

## Reflections on Studying Abroad: Spain

Upon my return home from a semester abroad in Spain, during my first few minutes of relaxation and peace, I jotted down the things I learned and thought about during my trip. During this recollection, I noticed that some of my realizations seemed obvious in hindsight. Therefore, I made this list to avoid thinking later on in life that I was born knowing what I had actually learned while living abroad. This would enable me to appreciate just how much I got out of my semester in Spain. This list fits into the following categories: language, reading and writing, gender stereotypes, budgeting, travel, minimalism and food.

### **Language**

First and foremost I learned a lot about the Spanish language. While spending time with my tutor Julia and her friends, I learned slang and colloquial expressions. When I appropriately used a new word or expression in conversation, we all excitedly celebrated my progress. I also learned new words from the many texts and novels I read for my courses. I kept a list of all the new Spanish words I came across and I studied them daily while riding the metro.

### **Reading and Writing**

Reading texts and novels also highlighted what I've probably been taught many times in previous literature courses. I realized from studying Spanish novels how important every word in a well-written book is. Not only was it important for me to look up every word I didn't know, but also to learn the cultural connotation of the words in order to fully understand the author's story.

While reading for my courses, I thought about my own writing. The assigned texts were all very direct and purposeful; each article introduced and clearly outlined the topic at hand and often used sub-headings to organize the content. Exposure to writing styles from different cultures encourages me to step away from meaningless writing conventions I may have learned over the years and to focus on effective communication.

### **Gender Stereotypes**

In Spain, I was also struck by the difference in gender stereotypes. In particular, I noticed that the stereotypical girl in the Universidad Autónoma de Madrid was very different than the typical girl at my home institution, Lafayette. I noted differences in dress, manner and even the tone in which they spoke. I realize now that not all the traits I think of as universally feminine truly are.

### **Budgeting**

With regards to budgeting, living in Spain was very different from both living at home and at school. I was purchasing things that in the past were covered by my parents or college tuition. My costs in Spain included food, school supplies, transportation, travel, entertainment and gifts. During my trip I realized that I was not budgeting my money well; I didn't plan ahead of time how much I was comfortable spending, nor did I predict how much I should allocate to each anticipated spending category. This mistake resulted in constant worry about how much I was spending. Making this mistake taught me that I'm not always going to know exact costs, exchange rates or my situation in the future, but the beauty of budgeting is tackling this truth with a best guess. With a budget, I can predict my expenses, factor in leeway for the inevitable unpredictability of life and keep my sanity. One of my first projects, after returning home from Spain, was toying with Excel and creating a program where I could manage my finances.

### **Travel**

One benefit of my new Excel budget spreadsheet is that I can confidently and comfortably allocate money for traveling, which has been a particular interest of mine ever since I lived abroad. Independently making decisions in Spain helped me to realize my personal motivations for traveling. Unlike field trips and family reunions, I was planning my own trips. I realized a pattern in the type of attractions I traveled to see: people, unique cultural events, nature and food. For example, I went to Lithuania to visit my boyfriend's

family, I traveled to Cadiz to experience carnival, and when I return to Spain in the future, I plan on visiting San Sebastian, to eat at some of the best restaurants in the world and see the beautiful sites.

### **Minimalism**

In conjunction with my new interest in traveling, I have come to value minimalism. I was forced to pack light on every trip because I simply didn't have more than a suitcase of things with me in Spain. Packing as little as possible made traveling so much easier. I could best see the difference between my pre-Spain self and my new minimalist self when I came back to campus and took my things out of storage. While going through my storage containers at school, I thought, "Why do I have all this stuff?" I realized how few things I really need in order to get by, and how liberating a reduction in meaningless possessions can be. A certain degree of minimalism allows flexibility as I travel and move around during these early years of my life.

### **Food**

Lastly I will share my discoveries about a more personal interest, food. My stepfather always said that, "some people eat to leave, while others live to eat." I fall into the second category. Although my love for food existed both before and after my semester abroad, it has proliferated as a result of my experience in Spain. My host mom taught me how to make her delicious arroz con leche and my friend Julia and I made her grandmother's chicken and cheese empanada together. I sampled various types of olives from a small specialty shop in my neighborhood and tried grilled sardines during carnival in Lisbon. My host mom also spoiled me with the best chorizo from her hometown, Diego y Leon. Not only did I learn new cooking methods and techniques, but I also came to appreciate new foods and flavors.

This list might seem a bit scattered in content, but it's that diverse, mixed bag of experiences and thoughts that characterized my trip. I learned many unexpected things through exposure to a new and different environment. I had initially expected to learn about Spanish culture and improve my reading, writing and speaking in Spanish. What made my experience even more rewarding was all the unexpected things I learned about budgeting, traveling, stereotypes and food. It only took a couple weeks of reflection before I decided to study abroad again. This time I'm off to Argentina!

-Katie McFadden  
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