

What It Feels Like To: Run From The Bulls In Pamplona, Spain

by Patrick Kendrick

Esquire magazine does an annual issue called "What It Feels Like." The issue details what it feels like to live through various experiences, such as: getting shot, getting electrocuted, surviving a shark attack, etc. So, I thought I would share one of my experiences. Researching the life of Ernest Hemingway brought me to the annual running of the bulls in Pamplona, Spain. This is what it was like.

At 50 years old, you realize it's now or never. So, while swilling rum with your buds, you throw out a bunch of over-the-top, loony ideas; things you'd like to do but know you never will and try to get them to buy into them, too. White water rafting, a Baja dune-buggy race, or the insane but traditional run from the bulls that has become so much more popular since Billy Crystal immortalized it in the movie, *City Slickers*. (Sorry, Papa H, but the truth is while *The Sun Also Rises* introduced the event to the world, Crystal's film turned the run into an acceptable vacation idea for scores of Americans who believe that 50 is the new 30, whatever the hell that means). Your well-meaning, deluded, but loving wife listens to your inebriated ramblings and the next thing you know, you're in a very narrow street in Pamplona, Spain with a dead end stadium at one end and a herd of pissed-off bulls at the other end. You're packed in like canned Vienna sausages, among thousands of other Hemingway wannabes, most of whom are stinking drunk, literally. The scent of vomit, cheap sangria, and urine burns your nostrils. Slowly, you realize that the thing you thought would underscore the best of your life, that would represent that true adventure that every man has to have sometime in his 70-80 year (maybe) life span, has become a premonition: this is what it looks like in hell.

You can feel, even smell, the fear that the crowd emits like musk from a frightened animal. It's a scent you seem to detect in your stomach, rather than your nostrils; maybe that's

because it's coming from you. By 8:00 o'clock, the official starting time, the crowd has grown impossibly tight but quiet from the suspense. Your arms are mashed to your sides, so you are not in the best starting position for a run. A half-hour before it begins, no one is allowed in or out of the street. You're stuck and realize you should have peed before you got into the street. The Aussies try some feeble gallows jokes but no one is laughing those last few minutes, anymore than they would before a firing squad unleashes its payload.

Damned and foolhardy souls from all over the world (the Australians are the craziest and the drunkest) are braced to run through these wall and fence-lined streets when signaled to do so by two rockets whose purpose is to start the run by scaring the shit out of some already pretty confused bulls. Escape is not a contingency consideration, but survival is, and so, those clever little Spaniards who have been doing this crazy run for generations and whom do not share your drunkenness because they know the best way to do this thing is sober, the key to be agile, and have some buddies watching your back, have their route strategized and any big, dumb American who gets in their way will get knocked to the pavement and under the thundering hooves of a half-dozen bulls.

You have to be corralled into the street very early, no later than six o'clock, or you will not be given the opportunity to be disemboweled by the enraged longhorns. Most of the runners stay up all night and stumble into the street. Very few know you should have a plan and much like George W., believe if they simply "stay the course" they can win this war against not only the bulls but the thousands of runners who plan on going all the way. In fact, most of them, some estimates are nearly fifty percent, cowardly jump through the openings in the fences as soon as the last rocket signals the coming of the bulls. But, you, dressed in your all-white clothing and red bandana (please subscribe to this attire even if it makes you feel like Clay Aiken singing

Broadway tunes-the locals are becoming intolerant of increasing numbers of tourists who shun the tradition) will bravely go all the way, if you heed my words.

My buddy, Paul, and I came with a plan, and if this is something you really want to try one day, listen up, bub, or you might become a stain on a piss-soaked *calle* in a foreign country, hardly the brave and noble goal you have set for yourself. First, go to the web site sanfermin.com and look at the hundreds of pictures of all those silly *turistas* whom have gone under the hoof and horn and be warned: You have to take this thing seriously. Second, know your route. The most dangerous areas to be in when the bulls come charging is at the corners of Ayuntamiento and Santo Domingo Streets and the corners Estafeta and Mercaderes Street. In both of these areas, you have to go around a corner; bulls tend to pull to the outside when making turns so you go to the inside: left at the first corner and right at the second, respectively. Also, DO NOT get stuck in the *Callejon*, the narrow corral that leads into the entrance of the bull ring. This is where, historically, hundreds of runners have been trapped and many crushed to death.

After much anticipation, the rockets go off and the crowd surges. Try to have your feet solidly underneath you or you'll go under the crowd in a second. Stay in the middle of the road! This is contrary to what most people believe. They will tell you to try to make it to a wall where, preferably, you can jump up and catch the edge of a balcony and hoist yourself out of harm's way. Caution: I saw dozens of people stuck along the walls with no balconies available as the bulls did a strafing run along the wall with their horns picking off people (read: Americans) with no place to hide. The day I ran, a gringo from New York fell from one of those balconies and into the path of a bull which, sadly, put him in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. This is serious, fellas. If you stay in the middle, the crowd thins and you can actually run. Do so, as fast as you can and don't look back. The sight of people being thrown fifteen feet into the air and

landing on their necks, or taking a horn in the abdomen can be unnerving and throw your pace off. Keep in mind, these twelve-hundred pound bovines can run fast; they can close a hundred yards in 6 seconds *uphill*; you can not. You will hear the clack of the hooves beating the pavement behind you and it comes quick. If the bulls get close to you, do not tease them; they don't care for it anymore than Mike Tyson does. If you want to be near these animals, run all the way into the bull ring and stay near the side or behind one of the bull covers, though you may not find any room left. If you have to bail, you can jump over the wall into the stadium seating. Once in the ring, you have some space to run and it's at this point, if you care to dare, you might turn and catch a glimpse of the animal's bloodshot eyes, smell the history of this ancient ritual in its hide, hair and horns.

Finally, if you make it, these are the rewards: the roar of the crowd as you enter the arena goes right to your heart. You will never feel more like Russell Crowe dispatching a bad guy gladiator than you do at that moment. You will have beaten death, or at least a good maiming and, as you head for your well-deserved shot of tequila at 9:00am, you will never feel more like a man who has accomplished something that is, at a glance, so stupid but so rewarding to your machismo soul.

And, Spain is unforgettable. The food is incredible; *tapas* during the five-hour long happy hours are varied and delectable. You will never eat drummies with a beer again. The country is beautiful, with climate very similar to California, warm and sunny but cool at night, hence producing some of the best wines outside of Napa. And the señoritas are gorgeous. In fact, just before our run, one of these noble creatures came out onto a balcony overlooking the waiting runners. Her hair was the color of crow's feathers, her skin like café con leche. The crowd screamed for her to take her shirt off and as demurely as it can be done, she complied, blowing

kisses as she did so. I stared longingly at some of the best breasts ever produced by man or God, and these were definitely made by God and my pre-run fear dissipated with that acknowledgment. I can only say this, I'd risk being gored by a bull again to see those beautiful Spanish hills. And, my wife would understand.