

Oh My Gaudi

A Medical Elective in Barcelona

Intermediate Spanish

Report for the AJ Pressland Bursary Fund

Jesse Anthony

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Introduction

¡Hola, me llamo Jesse. Soy estudiante de medicina en mi último año en Clare! My name is Jesse and I am a final year medic at Clare. This summer I had the privilege, and experience of a lifetime, spending 7 weeks in Barcelona, Spain (or Catalonia depending on who you ask) as my medical elective placement – a compulsory 7-week section of my course.

The idea for this trip was conceived 3 years ago in the summer of 2019. I had just returned from a four-week trip to Colombia with some friends. This was a far more exotic location than my usual holiday destinations, which are typically resorts in Europe where, being the classic Brit, I am surprised when not everyone speaks English. During the trip I was not able to speak a word of Spanish and in rural Colombia the average person does not speak a single word of English. I remember trying, in vain, to speak to a taxi driver (**taxista**) and he told me, “*Español es un idioma muy facil,*” which at the time meant nothing to me. Due to my frustration with my lack of communicative abilities I decided I would do something about it upon my return – realising the importance languages can have in unlocking the world, particularly a language as widely-spoken as Spanish.

I have never been someone interested in languages (despite my much-lauded A* in GCSE French) and if you had told me as a fresher that I would be doing my medical elective in another language, I would have thought you were **loco**. Upon my return from Colombia, I decided I would do one hour of Spanish per day on Duolingo with the intention of doing my medical elective in a Spanish-speaking (**hispanohablante**) country. I thought this goal would be: 1) good motivation to persevere with Duolingo and 2) give me freedom in choosing an elective destination and project that was unique in aiding my development into a good, understanding doctor. Every time I felt lost in the maze of learning Spanish, I would hark back to what the taxi driver said (which I now understand), “*Español es un idioma muy facil.*”

I had never had Spanish lessons in my life and I was using Google for the more complex grammar that Duolingo skirts over. In 4th year I was privileged enough to get a place on the CULP Languages for Medics Spanish B1 in which my teacher, Alicia Peña Calvo, taught me so much. I will always be grateful that the university provides such an opportunity. I was unaware of this at the time but this course certificate was necessary to carry out my elective in Spain (B1 or above) which made me feel doubly lucky to have had the chance.

Whilst my course mates (**compañeros**) were pondering over their exotic elective destinations such as Tobago, Tanzania, Belize, I instantly knew I wanted to go to Barcelona. Having visited the city in December with my girlfriend, I fell in love with it. In addition to this, I feel hopelessly robbed of my European identity due to Brexit and was excited about the opportunity to be able to live in Europe for 7 weeks with my new language competency (yes, I was aware they speak Catalan there too). After sending emails to over 10 hospitals, I found one willing to have me and thus my plans were confirmed.

I felt it was important to take myself out of my comfort zone, being a once in a lifetime opportunity to go abroad in the capacity of a student as opposed to a doctor, so I decided to go alone. This would give me much more freedom and I would have to immerse myself in activities to meet people, deepening my connections to life in the city.

I planned to do a 2-week intensive Spanish course at Camino Barcelona Spanish School followed by 5 weeks “working” (being a medical student) in Hospital Universitari General de Catalunya. The order of the itinerary was intentional. The Spanish school would improve my conversational Spanish and allow me to interact well in hospital. It would also be a chance to make friends and conquer the risk of social isolation due to the fact I was alone in Barcelona. From this launchpad my time in hospital would be more fulfilling and productive.



(L to R) 1 and 2: My girlfriend and I on my “probing” trip to Barcelona. 3: My friends and I at Guatapé in Colombia, 2019

The Course and the Culture

The course was at Camino Barcelona Language School. I chose this school because it is a very professionally run school with the highest score from the Instituto Cervantes accreditation as well as running daily cultural activities and trips. The course was 20 hours a week and carried out in small groups of no more than 8. In addition to this I did 5 hours of conversation classes per week.

After an initial placement test, I was entered into the B1 revision class, essentially the last 2 weeks of the B1 course at the school. This was the first time besides the CULP Spanish for Medics course that I had been formally taught Spanish and I feel very lucky to have had the opportunity to do this as part of my course. Due to my Duolingo use with minimal formal teaching I realised that my grammar in particular needed some work. I found the course very useful for all the finer grammar points I had less understanding of. The classes were conducted solely in Spanish and I found this a useful feature to improve my listening. Lessons consisted of being taught a topic, then correcting grammar with sentences on the board deciding if they are, “*bien o mal?*”, a sentence I had heard enough of by the end! Then we would practice speaking in pairs or threes, often including some fun grammar games such as snakes and ladders.

