

## **Media Contact**

*Bulls Before Breakfast:*

*Running with the Bulls and Celebrating Fiesta de San Fermín in Pamplona, Spain*

By Peter N. Milligan

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## Talking Points



Peter (red long sleeves and white pants) runs with Bill Hillman (wearing No. 9—famous American bull runner), “Farmer Bob” (famous Basque bull runner sporting a classic Basque mullet), and the “El Pilar” bulls (July 13, 2010).

*It did not end well for the author.*

### **Why in the world do they do this in Pamplona?**

The Romans built the city’s main plaza, the Plaza del Castillo, too far from the river. A half mile too far away! The bulls were brought to Pamplona by barge for the annual *feria*, and every morning of the festival ranch hands and cowboys had to try and sneak the bulls through the city streets at dawn. It proved irresistible to the people of Navarra and Basque that call the city home. Hemingway then lit the fuse in 1926 with the publication of *The Sun Also Rises*.

### **Wait, they don’t run the bulls just once?**

The bulls are in town for the bull fair. Six *toro bravo* run with six steers in the

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morning at 8 a.m. *every day* between July 7 and 14. It is the most exhausting marathon. The fiesta starts at noon on July 6<sup>th</sup> and ends at midnight on the 14<sup>th</sup>. You get about four hours of sleep a day. Maybe.

### **Aren't the bulls just old and blind?**

These are four year old bulls—at their angry, masculine prime. The average bulls are 1,200 pounds. The big ones? Well, they are much bigger. Like the size of a Toyota Prius, but much angrier than the meanest hybrid car you can imagine. The bulls all run around 35 mph, making Usain Bolt look glacial in comparison. Spanish *toro bravo* are not hobbled in any way; they are more dangerous than lions in the streets.

### **What's with the white pants and the red scarf?**

Everyone, and I mean everyone, wears white pants, white shirts, and the red scarf around their neck and the red sash around their waist. My favorite legend is that Pamplona's butchers were the first locals to run down the cobblestones. The white pants hearken back to their white aprons. No one really knows anymore whether it's actually the butcher's tradition or religious symbolism, but it doesn't matter. It's a tradition now, and you stand out if you're not wearing white. The red scarf is homage to Saint Fermin, who was beheaded by the French in 303. He is said to have picked up his head and walked back into Spain—sounds legit. The Pamplona cathedral was built where he finally sat down and died. The religious fiesta started in 1196. The bulls wormed their way in within years. The sash? It's just for style.

### **You're safe if you stay on the sidelines, right?**

Yeah, no. With a casual flick of a horn, the bulls will kill you. They'll say they didn't mean it, but they're liars. They don't care if you are running, jumping, skipping, or cowering in a corner. Actually, in the center of the streets with the bulls is the safest place—run straight, true, and as fast as you've ever run. Everyone else thinks they can hide on the sidelines, but when the bulls arrive it is a madcap fear-filled panic. Other runners can harm you, as well as the cobblestones. There are no pillows to catch your falling body. Remember, they only report the horn gorings. Split skulls and comas don't sell newspapers.

### **Isn't the fiesta just a drunken brawl?**

It can be, but we keep that away from mother. There's the "frat party fiesta" and the "family fiesta." Both mix at times in very entertaining fashions. Either way, you are getting white pants dirty. For the most part, the fiesta de San Fermin is a family festival for the locals. That's the part of the fiesta we've discovered. After

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the bulls, there is almost nothing that's not appropriate for children, or at least Spanish children. Giant puppets do wander the streets to scare kids and strike them in the head with a truncheon. And, at night they cover a life-sized model of a bull with fireworks and set it on fire. And then chase children. Other than that....well you have to see it to believe it.

**You don't take your kids to Pamplona do you?**

You bet I do. My family—my wife and my children—love Pamplona. My oldest son has run with the bulls, and it will not be physically possible to stop the younger later. I look forward to growing old and running enough for my boys to try to convince me it's time to hang up my running sash.

**So if this is like three minutes, what the heck do you do the rest of the day?**

Well, the festival is only 204 hours long, and there is a lot to do. There's concerts: real ones and "cultural" ones. There's a firework competition. Parades. Mountains. Beaches. Strong man contests. Ham. Stunning gastronomic experiences. If not already, Navarra is the future dining capital of the world. They've got a big Basque boot firmly on the French necks. And, we have mastered the ability to fill an entire day with utter nonsense. We get about 4 hours of sleep a night.

**Have you ever been hurt?**

Only every year. I've suffered a debilitating amount of bumps and bruises. I have a plate and screws in my ankle. I have bursitis in each elbow. I broke an elbow. I've had infections that put me in the hospital. I've broken fingers. Ribs. I've been kicked in the head by runners and bulls. They entire herd stepped on my back once. Alleged concussions. My brother has been gored, and so have a silly amount of my friends.

**Then why do you keep going back every July?**

It's the breakfast. There is no finer experience on this earth than running with the herd and bragging about it with family and friends over spilt eggs, tortilla de patata, and a nice hot café con leche.

**What is there to do the rest of the year?**

Pamplona and the surrounding countryside is a year-round destination for travelers. There are wonderful beaches and mountain hikes. Christmas and New Year's Eve are particularly wonderful times to spend there. The "Camino de Santiago," the pilgrimage route to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in

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Galicia, goes right through Pamplona and the Navarran countryside. Approximately 200,000 Christian pilgrims, from a stunning 265 countries, make this walk successfully every year. There is cross-country skiing in the Pyrenees for the winter, and gastronomic competitions and celebrations in the spring. In the fall, there are leaf tours in medieval forests; mushroom picking and grape harvests; music and theatre festivals; and Día de las Palomeras, the famed autumnal capture of pigeons with nets, and the dinners that follow.

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