

**E**LKO, Nevada—When they celebrate the Festival of San Fermín in Pamplona, Navarra, Spain, they run with the bulls. When they celebrate National Basque Festival in Elko in July, they call the event “Running from the Bulls.”



The Festival of San Fermín is held July 6-14 in the Basque town located in the foothills of the Pyrenees Mountains and honors San Fermín, the first bishop of Navarra, whose evangelical zeal cost him his head. In memory of him, the people of Navarra wear a red scarf, a *pañuelo*, which represents the shedding of his blood. Usually, the *corredores*, the runners, dress in white and also wear a red sash. Few

of the 15 or so *corredores* of Elko wore a red sash, and most dressed in shorts or jeans and wore the T-shirt they received when they paid the \$22 registration fee to run.

The Basques are a people with roots in two countries, France and Spain, and who speak a language unrelated to other European languages. One source estimates that between 5,000 and 10,000 Basque-descended people live in Nevada but the U.S. Census data for Elko County lists Hispanics, not Basque, and so it is difficult to divine how many of the 9000 Hispanics (out of a total population of 45,000) are really Basque. Several restaurants advertise themselves as Basque-American and patrons of all ages greet each other in Basque, not Spanish.



In fact, one of New Mexico’s successful governors, Juan Bautista de Anza, was a Basque born in Sonora, Mexico. He as served as governor for nearly a decade in the late 1700s and rates six pages in Marc Simmons’ *New Mexico: An Interpretive History*, with Simmons lamenting Anza’s undeserved obscurity in history. A National Park Service historian portrayed Anza during the National Basque Festival. This year’s festival was the 41<sup>st</sup> and was organized by the Elko Basque Club or Elko Euzkaldunak Club Inc. (<http://www.elkobasque.com/index.html>).

Elko lies in a valley near the Ruby Mountains, which stretch for nearly a hundred miles and have 10 peaks reaching above 10,000 feet. Like any town that owes its existence in part or in whole to the railroad, Elko grew long before it grew wide (just like Albuquerque). It rates three interchanges on Interstate 80.

Unlike Pamplona’s thousand-yard course, the running from the bulls in Elko is contained within an L-shaped one-block by one-half

block area in front of and beside Stockmen's Hotel and Casino. The organizers used Mexican fighting bulls, which are smaller than the bulls used in Pamplona, but whose horns are just as deadly. The eight bulls were released from a trailer that was backed up to the course and they wasted no time charging after the runners, who just as equally wasted no time running away.

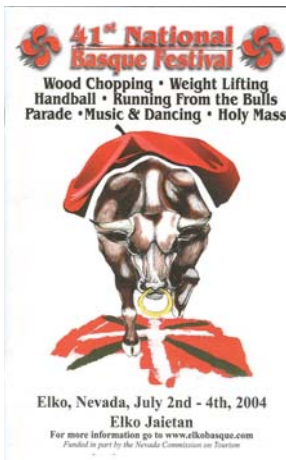
At the left-hand turn, one bull slipped and fell, but got up quickly and proceeded after the runners. At the end of the run, the bulls were penned momentarily, everyone rested, and then it began again, ending at the trailer, where the bulls ran inside and their handlers slammed the trailer's doors shut.

The course was lined by a double row of durable tube fencing, with barrels and concrete barriers as padding in between. The fence was very easy to climb and the runners scrambled to the top at the first sign of danger. One bull refused to go back to the trailer and instead kept poking at one of the handlers who had climbed halfway to the top of the fence and kept kicking at the bull to get it to go away. Early in the run, one of the runners climbed the fence near the platform I was on and said to no one in particular: "I'm getting too old for this." He rested there for awhile.

As the back-and-forth running continued, the bulls became less cooperative. Once they refused to enter their trailer and instead turned on the unsuspecting runners and started at them. The runners scrambled. In order to get the bulls back into their trailer, the handlers started closing down the course by pulling pieces of the inside fence toward the center of the course. Eventually penned just outside their trailer, the bulls went willingly inside for the trip home.

The bulls in Pamplona are not as lucky, according to Gary Gray's Running with the Bulls: Fiestas, Corridas, Toreros, and an American's Adventure in Pamplona. Gray, who has run in Pamplona for more than two decades and ran again this year, reports that the bulls there chase the runners into the Plaza de Toros, where in the afternoon the bulls will die in a fight with a *torero*—a bullfighter.

But the National Basque Festival is more than bulls. The festival is devoted to keeping Basque traditions alive and making sure they are passed on to younger generations. Before the running,



dancers dressed in traditional Basque clothing perform for the audience. Some of the male dancers, with their white shirts and trousers, red scarf, sash and beret are models of the way the runners dress in Pamplona.

One of the dances is about fish and the emcee reminds the audience that Basque are not just shepherders, but also fishermen (they also had a good reputation as explorers). The dancers ranged in age from around 4 to early 20s and performed three times, the last time on Sunday at the Elko City Park. The last round was a contest with cash and trophy prizes awarded.

The entire festival is competitive, but in a friendly way. For example, there's the shepherders' bread contest. The first prize winner got \$50 down to \$20 for third, but then the entries were then auctioned and the first-prize loaf this year went for \$85. All proceeds went to the Basque dancers club. Other competitive activities included weightlifting and woodchopping.



worshippers were provided with a program in both languages. The Basque dancers sat in a semi-circle in front of the altar, which was flanked by the U.S. and Basque flags, and eagerly and respectfully greeted Father Tillous when he joined the audience in an exchange of greetings.

Mass was followed by a tremendous meal. For \$14, an adult got both steak and a lamb chop, beans, salad, a roll, cake and a glass of red wine. In the days preceding the festival, the Elko Daily Press conducted an online "poll" to find out what readers considered their favorite part of the festival. At 57 percent, food beat out the parade, games, and the bulls, all of which polled about equal. The day before the picnic many people gathered at the Elko County Fairgrounds for more dancing, weightlifting and woodchopping and feasted on chorizo in a bun and a cold beverage.

The National Basque Festival is one of many activities tourist can enjoy in Elko. Among others is the cowboy poetry contest in January. And the week after the festival, the city hosted the Silver State Stampede, considered the town's oldest professional rodeo event.

As in Pamplona, religion is an important part of the festival. On Sunday morning, Basques attended mass in Elko City Park. Father Martxel Tillous, a native of France, delivered the mass in Basque and English and



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