The Value of Learning Spanish in Spain

Living in a different part of the world with unfamiliar places, customs, and etiquette can be challenging for anyone. Even though Kenzie Peterson (IAFS '20) had taken three semesters of Spanish classes at CU Boulder, she wasn't sure how different things would be once she got to Spain. She chose the ISA Spain: Madrid Spanish Language, Liberal Arts & Business spring 2020 program because of its focus on language and grammar, variety of courses, and affordability. Learning Spanish has always been a dream of hers, academically and personally. "There are family members on my mother's side that only speak Spanish and I'd love to be able to converse with them," she explains. Prior to departing for Spain, Peterson set herself up for success with five essential ways to sharpen her language skills.

Peterson (right) and friend at El Retiro Park, Madrid, Spain

Home life
In Madrid, she lived with her host mom, Marta, teenaged siblings, Laura and Gonzalo, and fellow study abroad student, Ella. "My host family made the transition to Spain easier and more comfortable especially when first arriving," says Peterson. The simple interactions of eating meals together, enjoying nightly conversations, and asking questions about local life gave her a fresh perspective to feel like a resident rather than a tourist.

Intensive Spanish course
For the first month of her program, Peterson enrolled in an intensive Spanish course at Universidad Antonio de Nebrija in Madrid, hammering away at language learning for multiple hours a day, five days a week. "The class was only in Spanish and it was very difficult at first, but it truly improved my ability to understand Spanish when someone was speaking very quickly," she notes.
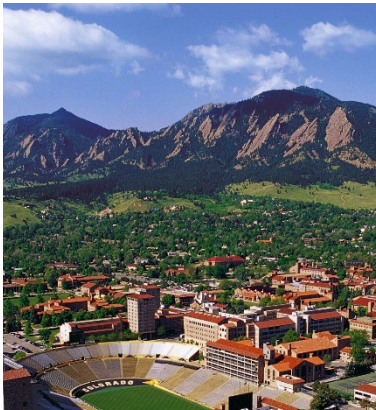
City life
Alongside friends from the program, Peterson frequented El Retiro Park, Museo del Prado, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, historical buildings, and local markets. She rode the Madrid Metro to and from school and to visit friends throughout the city. Being able to read the Metro signs and hear announcements upon arriving at destinations helped her get around town with greater ease.

Classes taught in Spanish

Though her semester abroad was cut short due to the global pandemic, Peterson was still able to take English- and Spanish-instruction classes at Universidad Antonio de Nebrija for two months. "Unique to class abroad compared to class in Boulder, I got to learn about European history while being in Europe and the history of Spain while being in Spain," explains Peterson. She found herself paying attention more than normal because it required her to translate everything in real-time in addition to learning the subject matter.

Traveling Spain
Receiving an IAFS Global Grant scholarship gave Peterson financial abilities to see neighboring cities in Spain. She visited Toledo, Segovia, Cádiz, and Alicante. She experienced first-hand the different dialects of the spoken language from native and second-language speakers. Even with a shortened semester abroad, Peterson found true value in language learning in Spain as well as a broader global view of the world. Communicating in Spanish with special attention to multiple dialects is a skillset she plans to use in her future career plans as a bilingual immigration lawyer.

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