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Spending Time with Friends: A Priority

My primary contact with the lifestyle and culture of Spain is my host mom, Inma. She lives in a brick apartment building in the center of Alicante with a blue-eyed, talkative cat named Miso. Inma is in her seventies and lives alone, but I have been surprised by how busy and social her lifestyle is. Her son calls her every day; she frequently has people over for dinner, and often goes out in the evenings to visit friends. I found this to be an interesting contrast to the lifestyles of many elderly people I know in the states where that level of socialization seems lower for people more advanced in years.

On a similar note, one cultural difference to which I've needed to adjust to is the importance placed on going out and spending time with friends in Spanish culture. I love spending time with my friends, but there is nothing wrong with staying home for a day to just relax and get work done to me. Inma has a different perception of socialization, and she almost always encourages me to get outside the house or to meet up with friends when she sees I'm staying home for a day. I agree that getting out of the house is important, but her perception of what represents a normal level of socialization is different from what I'm used to in the United States.

Talking with Inma has also made me look at the U.S. in a new way. Namely, I have come to appreciate how much open space we have. The price of property in Spain is high and most people live in apartment style housing rather than the classic American model of one house for each family. My host mom has a large patio with a wide range of potted plants, and she considers it a luxury to own that space in the middle of the city. Describing my parents' home in Oregon to Inma has made me realize that just having your own garden can be seen as a luxury.

Although these differences in lifestyle and values have sometimes been challenging and unexpected, overall I have felt very welcomed, comfortable, and accepted by my host mom. Before I came to Spain, I think I worried more than I needed to about adapting to cultural differences. Comparing and contrasting the cultures of Spain and the U.S. is one of the most interesting aspects of being abroad, but I have found I have more in common than I expected with the people I have met in Spain.