

I chose to take the European Option because I wanted to carry on with the Spanish that I'd learnt at GCSE and A Level, as I knew that languages can easily be lost if they're not regularly used. The main reason for wanting to keep this skill was to have a language as a passport to travel and work abroad in the future. I had travelled to Argentina during my gap year and really wanted the opportunity to return to South America for a longer period of time in the future, and to work there as a doctor.

I was based at Hospital Puerta de Hierro, which is affiliated with Universidad Autonoma Madrid. The hospital itself is in a town called Majadahonda, just outside of Madrid. It's about 30-45 minutes journey on an 'interurbano' bus from Moncloa, so Moncloa and the surrounding areas are the most convenient to live in in terms of commuting to the hospital. However, flats in Moncloa/Arguelles can be more costly than other areas, and I met plenty of other medical students at the hospital who lived in different areas of Madrid despite this commute, so if you're happy to catch a metro or bus to Moncloa, then other areas are just as reasonable to live. Obviously you'd have to consider that you may then be paying a bit more in transport, if you had to get a metro or a bus to Moncloa. NB, the buses that go around central Madrid run on a different travel pass to the ones that travel from Madrid to surrounding towns, such as Majadahonda.

The way the transport system works in Madrid is that central Madrid is considered zone A, then each area moving out of from the centre through to the surrounding towns are categorised into zones according to distance. You can then buy a monthly travel card based on the zones you use and the modes of transports – for example, only interurbano buses, or a combination of bus, metro, and cercanias (the local train system, running inside central Madrid to surrounding towns). Obviously the more zones you need, or having more than one mode of transport increases the price of the ticket.

I bought a combined travel card which allowed me to travel to the hospital, as well as to the university campus, which cost me around €70 a month, and this was unlimited travel on all of the different types of transports, so I then no longer had pay for any more travel costs.

I lived in San Bernado, which was about a 10 minute walk from Moncloa. It was well located as it was near two different metro stops on several different metro lines. There were plenty of local supermarkets and bars nearby. As mentioned earlier, this area near Moncloa can be a bit more expensive than other areas of Madrid. My rent was €350 a month, plus about €35 a month for bills (water, gas, electric and internet). I looked at several other flats in this area which cost up to €450, without bills. Whereas other students I met who lived in other areas paid around €280-300.

It's only really possible to rent flats in Madrid – I don't think I saw a single house while I was there. However some flats can be very big, and can have quite a few bedrooms - my friend shared a flat with 8 people.

Some flats can be very decent sizes. Although my bedroom had a single bed, the room was big enough for a double still with plenty of room, and fully furnished with a wardrobe and desk. The downside was that the kitchen and living room were quite small which was the compromise for the

big bedrooms. However I viewed some bedrooms which were a lot smaller, and I often saw bedrooms which could only fit in a bed and wardrobe and not much else.

The way Spanish flats seem to be designed is to have a central courtyard with bedrooms which either have windows opening into this courtyard (*habitaciones interiores*) or bedrooms which open onto the front, street side of the building, (*habitaciones externas*). The exterior bedrooms tend to be a lot lighter, and thus is usually where the balcony is if the flat has one. These rooms are much nicer and get more light, but sometimes the rent is higher for them, for this reason.

The university do offer halls of residence to Erasmus students. I only met one person who was living there. They are quite near to the university campus, and because this is slightly outside of Madrid, it caused a lot of difficulty in terms of returning at night. Although there are buses that run throughout the night, they are a lot less frequent, and can run as infrequently as 4 hours apart.

On top of this, I wouldn't recommend these as accommodation for medical students because you'd also have to factor in how you'd get to the hospital from the university, which, for Puerta de Hierro, could take 1 hour 45 minutes.

When looking for a flat I'd advise picking one with at least one other Spanish or Latin-American person living there. I lived with other international people – some on Erasmus, some doing internships – and while we always spoke in Spanish, it was obviously slower and broken Spanish, and I'd have improved much more had I lived with other native Spanish speakers. I was surprised and a bit disappointed that at the end of my trip I still sometimes had difficulty understanding Spanish people (although no where near as much as at the beginning) I think that if I'd lived with Spanish people, this wouldn't have been the case. So I'd really recommend that, given that it can be very difficult to meet other students other than those also on Erasmus. Besides, a Spanish person can teach you more colloquial terms and more about Spanish culture than you'd learn from international people.

My first rotation at the hospital was internal medicine. Most doctors work from 8am until 3pm, and this is when I was expected to be in. The day would start off with a Grand Round type teaching session. Then back in the office we'd go through any new admissions, then have a ward round. I tended to use this placement more to focus on developing my Spanish, rather than to focus on medicine.

