

# Visiting Colindres in October of 2010

We arrived on-time at 1:30 in the afternoon after uneventful flights from Charlotte to Frankfurt, and from Frankfurt to Bilbao. The Bilbao airport is familiar to us now, and we quickly walked to the international flights' baggage claim area. We knew it would take about ten more minutes before our bags would appear on the carousel, but Betsy and I were eager to see if Nora had come with Erik to pick us up. We knew from past trips that the Bilbao airport had a glassed viewing area where people waiting for passengers could look down upon the baggage claim areas, and, more importantly to us, arriving grandparents could look up and see if their little eighteen month old granddaughter really could stand and walk on her own now. It had been a little less than five months since we had last seen Nora. Back then, she couldn't crawl. And . . . There she was! Standing about 10 feet to the right of Erik, looking like a miniature girl in her lovely jumper and sweater. I waved like a maniac, but she kept control of her emotions.



**Betsy and Nora picked right back up where they had left off in May, having fun playing together.**

While Erik drove us the 45 minutes back to Colindres, Betsy and Nora kept up a constant conversation in the back seat. Nora has always been very leery of people trying to get close to

her, and although she had warmed up considerably to Betsy in May, I was surprised and extremely pleased that Nora was again letting Betsy get very close to her.

Marga was on a new schedule at work, one she likes a lot. She goes in at 7:00 am, and finishes work each day at 3:00. She wasn't home yet, so Betsy and I took turns playing with Nora while Erik prepared first Nora's lunch, and then ours. Marga arrived home from work shortly after 3:00, and we all sat down and enjoyed bean soup, bread, cheese and wine.



**Nora liked to sit in her red chair and do table work on the living room coffee table. I assisted her.**

I hadn't slept since rising early Sunday morning to go play golf, so I was pretty tired, but watching Nora was fascinating. Her receptive and expressive language skills were much more advanced than I had expected, and she was walking all over the house. A baby-gate kept her from climbing the stairs, and devices on doors kept her from pinching her fingers. She knew that some head-level drawers were off-limits. When she would accidentally reach her hand up and grab the handle of one of these enough for it to accidentally slide out an inch or two, she would always stop and cast her eyes upon any nearby adult and wait patiently for that person to say "Nora, no, close that", and then happily obey. When everyone napped (except Erik, who was working in his office), I stretched out on the couch and read Catch-22 on my iPad, occasionally closing my eyes and resting heavily. Eventually a dinner appeared, a tortilla I believe, which we enjoyed with a salad, some wine, and bread. Around 10:00 I went to bed and slept.

Tuesday was Columbus Day, and a Spanish national holiday. All the stores are closed, but all the bars are open, so except for the problem of securing the day's fresh bread, there is really no

hardship. In the morning I watched Marga clean and chop up vegetables as she prepared a sauce for the afternoon meal. Betsy and I played with Nora as much as we could, which was quite a bit, since Nora's day care program was closed for the holiday. Playing with Nora was exhausting work, and great fun. It helped to be able to tag-team her, since her energy never flagged.

Marga served the sauce over some thin cuts of lean beef, along with a salad, bread, wine, cheese and olives. It was very good, but it always takes me several days for my stomach to adjust to a new time zone, and I wasn't able to eat very much. Tuesday was Erik's birthday, and after lunch we brought out a couple of presents we had brought from the States. We gave him a birthday card from my mother, a Darwin figures play set, and the latest book by Ken Follett. When we were done, Erik went back to working in his office, Marga took a well-deserved nap, and Betsy and I played with Nora.



**Nora can be a bit of a handful at the playground. Here she turns her father Erik into a pretzel.**

By Spanish tradition, the person with the birthday picks up the dinner tab for all who have dinner with him or her, so we all drove to Laredo and went to a favorite restaurant of ours owned by José Luis, a good friend of Erik and Marga. While the Spanish soccer team beat the team from Scotland on a television in the background, we enjoyed a pleasant dinner and several bottles of wine. We had left Nora home with a babysitter. While Nora can be extremely good while her family is eating in a restaurant, that is not always the case, and when it not the case, one parent or

the other is drawn from the table, so the sitter was our insurance policy. When we returned home, we found Nora sleeping soundly. The babysitter reported that after we left, she and Nora had searched the house thoroughly to establish there were no parents or grandparents available, and that after that she settled down and was willing to play without crying.

On Wednesday morning, and for the rest of my stay in Spain, I got up around 8:30. Except for Marga, who had risen at 6:00 and left home for work before 7:00, I was always the first person up. When Betsy appeared, the two of us walked down the street to the bakery to get fresh pastry for breakfast, and a fresh loaf of bread. Each morning Erik carried a sleepy-eyed Nora into the living room, set her on the couch, and put her shoes on her. Nora would then walk to her chair in front of the coffee table, take a seat, and feed herself her morning bottle of formula mixed with cereal. Later she would sit in her highchair or wander around the table while the adults ate their pastry and drank their coffee and orange juice.



