

After all the craziness of getting ready for finals I had almost forgotten that I was about to Go to Madrid for four months. It seems like so long ago now to think about, but I remember feeling like I had forgotten all Spanish and being nervous. When I got to Madrid, I had booked a hostel for a few days to give myself time to look for a place to live, and shortly after that I started my placements. During my time there I had four placements: geriatrics, psych, cardiology and GP.

Finding a place to live

This was definitely the most stressful thing after I arrived in Madrid. I know some people sorted out their accommodation in advance but I would advise against this. There are plenty of places and this way you get to have a look around the place and compare it to others once you know where in the city you want to live. After looking at a few flats (including a tiny room with no windows...) I came across a website advertising accommodation for Erasmus students. The place is essentially halls; it has six floors each filled with Erasmus students. It will obviously depend on what you want (if you want to live with native speakers etc.) but for me there were a lot of upsides to it. Being in a place like that I was able to meet so many people from all over the world (in my flat there were 3 other Irish guys, a Spanish guy, a German guy, 2 Italian girls and a Turkish girl), and all of the flats had parties together etc. so it was a great way to find new friends. Figuring out where you want to live will probably be the best starting point as the city is so big. But once you know which hospital you'll be working in you'll be able to figure out the best area for you. I lived in Malasaña and loved it. It's an area of the city which has a lot of young people, lots of cool places to eat and drink, and lots of different types of bars and clubs.

Aside from Malasaña, there are lots of other interesting places you could live in the city. Sol is pretty much the Piccadilly of Madrid, right bang in the middle. It's where I stayed in the hostel when I first arrived there, and it's a great place to base yourself as it's close to pretty much everywhere else. If you're thinking about living here though have a good look at different flats as they may be more expensive here, and also the area is always extremely busy with a lot of tourists. La Latina is next to Sol and I think it's similar to Malasaña in many ways. Lots of interesting places to go, but perhaps a little out of the way for some of the hospitals (to be honest I'm not sure about that apart from the one I worked in, HUGM). Moncloa and Argüelles seem to be the most student filled parts of the city, and Chueca is another cool barrio which is comparable to Manchester's gay village.

Hospital placements

One thing in general that you should bear in mind is that people in Spain tend to be much more relaxed about pretty much everything. While this has its upsides, be prepared to not receive a whole lot of information about your placements. When I emailed the uni to ask for the names of my tutors, I was told that they could not give them to me. And when I emailed the address they had given me I got no reply. So don't be afraid to go online yourself and find the email address of whoever is in charge of the department, or even just walking onto a ward and telling them the situation. Chances are you will have to do something like this at some stage. The hours of the placements were roughly 8.30-2 ish most days with occasional longer or shorter days. You will also have to get used to the White coat you've seen on ER all these years (or whatever people watch now, I'm old). I know that some students really liked this, but I did not. Mainly because I somehow managed to get the strap on the back of the coat caught on door handles a lot so that wasn't fun. However, there is a big upside to the White coat, you can dress very casually to hospital. It's not like in the UK with dress codes etc., wearing jeans trainers and a t-shirt is completely fine.

My first placement was on a geriatric ward which dealt primarily with people who had no fractures. At this point I was not confident with my Spanish at all but the people I worked with were really nice and patient with me. The mornings were spent doing handover and the ward round. Things were not as hands on as I had been used to, there were few opportunities to speak to patients on my own and examination consisted of a quick listen to the heart and lungs without much else. But you soon get used to it and as I've said people are more than willing to help you if you need it. However, just as in the UK, older people at times do not speak very clearly and there were many times in this placement where I didn't have a clue what patients were saying. It's maybe something to bear in mind when choosing your placements, if you want to do geriatrics maybe save it until towards the end.

