



Hello, From Somewhere:

Stories of the Roads I Traveled

A Memoir

From Alaska to Zanzibar, and the Camino Santiago de Compostela, a woman triumphs over loss and aging and celebrates life.



Metty Pellicer



A debut memoir of author Metty Pellicer's mostly solo travels after her husband passed. She offers colorful and humorous stories of the travels that has taken her around the globe. Along the way, she encountered brothels in the ruins of Pompeii "with frescoes of all the ways you can copulate," the blue ice of Antarctica, a lion kill in Africa, and much more. She writes about her loss and aging, but mostly about the thrill and empowerment of travel.

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(A Memoir)

METTY PELLICER

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“There is fun to be done!” -Dr. Seuss

CHAPTER 1: A Party to Remember

To celebrate my retirement from thirty-six years of medical practice, I booked my friend Delia’s five-bedroom villa in Monte Pego, in Costa Blanca, on the Spanish Mediterranean Coast. Delia and I went back all the way from Baltimore, where I did my General Psychiatry Residency and Child Psychiatry Fellowship at Sheppard-Pratt Hospital in 1968-1972. After I moved to Atlanta in 1980, she had often invited me but our busy schedules never meshed. She and her villa immediately came to mind when I began to think about how to mark this chapter of my life.

I wanted a celebration to remember. I had a large private practice until managed care health insurance became the norm. It imposed mandates on my clinical practice which forced me to choose between services to patients and reimbursement. Jay-Jay and Doobie have graduated from college, and Johnny and I were empty nesters. I did not need a big practice and could downsize to a salaried hospital staff position until my full retirement age in ten years. I wouldn’t need to deal with insurance companies and reimbursements, and I could just concentrate on treating patients as I saw fit. An ideal position opened up at Georgia Regional Hospital as the Director of the new Child Psychiatry Inpatient Unit. This went well. I was happy in my position until the last two years. Because I protested loudly the staffing cut backs that impacted patient care adversely, I earned a place as thorn on the side of administration. Work politics became unbearable. I couldn’t give in to the reckless impulse to quit and throw away retirement benefits from the State which I would qualify to receive in twelve months. I felt trapped and suffocated, demeaned, and powerless. I had to harness support and strength from my friends

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and family. And so when my tenth employment anniversary arrived on August 31, 2008 I couldn't wait to check out. I discouraged any farewell party plans. I was not cut out to be politically correct. When my colleagues looked at me with pitying eyes and made remarks as if I was going to be lost in long days of emptiness and boredom, I sent them a cheery card bidding adieu to the tune of Evita's aria, "Don't cry for me GRH-Atlanta, the truth is I couldn't wait to leave you!"

After I signed off at Personnel, cleaned out my desk, and turned in my badge and keys, I rolled the top down of my Beetle convertible and drove off into the brilliant sun, my hair blowing in the wind, and my joy soaring with Beethoven's Violin Concerto in D major playing on NPR. Free at last!

I had a grand retirement party planned for months. I had this idea that I should be a nomad for a while, living for months at a time in a single country and really getting to know the place and the people and experiencing how they live. It turned out that a lot of people were already doing this as a lifestyle. I started corresponding by email with one of them, Rita Golden Gelman. I wanted to meet her while she was in Atlanta but our schedules didn't merge. I could be a dilettante nomad, that was it! So I planned right away to be abroad in September and October with the first month to be my grand retirement party in Costa Blanca. I rented Delia's five-bedroom villa and I invited all my friends to join me. Twenty-three signed up.

It turned out that Costa Blanca was populated mostly by English expatriates who had transformed the coast into a homogeneous strip of high rise condominiums. Their cookie cutter luxury villas each with backyard swimming pools covered the hills of Monte Pego. There was no opportunity to get acquainted with the local culture as the neighbors were English and friends streamed in throughout the four weeks. The indigenous population in the interior villages became the tourist

attraction together with the Roman and Moorish ruins dotting the coast. So OK, this was a party. My nomadic experiment would have to be launched yet.

