

## Señor Forbes

*Amity, vanity, and calamity as CHIP BROWN follows the Harleys through Spain*

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Aline, the Countess of Romanones, tugged at the hem of her red leather mini. She was in a state. Oh, sure, she'd had the presence of mind to pass out copies of her World War II memoir, *The Spy Wore Red*, but she'd forgotten to pack her emerald necklace, and now that we were airborne in the Capitalist Tool she urgently needed to call her butler before he tossed the jewels in the trash. He was funny that way, always tidying up. Luckily, there was a phone on board. A phone, a steward, a captain, fresh orange juice, Godiva chocolates, overstuffed leather chairs, aromatic lavatory hand soap, the latest chart-laden issue of *Forbes*, a Spanish Grandee, and a contingent of ex-Reagan insiders. When you travel with Malcolm Forbes, everything you could ever want is right at your fingertips. Aline came back smiling: The emeralds were fine. We landed in Seville that night.

And so began "Viaje de la Amistad España 89" – six cities, eleven days, twelve hundred miles of dusty red roads and new Common Market-inspired highways. Our patron, architect, and overlord is a man the Spanish press calls the *Millonario Romántico*. It is the romantic fellow who travels with an entourage of forty-five people and picks up the \$600,000 tab. After motorcycling with Malcolm Forbes for a fortnight, watching him exchange pleasantries with mayors and governors, watching him give press conferences and launch balloons, watching him wade into crowds to pass out pins and patches and sign autographs for kids who swarmed around him like minnows on a piece of bread, you have to wonder what he's running for. The political career that took him to the New Jersey State Senate and culminated in his unsuccessful bid for governor on 1957 seems very much alive. Over the years, by dint of his bonhomie and his showmanship, his thirst for publicity and his massive fortune, he has appointed himself Ambassador of Capitalism. It's a job with none of the inconveniences of political life, like elections, and many of the benefits, like police escorts through rush-hour traffic.

Forbes's Friendship Tours are whistle-stop trips, with managers, advance men, and security teams. The purpose of "Viaje de la Amistad España 89" was to promote international amity between Spain and America, one the eve (give or take three years) of the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus's voyage to the new world. The conceit was that the goal could best be accomplished by sending a gang of American motorcyclists rumbling around the country panicking goats and gorgonizing old men. Incredibly, it seemed to work. When I broached the question with Señor Forbes himself, he said, "I'm colorful, not crazy."

Well, it's a fine line.

The leafy capital of Andalusia was where we started. Seville is the most Spanish of cities, old-fashioned, inward, provincial. Radio thieves are less likely to smash the windows of cars whose license plates start with a Sevillian S. At night the narrow lanes of the old Moorish quarter echo

with a more hospitable sound than breaking glass – the songs and shouts and percussive report of flamenco.

Our mission the first evening was to launch a hot-air balloon. Hot-air balloons are as much a part of the Forbes Friendship spectacle as motorcycles. We set out for the launch area in our friendship caravan: First came the blue security car, driven either by Eduardo or Fernando, whose jobs were to keep the Basque separatists and anybody else from holding Señor Forbes for ransom. Then came Señor Forbes on his red cream Harley-Davidson. Trailing him, eight other motorcyclists (one of whom would be me when we headed for Córdoba in two days' time). Then the two balloons trucks flashing yellow lights, and then the double-decker bus. Aline, still in her red leather mini, jumped on the back of the Harley. At forty-five miles an hour the wind hardly affected her hair.

When we arrived, the yellow-trousered balloon crew went to work. Forbes was feeling the pressure to get a balloon launched, but it was too windy to inflate the Santa María, the ripstop replica of Columbus's ship that he had built especially for the trip. As a consolation, he had his crew unfurl a nylon-and-hot-air version of Forbes magazine. Even a balloon in the shape of a chart-laden biweekly business journal has a certain panache.

Forbes climbed into the wicker basket under the mouth of the balloon and couched behind the twin propane-fueled, flame-throwing burners. He looked like a gunner on an ack-ack battery. The burners roared, the crowd cheered, and the balloon began to swell. But the wind hauled it this way and that, and when Malcolm began to scorch holes in the fabric with hot blasts of flame, he finally had to give up. It wasn't a total defeat. The photographers went crazy when he and Aline straddled a Harley together.