**This handmade anniversary card from Erik's grandmother included a 3-D pop-out picture of them.**

Wednesday was Erik and Marga's third wedding anniversary. After lunch Wednesday afternoon we gave them a couple of presents - a sun catcher, and a globe, and a lovely card from my mother.

We got into a pretty good routine. Sometime between 10:30 and 11:00 we would go out for a walk. Sometimes Nora walked on her own, and sometimes she walked holding Erik's hand, but most of the time Erik carried Nora, or she rode on his shoulders. I usually pushed the empty stroller, since I found it actually provided some support if I leaned on it right. Every couple of hundred yards Nora would spot a dog and cry out "Doggie!" Sometimes we stopped at a drug store or shoe shop, and all morning walks included a stop at one of the town's public playgrounds. There Nora would slide down the slide (with assistance), and swing in the baby swing (with assistance). She would also climb through the netting (independently) and walk through the underside of the nearby bleachers (independently). When noon approached, we would head for Susinos Grocery store, run by our friend Andrés Susinos. When we get there, Nora heads back to see her friend Tona who runs the fruit and vegetable section. Tona always has a treat for her, perhaps a banana, or some apple slices. We buy the food we will be cooking that day, along with a bottle or two of Rioja, and then we take the short walk home. Betsy and I took turns playing with Nora while Erik prepared Nora's lunch and fed it to her.



**Here Nora walks innocently towards a pink stroller which seems to have no known owner.**

At 1:30 it was time to take Nora to her day care program, which is just a short walk away. She doesn't cry when dropped off, but instead gets right down to the task of socializing cautiously with the children who approach her. After dropping her off, Erik, Betsy and I would usually walk around town and visit a few bars, enjoying a small vino tinto and tapas in each. When it got close

to 2:00, we would usually head home so that Erik could prepare the mid-day meal. Now that Marga is working a 7:00 to 3:00 schedule, lunch on weekdays was a 3:10 pm event. Wednesday Erik made a tasty pasta and sausage combination, served with a green salad, bread, wine and cheese. On Thursday Erik made a sausage and red pepper pizza.

After lunch Erik would go into his office, close the door, and get down to work, Betsy would take a nap, and I would read *Catch-22* on my iPad. At 5:30, it was time to get Nora. Betsy and I walked to the day care center, and Betsy would listen closely to the day care worker's report (in Spanish, of course) on Nora's afternoon. Then we coaxed Nora into her stroller and pushed her home. We usually sprang her from her stroller in the lobby, and by the time she has reached her front door, her loud cries of "Poppy! Poppy!" must have alerted all in the building to her arrival. She loved seeing her mother in the hall as she entered, and she continued to follow her usual pattern of charging towards her father's office yelling "Poppy! Poppy!" After things settle down, Marga, or Marga and Betsy would take Nora out again for another walk to the playground. Erik would return to his work, and I to my reading.



**Nora was pretty good with her feet, but here she accidentally knocks over a tower of blocks.**

Betsy and I offered to babysit Nora on Thursday night so that Erik and Marga could join their Thursday night dance group once again. They used to attend every Thursday night, but Nora's arrival in their life changed that considerably. On Friday night, however, since Marga didn't have to get up at 6:00 am the next morning, they decided to let us babysit, and they went out for drinks with some friends, and for dinner in Laredo. They snuck out of the house around 9:00, and

Nora never missed them. She did, however, miss her Grandmother considerably when Betsy slipped away from the living room game playing to take a shower. The three minutes Nora spent at the foot of the stairs screaming for her Grandmother to return was the only time Nora cried the whole night. I cooked up a couple of steaks that Bruno the butcher had cut for us, and I also fried some of the mushrooms that Andrés had grown and given me, along with an onion. Eventually Betsy took Nora up to bed and sang to her for a few minutes until she fell asleep.

Betsy and I had made the usual bakery run before breakfast on Saturday. After breakfast we had walked over to Susinos Grocery. It was Andrés birthday, and we had brought him a birthday present – a bottle of Crown Royal with a label that read "Andrés Susinos, 2010 World Cup Champion". He was surprised, and pleased, and quickly took it back to the meat section so he could show it off to his brother Bruno.



**Andrés was pleased to receive a birthday present of Canadian whiskey brought from the States.**

Saturday was also Betsy's birthday. At breakfast she opened a birthday card from my mother, and a present from Erik and Marga, an attractive grey sweater. There was some question as to whether the sweater was the right size, and later that morning we all walked to the store where Marga and Erik had bought the sweater. The lady there declared that Betsy needed one size larger, and the swap was made.

