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Person to Person in Spain

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Kiersten Hendrix

Spain

April 3, 2013

Field Notes from Abroad: Person to Person in Spain

After living in Spain for seven months, the Spanish life starts to become normal and the lines between the culture that you used to live in and the culture that you're currently living in begin to blend together. As I chatted with my host mother the other day, I realized that I had become so used to the way that she and my family here live that I was having a difficult time trying to compare it to my lifestyle, norms, and habits in the United States. It has become normal to me that the only times my host mom ever really goes out are to go grocery shopping or run errands, and that when she returns home she spends almost all of her time in the kitchen either cooking or cleaning; but that's not always normal (nor viewed well) in the United States. For breakfast, my host mom enjoys a piece of toast with olive oil and salt; they cook their fish whole with bones and head still intact; sometimes we have a large leg of ham in our kitchen that slowly gets whittled down as people slice off pieces when they feel like it. After being here for so long, none of that really is surprising – it's just normal life, in a different way. And I like it.

In terms of cultural similarities and differences, I would say that there are many similarities and that they seem the most obvious to me. We are both religious people but believe that everyone has a right to believe what they want. For her, family is the most important thing that there is, and I agree with that outlook. The biggest differences, I suppose, can be found in the language and the food. Whereas I speak English and some Spanish, she speaks Spanish and some French. The Spanish way of cooking is definitely different from the American way, but it is nice in its own way.

(Although I must say that I miss spicy food with everything in me!) Also, my host mom is definitely a follower of the Spanish “no pasa nada” attitude, which basically means “don’t worry about it”, or “it’s alright”, which she applies to everything. Coming from a culture where almost every little thing matters and you worry about getting it all right, that cultural change was a breath of fresh air.

This interview and my time here abroad have changed my idea of Spain and of the United States. For some reason before I came here, I imagined Spain as being really hot and really old-fashioned, but I’ve been happily surprised to see that it is a very modern European country. Yes, they are stuck in a terrible crisis right now and, yes, there are small *pueblos* in which the people are much more traditional, but in general it’s a very modern and open-minded country. Also, it rains a lot. My perception of the U.S. has changed while I’ve been here as well. Before I came to Spain, my view of the United States was decidedly negative. I wanted to get out and I couldn’t point to very many things that we were doing well. Being here, however, has opened my eyes to a more realistic view of the U.S., I think. I still think there are many areas of our nation that could use some improving, but I am starting to see good aspects or things that we are doing well also. I can’t put into words how meaningful this experience has been and how much I enjoy learning from the people I am surrounded by.

Interview: Maria Isabel Vives Rodes (Host Mother)