My second rotation was obstetrics and gynaecology. On this rotation I was given a sign off sheet to get signed off for any histories/examinations/skills I did. There were plenty of outpatient clinics to sit in on, including antenatal ultrasound scans, which are performed by the obstetricians. All pregnant women in Spain see an obstetrician as part of their antenatal appointments, rather than just a midwife.

There was also the opportunity to go onto the birthing suite or to operating theatres to see planned and emergency caesarean sections. This wasn't made clear to me at the start of the placement, I was only introduced to the out-patient department, and I didn't feel like I was getting that much from the clinics, so don't be afraid to ask if there's something else you can do if you're not gaining much from what you're doing. If anything it shows that you're enthusiastic.

My final placement was A&E which I did for two blocks. Here I shadowed the Residents, and it was a really useful placement to practice clerking in patients, once I felt more confident to do so having improved my language skills over the previous weeks. By this point I felt a bit out of practice with medicine as the role of a final year medical student in Spain is very different to that in the UK, and I hadn't felt that I'd been able to be very hands on. For this reason, this placement was really useful to get me back into the zone of 'history-diagnosis-treatment', something that I'd not done loads of during my obstetrics and gynaecology placement.

There are three levels in A&E – nivel 1, 2 and consultas – which equate to resus, majors and minors. The main difference between A&E in Spain compared to the UK is that the patients can stay in A&E a lot longer. They don't have a 4 hour target like the UK, or any target for that matter, and patients can remain on the department for up to several days while waiting to be admitted or are well enough to be discharged. This means that during the morning, each patient is reviewed, so A&E feels a bit more like a ward in the morning, compared to British A&E.

Doctors don't do skills such as cannulas and catheters – these are all done by nursing staff. So if you want to practice these skills, make sure you voice this and get in with the nurses. Also infection control is much laxer there, so these skills are a bit easier to do.

The way patients are triaged on majors is that each doctor takes turns to receive the next patient. When the patient arrives they take a very brief history, and decide whether it's appropriate for them to be on majors or minors. If it's decided that they should stay on majors, they're allocated to a bed, and the doctor then speaks to them and examines them, sometimes after the investigations have been ordered.

Another big difference I noticed was in communication. Firstly, Spanish doctors tend to rely more on test results than clinical history. The history is much more brief than what UK medical students have been taught to do, and the physical examination less structured. Also, the physical examination is a different order to what we do. For example, sometimes they start by checking the legs for oedema. This was quite useful for me as it's something that I often forget, so now, having seen it done first so many times, it's one of the first things I think to check for.

Other information, such as the past medical history, is taken from the patient's hospital record, rather than directly from the patient. Because of this, there tends to be a lot more sitting at

computers, and less patient contact, than in the UK. If you feel like you want to practice your history/examination skills, feel free to ask if you can speak to the patients after they've been seen by the resident. In general, they were all very friendly and willing to help medical students. Plus, the stereotype of the Spanish is that they love to talk!

Spanish doctors don't receive any communication skills as part of their training. This includes breaking bad news. Overall the doctors were very friendly and sympathetic. However, I saw a few cases where it was obvious they'd not had communication training. One of them for example, was during the ward round on internal medicine. A patients wife had left the room to join us in the corridor to ask us for the results of his biopsy. The consultant then went on to tell her that his tumor is malignant and probably terminal. All of this was done in the busy corridor. I later asked if there was a private room for breaking bad news to patients. The consultant told me that there is one, but its not often used because if they used it with each patient/relative, they'd be going in and out of it all day.

Another cultural difference I noticed in hospital was the lax approach to patient dignity. For example, a patient was catheterised during a ward round with 8 members of staff present, with the door into the corridor open. Also, although there were curtains to completely close off cubicles in A&E, these were rarely pulled all the way around, despite the doctor performing, for example, a breast examination. However, what surprised me was that the patients didn't seem to mind. I think that because this is what they experience whenever they see a doctor, they are used to, and not bothered by not having very much privacy.

I didn't have any classes or lectures during my time in Madrid. The major down side of this is that it was really difficult to meet other Spanish medical students. It's really easy to meet other fellow Erasmus students, but obviously, spending time with Spanish people is the best way to improve your language skills, as well as learn about the country, so try and make friends with Spanish people where you can. If this isn't through the university, then there are plenty of language exchanges in the city where people go to practice speaking other languages, and theres often loads of Spanish people there looking to practice English, in exchange for Spanish conversation. Or even find an activity/hobby you enjoy doing to meet people that way. I met a girl who had joined a hiking club and met loads of Spanish people like that.

