



Skye dancing at the foam festival.

Dancing in Foam & Other Adventures

They say that wherever you go, there you are. But as ANNE CUSHMAN discovers in Spain, it's also true that travel gives you a fresh take on yourself.

I WAS IN MY TWENTIES WHEN I first met Shawn. She was a slender, intense yogini from Vermont with a long brown ponytail and Birkenstocks. In a teacher-training program at the Iyengar Yoga Institute in San Francisco, we drilled side by side in our eighties-style leotards on green sticky mats, parsing the muscular grammar of downward dog and revolved triangle. We crayoned nerves and organs in our anatomy coloring books; we identified—blindfolded—the disassembled vertebrae of a plastic skeleton; we visited each other for yoga dates, where we balanced side by side on our heads while discussing our once and future boyfriends.

But then she fell in love with one of our fellow yogis, a handsome, serious Catalan on sabbatical from his engineering job. Shortly after their first baby was born, she wrote me a letter from Barcelona on a flimsy blue aerogram. I meant to write back right away, but I got distracted by a few other things—some long treks through India, a couple of books, a marriage, a child, a divorce. Suddenly more than twenty years had slipped by, and I wanted to take my ten-year-old son, Skye, to study Spanish in Spain.

My Google search found Shawn teaching prenatal yoga and working as a doula in Sitges, a beach town just south of Barcelona. She answered my email right away: “I still have a photo of you in downward dog hanging in my painting studio!” I toured her Facebook wall, where she looked exactly the same as I remembered her, until I realized I was viewing a photo of her daughter. I had a warm but disorienting Skype conversation with a European woman with a chic blonde haircut who answered to Shawn’s name but kept breaking off to chat in Spanish and Catalan with her two teenagers.

In the decades since we’d last spoken, Shawn and I had each built a thriving life—and along the way, accumulated the usual list of roads-not-taken. I envied her established twenty-year marriage. She envied my fresh new romance with Teja, a musician and qigong teacher. I pined for her trilingual sophistication. She pined for my local community of dharma yoga friends. She told me about the first yoga class she ever taught in Spanish, in which she had instructed a group of pregnant women to “sit on their testicles” (inadvertently confusing the Spanish word for

cushions, *cojines*, with *cojones*). I told her about the time I led a silent yoga and meditation retreat with my screaming four-month-old son in a front pack, my milk letting down and soaking my camisole as I guided the retreatants into *savasana*.

A flurry of emails later, Shawn was sitting at my kitchen table in California—along with her husband, her son, her daughter, and her daughter’s best friend. She was handing me the keys to her house and instructing me on how to operate her Persian blinds and put her cat’s bowl in a moat of water so the ants wouldn’t infest it.

Soon I was doing a seated twist on Shawn’s terracotta patio, looking over a valley of rooftops and orange-blossomed trees to the Mediterranean Sea. Teja, Skye, and I were swapping houses with Shawn and her family for the month.



TRAVEL WRITER Bill Bryson said that the great gift of travel is that it puts you in situations where you can’t take anything for granted. Like meditation, it cultivates a beginner’s mind in which each experience is fresh.

A house swap, in particular, invites the tantalizing fantasy that you’re leaving behind not just your own familiar routine but also your own familiar and slightly annoying self. You’re swapping it out for a new, improved, more fascinating self, with better outfits and a better shot at enlightenment. Dropped into the middle of another woman’s life—sleeping in her bed with her mosquito coil humming, riding her bicycle to the beach while wearing her (only slightly too small) flip-flops, sautéing zucchini from her garden in her kitchen—I felt, at first, as if I’d been reincarnated.

Our first evening in Sitges, a friend of Shawn’s invited me and Skye to a *fiesta de espuma* (foam festival) in a nearby village. It was a giant public bubble bath, in which a cannon mounted on top of a truck fired a stream of soapy foam into a plaza next to a seventeenth-century church, while a salsa band played with no shirts on. Children in bathing suits and goggles, wrinkled *abuelitas* hand in hand with their grandkids, and papas with toddlers seated on their shoulders all frolicked in neck-deep bubbles to a Latin beat. Skye danced through the crowd with a corona of bubbles, shaking his frothy hips and waving his arms.

