With mountains and seashores and two of the leading city destinations in Europe, Spain has become a world leader in tourism.

The reasons to go are almost without limit: history, art, culture, scenery, architectural delights, diverse landscape and entertainment, to name a few. And that’s just from seeing a small part of it. Spain is second only to Switzerland as the most mountainous country in Europe and has famous ski resorts all over. The endless sandy beaches along both the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean make coastal resorts popular as well.

About 10 years ago, Spain became the second most visited country in the world. France was first. Now, it also trails the United States and China. Tourism contributes about 6.5 percent of its GDP, with Madrid and Barcelona leading the way.

My wife, Mary Ann, and I went to Spain with the Chancel Choir of St. Luke’s United Methodist Church in Indianapolis. My sister, Alice Shooter, a member of the choir, invited us to fill some extra slots. Their schedule of concerts added elements of purpose and anticipation to the journey.

We arrived in Madrid around noon on a Sunday. The city has numerous open spaces – called plazas, squares or centers – surrounded by narrow streets. That was the case with our hotel, the Me Meliá Madrid, on the Plaza de Santa Ana in the heart of the city’s literary district, the former home of such literary greats as Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616), the creator of Don Quixote, and Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600-1681).

The building was constructed in the 1920s as a luxury department store and converted to a hotel in the 1980s. Our bus had to unload about a block from the building. But it was in a great central location, just a few blocks from the Museo Nacional del Prado to the east or the Royal Palace to the west.

First, we got an overview of Madrid’s biggest attractions by boarding an open-top tour bus. We saw many of the same sites during a walking tour the next day. At no time day or night is the square in the city center lacking people, our tour guide, Maury, commented. One of the narrow streets leading up to it carries more than half a million pedestrians every day, he added. A three-story building in the city center is considered the exact center of the entire country. Everything is measured from this building, Maury pointed out, which serves as a focal point, like Times Square in New York City on New Year’s Eve. Another feature is a statue of Carlos III, aka Charles III, the king who loaned money to the colonies to help fund the American Revolution.

Madrid sits on a plateau 650 meters above sea level. The weather was fine during our visit. But Maury described it as “nine months of winter, three months of hell,” noting that the temperature goes from 32 to 120 degrees.

Madrid grew eastward from the Royal Palace (built in the 17th Century). The “main” square (a place for markets, bull fights and public executions in the 1400s) moved several times and the wall around the city was rebuilt four times (each time further out). Now, Madrid has a population of 3.2 million with 7 million in the metropolitan area. In the 1600s, the Plaza Mayor was the main gathering place. All the facades were cleaned in the 1980s, and it is now the most expensive place to live with space going for 7,000 euros a square foot, despite the need for extensive renovations. Nearby is the oldest ongoing restaurant in the world, the Sobrino de Botin, established in 1725.

The Museo Nacional del Prado sits at the end of a five-mile, multi-lane Paseo del Prado (one of the few wide streets in Madrid) known as the Boulevard of Power. Urbanized in the 18th century, the street now features government offices, embassies and numerous corporate headquarters. The world-class museum (one of three in the immediate area) featured the works of such artists as Goya, van der Weyden, Raphael, Rubens and Rembrandt.

We thought about going to a bull fight that night, but Bob Zehr, a member of the choir who operates the travel agency that put the whole trip together, had a full agenda staked out, this time a flamenco dancing show at the historic (opened in 1911) and colorful Villa-Rosa tablao next door to our hotel. To my unsophisticated mind, flamenco was a highly energetic combination of tap dancing
and clogging. With a single guitar player and singer/chanter (who reminded us of Stevie Nicks) providing the background music, the dancers (two females and a male) took turns tapping, stomping, flailing, arching, hip gyrating and finger snapping while moving quickly around the stage. They totally filled the audio and visual senses, and I concluded that it was just as entertaining as watching a bull get skewered in the dust.

The next day, Mary Ann and I took a side trip about 50 miles south of Madrid to the scenic and historic city of Toledo (pronounced Toe-lay-doe) where the walls were built in the 9th century. It’s the place one needs to go if interested in buying a sword or a suit of armor. It also has a great cathedral, a diocese building that houses the cardinals for all of Spain, the fascinating tomb of Don Gonzalo Ruiz de Toledo, a 12th century synagogue, the monastery of San Juan de los Reyes (built by catholic monarchs in the 15th century) and the Alcázar Fortress overlooking all of it. Toledo is so accommodating to tourists that a set of four escalators take visitors up about a thousand feet from the parking lot to the old town perched atop a mountain. So, who gets hurt on an escalator? Mi. Standing sideways and paying attention only to the landscape I was photographing, the side of my foot hit the stationary metal plate at the top of the moving stairs so hard that I walked with a limp and a swollen foot for the rest of our overseas venture. Back home about two weeks later, a x-ray revealed a broken metatarsal. Glad no particular treatment was in order.