The second placement I had was psych. As I had no idea who my tutor was, I just went into the department

and found the 'jefe' and asked him to help me. He organised a placement in an adolescent unit which I really enjoyed for the most part. Some days I would be in clinic, other days on the ward doing rounds and being with the doctors who spoke to parents. There was unfortunately a very sad event during this placement. A 16 year old girl committed suicide. Although I hadn't known her, we had to tell the other children what had happened and try to support them eye which was extremely difficult at times. Despite this tragedy, I did find the placement to be interesting and again the staff were all lovely.

As with psych, I pretty much had to walk onto the cardiology ward and organise my placement myself. In my experiences though, the staff on the wards seem almost used to this. More than once I had people say to me, 'Oh you're Erasmus? Fine leave your bag here and come with me' without questioning me at all or asking for any I.D. The cardiology placement was probably most like a manchester placement of the ones I did in Spain. It was very busy, I was able to get a lot more involved, and I think by this point I was more confident with my Spanish. The hours however were still much better than a Manchester placement, so don't think you won't have time to do lots of other cool things.

The final placement I had was in a GP surgery or 'centro de salud'. If you are going to have a community placement, try, try, try and organise the details as soon as you can. I had so much trouble with this placement, and was only able to organise it because on my third placement there were some Spanish students who helped me. Organisational things aside, it was probably my favourite placement. It was in a much poorer part of the city and we saw all sorts of patients. The only real downside is it was a bit harder to get to in the mornings as it was further from my flat.

In Spain I very much got the feeling that life comes first, work comes second even as a doctor. It was so refreshing to see doctors really enjoying what they do and having the time to enjoy it. In the UK doctors are always rushing, always look exhausted, never have time to eat or drink anything. The notion of going to a bar around the corner from the hospital for a coffee and some breakfast (which happened many times) would be unthinkable in the UK. I'm not sure if it was a cultural thing, or better staffing levels or what, but the Spanish attitude to work is much healthier than the British one.

Transport in Madrid

Madrid might be a pretty huge city, but it has such a great transport network that you'll never feel too far away from anywhere. The metro runs from about six in the morning until 1.30am. There are also millions of buses running at all hours that will take you wherever you need to go. One thing that I would definitely recommend is to get the metro card, basically Madrid's equivalent to an Oyster card, but much cheaper. If you are under 26, you can pay 20 euros a month for unlimited travel on the buses and metros. Some of the stations (Sol, Ciudad Universitaria and others) have offices where you can go in and get the card. You'll need to make an appointment, and also try to have your address sorted and a Spanish phone number before you go. When I got mine I was still staying in the hostel and just had my UK number, and I think the lady thought I was a confused tourist wanting to buy this thing for a weekend or something. But it will make your life much easier and you won't be constantly rooting around for change when you're travelling around. Also if you lose the card you just go into one of the offices and pay something like six euro for a replacement.

Things to do in Madrid

Before coming to Madrid I had the impression that it was a city full of parks and museums. And while this is true, there is so much more to do. Retiro Park was probably my favourite, it's a huge space with lots of great sculptures and lakes. Many an afternoon was spent there with friends and a few beers enjoying the sun. Other parks that you should visit include Parque Oeste (has amazing views over the city and an Egyptian temple which is free to visit) and casa del campo (more of a natural space, which also has the zoo and a pretty impressive theme park). The list of museums is too long to include here, but if it's your thing you should definitely try to get to the Prado and the Reina Sofia. Other notable mentions include the Archeology Museum and the Museum of the History of Madrid. A lot of these places are free at certain times, and some are free whenever if you have a student card.

Seeing films in Spanish was one of the ways I convinced myself I could improve my language skills, and cinemas in Madrid are generally quite cheap. On a Wednesday some of them have a deal on where it's about 2 euro to see a film. However, if you'd rather see movies in English they also have cinemas that can

do that. There are also a zillion places to go and eat. They have every time of food as you can imagine in a big city but I'll make a list of some of the places I enjoyed. Tierra is a burrito bar, there are a few in Madrid and the burritos are amazing. One was right by my house and I probably averaged 1-2 a week and never got tired of it. Tigre is a tapas chain in the city, while the tapas are probably not the best you can get, they are still good. And for six euro you get a huge drink and as much food as you want which is hard to beat. If you're into burgers then you need to go to Goiko Grill. The burgers are pretty huge and come with all sorts of weird and wonderful toppings. Pizaolo was another favourite of mine, a little bit more expensive but it had really good authentic Italian food.