That night Alecko Papamarkou organized a big dinner party at a pleasantly unpretentious restaurant in the Moorish quarter called El Mesón. Alecko was the Forbes family's mysterious Greek connection, a businessman and professional go-between who set up the royal dinner with King Juan Carlos scheduled later in the week. On the flight from Newark, Alecko had been in top form, memorizing everyone's name and potential social utility even before the steward made the first circuit with the orange juice.

We were a big party that night, supplemented by a large helping of dukes and duchesses. During the flamenco performance one of the dukes insisted on talking, and he drew hisses from a large dark-eyed matriarch onstage. I can't say which duke, because after a few glasses of manzana, the apple liqueur widely drunk in Spain, it is impossible to keep aristocratic pedigrees straight. Suffice it that the Chatty Duke Show was finally removed to the other end of the table. Onstage a beautiful raven-haired dancer in her early twenties stepped from the line. She swirled the flounces of her green dress and stamped her purple shoes – softly, then emphatically, building small crescendos as the guitarist strummed and a man warbled a song about ruinous love. Such reserves of pride in the way she moved, mingling scorn and dignity and desire, a tantalizing essence that would not be possessed. She slung her dress to one side, whisked it back, and stamped the floor so vehemently that a potted fern began to creep toward the edge of the stage. A sort of demonic infield chatter sprang up, with the other dancers urging her on, the men crying "Olé!," the guitars blazing, and the singers beating their hands. Suddenly she broke off and stood before us in vitalized silence, chest heaving, sweat beaded on her brow. It was a stunned moment

before we recovered ourselves. She was not in the least displeased to receive the applause, but it was not in her character, or in that of the dance, to bow.

Later, when everyone was clearing out, I went up to touch the stage, peened and pitted by many emphatic heels. By chance, we had arrived in Seville in time for the boisterous May Day parade through the heart of the city, and that morning I watched Women of the Left demonstrating in high heels. And now tonight, the provocations of flamenco. In less than twenty-four hours Spain had stretched the parameters of international amity. For a country where not so long ago it was impermissible to display affection in public, it seemed about to burst with examples of ruinous love. I ran into Alecko the next morning in a hotel boutique buying Loewe leather for fellow travelers Charles Z. and Mary Jane Wick. It had not escaped Alecko's attention that Charles Wick was the former head of the U.S. Information Agency and that Mary Jane was an intimate of Nancy Reagan.

"I want you to buy something, darling," said Alecko to me, out of the kindness of his heart, I have to believe, because my job in the Reagan administration had never come through. "Tell me, what do you want? Anything you want, I will buy it for you."

I said I wanted a piano, although I would have been happy if he had just stopped calling me darling.

"I cannot buy you a piano, but I have a piano," he said. "I have a very nice piano in my apartment in New York. You can come over and play it anytime, darling. You can come over and play my piano whenever you want."

International amity was taking an ominous turn.

Each night in Seville we stayed up until the early hours of the morning watching flamenco, and then had to rise at 6A.M. for balloon flights. Finally Señor Forbes got the Santa María into the air, and it floated in the sky above Seville, an irresistible sight with its great white masts and sails, its brown hull and long green waterline. With Forbes at the helm, the languid behemoth sank about an hour later in the middle of the empty bullring. The photographs were flashed around Spain and back to the United States.

The last of the late arrivals trickled in, including Peter and Abby Schoff. Peter Schoff, the head of Forbes's European and African advertising sales, had that wonderful salesman's way with a fulsome phrase. Someone would say, "Malcolm seems like a nice guy," and he'd say, "Oh, you bet." Meaningful pause. "Beautiful family, too."

As it happened, the beautiful Forbes family was lucky to get out of Seville in one piece. On a farm the first day, Robert had been grazed by a bull, a glancing blow but dire enough to put a fright on his father. And then on the night before our caravan hit the road, Malcolm and another son, the pun-crazed Christopher Forbes (or Kip, as he's called), had a motorcycle accident.