That night the choir had its first concert about a mile from the hotel at the Real Baslica de San Francisco el Grande. On its way, the choir stopped at the “main” square to sing a couple songs and hand out invitations. The concert had good attendance. I don’t know if the flyers helped. Forty-eight choir members (about a third of the total) came on the Spanish trip and another 30 of us tagged along.

We went by bus the next day to the charming, smaller city of Segovia (population of 55,000) where the main attraction was the aqueduct – a massive aqueduct built of large granite blocks by the Romans some 2,000 years ago to bring water to the top of the hill in Segovia from a mountain nine miles away. The part of the structure that still remains is about 1,200 feet long and stands about 100 feet tall at the highest stretch. The granite came from a quarry nearly five miles away. At one time, the aqueduct provided water for 11,000 people.

Segovia is anchored by Plaza Mayor, stretched across its highest point with the Catedral de Nuestra Señora at one end, the San Juan theater at the other and restaurants and shops in between. The choir performed its second concert at the theater where tickets were sold to support a mission project of a local church. Again, a nice crowd attended.

About two blocks west of the cathedral is the Alcázar de Segovia. Rising above a rocky crag overlooking the confluence of two rivers near the Guadarrama mountains, it served as one of four castles for Isabel and Ferdinand V who (uniquely) reigned with equal authority. Before Ferdinand, the city had been divided into sections for Christians, Jews and Moors who coexisted quite peacefully. A plaque in the castle sums things up: “Ferdinand V. 1452-1516. King of Castile and Aragon. Established the inquisition at Seville. Expelled the Jews and Moors. Promoted expeditions of Columbus and Vespucci.”

The next morning we headed westward into the La Rioja wine country. It was Mary Ann’s birthday and the first time she’s had “happy birthday” sung to her by a chancel choir in a winery. After spending the night in the quaint and charming town of Haro, we bussed to the small town of Nájera where we began a walk of about three and a half miles along the El Camino de Santiago trail, a minuscule part of the Way of St. James where pilgrimages have been taking place for hundreds of years. Along the beautiful wildflower-lined trail through the vineyards that snaked over rolling hills to the mountains on the horizon, the hike was good for the eyes and the soul but hard on my foot still smarting from the escalator attack.

Then, on to Barcelona where our hotel was located directly on the La Rambla, a .7-mile long street in the central city with a wide pedestrian mall that is bustling 24-7 and leads to the 200-foot column holding a statue of Christopher Columbus overlooking the Port of Barcelona in the exact spot where he disembarked after returning from his discovery of the “New World.”

Sunday was a big day for the choir – from singing at a small church where the sanctuary sat behind a row of storefronts to performing a couple of selections inside the world renowned La Basilica de la Sagrada Familia (aka Catedral de Barcelona) and to presenting a final concert that evening in an historic basilica a few blocks from our hotel.

Construction of the Sagrada Familia began in 1882 and is expected to be complete by 2026, a hundred years after the death of Antoni Gaudi who designed and began building the architectural masterpiece over a period of 43 years. He left models that are still being followed. Nowadays, the work is progressing much faster with the use of cranes and computers. With the naves now closed, the church has 4,500 square meters where 8,000 people can worship. It is nearly 250 feet to the top of the dome inside and nearly 400 feet to the top of the ornate bell towers outside. The front has three facades bearing collections of statues replicating Christian scenes from the nativity to the cross. It’s a “temple of atonement,” so contributions of work or money will “open the gates of Heaven.”

Massive stained glass windows in circular and oblong patterns line the sanctuary and send streams of vivid pastel colors creeping down the white stone walls, pillars and arches at mid-afternoon until it looks like you are standing in a gigantic bowl of spumescent spumoni.

On our last day in Spain, we travelled by bus about an hour north to Montserrat. Literally translated, it means serrated mountain, so named because it looks like the sides – rising nearly straight up more than 4,000 feet – were cut by a serrated knife. Montserrat is also accessible from Barcelona by train and cable car. Near the top of the mountain – where Gaudi found inspiration for the Sagrada Familia – is a monastery with a 12th century Black Madonna statue and a basilica where we were thrilled with a short performance by the world famous boys’ choir, L’Escolania, before our choir did a couple songs of their own. The views around the monastery were truly breathtaking.

The choir flew back to Indianapolis the next day. Mary Ann and I flew to London to meet an English couple who became good friends on a Danube riverboat cruise.