The university Autonoma offers free Spanish classes for all erasmus students. I'd really recommend doing them, because they're very well taught, with native Spanish teachers. It's a great chance to learn colloquial terms and more complex gramma, as well as to raise any doubts about the language. On top of that it breaks up just having to be on the wards all day every day.

For each level of Spanish there is a class which is more conversational Spanish, which is more laid back and tailored according to the needs/interests of the students. The other one is to prepare for

the DELE language exam. This class is more structured and more intense. The exam for this qualification was some time in June, so if you want to sit it, it's worth checking the date to ensure it doesn't clash with something back in Manchester. Also, bear in mind that you have to pay for the exam, which was over €100. However, it may be worth it to have a higher language qualification that is well recognised. In order to work in Spain, it's necessary to have at least B2, however for working in healthcare you need to have C1. In the conversational Spanish class, there is a small exam at the end of the course, and you gain a certificate to say you have completed the course at that level, however this is not an officially recognised qualification, unlike the DELE.

The Spanish classes were a great way of learning about Spanish culture, with the Spanish teacher explaining traditional festivals, recommending traditional foods, showing nostalgic films/TV programs, etc. Another excellent way to gain cultural insight is to travel to different parts of the country. Spain varies enormously from the north to the south of the country, both scenically as well as socially. A film I'd recommend is 'Ocho Apellidos Vascos' which is a comedy film to explain the different stereotypes from the Basque Country compared to Andalucia.

Asides from this you'll probably want to travel to the coast. Madrid is a great city, with so much energy, but the one thing it's missing is a beach! There are loads of trips arranged with the Erasmus Social Network (they have a Facebook group) for example, we went to Valencia during the Fallas. There were also trips to Salamanca, Ibiza, Seville. If you want to go to other cities, or you don't fancy going with Erasmus, coach travel is very cheap, and there are different classes so you can pay a bit more for an extra bit of comfort.

Madrid isn't a huge city, and a lot of it can be explored on foot. It's a good idea to try and walk places instead of catch a bus or metro, as you'll get to know the city so much better, and discover things along the way. Madrid seemed to be the sort of place where I was constantly discovering a new bar or clothes shop down a little side street.

I bought a cheap basic phone and a pay as you go SIM card when I arrived in Spain. However you can get really cheap pay monthly or pay as you go SIMS which include internet. Because it's so cheap, most people tend to communicate through whatsapp rather than text, so I'd advise bringing a smart phone and getting one of these SIM cards.

The Erasmus Social Network (ESN) office in the university sell ESN cards for just €5, and it gives you a discount to all the social events they organise, as well as reduced entry to certain places in Madrid.

For example, at the very top of el museo de Bella Artes, there is a terrace with brilliant views of the city. It normally costs €3 to get in, however with this card it's free.

Obviously this time in Spain has helped me enormously in terms of my Spanish ability. I don't think there's any way to improve and to become a fluid and natural speaker in another language without spending time in that country. When I compare my ability from the start of my stay to the end, the flow of my conversation had improved tremendously. A major part of this was due to confidence. Initially it was easy to become avoidant of speaking, for fear of making mistakes, however as time went on my confidence grew, and I became more relaxed about speaking to people.

My writing skills probably didn't improve massively because I didn't have to write very much. However, I wanted this time to focus more on conversational language, which I feel I achieved.

In Spain at the moment there is a lot of talk about the economic crisis and because there is such a shortage of jobs, competition has grown, and employers are asking for more from job applicants. Now a lot of Spanish people are looking to learn English to increase their employability, whereas few people spoke it a few years ago. This means you meet a lot more Spanish people who want to practice their English with you, and it can make things a bit easier if you're struggling/need a break from Spanish, particularly in the hospital as many doctors speak English.

Aside from this, it has made me realise the value of speaking a foreign language, and how useful it can be for opening up doors to different opportunities, both in employment and in leisure.

This time in Spain has definitely given me the urge to travel more and develop my Spanish even more. With a language it will be so much easier to work abroad, and I'm hoping to take a year or two out after Foundation Years to work in South America. This European Option placement has built my confidence and drive to do this, as well as my Spanish ability.

Useful contacts

Although Autonomía provide Erasmus students with websites for searching for student flats, I found these were more expensive. I was recommended to use two websites, which are the Spanish equivalent to Gumtree, called segundomano and idealista. These websites have listings of accommodation to rent, as well as other second hand goods for sale.

There are Facebook groups for Erasmus students, as well as the Erasmus Social Network, where trips and social events are organised. Other students also post adverts for flats on there when they're/their flatmates are moving out so it's worth giving it a look, that way you can get advice and information about what the flat is like from someone who's already lived there.