

RUNNING OF THE BULLS SURVIVAL GUIDE

The Most Important Things You Need to Know
Before Buying That Ticket to Spain

No Seriously, You Really Want to Run with the Bulls?

“SUELTO!”

This is one word you absolutely *do not* want to hear charging up the Estafeta with all the other mozos on your way to the Callejón. With us so far?

It's okay, you're not alone. Fortunately, unlike many others also risking death and/or dismemberment, you're doing your due diligence beforehand. Kudos. If you're even remotely thinking about tapping your inner Hemingway by going to Pamplona for the fabled running of the bulls, it pays to be smart about it.

Okay, as smart as somebody can be who's about to do what you're about to do.

Eyes forward. We hereby present to you the key nuggets you'd better keep in mind before setting foot on Calle Santo Domingo.



What happens when you convince yourself you have nothing better to do that day.



Foothills of the Basque Pyrenees. Possibly the last scenic vista you'll ever see.

Part 1: The Lingo

While a grasp of the language may not directly influence your life expectancy, it's still a good idea. Fluency isn't required, but don't be disrespectful by, say, claiming ignorance en Inglés as you pull out a greenback to pay for your scarf and sash. If you do, don't be surprised when the annoyed shop owner tells you, en Español, what you can do with that bill.

Believe it or not, it does happen. How would you feel if the gentleman in front of you at 7-Eleven whipped out a handful of Euros for his Mentos? *Exactly.*



While Spain's larger cities like Barcelona and Madrid pose no threat to the non-native speaker, Pamplona is a bit more secluded in the country's Basque region near the Pyrenees mountains. You'll be fine for the most part, but on occasion you'll run into a merchant, concierge, or cabbie who doesn't know a lick of Yank.

The wise among us would therefore tell you to make at least some effort to learn a few basic terms. For example, *¿Dónde está el baño?* ("Where's the bathroom?") will be quite handy. At the very least, try to incorporate some of the following event terminology into your short-term memory so you don't sound like a complete imbecil.



Pro Tip!

It's rural Spain. Know some Spanish.

Vocabulario Importante!

Encierro

It may come as a surprise to learn that "The Running of the Bulls" is not the formal name for the running of the bulls. Locals have called it the "encierro" throughout its long history. So, act like one when you ask the group of young Spaniards you've spent all afternoon imbibing Kalimotxos with by the bucket-full how you can score tickets to the bull fight later. May just improve your chances.

Kalimotxo

Speaking of, this is a traditional Basque beverage and the official swig of San Fermín, which is the week-long festival you'll be attending as part of this little excursion, by the way. Pronounced "KAL-ee-MOCH-o," the drink sounds like the concoction of poor college students at the end of the semester in both name and ingredients: red wine + Coke. A Big Gulp's worth rings up to a about €6, so bring plenty of cash and even more toothpaste.

Toro

Bull. "Bull" is pretty much universal, though, so this won't really be an issue. The issue is the next one.

Suelto

Raging bull, and not the Robert De Niro kind. A suelto is a rogue that's been separated from the pack. Packs are predictable, sueltos aren't. They can panic as loners and have been known to charge crowds of runners, turn around to run in the opposite direction, or even plow through a fence and down some store-lined street. It's all fun and games until a bull actually *is* in your China shop.

Mozo

Bull runner. Similar to toro, this term probably won't come up too often. But, considering you yourself will *be* one, remembering it is just good form.

Serveza

If you don't know this, you must have missed the 75 different Corona ads aired at any given time throughout the year. It's okay if beer isn't your thing, but you should know you'll be wearing it, slipping on it, and otherwise immersed in it from dawn to dusk.



Try to incorporate some of the following event terminology into your short-term memory so you don't sound like a complete imbecil.



Part 2: The Layout

It's only a half-mile stretch from beginning to end with no turn-offs, but even the strongest track-and-fielders among us shouldn't get cocky. That is, unless you want to end up as a horn ornament.

Step back and think about this rationally (and no, the irony of that statement isn't lost on us). If this is your first time, wouldn't you want to get a lay of the land before deliberately placing yourself in the path of several angry, unrestrained bulls traveling in the same direction?

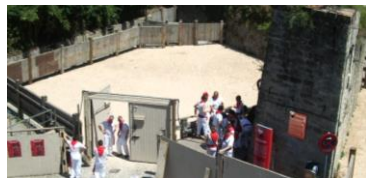
Don't be a hero, the answer should be a hard *yes*. Where should I position myself before the start? Where can I bail out if I sense pointy things rapidly approaching from behind? How much wiggle space will I have down the stretch (spoiler: not so much)? If you're asking these types of questions, a little reconnaissance wouldn't hurt.

