Language School Fact File

Where? Elefun Spanish School, Medellín
What? Small Group Classes: 2X 20 hours a week (£141/week) + Individual Coaching Classes: 10 hours (£8/hour)
Why Spanish? Why Colombia?

Medicine, by nature, is to some extent an inherently international profession. However, the varying medical challenges presented by location and language pose both significant opportunities and challenges for healthcare professionals. As a medical student interested in working abroad in the future, learning to adapt and respond to these contextual factors represented and continues to represent a key part of my development as a medical practitioner. The opportunity generously provided by The Pressland Fund to visit Colombia this summer thus was an invaluable opportunity to develop my language skills, to observe and experience healthcare in Latin America and to gain insight into another culture and how healthcare fits within this scape. In every regard, my time spent in Colombia exceeded my expectations.

In mainstream media, portrayals of Colombia are frequently influenced by preconceptions about its drug industry and its violent past. Series such as the critically acclaimed Narcos perpetuate and promote this view of Colombia as a national drug cartel. However, my experience in Medellín — once the home of drug lord Pablo Escobar and previously one of the world's most violent cities — not only revealed the reductive nature of mainstream portrayals of Colombia but also revised my own perceptions of the country. Medellín, now a bustling metropolis, testifies to the incredible transformation that Colombia has undergone in the last twenty years and to its potential for further development. The people I met while studying at the fantastic Elefun Spanish school welcomed me into their community, sharing with me their language, their beautiful country and their culture. I learnt so much from my time with these people and developed a deep respect for the community, to which I hope to return in the future.
**Medellin and the Spanish School**

While in Medellin, I completed 2 weeks of a 20-hour intensive course and did a week of individual language coaching at Elefun Spanish School. The classes focussed on a full range of language skills, developing both speaking and listening for informal and professional contexts. The school additionally placed an emphasis on grammar, which was particularly useful for me as it has previously been an area of weakness within my language development.

The small class sizes (a maximum of 3 students per class), enabled the teacher to correct my speaking inaccuracies without disrupting the flow of the class and to differentiate for each student’s individual needs. These classes built effectively on the skills I had developed through the CULP course in Cambridge over the previous year. However, from an academic point of view, perhaps the most incredible aspect of the course was the one-on-one coaching offered. For me, these sessions represented an opportunity to develop medical vocabulary and the healthcare terminology required by clinical scenarios and medical articles. Given my ambition to spend time working in Latin America as a doctor, or during my medical elective while training, this was an invaluable opportunity for me. I also visited the University de Antioquia in Medellin and met with a public health doctor to discuss the health challenges faced by cities and rural communities in Colombia, and programmes to improve access to healthcare – a topical issue due to the large numbers of Venezuelan refugees arriving in Colombia in search of healthcare, as well ongoing challenges in the cities with water access and housing. He also provided advice on the opportunities for medical electives in Colombia, which will be extremely useful for the future.
Being part of the community at Elefun Spanish School however, was far more than just doing a language course. The school has a lovely group of staff and students from around the world, which made for interesting discussions, whether that was while tasting local fruit or street food snacks in the mid-morning break, eating the national dish of Ajiaco for lunch or doing afternoon activities such as dancing or football.

While at the Spanish school, I also was lucky enough to get to know Walter. Having previously worked throughout Colombia for NGOs supporting development initiatives in rural areas, and also lectured in sociology at the University of Antioquia, he now spends his time showing language students around Medellin and introducing them to Colombian culture. Crucially, unlike the teachers, Walter communicated only in Spanish meaning that every afternoon spent exploring the city under his guidance was also fully immersive Spanish practice. A highlight of these afternoons was a visit to a Medellin Radio station where we were interviewed on air (a real test of my ability to speak fluently in real time!) and learnt about Medellin’s music culture. Elefun Spanish School took every opportunity to further our understanding of Colombian culture through teaching, activities, and daily articles written by Walter. This cumulated in a quiz about Colombia, and, as proud winners of the quiz, we won free dinner at the local university haunt. It was a fantastic evening discussing Colombia culture, politics and gaining insight into Walter’s previous work with NGOs in Colombia.
**Graffiti in Medellín**

‘Painted for Life’ is a government-supported initiative which employs local artists to paint murals and help to artistically transform neighborhoods. The project promotes both community art and also tourism, since tourists now come to areas such as Comuna 13, once of the city’s most dangerous neighborhoods, to see the artwork.

