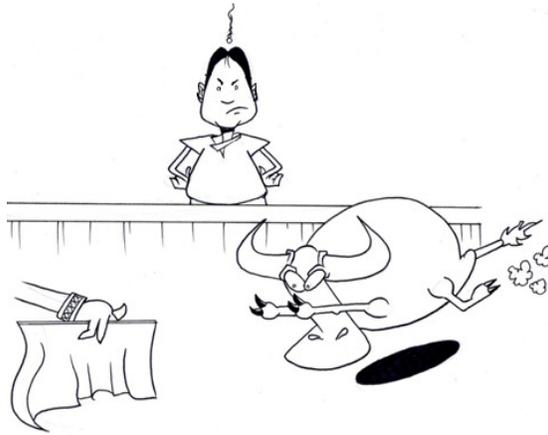


## Chapter Eight – Albufeira bullring – 41 years old



During my 2010 trip to Portugal I had the opportunity to take in a bull fighting show. This was not something on my list of things to experience and I was in two minds whether to go. I decided to go, keeping an open mind and casting a critical eye over proceedings. On the one hand it had the reputation of being cruel, but on the other it was a cultural experience. If it was too disturbing or not to my taste I could always leave. We vote with our feet every day and this showing should be no different.

I had always thought that bullfighting was part of the Spanish culture. I suppose they are neighbours and there is bound to be some crossovers. But did the Portuguese really have a different approach to the Spanish? Most signs stated the bull would not be killed. There was only one way to find out, I had to see for myself.

Incidentally, I had to look up the different participants' names. I originally thought they were just Toreadors and Matadors but those are the Spanish version of the names. The Portuguese have their own names and / or a slightly different custom.

- Cavaleiro – a horseman, dressed in traditional eighteenth century costume
- Forcados – these are a group of eight men who challenge the bull directly and are completely unarmed
- Matador – same as the Spanish matador, except they do not kill the bull afterwards.
- Bandarilheiros – these men are the helpers in the arena and carry gold and pink capes
- Lusitano horse – specially trained for the arena. They are also trained in dressage.

I learned that bullfighting is not customary throughout Portugal, it is only popular in the South. The bulls are not killed in the ring in front of the spectators but behind the scenes by a butcher. The meat is then eaten by the locals as a delicacy. Occasionally there are the lucky ones who after an exceptional performance are put out to pasture for breeding (the bulls not the locals).



Notice boards were posted all around town and in the hotels. Some of the other signs stated that the bull would not be killed and the skilful Cavaleiro would put on a fantastic show.



The bullring was conveniently located between my hotel and the strip and I passed it every day. So out of curiosity I took a walk to the arena on the Friday morning and had a look around the outside. From a distance the structure looks like a collection of houses and belies its real purpose.

I read all the information available and decided to purchase a ticket. I had a choice of where to sit, it was colour coded in bands around the arena. The most expensive tickets were near the front and cheapest were at the back. I bought a ticket for 40€ in the front row so I would have a good view and wouldn't have people standing up in front of me.

There was a bar next to the stadium and this seemed the place for the locals to meet and have dinner and drinks before going inside. When I returned I would carry out further research. I spent the early part of the afternoon having lunch in a restaurant on the strip.

When I did return to the bullring it was an hour before the doors opened and I headed for the bar. I sat down and watched the locals file in and sit in their regular places. When each person arrived they were greeted by their friends. One group had a big pot of stew in front of them, no doubt enjoying some local delicacy (bull meat?). The doors would be open soon so I drank up and waited by the entrance.

There were four sectors in all and there was a mad rush when the doors opened. Inside there were the usual food, drink and cheap merchandise outlets.



I had a quick look round, ignored the vendors and decided to check out the seating arrangements. When I entered the arena I quickly realised my mistake in paying for an expensive seat. People just sat where they liked and no one checked the tickets! There were also no seats to speak of, just concrete steps. More vendors circled the arena like vultures offering snacks and hire cushions.



The bullfight opened with a parade of all the participants. Horses were put through their paces, the riders leading them in a dressage procession. Once the parade was over the show began, the first bull entered and confronted the Cavaleiro and his horse. I noted the bull had its horns cut so they were blunt.



The horse was no doubt the most grateful for the mutilation. However it was obvious that the bull would never catch the horse anyway no matter how hard it tried. At best it might cause a minor scrape but as it tired this seemed less and less likely. The main objective was to stick a number of long ribboned darts (bandeirilhas) into the bull's back. A cheer went up every time a dart landed followed by a wave from the Cavaleiro. I was by this time struggling to see where the sport element came into play. The bull was starting to bleed as the darts landed. It was also growing visibly weaker and starting to pant. It now had to be teased to chase the horse, fortunately for the spectators its nature got the better of it.



There were three shows per night, each lasting half an hour but I left after ten minutes. I did not enjoy it, could see no point to it and it wasn't even that interesting.

In modern times it seems bull fighting is in decline and I think that can only be a good thing. This was definitely a one off and not an experience I will be repeating.

