**PAMPLONA’S PARTY  
OUT OF BOUNDS** words by Richard Bangs for Mountain Travel Sobek

**I**n 1926, Ernest Hemmingway published his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, which featured Pamplona’s San Fermin Festival and the Running with the Bulls. At the time, it was a small event wherein young men would run along six fighting bulls from the Santo Domingo stables, through the city’s narrow cobblestone streets and into the bullring. At least 500 years old, the festival had evolved into a manhood ritual so that in order to win a bride one had to survive a run with the bulls.   
 With the book’s acclaim, the festival began to draw an international audience- and more casualties. Fifteen lives have been lost to the bulls in the last 100 years [*possibly more since the printing of this article in July 2004*]. The latest, a 63-year-old hometown participant, had been running with the bulls since he was 14 years old. And with every casualty it seems more people show up to run. I am one of those people. The run takes place every morning throughout the 9-day festival (which is celebrated July 6- July 14 every year) and I arrive on Day Four to the news that four people have been gored, and several others either trampled or injured. I team up with a 23-year-old *Divino*, or Divine One, a local who has mastered the art of BR (bull-running) survival. His family has run for four generations, and he has been running since he was 15. He tells me he stills gets scared, and that his strategy is to run down the middle of the road as there are fewer people to trip over. He is disappointed there are so many foreigners—he guesses 2000-- and blames them for most of the injuries. “Don’t touch the bulls”, he advises, as though that might be high on my list.   
 As we near the starting point, we pass a Red Cross station; some 200 volunteers are set up along the route to assist the fallen. Through a blizzard of bodies, I make it to the end of the run—into the bullring—white pants and shirt stained with sweat and dirt, but no blood. About 10 percent of the runners actually get there before the gates are shut behind the last bull. I feel pretty *machismo* until I see two teenage girls in hiking boots who have beaten me in. Still, I am lucky. Thirty-seven others are injured during my run, bringing the week’s total to 127. It’s a bit like Spanish roulette, only the odds go up each passing year, with more and more people pressed into narrow streets as the bulls run.   
 In *The Sun Also Rises* Hemmingway depicts a generation lost as it wanders through the fiesta of Pamplona looking for some sort of center or heart. Only one person in the novel knows the way unwaveringly: Romero, a Spaniard who faces the bulls without fear. I can’t help but wonder but wonder if Romero could exist today. But with more tourists in Pamplona spinning down streets; with animal rights groups picketing the bullfights; with matadors booed as politically incorrect; and teenage girls proving as macho, or *macha*, as the rest, it seems doubtful. It seems, in the end, the sun also sets.

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**Running of the Bulls FAQ**

**Why is there a bull run?**

The tradition dates back to medieval times when bulls were herded through Pamplona’s streets to the local bullring. Locals helped drive the bulls. Running behind the bulls became running in front of the bulls.

**Who can run with the bulls?**

Anyone over the age of 18 can run with the bulls. It is free to run, but very dangerous.

**Is the bull run dangerous?**

Yes. Not only will you be running with 12-15 bulls each weighing approximately 1.5 tons, there is also the danger or tripping and falling over fellow runners. Depending on your source of information, since 1924 there have been 14 recorded deaths. The last American killed during a bull run was 22-year old Matthew Tassio in July 1995. More recently, Daniel Jimeno Romero died in Pamplona on July 10, 2009. This 27 year old from Madrid was vacationing in Pamplona with his family. He was gored in the neck and died in the hospital shortly thereafter.

**I want to stay in the center of Pamplona, is this a good idea?**

Not if you want a good night’s sleep. Unless you plan to fiesta all day and night, stay within walking distance of the old town. From July 6-14, Pamplona’s old city is transformed into a 24 hour fiesta. Every street is packed with revellers, music booms from nightclubs 24 hours a day, brass bands play in the streets at all hours, and there are fireworks every night. We recommend staying where you can get away from the festival so within a 10-15 walk of the city center.

**How do you dress for the festival?**

Head to toe in white with a red scarf and red sash. The scarf should only be worn after the festival’s opening ceremony, held every year at 12 p.m. July 6, 2008.

**Why does everyone wear scarves and sashes?**

Like many things about the festival, there are different answers: some say it is to mask the blood from gorings. Another version is that the sash (worn around the waist) distracts the charging bulls from the runner. The scarf and sash became a festival tradition in the 1960s.

**Who or what is San Fermin / Sanfermines?**

San Fermin (or Saint Fermin in English) is Pamplona’s patron saint. The festival is held in his honor and legend has it that he was killed when tied to wild bulls by the Romans and dragged to his death. Sanfermines is the Spanish word for the festival and runners still pay homage to Saint Fermin’s statue before the morning bull runs. After a successful run, locals often say they had Saint Fermin’s cape for protection.

**How many people go to the running of the bulls?**

On any given day, between 1500 to 3500 people run with the bulls. Over 1 million people attend the festival each year.

**What is there to do at the festival other than run with the bulls?**

There are endless possibilities: a midway; rock concerts; traditional basque dancing; processions; religious ceremonies; fireworks; outdoor cafes; and bullfights to name a few.

**Why do I need a private balcony to see the bull run?**

The bull run is a 0.5 mile (800 metre) course through the small cobblestone streets of Pamplona. The run is no wider than an alleyway (20-25 feet wide) and there are either apartment buildings or 8-foot high double security gates along the entire course. Unless you are running, it is impossible to watch it from street level. The best vantage point is a second floor balcony. Demand for balconies is such that many reservations must be booked 6-12 months in advance.

**What is the bull run?**

The bull run or encierro is the most famous tradition of Pamplona’s San Fermin festival. Twelve bulls (6 tame steer and 6 wild black bulls) are released from holding pens and charge through the old city’s streets. This first group is followed by another 3 steer that serve as a kind of clean up crew should any of the wild bulls turn back. They run along a 0.51 mile (825 metre) course arriving at the municipal bullring. The runs are held every morning at 8 am from July 7-14.

**Where do the bulls come from?**

The wild black bulls are Miuras, the most famous breed of fighting bulls in Spain. Ranches all over Spain breed Miuras specifically for bullfighting and are representatives of Pamplona’s Plaza de Toros or bullring carefully select about 48 full-grown bulls six months before the festival. The bulls live in open pastures for four years before being transported to Pamplona.