



DAYZREN/YAY MICRO/DINDODIA

Olé!

Watching a bullfight in Madrid stirs up a rollercoaster of emotions, from wonderment at the spectacle to immense sadness for *el toro*. Text and photographs by GUSTASP & JEROO IRANI

The orchestra struck a rallying tune as matadors in colourful and glittering, body-hugging costumes strutted out and across the golden sands of the Plaza de Toros bullring in Madrid. A parade of lancers on armoured horses and the supporting cast of the day's event followed in their wake. It was a goose-bump moment, pregnant with uncertain possibilities.

Once the opening ceremony was over, the matadors (*toreros*), waving their red and gold capes at imaginary foes, took their positions in front of a few protective barriers located around the ring. The ringmaster, clad in a sparkling purple costume, stepped briefly into the ring and signalled the gate from which the bull would emerge was about to be opened.

Moments later, *el toro*, a handsome specimen of a bull with rippling muscles, cantered into the arena. We could not help but admire and sympathise with the reluctant gladiator who had no idea of the tragic role he was destined to play in a fight to the death.

The crowd that filled the stands encircling the three-tiered ring cheered as he pawed the dirt and charged, head down, at a red and gold cape being waved at him. The waltz with the bull that followed was poetry in motion: graceful,

violent and quite tragic. The matador would often disengage from the contest, to acknowledge the enthusiastic roars from the stands by doffing his bejewelled cap.

And then a lancer, mounted on a horse sheathed in protective armour, entered the arena. An enraged *el toro* charged at the intruder. It was a fatal mistake. The rider jabbed at the gallant beast with a mean-looking lance. Rivers of blood stained its beautiful velvet coat. The matador engaged *el toro* in a dance of death once more. With the grace of a ballerina he would sidestep half a ton of charging rage at the last minute; its rapier-like horns whizzing past him by a few inches. The fluttering red and gold cape added brilliant colour to the spectacle.

Up in the stands we were engaged in a crazy dance of our own—wrestling with the surge of conflicting emotions that the brutal battle unfolding in the ring below us stirred up. It was an uneven battle loaded heavily against *el toro*, but it was stunning nevertheless. We felt for the bull who at times looked confused; the beast might have been wondering why he was being picked on and assaulted. We may deny it later, but we had to admit that at that point in time we were rivetted by the violent, yet grand and beautiful carnival of gore unravelling in front of our eyes.

ling in front of our eyes.

Then three *banderilleros* (matadors without capes) stepped up and stuck barbed colourful flags in *el toro's* back. The magnificent beast was losing blood, but although its body may have been weakened, its spirit was still unbowed. It pawed the dirt and charged each time the colourful cape was waved at it. Finally the matador unsheathed the sword hidden under his cape and thrust. *El toro* staggered. The matador preened in front of his stricken foe. *El toro* groaned and toppled over.

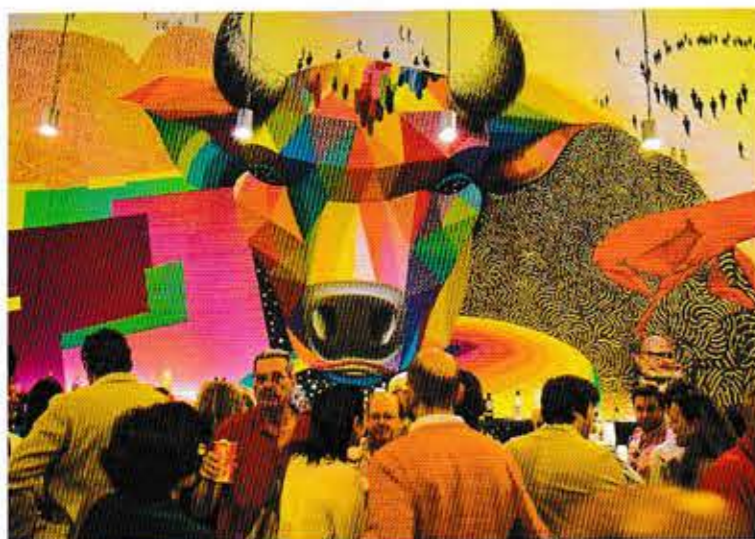
A lady next to us stifled a sob. The man in front of us clapped and cried "Olé!" Four horses dragged the carcass of the fallen gladiator out of the ring. We found ourselves struggling to stay afloat in a sea of emotions.

