

Rachel Lilley

Study Abroad

4/22/09

I wrote this paper as an account of some of my experiences, good or bad, while studying abroad in Madrid, Spain. I tried to include some useful information that I wish I had know before arriving. I hope that someone who studying abroad will find this helpful!

The Decision

I decided in the fall semester of 2007 that instead of completing two more semesters in Manhattan and graduating in December of 2008, that I would instead study abroad my final fall semester. I had always been interested in study abroad, but had never looked into the possibilities. I knew that I wanted to learn Spanish, I chose Spain over Latin American countries because I had never been to Europe before. I grew up in a rural area in Kansas and had not yet experienced living in a larger city. Spain's capital Madrid with a population of 3.4 million seemed like a fun place to try!

I was also interested in the ISA program in Madrid. Since I need to take two more business classes as well as electives to graduate, and I could take my business classes in English, Madrid's program was the best choice for my situation.

The Housing

When I first arrived at my host's apartment I was surprised at the small size of the room and the bunk bed. I had a roommate that was on her way, and I wondered how all of our stuff was going to fit! It worked out though. I lived on the fourth floor of a small apartment building. My window over looked a busy street and pedestrian walk. Hello city noises! It took me about a week

to adjust to the late night noises. Spaniards keep late hours; some eat their evening meal at 11 in the evening!

My roommate and I shared a small bathroom, and since we had a host, our meals were prepared for us. Unfortunately our host, who was middle aged and single, was not the greatest of cooks. I was more than a little disappointed in my host. I sometimes felt like little more than a renter and even an inconvenience at times. My host family experience was not quite the cultural learning experience that I had expected. However, I would not discourage others from trying it. All of the other Americans that were in my program enjoyed their homestay families and had few complaints. A few Americans that I met had an apartment together; this was a fun accommodation. We could all get together before we went out. Also, host families sometimes discourage you from having visitors over.

Since I had already paid for my food through my homestay, I did not eat out very often. If I did it was easy to spend around 10 euros for a meal. Probably the best food that I had in Spain was at the school cafeteria! I still miss the coffee and pastries!

The Program

Since I had never taken any Spanish before, I decided to take the intensive month before the regular semester started. I think this was a good idea for me, although it was a little difficult because the instructors were not allowed to explain anything to us in English. The International Business class that I took was my favorite. The instructor worked in the agricultural importing and exporting industry of the Spanish Government, so his real life experiences were very interesting. The International Marketing class that I took was a disappointment, I think that the instructor was more into philosophy than actual marketing. Many of my friends were in that class and no one learned anything.

My Spanish language classes were very intense and the instructors expected a lot out of the students, so even though I am not fluent yet, I learned a lot in these classes. My class schedule

was fairly busy. I had classes all day twice a week and 2 half days, as well as an evening class. I had 17 hours completed while there. One class took about an hour and twenty minutes.

Homework was assigned every day in most subjects. One thing that I disliked was the missed class policy. If you missed over 3 classes you automatically lost 30% of your entire grade. This was a little difficult for me because of all the trips that my program had set up for us, independent travel, and illness. I did like that there was no classes on Fridays except for the intensive month.

The Location

I really like the city of Madrid. The metro system is one of the best in the world, it was very clean and the trains came around every two minutes. There is also a good bus system that ran through the day as well as the night when the metro closed at 1:30. This made life a lot easier since clubs opened at 2 and closed at 6. Another plus is the metro goes out to the Barajas Airport which is located quite a distance outside the city. If you take a cab to the city center from the airport or vice versa, then it will cost you from 30-40 euro. Instead you can take the metro from any terminal, just be sure you have a few extra euros in case you need a one-ride pass. This service saved me a lot of money while traveling. If I was supposed to leave early in the morning for a trip I would often go to the airport before the metro closed the night before, and overnight it in the terminal. This seemed pretty common with the Spaniards as well.

