

Regional

Students learn more than Spanish in Spain

One of the most important experiences college students can have is to participate in a study abroad program. Whether it is for improving language skills or simply because of the cultural experience, these students usually come back with knowledge they will never forget. That was certainly true for a group of students from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville who traveled to Spain this past summer, a trip that, according to some, changed their lives.

"I think it was so beautiful," said Martha Piñones, a graduate student in psychology. Being able to walk a mile and see all of these beautiful things. And the culture is just so different. I come from a Hispanic background, my mom is Mexican and my dad is Chilean, and the culture is completely different in Spain than it is in South America or Mexico. So it was something that was completely new and it opens up your eyes to a new culture."

The trip was led by Joaquín Florido Berrocal, an assistant professor in the department of foreign languages and literature, who explained that these kind of trips must be planned well in advance.

"I always ask my students, 'What do you want to accomplish?' and often I hear that they want to learn some more Spanish," said Florido Berrocal. "For that you need a certain level of Spanish. You can go with almost no level of Spanish just to get a first grasp of the culture and that is excellent, but if you really want to solidify your Spanish and take off from there then you need a certain level of the language." This trip was the second that he has led to his native country.

There is another consideration with dealing with students who, like the majority of the ones attending SIUE, come from rural areas with little—if any—experience in international travel.

"I don't really recommend that they spend their time abroad in a gigantic



Photo by Sadie Sakurada

The group of SIUE students in Seville, Spain.

city," Florido Berrocal said. They might be very overwhelmed. I normally recommend medium sized cities where you can get all the commodities of a big city and also be a little bit more comfortable." On the other hand, some students like Sadie Sakurada, a graduate student in biology who went on the trip, have been abroad before. She said it is always an interesting experience to compare Spain with other countries.

"My father is from Japan, so I actually have been an exchange student when I was much younger," Sakurada said. "I have been thrown into a place where you were not raised and have not been to very much. But the difference between that experience and this one is that I knew the language with no problem. I know Japanese. I grew up speaking it, and so to be there was not that big of a shock to me." For some-

one who has studied under different educational systems, the experience can also be revealing. "The cultural experience, like the schools, are very different, how they function day to day is different, but the language is a big aspect as to being completely comfortable or being completely nervous and timid in what you are doing," she added. And these differences are not just between Asian and European

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countries, but also among different Hispanic cultures. Piñones, because of her Hispanic background, found it interesting the way others perceive such differences. "We were in a hostel with eight people sleeping in the room, and there were two girls from Amsterdam, and I remember them asking how we liked Seville and how we liked Spain," Piñones said. "And at one point they asked me, 'Since you are from America do you eat your lunch in a lunchroom? Are there really groups that eat together?' And they were amazed. They thought that was just in the movies. We asked what they do for lunch and they told us that they just eat some bread and that they don't really have a lunchroom."

A major concern, especially for parents, is safety, and that is something professors leading these kinds of experiences are well aware of.

"Seville is a one million people city," said Florido Berrocal. "I always advise students not to do anything that they wouldn't do here in the United States. Seville is a very safe city, but it is a big city so you have to be careful, like you should avoid walking alone at night. But that's also something you should do here in Edwardsville."

While in Spain they took advantage of practicing their Spanish skills in a formal setting. "We had activities in our classes where we had to go talk to people," said Sakurada. "We just had to go up to people. At first it was terrifying, but it turned into, 'Ok, this isn't so bad. They aren't going to push us away.' So once you got over the feelings of they're going to look at us funny or think we're weird, you could just go up to people and talk."