

Study Abroad Reflection

The only time I've ever seen my Dad cry was hugging me goodbye at the airport security checkpoint before my semester abroad. These weren't tears of sadness though, they were tears of anticipation, excitement, and anxiety that he knew I felt going into the most "foreign" experience of my life. In college, my Dad studied abroad, as did my mom. They actually met there. I grew up hearing their stories for the fourth or fifth time about how they absolutely loved their host families, the people they met, and the little town where they experienced abroad together. Ever since I can remember, I knew I was going to study abroad. Studying abroad has always seemed like a given of my eventual college experience. Also, I grew up going to a Spanish immersion school, and my grandparents would take my family on trips around the world to hone my Spanish skills, and to share their love of traveling. Studying abroad has always felt like it was meant for me, even before I knew what I was going to study, or where I was going to go to college. Together, all this is what led to the culmination of my own incredible study abroad experience in Santiago de Compostela, Spain in the spring of 2024.

Since I had been to Europe before, I knew everything would be different, but I never truly understood the extent of the difference between a European and American lifestyle before I had lived in both. I had seen big cities such as Madrid and London and understood that cars didn't play as much of a role in European cultures, but even in my small city of Santiago de Compostela, cars were a burden. During my month and a half of classes I would walk to class, walk to get lunch, and walk home. I would walk to the university athletic centers to play soccer or basketball with locals, but I would never need to walk more than 2 miles. When I switched to my internship I would walk 3 miles to the hospital I worked in. It didn't matter. Everything was convenient and it was expected that walking was to be my primary transportation method.

During my 3 and a half months in Spain, with the exception of taxis, I was in a car less than 5 times. In America, my life revolves around having a car. It's impossible to do anything efficiently without having a car and I think that's what adds to the charm of Spain and Europe as a whole. You walk places, you meet people, and you feel more familiar with where you are because of it.

Outside of expanding my perspective on what daily life is like in other countries, abroad also helped shape my future career goals. Going abroad, I figured I had given up on the pre-med route. I had decided I was going to completely shift into biomedical device sales and truly believed that that was what was best for me. However, my internship absolutely changed this outlook. I shadowed in a pediatric emergency room in the hospital for the University of Santiago, and I couldn't have enjoyed my time more. Work in the emergency room was fast, exciting, and always busy. Also, due to the absence of urgent care facilities in Spain, the emergency room assumes this role and takes on any type of patient. This was what was most interesting for me. One minute there would be a girl being wheeled into the emergency room with a possible meningitis case, and another I would be talking to a kid who very obviously just wanted to stay home from school. I also got to work with doctors, nurses, anesthesiologists, and even some medical residents. They taught me all sorts of things about the process of going into healthcare in university, and the differences between it and the process in the United States.

My experience abroad, although rewarding, was also challenging at times. I had never flown alone, and was incredibly nervous at the thought of forcing myself to be friends with 10 random girls from Clemson. Also, since I am incredibly close with my family, I was anxious about being an ocean away from them and on a completely different schedule than what I was used to. This did prove to be difficult at first, but eventually I fell into my own personal

Spaniard-influenced rhythm. One of the ways through which I was able to lose my sense of homesickness was through staying busy constantly. I wanted to make the most of my time abroad. I picked up volunteering at a local soup kitchen with 85 year old Spanish nuns, I played soccer and volleyball with locals, and even attended one of Santiago de Compostela's low-tier soccer games. On weekends, I traveled to Seville, Barcelona, London, Porto, Vigo, Ourense, just to name a few and would come back late Sunday nights ready for a full week of class and experiencing Spanish culture ahead of me. One thing that I look back and appreciate is that I never let a moment go to waste.

I'd like to say that my experience abroad taught me adaptability skills, and showed me how to stay comfortable in uncomfortable situations. I completely changed my outlook for my future career abroad, and was able to do so many things I wouldn't have had the opportunity to do otherwise. I checked countries off my bucket list, met people from all around the world and ate ray. I'll never forget running into friends from high school in the Great British museum or a random park in Seville. Abroad taught me how to be more independent as well. I went to the doctor's, stayed in hostels, and navigated the tube in London all by myself. Having gone 3 months away from the comfort of Clemson and my college friends and family may have been intimidating at first, but stepping out of my comfort zone to meet new people and embrace other cultures is what ultimately led to my most unforgettable semester, the best 3 and half months of my life.