The next day, Skye, Teja, and I took the train into Barcelona for a bicycle tour through fifteenth-century streets jammed with honking, fuming, twenty-first-century traffic. We pedaled through the medieval courtyard where Ferdinand and Isabella greeted Christopher Columbus on his return from the New World. We cruised past the sandcastle-like splendor of the

still-unfinished masterwork cathedral of the architect Antoni Gaudí. We paused for power bars and water at a series of memorials commemorating religious and political martyrs who over the centuries had been shot or burned at the stake or rolled through the streets in barrels full of broken glass.

But it wasn’t just soap bubbles and touristy photo ops that

brushed the cobwebs of familiarity from my eyes. In a foreign country, ordinary life—buying groceries, doing laundry, driving Skye to and from his beach camp in Shawn’s old VW van—was a constant mystery. I blundered through my days, bleating the primal phrases from my introductory Spanish CDs—“I want... I need... Do you have...?”—and misunderstanding the answers. A freeway sign flashed “*peligro*,” which I knew meant “danger.” But I couldn’t understand the rest of the

warning, which, in any case, quickly disappeared behind me. Why was the old woman at the roadside fruit stand so irritated that I’d picked up the melon and set it on the weighing scale? Why were the carts in the Supermarque chain-locked together, and how did I get them apart? For that one, I sent Skye to inquire in Spanish of the white-coated man at the meat counter—who was standing next to an entire pig, skinned and gutted, dangling by its hind ankles from an overhead hook. (We learned that vegetarianism was a rare phenomenon in Spain when we requested our salads *sin carne*—without meat—and they came with ham instead.) In the U.S., meat came tidily packaged in plastic, its animal origins coyly disguised. In Spain, it stared right at us and said, *Hi, I’m Wilbur and I’ll be your tapas for this evening...*

Alas, it quickly became clear that I had not been reborn into this new reality as an entirely new person—as, for example, a person who didn’t get snippy when her partner played classical guitar till after midnight, slept in till ten, and then drank strong Spanish coffee from a two-liter measuring cup, even though she had repeatedly told him that the best way to get over jet lag was to get up at dawn and do yoga and meditate with her, and even though she was clearly *so right* about that! Unfortunately, I had packed my mind along with me—as opinionated and prolific as always.

A few days into our trip, I stayed home all morning to practice yoga on Shawn’s patio. A garbage truck groaned up the street, with a sound like a very large animal in labor, but the breeze smelled of salt water and orange blossoms. As I dropped into the pause at the bottom of a long exhalation, I thought, *Now I’m finally here.* ➤

But what did I mean by “here”? Shawn’s house was eerily similar to my own: peach-colored walls, a closet full of yoga props, a stack of meditation cushions piled in the corner of the living room. Deep in the heart of my practice, I could have been anywhere in the world. Folding into a forward bend, I met the same familiar body I greet in California—though admittedly more laden with *pan al tomate*. Seated in meditation, I met the same familiar mind. Sure, the content of my tumbling thoughts was different: What metro stop would get me to the Joan Miró museum on the peak of Montjuïc? Was it really okay for Skye to eat chocolate croissants instead of oatmeal for breakfast and, if so, could I have a bite? But the basic structure was the same: the

The guitar player held his guitar like a lover in his arms. His fingers released a torrent of song as they traveled over the strings.

flickering slide show of planning and judging, the undertow of anxiety laced with longing.

As I hoisted my pelvis onto a foam yoga block for a supported inversion, I reflected on one of the basic teachings of buddhadharma: the solid self that we cling to so tenaciously is actually composed of a limited number of ever-shuffling components. Wherever we go, our experience is created from the same basic elements: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking. *Spain and America, today and twenty years ago*—these are just abstract concepts. There’s no coming and no going; we’re always right here, right now.