It happened at the end of the driveway of the Alfonso XIII, which is generally not considered one of Spain's more hazardous intersections. The older Forbes braked to a halt, put his foot down, and found a pothole instead of the street. Their bike went over, unseating Kip. The bulletin

crackled over the walkie-talkies – “Forbes is down, Forbes is down” – and Fernando, riding shotgun in the security car, went white. He sprang out of the front seat and sprinted back to the crash site. The damage was minor: Señor Forbes had mashed his right big toe under one of his Harley’s chrome pipes. On the morning of our departure he took off his sock and showed it to us – it was red and raw, like a piece of octopus tapas slathered in pepper sauce. For the rest of the trip he walked with a limp.

By this time I was quite anxious about riding a Harley. I had never been on a “Hog” before, much less in a macho pack where the pressure to keep up with the pack overrides the instinct to proceed cautiously. I had some tips from Art Friedman, one of the riders and the editor of *Motorcyclist* magazine, but somehow it wasn’t encouraging to learn that Art had crashed three times at a hundred miles an hour with nothing worse than a broken pinkie. The trick to riding these big bikes, he said, was to lean into the turns and steer opposite the direction you wanted to go. “It’s called countersteering,” he explained. The concept was so counterintuitive, so richly metaphorical of the Zen-like way in which life works – you can only get where you want to go by aiming in the opposite direction – that I almost decided to ride the bus.

The motorcycles rumbled to life at dawn, belching smoke and backfiring and raising the sort of noisome ruckus that could well have knocked a star or two off the rating of the Alfonso XIII had the guidebook writers been there. Balloonist Dennis Fleck’s Harley was equipped with a synthesizer that played “New York, New York,” “I’m a Yankee Doodle Dandy,” and Spanish favorites, and when it was time to move out, he rallied us with music. There was only one rule, unstated but ironclad: Malcolm Forbes rides at the head of the pack. One after another, the Harleys rolled out. I was next to last, and suddenly, before I had moved an inch, my bike died. No amount of coaxing could start it. All the pack except for Bob Forbes was gone, vanished into the bosom of Andalusia. I didn’t even have a map. Bob tried to start the recalcitrant thing, to no avail. Finally Dave Stein, who has a fulltime job taking care of the Forbes fleet of some seventy-plus motorcycles, returned. The Boss and the whole caravan were pulled over on the side of the road. What was the matter with me? Hadn’t I learned that when Malcolm moves, the bikers move, the in-house camera crew filming the adventure moves, the balloon trucks move, the double-decker bus moves, the Spanish economy moves? Amity schmamity, the real payoff of Friendship touring is police escorts through foreign rush hours. If there’s one thing Malcolm Forbes hates, it’s waiting. Now here he was, somewhere in a fume-choked Seville intersection cooling his heels, and who did he have to thank for that? Dave fiddled with knobs, but even he couldn’t get the crummy American-made Harley started. Somebody finally checked the gas tank: empty.

We all wore red vests emblazoned with patches on our backs that said CAPITALIST TOOLS. Perfect targets for Basque snipers, but they might have had a hard time hitting us because we were no bunch of leisurely tourists. I motorcycled twelve hundred miles through Spain, and I saw mostly white lines and guardrails. My only conclusions had to do with the nature of fear, which, I realized, is simply the inability to control dire thoughts. What if a tire blows? What if a rabbit squirts across the road? What if Don Quixote swerves across my path?

The first day even going forty could set off the willy-nily speculation. I fell back in the pack, buffeted by winds. Mine was the one bike without a windshield. I had to hunker forward. Small

pebbles stung my face. “You looked like the Wicked Witch of the West,” said Kip Cleland, a veteran of many motorcycle tours. Evidently the Capitalist Tools were getting a big laugh out of my straddling-a-broomstick style, not exactly the sit-up-and-beg posture *de rigueur* on Harleys. Did the Hog honor code call for a fight? Kip Cleland’s improbable title at Forbes was director of physical fitness. I held my peace and resolved to slander him later in print. No, really, he’s a nice guy.

Ever sensitive to the needs of the press, Malcolm Forbes transferred me to a bike with a windshield. After a few days I got the hang of countersteering and pushed back the terror threshold. Sixty? Child’s play. I had my Hog up to ninety-two. “You’ve been velocitized,” Art said. Riding a Harley at eighty is like sitting on a paint shaker. The vibrations last for hours afterward, and if you combine them with a night in a flamenco club, the experience can create the sorts of conditions that jeopardize a stable marriage.

