“The Run”– Pamplona, Spain

If there is an event anywhere in the world that is the perfect manifestation of everything your mum told you not to do it is the San Fermin Festival in Pamplona, Spain. Participating in this puritan’s nightmare requires drinking volumes of sangria, frolicking with the opposite sex, dancing all night, running with very sharp objects – which happen to be attached to 600 kilograms of angry bovine flesh – and cheering the bloody demise of innocent animals. “The Running of the Bulls” is a celebration of all things primitive.

6.45am 65bpm
(time) (heart-rate)

It has been drizzling all morning. I had hoped this would deter some from participating but thousands now crowd into the barricaded streets wearing the traditional uniform of white shirt, white pants, red scarf and red sash. Some carry rolled up newspapers to help direct the bulls along. Most are men. A good number of girls are present, though, ignoring the Spanish machismo that discourages them from running.

I have no choice but to run this morning – it is my last of three days in Pamplona and I missed the closing of the barricades yesterday. Once the barricades are closed it very difficult to join “The Run”; the crowd controllers aren’t timid about using their sticks to stop latecomers.

7.00am 75bpm

My mouth is dry. I try to swallow. Is it fear or last night’s sangria? Its probably fear; images of nine people gored on the first day flicker in my mind as they did yesterday on local television. Two of the victims are seriously injured – one man had a bull’s horn stop within a centimetre of puncturing his heart. Rumours spread last night that they died, but fortunately it is not the case. There hasn’t been a death in about 6 years. There is, though, the stunning realisation that “The Run” is deadly serious.

7.15am 75bpm

More runners arrive, and small groups form around those that have run before. These “experts” give advice to us novices regarding how “The Run” unfolds and where to stand for the best encounter. “The Run” is the movement of bulls from holding pens at the edge of the old town to the arena (Plaza de Toros) at the centre. The bulls that run in the morning are the same that stoically meet their demise that night. For the first two hundred years of the festival, the bulls were driven through the streets on their own by herders. Then in the 18th century several local “lads” jumped the fence and ran along beside the bulls, thus beginning an annual tradition.

7.30am 90bpm

Hurry! Last minute arrivals squeeze through the barricades as they close. Spectators behind surge forward to guarantee a good view. These crowds contain many of the seniors and children whose appearance around Pamplona during the previous days has surprised me. The expectation I formed prior to my arrival was that any local participation in this festival had long been washed away by a tide of Australian and South African beer, urine and vomit. But thousands of Spanish families still attend the celebrations. There is a family atmosphere. Local bands play in the squares and there is a giant fair. And though they have their families with them, once they put the children to bed the Spanish do some of the hardest partying.

7.55am 95bpm

Many runners gather around a small wall-mounted alter that houses a statue of San Fermin. They sing their praises to the patron saint of the festival and pray for his protection. The festival, from the 6th July until the 14th July each year, of which the run

is only a part, celebrates San Fermin's life. Ironically he was martyred by being dragged behind bulls.

8.00am 110bpm Boom! A rocket explodes to signal the bulls' release. A roar goes up from the runners and spectators. Looking back down the street I can't see the bulls. Where are they? I can sort of judge their progress by the disturbance they create in the crowd of runners. They're quickly coming up the hill towards me along the cobble-stoned streets of the old town. Because the streets are slippery and the course is up-hill and crowded, it is impossible to out run the bulls as they take less than three minutes to plough their way the 800 metres to the arena.

8.01am 130bpm The crowd around me begins jostle and with no warning I suddenly see the bulls only 10 metres away. I run. I weave. The leading bull is beside me. They are grand creatures bred specifically for this day's events. Every muscle and vein is visible beneath his taut hide. Deciding it is safer to be on the barricade I leap up. Rip. The shirt of the runner behind me is shredded as another bull gallops by. There is a bull running etiquette that the locals expect you to follow. Their main rule is that the bulls are not to be touched or distracted. If the bulls are distracted they may turn around and run back down the course into unsuspecting runners. Anyone who does disturb the bulls receives swift and somewhat brutal justice from the locals.

8.02am 140bpm All the bulls pass. I run again. "The Run" is not over just because I am now behind the bulls. Boom! A second rocket detonates to signal the release of the cows. Three cows are let loose after two minutes to sweep through the streets and control the bulls once they enter the arena. Though a cow is half the size of a bull, they are still large animals plus they too have a set of horns. I must remember to watch for them and reach the Plaza de Toros quickly because the arena gates close as the cows enter – and I want to be inside for the for the next phase of the morning's activities.

