

Living abroad in Spain

This brochure has been compiled from the experiences and knowledge of several European Studies students who went on exchange to Spain. It is written from the students point of view and is updated yearly. We hope you find its numerous hints and practical tips useful during your stay overseas. May it help you get past the “survival” stage quickly and contribute to your enjoyment of the Spanish experience next year.

When you come back to Guelph, you will be expected to return this brochure (or a copy) to me, with appropriate corrections and additions, so that it can be updated for the benefit of the next group of outgoing students.

Bon voyage!

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(The last person to edit this lived in Málaga Spain for six months, attending La Universidad de Málaga)

Documentation

Assembling all of the necessary documentation for a year abroad takes a fair amount of time and money. Start collecting all of these documents *early*. It is not possible to get all this done in the last three weeks before you leave!!! Here is a rough idea of what you will need. The documents required vary depending on what university in Spain you choose to attend. The documents required also vary depending on whether you are completing one semester or two semesters in Spain.

In order to live in Spain for the duration of the academic year you must have

- A passport; preferably valid for a few months after you expect to return from Europe
- Visa (add info)
- Birth certificate (check specifications)
- A letter of permission from the University of Guelph
- A letter of acceptance by the Spanish university of your choice (within the limits of ESP partnerships, of course)
- A statement of financial support from your parents
- Proof of health insurance, which can be obtained from OHIP (235 King St., Kitchener)

Just before you go make sure your credit card will be valid for your whole trip. It is no longer necessary to notify your bank that you will be out of the country. However, if it makes you feel more comfortable you can notify your bank that you will be out of the country so that they don't see unusual activity on your account and cancel it. From my experience, it was not convenient to find places to print or photocopy, so do yourself a favour and bring multiple copies of your documents. Your passport DNI is very important in the school system so it will benefit you to have many copies on hand.

Banking

You might want to visit a lawyer and have power of attorney given to one of your parents so that they can access your financial matters. You could also consider opening a joint account with your parents. Make sure your Visa/Master Card pin number is not longer than 4 digits, or it won't work internationally. It might be a good idea to set up online banking. This is the easiest way to keep track – not only of your home bank, but also your Spanish bank account. You can also use your debit card to withdraw money from European bank machines but your bank might charge you a fee (not all banks do). Get a bank authorized letter of support (for apartment and for opening an account in Spain). Having a debit card with a chip makes paying much easier, because automatic machines (when paying for train tickets and other things) only accept cards with chips. Also, tell your bank that you will be overseas so that they don't freeze your account because of irregular activity (check each country specifications)

Things to take to Spain:

School Things

10-15 passport-size photos (to give to professors and attach to documents)

BIC pens (ridiculously expensive! Everyone uses fountain pens.)

Spanish grammar reference

Spanish/English dictionary (most professors in Spain will let you use them in class, even sometimes on tests!)

Day-timer or calendar

USB stick – many profs will gladly let exchange students copy the PPT slides onto their USB stick

Clothing

Bathing suits, beachwear, hats

Hiking gear (lots of cool trails to be discovered)

Spring coats, scarves, (nights can be chilly when the sun goes down, especially near the beach!)

Sandals or slippers

Winter gear if you plan to ski!!

*Note: If in Spain in the months of January/February, it can be quite cold inside houses as there is no heating available. These months also can be rainy depending on where you are in Spain. This time of weather calls for a light coat, long pants and sweaters.

Helpful Items

Journal: I kept a daily journal and filled it with details big and small so that I won't forget my time there!

Folders: organize all your important papers so they don't get lost.

Money belt (can be useful while travelling. Certain areas are known more than others for pocketing. For example – Barcelona)

Digital camera (invest in rechargeable batteries, makes life a lot easier... make sure to have a

Large SD card for the camera, you don't want to run out of space for photos)

Adapters: the outlets are different in Spain, you'll need them for plugging in your computer or cell phone. Buy these in Canada before your trip.

Portable charger: These fit in your pocket and gives your cell phone extra juice while you are on the go.

