back to Spain. From Ontinyent I was driven by car to Alicante, another hour south and back to the coast, where I stayed for a week. It's on the beach and is a favorite vacation place for the British and other northern Europeans. The center is on the fourth floor of an apartment building in one of the narrow city streets. Paloma, one of Rinpoche's Spanish nuns, runs it.

Sunny Alicante.



The Feast of St Juan in Alicante: a week-long festival, unlike anything I've ever seen, that culminates on the Summer Solstice with "La Crema" or "The Burning." Bonfires are lit throughout the city, both on the streets with the burning of the hogueras: giant colorful, usually satirical statues, built for and displayed throughout the festival, and then also along the beach. Photos: Sydney Polke; Aspiring Backpacker; Lydia Cerrada; El Hermano Pila.

What a week! My visit coincided with the Feast of St. Juan, celebrated throughout Catalonia but especially in Alicante. The actual feast day is June 24, but celebrations – and I mean celebrations! – start days earlier. The first sign of things was on June 19. The streets were lined with people sitting in city-provided chairs (very civilized), waiting for a parade of bands while speakers were blaring music so loudly, I'm sure people would go deaf. Throughout the city they were building gigantic spindly sculptures made of wood that would be the source of bonfires on the main day. The next days would see parades of people dressed in traditional local costumes, fireworks, and plenty of street parties – and the speakers blasting music so loud that the apartment building vibrated. The last night was the most exciting: it lasted till dawn. Forget about sleep. I've never experienced anything like it. (My friends in prison tell me the noise is so intense there, it's like being in a rock concert, so maybe it was like that.)



Valencia, Ontinyent, and Alicante are all part of Catalonia, a little pocket of the northeastern corner of Spain and a bit of France. Catalan is an official language of Spain, so all the signs in all the public places, including hospitals, offices, etc., are in both languages. Most people, it seems, speak both. Inevitably there are those Catalans who are fierce about their heritage, but I heard most are not as fierce as some of the Basques, for example, who fight for their independence. Everywhere on this planet, the same; the Irish, Scots and Welsh; the French Canadians.

Tushita Retreat Centre, in the mountains northwest of Barcelona.

More of Catalonia: Tushita Retreat Centre is near Arbucies, an hour or so northwest of Barcelona. My old friend Isabel runs this one. We had a weekend there. Up high, ancient stone buildings, big lovely sky. On the Sunday afternoon, after the retreat was over, Isabel and I drove to Barcelona with Paco, Osel Rinpoche's father, who was at the retreat.

Barcelona, Catalonia's capital, and Spain's second biggest city, after Madrid, sits on the northeast coast of the Iberian Peninsula; photo Ecobe.

I have always wanted to see some of the buildings of early 20th century designer and architect, and avid son of Catalonia, Antoni Gaudí. What a sight! Paco, Isabel and I went to Mass (just a little bit of it) at the Gothic Art Nouveau concoction, Basílica de la Sagrada Família. He started it in the late 1880s and died with it mostly unfinished in the mid-1920s. But not just that: driving around, you can't help but notice the houses he designed: so lovely!

We walked, ate some tapas at an outside cafe, and tried to find a jazz club, but everything was closed for the summer.

The Barcelona horizon from the entrance to Gaudí's Park Güell; photo Ecobe. And a bird's view of his Basílica de la Sagrada Família, still under construction since 1882! And Paco and me.

Finally back to Madrid by train, an evening teaching there, and off to Greece the following morning.

My journey around Spain. Madrid, Valencia, Ontinyent, Alicante, Arbucies, Barcelona, and back to Madrid.