

European Option - Madrid 2018

Why I chose European Studies

Foreign languages and linguistics have always been a keen interest of mine and one of the principal reasons I chose to study in Manchester was the European Option to continue either my French or Spanish studies. It has been my ambition for almost ten years to work for a humanitarian organisation such as MSF and being proficient in other languages is a value they look for when selecting doctors to work in international relief teams. I knew that it would be important to have a good grasp of medical Spanish if I were to work in this field and having scheduled classes was also a way to motivate me to continue practising general Spanish. I also love to travel and firmly believe that it is a more rewarding experience when you can speak the language of the country. Guides are usually more informative in the local language, people often appreciate the effort and it is much easier to both avoid and resolve difficult or unsafe situations.

Living and working in Madrid

Having completed my third year PEP in Madrid I had no concerns about moving to the city for four months as I loved my time there. However, I knew the experience would be different this time as I didn't know any other medical students who would be coming due to intercalating in the previous year. I did however know some Spanish people from the month I had spent in Madrid as well as Spanish students that had done an Erasmus placement at my hospital in the UK which made it less daunting. I also knew from talking to others who had done semesters abroad that it would be easy to meet people and get involved in the Erasmus community.

Accommodation

A few weeks before moving to Madrid I searched online for student accommodation but encountered several problems including vague information, long minimum contracts and extortionate booking fees, but my main concern was that it was difficult to distinguish between legitimate and fake advertisements. Many students on Facebook groups recounted stories of paying large deposits only to find out the property was nonexistent. For these reasons I decided it would be better to find a place to live once I arrived in Madrid which I found to be a much better experience. I used idealista and Facebook groups to contact landlords and ended up choosing a property with a letting agency called Atmosphere Living. They provided all the information I needed, allowed me to view several properties and meet the current tenants. They also included free trips to Toledo and Aranjuez, a flamenco show and wine tasting evening in the cost of the rent which was a nice touch.

My flat was in Sol in the very centre of Madrid, which was fantastic in terms of shops, bars, other amenities and proximity to other locations however battling the crowds of tourists did become a little tedious after a while and public transport is excellent in Madrid so location doesn't particularly matter. The price also varies considerably from the centre of Sol to the outskirts but it is still possible to find cheap and centrally located apartments if you are willing to overlook certain drawbacks (in my case not having a bedroom window).

I deliberately chose a flat with a large number of tenants as I wanted to enjoy the social aspect of Erasmus. I lived with eight other students, all of different nationalities (Dominican Republic, Greece, The Netherlands, Germany, Hungary, South Korea, Ecuador and Italy) which I found to be a really positive experience. I was fortunate to get along with all of my flatmates and it was useful to practice Spanish with the Latin American students, particularly as I find the accent easier to understand than Castilian Spanish. I quickly formed close relationships with my flatmates which made it easier to integrate into the typical Erasmus programme and I enjoyed attending many of the organised weekly events. These included language exchanges on Monday and Thursday, karaoke and beer pong tournaments on Tuesday, salsa/bachata classes, pub crawls and cooking classes. The events were well organised and provided a great opportunity to meet other students, practise Spanish and find travel companions and people with whom to play sports.

Having neglected my Spanish studies for six months while I concentrated on finals, I was a little apprehensive about how I would cope with the language. As expected, the first few days were especially difficult and I felt quite embarrassed that I was unable to effectively communicate everything I wanted to say. However, after getting over this I was able to relax a little more, get used to the speed of madrileño speech and my confidence grew enormously. There were still times that I struggled to understand, particularly in large groups when several people were speaking at once, or if there was a lot of background noise, and by the afternoon I was usually quite tired of focusing on Spanish and my concentration often faltered. Nevertheless by the end of my elective I felt that I had improved significantly, I didn't need as long to translate everything in my head and conversation flowed much more naturally.