I enjoyed the culture and sites in Madrid, there were lots of museums to see as well as the palace, parks, and shopping areas. I was able to see a bull fight in October! My friends and I bought our tickets online, however we weren't told that the location to pick them up was at a location downtown, luckily we were able to buy tickets outside the gates before the fights started, and they weren't very expensive.

Also, since Madrid is a large transportation hub flights in and out were relatively cheap. Before I left I thought the best way to travel in Europe was by train. It was actually much cheaper

to book flights well in advance from budget airlines like Easyjet and Ryanair. Easyjet is usually a little more expensive but maybe a little better service. I flew Ryanair to Dublin for a weekend and it cost 20 euros round trip!! That was about 35 dollars at the time! Beware though; Ryanair tries to charge a 10 euro fee when checking in at the airport. Since I wasn't from one of the European Union countries I couldn't check in online and print my tickets.

The On-site Staff

ISA had an office in the city center, there were multiple computers the students could use, and we could go there for help if we needed anything. The staff was young and very nice. They were a lot of fun when we went on excursions. One of the trips was in a passenger bus to Morocco, this was the most fun I had! The staff were very easy to get along with and very helpful when most of us got sick from the food. Even though the bus ride during my Morocco trip was miserable, and the food was even worse, I would recommend the experience to anyone. If your program doesn't provide a trip to Morocco, there were other study abroad lead companies offering trips from Madrid. My university in Madrid posted travel and international student activities regularly.

The Packing

I packed very moderately; I had two average sized suitcases and one carryon. I brought all of the toiletry items that I thought I would need and most of it lasted till the end of the semester. I didn't bring a lot of clothes because I thought I would buy some in Madrid so that I would fit in better. I wish I had packed more of my own clothes though. The clothes in Spain were expensive if you wanted something nice, and the dollar was down compared to the euro while I was there. Also, don't forget the comfortable shoes! My American tennis shoes were out of place in Spain, but I felt they were a necessity! It was also a lot colder in the winter than I thought it would be. It also rained more. Don't forget a winter coat and waterproof shoes!

I would recommend to anyone planning on weekend travels to bring or buy a bag that rolls and is small enough to be a carryon. I bought a rolling backpack for 10 euros while there. I took a lot of weekend trips and to avoid the cost of taxis and transportation I did a lot of walking. Also, check the dimensions of the allowed carryon on the airlines website.

The Culture

I wish I had taken some Spanish classes before going, I think that the immersion that I experienced would have made me fluent by the time that I returned. But I wouldn't discourage a beginner to study abroad. I was surprised how much I missed my own culture, the Spanish people are very interesting to observe. They are almost rude when in a public area; they never say "excuse me" and just stand in the way oblivious to you if you are trying to get by them. But they are also a very family oriented, loving people. It's all kisses and hugs when being introduced! It was a little difficult getting used to the shops closing at 2:30 every afternoon and not reopening until 5:30 or so. However, it was really nice to have a siesta time if you had been out all night!

The Experience

Overall, I had a great experience while abroad; I was able to see amazing historical places, meet fun and interesting people from all over Europe, and adapt myself to a whole new culture. Even though I had some frustrating moments, I have no regrets for the time and money spent on my experience. I would suggest to anyone that they bring a laptop for ease of communication. Skype was invaluable to me while there because phone cards can become expensive quickly. I also bought a Spanish prepaid cell phone for about 30 euros at El Corte Ingles (a large department store) this was probably the least expensive inter-country cell phone plan. I used mine mostly for texting friends when and where to meet.

My advice to anyone would be to make the absolute most of your experience. Some of the best times I had were when my friends and I just went out walking and found interesting

things to look at. One of the most exciting moments for me was riding a camel through the Sahara desert. Another was standing inside the Al Hambra, where Christopher Columbus asked Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand to go on a venture that would eventually lead him to America. The Coliseum in Rome, the Guinness factory in Dublin, waffles from a street side vendor in Belgium, Hitler's Bunker. These are a few of the irreplaceable experiences of a lifetime that I will always have to remember!