



**Playing with monkeys
in Gibraltar**



My street and apartment

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View of Granada from The Alhambra

SMEAL International Programs Newsletter

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Rachel Prager spent Spring semester studying and living in Andalucia, Spain.

Sitting on the IES Abroad terrace, overlooking the breathtaking view of The Alhambra and all of Granada, I realized how fortunate I was to be experiencing life in another country. Spain was gorgeous, and Andalucia – the southern portion of Spain – was my absolute favorite. Not only did I learn a new language and culture by spending 18 weeks in a foreign country, but I realized how much more there was to our world than my tiny bubble I spent the last twenty one years living in.

Granada was a small city, but the old European-style cobblestone sidewalks were always crowded with people. During the day between classes, I would go walk through the center of the city to find thousands of Spaniards browsing through stores and sitting at outdoor cafés drinking a cup of “vino” and eating free tapas. The plazas were not only a place to meet up with friends, but beautiful areas of the city with flower vendors and fresh bread being sold on the streets. This picturesque city with the white roofed houses and famous architectural buildings would be my new home for the next four and a half months.

When I began my experience, I did not know what to expect. I went without knowing anyone and was barely able to speak the language. When I got off the bus from Malaga, my host mother was awaiting my arrival. In her few words of English she knew, she asked, “Are you Rachel?” Unable to understand her, I shook my head no and walked away. This was the first of many frustrating times I would encounter while being caught up with this language barrier. After our unfortunate first encounter, I got to know my host mother or as I called her, my señora, and before long I considered her family.

Although we lived completely separate lives, we surprisingly had a lot in common. We both enjoy hiking, bicycling, spending weekends on the beach which I learned from her through our attempt at making conversation. She did not speak a word of English, yet while we sat and ate our lunch every afternoon that she thoroughly prepared, we just clicked. There would be times when I would try to tell her something that happened at school and while I struggled to figure out the correct verb tense, she would sit there and walk me through it. Then she would even make me repeat it back to her so that I would understand for the next time. For two different people who are from two very different places, we had a bond stronger than I have had with most other people who are just like me.



My señora and roommate

After many weeks of playing charades with my señora, spending twenty minutes figuring out how to pay for a lemon at the grocery store, attempting to tell a taxi driver how to get home, I felt like I was a true Spaniard, completely immersed in their culture. Who would have thought that when my parents came to visit two months into my stay, I would be the one translating what the waitresses and hotel clerks were saying. The once frustrating language barrier turned into one of the greatest accomplishments I have experienced.

While spending three years going to college at Penn State, actually taking classes in Granada was a whole new experience on its own. The four hundred student lecture halls were replaced by fifteen or twenty person interactive classes about the Spanish



**Riding a camel
through Africa**



**Hiking through the beautiful
hills of Granada**

language, the art and architecture of the beautiful city in which I resided, along with classes regarding Arab culture and Mediterranean literature. At least once a week we would go on field trips to famous cathedrals, mosques, and other cities throughout Spain. Visiting the Mosque of Córdoba or The Alhambra for my Spanish architecture class was just a typical Wednesday afternoon class activity. The hands-on learning I experienced along with the personal one-on-one interaction with native Spaniards definitely added to a very worthwhile semester of studies. I was able to take a break from my grueling business courses and spend a semester focusing on something that I never previously had the opportunity to learn about.

One of my greatest adventures of studying abroad was when I went on a five day trip to Morocco. I never realized how close southern Spain was to Africa. Spending only twenty eight minutes on the ferry from the tip of Spain, we arrived in Tanger, Morocco. When I arrived in Spain, I thought it was so different than life in the United States. However, as soon as I got to Africa, suddenly Spain didn't seem so foreign anymore. Morocco was a whole new world, different from anything I have experienced. It was a Muslim country which was a big culture shock in itself. We had the opportunity to meet Moroccan college students who took us around town and helped us bargain for products sold on the street. We were brought to Hammam's (Arab bath houses) where Moroccan women go once a week to bathe. We stayed in homestays and were provided with authentic Moroccan food. Eating couscous with my hands with my new Moroccan family was something I'll never forget. The whole trip, which was provided by the program, was an eye-opening experience. It really gave me perspective on my life in the United States and how fortunate I am to have grown up here. I spent some time chatting with Moroccan students my own age who said they would do any-

thing to be given the opportunity to leave the country and travel around the world. That experience taught me so much about what it is like to live in other parts of the world and how different people's lives are depending on where they grow up.

Spending weekends traveling through Spain, Africa, and the rest of Europe were indescribable experiences. Being independent enough to rent a car with a few friends and drive to Sevilla to see a bullfight, then to Portugal for a weekend on the beach was something I didn't think I could do alone. Staying in a Moroccan homestay for a week and experiencing a brand new lifestyle different from anything in Europe, opened my eyes from anything I was used to. Playing with monkeys in Gibraltar, climbing to the top of the Eiffel Tower, riding a camel along the beach in Africa, and learning how to make wine in Italy were only a few of the highlights that studying abroad has given me the opportunity to experience.



A street in Morocco



There was something about sitting on top of the Albaicin (the old gypsy neighborhood in Granada) at sunset overlooking the snow peaked Sierra Nevada mountains alongside the famous Alhambra castle with my new Spanish friends, that showed me how lucky I was to get this opportunity. Those eighteen weeks, although extremely challenging at times, have been some of the best times of my life. During my last day in the IES building, while I was printing out my flight information back to the states, I came across an e-mail from the director of our IES Granada program. Included in the e-mail, he wrote, "Use the next few weeks to reflect on your experience – how you have grown by simultaneously riding on a wave of euphoria and coping with adversity; feeling proud of your accomplishments one day and feeling like an idiot the next; wishing you were a true Spaniard, and not quite finding the American you used to be." Every now and then I think back to his e-mail and realize I'm not the American I used to be. I'm no longer close minded, stuck in my bubble, but able to remember what it was like to actually feel like a true Spaniard.