On Friday 15th June 2018, some 50 IFEAT members from 22 countries met at the celebrated Alfonso XIII Hotel in central Seville for a welcome dinner at the start of IFEAT’s 11th Study Tour to Spain (SST). Twenty-one years earlier the hotel was the location for IFEAT’s Seville Conference.

Following an initial briefing, the SST began as it was to continue - convivial and knowledgeable people, excellent food, perfect weather and fascinating Spanish culture - and this time, some amazing flamenco music and dancing. Some delegates got into the mood earlier in the day with a flamenco lesson.

Each study tour is both memorable and different. By the end of the SST on Saturday 23rd June delegates had travelled over 1,500 km through magnificent scenery starting in Andalucía, Spain’s most southern province bordering Portugal, to Perelada Castle in the northeast on the French border. The eight days were filled with visits to a number of diverse companies and organisations - mostly IFEAT members - involved in a range of F&F activities. Delegates saw and discussed at length a large number of essential oils and other F&F ingredients. Each company gave a warm welcome and explained in great detail the growing, harvesting, distillation and further processing of various Spanish produced essential oils and other F&F ingredients. Distillation produces about 1.5 MT of cistus oil, predominantly organic, and the extraction process produces 60 to 70 MT of concrete. A planned visit to a thyme distilling operation was cancelled because of the late crop; instead we saw the harvesting and distillation of Eucalyptus globulus.

For many members it was their first experience of seeing cistus, which grows wild on large expanses of uncultivated land and has a strong balsamic ambery odour. Cistus develops a protective gum and reproduces quickly after being cut or burnt. The branches are harvested from July through to October and products made by distillation or extraction of the twigs are called “cistas”, while products derived from the gum are called “labdanum”.

The weekend started in Huelva and Seville, with visits to three companies specialising in cistas (Cistus ladaniferus L.). The first was Biolandes Andalucía S.A., which operates a 24/7, automated cistus processing plant. Biolandes, the parent company, is a world leader in natural extract production. The others were Aromas Y Esencias Del Andevalo, Spain’s largest producer of ciste oil, and Aramouza, owned by Albert Vialle, whose chairman Georges Ferrando was there to greet us. While Aromasur’s major products are cistus-based, it processes a range of other natural extracts, all of which were available during the smelling session.

A key feature of study tours is the interaction between participants from many countries and various F&F sectors. During the long hours travelling together they share their knowledge and experience either through individual discussions or via the “bus lectures” - it is an intense learning experience in an enjoyable environment. Nevertheless, considerable stamina is needed - early rises, often daily checkouts, much travelling and being on the go all day, late nights and dinners. But everyone seems to enjoy themselves and each returns to work refreshed and revitalised.

The weekend started in Huelva and Seville, with visits to three companies specialising in cistas (Cistus ladaniferus L.). The first was Biolandes Andalucía S.A., which operates a 24/7, automated cistus processing plant. Biolandes, the parent company, is a world leader in natural extract production. The others were Aromas Y Esencias Del Andevalo, Spain’s largest producer of ciste oil, and Aramouza, owned by Albert Vialle, whose chairman Georges Ferrando was there to greet us. While Aromasur’s major products are cistus-based, it processes a range of other natural extracts, all of which were available during the smelling session.

For many members it was their first experience of seeing cistus, which grows wild on large expanses of uncultivated land and has a strong balsamic ambery odour. Cistus develops a protective gum and reproduces quickly after being cut or burnt. The branches are harvested from July through to October and products made by distillation or extraction of the twigs are called “cistas”, while products derived from the gum are called “labdanum”. Detailed descriptions as well as documents were provided of the techniques used to produce the range of products, e.g. cistas and labdanum oils, concrete, absolute, gum labdanum and amberine. Spain produces 80% of cistus derivatives and Andevalo is the dominant producing region. Annually approximately 10,000 MT of cistes twigs are processed of which 6,000 to 7,000 MT are used to produce 300 to 350 MT of gum labdanum, a major perfumery ingredient. Distillation produces about 1.5 MT of cistus oil, predominantly organic, and the extraction process produces 60 to 70 MT of concrete.

A planned visit to a thyme distilling operation was cancelled because of the late crop; instead we saw the harvesting and distillation of Eucalyptus globulus.
lavandin and helichrysum were the focus of attention. In the forests around Coca, delegates saw the tapping of 50-75 year-old pine trees - another new experience for most delegates. The pine oleoresin is then processed into gum turpentine and rosin at the nearby operations of Luresa Resinas, S.L. (formerly La Union Resinera Española, founded in 1898). We then moved to the beautiful 15th century Coca Castle, where a detailed presentation on the global resin, turpentine and terpene sectors was made, followed by a presentation on trends in the global terpenes industry and their vital role in ensuring the future sustainability of the F&F sector. The dinner in the evening was in Segovia overlooking the magnificent 2,000-year-old Roman aqueduct.

The following day we travelled to the beautiful historic town of Brihuega, some 920 metres high, which has become the centre of Spain’s expanding lavender industry. We visited Intercova Aromaticas’ 125 ha of lavender/lavandin and 10 ha of immortelle (helichrysum) fields and then its new distillation facility, incorporating some of the latest technology. The owner, Emilio Valeros, a leading Spanish perfumer, guided us around the operations. Lunch was at Brihuega Castle followed by presentations on the Spanish and French lavender industries and on Spain’s expanding essential oil industry, including fennel, immortelle, marjoram, rosemary, and thyme. Dinner was at the magnificent Castle of the Bishops of Sigüenza - surrounded by many Ferraris and other classic cars also on tour.

The next day we took our second high-speed train journey, this time to Barcelona. We visited the Ventos operations and saw various forms of distillation (molecular, fractional and CO2), as well as toured the impressive warehouse facilities. Also AILIMPO - the association representing the Spanish lemon and grapefruit industry - gave an excellent presentation on Spanish citrus and its oils. In the evening Lluch Essences entertained us to a superb buffet and paella meal overlooking the beach in Barcelona.

Two companies involved in citrus oils - as well as other vegetable oils - were visited in Lleida, a rich horticultural area. At Textron, part of the Plimon Group, we toured their new operations producing a range of vegetable oils mainly for the cosmetic, food and pharmaceutical sectors. Close by we toured Dallant’s Moleva plant to see the processing of fruit juices, fruit by-products and various specialty compound flavours, emulsions and juice blends.

The final day was spent at Jordi Calonge’s estate at Empordu, visiting the surrounding plantation and assisting in loading the still used for cypress and lentiscus distillation. After a very intense week, delegates were able to “chill out” and enjoy a string quartet and a swim in the pool. The evening saw a farewell dinner and fireworks display at Perelada Castle followed by a disco - a fitting end to a superb week.

Throughout the tour delegates were able to witness many aspects of Spain’s rich cultural heritage and entertainment. Every day a wide range of excellent Spanish cuisine and drinks were available - although perhaps too much and too late for some! From beginning to end, both the weather and organisation were excellent. The Local Organising Committee of Jordi Calonge and Ramon Bordas, as well as tour agent Events&Co, are to be warmly congratulated, alongside the many Spanish companies that participated, and sponsored events and gifts, as well as opened their operations to visitors over the weekend. This was yet another memorable IFEAT study tour and for many delegates a wonderful and unforgettable learning experience.

A book on the SST will be available later this year.