Extra Tips

- ISIC card, available free from our Travel Cuts (this was pretty useless for the most part).
- Monthly bus passes are cheaper than paying each trip individually.
- Join face book groups for international students that are in your school. Here you will learn about events/parties/trips that are taking place. I found many tutor opportunities on Facebook groups that I took advantage of and ended up tutoring 2 families how to speak English!
- Unlock your phone before leaving Canada. I tried to unlock mine in Spain and it took them 2 weeks to realize they couldn't do it. Phone plans in Spain typically are monthly, and when your time runs out you can go to a cigar shop or a convenience store to buy more minutes.
- Most larger cities in Europe have what is called a city center. This area is where you will find lots of shops and overpriced restaurants. It is what we would call "downtown." Don't be afraid to

venture away from the city center every once in a while and search for the hidden gems that each city holds!

- Remember that most shops and grocery stores are closed on Sundays and holidays, and Saturdays are usually shorter hours. The Siesta (nap) takes place every day from around 1-4. During this time stores are closed and you will have to go either before or after.

Health and Toiletry Supplies

Contact lens solution (\$10 in Guelph, \$20-25 in Spain) Although it might be more expensive in Spain liquids do factor into the strict weight restrictions for your baggage which could cost you more in the end!

Pharmacies are super available in Spain, there is almost one on every street and they have access to your everyday cough and cold needs. For prescription medicine, it is recommended to fill these prescriptions before your trip.

*Cigarettes are much stronger than in Canada but somewhat cheaper too. Second-hand smoke will likely suffice and it's free!

* Bring some Canada treats to give to your new friends. Some items that can't be bought in Europe are: KD, mini eggs, peanut butter, Kool-Aid, ketchup chips

* Memory cards for your camera. If possible, invest in a laptop computer AND external hard drive. You will have wireless connections at school and in libraries. This way you have a CD and DVD player, word processor, dictionary, etc.

Suggested Reading

First Time Europe (A Rough Guide Special), by Louis CasaBianca

This is a great guide for new travellers. I'd been to Europe many times before, but I still found tons of useful ideas here. At \$15, it's worth every penny. Routard Guides are good.

www.lonelyplanet.com is a great site to use when traveling.

While it is always a good idea to do some research before your trip, you won't find all the answers you are looking for in a book. Since you are living there, not just staying for a vacation, you have plenty of time to do some exploring yourself. Each city center will have a tourist guide, this is where you can find maps, information on explorations or tips on where to eat/visit. Leave some of the exploring for your new friends that you meet, and even talk to the locals, they will know where all the good spots are!

Airline Tickets

I did a fair amount of shopping around for the best deal on airfares and found Travel Cuts was the most reasonable. For other options, visit www.airtransat.ca, www.kayak.fr, www.redtag.ca. It is best to book your flight as early as possible so you have the most choice of when to leave. Discuss options with your travel agent about changing return dates. If you plan on coming home for Christmas, book your flight as soon as you know when classes and exams will end.

Consider how you will manage your luggage - from airport to bus/train to taxi to residence desk, to room etc. If you are taking a lot of things, some airlines will give you permission to bring more than the normal weight, check it out before you get to the airport and are ordered to re-pack or stay home!

When to Arrive

Do not arrive on a Sunday or holiday because you could have difficulties getting into residence, negotiating bus schedules, etc. Find out when classes will start and plan to arrive at least a week early. Taking an intensive language course for foreigners before regular university classes begin is a good way to ease into European life and to meet other foreign students. You will get to know your surroundings and improve your language skills before the real school year starts. In the past, Guelph students have received Foreign-language course credits for this work upon presentation of the appropriate transcripts. (The stage includes more than reading, writing, listening and speaking skills – you have tours of your town, the nearby towns/cities, and wine/cheese tasting outings, with 50 other exchange students in the same boat as you). This is available in some exchange countries and universities but not all of them.

You will be very sorry if you do not have at least \$200 (CDN) worth of Euros in small bills when you arrive. Order this from your bank or currency exchange a couple of weeks before leaving Canada. The best rates are at Global Currency (Gordon and Kortright; Home Hardware plaza). This money will pay for your bus, cab, phone card (to let Mom know that you arrived safely), and perhaps a meal or two. Do not take travellers' cheques. They are not accepted anywhere.

