

European Studies Placement – Hospital Gregorio Marañón

Arriving in Spain was a bit of a whirlwind affair. We'd just finished finals, barely blinked, got our results on the Thursday and had to leave to a new country on the Friday. I was all a bit daunting at the start as, through incessant revision, I'd lost all social skills and suddenly had to leave all of my friends. Two of my friends and I decided to stay in an AirBnB for the first two weeks until we found our feet in Madrid, as we weren't familiar with it at all and didn't know which areas would be best to live in or most commutable to our hospitals. If you've never used AirBnB before I'd highly recommend it, as it has a wide variety of rooms and whole properties and most are quite reasonable. Six other people from our group opted for a hostel which worked well for them as there were more of them. Either way, unless you are familiar with Madrid or have someone out there who you can stay with for the first few weeks I'd highly recommend doing this so you're not rushed into finding a rubbish flat.

Where to Live:

Madrid has a wide variety of 'barrios' which have their own unique qualities and you'll have to have a read before you decide which one to live in. The most central is Sol, which is the epicentre of Madrid and is busy all the time (exceptionally so during holidays). There are a lot of nice apartments in the surrounding area which means you're never too far away from the crowds but at the risk of being slightly more expensive and noisy. Malasana is kind of like the Northern Quarter of Madrid and is full of cool bars and cafes and is a ten minute walk down Calle Fuencarral to Sol. There are lots of great eating places to be found all over Madrid but if you're looking for somewhere to have a drink and a nibble, that's what Malasana is all about from Thursday to Saturday – most people bar hop and don't stay in one place all night as there are too many to discover! La Latina is a really quaint area of town between Sol and the Palacio Real and has lots of hidden gems (not to mention a bar called La Latina Turner...) and is home to the infamous El Rastro market every Sunday from 8am-3pm which takes over every street in the barrio (more about this later). Next to La Latina is Lavapiés which has by far the most cultural diversity of all the Madrid barrios and is a really interesting place just to be – it has a lot of unique features and some of the apartments there have roof terraces looking over Madrid at much lower prices than elsewhere! Where I lived was in Barrio de las Letras which is between Sol and the museum district/Retiro park. It's a really safe area as the government buildings were across the road, but we were a five minute walk from Sol. It's rammed full of amazing bars, restaurants and cafés and you can't go a few minutes walk without ending up in a beautiful square to sit and have a coffee in. All in all it is personal choice but I would recommend reading more about each of the areas to see what suits you most as it could really affect what you get out of your trip. I'd also recommend getting on Facebook to follow Madrid Erasmus groups as rooms are posted on here daily. In addition, good websites to search on are idealista.com and easypiso.com. Be warned, flats go quickly so if you find one you really like, don't hesitate too much, as with all the erasmus students arriving at the beginning of the semester, chances are there are at least 5 other groups looking at that flat on the same day! We lived in a flat of 8 which seems like a lot, and is more people than I've ever lived with before, but we were really lucky and had a great mix of people from different countries and we all got on really well. Even though it might be a bit daunting I would recommend living with at least one other Spanish person so as you can practice when you're not in hospital – chances are they want to improve their English too so you can spend half the time in each language. If you're a bit nervous about living by yourself with a bunch of people you don't know you could always live with one other person from Manchester in a bigger flat then you'll always have someone you know.

Hospital Life:

Hospital life in Madrid is definitely a learning experience – not so much academically as medical students in Spain tend to be seen and not heard (it was six weeks before I examined a patient and this was rare). It really does make you come away appreciating what we have in the NHS. Be prepared to be ignored. I pride myself on being a pretty friendly person, and even though I'd try my hardest, sometimes it was met by the kind of active ignoring I'd never seen before. I had two surgical placements (cardiovascular surgery and neurosurgery) as both were on my medicine 'bucket list' and I wanted to see them. They were great in terms of seeing cool stuff, and my cardiovascular team were nice, got me involved as much as they could (which still involved minimal teaching) and sent me home after the morning in theatre (can't complain). The neurosurgery team, however, made it quite clear (through the medium of mime and interpretive dance) that they wished I wasn't there or at the very least stopped asking questions. I saw what I wanted to see (an

