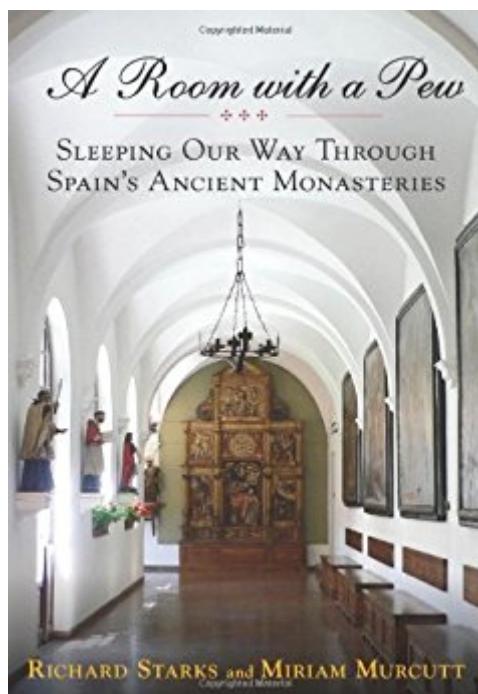


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A Room With A Pew: Sleeping Our Way Through Spain's Ancient Monasteries



Synopsis

An offbeat and entertaining account of a journey through Spain — staying only in ancient monasteries.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

A somewhat caustic view of the monasteries and people of Spain; yet still informative.

Nice, low key travel account of couple who used monasteries on one of their trips. Nothing too adventurous. Not sure what the intended direction of writing this account was headed.

This is a childishly offensive book. It is a mocking wise guy approach by the authors that exhibits no respect for the spirituality of centuries of devout people. An example of how the authors treat the subject of relics: "I've never seen a severed finger before. This one when I examined it closely, is unnaturally long, as if it possesses an extra knuckle. It's also brown what I would call "formaldehyde brown" the color laboratory specimens turn when they are past their sell-by date. It sticks up in what might be construed as a rude gesture set like a spent candle in an ornate filigree holder." The

authors, who were benefiting from the generosity of believers who were extending hospitality to them according to the dictates of their faith, write glibly: "And most nights I've slept in a room with a man nailed to a cross, blood coursing from an open wound in his sight, his crowned head lolling on one shoulder or thrown back as he gazes skyward in an anguished rebuke it's been a fun filled few weeks Christianity must surely be one of the world's most violent religions - especially when you see it up close from inside the Spanish monastery." It can also of course be an inspiration - and, if you approach it with a modicum of doubt, even an inadvertent source of amusement "The fingernail," I tell a man beside me, "it needs a trim". People who write from this viewpoint clearly have not a clue about Spain and her culture.

This is a great idea. Spain still has plenty of monasteries and convents around, and many of them offers rooms. These monasterios tend to be cheap, off the beaten path, incredibly historical, and full of interesting architecture, art, and treasures. You also get some insight into the cloistered life — and maybe a rich spiritual experience to boot. The authors do a good job of describing these places — how they operate, their architecture and art, the local town and landscape, etc. What is totally missing, though, is any insight into the monks and nuns who inhabit these places. No, it is not because all of them were cloistered. In fact, Starks and Murcutt arrange interviews pretty much everywhere they go. What is missing is any appreciation whatsoever on the part of the authors on anything remotely religious or spiritual. A number of other reviewers have shared some specific quotes, which are really good. Overall, the impression is of some high school kids making jokes, baiting believers, and generally making fun of everyone and everything involved. This makes such a colossal mismatch between topic and writer that I just have to wonder how the authors ever came up with the idea or how it ever got approved.

More a travelogue than a guidebook, *A Room with a Pew* chronicles the adventures of Richard Starks and Miriam Murcutt as they try out-of-the-ordinary accommodations while touring Spain. Instead of staying in hotels or resorts, they opt to stay in monasteries. These aren't monasteries that have been converted into hotels, either--they are monasteries that remain true to their calling of housing those involved in the work of God. The two authors weave their story into one first-person singular account, which did leave some room for questioning which of the two made some of the observations. However, it also lent an easy flow to the writing. These are obviously seasoned world travelers who were undaunted by the rough terrain they had to traverse in many cases in order to

reach their destination. They also didn't seem to be bothered in the least by the spare furnishings and meager meals they were afforded in most locations. But, then again, they insist they went into the journey without an agenda, so they are also evidently expert at keeping their expectations to a minimum. I know I would have a difficult time consenting to stay in a place that smelled dank and mildewed, or that was extremely cold, as were two of the buildings in which they roomed. They also make a point of trying to discover something about the routines of those who choose the monastic life. They've interviewed some of the monks and nuns and asked questions, the most important ones revolving around faith. The authors--or at least, one of the authors--struggle mightily with trying to get to the truth about faith. I kept hoping that their journey would be an even more fulfilling one, but it didn't seem that they got a bolt out of the blue by asking questions about the subject. Nevertheless, they did admit to learning a degree of respect for those who had committed to a life of prayer and (mostly) seclusion. I enjoyed the history that provided the backdrop for how the orders were formed, who built the monasteries, how they evolved throughout the ages, and so forth. I think it would have been beneficial if some of the historic points had been annotated, just as a point of reference and in order to delve more deeply into some of the history. The only criticism I have is the inclusion of some very stale jokes. It's not that they aren't funny--or at least, they were the first time I heard them--but that was many years ago. If you have any inclination to try an offbeat way of seeing Spain, this book would give you some options. The authors do a good job of giving step-by-step advice about how to approach such a trip, and, given their degree of travel experience, I would say it would be most helpful advice.

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