

# Lalita - a Tai Chi Haven

Acebo, Spain - September 2009



Early September 2009 saw me making yet another tai chi journey with my good friend and fellow teacher, Bob Lowey. What was different for me this time was that I would attend as a guest, rather than as a teacher.

I had heard good things about Tai Chi Lalita and when Bob told me he was teaching there this year I told him that it was the only major European event I hadn't attended and felt I should visit sometime. Somewhat cheekily I asked him to ask Enrique, the organiser of the event, why I'd never been invited

to teach there. A short while later Bob told me that Enrique suggested I come as his guest, with a view to teaching the following year - a very noble gesture on his part.

After some troubles organising flights we finally found our way to Stansted airport and onward to Madrid. Michelle LaRoux, who Bob knew well, and who, coincidentally, had attended all my teaching sessions at Recontres Jasnieres a few months earlier, met us soon after arrival and kindly allowed us to travel the 3-4 hour ride south in her hire car.

We made a couple of stops en route, once at a truck stop where we enjoyed a local steak and chips and beer, cheap - delicious and much welcome in the long journey. Our second stop was at a charming little town where we savoured a local wine at a pavement café in the picturesque town square.

For the final part of the journey I took the wheel and, when Acebo approached Bob encouragingly offered to take over to negotiate the dirt track, mountain track leading up to the spiritual centre Lalita, which nestled in depths of a small



Sam Masich

forest on a potentially dangerous road. Fired by a sense of adventure I gently drove up the rocky road, dust road and, much to the relief of my passengers we eventually arrived at the car park and walked through the trees to the grounds of Lalilta.

Lalilta spreads over an area of a few square miles or so and consists of a series of imaginatively designed buildings that includes an indoor kitchen and dining area, two temples and residential quarters of various sized rooms. Each building was handcrafted with natural wood and a strong eye for aesthetics and quality. In temperatures of 300+ the rooms were cool and comfortable and conducive to meditation and movement.

On arrival we reported to the reception room where we were cordially welcomed and shown to our sleeping rooms. Once settled in we joined others including Enrique, the organiser, Sam Masich and Nathan Menaged, two of the teachers who we had also known for some years.

Being Spain, and being constantly either hot or warm (in the evenings) almost everything took place outdoors,

including most social interaction. There was an area set to the side of the main central building which had a large table surrounded by various sofa, chairs and lounging furniture. Here was where we all gathered to relax, chat and listen to the performances of Bob & Sam who had by now become the acoustic music providers for a number of similar gatherings in various European countries. Much wine, laughs and merry moments were enjoyed around the 'Kasbah' over the course of the event.

The next morning we took a leisurely walk through the woods, along to the smaller temple, where Jean Luc-Perot was conducting an early morning qigong workshop. Again the room was spacious and cool and the students were enjoying a series of qigong movements. Jean-Luc has a relaxed, easy-going manner and teaches quality movements in a way that allowed students to discover their natural energy flow.

The grounds of Lalilta are ideally suited for the practice of internal arts; flat ground, warm but shaded and surrounded by fresh, natural foliage by way of mature trees. Other teachers included Nathan Menaged working on the Water Form, Mario Napoli teaching tui shou with an emphasis on ground connection by way of stability and strength and Sam Masich dealing again with his unique approach to push hands focussing on sticking and rolling. Bob Lowey taught a short, but dynamic Wudang Hand Form that included a range of movements including testing low stances. Jean-Luc Perot also displayed a relaxed by highly effective use of the stick when teaching the stick form.