orange-sized tumour being removed, shunt insertion, aneurysm clipping and removal of a cavernoma whilst the patient was awake) and that's as far as it goes really. The medical teams do tend to get you more involved but only if you ask for it really. If you sit in a corner and say nothing they will absolutely let you but it doesn't make the time go any faster and you can actually feel knowledge seeping from your mind. Days in the hospital start at 8am with a sesión where the team gather and talk about all their patients and have some sort of educational presentation. They will then look through the patients they have (usually after a coffee or breakfast) and read about them and their progression. They will then do a ward round where they spend approximately 3 minutes with each patient and then go back to the office to type up what has changed. Essentially in Spain, doctors treat the numbers and have a less hands-on approach with the patients. Basically every job that an FY1 doctor does here is done by a nurse in Spain – I have never seen a doctor take blood, put in a cannula, do any investigations etc. Which sounds dreamy but is in fact mind-numbingly boring, especially when all you do is watch. Infection control is another thing which you'll have to get used to not having. Spain is still of the habit of wearing white coats, sleeves down, watches and jewellery on, hair down etc combined with not washing their hands (even in the infectious diseases department). I once watched a junior doctor spend almost 5 solid minutes struggling to put on a pair of sterile gloves in theatre so as not to contaminate them only then to scratch her nose with them on almost immediately. In addition, don't be perturbed if you smell cigarette smoke in the hospital-I was getting changed to go into cardiovascular surgery on the fifth floor of the hospital and thought I could smell burning...turns out it was a nurse having a cigarette out the window before she went into theatre (this is in addition to the consultant who came in in the morning smelling of cigarettes and proceeded through the whole sesión to smoke an e-cigarette before spending his day doing triple bypass procedures). Also don't be alarmed when someone who isn't scrubbed up reaches over into the sterile field to take a picture on their phone. Regardless of this, all of the doctors I came across had a really good relationship with their patients but they didn't sugar-coat anything or make any grand efforts to break bad news gently. Maybe that's how they like it in Spain, it seems to work for them. What I will say for hospital in Spain is that due to the listening-heavy nature of a medical student's role, it will improve your language skills infinitely. I was surprised and pleased to find that in the last few weeks in Spain I was sat in clinic and if my concentration wandered (it was 43 degrees in a room with no ventilation) I had still understood everything that had been said-I was no longer having to actively translate things but was passively understanding which was a really nice feeling as I've never had that before.

Getting Around:

Getting from the airport you can either take the metro, the number 200 bus which drops you at the Avenida de America metro stop, or the express airport bus. Madrid is crazily easy to get around. I would recommend what we did and walk from place to place for the first few weeks and you'll be amazed to find how close together everything is and how, somehow, you can get to the same place a hundred different ways. By the end of the four months I thought I knew Madrid's layout pretty well then would suddenly turn a corner and realise I was somewhere I'd been before but didn't realise was so close-by. The bus system is an enigma. Unless you're really confident, I would absolutely avoid it (unless you're getting the express bus to and from the airport-it's usually a bit quicker than the metro and has minimal stops). The metro is an absolute dream. The stops are so close together you're never far away from anything, they run from 6am-1.30am (bearing in mind most clubs shut at 6am...) and they're so frequent it's almost impossible to blame public transport for being late anywhere. As soon as you can, you should get the Abono Tarjeta de Transporte either from one of the participating metro stops or from a tobaconist (estanco) – there's one outside Tribunal metro station in Malasana that does it and means you don't have to wait in the days-long queue in the metro station. It's around 55 euros a month for unlimited travel on the metro and saves you so much money!

Life in Madrid

Like I mentioned before, every barrio has its own personality and its own quirks but you'll never run out of new places to go for food or a drink. One of the best things about eating in Madrid is the menu del día, which is a menu from which you pick a starter, a main, a dessert and a drink (usually also with some bread) for around 10 euros. It's mainly a daytime thing up until the early evening but if you time it right you can have it as a late lunch and eat once in the day. Pinchos (which are various delicious things on top of bread) are a good way to have something to eat if you're meeting friends for a drink and don't fancy a sit-down meal. In addition, tapas are indeed all they're cracked up to be – I'm definitely the person who wants to try a bit of everyone else's food so this was a perfect way for me to try a bit of everything myself! Bars in Madrid are usually open until 3am after which point everyone either goes home or moves on to a bigger club (all of which close at 6am). Unlike at home where people go to the pub and stay in the same one most of

the evening, people in Madrid know there's too much choice to stick to one place and tend to have a drink in one place and bar-hop for the rest of the evening. There are a lot of bars with live jazz in and you'll find one for every budget and taste. Cien monteditos is a good little meeting place (not least because there's one on nearly every street) but it's super cheap (all monteditos are 50 cents on a Monday) and always busy. One thing not to miss in Madrid is the El Rastro market - not only can you buy everything from a centuries-old metal chastity belt (who knew?!) to vintage Barbour jackets, art, jewellery, books and antiques, but if all this makes you peckish then you're in the right place (you can never be in the wrong place for food in Madrid)-tapas bars line the streets! My favourite part of the Rastro was the one euro stall – all the vintage clothing you can shake a stick at for one euro a pop. I came back to Manchester with double the amount of stuff I left with and I'm not even sorry. Afterwards people spill into cafés and food markets in La Latina to relax for the rest of their Sunday and pass the time people-watching. Also in the area is Mercado Cebada which is one of the coolest places in Madrid. It's run by the same people who run El Patio Maravilloso (a bar/community centre which looks like a giant living room where the staff dance salsa on the bartop-think Antwerp Mansion but better). Outside they have open-air seating and live music for the rest of the Sunday and it's the perfect way to while away a Sunday.

