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The Student Life section of Utah State Today highlights work written by the talented student journalists at Utah State University. Each week, the editor selects a story that has been published in The Utah Statesman for inclusion in Utah State Today.

By Shelby Black, Utah Statesman, Sunday, August 12, 2018

While studying abroad in Spain, a group of Utah State University Students experienced a variety of adventures that included going to the beach, hiking, visiting art museums, playing futbol, eating tapas, seeing the running of the bulls and much more.

Accompanied by Crescencio Lopez, USU Assistant Spanish Professor, the students lived and studied for a month in Logrono, a city located in northeastern Spain. The city is home to the University of La Rioja. Through this university, USU students took courses in language, culture, literature, cooking and dancing.

These courses allowed students to gain more knowledge about the country they were living in. During cooking class students, prepared several traditional Spanish dishes like paella, patatas bravas and croquettes. In dance class, the students learned a full flamenco routine to the popular song “Despacito.”

Jenna Riches, a study abroad participant and former dancer, said her favorite class was dance class. She liked learning the traditional Spanish style.

“My favorite class was dance class. I love dancing and it was cool to learn a different style,” Riches said.

Along with these courses, students gained more experience in the native language by living with host families. The Spanish families opened their homes to house students for the month long program.

Lauree Milligan, study abroad participant, enjoyed learning from her host family.

“My host mom and I were a good match,” she said. “She knew so much about Spain and what was going on. So I could just ask her questions and she could answer all of them. I enjoyed spending time with her.”

Living in another family’s home also brought some unique cultural experiences. Trying new foods was a big part of this.

“Squid ink … My host mom made some for me,” said Vanessa Soto, a study abroad participant. “Apparently it is a popular dish, but it was pretty gross. We put it over rice and it just turned all the rice black. I ate the whole thing though.”

Not only was the food unfamiliar, but the culture in Spain is also different from Logan, Utah. The Spaniards run on a different schedule. Lunch is the biggest meal of the day and dinner is eaten late in the night. During the afternoon, there is also time set aside for a “siesta” or “rest period. During this time families gather to eat lunch and then relax with each other.

“I enjoyed that the culture was really relaxed. It’s not lazy, but just calm. You can just go about and talk with people. The people were really kind and understanding,” Milligan said.

During the trip, students also had free time to go and explore the country. On the weekends students traveled to nearby cities to see what they had to offer. Some traveled to the historical city of Zaragoza, the beaches of San Sebastian and the artisan city of Barcelona.

“I loved visiting San Sebastian, Spain. I loved relaxing by the water,” Soto said. “The beaches and warm weather were great. There were so many cool places to walk to and see.”

Traveling, living, and studying all in a different language helped all the students increase their Spanish skill set.
McKay Christensen, study abroad participant, was able to pick up some new words. Christensen had previously lived in Argentina for two years and noticed some differences between South American Spanish and European Spanish.

“It was a bit of a challenge at first. I also learned more about the uses of ser and estar. There is a lot of abstract uses,” he said.

Riches used her understanding of the language to communicate and create relationships with other Spanish speakers.

“My Spanish improved in being able to truly talk and connect with people,” she said. “I learned how to communicate and connect on a deeper level. It was different than just having conversations in a classroom.”

Professor Lopez noticed that all the students improved in their abilities throughout their visit in Spain.

“Over time, students became confident in their ability to effectively communicate in Spanish using correct grammatical structures,” he said. “I also noticed that students benefited greatly from an intense language immersion program, from their experience living with families, and from their weekend trips to other cities. These are experiences that cannot be taught in a classroom setting here in Logan, Utah.”

In addition to learning about the culture and gaining new language skills, spending a month abroad provided students with the opportunity to earn some credits.

“I think I learned about myself that I love to learn and see new things. It was something I haven’t been able to explore before,” Riches said. “Going out and doing all these crazy things and meeting new people awakened something in me.”

For those thinking about going on a study abroad trip, Riches, Christensen, Soto and Milligan all responded with a resounding, “Yes, you should go.”

“I would definitely recommend study abroad. Although our trip was only a month, it was enough time to go out and experience the culture,” Christensen said. “Go and be super outgoing and you will make friends. Go out with a plan to do a bunch of things and make the most of your time.”