

Spanish Immersion – Salamanca

by Anna Henderson, Naenae College (2017)

This July I was lucky enough to study at the prestigious Salamanca University in Spain, and having just returned home to the chilly short days of wintery Wellington, I am reflecting on the wonderful experience.

There were many highlights, which I will break down into three categories. History. Food. People.

The historical element was probably the most impressive element for me. It really makes you realise what a young country New Zealand is, when you are studying in a university that is about to turn 800 years old. There were many legends

that we learned of on educational tours of the university and the town, for example how finding “la rana” (the frog) on the wall of the university will give one luck for upcoming exams, not to mention what the frog symbolised. Additionally we learned about the occult history of a now ruined church, and had the rare chance to visit a library with books that pre-dated the printing press.

We went on two day trips during the weekend which allowed us to learn about the culture and history of surrounding towns such as Alba de Tormes and Toledo. In the mediaeval town of Alba de Tormes we visited a local family that has been making bricks in a traditional manner for generations and are used in many of the old buildings and restorations of ancient buildings around the Salamanca region. It was fascinating to get an insight into the process behind some of the impressive buildings that we had visited.

Later in the evening, we were able to see a local fiesta take place. On 16 July, the historical importance of fishing is remembered on the day of the Patron saint of anglers, Virgen del Carmen. This was a special experience for us, and gave me as a teacher an authentic view of an important day in Spain and cultural context for how I would go about teaching my students more about this kind of celebration.

In Alba de Tormes, I consumed one of the most extravagant meals I have ever eaten. There was no doubt that the Spaniards know how to have lunch; a sandwich now seems unacceptable in comparison. It was a luxurious three courses at a long table. The proprietor refusing to clear a plate way that was not completely empty. The subject of food is close to my heart, and in Spain, I was certainly not disappointed. It took a few days to get accustomed to the 10pm dinnertime, but soon I found myself in food heaven. Our group of teachers attended cooking classes and learned to make traditional Spanish meals. We learned several simple yet truly delicious meals that we all vowed to teach our students back home to cook.

In Salamanca, we learned culture through not only the food or the stories, but we learned that the heart of a place is the people. I adored getting to know some of the Salamanca University teachers, who truly wowed us with their passion and sparkle. We loved getting to know the families that we lived with, who introduced us to the new mealtimes and foods in a motherly manner. The students that I met in Salamanca will never be forgotten and I am lucky to have made friendships while swatting over impossible grammar problems and essays about Flamenco stars.

On my return to New Zealand, I was already planning lessons in my mind, excited at the possibilities available to me now that I had learned such an abundance of new knowledge. New sayings, gestures and cultural experiences, not to mention the teaching methods of grammar and vocabulary at my fingertips. I am grateful for the experience.