Autónoma University

Registering on my first day proved to be a great hassle. Having read the accounts of students from previous years and my own experiences leading up to the placement I was fully expecting this, but I still assumed I would get it sorted by the end of the day. I had been in contact with my coordinator until just before leaving the UK and she had told me to meet her at the university campus on Monday. This is on the outskirts of the city and can be reached by metro then train. I eventually found the international relations office and waited in line for around an hour before reaching the front desk. The lady I spoke with told me that my coordinator was not at the office, and after a phone call found out that she had another office at La Paz Hospital back in Madrid. She told me that I had around 45 minutes to get there before she left at midday, which I made just in time. Once I met my coordinator I gave her all of the requested documents including my learning agreement and certificate of arrival, which she said she was unable to sign in this office as she didn't have the stamp but she would take them with her to complete at the other office. A few days later she emailed me to say I had provided her with the wrong documents and I would have to do them again. I confirmed with UoM that they were indeed the correct documents and asked her when I could collect them. From this point she stopped responding to all of my emails, and the times I went to her offices proved pointless as she was never there. It took over two months to find her, when she told me that she didn't have the documents so I had to give them to her again and she promised to sign and stamp them. It wasn't until I made a complaint about her that they were eventually returned to me, by which point it was too late to receive Erasmus funding. The moral of this story is you don't get anywhere unless you make a big fuss.

Placement 1 - Cardiac Surgery - La Princesa

My first two placements were at La Princesa, which is a large hospital in Diego de León, around a 45 minute walk from Sol but also easily accessible by metro. I met a lady in the education office who checked my ID and gave me two forms to be signed at the end of each placement, before going to the cardiology ward. My supervisor was on leave for the first week but I introduced myself to the other doctors who were all very helpful. There was a group of five Spanish students who started on the same day and I found it useful to be there for their induction. I followed their timetable which involved a mixture of cardiac surgery, cardiology ward rounds, coronary care, cath lab and echocardiogram, which meant the days were varied and interesting. The students were also very kind and I felt comfortable asking them to explain anything I hadn't understood. They also helped me to get scrubs as I was not provided with any at first.

When I met my supervisor he explained what he expected of me which included writing reports of operations I had attended and interesting clinical cases which was not something I had anticipated but was beneficial for helping me to consolidate my learning and practise writing essays in Spanish. I enjoyed spending time on the wards and there was ample opportunity to practise auscultation and cardiac examinations. The time I spent in surgery was also excellent and I witnessed several big operations such as valve replacement and coronary artery bypass grafts. However, I did struggle to understand what people said in surgery as the masks muffle voices and hide vocalisations which often made it difficult to provide an accurate summary of the procedures and I frequently relied on the other students to explain certain aspects of the operation.

Placement 2 - Neurology - La Princesa

I also really enjoyed my second placement in neurology. The doctors were very welcoming and provided a great induction for me. One of the doctors in particular was excellent and frequently sat me down to go over the patients we had seen to explain more about their background history and answer any questions I had. There were also several other students on the ward; a group of fourth year students and a final year student. It was good to chat with them about their different experiences of medical school in Spain as well as interesting clinical cases as well and general conversation. The days on neurology were more repetitive than cardiac surgery as I mostly spent my time on the neurology or stroke unit ward rounds, both of which had a slow turnover of patients. That being said, it was very good to observe the progression and treatment of a wide range of conditions over the course of the month, and I felt more comfortable talking to the patients who knew I was an Erasmus student and were happy to let me practise history taking and neurological examinations and wouldn't get annoyed if I needed them to repeat things.

Placement 3 - Paediatrics - La Paz

After the Easter break I moved to La Paz, another large hospital in the north of Madrid. Since my coordinator had stopped contacting me, I was unsure of where I was supposed to go to register but with the help of several receptionists and secretaries I eventually found my way to the office of the education supervisor. In stark contrast to the brief registration at La Princesa, I received a thorough induction that lasted (somewhat unnecessarily) around an

hour and a half. Here I was provided with an ID card, given instructions on how to get scrubs and a white coat, and provided with a locker and padlock.