Culture Shock

You may have done lots of travelling before but you will find that moving to a foreign country for a year is entirely different. You will feel tired and frustrated quite often during the first few weeks in your new environment. The mind tires quickly when trying to struggle with a new language and taking in a new environment. Things that are automatic for you in Canada, such as taking the bus to school or going grocery shopping, will be challenging at first in a new country. Relax. In time, everything will become more natural and you will begin to find some more energy as your language improves. Talking with other foreign students can be therapeutic, but be careful to keep an open mind and positive spirits. Things *will* improve by Christmas and the second half of the year will fly by.

Problems

If you lose documents, contact the Canadian embassy (or police) immediately and fill out the necessary forms. **Under Spanish law, all citizens AND tourists must carry some identification in case they are stopped and questioned by police.** Don't forget that you will be hanging around bus and train stations in a country where police searches are not uncommon. Bring photocopies.

Banking

Opening a bank account is the most practical way to deal with daily life in Spain. You will need cheques to pay your rent and a European bank card (Carte Bleue(?)) is really convenient. **Get a bank-authorized letter of support for your apartment and for opening an account in Spain.** Choose a bank that is near your daily route to school so that you do not have to go out of your way. You will likely need your passport to open an account but the requirements will change with each different company. Some banks may offer you insurance on your bank card and cheque book or even money when you open an account. **This is done because the Spanish do not check for identification before cashing a cheque.** In other words, if you lose your cheque book someone could steal the balance of your account. You also need to show your banking information to get a cell phone

*Note: If living abroad for only 1 semester (5-7 months) it might be too much of a hassle to set up a banking account. If going for a full year you might find it more worth while.

Etiquette in banks and other service areas is a little different in Spain than what we are used to at home. In spite of the fact that there is a privacy line painted on the floor of the post office, people seem to see nothing wrong with crowding you at the teller's counter. Just get used to having someone peering over your shoulder to see how broke you are. Do put away any large withdrawals in your money belt before leaving the bank, cash machine, or exchange booth. Thieves love to hang around waiting for tourists to fiddle with their money near a currency exchange. Expect business to take *longer*.

You can also have money sent from Canada but the service charge is expensive at both ends (a wire costs \$15.00, plus the exchange). Ask your home bank before you leave to find out how much this will cost. Your Canadian bank card *will not* work on all European machines (especially in England) in spite of what your bank will tell you, though it may work on most (with a charge each time). Bringing a cheque or cash will cost you the least. Global currency services, on Gordon south of campus, will help you out. If you plan on withdrawing from a Canadian account, take out a lump sum so that you get charged all at once.

Telephones

Getting a cell phone with "pay as you go" credit is recommended. (Download SKYPE on your computer, one of the best ways to talk... once you have struggled through the internet issue)

The easiest and cheapest way to call home is Canada Direct. This service provides toll-free lines that give you direct access to a Canadian operator and then you are billed on your calling card at Canadian rates. A 'Call-Me' card is also a good idea. Call or write to Canada Direct for the listing of numbers or ask your travel agent (available at Travel Cuts). Keep this card with you when you are travelling to make phone calls easier.

Internet

There are a handful of cafes/fast food places in town where you can use wireless on your own laptop/iPhone).

The best advice I can give is to wait until the other students move in and post an ad looking for someone to share with; however, this may take a little while.

Libraries

Libraries are generally difficult but different in each school and city. Worthwhile books are usually in storage; fill out a request card and wait half an hour to an hour to get them. University libraries look more like high school ones at home due to lack of funding. (Short hours, limited computers/seating, strict no-food/drink rules... plus checking out books corresponds with your university level... you will miss the UOG library! The best advice is to be patient and try using the Internet as an alternative. It's worth while to get a membership at municipal libraries as well, as they have a varied collection of local/national music etc. (and guide books, so that you don't have to bring them!)

Restaurants

- Restaurants in the city center will be more expensive
- Menus are typically in English and Spanish
- Servers typically speak good English
- Sample local food

Staying in Touch

School of Languages and Literatures main office at the U. of G. (519) 824-4120, ext 53883. Fax: (519) 763-9572 (Prof. Margot Irvine: ext. 53182 E-mail: mirvine@uoguelph.ca)

Please send Dr. Dorothy Odartey-Wellington (dodartey@uoguelph.ca) a list of the courses you would like to take once you've chosen them, and let her know how you are doing! Your European Studies profs in Guelph love to hear about your adventures in Europe and are always available for consultation.

