A.J. Pressland Fund:
Course Report

Nora Staack
Sidney Sussex College
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WHAT THIS REPORT IS ABOUT...

Looking back on my two weeks in Spain I want to review the language course I have taken and at the same time describe the activities outside of the classroom that made my stay so special. Because the report might be read by other students planning a stay abroad, I have tried to keep it short and well structured so that interesting details can easily be looked up. And this is what can be found on the next pages:

What this report is about................................................................................................................................. 2
My stay in numbers ............................................................................................................................................. 2
The course structure........................................................................................................................................... 3
The language learning experience.................................................................................................................... 3
Workshops, language café and excursions......................................................................................................... 4
Accommodation and the campus facilities.......................................................................................................... 4
Leisure time ....................................................................................................................................................... 5
Why I would like to come back......................................................................................................................... 5

MY STAY IN NUMBERS

Duration: 5th - 16th July 2010
Institution: Universidad Internacional Menendez Pelayo (UIMP)
Avda de los Castros, 42
39005 Santander
Spain
Course: 2-week intensive Spanish course (55 hours), 340 Euros/50h
Modules taken: 30h language classes (“Lengua Española”)
10h “Business Spanish” (“Español de los negocios”)
10h “History of Spanish Art” (“Díez momentos de la Historia del Arte Español”)
5h “Spanish for specific needs: Health and Law” (“Español para fines específicos: Salud y Jurídico”)
Other modules: e.g. Contemporary Spanish History, Grammar, Tourism, Spanish Literature, Spanish Economy
Class sizes: 9 students in language class, 10-40 students in optional courses in the afternoon
Level of course: C1.1 (University offered courses from A1-C2 according to CEFR)
Accommodation: Single, En-suite, 315 Euros/2 weeks, College Cabo Mayor (on Campus)
Doubles also available but not on Campus
Stay with family also possible
Facilities: Library, WLAN, Computer Suite, Gym, Hall, Café
Excursions: offered every weekend (~15-20 Euros)
Culture: Concerts, Theatre, Parties and Poetry Readings nearly every evening (usually free for UIMP students)
Workshops: 35 Euros, offered irregularly by the UIMP, topics include Spanish dance, drama, dubbing, Spanish cuisine, short movies and others...
THE COURSE STRUCTURE

On the first day of the course everyone had to take a test and do an oral interview. The total of 180 language students at the university was then split into language classes according to our strengths and weaknesses. I was tested to be on the level C1.1 (according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). There were two classes on the C1 level. In my class we were nine students in total with very different backgrounds. My youngest classmate was 19 my oldest about 50 years old. This is quite a typical mixture as the UIMP is not focusing on specific target groups but having students from all possible backgrounds. Most of the younger members of my class were students studying Spanish or going to be studying in Spain, of the older classmates some were teachers, others wanted to learn Spanish for their job like me or just out of interest. We had three hours of class every morning with the same teacher and in the afternoon we could choose from various modules taught by different teachers. As a standard everyone would choose at least two modules (each 5 hours per week) but we were allowed to take more classes in the afternoon if we wanted (but any additional classes are only being certified for an extra fee).

THE LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

I enjoyed the classes in the morning very much. Our teacher was very engaging and always trying out something new. We did a lot of group work and discussions, everyone had to present a chosen topic in front of the class, we worked with textbooks, articles, movies and recordings. We also had the opportunity to hand in written work and grammar exercises regularly. After my first week she gave me a very detailed feedback with proposals how I could improve in the areas where I was making most mistakes. This was very helpful to be able to focus because with five hours of Spanish a day everything can get quite overwhelming. Her advice is also helping me now while I am trying to keep on studying on my own. In the second week we were having a look at Spanish newspapers. After analyzing national and regional newspapers we went on an excursion to the Diario Montañés, a very popular newspaper in Cantabria. At the end of that week we also produced our own newspaper.

From the available options in the afternoon I chose to do Business Spanish, History of Spanish Art and Spanish for specific needs: Health and Law. Although I could not get it certified as I was only staying for two thirds of the course, I also attended the first two weeks of the three-week Grammar for Conversation class to prepare for taking the “DELE” (Diploma of Spanish as a Foreign Language). Especially the Business Spanish class was very useful as we learned how to write a cover letter in Spanish, the art of preparing a CV to apply in Spain and also something about the business regulations in the country as well as the terminology. A comparison of the economy with other economies in Europe completed the course. I really enjoyed that we had many different teachers as each of them had a different teaching style and as they were all from different regions in Spain they also had different accents.