I had all the arrivals on a calendar grid, and I had a map laid out on the dining table to mark the places we'd visit with colored pins. But Kathy and Susan arrived on the day before I thought they would. They didn't have the villa address and had no clue how to get there. They tried to call me, but got my voicemail. Meanwhile their phones were on low battery and so they decided to call Dick, Susan's husband who was in Atlanta, to get in touch with me. Dick had no idea how so he got a hold of Anicia, who was going to join our party in a few days, to follow-up. Meanwhile Susan and Kathy were trying to charge their phones and was looking for a charging station but they couldn't communicate in Spanish. Susan thought she could demonstrate by holding her left index finger and thumb in a circle and moving her right index finger in and out of the hole to suggest an electric socket. She got a smirk and a quizzical look. Between Dick and Anicia calling back and forth I finally got the message, and unable to reach Susan and Kathy by phone, I decided to drive to Valencia even if it was very late. It was close to midnight when I arrived and the airport was closed but I found a security guard who let me in to see if my people would be among the passengers sleeping inside. I examined every snoring body prostrate on benches and on the floor and not finding them I concluded that they were big girls and would know to book a nearby hotel for the night. The landlady, who Anicia finally contacted, came by early in the morning to deliver the message that Kathy and Susan were at Hotel Ibis. Later, this misadventure evolved into highly entertaining cocktail vignettes at dinner parties, told over and over again. We got full mileage out of the tale. To cap the day's excitement, Evelyn, famous for her photographic memory, recognized Susan instantly, a colleague from work twenty-five years ago, an old friend rediscovered. Small world indeed.

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The next day Anicia and Diane arrived, but not their luggage, and it wasn't delivered until two days later. We already scheduled a trip to the flea market in Benidorn so this would be a good place to pick up some necessary supplies. This is a big one and with lots of English antiques and stuff since the town is mostly populated by them. I got a sterling necklace of a flying unicorn and a 1920 brooch with mink and pearls, very chic. Anicia got a bathing suit, one size smaller for \$3. I suggested that she may need to lubricate it with baby powder, teasing that it was mine if it didn't fit her. She was determined and wiggled and held her breath to squeeze into it.

In the afternoon we went to the beach in Denia, the main town nearest Monte Pego, then picked fresh fish from the market to grill at Delia's villa and watch the sunset there. Delia got her two villas precisely for their orientation to the sun, rising in Villa Delchel, where we were staying and to the sunset in Bella Ocaso. The following day Delia took us to Guadalest, to visit the castle and to view the amazing valley and mountains and river encircling the fortress like a moat, its water the color of jade. We had lunch there, and celebrated Susan's birthday. She got an enormous red lollipop to lick for a year until her next birthday. Intoxicated by nature's beauty, we overindulged and so we were lucky to have Diane who is allergic to alcohol, our designated driver. Mary gave me a GPS, my retirement gift. We named her Petra and she took us around the scenic route going back to the villa. She was really getting to know us and finally became a reliable friend and guided us safely. When we first activated her for duty, on the twisting roads of Monte Pego at night, she directed us to plunge into the ravine. Driving from Seville to Alhambra in Granada, she steered us towards Madrid. We didn't know that there are many Alhambras in Spain. Realizing this after two hours, we corrected her, but then she had us drive up the narrow cobblestone alleys of Albayzin, the medieval village along the route to Alhambra, only to be met with frantic waving of the hands and wide-eyed warnings to stop and turn around by the

pedestrians. We learned that vehicles are strictly forbidden and the Alhambra had to be approached from the highway. After this yet another faux pas, we renamed her Bitch. However on this Guadalest trip, she took us seamlessly up and down two mountains to go home. Climbing to the peak, the nearly full silver moon emerged before us while the setting sun left muted reflections of purple and oranges and reds in the back drop, like a painted landscape. It was so dramatic it moved us to sing songs with moon themes. I started off with made up lyrics, only remembering the melody, but the gang quickly guessed and put words to Harbor Lights. We sang Moon River with complete lyrics, and followed with Fly Me To The Moon, Full Moon and Empty Arms, By the Light of the Silvery Moon, how about that!

Next came Pauline, my niece, with her five girlfriends. They were refused boarding in Barcelona without a printed ticket, the virtual ticket on their smart phone would not do, and the others had their tickets packed in their luggage. It took a while looking for a printer, they missed two trains, and therefore were late arriving in Valencia. By this time I had information on a nearby train station, Xeroxa to pick up arrivals, only thirty minutes away, compared to two hours if I pick up in Valencia. It required a transfer to a local train in Valencia. I sent a text message:

You're on the train already from Barcelona, you'd be in the station in Valencia Nord, transfer to the train to GANDIA and get off XEROCA, 45 MIN TRIP, THEN I CAN PICK YOU UP AT XEROCA, train leaves every 30 minutes.

They missed two departures, and arrived in the evening, but they were cool. No worries. The following day they slept in and hung out in the pool. They announced that they'd prepare dinner so we drove to Denia to market and to pick up some wine. The bodegas of Valencia, Alicante and Murcia, are producing wines that's starting to rival the great producing regions of La Rioja. Its tintos, tempranillos, grenaches and chardonnays were cheap and

plentiful, and as good as they come. We had a wonderful meal, they giggled and shrieked all night, and next day, the trash was full of empty wine bottles. Ahh, to be young. Then they were off on their own to overnight in Alicante and I was left alone for the first time since I arrived.

