

No Monday blues in Bilbao

There's too much to do even with the museums closed

FORMER MediaCorp Radio Gold 90FM DJ Steven Shalowitz is on a round-the-world journey after leaving Singapore. This week, the Chicago resident finds himself in Bilbao, Spain.

I BELIEVE I was the first to arrive at the ticket counter of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao this past Sunday.

I visited this northern Spanish city with the express purpose of seeing the structure, designed by architect Frank O Gehry, which in all of its fanciful titanium glory has served as a catalyst for the regeneration of this once sooty industrial town.

Since the building opened along the banks of the Bilbao River in 1997 – and joined other high-profile works from other leading architects such as Santiago Calatrava's Puente de las Universidades bridge and Norman Foster's metro system – Bilbao has scrubbed itself up to the point where it is proud to showcase its snazzy cityscape.

My three-day stay in Bilbao, however, ran over a Monday, when all the museums are closed.

Fortunately, this city had more than enough to keep an impatient traveller like me occupied.

A WORLD APART

Even the driving rain didn't stop me from visiting the charming neighbourhood of Portugalete, which is located beside the impressive "hanging" bridge El Puente Colgante – a feat of engineering inaugurated over 110 years ago and reminiscent of the Eiffel Tower.

Back downtown, I checked out the ultra-hip Miro Hotel. Its name is taken from Catalan fashion designer Antonio Miro, who applied his minimalist aesthetic to the only boutique hotel in the city.

Then there were visits to Zara and other renowned Spanish clothing outlets to enjoy some of the post-Christmas sales. And, with umbrella firmly in hand, I bar-hopped to sample tapas, or *pintxos* as they're known in Bilbao.

The city sits proudly in Spain's Basque province, a region with its own language and traditions.

Just how different is the Basque language from Spanish, which is universally spoken in Bilbao?

Consider one sign in the Guggenheim Museum stating that it is a requirement for children to be accompanied by adults. In Spanish, it reads: *Menores Acompañados*. And in Basque? *Adin Txikikoek Beti Helduekin!*

TIE ME UP! TIE ME DOWN!

By late afternoon, I was concerned that, unlike the puddles on the pavement, my possibilities would soon dry up.

I considered the idea of acting out my own twisted drama, as if in a film by Spanish director Pedro Almodovar.

I had it all worked out – while asking for directions, I would meet a beautician named Letizia who would sound like she suffered from emphysema (which, in tobacco-loving Spain, is quite plausible).

Over coffee in her apartment – enjoyed on a sofa whose pattern of fuchsia polka dots would match those of the walls and curtains – she would tell me about nursing her aunt back to health after the old woman broke her pelvis and lost her memory in a hit-and-run accident.

But rather than complicating my life even further, I decided on a less taxing option in light of the approaching dusk.

I returned to my *pensione* and questioned the woman behind the front desk, Igone Oribe, on what else I might experience in Bilbao.

When she found out

that I had once lived in China and spoke Mandarin, her brown eyes began to sparkle under her blue beret.

"My daughters were born in China," she said.

"Shuang in Sichuan six years ago and three-year-old Mei Jin in Jiangxi. In fact, they are going for Chinese lessons shortly – why don't you join us?"

CHINESE LESSONS IN BILBAO?

Classes were held in an old stone building that serves as the town hall of Bilbao's Casco Viejo quarter.

Parents keen to have their little ones learn the language of their birth country soon joined us.

The two female teachers – originally from Tianjin and Taipei – arrived a short time later.

Oribe told me the parents had organised the classes, which also included the siblings and friends of these youngsters.

"It's very important that they have a Basque identity and a Chinese identity too" she explained.

"But we're looking for Chinese speakers to live with us, to do some light housework and care for the children for several hours a day," she said. "Do you know any?"

Given the exciting re-birth of Bilbao, and the endless opportunities to enjoy the Guggenheim's changing exhibitions, I was tempted to take up the offer.

outofoffice
explore with attitude



HE WISHED HE WAS THERE: The ticket counter was as far as Steven Shalowitz got to Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum — all museums in this city are closed on Mondays.

AFF

At the Esplanade Theatre
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