

SOME LANGUAGE AND CULTURE ASSISTANTS IN SPAIN EXPERIENCES

Some participants tell us about their experiences.



Name: Isabel French

School: CEIP Europa

City / town: Mejorada del Campo

Province: Madrid

Autonomous Community: Madrid

Everything went perfectly at the arrival. I had managed to sublet my room from last year for the summer, so I just came back to the same flat.

My friends and flat-mate helped me during the transition period. Last year I made a lot

of close friends who helped me move in this year, get settled etc.

I would say that I have a professional relationship with the teachers at my school. They are all very kind and we get along quite well. Although they are my age we do not spend time together outside of school. Although we speak only English in the classroom, I was surprised to find (last year) that outside the classroom only one person on the entire English staff wanted to speak English. I expected them to view my presence as an opportunity to improve their English, but neither last year nor this year has that been the case. I am perfectly happy to speak Spanish, but it was a shock a first.

I suppose the first year around I hoped they would express more interest in my language/culture because they were English teachers. This year I knew what to expect. Last year the other Auxiliar was new to Spain and I think the fact that nobody on the entire English staff reached out to her in English made her feel rather culturally isolated at first. But her Spanish was excellent by the time she left!

I love my students! With time I have learned the art of controlling a classroom of 25 seven-year-olds in English and I love watching their progress. At my school we teach PE in English and I think it has really helped improve the students' view of the *Auxiliares* because now they also associate English (and us) with having fun and running around.

I am very friendly with many of the parents at my school because last year I gave English classes to a number of the mothers of my students. They have taken me under their wing and are all very affectionate with me. We always stop and talk on the street and they often come stand with me while I wait for the bus- just to chat.

I love the administration at my school. They have always been very supportive and helpful, and I know if I even needed anything (a new flat, an *intercambio*, etc) they would do everything they could for me.

Last year I did not but we hope that I can this year. So far the only trip this year has been to the public library a block down the street with 1º, but I plan to participate in future field trips.

Other than giving classes to my student's moms, there is a parent day at school, and town race down main street for our school's students and parents.

I have three close friends (two of whom lived with an American friend last year) - and through them I have met lots and lots of friends. Also, this year I have made some friends in my classes at the Escuela Oficial (Official School for Adults).

Americans wait for the person speaking to finish before we begin speaking. Spaniards do not and this can be interpreted as rudeness or interrupting if you don't know better. Not so! It is just a different style of conversation. Nobody invites you to participate in conversation here you just have "interrupt" and dive in don't wait "your turn."

People here do not "sugar coat" anything they say. Sometimes it can feel a little harsh to an American who is not used to it. Spaniards are always joking and making jokes about each other. Don't take it personally!! If you are the brunt of a joke it is just because they consider you to be a friend!

It is perfectly acceptable to be late to social events.

There also seem to be different rules about which fruits need to be peeled or "dunked" in a glass of water before being eaten. I once took a bite out of an apricot without "dunking" it first! Oops!! Also, never put raw mushrooms in a salad you are going to eat with Spaniards! Totally taboo!

Last weekend I went to Burgos with a friend. We stayed in an adorable little hotel on the plaza and spent the weekend wandering around the city. It is a beautiful little town with a river and a castle on the hill and snowcapped mountains in the distance. Despite the cold, that Burgos is apparently famous for, we had a wonderful weekend drinking hot cocoa, walking along the river, eating croissants and *tapas*, and exploring the sights.

I miss everyone listening to each other in group conversations, rather than having to shout over someone in order to participate. I miss blending in on the street (I'm 6 foot and blonde). I miss international restaurants with good food at reasonable prices (and having friends that like to eat international food!). I miss being able to buy certain products at the pharmacy off the shelf rather than having to go to the doctor first and get a prescription. As far as products go, after a little searching you can find nearly everything. Nothing comes to mind at the moment.

I studied at La Complutense in 2003 and yes, I remember it being difficult to communicate that year, but these past two years I have had no problems aside from minor misunderstandings now and again.

I understand what it is like to be a foreigner, and living in the US, particularly California, I think this is priceless. Now when I come across foreigners in the States I literally want to help them find housing, teach them English, ask them a million questions about their country and culture, and befriend them and immediately include them in my group of friends.

I know how to teach. I understand children. I speak fluent Spanish. I have friends all over the world. I have great job experience for my resume. I could really go on and on...