There were 2 core classes each day with a 20-minute break between. Each class was taught by a different *professor(a)* who remained our teacher for that class each week. One of the nice features was that each week the teachers rotated giving us access to a wide variety of

Spanish accents and dialects. This proved useful later in my trip in hospital as the staff were from different South American countries and Spanish regions, thus being acquainted with these subtle changes in the language was of great benefit!

I signed up to conversation classes because I had virtually no experience in speaking Spanish except from working in a warehouse in summer 2020 with Spanish colleagues, however my Spanish was a lot less advanced back then. The classes were very relaxed and free, the **professor(a)** letting them flow freely. We were given a topic to speak about that day and split into pairs based on our ability, yet not necessarily of the same ability, allowing us to all learn from each other. I found what hindered me most was not my linguistic abilities but my lack of knowledge on Spanish culture, in particular the day we spoke about Spanish celebrities and I knew none! My vocabulary improved greatly due to these classes and I learnt not to be afraid to ask for words when unsure. These sessions also proved a very good opportunity to make friends and I made one of my best friends in Barcelona during these sessions.

A unique feature of the school was its provision of daily trips and activities. These included visits to the Picasso Museum, a walking tour around Barceloneta and the labyrinth park (**Parc del Laberint d'Horta**). Invariably the outings ended with a visit to a bar in which we were plied with the local Spanish delicacy sangria; the exception to this was the wine tasting on the terrace of the school which began with jugs of sangria. My knowledge of Catalan culture grew with an understanding of the independence movement, with comparable movements existing in the UK, and I found the history of Barcelona fascinating having had no idea the beaches were artificial beforehand. It was on these trips I made many more friends who would be there for the entirety of my stay in Barcelona and will hopefully stay friends for life. The school provided on-site accommodation, if requested, and this building proved a social nucleus – something I was grateful for given I did not know anyone prior.

My time at the school vastly improved my Spanish. After the course I felt much more confident speaking and interacting in Spanish and have a greater grasp of complex grammar including the dreaded **el subjuntivo**. Alongside this I made lots of close friends and learnt a lot about Spanish (and Catalan) history and culture.



(L to R) 1: A Spanish class with Profesora Nuria. 2: The tour around Barceloneta. 3: Trip to the Parc del Laberint d'Horta.

Universitari Hospital General de Catalunya

The next phase of my trip was in Universitari Hospital General de Catalunya, a hospital in the Quierónsalud healthcare group. This was divided into 2 weeks with the anaesthetics



department (*el departamento de las anaesthetistas*) and 3 weeks with intensive care (*la unidad de cuidado intensivo*, UCI). I chose these departments as my future aspiration is to become an anaesthetist/intensivist. In the UK these are the same specialities with the same training pathway however in Spain they are two separate entities. The hospital was set in the sleepy village of Sant Cugat de del Vallès, 30 minutes from the centre of Barcelona by *ferrocarril*.

To maximise my immersion in Spanish the first words I said to my supervisor were, “*solo puedes hablar conmigo en español por favor*,” which according to them is “too polite” and is “classic British when speaking Spanish.” What I should have done is simply used the imperative “*solo habla conmigo...*” *sin por favor!* I adapted to this style of speaking throughout the placement but it still feels a little rude to me and I do revert back to being the over-polite English person my mother taught me to be. Alongside this desired immersion in Spanish, I found myself immersed in Catalan too, from both the medical notes which seemingly randomly were in Catalan or Spanish and from the Catalan-speaking staff. Due to this I picked up some elementary Catalan such as, “*Bon dia*,” “*si us plau*,” and “*obre la porta*.”

Over the following 2 weeks I was flung into the fast-paced world of anaesthetics. Everyone was incredibly happy to teach me and I became highly proficient in airway management during surgery. In Spain they have a preference for gaseous anaesthesia as opposed to total intravenous anaesthesia (TIVA) in the UK. Such anaesthetic agents are potent greenhouse gases therefore we try not to use them in the UK so this was a useful experience that would have been harder to come by in Cambridge.

My confidence with Spanish grew consistently throughout the placement. At first, I was a little shy to ask what words meant but I gradually gained the confidence to do so and improved very quickly as a result. I found the Spanish medical terms very interesting to learn. They were either Spanish-sounding versions of the English i.e. morphine = *morfina*, fentanyl = *fentanilo* or the direct translation of the Latin (which we use in the UK) into Spanish i.e. dura mata (hard mother, the outer layer of the meninges) = *dura madre*, cauda equina (horse’s tail, the bottom of the spinal cord) = *cauda de caballo*. This was amusing at times but it made the understanding of conversations much easier even if I hadn’t specifically heard that word before.