We suggest walking the path the day before. That way, if you wimp out the following morning, you can still claim you made it from the pen to the ring in one piece. Kind of.

Though it won't feel like it in the middle of a stampede, it's a relatively short route with only a handful of sections. Let's explore them together.



Things you won't be paying attention to while fleeing in terror, so scout them out beforehand.



1. Bull Pens

The stars of the show start from a single pen. Pretty straightforward. Not that you're allowed to, but trust us when we say that you do not want to be nearby when those gates open. Moving on.



2. Calle Santo Domingo

This is the first stretch of road, which gradually slopes upwards from the pens alongside the city's ancient fortress. It's positively frightening how quickly cattle can sprint this before reaching the first batch of future ER patients.



3. Plaza Consistorial

At the top of the hill sits Town Hall. It's a pretty nice backdrop and serves as the starting line for the runners. Almost makes you forget that you'll literally be caged in with thousands of other adrenaline-charged, mostly-sober Knievels with nowhere to go but straight ahead to the ring. What could possibly go wrong.



6. Estafeta

This is the longest stretch, bordered by six- to seven-story brick buildings on both sides no more than 30 feet apart the whole way. Most of the runners position themselves along this street, with every window and balcony overhead crammed full of humanity watching the spectacle unfold below.



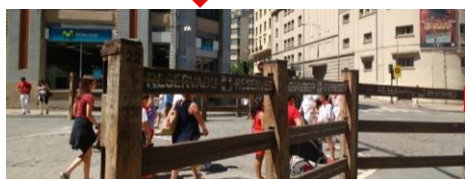
5. La Curva

If you don't get collared by the policía, you run smack dab into "The Curve," which goes by the ominous nickname "Dead Man's Corner." The 90-degree hard right is arguably the most famous part of the course and unquestionably the hairiest. Essentially, the herd surges into the turn only to crash into the barriers, fall, and then get up and horn their way through. Wildly entertaining for the spectators, not so much for the spectated.



4. Calle Mercaderes

Plaza Consistorial provides the first crossroads. Just follow the "Encierro →" signs posted on the buildings, and you'll head down Calle Mercaderes. This will be the location for the notorious police line. They'll be looking for cameras, purses, knuckleheads, and anything else that really doesn't need to add to the inherent danger. They WILL throw you out, forcefully if necessary, so don't get cute.



7. Telefónica

Almost there, folks. The claustrophobic Estafeta opens up into an area known as Telefónica, where temporary wooden fences replace the buildings that had lined either side of the street. On the surface, you'd think a little more space would be a welcome change. Not so fast. This is actually fertile ground for the dreaded sueltos. You're not out of the woods yet.



8. Callejón

Those barricades that had once bowed out to provide so much extra room after Estafeta eventually close in again. This happens directly in front of the ring to form a bottlenecked kill box known as Callejón. American journalist and veteran mozo Bill Hillmann described it best in *Outside* magazine: "The herd arrives at full speed. They buck, gore, and stomp their way through the pile-up. The injured fill the local hospital beds to capacity." Most encierro brochures have opted not to include this, but it's nevertheless something to keep in mind.



9. Plaza de Toros

Think you're done once you get to the ring? Think again. The fun's only just begun.



Pro Tip!

Do yourself a favor and take a warm-up lap.



Part 3: The Run

Still with us? Still counting yourself among the Bold and the Brazen? Okay, superstar, then keep reading.

Now that you know the major points of interest, it's time for some field-tested techniques to help you make it to the ring with all limbs intact. That last part, and not simply finishing, is the goal.

The day begins early. Encierro action starts shortly before 8 a.m., so try to get to Town Hall no later than 7 before the crowd swells to epic proportions. If you're like most tourists, you've got either a lengthy walk or bus ride into town. Either option would be a good opportunity to sober up . . . again, if you're like most tourists. Just don't overdo it on the fluid intake. If ever there were a time to make sure you go before you leave, this is it.

Head toward the freshly-erected barricades separating runner from onlooker at Plaza Consistorial. You'll enter through a single open gate on the west side of the plaza to join a growing mass of brave souls. No tickets, no waivers, no charges. Strict security measures don't appear to be a high priority for event organizers.

Which is interesting, if not wildly alarming in most public safety circles. We're talking about thousands of jittery people standing shoulder to shoulder in an enclosed alley awaiting their chance to become target practice for very large and very loose livestock. "Encierro" even comes from the Spanish verb "encerrar," meaning "to fence in or to pen." The full weight of that statement really sets in shortly after 7:30. This is when the gate closes with a sharp *clang*, followed by a violent lurch forward as hordes of latecomers dash in at the last minute only to squeeze the pack like sardines. Congratulations, you've passed the point of no return.