If you are from California, bring everything you own. Winter here is long and cold and the heaters often leave something to be desired. Come with an open mind. Americans are famous here for saying that everything is better in the States...don't be that American. Come to learn and improve yourself. Don't teach people how you think things should be done, let them teach you. After all, you are the one visiting!!! Of all the places I have been I have found Spanish people to be one of the warmest, most open, and happiest peoples anywhere. Just come here willing to eat new and different things, act new ways, and learn.

If you have trouble meeting people, don't despair. Get an *intercambio*, or five. Go to the gym. Join one of the many running clubs in the Retiro. Go out for a beer with an American in the program and strike up a conversation in the bar with someone next to you (you may end up going out dancing with them until 6 am). Take classes at the *Escuela Oficial* (or any academy). Volunteer. Just put yourself out there as much as possible! And have fun!!

Name: Julie R. Taylor

School: Celia Viñas

City / town: Fuenlabrada

Province: Madrid

Autonomous Community: Madrid

My arrival in Spain went smoothly as I had visited Madrid before while studying in Spain and knew how to get around. I had reserved a hostel and had a great first few days getting to know Madrid a bit better and meeting people in my hostel. The search for housing was difficult; I went to see many different apartments and it became very stressful after over 8 days of searching. I think that searching for housing in Madrid is a challenge and even more so in September when all the students are looking for accommodations. It all worked out in the end and I'm very happy to have the experience of looking for housing in a large city (as I'm sure it would be just as difficult in NYC or Chicago). It also gave me a chance to see different neighborhoods of Madrid.

I enrolled myself in a French class and a dance class that I found over the internet. I think staying busy was the best thing for me. These classes were also a great chance to meet new people and to not feel too lonely. I also met a very good friend the first week in the hostel who was doing an internship in Madrid. It was nice to have someone to get to explore the city with.

I feel very comfortable with the teacher I personally work with and the administration. They are all very friendly and have been extremely supportive and helpful in difficult situations (medical, legal papers, random questions about living in Spain, etc.). I had no contact with the families.

I have attended a few field trips to the English theatre and the science museum. I think this was helpful as I could share the experience with the children and had a good idea of their overall experience and knowledge in English.

Other than attending classes and field trips I have attended the school events (as they occurred during my work day) and joined the teaching staff for dinners.

I got to know people outside of my work environment through different private classes I signed up for (language and dance), through my roommates, and by going out with friends.

I had studied in Spain for a year before so I didn't have any major misunderstandings this time around.

I visited a friend in Glasgow, Scotland over Christmas vacation and then met up with another friend in Dublin for the New Year. I visited the States during *Semana Santa* (Easter) and made many weekend trips to different Spanish cities throughout the year.

I mainly missed people: friends and family. Sometimes it was more of a challenge to find things here not knowing where to look, but I haven't found anything impossible.

Before arriving my level of Spanish was pretty advanced so I didn't have too many major difficulties, but there is always room for improvement and overall, my Spanish is much better now (pronunciation and lexicon).

The experience of living in a major European capital and in Spain is great. Meeting many new international friends. Living in a Spanish speaking environment to improve my Spanish (and live the lifestyle). Experience with children in a classroom setting (and teaching subjects other than just language!). Working with experienced professors. Two years of teaching experience for my CV.

A good advice could be arrive at least mid-September or earlier to look for an apartment. Involve yourself in classes or courses outside of school to meet people. Don't take on too many private English classes and enjoy your time in Spain!

Name: Joseph Casillas
School: Escuela Oficial de Idiomas
City/town: San Fernando
Province: Cádiz
Autonomous Community: Andalusia

Arriving in Spain is always an exciting time, but very tiring due to the time change. It is best to sleep as much as possible on the plane so that you are awake and ready to meet new people the first few days.

The director of my school was very helpful regarding housing. She even offered to let me stay with her until I found something more permanent. Overall it was not too difficult to get settled in. The Internet is your best resource when apartment hunting.

The other teachers in my school went out of their way to include me and make sure that I was adjusting with out any problems. It is important to do your best to get out and meet new people. The sooner you are able to make new friends of your own the faster you will adjust to your life in a new country.

From the very beginning I had a unique relationship with the teachers in my school. We often met up outside of work to have a drink and practice our language skills. Thus I was placed in a small town so it was a little strange being "*el Americano*" at first, but it was fun to see how interested the students were in me for being the new guy. Many of them are older and have become good friends of mine. The same goes for the teachers/administrators.

Our school planned three excursions during the school year and I participated in all of them. It was an educational experience and the bus rides were memorable. We also organized a EOI soccer team and played against other schools on Saturday mornings. On several occasions I brought an American football and showed them how to play "real" football.