I visited the pain clinic (*la clínica de dolor*) in Mataro, a nearby town, as part of my anaesthetics block and this experience had a profound effect on me. In my 5-years of medical school thus far, I have not seen such a short consultation have such a life-changing effect on a patient. Patients entered in intense, life-restricting agony and would leave with a renewed sense of being and optimism and the resolve to conquer their pain. This has inspired me to consider the pain of my patients more so than before as I understand its effects on people and to specialise in this once fully qualified. I have often noticed pain is overlooked by doctors on my clinical rotations. In my future clinical practice I will stress to my colleagues the effect pain can have on the lives of our patients and how it is essential we manage it aggressively and not belittle it because we can’t see it.

Following this I was embedded with the intensive care team. What I found most difficult, from a language perspective, was the wide variety of accents, from strong Catalan to neutral central/Southern Spanish to thick Buenos Aires. Whilst challenging, I tried my best to spend time with different members of the team to work on understanding different accents and became conscious of the fact my conversational Spanish was improving consistently. A watershed moment in this improvement was when one of the doctors was explaining to me how a ventilator worked and I understood every word. I felt very proud of this improvement and I will remember this fondly.

A benefit of working in the Spanish healthcare system was I could draw direct comparisons to the NHS, both being developed European countries. The work culture in Spain is far more relaxed than in the UK. There is no culture of staying past hours to impress others like there is in the UK; once your work is done you leave and go and enjoy your life such as spending time with your family (or going to the beach every day like I did). Moreover, doctors work far fewer hours per week in general leading to less burnout, greater staff satisfaction and, I'm sure, better retention of highly skilled staff. This undoubtedly has an impact on patient treatment and safety. I was fascinated to learn about *guardias*, 24-hour shifts, worked by some of the doctors. I was told this was due to a lack of staff to both fill night and day shift cover like UK hospitals. However, upon asking other doctors about them it sounded as though they liked them, with some doctors working 6 guardias per month, allowing them to enjoy increased amounts of free time compared to their UK counterparts working several 12-hour shifts per week. I am sceptical as to the safety of these shifts but nonetheless they are a distinctly different feature to the UK. I was also struck by how young some of the senior doctors were, not much older than 28. After 5-6-years of medical school in the UK we do 2-years of foundation rotations around several specialities followed by 8-10 years of speciality training thus the consultants are all much older and experienced. In Spain after 6-years of medical school they go straight into a 4-year medical residency in their chosen specialty and, *ya está*, they are fully qualified after 4-years. This is vastly different to the UK and I would argue their system provides far less breadth and depth in their knowledge compared to UK counterparts.



(L to R) 1: The intensive care team and I. 2: Dr Juan who took me to the pain clinic and spent a great deal of time teaching me.

An aerial photograph of Barcelona, Spain, taken during sunset. The city's dense urban landscape is visible, with buildings and streets stretching towards the horizon. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue, indicating the time of day. The image is positioned on the left side of the page, partially overlapping the text.

Mi Vida Personal en Barcelona

My accommodation was situated in Carrer de Roger de Lluría 42, right in the heart of L'Eixample neighbourhood (*barrio*). I was surrounded by the fascinating nature-inspired architecture of Gaudi contrasting with the high-end commercial shopping street of Passeig de Gracia (I was never sure if my pronunciation of these places was correct due to the Catalan naming). The building was beautiful, being the restored Palace of the IX Marqués de la Montilla from 1880. It was both built and designed by disciples of Gaudi and thus I felt uniquely connected to the history of the city. The apartment had enviable transport links, being a 5-minute walk from stations with lots of metro connections. I chose this location as it was very convenient for commuting to hospital and was near the language school too.

My commute to the language school was a short 6-minute moped ride for which I would use one of the plentiful moped hire apps. This cost under €2 each way and ensured I got those extra precious minutes of sleep in the morning. In order to arrive at the hospital, I would walk for 15 minutes to Plaça de Catalunya and take the *ferrocarril* for 30-minutes. I felt very integrated into the hum and buzz of life in Barcelona.

At the language school I made a wide variety of international friends from countries including the USA, Netherlands, Germany and Ukraine. I thrived on being within this melting pot of different languages and relished learning about all their different languages being able to learn many different words and phrases and I can now have a rudimentary conversation in Ukrainian. For example, “*привіт, як справи? Мене звати Джессі.*” (Hello, how are you? My name is Jesse). Equally I taught some classic English lines to them and had everyone singing, “It’s coming home,” when we won the Women’s Euros.

