

Universidad de Salamanca, Spain Spring 2009

My exchange experience has certainly been an experience. I was moving non-stop since before my arrival, asking questions, researching, and getting paperwork together. Overall it's been a great experience and I've met some wonderful people. However, it was very difficult to get the information I wanted quickly. Things move slower over in Spain.

I came feeling unprepared about where I was living, when, where (and what) my classes were, about the administrative and registration process, etcetera. It seems silly now, but I didn't think I needed a visa to study in Spain. (My older sister had studied abroad in Germany for a year and only had to register with the local police.) That left me thinking, "Europe is integrated with policies, right?" I was extremely aggravated with myself when I found out that wasn't the case.

Miss Benito (USAL) was quite helpful and patient after I arrived. I settled in to my dormitory and made some friends from all over the globe. Classes were scary at first, since the Spanish taught is that of native speakers, but after a few weeks the listening and understanding seemed to fall in to place. Almost all of the students and professors I've talked with are extremely understanding and friendly, and realize that the many foreign students may not always follow along. When asked, they repeat themselves, and listen attentively to the questions of everyone.

Registering for classes was interesting. As an exchange student, I could choose almost any course within the "libre eleccion" of the university. I was given a course catalogue and told to roll with it, and when I found what I liked, the secretary in the office did my registration for me. It was simple. Many students attend as many classes as they can without registering officially to see if they like the material, professor, etcetera. I suggest doing this, since a lot of the time the first week is dedicated to going over a brief syllabus and giving the students a feel for the course.

Once you're in your class, you really need to be on top of things. Homework and textbooks are basically nonexistent; the professor lectures for 1-2 hours and assigns readings that the students photocopy from the library. There may be a big paper due at the end of the semester, which is usually the only other grade besides the exam. Attend class regularly and take good notes, because if the professor knows you, they'll probably cut you a little more slack. Trying to play catch up with readings and essays in Spanish is a lot harder than in your native tongue.

I experienced minimal culture shock. The Salamanca lifestyle suites me very well and I made some friends that made me feel welcome and at home. Though it is a small city, one can find what they like, whatever their tastes may be. I missed being to talk to family and old friends every once in a while, but email and Skype make things like that much easier. The siesta makes efficient errand-running null and void, but it is a good excuse to go home and nap.

You might be surprised to see young children and older adults out late at night. The siesta pushes everything back later than in the US: dinner doesn't start until 10pm, thus the after-meal stroll could go on well past 1 in the morning! Salamanca is a college town with students from all over the world, so the nightlife is like that of a larger city like New York or Madrid. There's something going on every night of the week if you know

where to look. Live music on Sundays at Ohara's, International Party on Mondays at Irish Rover, and salsa every night of the week at Savor. The city of Salamanca distributes pamphlets showing the cultural activities of the month like special concerts, theater productions, art exhibits, and more. Museums have student discounts and on certain days free entries.

Spanish food is tasty as long as you're not vegetarian. Lucky for me that's not the case; almost every dish has meat of some kind, and it's usually pork. They like their mayonnaise, and seem to put corn and tuna in everything. Moving in to an apartment required me to do my own grocery shopping and cooking, so that meant I could eat whatever I liked, as long as what I liked was on the shelves of Carrefour. They don't always have the products or the brands you're looking for, so you have to fake it and make do. Moms and Dads are good for sending some Jiff when you can't find any around town.

If there's one thing I'll certainly miss when I go back to the States is the public transportation. City busses are clean and mostly on-time, taxis are easy to find (you can't just hail one down in the street, you have to go to a "taxi station"), and travel between cities and countries is a breeze with the number of buses and trains available every day. You can walk yourself almost anywhere within the city of Salamanca, but it's good to know that there's a bus or taxi available on the lazy, rainy days.

Prices are reasonable in Salamanca. Groceries and eating out are surprisingly cheap (less than 2 Euro for coffee and a "pincho") and should the urge for some self-indulgence overcome you, the major chain stores are about equal in price as certain stores back home. However, thrift shoppers and bargain hunters despair, cheap buys are few and hard to find. Those who like to shop should pack less clothing with them, knowing very well they'll end up with more than they can bring back.

Traveling and living abroad as an American student requires a bit of responsibility, I think. Many Europeans think badly of Americans because of the political agenda of our government, or only know what they see in the movies. Be careful how you answer questions, and if you aren't comfortable talking about certain issues, just politely say you have no interest or even better, use the language barrier excuse and say you don't understand. It's hard to defend yourself, your views, and the reputation you want to show of the US when you don't have a good grasp on the language. Political talks I've had have ended without too many bad feelings except for one, and that was the first one I was thrown in to.

Other tips I recommend, forgive me if I repeat myself:

1. Buy your flight round trip and just change the date later, no matter how cheap you think the one-way is. It's not cheap enough.
2. Start your visa application as soon as possible. This is difficult because the Spanish embassy only lets you solicit a student visa within 2 months of your planned departure. If they tell you it will be ready in two weeks, it'll really be four or five.
3. If you don't think you're going to use what you pack, don't bring it. You can always buy whatever you need when you get here.

4. Don't try to bring everything home with you at the end of the year. Leave behind old, beat-up clothes, shoes, notebooks etc. that you won't miss. "Donate" your leftover books, shampoos, etc to a friend. If family or friends visit throughout the year, send stuff back with them to make your load lighter.

5. Try not to stay exclusively in the American social/party scene. Some of the locals are a little closed off, but other Spaniards and international students are usually friendly and open to Americans who are open to them. Salamanca is full of international students, thus it is a very international city.

6. Do as much traveling as your budget allows. You never know when you'll be so close to the major European centers again. Ryanair.com has round-trip flights from 2 cents a piece! Busses and trains are reliable and affordable as well.

7. You'll get used to living here and might forget you still have to be careful. Salamanca is a pretty safe town, but you should still never walk alone at night. I know a handful of people who have been robbed, including my brother while he was here for a visit.

8. Apartments are easy to find and much cheaper than I expected. My first apartment was only 175-180 Euros a month, everything included, and my second was 200 Euros a month plus light and gas. If you choose to live with a host family, be ready for awkward culture clashes and family or roommate drama. Living in a dorm is social and easy, but very expensive (over 360 Euros a month.)

9. It's rare to live in a house that already has internet. Cyber cafes and bars with Wi-Fi are how most people get connected without signing a contract with an internet company. Bringing a laptop to Spain isn't necessary, but does make life easier.

That's about all I can think of as far as advice goes. When you arrive you'll learn the peculiarities like which store sells what you're looking for and how the work schedule goes. I highly recommend living and studying in Salamanca for the whole year, because just one semester can't possibly give the fulfillment like a whole year can. It's really a wonderful place.