The piece above depicts the ongoing struggle of the community, with different elements representing different aspects of the struggle. For example, the chess piece represents the use of innocent people as players in the drug wars, while the dove represents striving for peace – themes that resonate throughout Medellín’s history.

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**Medellín Life**

While in Medellín, I stayed in a hostel, which was both affordable and a great way to meet people, such as Margarita, the charismatic character who ran the hostel. She only spoke Spanish and was always keen to chat about your day or introduce you to her friends and family. The other major positive of the hostel was its location: it was 5 minutes’ walk from the Spanish school, a free sports complex which included an outdoor swimming pool and numerous salsa clubs, but was also nestled in a pleasant part of the bustling city. Medellín also had many language exchanges during the week that offered further opportunities to put the Spanish you’d learnt during the day into use, and I really enjoyed having this opportunity to meet and get to know a range of local people.
Another one of my favourite things about Medellin was salsa. Music and dancing are everywhere: in the bars, on the streets and in the main plazas. Taking salsa classes, both those organised by the Spanish school and at the local dance academy, Así Se Baila, and going along to local salsa clubs to practise what I’d learnt was one of the highlights of Medellin. These dancing skills and my language skills came together for Colombia’s two Independence Days and the internationally-renown Festival de Flores. The celebratory atmosphere of Medellin, much like their love of dancing, was infectious!

Right: Plaza de Cisneros – urban transformation projects have turned this once dangerous square into a safe and friendly place for young people and families, which includes hundreds of artistic lampposts, a library and an education centre

Below: a traditional Silleta with intricate designs made entirely of flowers at the Festival de Flores
I was also lucky enough to spend some time exploring Colombia. I spent 9 days in Jardin, a popular country holiday destination for Colombian tourists, working with a lovely Colombian couple, Elkin and Francie, who run a small cabana for tourists. Helping out at the cabana was a really interesting and immersive experience. The work involved building a pond, cleaning and helping with the running of the hostel and assisting them with the online Colombian immigration system and their profiles on booking websites. This often involved verbally translating the websites for Elkin and Francie, in order to explain the information to them and then respond on their behalf, which was enormously helpful for developing my skills at relaying important information in Spanish, a skill which would be of use in the future if I am to practise medicine in Latin America.

Colombia has one of the most biodiverse and varied environments on the planet. I loved spending time in the Efe de Cafetería, Colombia’s major coffee producing region, which is characterised by endless rolling hills littered with coffee plants and fruit trees on the lower slopes and mysterious cloud forest higher up. Visiting a coffee farm and wandering through the fruit fields in Filandia gave me a sense of the incredible hard work that goes into each cup of Colombian coffee drunk all over the world each day. Coffee is a key export of Colombia (it is the third largest producer in the world) and an important part of the culture: visit any square in a Colombian town and there will be people sat out drinking coffee at any time of the day. Outside the iconic town of Salento, I trekked through the Valle de Palmas, which is full of amazing wax palm trees which are the highest in the world.

At the end of the trip, I also had the opportunity to visit the northern Caribbean coast, a very different part of the country, and camp in Parque Tayrona, one of Colombia’s many national parks, where I spent the time trekking to a small, lost ancient city and discovering secluded beaches.
Gracias por todo

I would highly recommend Colombia as a great place for learning Spanish. The local inflections add vibrancy but do not make it difficult to grasp the linguistics whilst their slang and idioms are colourful, such as a particular favourite of mine: ‘no dar papaya’, which means be careful (or more literally, ‘don’t give papaya’!). Medellin in particular, is full of opportunities to meet locals and practice more of your Spanish in a fun and friendly environment, where people will more often than not be delighted to show you their wonderful city and speak to you whatever your level of Spanish.

I feel very lucky to have had this amazing experience. From an academic point of view, my Spanish was given time to develop in an intensive course and with full immersion, a rare opportunity during medical studies. In terms of my future career, it has opened up possible opportunities for completing my medical elective, and pursuing future work as a doctor, in Latin America and enriched my knowledge of Colombian healthcare and the unique challenges being faced there. On a personal level, it was inspiring to meet so many lovely people and learn from their experiences about the transformation Colombia has undergone to become un país de esperanza – a country of hope. Being able to meet local people and speak to them in their own language about life in Colombia was an incredible opportunity for which I am enormously grateful. It reminded me how important it is for people of all backgrounds and academic disciplines to travel, experience different cultures, speak other languages and have the opportunity to learn from people all over the world. I cannot thank the AJ Pressland Fund enough for enabling me to have this amazing experience.