In terms of nightlife, it doesn't really get much better than Madrid. One thing to remember is that things happen a lot later there. You'll probably start drinking at home around 11, then head out between 1-2. Bars tend to be open until around three, and most clubs are open until 6 or later. I would definitely suggest going to some of the Erasmus nights as it's another great way of meeting people from all over the world. A lot of the clubs will have an Erasmus party one night a week. There are also a lot of rooftop parties at the weekends, which are usually at the top of hotels or museums. They're a lot of fun but a bit expensive, but once the weather heats up it's a great way to spend a Sunday afternoon.

El Rastro market is another thing you have to do during your time there. It's basically a market that goes on for streets and streets and sells everything you can imagine, from clothes and jewellery to old video games to art. If you're not a fan of crowds, then maybe stay to the peripheries but it is definitely worth a visit. It is however the only place I would advise you to be careful with your bag/wallet. The streets are so crowded and if you look touristy people may try and get your stuff. Also, on the last Sunday of every month there is this thing in an old animal slaughter house (which isn't as weird as it sounds). It's now this amazing space that puts on plays and art exhibitions. But anyway, one Sunday a month the place gets filled with food stalls of all different types of Spanish and international food. I can't actually remember the name of the place (and you thought this essay would be helpful) but the metro stop is Legazpi and then you walk toward the river and you can't miss it. Bring some beers, stuff your face then lay by the river taking in the sunshine.

Another great thing about Madrid is that it's just so nice to look at. Most of the buildings are beautiful no matter where you are in the city. I used to love just going for a walk and getting myself lost in the city admiring all the cool stuff around me. You'll never be far from a metro stop so you'll be able to get home easily, and it's another good way of seeing parts of the city you might not otherwise go to.

Travelling in Spain

If you're going to be in Madrid, it'll be perfect for exploring the rest of Spain. While I was there I went to Valencia for Las Fallas (a city wide firework festival where each neighbourhood spends the year building these amazing big floats of cartoons, political figures etc., on the last night of the festival there is a big firework show and they set fire to all of the floats), and spent a weekend in Malaga. It's probably my biggest regret about my time there that I did not travel more. Toledo, Segovia, Cuenca are all fairly close to Madrid and I've heard great things about all of them. Also there are a lot of companies which organise Erasmus trips to these places and many others. However, if you don't get the chance or don't have the money to visit many places don't worry, Madrid has more than enough to keep you entertained (while you're there the Easter processions will be taking place, and the festival of the patron saint of Madrid with lots of free concerts and parties).

I not going to pretend like I am some sort of Madrid expert now, at the end of the day four months is only four months. But I'll finish with some pieces of advice that might come in handy for you:

- Try to learn some Spanish slang! This is something you will inevitably pick up as you're there, but you will find having conversations with locals much easier if you've tried to learn some before you go
- Bring some warm clothes. Madrid is not overly warm in February/March. You'll need to bring some decent wintery clothes for the first month at least
- Go to some of the language exchanges. These are events where people come together to help improve their language skills. They're usually free, and another great way of meeting people
- Don't work too hard. This may be a given, but some people I knew who were there worked way too hard. At the end of the day, you will have just finished finals, and when you come back from Madrid you'll only have a little bit of time before starting work. So go mad and enjoy it.

I'm going to leave my email address in case any of you have more specific questions (I can give you the

email address of the halls place where I stayed etc. stuff like that) and because I know that I probably should have put a Lot more effort into this. I also know a few people who live in Madrid permanently who would be more than happy to help out if you get into any trouble while you're out there, or if you want someone to help you settle in. Have a great time! It'll fly by before you know it.