

HOME OR AWAY

By Emma Kelly

Following her time in Barcelona as an Erasmus student last academic year, Emma Kelly recounts her experiences of living, working and studying in the Catalan capital. Emma was awarded the prize for Regional Winner for England in the British Council essay competition for her entry. This piece is an edited version of the winning entry.

Contrary to popular belief, the final month was perhaps more testing than the first, saying *adiós* was definitely more troubling than all the awkward *holas* and *qué pasas* I mumbled embarrassingly in the early days. By August, I had made the linguistic improvements that previous students had prided themselves on and which I never believed could be true for me; understanding a lecture in Spanish, making sense of the conversations I subtly eavesdropped on in the street and working in a Spanish-speaking business. Personally, I had made strong attachments to the people, culture and, most of all, the city, an emotional attachment that no one could have prepared me for and one that made the numerous farewells extremely difficult.

Oral classes at university had always been a huge personal challenge. Such classes were a game of careful seating and furtive glances rather than words – avoiding eye contact with the lecturer as intently as the ‘T’ of the subjunctive conjugation of *ser*. The thought of answering any form of question brought me out in a cold sweat, a cold sweat partially welcomed when I stepped through the revolving doors of *Aeropuerto El Prat* and faced the 34°C heat and the row of black and yellow taxicabs. It had been less than one hour into my year abroad and not only was I confronted by the insatiable heat but also my insecurity about speaking a foreign language. I sensed the year was going to be a learning curve with a steep uphill struggle, from which no amount of crafty glances around a classroom could save me.

Following the initial period of apartment-hunting, university locating and general settling in my confidence with Spanish, my self grew as did my *agenda Española*. The city became a list of endless opportunities. Being a very cosmopolitan city, Barcelona is filled with streets that are bustling with a large number of ex-pats, tourists and fellow Erasmus students. Nevertheless, this has neither tarnished nor diminished the strong Catalan culture that infuses the region. Having travelled extensively in Spain before my year abroad, I was aware of the traditions of different regions, particularly the fervent nationalism that *País Vasco* is known for. I believed *Cataluña’s* fame to emanate from the grand peaks of Gaudi’s *Sagrada Família*, the deformed depictions of Dali and, more recently, from its position as a business hub of Spain following the birth of Catalan multinationals such as Clickair, Vueling and Mango. Yet, as I was soon to learn, *Cataluña* is also passionately nationalistic with its own language to learn, *fiestas* to attend, patrons to worship and traditions to practise - one for almost everyday. *Le Mercé* marked my first encounter with Catalan traditions; countless circles of Catalans dancing *Sardanes*, continuous firework spectacles and the fusions of music styles as each street was turned into a stage. Less than a week had passed, and as my eyes were opening to the richness and vibrancy of the people and the culture, my heart was simultaneously opening to my second home.

Second to the location of any new home are the people and the friendships you make. University classes functioned equally well socially and academically; through classes, my knowledge of the language improved and opportunities opened up to practise with fellow classmates, who were either Spanish or an exchange student like myself, with whom I made true and lasting friendships. As a Political Science student, I had courses that varied slightly from those in London, yet these new courses in Philosophy and Geography at the *Universitat de Barcelona* provided new angles to my dissertation research. Furthermore I was able to pursue humanities courses unavailable at UCL, which focused on the Spanish economy, Geography and Politics. Exposure to Spanish academic journals opened avenues of research into the field of NGOs.

Researching for my dissertation led me to discover *Club de Madrid*, an important Madrid-based NGO. Through correspondence with them I became aware of, and was subsequently invited to, a conference related to globalisation and immigration at *Universidad Internacional Menéndez Pelayo* in Santander. This two-day conference brought me in contact with influential figures in politics. Of particular interest was the ex-President of Cape Verde, Antonio Mascarenhas Monteiro, whose country's recent immigration agreement with the EU I am researching for my dissertation. The conference has not only provided me with further lines of enquiry for my dissertation but also with contacts for future work in this field.

As the academic side of Erasmus was drawing to a close and friends were making plans for work in their home cities, I knew that my job prospects for the summer were to be found in Barcelona. Spanish friends had made me aware of the cliquey nature of Spanish business; to work in a business *enchufes* (contacts) were a must and despite the endless opportunities the city had to offer, I realised I needed to do some groundwork. The stereotypical English-teacher roles were abundant but I wanted something to challenge me linguistically and personally. Following a speculative email to a financial firm enquiring about internship opportunities, I was invited for an interview at a new business start-up in the heart of the city and succeeded in securing a three-month placement at Gild International. Joining the company in the early stages allowed me to leave my own mark on the company through designing and implementing the front desk operating procedures, and brought me in contact with a multitude of business areas. Promoting Gild at *ifest '08* [a conference for international business and enterprise held in Barcelona] provided me with a snapshot of the diverse fabric that makes *Cataluña* so visually vibrant and socially alive; the industries, nationalities, cultures and events, the fibres that proudly weave the red and gold bars of the Catalonian flag make me want to return.

The Erasmus experience has definitely made a positive contribution academically, professionally and personally. That is not to say it came easily. The options available to me during my year abroad were not handed to me but were the result of maintaining an open mind and attitude, an eagerness to experience the culture, determination to develop and hard work.

Looking back fondly on my time in Barcelona, the only regret I have are of those few wasted moments in the early days when I anticipated my return home in a similar way as I now anxiously await my return to Barcelona. I wish I had instead spent it wandering down *via laietana*, surrounded by the now familiar flurry of café tables and chairs with the mountains at my back and the sapphire shores drawing me forward to the clear waters and warm sea air; this is the secret to longevity, the Catalans say - along with a bottle of sun cream. If this be so, *Vivan los catalanes, Viva España y Viva Erasmus*.

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