

At the General Archive of the Indies in Seville

I'm in Seville. But why did I come to the Archive? Perhaps something to do with feeling that somehow, here, I might connect with some latent energies from those distant days of the Spanish seaborne empire that will instil me with fresh ideas.

All around me as I write there are other researchers, all lost in their own little virtual worlds, pouring over *lejagos* –stacks of tattered yellowing pages covered with the scrolled elegant but faded handwriting from those days. The Archive is like the memory bank of a vast mind, each volume a neuron containing enshrined within it a memory, a group of memories; a story from the long past of a lifetime, a view of a lifetime, an account of lifetimes. It is a house of experience: of summers and winters, of home making and journeying; a portal into another dimension of people and their worlds that passed so many long years ago.

As a single leaf falls from a tree and, with the thousands of others carpets the forest floor, here, thousands of letters, reports, statements and chronicles – pages of individual experience from some human being caught in their own place and time of history, found their way in crates, in ships' holds back across the ocean to find their final resting place here – the Archivo General de Indias. A modern hand now holds the faded parchment, reads the scrawled handwriting of that other across time: two people holding hands across that vast divide of time.

Here you can almost smell the sea, feel the spray, hear the scream of seagulls and the creaking of the ships masts and ropes and hull. Hear the shouts of sailors, eavesdrop on so many tales of faraway places that the passengers of these naos and galleons have seen.

Later, another world away, I lay on my back on the park bench in the hot sunshine, listening to the strumming of sweet guitar music and the cooing of the multitude of ring doves high in the old trees, branches latticed against a cornflower sky devoid of cloud, lost in a haze of lunchtime's soft Rioja. The morning chill of March now banished, it was like Seville of old – the radiance and the heat. I awoke and dragged myself into the present. The guitarist had briefly paused, but

the doves cooed on. The sunshine had started to burn now, and the wine haze threatened to turn into a dull headache. I pulled myself upright. Hours it seemed had passed under those shining skies, dreaming of those far away times and places. I gathered my few belongings and continued my journey to find a better place to siesta, back in the cool dim hush of my little hotel.