Having spent the summer visiting a number of taiji events in many countries I decided to take a day off to climb a mountain, which overlooked the campus of Lalilta. Judging by what I could see I reckoned on a couple of hours to get up



and an hour or so to return. Heading off around 10.00 am, just after breakfast I made my way through the trees, down by the river and through a farm track to the base of the mountain. After 45 minutes or so things started to get a little rough; everywhere was covered in bracken which grew higher, the more I ascended. Then there was the added work of climbing up rocks, and leaping upwards to get the next handhold. It also began to get hot, very hot. Despite the fact it was now September the temperature rose upwards to 30+. Stupid me! Heading off in only a T-shirt and trousers and not a drop of water to refresh me. An hour later things were getting desperate, I was drying up, lips cracking and scratched and arms bleeding from the bracken. Then I heard a trickle of water, I knew it was

somewhere but couldn't see it. Slowly and gingerly I made my way across the rocks to a small creek down below. One big difficulty – it was covered in wild raspberries. Nothing else to do but rip them apart with my bear hands to lower my upper body down the space between the rocks, just far enough to get my mouth under the droplets and suck in fast in all I could get. 4 or 5 gulps in I pulled myself up and lay down on the rock. Seconds later I was violently sick, everything just leaped out of me! I then scrambled over the rocks on all fours, sought some shade beneath a bush, and fell asleep for around 40minutes or so. Once suitably recovered I decided to look for another route home – nothing else could be this bad!

Earlier that morning I spied a cow-herder driving 20 or so cows along a

mountain dirt road. I reckoned that would be a safer route home. I could see the track some way down the mountain and headed in that direction. Only trouble was, again I had to plough through intense bracken, way over my head. An added hazard was the steep rocks hidden beneath the bracken, which necessitated getting down on my butt and sliding downwards into the abyss below. During this tedious process I succeeded in ripping the ass out of my trousers at both sides whilst ripping the flesh from my arms in various places. Eventually after a couple of hours or so sliding, crawling and leaping across branches I could see the path some 100 or so metres ahead. Alas the only way through was to deal with the increased growth of wild raspberries once more. I looked carefully at the possibilities and decided to climb upwards and to my left for another 40 minutes or so. Again I needed water, again I hung upside down into the space beneath and again I was violently sick. Another bush, another sleep, then pick myself up and soldier on.

Eventually I made the path, followed it for 20 minutes to my left, and came to a dead end. No way through. About turn, follow the dry-stone wall around the intense woodland and head back towards my original route. By now the intense heat had left the sun but the onset of potential darkness was of additional concern to me. In the distance I could finally see sight of Lalilta but it was to be more struggling to reach the base. The bracken was well over head-height for most of the route and I varied between crawling low underneath and body-surfing across the top. More scratches, more trouser tears, increasing exhaustion and finally the end was nigh. With great relief I reached the base and saw the familiar little bridge over the little river. Around 8.30 I climbed the little incline into the back of the kitchen of Lalilta. Suddenly the dogs went



Mario Napoli

crazy, barking like hell at me. I waited to identify myself in the darkness and found my way to the dining room as folks were enjoying dinner.

Bob was shocked, relieved and angry at me for causing him and a number of others great concern about my well-fare. It seems that they were 10 minutes away from calling out the rescue services. Sam was also concerned whilst he and Bob seemed to take on the roles of my father and mother respectively, alternating between caring and scolding me simultaneously. Meanwhile the inimitable Mario expressed his disappointment at my return as he had his claim on my laptop in the event of my demise!

After copious amounts of water, a little food a sleep and shower I resumed the evening's entertainment at the Kasbah but surprising felt disinclined to shake my increasingly aging and well-scarred booty at the more than inspiring dance-music played by the young DJ at this, the final evening's party.

The next morning I was back in full strength, in favourable condition for the long journey home. Despite my arduous ordeal on the mountain I had an



Enrique & group during form practice



Chillin' by the Kasbah!



Laura Stone & Dan

absolutely wonderful time in Lalita.

There is unquestionable quality control shown in the selection of instructors and material taught and for that alone it's worth attending the event. However if you like to train in a lovely atmosphere with genuinely friendly people Lalita is a place to go. Having attended every major event in Europe I always wanted to tick the final box by visiting Lalita. I'm delighted to have been privileged to be a guest of Enrique and his organising group. Each event has its own flavour and for me Lalita was a place of quiet, charm and grace. I'm already looking forward to a return visit next year when I'll be teaching! – Thanks to all!



Mario in action!