Centre for International Programs: goabroad@uoguelph.ca

A Few Words of Advice

As appears to be characteristic of the Spanish university system, inefficiency and disorganization reign, despite the **valiant efforts** of the program coordinators. Don't expect things to work the way they do in Guelph. Try not to stress out over courses and don't take any of it too seriously. It is not unusual to find that a course you have been in for 6 weeks one day evaporates never to be seen again; to have room mix-ups; prof. mix-ups; class mix-ups.... **CHECK BULLETIN BOARDS AS OFTEN AS POSSIBLE.** The only notification you will ever get regarding exams, room changes etc. will be postings on the bulletin boards. Don't expect anyone to tell you anything! You will have to sign up for exams in October. Classes often have 100% finals, sometimes as orals. Ask what efforts are made for foreign students. Lectures are usually 2-3 hours long. Be prepared to stay awake and tuned in. Reading the material before the lecture will make your life easier! Be prepared to have notes with many words missing. Many profs dictate notes... although commerce classes tend to have slides. Good excuse to talk to other students and ask to borrow their notes!

Marks

The grading system is much different than in Canada. Exams are often weighted much more also. Some exams can be worth 50-70%, and if you don't pass the exam you can't pass the course. While some professors are much easier on exchange students you might come across professors are the exact opposite. There is this assumption that exchange students are only in Spain to party and travel. While this might be true for some, others who really care about their school work and need to pass their courses should visit their professors regularly to show that they aren't just there to party. (This was an issue for me, it is very common.)

Class Etiquette

Don't eat or drink in lectures, it's considered very rude. Although having an entire conversation about your ski weekend doesn't seem to be frowned upon at all!! Let the prof be your guide, if the prof has a coffee or water, it may be OK for you to have one too.

Beware! You will have to stand in line for hours on end only to find out you are in the wrong line! This is part of studying in Spain. There will be endless amounts of seemingly useless paperwork to fill out. Make 5 photocopies of every important piece of paper you own; everyone will want one! Another possibility would be to scan your documents and keep electronic copies. The beginning of the semester is often challenging. Choosing courses can be very stressful. Sometimes it takes a full month to have your schedule finalized. This is normal.

Even if you don't need a visa for staying in Spain, you might want to consider getting a NIE (Número de Identificación de Extranjero - Foreigner Identification Number) and a Tarjeta de Residencia. These make you a legal resident in Spain and are useful more many transactions, for instance a NIE is required to work by the social security administration.

Personal Experience from Málaga, España

- Spending 6 months abroad helped me in so many ways. There is something about meeting youth from all over the world that changes your perspective on things! My only regret is not travelling enough. Make every weekend count. You don't need to do large trips like visiting other countries, just travel to neighboring cities. Each city is unique in its own way. There are many day trips to take.
- My favourite experience from my time in Spain was tutoring 2 families. They welcomed me into their home and taught me so much about the city. They also gave me great tips on where to go and what to see. I went weekly to teach English and it forced me to leave the city center area and visit the outskirts of Málaga. Here I got to witness a more authentic Spanish lifestyle. Not to say the city center is not realistic, but there are many tourists in the area.
- Take the intensive language course!!! It forces you to arrive in Málaga 2 weeks before university starts. So it gives you time to find housing and/or roommates. The language course is for international students and is broken down into groups depending on your level of Spanish. This is the best way to meet people and fast! It is much harder meeting friends in your courses at university!
- I loved going to the market for food instead of relying on the grocery store. It's something

that I never would do at home and it really engaged me with the Spanish culture.

- Bring Mini eggs! They aren't available in Spain/Europe so everyone loved me for sharing them!!!
- I know I mentioned this before but I can't tell you how many times I needed to show my passport number. Bring many photocopies with you in your bag/wallet. You'll need it registering for school, buying a bus pass, buying train tickets, etc. etc. Save yourself the hassle and have your copies ready before your trip!