

Spanish Immersion – Salamanca

by Vicky Mottart, Gisborne Girls' High School (2017)

Qué experiencia!

La cultura, la historia, el arte, la música, la comida y la gente –mi vida en España.....

On 9 July myself and eight other lucky teachers from NZ arrived in the beautiful, historic City of Salamanca, Spain. We were about to start our two-week Spanish Immersion Course run by ILEP (International Languages Exchanges and Pathways). We were going to study Spanish and learn all about the culture of Spain, attending the renowned Universidad de Salamanca, the third oldest University in the world, which next year will celebrate its 800th Birthday!



A typical day went as follows; breakfast at 7.30am, walk to Uni along medieval streets through the Plaza Mayor, buy a croissant from the pastelería and then start lectures at 8.30am. Attend 2 hours of language classes, then onto a cultural class followed by an Art History class – all in Spanish. The classes were very international with students from all over the world, e.g. Brazil, Israel, Korea, USA etc. ... all coming here to study Spanish. My tutors were amazing and inspiring. It was so interesting to be on the other side of the classroom, as the learner, taking part in tasks, games, writing essays and even taking exams! Lectures finished at 1pm, time to walk “home” for lunch at 2pm – a three course meal that could easily last well over an hour.

By 3pm the temperature was often touching 40 degrees, or as they’d say in Spain, “en el horno” (in the oven)– time for a siesta or to do homework! For three nights I went to a cooking class from 5.30–8pm learning how to make typical dishes like Paella, Tortilla Española and ensaladas, sopas etc. ... It was hot but so much fun! Dinner was usually from 9.30 or 10pm (quite a culture shock to me as back in NZ I would have gone to bed by then!). Families, grandparents and small children (and their dogs!) would all be out for dinner. The streets were lined with restaurants and cafes, busy waiters with their tables and chairs full around the Plaza; an atmosphere buzzing with live music, conversations and socialising. I loved watching the world go by on an evening in Spain, so colourful, friendly and of course, accompanied by delicious food. You haven’t tasted ham until you have eaten jamón serrano!

Other afternoons, when we weren’t cooking we had cultural and architectural tours, including visiting one of the oldest libraries in the world where we were privileged to see exquisite illuminated manuscripts which inspired Steve Jobs to make the computer symbols that we use today. At the weekend we spent a day in Toledo, the old Capital of Spain, a labyrinth of streets, churches and cathedrals. A highlight for me was being able to stand in front of the works of art that I had studied over 30 years ago when I did my degree in Art History. Paintings by El Greco, Goya, Velázquez and Picasso have now been etched in colour in my mind. It felt almost surreal to now be studying them again but in Spanish! I also learnt about the contemporary art of Miguel Barceló, whose giant upside-down elephant sculpture in the Plaza Mayor made me smile every day.

On the Sunday we set off on a journey to Alba de Tormes, off the beaten tourist track, a pueblo 30 minutes from Salamanca. We saw clay being made into roof tiles, visited historic buildings and an ancient bull fighting arena and shared the most amazing lunch. In the evening of 16 July we were able to experience the fiesta and celebration of the Virgen del Carmen, the saint of fishermen and water. Being able to witness events like this and be part of the people of Spain has given me so much that I can’t wait to share with my students at my school. Authentic experiences, showing that culture and language are intertwined.

Thank you to all of my wonderful lecturers who shared their passion for learning, encouraging me to speak, write, communicate, eat and even flamenco in Spanish! Also to ILEP for running this amazing scholarship programme, to GGHS and to my family for your support and help in getting me there. I want to say

“¡Gracias por todo!”