You are here. "Safety in numbers," though optimistic, can be misleading.



Pro Tip!

If you have any reservations about this whatsoever, act on them *before* entering Plaza Consistorial.



The police line at Calle Mercaderes as seen from La Curva. They're now the only thing standing between you and glory. We mean glory.

At exactly 7:50, authorities open the barrier holding everyone in, allowing the runners to move ahead and take their places along the course. That is, if they make it through the policía. Just before The Curve, a row of eight to ten officers stretches from wall to wall looking for cameras, other distracting accessories, and rowdy contestants to toss out swiftly and mercilessly.

Make it through the police line and you have a few minutes to choose your spot between Town Hall and the bull ring at Plaza de Toros. Unless you're a pro with a death wish, your spot will be somewhere *after* The Curve along the Estafeta. Shoot to be near the midway point of the street, making your sprint to the finish roughly a quarter mile. The more serious runners often choose to do light calisthenics to limber up while they wait. Others spend the time laughing and teasing one another as they work off their hangovers. You do what you think is best.

All too quickly, 8 a.m. rolls around and the first of four rockets goes off. This is the signal that the bull pen has been opened. All joviality ceases, and the only sounds that can be heard are a quivering "Aye dios mio" here and a nervous "Oh [choose a four-letter word]" there.

Moments later, the second rocket echoes through the backstreets indicating the bulls have all left the corral and are speeding their way to, well, *you*. After a predictable uproar from onlookers and runners alike, the noise falls to a low din. To understand the feeling at that moment, visualize standing on a beach staring offshore unable to see a tsunami you know is coming. You accept that you have no choice but to try to catch it and ride safely inland once it finally does reach you, or get pulverized in the process.

With this comforting metaphor in mind, you wait. And you wait. And you wait some more. Time seems to slow down as you ponder whether this was really such a good idea.



Out of the pens, up Santo Domingo.



Charging through Plaza Consistorial.



Dead Man's Corner. Sure you want to do this?

Then things get tense. You'll first see heading your way two waves of fleeing mozos, neither of which you should follow. As one Irish encierro veteran puts it, "When ye see ell the marines and rugby players ruunnin' by ye screamin' ligh lil gehrls, doon't ruun yet."

Counterintuitive though it may be, the key is to not look down the street for the oncoming bull rush, which you wouldn't be able to see until it's right on top of you, anyway (hopefully not literally). Rather, peer up at the people on the balconies. Their cameras will follow the herd, not the spooked "lil gehrls" missing the entire point of running *with* the bulls.

Now, it does take quite a bit of nerve to stand your ground amid the swirling chaos. But, if you want to experience the genuine article, then keep your Pumas planted. Point your eyes skyward to the cameras and smartphones as they gradually pan in your direction. When you catch the first glint of sun reflecting off the lenses, that's the sign.

RUN.

You have one objective at this point: stay upright. People of all shapes and sizes will begin falling and getting trampled before the bulls even get there. Concentration should be squarely on maintaining balance, with your eyes dancing between the backs in front of you, the ground below you, and eventually the six powerfully-built bovines that will pass within an arm's length of you. Just remember, you *chose* to do this.

When ye see ell the marines and rugby players ruunnin' by ye screamin' ligh lil gehrls, doon't ruun yet.

If by chance you do fall, do not get back up. That's important enough to repeat, in italics. *Do not get back up.* Put your hands over your head, prepare to be kicked and tripped over, and wait for someone to come by with an all-clear. "That doesn't sound very safe, why should I do that?" Because getting up was what caused the last fatality in 2009 when an angry bull named Capuchino saw an easy target and gored the poor guy not once but twice. Speaking of, it may be a shrewd move to double-check your insurance's impalement coverage ahead of time.

Even with the pushing and shoving, the crowd will slowly begin to move in sync towards Telefónica and the final stretch. Keep your wits about you and your head on a swivel to lithely maneuver through the Callejón bottleneck and into the bull ring, your final destination.

The whole terrifying ordeal takes around two and a half minutes. What most people don't realize, though, is that this is the prelude to the *real* deal. Surprise, there are plenty of fun ways left to catch a ride home by ambulance.

Part 4: The Ring

How much more insight could you possibly need before your trip to San Fermín at this point? Turns out quite a bit, actually.

At the very least, you ought to know what you're getting into if you make it all the way to the ring. See, in "The Running of the Bulls," the eponymous *running* segment makes up less than five minutes of the one-hour drama.



Pro Tip!

Don't worry about it, you probably won't even make it this far.

Allow us to set the scene.