I was involved in everything I possible could be as far as the school is concerned. Excursions and our soccer league are the first things that come to mind.

At first it was a little bit slow keeping in mind the language barrier and the fact that my town is rather small, but after several weeks I had already found my niche through going to the beach and participating in sports. Obviously nightlife is another great way to meet people. You just have to tough it out in the beginning until you meet more people.

I think I could write a book about the cultural differences regarding food, clothing, music, and humor. These are things you learn as you go and I often found myself laughing at a few of my many "misunderstandings". After two years here I still find myself thinking a certain conversation went one way only to be told later that I had accidentally offended somebody or come off as shy/timid/cocky etc. Depending on the situation. In general, people understand that these things happen with foreigners.

On several occasions I went to Granada and Madrid. It is important to do as much research as possible before embarking on any journey and to keep in mind that cultural differences can be seen from one part of Spain to another. I've mostly had to be careful with what is considered normal/proper conversational Spanish and what should be said in more formal situations. A good piece of advice is to learn proper/formal methods of conversing first. Later, it's always easy to "lower" your register for when you are talking to your friends.

The main thing I found myself missing was my family. The gastronomy of Spain is fabulous and you can find just about anything if you really miss certain foods. Typically the things I had no way of accessing (my mom on the other side of the world) are what I most often missed.

I think most people have varying experiences with the language depending on where they are living and the amount of Spanish they have studied beforehand. Generally, it will take you a couple of weeks to make the change into "Spanish Mode". If you are living in the south you should be prepared to make an extra effort to understand people, but this also improves with time. The amount of improvement you make is completely dependent upon the amount of effort you make. Find an *intercambio* who can help you or ask the teachers in your school. Another good idea is to record yourself (you'll be surprised how much worse your pronunciation is than what you originally thought) and to read out loud.

Utilize all the resources you have available to you, which are mainly your co-workers and the administration at your school. Also, learn which are the best websites. Pretty much any question you can think of has been discussed ad-nauseam on the forums and everybody there is willing to help out and answer questions.

Name: Michael D. Winchester
School: C.E.I.P. Gloria Fuertes
City / town: Getafe
Province: Madrid
Autonomous Community: Madrid

My arrival in Spain was smooth and easy. The first few days were fine, no problems. The search for housing/accommodation was not too hard. This year I had an apartment ready when I got here, and last year I used an agency to help me locate an apartment.

My Spanish friends here in Madrid helped me. In general, it was easy. I had studied here in the past and was already very familiar with the city and customs, so there was no "culture shock".

My relationship with the teachers is amazing. I think I am very fortunate to have been placed in the school I am in. I have made some very good friends here and have become very close with many of my coworkers. The students look up to me not only as a teacher, but also as a friend. The families (I think...) respect me and appreciate the work I am doing, although I think many are skeptical of what we are trying to accomplish.

I feel I have become very involved within the school, but not so much within the community, per se. I do everything I can within the school to help – and I always go to the festivals whenever I can.

I got to know people outside my work environment through my friends here in Spain. Luckily, I had a couple of friends upon arrival, and they have been more than welcoming and more than kind. I feel that Spaniards in general are a fairly open people, and it is through them that I have met most of the people outside my work environment.

The major cultural differences I see between Spain and the United States are the interactions and interpersonal relationships between friends and co-workers, co-workers and the children in the school, and societal views on political issues (obviously).

I've taken many trips in my two years here, but I guess one of my favorites was a short 4 days trip to Denmark on a *punte*. Three friends and I found some really inexpensive flights on easyjet.com the week before the *punte* and decided to go. We spent the *punte* in Copenhagen enjoying the local sights and culture (although it was incredibly cold.)

The things I miss most about my country are my friends and my family (especially at Christmas). Medicine is incredibly easy to find and buy here (and cheap too!) but I have found other things much more expensive than in the USA (deodorant, razors to name two). It is also very hard to find a lot of food products here, like peanut butter, brownies, pancake mix, and other things of that nature.

It was hard to communicate at first. Not so much in terms of everyday things at the supermarket or at the school, but more so with my friends and colleagues. It was very hard to communicate exactly what I was thinking and feeling, and I always felt as if I wasn't translating everything I wanted to say. It is still that way now, to some extent, although much less. There are just some sentiments and ways of expression that do not translate into other languages, no matter how fluent one is.

Independence, knowledge of another country/culture, knowledge of a foreign language, learning how to communicate on another level and in other ways, learning to think about things from a different perspective are the best things of the experiences.

My advice is to come with an open mind and an open heart, don't get discouraged, and enjoy every minute.