

## Patrick Conrad: Study Abroad Experience in Madrid, Spain

When I am asked to describe my study abroad experience it's more effective for me to break it down into three sections: my study abroad experience in general, my experience in Spain, and my experience in Madrid.

Studying abroad is something I would recommend to anyone. It's a learning experience which cannot be attained at your home campus or home country. There's no better way to understand another culture than to be surrounded by it, and there's no better way to understand your own culture than to look at it from a different perspective. Even though the idea of studying abroad sounds like a big vacation, it can be very emotionally challenging. It's not easy to be removed from the environment you're accustomed to. You have to be prepared to start a different lifestyle without the connections that you have at home. You can't just expect to find friends, you have to try hard to meet new people and make new friendships. By taking advantage of the IEEC you can meet people and even make friendships with people of the country you are going to before you go there. It's good to have as many connections as you can get before you embark on your experience abroad. It might be easier to make friends with Americans once you are abroad, but remember, you didn't move to another country to meet Americans that you could have easily met at home.

Of course you might experience "culture shock". This is something that everyone will tell you and I'm sure you've heard it before. Though what a lot of people don't mention is the "culture shock" you feel when you return to your home country after your time abroad. Arriving home and viewing your country with a new perspective can sometimes be more shocking than entering a different cultural environment than your own.

An important piece of advice I would give about studying abroad no matter where it is you may choose to study is that if you learn the history of where you study it will help you to better understand the people and culture of that country.

When planning for studying abroad in Spain there are lots of things you have to prepare for. First and foremost is the language. In general, they don't speak much English out here. This could result in you not integrating with the Spaniards and hanging out with only Americans and other English speakers. Or, you could end up speaking really good Spanish after a lot of hard work and frustrating conversations. Keep in mind that once you come home after your time abroad you will have to put in a lot more effort to find people to speak Spanish with, so take advantage of it while you can.

I would not suggest for a strict vegetarian to come to Spain. They pride themselves on their meat out here, ham especially. A vegetarian sandwich in Spain is lettuce and tomatoes on a ham sandwich. You would definitely have to make a huge attempt to maintain your vegetarian diet in Spain. But if you do like ham, you'll love this place.

Petty theft is a huge problem in Spain, especially for females. To prevent from getting robbed I would suggest to stay alert in tourist filled places and try to avoid situations in which you are walking home alone in the early hours of the morning (but that doesn't mean you can't get robbed in the daytime). The most important advice is stay attentive of your belongings at all times.

One of the great things about Spain is all of the seasonal parties. In many different Spanish cities and towns, at many different times of the year, they have traditional parties. These parties are a great "Typical Spanish" experience, as well as a great place to meet Spanish people from all over Spain.

One of the negative aspects of Spanish culture is their attitude toward immigration. Since immigration is a relatively new phenomenon for Spain, it's an issue that many Spaniards react to with ignorance. When coming from a diverse metropolis like the San Francisco Bay Area the Spanish racial ignorance can come as a painful shock.

One of the last things one should consider when studying abroad Spain is where to go; Granada, or Madrid? It all depends on what you're looking for. If you're looking for the city lifestyle, go to Madrid. And if you're looking for more of a small college town environment, go to Granada. Keep in mind that even though there are more things to do in Madrid, it can be harder to meet people because everyone is caught up in their own thing. Yet while it's easier to meet people in Granada, there are fewer things to do so you might find yourself getting bored.

I chose to come to Madrid. One of the convenient things about Madrid is its central location within Spain. Travelling within Spain is easy because everywhere is at most a daytrip away. Even though Madrid isn't a beautiful city, it does have tons to offer just like any other big city. However, there is no ocean, river, nor body of water. This may bother some people. Within Madrid a good neighbourhood to live in is Moncloa. It's close to the Complutense University and everything else you need (supermarkets, internet cafes, bars, public transportation, movie theatres, etc). It's also filled with university students so it's easy to find shared housing. I would recommend waiting until you get out here to find housing so that you can meet whoever you are going to live with before you move in with them. Everyone I know who had apartments hooked up via internet before they came out here had bad experiences and ended up moving out eventually. I would also suggest living with Spaniards so as to practice your Spanish as much as possible.

Another thing to account for is the weather. Unlike the Bay Area, Madrid winters are freezing cold and their summers are boiling hot. I would suggest bringing clothes for both seasons unless you plan on buying lots of clothes in Spain. For the most part clothes are cheaper out here as long as they're not American brand name clothes.

So while there are both pros and cons to anyone's experience abroad, the most important thing is having the experience. While studying abroad everyday you are subject to learn something new due to the fact that you are submerged in a different environment than that which you are accustomed to. If you are only considering studying abroad, do more research and figure out if it is really something you could handle. And if you have already decided that you are going to study abroad, decide a place where you will be comfortable and prepare for the unexpected. When it's all said and done studying abroad is a healthy experience which will change your life for the better. Not only will you learn more about the country you live in, you will learn more about yourself, your country, and the world.