



SMEAL International Programs Newsletter

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Focusing on the home-stay experience, Michael DeCarbo shares study abroad memories from his time in Seville, Spain, Spring 2007.

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Studying abroad was never a goal of mine before attending Penn State. Let’s face it, I had no idea what studying abroad could do for me, and how meaningful that time abroad would become. My name is Michael DeCarbo and I am currently a senior studying finance at Penn State. I am involved in the Smeal College of Business Mentors organization and intramural sports. I studied in Sevilla, Spain in the Spring 2007 semester.

During my spring semester of my sophomore year, a lot of my friends started talking about being abroad for a semester. Some of them had Rome in mind, others had New Zealand, and even one was set on going to Tokyo. Some friends started seriously considering Sevilla and wanted me to be a part of it. If I were to study abroad at all, Spain was the obvious choice because of my background in the Spanish language.

Around the middle of fall semester before my semester abroad, my enthusiasm began to grow for two reasons. One, a lot of my friends were talking about where they were going to be in the world, Tokyo, Paris, Rome, Seville...just about everywhere! Then, it finally

hit me. I was going to be in a different country for four and a half months and was going to be able to see the world from a completely different perspective. That truly excited me.

All the participants in my program spent a few nights in the hotel, meeting the CIEE staff, but most importantly getting to know each other. However, those nights were all in anticipation of finally meeting our family. The time came and you could tell that everybody was nervous. We were going to meet family members we would live with for the whole semester! Finally, my roommate, Jason Axt, and myself were called to meet our family in the lobby of the hotel. The first words my Senora, Tere, said to us were “Ahhhh, muy fuerte!” which translates “Ahhhh, very strong!”. We started laughing and I had the feeling it was going to be all right. We packed up and got into the car, met my Senor, Pepe, and the barrage of Spanish started. Then I realized I had a lot to learn.

We arrived at the spacious apartment and met one of the sons, Alejandro, and a family friend Ramon (who lived with us). The first meal could not have been a better indication of what our meals would be like for the whole semester. It was a baked macaroni dish with tuna fish and tomato sauce. The meal was fantastic, I think Jason and I ate half of it ourselves. After our first meal, we got situated in our room, and then it was time for Pepe to take us for a long walk around Sevilla. He spoke to us with a grand ceremonial voice all about the seasons in Seville and the different buildings we were walking past. Although my Spanish was rusty, he made sure that I knew what he was talking about. After the 2-3 hour walk around Sevilla, Jason and I found ourselves very comfortable with Pepe, and realized that if we needed anything, all we had to do was ask.

The best part of the semester was definitely the decision to stay in a Spanish home. Reading about what it’s like to live in Spain, can’t compare to actually being immersed in the culture by living in a foreign home. Everyday I learned something new about my family and how a





Moroccan dancer/waiter delivers drinks with flair.

“The only dissonance between the family that I witnessed was when Sevilla’s rival soccer, or futbol, teams played each other. “

Michael enjoys the architecture of Sevilla (right).

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family lives in Sevilla. I was given enough freedom to live the way I am accustomed to living, however, there were boundaries, which I met. Jason and I respected them and they respected us, and that made for a comfortable four and a half months. Even though my Spanish was rusty, I was still able to communicate with my family, and they made sure they slowed their speech down if I needed time to decipher what was being said. We even had some laughs about it. I remember it was my roommate’s birthday and we were eating dinner, getting ready to go out for the night. My senora is talking to us about birthdays and looks at me and says “Michael, cuando es tu cumpleaños?”, which translates into “Michael, when is your birthday?”. I simply looked up at her and answered “Si.” My roommate gave me a look, and Tere just started laughing, shaking her head, as to say “What are we going to do with you?!” There were times when we felt sick, and my Senora and Senor made sure to care for us if we needed it, and that made me feel very much at home.

The most important Spanish cultural value that I learned was how everybody lived in the present, no matter what they were doing and what part of the day it was. The phenomena *sobremesa* is indicative of this cultural norm. This term refers to the conversation after a meal, which can last for hours, even if they don’t order anything else. Another example is how Spanish people always devote two to three hours a day at *siesta* to have lunch and spend time with one another. It is extraordinary how the Spaniards care about their relationships with people more than anything else in life. This can extend to how young

people get their first employment, often because of a good friend or family member. If they are 30 minutes late for a meeting it is not a problem, due to their characteristic of living in the moment and not being obsessed with worrying about the future. As an American, that lifestyle is totally different, I may even go as far as saying opposite to my own. We are absorbed with details and

schedules, to make sure our time is used as efficiently as possible, and sometimes we may forget to breath, and take in the moment. Ever since I studied abroad in Spain, I’ve been living in the moment here in America, especially here at Penn State, because this is my last year.

Another Spanish cultural norm is how close families are and how close they stay, even as the children grow up and go through college. Many children choose to live and work in the same city as their parents, or very close to that city. It was nice to be able to meet all of Tere and Pepe’s sons because they lived so close. The only dissonance between the family that I witnessed was when Sevilla’s rival soccer, or futbol, teams played each other. Futbol Club de Sevilla and Betis were the two Sevilla teams in the Spanish futbol league. Most of the family liked Sevilla, however, there were a few, including Tere, who rooted for Betis. Whenever the two teams would meet, you knew. The Spanish people take a lot of pride with their futbol team, which stems back to the dictatorship of Franco in the mid 20th century. During those hard times, the futbol teams were one of the only ways to keep the Spanish morale up by keeping all the people united in some fashion.

A home stay is the best way to have a true cultural experience. If I did not live in a Spanish household I would not have been able to improve my Spanish fluency as fast as I did, and the experience definitely made me grow as a student, as an American, and as a person.