No, we did not leave. Instead, we sat through three more encounters between the *toreros* and *el toro*. We cheered lustily when *el toro* thundered after a matador who scampered to safety by vaulting over the barriers around the ring and into the crowd. We gasped when *el toro* upended an armoured horse and smiled when a group of matadors grabbed its tail in an attempt to stop it from venting its fury on the fallen animal whose legs thrashed helplessly in the air. When the bull was finally pried away, the horse

We had to admit that we were rivetted by the violent, yet grand and beautiful carnival of gore unravelling in front of our eyes

OUTLOOK TRAVELLER • MAY 2015 97

SPAIN



A lady next to us stifled a sob. The man in front of us clapped and cried "Olé!" Four horses dragged the carcass of *el toro* out of the ring

rose to its feet, miraculously it seemed, as we were quite certain that it had been badly gored.

The incident reminded us of our stroll through the bullfighting museum at Seville in the south of Spain. Our guide had stopped us in front of a painting of a bullfight in the early days. In one corner of the canvas a horse lay in a pool of blood. In those days, horses did not have

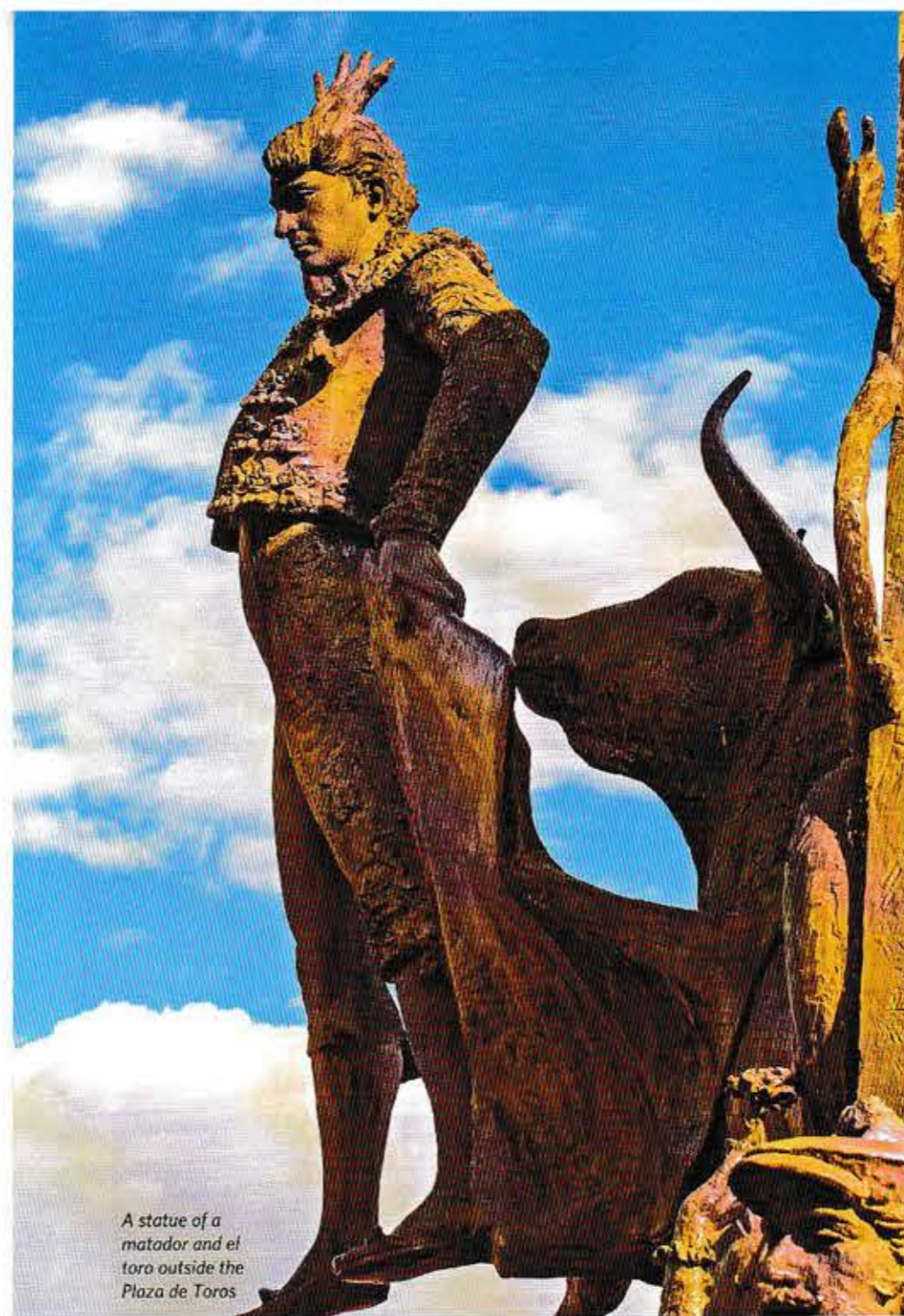
Clockwise from above: lancers on armoured horses; the restaurant at the Plaza de Toros; the facade of the arena; and the band at the arena