After all this I made my way to the paediatrics building and eventually found my supervisor who was very pleasant and I sat in her outpatient clinic for the rest of the morning.

Unfortunately, she had to rush off and I was left not knowing some important information such as my timetable and where to meet in the mornings. After this the placement continued in a similar fashion. I spent most of my time following my supervisor who was often too busy to give me any attention, and since I wasn't introduced to the rest of the team nobody really understood why I was there or what to do with me. This was a real shame as I am very interested in paediatrics but found that I didn't get as much from the experience as I had hoped. I believe part of the problem was the team were unaccustomed to dealing with students as they normally go to Niño Jesus, a specialist paediatric hospital.

That said, there were still good things about the placement: there were several interesting cases especially related to infectious diseases; I was able to learn a lot of slang/child friendly phrases, and it was good to talk to some of the other junior doctors about their experiences in paediatrics.

Placement 4 - Internal Medicine - La Paz

I was glad to have internal medicine as my final placement as it was the most difficult in terms of vocabulary and learning new things each day, so having some practice and greater confidence definitely helped. It was also the placement that provided the most opportunity to clerk patients, perform examinations and discuss potential diagnoses and management. I thoroughly enjoyed this and felt confident enough to lead consultations (with the assurance that they would check everything again and not to worry if I made mistakes). I spent most of my time with my supervisor and his first year resident doctor and although the team was small they quickly made me feel welcome, were interested in my experiences and taught me a lot of useful phrases and slang words. Again, it would have been nice to have students on the ward as they have more time to explain things and talk about things other than medicine but this mattered less towards the end of my time in Madrid.

Comparison of British and Spanish medicine

You will likely be aware of some of the stereotypes and cultural differences in Spain such as 'mañana culture', direct language and less stringent health and safety regulations. These largely hold true in the hospitals and there were times when, after arriving at 8:00 the first patient wouldn't be reviewed until 10:30 following breakfast, two coffee breaks and chatting to everyone they meet in the corridor. Some of the remarks made by doctors to patients would result in formal complaints in the UK but the Spaniards appear to be more tolerant and responsive to abruptness and open criticism.

Doctors are not required to perform many of the clinical skills that we would normally do in the UK such as venepuncture, cannulation, catheterisation and ECGs. Instead it is solely the nurses' responsibility which frees up time for doctors but also makes them less useful in an emergency situation.

That said, there were many things I prefer about the Spanish health system. The doctors and nurses seemed more relaxed but everything was eventually completed without care being compromised. There was also a more informal relationship between consultants and

juniors, and between doctors, nurses, medical students and patients. This created a friendlier environment in the hospital which makes it a nicer place to work.

The medical school system is also quite different to that in the UK. The main difference is they have six years of education, followed by another 8 months to revise for a national exam called MIR which decides their future. Their success in this exam decides whether they can practise the following year and also influences where they work and in which specialty. While the same can be said to some extent in the UK, having spoken to Spanish doctors it seems that medical care in the large cities is far superior to rural areas due to the best performing doctors getting their first selection of job and location. There is also no comparison to Foundation Year 1 and 2 in Spain; once a doctor starts working they will continue in their chosen speciality for their entire career unless they decide to retrain. Although this may be beneficial to the health system because they can focus on one specialty sooner and quickly become highly proficient, it gives doctors less general experience and opportunity to trial different careers to see which they are most suited to.

I often finished at the hospital at 1 when the other students went to their classes so in the weekday afternoons I had plenty of time to explore Madrid. As previously mentioned, I had already spent a month in Madrid for my PEP so it didn't take long to get reacquainted with the city but I discovered that there are so many things to do in addition to the main tourist attractions. A particular favourite of mine are the many huge parks around the city (Retiro, Juan Carlos, Felipe VI, Oeste, Manzanares, Casa de Campo) which are great for running, cycling, sunbathing and even kayaking in Juan Carlos. Madrid has its own version of 'Boris bikes' which are easy to use but there are also many cheap bikes for sale on Facebook marketplace. I bought one for €50 which I was then able to resell for the same price at the end of the semester.

