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MFL Travel Essay

April 3, 2008

Red Wine and Rooftops

Like so many people who grow up in the United States, I was suckled from infancy on a steady diet of “American pride” and accustomed to a general obliviousness to the world that exists outside the confines of national boundaries. Here there is a widely-held and unchallenged belief that the U.S. is the best country in the world, that nowhere else enjoys the freedoms that we do, and that everyone else wants to come to America and to be American. I never realized how limited my little Midwestern worldview actually was until I had the opportunity to step outside of it for a while. I know that in the course of an entire lifetime, two months may not seem like a very significant stretch, but when I flew across the Atlantic to experience life in Spain, my whole world was turned around.

I confess that my intentions for a summer-long study abroad program in Granada, Spain were pretty small-minded at their conception. I decided to take the big leap of leaving my husband for eight long weeks so that I could get college credit hours and complete my Spanish major on time. There was no way I could have fully grasped the magnitude of the trip at that point. I said my goodbyes in O’Hare International Airport in Chicago and boarded American Airlines Flight 2050 feeling a combination of excitement and nausea. ‘What on earth was I getting myself into?’ I wondered.

When I disembarked from my plane in Madrid, I didn't find the Mediterranean paradise I had anticipated. In fact, that first day proved to be the most grueling, life-sucking challenge I had ever experienced. Exhausted by a 12-hour flight, unaccustomed to the language, and completely unprepared to find shelter or assistance, I desperately wandered on foot through an unfamiliar city of 3.5 million people for approximately ten hours. In addition to the uncertainty and sleep deprivation that gnawed at me was 90 pounds of luggage and incalculable flights of metro stairs that had to be climbed and descended, climbed and descended. The overwhelming nature of this maniacal expedition through Madrid far surpasses my descriptive abilities, but what didn't break me made me stronger.

Because of poor planning on my part, my first hours in a foreign country were trying beyond belief. However, things were soon to improve. With the help of a few compassionate strangers, I was able to make my way by train to Granada, which was to become my home for two months. There I took residence at a youth hostel called Funky Backpackers. Despite its comical name, this hostel became for me one of the most significant places in Granada. It was there that I met Mael, a young, trilingual Frenchman who worked at the hostel while living in the city. Beginning in those first few days, we developed a friendship that lasted long past the summer. While I cannot undervalue the fantastic friendships that I cemented with other American students throughout the course of the trip, my friendship with Mael was unique and invaluable. It provided me with first-hand access to a European outlook on life, insider knowledge of the country and its culture, and extensive conversational use of Spanish that I would have been unable to practice with other Spanish learners. My linguistic abilities grew more from this one friendship than from any course I have taken, both at home and abroad.

As I got more accustomed to the city, I became increasingly aware of its quiet beauty and stunning life. Some of my fondest memories of the entire summer are actually the simplest ones: afternoon walks down the city's narrow cobblestone streets; explorations through the winding pathways of the ancient neighborhood of Albaycin; sitting on the wall of the Mirador San Nicolás; watching the sun set over the massive Alhambra fortress on the other side of the valley. Not to mention my daily visit to the heladería and the refreshing delight of Spanish ice cream. These simple, unadulterated pleasures are the ones most deeply engrained in my memory. When I close my eyes, I can still see the snowcapped Sierra Nevadas looming behind a majestic castle; an expanse of white-washed stucco and terracotta rooftops has become a part of my vision of heaven.

I was able to experience a lot in the city of Granada on my own, but living with a family was a rewarding cultural adventure as well. María's home-cooking took a little while to get used to; I was unaccustomed to eating fish with skin and heads on, mussels in their shells, greasy patatas fritas at nearly every meal, and frequent servings of Spanish omelets. My olive oil intake skyrocketed! The diet was certainly different from what I was used to back home, but the food was surprisingly tasty and it didn't take me long to start salivating at the smell of a tortilla española frying on the skillet. And the fresh cherries! Never have I tasted anything so sweet! While I certainly missed my family back home, being a part of a family in Spain made time go much faster. I was able to speak with the señores of the house and their adult children about politics, work, education, family life, and culture, albeit in broken, but steadily-improving Spanish. At their home I had good company as well as my own space to study and relax. One

of my favorite new activities was taking a daily siesta, the balcony doors thrown wide open and a cool breeze softening the heat of the afternoon.

My host family was hospitable, flexible, and welcoming; however, I made it a point to explore the city, the country, and the continent as often as I possibly could! Whether it was putting on my running shoes and simply jogging around town or going on program-sponsored group trips to Spanish cities like Sevilla, Córdoba, Nerja, and Málaga, I kept extremely busy. In various cities in Spain I saw parades, castles, palaces, Roman ruins, museums, art galleries, fairs, beaches, and so much more. I was not just limited to my country of study, though. In Europe, travel between countries is almost laughably cheap, so it was quite realistic to book an affordable weekend flight to another country. I spent a four-day weekend in Ireland and was enchanted by the relaxing environment of a bed-and-breakfast and the pastoral freshness of the brilliant green countryside. Another weekend I was able to find \$50 round-trip tickets to Frankfurt, Germany, where a few of my new friends from the program and I explored the clean, modern, and exceptionally friendly city. The ease and affordability of traveling in Europe opened up a world of possibilities for me and kindled a longing for more!

So what about the actual college classes that I took—the reason that I went to Spain in the first place!!? Surely the preceding paragraphs illustrate just how much more there was for me to learn and experience in Spain than eight credit hours of Spanish grammar. Still, my coursework was an important aspect of the summer as well. At the Centro de Lenguas Modernas, a branch of the University of Granada, I had two classes per day that fused Spanish grammar lessons with cultural information. Although I was placed at the second-highest level at the center, the coursework was not particularly rigorous and I never felt overwhelmed by my

studies. Almost all of my classmates were American students. My classmates became my friends, and together we studied, explored and traveled, took weekend trips, and enjoyed the fantastic Spanish nightlife with snacks and tintos de verano—a delicious red wine drink—at tapas bars throughout the city. I certainly refined my Spanish skills through the classes I took, but needless to say, my education abroad can be more heavily attributed to my interactions with my host family, native friends, and exploration of the city than to the time I spent sitting at a desk.

I went to Spain with the general, uncomplicated expectation of completing some college coursework. Fortunately for me, I was in for something much different—and much better—than what I expected. In retrospect I laugh at how clueless I was before I left; there was much more in store for me than eight paltry undergraduate credit hours. While study abroad did allow me to complete my major, the experience of living in another country was even more significant in maturing me as a person and in broadening my horizons. I love my country and the privileges I have in here America, but living in Spain helped me to learn that there is a world outside of U.S. borders and that freedom and happiness are absolutely attainable in other places as well. Living and studying abroad has made me a more responsible person, a more independent thinker, and a more learned member of a global community. My summer sojourn helped me to appreciate my home while creating a hunger for more of this incredible world.