And yet... A pill bug crawled toward my head; when I blew on it, it curled into a ball and tumbled away. A fiesta firecracker banged exuberantly somewhere down the street. My sacrum released with a pop as I dropped my feet to the floor. My practice invited me into a living intimacy with this specific unfolding moment.

Again and again, my practice of yoga and meditation helps me navigate this dance between the universal and the personal, the absolute and the relative. It teaches me to honor my own quirky, specific human body and mind and story—while at the same time seeing their ever-changing, impermanent nature, inseparable from the interconnected web of pill bugs and chocolate, garbage trucks and stars. It reminds me that I don’t have to do a house exchange in order to have the opportunity to be reborn in each new moment.

I ground myself in my daily practice whenever I travel, so that travel itself can become a meditation. My practice reminds me that in travel, as in yoga, the point is not just to get from one peak experience to the next—the poses and destinations are part of an ongoing *vinyasa*, or flow. As Skye and Teja and I took the metro through Barcelona to a flamenco-guitar concert at the Palau de la Música Catalana, I reminded Skye that our day’s adventure wasn’t just the hour and a half we would sit in the concert hall, a stained-glass ceiling arcing above us, listening to Pedro Javier

González play “*Recuerdos de la Alhambra*.” The adventure was also our sweaty confusion as we puzzled over the metro map by the train tracks, and our rescue by a young architecture student named Maria, who listened patiently to our halting Spanish and led us through the maze of the station to the right line. If we couldn’t be present for Maria and the metro, chances were we wouldn’t tune in to the concert completely either.

My daily meditations helped me stay centered as we took a cable-car up a jagged mountain to the eighth-century monastery Montserrat, which now attracts a million tourists a year. “That sounds like a monk’s worst nightmare,” I said to Teja, but perhaps it wasn’t; outside the bar by the monastery museum we spotted a group of portly, black-robed monks drinking red wine and passing around trays of hors d’oeuvres. Skye took off his sun hat and set it on a wall to pose for a photo with a statue of a saint. Then by the time we had snapped a few shots, the hat had been stolen by one of our fellow pilgrims. I suggested to Skye that perhaps in a few hundred years, the Buddhist retreat center where I teach in California might look like this: a cable car to the hill above the meditation hall, with a café and a bar on top, and a viewing platform where one could watch through binoculars as the Vipassana students did walking meditation in the courtyard.

My practice also reminded me to stay relaxed as we celebrated Skye’s eleventh birthday with a few of his new Spanish friends and a chocolate-cream cake with *Felicidades* written in white icing. En route to a business trip, Skye’s dad flew in for the party with his beautiful new girlfriend. The kids played a Barcelona version of Monopoly and argued about the rules in Spanish, while the grown-ups drank sparkling water and made conversation that was not as awkward as I’d feared.

The trip, in its turn, reminded me to be free-spirited in my yoga and meditation practice—to enter it, every time, with the spirit of adventure, open to the surprises that might unfurl in even the most familiar posture, the most ordinary breath. It reminded me to celebrate my body and my life with the unselfconscious exuberance of the women on the crowded Sitges beach, where virtually everyone—grandmother or teenager, slender or with billowing flesh—frolicked in the waves wearing the kind of tiny bikini that back in California you had to be a twenty-something supermodel to flaunt.

At the end of my month in Spain, I flew back home to my own collection of yoga mats and meditation cushions, and Shawn flew home to hers. Since then, when I practice on my deck overlooking Mount Tamalpais, I often think of my longtime yoga friend, practicing on her patio overlooking the Mediterranean Sea. As I practice, I feel connected to her, despite the miles and years between us.

And sometimes, in the space between one breath and the next, I remember the families dancing together in a plaza full of foam. I remember the guitar player at the Palau de la Música: the way he held his guitar like a lover in his arms. The way his fingers released a torrent of song as they traveled over the strings. ♦