I decided to check out the fiesta in Vall DÉbo. Arriving at midday, there was nothing going on but a few people congregating at a bar-restaurant in the tiny main square. I thought maybe I had the wrong date or the fiesta was not starting until the evening. Teens were transporting chairs probably for the supposed free supper. Anyway it was a lovely little village, of seven hundred inhabitants according to the brochure, no Englishman there, and no one spoke English. I walked into the bar-restaurant and watched what people were eating, talked with the owner and a few patrons. They were very friendly but my poquito castilian espanol and their valencian dialect made conversation laborious. However the grilled lamb chops and the olleta alicantina, a vegetarian stew of chickpeas, lentils, chard, potato, beets, turnip, green beans, tomato, typical in the mountain areas, were pure gastronomic delight. I decided to drive to the next village to check out the stalactites and stalagmites of Cova del Rull. I explored the little mountain villages along the way. It was a Sunday, the village people were milling around the church square. It framed an idyllic scene with the rose-colored terra cotta cottages, on a backdrop of lush green pastures under a tranquil blue sky. The drive back was on knuckle-whitening serpentine roads, more steep and formidable than the return trip from Guadalest, with plunging ravines, literally breathtaking. Arriving in Monte Pego I decided to tour the other villas, weaved in and out of narrow side streets to check them out but turned into the wrong street to my villa. I chose to back up, instead of making a U-turn. I failed reverse driving maneuvers in my licensing test and I've gotten used to having rear view lookouts when everybody was around, so predictably, I hit the stone wall. My rental Renault Picasso's tail was badly disfigured and I scraped

the rear tire so deeply it tore. I could not drive on those mountains with the inflatable spare tire. The car was un-drivable and it took until four PM next day to get a replacement vehicle. I was marooned in the villa. I filed my nails, floated in the pool, read, and a mistake, watched CNN and got the bad news. The US was leading the world to a financial crisis with the mortgage debt debacle, the bail out of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, and the collapse of Lehman Brothers. Wall Street was seizing as the stock market plunged, and property values hit an all time low. I had just retired and had become dependent on my 401K. Aaarghh! I reminded myself, "I'm having a party, I'll think about it when the party's over." As Scarlett would say, "Tomorrow is another day." Thank goodness the girls had surplus wine and leftovers. I had a new silver Picasso delivered the next day.

Marites and company flew into Valencia, and decided they will rent their own car. In addition, the girls, who were visiting Valencia asked to ride back with them. I was on the golf course in Xavea, La Sella, designed by Jose Maria Olazabal, where I shot a 47 on the front and collapsed at the back. I texted directions:

*Driving from Valencia, in the direction of Alicante, you exit on #63 Oliva-Pego exit, then go through the town of Oliva, look for the small sign to Pego on right , then after you get out of the town, **look for the very, very small sign to Pego on your left.** Once you're on this road, follow it until Bella Vista, go up the mountain and on top turn left where there is a big sign board of the development, follow to the end of the road where the Bella Vista restaurant is, turn right there and follow the road as it curves right and just go straight until it ends to Villa Delchel. Text me of exact arrival.*

Myrna was driving and missed the very, very small sign to Pego just outside the town of Oliva. Before leaving Valencia she was already rattled by the round-about and kept on exiting the wrong road. This stretch of road was narrow and isolated, and

very dark at night, but as there were eight people in the car, they were nonplussed. Myrna couldn't make a U-turn on the narrow road so she decided to back up but found out she could not put the gears on reverse. Illuminated by the headlights, one of the girls read the Spanish manual while another translated, and Myrna tried to execute. Manolo in the meantime, sensing that his bladder was ready to burst, decided to relieve himself on the roadside just as one of the girls happened to turn her head and confronted the spectacle. Myrna could not find the reverse button as the manual described but by helplessly fumbling with the gears, she felt a small indentation on the knob and when she pushed her finger into it, the car automatically went on reverse!

Niti and Susan N. flew into Alicante, and they too rented a car. They had a GPS but it did not have the European application. To everyone's incredulity, they found their way to the villa, the old-fashioned way, with a map! Evelyn and Chai got lost in Alicante on their way to Madrid. They couldn't find the train station and were driving around in circles for an hour, asked several people but they kept on getting lost. Time was running out for boarding. Waiting at a red light, they asked a well-dressed Spaniard in a Mercedes convertible. Like a knight in shining armor, he came to their rescue. He guided them into the station with plenty of time left before departure. Meanwhile, in Madrid, Myrna got robbed of her wallet with thousands in cash, her credit cards and passport. In Barcelona, a nimble thief snatched the purse of one of the girls while strolling in the Barri Gotic, and swiftly disappeared into the crowd.



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