protective armour and were often gored to death by the testosterone-charged *el toro*. "It was cruel but the crowds loved it. Nowadays, of course, it's a no no and the horse must be protected with an armoured cape." We were thus spared a ghastly scene.

As a bull entered the ring for the fifth time, we decided to call it a day, and started to move down the amphitheatre-like arena towards the exit. Members of the audience got agitated and indicated that we stop and sit down. One Spanish lady explained in faltering English, "Please

respect *el toro*. Don't leave when he is in the ring." So we stayed put, in deference to *el toro*.

Judging from the wild cheers and applause that reverberated around the stands, this was the most dramatic matador-bull encounter of the evening. Spurred on by the crowd, the slim matador preened and contorted his body like a flamenco dancer and started to take daring risks. Repeatedly, he stood directly behind his cape and in line of the charging bull only to step aside at the very last minute. The crowd loved his



A statue of a matador and *el toro* outside the Plaza de Toros

flamboyance and bravado and cheered even louder.

For the final act, the matador stood face to face with *el toro* with his sword poised. A sudden thrust. Steel disappeared into the body of the animal, all the way to the hilt. The matador fell on one knee as though he was acknowledging the valour of his opponent. On cue, the front legs of the bull gave way and it collapsed on its fore limbs. We wondered what thoughts might have filled the void separating the two kneeling contestants,

facing each other.

The matador: "You were a worthy opponent!"

El toro: "Why? Why does it have to end this way?"

El toro collapsed. The matador rose and waved to the packed stands with a flourish. The audience was on its feet, expressing their ecstatic appreciation by waving white handkerchiefs and lustily shouting "Olé". We wept silently for *el toro* as his lifeless body was dragged out of the ring.

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF EL TORO

The Spanish feel strongly about bullfighting—they either love or hate their national sport, which is commonly viewed as a living tradition. And then there are some who are entirely indifferent. The naysayers say it's a cruel sport. Those who favour it argue that a bull reared for fighting in the arena lives a good long life. On the other hand, cattle bred for the table end up in the slaughter house once they are a year old. *El toro* is allowed to live wild and free, with little or no human contact, for five long years before they are let loose in the ring. The proponents of bullfighting concede that the last 15 minutes of *el toro's* life may be traumatic, but they point out that it is a small price to pay for four bonus years! So, while bullfighting remains a huge draw in Spain, the argument rages on.

THE INFORMATION

A bullfight (*corrida* in Spanish) generally features three matadors; each one fighting two bulls. Each contest typically lasts around 15 minutes. The matador has six assistants: two picadors or mounted horsemen who lance the bull; three *banderilleros* who plant spiked flags on the back of the bull and a sword bearer. In addition, a team of assistant matadors support the main star by often distracting the bull or providing him relief when needed. Many websites like [Ticketstoros \(ticketstoros.com/ingles/teyci.html\)](http://Ticketstoros.com/ingles/teyci.html) list the schedule of bullfights in cities around Spain and also sells tickets online. For more information, you can get in touch with [Spain Tourism \(spain.info\)](http://Spain Tourism (spain.info)).

■ GUSTASP & JEROO IRANI