

Where couscous meets paella

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Eclectic ... Melilla blends North Africa with European features. Photo: Getty Images



I LIKE the sight of security personnel at international transport hubs. It helps me feel that little bit safer, knowing the authorities are alert and watching for anything suspicious, protecting all the good folks like me.

So I'm comfortable having the burly policeman near me as I collect my X-rayed belongings from the scanner bench at the ferry terminal. That is, until he says: "Come with me. Give me your passport."

I'm heading from Morocco to continental Europe, taking the unusual option of the overnight ferry to Malaga from Melilla, a 12-square-kilometre Spanish enclave within Morocco, on north Africa's Mediterranean coast. There'd been no problems walking through the dusty makeshift border crossing from Morocco to Melilla. I'm now officially in Spain.

Melilla is a fascinating coexistence of North African and European features. Occupied by Spain since 1496, a leftover from centuries of tussles between Spaniards and Moors, it is home to roughly equal numbers of ethnic Spaniards and Moroccan Berbers and Arabs.

The guidebook says Melilla's modernist architecture is second only to that of Barcelona and I believe it. I'd spent an enjoyable warm evening admiring the stately, ornate buildings and exploring flower-festooned streets and parks and the 16th-century fortress adjacent to the ferry terminal.

I chose a cafe down a quiet street to have dinner and a table full of friendly local women saw that I couldn't read the menu, so had a great time selecting various local dishes for me. The waiter and cook joined in and I feasted. Maybe it is my satisfied expression that makes Mr Burly Policeman suspicious.

He leads me into a windowless room with just a chair, bench and X-ray machine. He gestures to the bench and I place my backpack there. He is clearly a man of few words. "Give me your shoes." I give him my left shoe and am undoing the right when he says: "One will do." After bending, twisting, smelling and groping the shoe, he then gives it back and leaves the room.

I wait. I wonder: is he watching me from outside somehow?

I become aware that I am shaking slightly, my breathing has quickened and I feel oddly weak. Why, I wonder, do we respond as though we're guilty when we're doing nothing wrong? I realise, with helpless despair, that the ferry departs in 15 minutes. Time passes.

Suddenly Mr Burly Policeman reappears. He gives me my passport. "You may go," he says. Without thinking, I say "thank you" and hurry to the ferry without appearing as though I'm a criminal making a getaway. I make it by one minute and as I catch my breath, I can't help feeling ticked off. But an enclave on another continent probably has plenty of dubious types transiting, apparently doing dodgy things with shoes. Today, they decided I could be one of them. Nothing for it, really, but to cop it sweet and remember Melilla as a brief, delightful Spanish/African experience with just a little bit of sour at the end.