Madrid is also fantastic for art aficionados, the most famous gallery being El Prado which has countless masterpieces by the likes of Goya and Velazquez, but also has excellent temporary exhibitions. La Reina Sofia (which houses Picasso's Guernica and many works by Dali), Thyssen Bornemisza, Miro gallery, Caixa Forum (Warhol) and several smaller modern art galleries are also excellent and many are free for students or at certain times throughout the week. There are a lot of great museums too and I especially enjoyed the National Anthropology Museum, National Archaeology Museum and the National Library tour. You can also find great, good value food of practically every cuisine. In Lavapiés there are fantastic Lebanese, Senegalese, Japanese and Turkish restaurants whilst La Latina offers excellent Spanish food and tapas bars. Malasaña is a really nice hipster area for cocktail bars, craft ale houses and venues with live jazz, blues and Latin music. As far as clubs are concerned you will either love or hate Madrid. The vast majority play reggaeton or electronic music and have expensive entry fees and drinks (a stark comparison to the cost in shops and bars). That said there are some smaller clubs that have certain nights that play different types of music such as rock, alternative, Motown and hip hop. I found the easiest way to find these club nights was through Facebook events pages, the Couchsurfing website and an app called Xceed which lists many other events happening in Madrid such as gigs, expos and fiestas.

Madrid is perfectly located for visiting the rest of the Iberian peninsula and I made the most of my weekends by visiting as many places as possible.

I went on day trips to Toledo, Segovia, Aranjuez, Chinchón, Cuenca, El Escorial, Guadalajara, Alcalá de Henares, Ávila and Salamanca all of which were beautiful. The landscape around Madrid is also breathtaking and I regularly got buses to Manzanares el Real, Cercedilla, Rascafría and La Pedriza to run and hike in the snow capped mountains. With the student transport card (€20 per month) it is possible to visit most of these places for free if you are under 25 and most are within one hour of Madrid by train or bus.

I also did a weekend road trip with other students to Valencia for Las Fallas, a really fun festival that culminates with an impressive firework display and the burning of huge Papier mache creations. My main advice would be to book accommodation well in advance (we had to stay in a town one hour away) and to take earplugs (people are constantly setting off loud fire crackers in the street). We found that it was really easy to hire a car and worked out far cheaper than every other mode of transport.

For the Semana Santa I went to Lisbon and Porto in Portugal with a friend. Again, I would recommend booking in advance as my friend paid the same price for 1 hour flights as I did for 7 hour buses and BlaBla cars.

In May I did another weekend road trip to El País Vasco including Bilbao, Zumaia, Gaztelgatxe and San Sebastian which I would also highly recommend, not just for the scenery and beaches but also incredible food

Finally, in the week before my return to the UK I visited Sevilla, Granada, Ronda and Cordoba in the south of Spain. It was fascinating to discover the rich history of Spain and to observe the increasing moorish influence the further south one travelled.

What have I gained from the experience

Although my time in the hospital has been very useful from a medical and educational point of view, this is something I could have developed back in the UK or anywhere else in the world. The most valuable things I have gained over the last four months are the friendships, the cultural experiences and the amazing memories. I have honestly loved living in Madrid so much. In fact, since I had to pay rent for June, I will be returning straight after my portfolio review and PSA to enjoy the rest of the summer there. I have also made friends all over the world with the promise of free accommodation and guided tours, and I have already made plans to visit Italy and Greece before I start working.

It's typical to be apprehensive about moving somewhere for four months but I can't recommend the experience enough; Madrid is impossible not to love!