In general, the people of Madrid are a really friendly bunch and they're more than happy to chat. They have a few strange customs – most of which are endearing but some which are kind of annoying, but if you're expecting them it'll be less of a niggle. First, people from Madrid will not move out of your way if you both happen to be walking in opposite directions and there isn't enough space-stand your ground, they look like they won't yield but they will (sometimes they don't but don't let them smell the fear). You could add an extra 10km onto your journey every day just by moving around people so make it a point to play chicken right up to the last minute and you'll usually find that people would rather move a foot to the left than be barged. Seems like a small thing but once you notice it you can't un-notice it (sorry). Second thing is that everyone in Madrid has a dog. This is wonderful. We spent more time in cafés dog-watching than people-watching and I have no regrets. Rather amusingly (not really, but if you don't laugh you'd cry), Spanish people are also too proud to tell you they don't know the answer to something, which becomes apparent when you're late getting somewhere (through no fault of the metro) and you need directions. A Spanish person will confidently point you in some direction, and of course you have no reason not to believe them, they were so confident after all, until you end up in precisely not the place you were supposed to be. You've been warned. 'Que aproveche' in Madrid is as reflexive as it is to us to say 'bless you' after someone sneezes – everytime someone sees you eat literally anything, they will religiously hope that you enjoy it. In addition, although being in a lift isn't known to be the least awkward experience (everyone is having a full-blown conversation which immediately stops upon crossing the threshold of a lift, only to pick up where it left off upon exiting), you'll find that people will say cheerio to everyone as they get out of a lift without having uttered a word to them before. Sometimes people do it when leaving the bathroom as well – unnerving but go with it. A few things which aren't customary in Spain include kettles, toasters and squash. You will become expertly skilled at pouring hot water into tiny cups (they aren't believers in mugs either) from a giant pan. I would also recommend that if squash is your means of drinking your 2 litres of water a day that you stock up on Robinson's super-concentrated squash before you leave and supplement this when you have anyone come to visit-it'll amaze you how much you miss it and once any British friends find out you have any, they're putty in your hands. Also something to note, try to get a Spanish sim card when you arrive – I went with an Orange 9 euro a month deal which was pretty internet-heavy, as most people in Spain exclusively use whatsapp to contact each other so texting is essentially moot and you can call using this app.

Travelling

We did a fair bit with our weekends as we wanted to see a bit more of Spain than we ever had before. We went to Valencia in March which was absolutely stunning-the weather was great and we were able to rent bikes and cycle down the river which has now been dried out and made into a really beautiful park, all the way down to the sea. It's also got an amazing Sunday market where you can try some of the famous black paella. We went down for the beginning of the Las Fallas festival where people from the city spend all year making giant (up to three stories tall) floats/paper sculptures which are relevant to what has happened over the past year in the news, pick a winner, then set them all on fire. Through all of this there are fireworks every night and the most amazing lights/firework display you're likely to see in Spain. It does also come with every child in the city having firecrackers which they don't hesitate to throw at your feet but it's all really good fun and seriously worth seeing. We also visited Seville during Easter which was incredible – as Andalusia is a very traditionally religious part of Spain we had wanted to see the Easter processions, as we'd been told they were unmissable. The whole thing was absolutely incredible – people were dressed up all week like they were going to a royal wedding and would watch one procession then immediately walk to the

next procession on the other part of town. This carried on all day, sometimes through the night, through all of Easter week. The processions themselves involved huge, intricate, representations of the Easter story and hundreds of 'dedicantes', a lot of them children, walking through the streets ahead of the 'imagen'. Even if you don't want to go for Easter to see this, Seville is a gorgeous city with a beautiful cathedral and an old Moorish Alcazar which is stunningly ornate with gorgeous gardens with peacocks, fountains and underground baths. We also decided to spend a few days in the western Sierra of Madrid in a little village called Valdemaqueda about an hour and a half's bus journey outside of Madrid. There are so many little picturesque villages in the mountains outside of Madrid that it's hard to pick one but all have their own charm and many serve as ski resorts in the winter months. We decided to go in late April and rented a wooden cabin in a campsite and I have to say, being from a small town in the countryside myself, this was the perfect getaway for me. There were walking trails everywhere and one day we picked a summit, climbed it and read a book overlooking the rest of the mountains in the sun – it was glorious. Apart from nearby places which are best reached by bus, I would recommend having a look on Blablacar which is a car-pool site where people can advertise free spaces in their car for particular journeys. It's a fraction of the price of the train and is very safe as long as you pick someone with pictures and reviews, and means you get to chat to someone who is likely to know a bit about your destination! If that doesn't appeal to you the coaches are really comfortable and relatively cheap too – most of the best deals you can find by googling but Alsabus is a great company with loads of routes.

Needless to say you're never going to run out of things to do in Madrid and it is sure to teach you a thing or two about yourself, what you want from life and how different things are in hospitals outside of the UK. You'll no doubt be sad to leave at the end of four months but you'll definitely come home with much more than you left with, and it'll always feel like somewhere you can call home and come back to.