The teaching styles in class also had to vary because the class sizes were very different. The language classes were mostly in very small groups with less than 10 students, perfect for conversation and discussion. The afternoon classes were in general bigger depending on their popularity and the subject. The lecture about Spanish art was regularly visited by about 40 students and more like a talk with a questions and answers session, while the Business Spanish class had only about 20 students and was more interactive. All teachers had in common that they were very motivating and open to questions.
WORKSHOPS, LANGUAGE CAFÉ AND EXCURSIONS

But the classes at university are not the only way I learned and practiced Spanish in Santander. The UIMP is offering its students a great variety of activities. Interested students can book workshops (“talleres”) at the university in Spanish Dance, Spanish Cuisine, Drama or Dubbing. On Thursdays there is an open language café called “Hablamos”, where I met many people from all over the world. On the weekends many students would go on excursions organized by the university. I only went on one trip to visit the National Park Picos de Europa on a Sunday. This was a very interesting trip combining the impressive landscape of the mountains with the cultural experience of visiting churches that are part of the Camino de Santiago. The advantage of these excursions is that it is very easy to see places that you could otherwise only visit by car. To go to places that are well connected by public transport (like Bilbao) I prefer to go on my own, but from time to time it is good fun to go with a whole busload of people.

ACCOMMODATION AND THE CAMPUS FACILITIES

Concerning the facilities I was positively surprised by the excellent learning environment at the UIMP: The University offers its students accommodation in the College Cabo Mayor (shown on the right), which is next to the lecture halls. It is also possible to stay in doubles on the Peninsula de la Magdalena close to the palace (see photo below), which is a 20 minute walk from the campus, or in Spanish families. I was lucky to have a recently renovated very modern en-suite room in the college. On the whole campus a WLAN is available for the students and there is a computer suite as well.

For the more active people like me there’s always someone to go running with in the park next to the campus or along the beach. And if it’s raining there is a gym in one of the buildings and a TV room. Furthermore, there is a hall on campus offering full board or you can pay each meal by cash. The prices are not cheap (lunch costs 8.20 Euros) but the food is quite good and abundant. For the breaks between classes there is a café offering drinks and snacks in the same building as the lecture halls. The small library in the building is especially for language students – it has an ample collection of dictionaries, grammar books, practice books, Spanish literature, and many good DVDs in Spanish that can be borrowed free of charge.
LEISURE TIME

In the end it’s not just the language classes but everything else around that makes a language course abroad such a great experience. And Santander is a good place to experience Spain. In the evenings there are many cultural events in and out of the university: cinema, theatre, concerts, dances, parties, poetry recitals, discussions or just a night out on the plaza... For many events the UIMP can provide its students with invitations so you can save a lot of money on entrance fees. Among other events I visited a Flamenco concert and it was very impressive how intense this music can be. These events are also an opportunity to meet other students of the university, among them many Spanish students that are doing summer schools in Santander.

We also had fun on campus. One Friday evening we took over the Campus kitchen preparing a “Spanish-Italian” meal with my class, some guys organized a championship on the football pitch playing “profesores contra alumnus”, we watched TV and we went out... Quite important: the beach is less than a ten minute foot walk from the campus and it’s just a fifteen minute walk to the city centre, where there are lots of bars serving the famous tapas...

Naturally, we also watched La Copa Mundial including the final España vs. Países Bajos. We went to the Sport Palace where the match was shown on huge screens. With a few thousand people in the building the atmosphere was amazing. Especially when the Spanish team scored the decisive goal in the very last minutes it got so loud that I thought I would be deaf the next morning. Afterwards young people were running through the streets and shouting “Viva España”. I think the whole city was celebrating that night.

WHY I WOULD LIKE TO COME BACK

This course has not only improved my Spanish a lot but also given me the opportunity to get to know the Spanish culture. Two weeks is a very short time to build your language skills but what I liked the most about the UIMP is that they don’t focus on maximizing the material that is taught in the course but instead they aim to make learning the language fun and motivate you to use your skills. And this is the only way to improve over the long time. I think I am now in a much better position than before and hopefully I can build on what I learned in Santander. It has been a great stay and I think I have found some friendships that will last for a long time. I would love to return to the UIMP someday and I can only recommend this course to everyone who wants to improve their Spanish and have a nice stay at the same time.