I scamper down the street after the bulls. I approach the one ninety-degree right hand corner on the route at Calle Estafeta. I sprint around the corner. Hold up! Bull on the road. Bulls often loose their footing on the cobblestones and this corner is notorious for bull pile-ups. The bull is struggling in front of me to get up. The herders ask those around to step back. I needed no prompting to climb the nearest barricade. Friends who had run on the first day warned that fallen bulls often get up disorientated, and run back the wrong way. The herders form a wall. The bull rises the wrong way but prods from the herders' poles soon correct him running.

8.03am 145bpm I race towards the arena. Spectators hang from every vantage point – balconies, windows, barricades and lampposts. I pass the statue of Ernest Hemmingway, Spain's and bullfighting's greatest marketer. His terse prose in his novels "The Sun Also Rises", "Death in the Afternoon" and "For Whom the Bell Tolls" drew many Romantic Americans and other Europeans to Spain. He sits overlooking one of the most

dangerous parts of the run, just in front of the entrance to the Plaza de Toros.

As the runners rush to follow the bulls through this bottleneck somebody trips and the suddenly there is a twisted pile bodies, legs and arms. Let's go! Let's go! Runners struggle to disentangle themselves but the cows come flying around the corner at full speed. Unable to stop they try to fly. Wham! They come up a little short. They land on the pile. I can't hear any screams of pain. Nobody appears hurt. The cows race for the arena gates. I follow. As soon as the cows entered the arena the gates begin to close – those of us left outside press up against the gates, trying to squeeze in. Push! Somehow I pop out into the chute. I'm in. I run for the ring.

8.04am 130bpm Ahh! Suddenly my arm is grabbed by a Basque police officer. You can't miss the Basque police – they're the ones wearing the bright red berets.

Many think that berets are part of traditional French dress. The locals quickly remind you that berets are actually Basque. The Basques are an independent and mysterious people – no one can trace their roots and their language is not related to any other in the world. Pamplona is within Basque territory, an area that straddles the north-eastern section of border between France and Spain. The festival in Pamplona is a chance for the Basque population to display pride in their heritage. The Basque flag, the ikurrina – white and green crosses on a red background –flutters everywhere. As a part of their semi-autonomy they have their own police force. One of these policemen drags me aside and explains that it is against the law to run with a camera. I have a small instant camera tied to my arm. He ushers me briskly towards the back of the stadium.

8.10am 110bpm A number of other delinquents are gathered in a group at the back of the arena. The police are attempting to confiscate cameras from some. My white pants don't have any pockets so I quickly hide my camera in my underwear. We are told we have to pay a "fine" to get the cameras back. It soon becomes apparent that the police are not going to arrest anyone. Taking us to the lockup probably involves too much paperwork and as none in the group have any cash to pay the "fine" the police soon loose interest. Slowly some of us slip from the group and escape down a tunnel towards the sound of the crowd inside the arena.

8.15am 100bpm The bull-fighting ring is full of a thousand muddy matadors. Once the bulls have exited each morning, six yearlings are released, one at a time, into the ring so that the "wannabe" bullfighters can show their moves. The yearlings are smaller than their fathers plus their horns are filed down and covered with a leather patch so the risk of being injured is greatly reduced. But they can still give those without the necessary skills a decent thump. I dodge, slip, dive and run as the yearlings careen around the ring.

8.30am 85bpm "The Run" for this morning ends as the final yearling is removed. The crowd begins to drift to their rooms or to the bars. I wearily start to wander back to the room I had rented.

For visitors the festival might be about the animal instincts revealed by the blood, sweat and dirt of "The Run" but many locals have a more rational attachment to it. The festival is the main moneymaking event for the hotel and pension owners of the town and they attempt to earn their yearly income within the nine days. Capitalism and Communalism form an uneasy symbiotic relationship during the festival. The room I share with two buddies contains a single bed and enough room for one person to lie on the floor, wedged between the wall and the bed. For this minute room we are paying US$50 per night EACH. To get decent accommodation in the old part of town during the festival visitors should book months in advance and expect to pay "mucho pesetas".

At this stage I don't care - all I want is a couple more hours sleep before tonight's bullfight and the partying starts all over again.