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Nearly six thousand kilometres and some adventures later, we're back in Switzerland in the spring. The 6000 k's took us to the Rock of Gibraltar and back, and for a trip through space-time. True! You don't need a rocket-ship, just a car that starts out in very early Swiss spring, and over four days drives through all the stages of spring, ending up in early summer in Spain. Day 1 took us from pale primroses to fully mature golden dandelions. By day 2 the raps (canola to us) was flowering, the apricots and almonds had almost finished, and the fields of artichokes were flourishing. By day 3, the orange trees were in full bloom, and the wheat was a good foot high. By day 4, it was a bit like early summer in Wellington - fennel, gorse and broom flowering, yellow daisies like those on the Wellington headlands, and (unlike home) red poppies along the way.

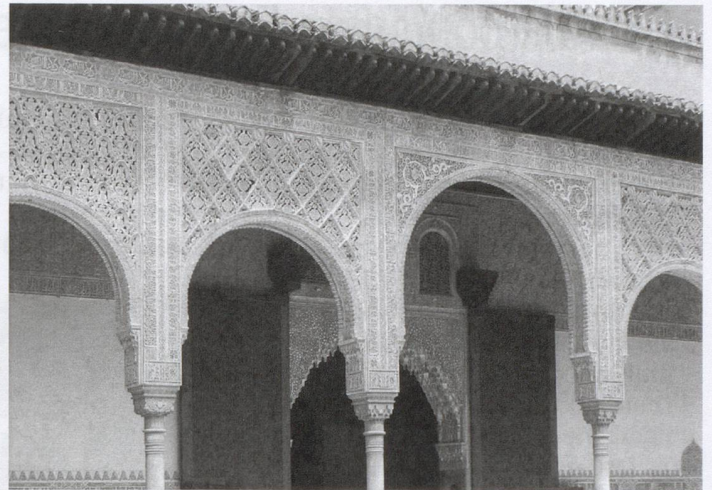
And just like in our imaginary rocket-ship, when we returned to planet Switzerland we found that nothing like that time had passed, and we were still in a full spring of blossom and field flowers.

Our purpose was not, of course, time travel. That was just a bonus on a trip to meet up with our Wellington friends (and my long-time business partner) Jane and Peter, in an apartment kindly lent to us in Marbella in the south of Spain, and then to bring them back with us to Switzerland.

Spain... well, the rain in Spain stayed mainly on the plain... and on the hills, and on us! Fortunately each time we went tourist-ing it cleared up to reward us. We went to Gibraltar on the "need to knock that off" principle - and yes we did collect a piece of rock. Earth-scientist Peter made sure it was really a piece of "the" Rock, not just a bit of random ballast or breakwater. That's now with the stone Mani collected from Nord-cap - so we have the farthest north-east point and the farthest south-west of Europe on the shelf.

We enjoyed parts of Marbella, like the old town, and a whole row of Dali bronzes running down to the sea. Malaga too - the cathedral is stunning, and the sun came out while we were sitting at a café waiting for the crowds at the Picasso Museum to ease - so we stayed out in the sun and supported the street musicians. Picasso was getting quite enough attention, we thought. The famous "white towns" were mainly mist-shrouded, but we did get to Mijas - which was quite charming.

The absolutely marvellous thing was the Alhambra in Granada. It truly is extraordinary art and architecture. How grateful we all should be that, at least early on, the conquering Catholic Monarchs (Isabelle and Ferdinand in 1492) respected the Arabs' art, architecture and culture, so such glorious buildings have survived. I'm playing a CD as I write this - it's a setting of the poems of Ibn Zamrak that were carved into the walls of the Alhambra in the 14th century. What fascinated me was how the Arabian script of the poems and purely decorative carving elements echoed each other.



The Alhambra

And that set me to thinking about the whole connection between expression and perception; between the way that we express our world in art and language, and how we think - how our brains actually perceive things. The whole tradition of art that cannot include human figures has produced something very different to European traditions. Does living among patterns instead of pictures of people make a difference to the way one sees the world? So much to wonder about!

Something else to appreciate - the kindness of strangers. I said there were adventures... well, one was when something smashed the back window of our car into a shower of glass while we were traveling at some 140 k's an hour on a four-lane motorway at the back of Barcelona. Mani kept his course and cool admirably. That was Saturday afternoon and a little research showed that there'd be no chance of getting it repaired until Monday at the earliest, so we drove on, and ended up at a town randomly chosen to stay the night. Finding a hotel was its own challenge, but eventually we ended up with one of those fabulous experiences of multilingual collaboration. The hotel housekeeper and her friends in the café over the road organised to get a chap who had a lock-up garage to come into town and move his car over so we could squeeze our wide open car into security for the night. All this in a wild combination of French, Spanish, English and sign-language lubricated by beers of gratitude. The next morning we set off again with the back window Glad-wrapped, a huge breakfast from the café under our belts, and our faith in human nature entirely repaired. The car window took longer to mend - but all was well.

And now back home... we've heard the first cuckoo. There was an immediate patting of pockets as everyone checked their pockets to make sure there was money there. That predicts a prosperous year. Given the fascinating fiscal, economic and political times as I write, it seems a useful omen!