We stopped that midday in Córdoba and toured its famous mosque and the castle of the Christian Kings, where Queen Isabella met Columbus. Charwomen in blue knee socks were emptying pails of soapy water onto Roman and Moorish ruins. Puckered sour fruit hung from the orange trees. A fan of purple bougainvillea flared on a castle wall, and the cypress twisted up like green flames. What a relief to be alive.

Then we motored over to see the Communist mayor of Córdoba. Nobody seemed to realize Herminio Trigo was a Communist until afterward. I don’t know what he expected from a tête-à-tête with the Ambassador of Capitalism, but it couldn’t have been nine dusty, sweaty, starving motorcyclists and an entourage of some thirty others, equally ravenous, crowding into his office to listen to him make small talk. By some oversight the crack Friendship planners had neglected to schedule a lunch that day. That mayor’s staff had politely set out a modest table of snacks and drinks. The aroma of the food began to permeate the room, creating an anticipatory frenzy. There were people on the verge of shouting. “Enough with the small talk, in the name of international amity, let’s eat!” And the mayor must have sensed this, for he finally suggested we all repair to the conference room where the refreshments lay. No sooner were the words out of his mouth than he and his aides were trampled underfoot. We hit the table like it was Normandy beach, and fell on the dainty bite-size quiches and rolled up slices of cured ham. Gael Greene, the food critic (like the Republicans, she had decided to help us shoulder the burden of international amity for a while), made sandwiches with potato chips. All pretense of conversation ended. The horde swarmed around, guzzling and gorging and chomping. Within minutes the table had been picked clean.

Thus refueled, ready once again to carry our cause forward, we headed for Granada over the mountains on Route 432. It was as hot in the afternoon as it had been chilly in the morning. We rolled past Baena – white houses clustered on a cliff – and through bleached white hills covered with row upon row of olive trees. The smell of pressed olive oil hung in the air. In Alcalá la Real, an old man swatted his goats with a long thin branch; aged road crews raked asphalt. When we left each settlement there was always a sign that gave the name of the town with a red slash through it. The abrupt transition between habitation and denuded land made it seem as if the villages had been crossed out – abnegated by heat, by sun, by lack of rain.

Now the snows of the Sierra Nevada glittered in the distance. We crossed a rain shadow, and suddenly the land was green with lush fields of wheat.

That night we stayed in a five-star hotel near Loja called La Bobadilla. A man on a white horse galloped up the road in front of us as we drove in. Swallows flitted through the halls. Sylvia Chute, the wife of Forbes's Spanish advertising representative Russell Chute, complained about the mosquitoes in her room. "I'm sorry madame," said the man at the desk, "even if I could give you another room, it wouldn't make any difference because all our rooms have moss-quee-toes." But it was a remarkably beautiful place all the same, owned by a German couple who had built a chapel with a twenty-seven-foot-high organ. The organ looked like an elephant in a one-bedroom apartment. We were treated to a recital by the organist, who had recently hurt his hand.

By dawn we were on the road again, throttles opened wide on a three-hundred-mile leg to Madrid. I expanded my theory of fear. That was the hardest day. No sooner had we arrived in the capital and checked into the Ritz than we had to rush off to meet the then mayor, Juan Barranco, who was late because he was stuck in traffic.

Señor Forbes had turned the visit to the Communist mayor in Córdoba into a stump story.

"I didn't know he was a Communist until I came out of the meeting, and here I was offering him the help of the Capitalist Tools."

"He's a very nice man," said the mayor of Madrid.

"Oh yes, very nice."

Did he have a beautiful family? I looked around for Peter Schoff, but he was nowhere in sight. A waiter came by with some rolled slices of ham.

"No thanks," said Malcolm Forbes. It struck me just then, the note of apology in his voice. It seemed consonant with his outsize goodwill and that strangely boyish quality of embarrassed pleasure that was transparent at press conferences. Trapped inside the canny publicity hound there is a boy, or a boyish man, someone who still finds great pleasure in toy boats and who is always talking about "happiness" and "fun" and who takes an uncynical delight in the attention he gets, still a little amazed, it seems, that all these people with pens and cameras should turn out to listen to him, as if he had something tremendously crucial to tell them.