Around 11:00 we all got in the car and drove west for 45 minutes, and visited the Cave of Altamira, which was the first cave in which prehistoric paintings were discovered. Erik bought our tickets, and we pushed the empty stroller through the museum. The cave had been discovered in 1880, but the strong consensus that prehistoric man was not capable of artistic expression meant that the authenticity of the paintings was not fully acknowledged until 1902. Damage from a large number of visitors in the 1960s and 1970s caused the cave to be closed to visitation. It reopened just long enough to develop a three year waiting list, and then closed again. The cave has been closed to the public for a few decades now, but an exact replica cave that has been built on-site represents a wonderful compromise between preservation and education. It was amazing to view the intricacy of the tools created 15,000 years ago by my ancestors. The artwork was simply fascinating.



**These paintings of mammals on rock were made about 15,000 years ago, well before I was born.**

When we left the cave, we drove to the other side of the small tourist town and chose a restaurant pretty much at random. It turned out to be a fine choice. Erik and I shared a large platter of different meats cooked on their large open hearth. Betsy had a large salad and some fish, and Marga had beans and fish. Nora ate various things shared by Marga, but mostly she wandered around the restaurant, or sat on the steps which led to the kitchen. If she sat too close to the center, I pointed to the edge and said "aquí", and she would promptly move over to where I was pointing. Betsy picked up the tab, of course, since it was her birthday.

That evening we all sat around playing with Nora until she went to bed around 10:00. We skipped the dinner meal, since nobody was very hungry.

On Sunday Marga's grandfather, father, mother, and sister drove the 90 minutes from Mondragón to Colindres for a visit with us. It is always good to see them, especially now that we are sharing the grandparent role. Nora is extremely comfortable with Marga's mother, Marce. She is very comfortable with both Marga's father, Juan, and Marga's sister, Belén. Marga's grandfather, Ramón, has cast himself in the cootchy-cootchy-gotcha! role, and has had to pay the price of Nora never being really relaxed when he is near her. Presents were exchanged - some childrens' books in Spanish for Marce and Juan, a bottle of 15 year-old Glenlivet with a custom label for Ramón, a bottle of acorn liquor from Extremadura for me, a wallet for Betsy, and some fine chocolates for us to share.



**My three drinking buddies. We each paid for one of the five rounds in the different bars we visited.**

We all sat around appreciating Nora's entertainment for a while, and then the four guys headed out into the streets of Colindres in search of a glass of wine or five. The ladies joined us about an hour later, and we all walked to the place that had been chosen for our lunch. Nora had conked out, so her stroller was placed opposite a man sitting at a table alone while the eight of us enjoyed the "menu of the day". This entitled us to three courses plus dessert, as well as wine, bread, and water for 12 Euros each. The food was excellent. After an hour or so Nora woke up and joined us. Later she wandered around the restaurant a bit, very comfortable in her noisy surroundings.

When we were done eating, instead of taking the five minute walk home, we went in the other direction. We walked through town, and then down by the waterfront. We ambled along the moored fishing boats, went past Marga's workplace, and eventually found ourselves outside Erik and Marga's apartment building. Nora did quite a bit of walking, and that takes some time. Ninety year-old Ramón also was not a speedy walker, and frankly, I'm not that swift myself. What would have been a five minute walk if we had exited the restaurant to the right, had, having turned left, become more than an hour's walk. Imagine my surprise when even now we did not go up to Erik and Marga's place, but instead walked past it and into another bar for a refresher drink. Later, we returned home, refreshed.



**Either Erik or Nora snapped this picture of us during the first course of our meal. I chose paella.**

Soon the rest of the family left for their drive back to Mondragón, and Erik, Marga, Nora, Betsy and I settled into our last evening together. Erik whipped together a fine Spanish tortilla, which we consumed along with bread, cheese and wine. Nora entertained us constantly, but eventually she gave us each a goodnight kiss, and went to bed. So did I, tired but happy.

Erik drove us to the airport the next morning, while Nora slept in the back seat. In a scene we have repeated many times now, Betsy and I hugged Erik goodbye before hurrying in to the

terminal to check our bags to Charlotte and board the plane to Frankfurt. During the long flight home I thought about the family we had visited. The hard-working father who arranged his life so that he could partake of all facets of childcare, and who was now reaping the reward of a child's unabashed love. The even harder working mother who carried the extra burden of being the dependent's first choice, in all matters, and at all times. And our granddaughter, who seemed to have made more physical and mental progress in the last five months than I thought was humanly possible. I missed them already.



**After our long lunch on Sunday, instead of a siesta, we took a long walk home along the waterfront.**