

Complutense University, Madrid

2015 S2

BA – major in Spanish

I decided to do an exchange in Madrid because I wanted to go somewhere where I could improve my Spanish and experience a whole new culture. Madrid is an amazing place and very different to anywhere in our part of the world. It is a big city of about 3.5 million people and there are so many incredible buildings, museums and parks to discover. The Spanish culture is also fascinating and Madrid is a great place to learn about what makes Spaniards tick.

Accommodation

I opted to live in a flat rather than the university accommodation because it was a cheaper and I wanted to live close to the city centre, so I searched online using websites such as easypiso.com and idealista.com. Because I was arriving in Madrid quite close to the start of the Semester (2 weeks before), I wanted to find a place before I got there in case there was nothing left by the time I arrived. I found a room in an apartment in the barrio of Malasaña, very close to Gran Via, for 400 euros a month including gastos. Gastos are things like electricity and internet, and these can either be separate from the monthly rent or included. I lived with 7 other international students (all girls as this particular place was girls only) and we all spoke mainly Spanish in the flat, which was good for practice (even though most people could speak English too). The price I paid was pretty low for this location mainly because our flat only had a microwave to cook with, but most flats DO have better cooking facilities and in the central neighbourhoods cost around 400-500 euros a month. I would advise living in a barrio near the university or the city centre such as Moncloa, Arguelles, Malasaña, Chueca, Sol or Lavapies.

Transport

I lived about 25 minutes from Complutense by metro, or about 50 minutes walk. I took the metro most days because it's efficient and highly accessible. I quickly discovered that the public transport in Madrid is way better than ours in New Zealand. Anyone under 26 can buy a public transport card called the 'abono' which costs €20 a month for unlimited travel

in any zones within the Madrid region. You can even travel to Toledo which is in the Castilla la Mancha region with the abono for free, which is awesome!

University

Complutense is a big university with approximately 80,000 students, and is separated into faculties, for example faculty of law, faculty of geography. Being an arts student, I was part of the facultad de filología which covers languages, cultures and literature. I took three full time papers and one paper that only went for one month and a half, as it was a Spanish language for foreigners course. This is one of the only manageable courses that you can take which cross credits for a Spanish language paper at Otago (in my case SPAN 332). It is run by the Centro Complutense para la Enseñanza de español which has an office in the filology building and you have to apply through them. It costs about 320 euros for 40 hours and is worth slightly less ECTS credits (4) than most papers (worth 6) so you will have to use credits from another subject to make up the full amount of credits in total. The other papers I took were Hispanic-American literature, History of Spanish and Intermediate French. The workload for these subjects was pretty reasonable and I managed to get decent results. The only really challenging paper was History of Spanish, which involves transcribing words from Latin into Spanish, so I wouldn't recommend it unless you're prepared to work hard!

In terms of admin and course enrolment, you have to go to the oficina de alumnos visitantes, NOT the oficina de relaciones internacionales, and buy the 'sobre de matricula' for 1 euro, which you then fill out with the papers you want to take. Once your application is processed you will be given a UCM email address and access to Campus Virtual, which is like our equivalent of Blackboard.

Complutense is quite different to Otago in the respect that things do not get done quite as efficiently and it is a much more relaxed learning environment. Most classes don't start til 10-15 minutes after the scheduled time because the teachers always arrive late, and they often finish early, so that a two-hour lecture will actually only be an hour and a half. The lecturers also take ages to hand your corrected work back to you, so don't be surprised if you're waiting months to get your results. At times these aspects could be frustrating, but in the end I just learnt to accept it and go with the flow.

I felt totally out of my depth when I first started at university, because all the lecturers were speaking so fast and I was nervous that they would ask me a question and I wouldn't understand/wouldn't know how to reply, but this feeling eventually passed. You will find that you quickly adapt to the language and become more comfortable, so that after a month or two uni doesn't feel quite as stressful.

Money matters

Most things in Spain are cheaper than in New Zealand, so your money goes a lot further. Food is generally cheaper, both in supermarkets and eating out. A set menu in a restaurant which includes a starter, main, dessert and a drink is between €10-15 (note \$1 NZ = approx €0.60), while at Complutense it costs only €5!. Alcohol in particular is ridiculously expensive, for instance you will pay €2-3 for a decent bottle of red wine in a supermarket, €2 for a beer in a bar and €10 for a bottle of vodka. You can also buy a range of clothes for better prices than in New Zealand, and they have much more variety! Overall I budgeted about €200-250 on average a month in addition to rent, with some months being slightly less or more depending on what I did.

Weather

I lived in Madrid for the second semester of the Otago calendar (the first semester at Complutense) and thus experienced autumn and winter. I found the climate to be quite pleasant - it was nice and warm from September to mid-November, and then started to cool down gradually. In Winter the average temperature was between 5-10 degrees so it wasn't as cold as a Dunedin winter. Also most apartments have good heating unlike Dunedin so you'll only feel the cold when you're outside.

Places to visit

Madrid is a massive city and has plenty to offer in terms of attractions. It boasts some of the world's best art museums, so make sure you check out the Museo del Prado and the Reina Sofia. It also has several large parks, of which my favourite is Parque del Buen Retiro (simply known as Retiro). I would also recommend going on the cable car across Casa del Campo and going up the Torre de Moncloa and the Circulo de Bellas Artes Terraza for awesome views of the city.

I was lucky enough to have plenty of time to travel, and I sure made the most of it! Because Madrid is in a great location geographically at the centre of Spain, it is easy to travel to many cities using public transport. Spain is very well connected with trains and buses - and bus is usually the cheapest option so I did quite a lot of travel this way. Some of the cities I visited include Granada, Cordoba, Barcelona, Salamanca, Zaragoza, Segovia, Bilbao and San Sebastian. My favourite region in Spain was Andalusia - I highly recommend going there!

Because Spain is close to many other European countries, you can quite easily and affordably travel by plane to numerous destinations throughout Europe. I visited central Europe (Croatia, Poland etc.) and England and Ireland prior to and during my exchange, which was amazing.

Overall I can't speak highly enough of my time spent on exchange. I met some incredible people who I will visit overseas in the future, my Spanish improved tremendously, I got to know a big city like a local and of course I was able to travel heaps and have loads of fun at the same time!