Usually at receptions we had to wear the Friendship Tour evening uniform – blue blazer, gray pants, and a red Forbes balloon tie. But whenever we showed up in the five-star hotels, we were dressed rather more adventurously, and in Madrid it got to be fun flouting the Ritz's ties-only dress code. You could stroll past the authoritarian gatekeepers in the grungiest motorcycle attire simply by saying "For-bez, For-bez!" The overrated hotel got the last word, though, when the room service laundry bills came in. The charge to clean a few pairs of blue jeans: \$60. His sense of thrift outraged, Señor Forbes quickly incorporated the story into his stump speech for the press in the next city on the itinerary.

That first night in Madrid, though, international amity reached its zenith. Some of us put on black tie and went to the Palacio de Fernán Núñez for a full-blown dinner with the king and queen of Spain and a mighty complement of dukes, marquesas, and counts. Reserved for state affairs, the palace has an unprepossessing exterior but is gorgeous inside, with great chandeliers and enormous mirrored rooms. Waiters steered through the crowd, protecting trays of champagne with their forearms. Protocol tips were passed to help those of us unfamiliar with royalty to negotiate the introductions; I studied the Spaniards. When they met the king or queen, the men smartly tipped heads forward; the women, with the exception of Aline, dipped in shallow curtsies like water ouzels. Aline had finally gotten rid of her mini and was wearing a black dress and a brilliant toreador jacket inset with gold lame swirls and red roses. Perhaps to compensate for the absence of her emeralds, when she took the queen's hand she went all the way to the floor in a theatrical heap, like a body falling through a skylight. I was rattled already. I don't know, maybe it was the stress of a long day promoting amity at ninety miles an hour, but for some reason when I shook hands with the queen I curtsied, too. She gave me a quizzical look and moved on. I removed myself in disgrace to the wall where Art was standing in his rented tux, looking like he'd rather be oiling a chain in a garage somewhere.

Dinner saved the night. I sat between two Spanish women. Señora Carmen de Araoz, who had fled to France during the Spanish Civil War, was on my left. She apologized for what proved to be her superb English. She was lively and unpretentious, glad to see snobbery ebbing out of Spanish society. Why, on the evidence of this dinner alone, it was all but eradicated! Upper classes no longer looked down at flamenco, she said. It was better to participate than to watch, and lots of young people were learning to dance and sing. As always, however, the best singers still came from the south.

"In the north they sing as if there is a death in the family," she said.

On my right was Marisa de Borbón, a cynosure of high fashion and a favorite with photographers from ¡Hola!, thanks to her black hair, dark red mouth, and ruinously blue eyes. Perhaps saying "For-bez, For-bez" would have the same open sesame effect on a glamorous woman as it had on the gatekeepers at the Ritz. No: Marisa wanted to know who was this man Malcolm Forbes and why was he scaring the goats of Spain. She spooned up the vichyssoise de tomate, careful to keep it from spilling on the white crinoline ruffle that ringed the top of her black evening gown. She said she was part Basque; she had married into the Borbóns, one of Spain's gilded families. When I asked about her dress, there was a sparkle of amusement in her steely eyes. She tugged on the ruffle and laughed enigmatically.

By the end of the night she had told me about her son, who would be going to an American school, and her daughter, "a beauty." Where was her husband? It seemed as if he were miles away. "Right there," she said, nodding to the other side of the table. Fortunately, he was mesmerized by Gael Greene, and so the hours flew lightly by. The waiters scuttled about with salvers of salmon, and pheasant presented so the birds' heads were macabrely peering down at the fillets they'd become. No glass ever begged for wine. Alecko rose to deliver a toast. "Mr. Malcolm Forbes is a kind of monster," he said. A risky gambit, gracefully redeemed. "Because he is really five people rolled into one."

During coffee, the Spaniards passed out business cards. No one was supposed to leave before the king and queen, but the king and queen didn't seem in a hurry to go anywhere. The king was busy telling people about the new black and cream Harley presented to him that afternoon by Señor Forbes. More fodder for the photographers from ¡Hola!. The party went on and on. In the days to come we would see other cities and other sights; there would be plenty of amity generated, but none more than on that winy night at the Palacio de Fernán Núñez. If I had to rewrite the evening, I wouldn't change a thing, except the curtsy.