

A climb to the height of tradition

In Barcelona, human towers build a link to Catalonia's culture

BY JOE RAY

FOR THE STAR-LEDGER

BARCELONA, SPAIN — My uncle the physics teacher would love this. The rest of the people I know in the U.S. would stare with a mix of amazement and disbelief.

But there I was last month, one brick in a tower of humanity, part of something called a castell — a centuries-old Catalan tradition of building human towers that can reach 10 levels high.

A guy named Gerard had caught me gawking at the team of castellers in the Poble Sec barrió and put me to work, squashing me up against someone to support them as they held the person above them firmly in place. I was hooked immediately and building castells proved to be an amazing window into Catalan culture, akin to a Catalonian getting into a Jersey Shore lifeguard competition.

Little did I know it then, but my role building human towers would help explain a region that through a Spanish government vote and regional referendum is gaining greater political autonomy.

Here or elsewhere, building castells is also one of the few human activities that span most age groups and social backgrounds.

Though its origins and best collas are in southern Catalonia, Barcelona has become something of a casteller outpost and a reason the tradition remains relevant.

"There's a lot of concentration and emotion," says Barcelona native Joaquim "Quim" Pérez, 20, a computer science student and a cap de canalla, or a captain in charge of the younger kids on the upper levels of the tower. "It's not like a soccer game where the ball goes back and forth. If you don't pay attention, everyone falls."

He lumps the falls, which happen more than you'd think, into two groups: "good falls" where the castell collapses on itself, a level at a time, which Pérez actually calls "kind of fun," and "bad falls" where the tower falls to the side in a mess of knees and elbows.

"It's teamwork and it's intense," he adds. "Plus, you've got 50-year-olds, little kids and everyone in between. The little kids can play with 15-year-olds and they like how they are an important part of it."

Making a castell works like this: With a fanfare of drums and tiny wooden oboe-like instruments called grallas, stout retirees are surrounded by a group of men and women, forming the base or pinya (yep, pineapple), which functions like a foundation and as a set of flying buttresses to support the tower above. My position tends to be a part of the pinya called the vent, stabilizing the tower by preventing it from twisting.

Once the pinya is packed together like sweaty sardines, several levels of increasingly younger — and generally slimmer — men and women, university students, and high school kids climb on their shoulders. Above that go the grade schoolers and the whole thing is



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A human tower is formed by the Castellers of Vilafranca team in Barcelona's Saint Jaume Square last year during the event performed every September to honor Barcelona's patron saint La Merce.

capped by a pair of 5-year-olds known as the aixecador and the exaneta, who fearlessly climb the sometimes-swaying tower, carrying with them the hearts and hopes of everyone in the crowd. Arriving, they wave and blow a kiss, and it's hard not to feel proud.

When Poble Sec's twice-weekly practice sessions end, most castellers adjourn to their nearby function hall for dinner, followed by a beer or game of foosball.

Whether practicing or performing in front of a crowd, the mix of the social and team aspects ends up creating a sort of synergistic bond between participants.

As the cap de colla, team captain, Benet Iñigo's challenge is to fit the castell together like a human puzzle, learning how to get the most from each person, while considering their height, weight and strength. He explains the tradition's growing popularity in Barcelona.

"It used to be a much more rural and masculine activity," he says. "Here in Barcelona, it has converted to a city function with a more diverse group of people."

As this happened, the stereotype of the macho casteller has faded. That said, he adds, when you participate, "You speak Catalan and get back to your cultural origins."

"Of course it's in Catalan," adds a smiling Pérez. "It would be like cricket players in England speaking French to one another."

They hold to it, too. Just about everybody on the team calls me "Pep" — the Catalan version of "Joe," mostly because pronouncing consecutive o's and e's makes it sound like they're calling someone else's name.

Beyond the stereotypes, Poble Sec club co-founder and current president, Xavier Ortega, 49, sees the castellers as a fitting symbol for this northeastern region of 6 million people.

"The pinya (base) requires a lot of force for it to work," he explains. "Catalans are serious, they're hard workers and they like to work for their community. The force in a castell is typical of our strength of working in groups and communities. A human group has so much potential."

"I like both sides of it," says Sandra Fàbrega, 12, who, as a dosos, tends to be just below the top of the castell.

Throwing bits of English and Spanish in with her Catalan, she explains why she's been doing this the past five years. "I have lots of friends here from school," she says, counting five giggling friends surrounding her, "and it's a tradition I like and am happy to do."

"Now," she says, grinning about two recent recruits, "both of my parents do it."

Joe "Pep" Ray covers food and cultural issues from Europe and is a proud member of the pinya for the Castellers del Poble Sec. He can be reached via his Web site, www.joe-ray.com.