

Upon my arrival in Seville, I had a hopeful idea of what my study abroad experience would hold. I had heard from friends about the plethora of cultural experiences, the cheap travel of every student's dreams, and the warm and inviting nature of Spaniards. While these things were true, at the same time, I faced the realities of living in a brand-new culture and the inherent challenges that come along with that. Coming from a small town in Virginia, I was simultaneously overwhelmed and excited by the big city. Suddenly, I was surrounded by millions of people, rich cultural traditions, a foreign language, and an opposite culture to the one I had grown up in. This reality, while different from the preconceived ideas I had going into the experience, proved richer, fuller, and much more rewarding.

During my first few weeks in Seville, I experienced what I now refer to as the "utopia" period. I was thrilled to be in Europe for the first time, navigating the city, trying local foods, and practicing my Spanish. Reflecting on my experience, I remember how joyful I was that people were out in the streets until the early morning hours, experiencing life together and getting to know one another on a deeper level. I first noticed the incredible work-life balance that every Spaniard embraced. During siesta, hundreds of people filled the streets as they ate together, talked together, and joked around with one another. There is no mantra in Spain of "living for the weekend"; instead, they focus on savoring each day. I appreciate the "work hard, play hard" mentality in the United States. However, I believe in a healthy balance that promotes health and well-being, like the one I experienced in Spain.

One of the biggest culture shocks I experienced was the absence of cell phones and technology in public spaces. The first Sunday I was there, I walked along the river for fresh air and exercise. Usually, in America, when I walk through a public place or eat in a restaurant, I assume that at least 70% of the surrounding people are on their phones or tablets, even when they

are in good company. I expected to experience the same phenomenon in Spain, but I was shocked to see almost no one using a screen, even alone. Instead, I watched as kids rode their bikes alongside their parents, who were chatting with their friends. I watched people reading books, playing games, or sunbathing as they enjoyed a fruitful conversation. After talking with my host mom about what I saw, I learned that Sundays are strictly dedicated to rest. It is a time set aside for families and friends to reconnect with one another and the outdoors before the beginning of the new week. This revelation became my favorite aspect of Spanish culture, inspiring me to seek that same mindfulness and balance in my life back in the United States.

One of the highlights of living in Spain is immersing yourself in the cultural traditions. In April, Seville hosts La Feria de Sevilla, a tradition dating back to 1846. The April fair is known as one of the largest celebrations in Spain, with more than 1,000,000 visitors coming to eat, dance, and meet friends each year. The week-long celebration starts with "El alumbrado," or "the illumination" of the gates when millions gather in the streets to watch the towering façade light up at midnight. The lighting is followed by seven days of 24/7 flamenco dancing, fair rides, food, and catching up with lifelong friends. Aside from the delicious chocolate-covered donuts, my favorite part was watching the beautifully adorned women in their flamenco dresses walk hand in hand with the men in tailored suits. I had never felt more immersed in rich culture than during the days I was experiencing the fair.

While I was abroad, I was fortunate enough to not only experience Sevillano culture but to experience the various cultures in Germany, Italy, Morocco, Scotland, England, Portugal, and many different Spanish cities, such as Madrid, Córdoba, Málaga, Mallorca, Ronda, and Granada. Each place taught me something invaluable about resilience, hospitality, and how people connect beyond borders. Reflecting on my experiences, I remember vividly the kindness shown to me by

the Moroccan merchants as they gave me directions to the best restaurants and stores, negotiated prices with me, and helped me find the perfect items that I was looking for. I also remember appreciating the structure and order I experienced while in Germany, the passion and generosity I saw in Italy, and the genuine compassion and authenticity exhibited by the people in Scotland. I learned that no matter where I am, who I am serving, or the assumed differences between myself and other populations, humans share an inherent connection that transcends borders, boundaries, cultures, and stigmas. I aspire to learn continuously from every person I encounter, and I strive to use this connection to serve better and more holistically in my profession as a physician assistant.

As I prepare for my career as a physician assistant, the lessons I learned in Seville resonate deeply with my professional aspirations. The cornerstone of my medical practice is the emphasis on connection with others, a strong sense of community, and holistic well-being. My goal is to foster relationships with my community and my patients and help them find their mental and physical balance. By embracing cultural diversity and humility, I will create a welcoming environment where every patient feels valued and understood, ultimately enhancing the quality of care I provide. My experiences abroad will undoubtedly shape my journey in healthcare, reminding me that every interaction is an opportunity to connect and make a meaningful impact.