Barcelona gave me the opportunity to experience the patchwork of different nationalities within a very international city. I went to a Ukrainian rally with my Ukrainian friend to mark the 5th month of the illegal invasion. As someone who is very interested in military history, I have been following the situation daily, on various websites and telegram channels, however this march brought home to me the hundreds of people tragically displaced due to the situation in Ukraine and the perils faced by my friend who had fled from Kyiv (pronounced Kyyiv) in February. The rally was awash with both Spanish, “*tropas rusas feura de ucraïnia,*” and Ukrainian, “*Слава Україні,*” and “*Героям слава,*” exposing me to a fusion of different languages. My desire to get a full international experience was fulfilled in my diversion from tapas to eating at a Ukrainian restaurant one night, where I tried Borscht, various pickled vegetables and many more dishes. As an Ashkenazi Jew I found this food reminiscent of my own cultural food and I enjoyed this small insight into how my own culture is influenced and has been influenced by others. A fun fact (*una curiosidad*) to demonstrate this point is that Spanish and Portuguese Jewish immigrants introduced fish and chips to the UK in the 16th century.

After a day at the language school (if I wasn’t going on a trip) or the hospital I would have a “siesta” (my word for going to the gym then work through my Spanish grammar textbook) and subsequently rendezvous with my friends on one of the beaches, something I rarely, if ever, do in the UK – the banks of the Cam can hardly be classified as a beach. Despite the beaches not being the cleanest, swimming in the sea daily was wonderful. The beaches made the general atmosphere of such an intense city more relaxing and this translated to

the staff in the hospital who were always in a good mood. The contrast of beautiful city architecture with beaches makes Barcelona even more enticing.

In the evenings I would often go out to eat with my friends, trying all available food options including tapas and ramen and even finding a Jewish restaurant one night when my girlfriend was visiting. There was a local bar/café near us called “Urgell Cafè” which does very reasonably priced tapas and mojitos (if a better combination exists then I am ready to hear it) which I will recommend to anyone visiting Barcelona.

Many major events happened whilst I was in Barcelona including the Sant Joan festival and pride weekend. These all contributed to the feeling that rather than being a tourist I was “living” in Barcelona. I really enjoyed the life I built there over the 7-weeks and I wish it could have lasted for longer.



TOP (L to R). 1: My apartment building. 2: Tapas. 3: Ukrainian Borscht. BOTTOM (L to R). 1: Ukrainian rally. 2: Urgel cafè

Reflections

During my time spent in Barcelona I was aware of how lucky and privileged I had been to be provided with the opportunity for this experience including the fact such a window in my medical course exists and also the various sources of my funding.

Languages are becoming an increasingly important part of my life. This is two-fold in nature. Firstly, my Spanish learning is broadening in depth like a snowball, the more I learn, the more Spanish media I am able to consume, the more immersion I receive and the more



Spanish I learn. Secondly, I am learning German due to the fact my girlfriend is from Austria. I am finding this highly rewarding, albeit much harder than Spanish. If you were to tell fresher me that he would be having such a love affair with languages he would be shocked. Having woken up to how languages unlock the world, I will continue this journey of learning and hopefully include some more travels. I intend to do Spanish intermediate conversation classes in the language school throughout Michaelmas and Lent as I found them very useful on my trip. I will also sign up for B2 Spanish in Lent term as I have my medical finals in Michaelmas so I wouldn't be able to give my complete attention then. Following this, in summer, I would like to complete the B2 DELE exams to fully formalise my Spanish learning.

The placement in a hospital where I am still not fully competent in the language makes me appreciate the difficulties patients may have communicating with doctors, either due to hearing/language barriers or the over-use of medical jargon. All the medical words were new to me (to my surprise Duolingo does not cover the translation of thrombopulmonary embolism to *tromboembolismo pulmonar*) and I had to keep asking for translations as well as asking people to slow down or speak more clearly. This was eye opening and will affect the way I communicate with patients in the future, with far greater understanding. I feel this is an experience all future doctors should have. During my career I hope to raise awareness of the importance of language learning to other healthcare professionals and set up some related schemes in the hospitals I work in (or even the wider NHS if the bureaucracy can be overcome) including opportunities for medics to learn/continue learning a second language or complete a rotation abroad.

In a highly diverse NHS workforce and patient population, a large proportion speak English as a second language. This greater understanding of languages will in no doubt help my professional communication skills and appreciate the nuances involved in understanding even daily mundane conversations.

Meeting people from conflict zones has made me appreciate how lucky I am to be in this incredibly privileged position, about to go into my final year in Cambridge and enter my dream job in a stable and prosperous country. I have valued being in a setting where I am not fully acquainted with the language and meeting those (patients and friends) who aren't as fortunate as me will ensure I don't take my position for granted. I will use these experiences combined with the medical knowledge gained to ensure I am an empathetic and knowledgeable doctor in the future and never let my desire to conquer Spanish (and German) wane.

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La puesta de sol en Los Bunkers del Carmel