You've just passed through the Callejón to join hundreds of other mozos who have also completed the gauntlet unscathed . . . for now. Before long, the third of four rockets explodes overhead. This signals that all the bulls have made it to the ring and the entrance is closed, once again locking you inside. The final rocket sounds soon after, letting all of Pamplona know the bulls have been penned and officially ending the run portion of that morning's little show.

As you catch your breath and high-five complete strangers out of joyful relief, you notice that you and your fellow runners aren't the only occupants of Pamplona's Plaza de Toros. As with the bullfight the night before, the house is packed. Except this time, all 20,000 people aren't there to watch professional matadors challenge aggressive cattle in combat. They're there to watch YOU do that.

That's right. You've just volunteered, wittingly or not, to do battle in Spain's most infamous coliseum. Your foe: young vaquillas emboladas, or wild Spanish fighting cows. These are released into the ring, one by one, for the sole purpose of running you down.

Tale of the Tape		
Contestant	Bull	You
Average Age	3	28
Average Reach	N/A	69 in.
Reach with Horn	48 in.	N/A
Average Weight	1,200 lbs	140 lbs
Top Speed	35 mph	?
Demeanor	Angry	Alarmed
Advantage	Not you	



Looks fun, doesn't it? Sure it does. Just avoid the back row in case one of them comes up short.



Everyone has their own approach in the ring. Success rates vary.



Pro Tip!

It is not a good idea—in fact, it's a *bad idea*—to attempt what Guy #1 above is doing or whatever it was that Guy #2 was trying to do.

Now, the cows aren't quite as large as the toros you were racing earlier. But don't for one second think that they aren't nearly as intimidating as their bulkier cousins. They are *large*, and you gain a whole new appreciation for just how large when there's nothing separating you from them in Pamplona's modern-day gladiator pit.

If this is your first encierro, keep your distance early on and watch what unfolds. The first thing you'll observe is what can only be described as a pseudo rugby scrum forming immediately in front of the bull chute. At the word of several large sentries manning the stall doors, 20 to 30 nearby mozos will drop to their knees, lock arms, and bend forward. The doormen then bellow one final command ordering everyone to keep their heads down. This is a good call, otherwise they're likely to be taken off by the cow cannonballing out of the chute a second later. Another prudent move is to not kneel down in the back row. Cows can leap surprisingly far, but alas they cannot fly, and you don't want to be the unfortunate soul sitting in the drop zone of a 16,000 oz sirloin.

What comes next is the most twisted game of tag in the free world. Feeling threatened by the legion of white-shirted atagonizers surrounding it, our friend the cow snorts menacingly, paws the ground, and takes aim at the nearest group of bystanders. The runners, for their part, have a similar goal in mind: touch the beast before it touches them.

The resulting tussle is fairly predictable. Some of the quicker and slyer daredevils are able to sneak up, touch its back with their hands or a traditional rolled-up newspaper, and then jump back to safety before it turns and charges. Others aren't so lucky. It's not uncommon to see bodies tossed high above the crowd from across the arena. That can be rough, but not as rough as being driven helplessly into the ground by the business end of a horn to the face. Sure, unlike those of the full-sized encierro bulls, the cow's horns are corked, but we doubt that makes recovery any quicker for casualties carried off bloody and unconscious.



It's just like being a professional athlete, minus the pay and disability benefits.

Of course, this is exactly what the other 20,000 people seated safely in the bleachers came to see. Guts and puncture wounds spur them on to even louder cheers. You do have the option of joining them if things get too intense, however. Just like during the preceding run, there are spots along the encircling fence you can use for escape. Also like the run, once you duck out, there's no going back in. So, think hard about pulling the rip cord.

The cow is eventually collected and re-penned when it tires out, and another fresh one takes its place in the play yard. This goes on for about 45 minutes until just before 9, when the crowds disperse for a full day of libations, siestas, and more libations.

If you've gotten this far, pat yourself on the back. You've just run with the bulls and made it out alive to tell the tale.

If you haven't, well, there's always tomorrow morning for round 2.

Be Prepared For Your Next Travel Adventure

A little light bedtime reading goes a long way before jumping into a dust-up like the encierro. Even if you're not defying death at every turn, knowing how to travel like a pro can save you time, money, and headaches while opening doors you may never even knew existed.

Our international team of globetrotting experts has years of experience combing the most popular—and most remote—vacation and active-travel spots around the world. Whether you're looking for affordable getaways, the smartest ways to redeem airline miles and credit card points, or the latest TSA-friendly trip essentials, we've got you covered.



If you've enjoyed our bull-running tips and tricks, then make us part of your travel routine. Visit [www.\[site\].com](http://www.[site].com) to sign up for our newsletter and subscribe to our industry-leading globetrotter podcast.

Boiler / Contact