

# A STUDENT IN

The best way to learn about life in another country is to live there.

**S**pain! What is the first thing the name brings to mind? Flamenco dancers? Bull-fighting? Perhaps gypsies or siestas? To many people, these are the only impressions Spain elicits. Often, though, the perceptions we form of other cultures are not our own, but merely an effect of mass media. We receive news daily about events in other countries, but a tremendous amount of information remains unpublished or misrepresented. It is difficult to understand with any accuracy the day-to-day lives of people—the goals they hold for the future or just the foods they eat—without actually witnessing them.

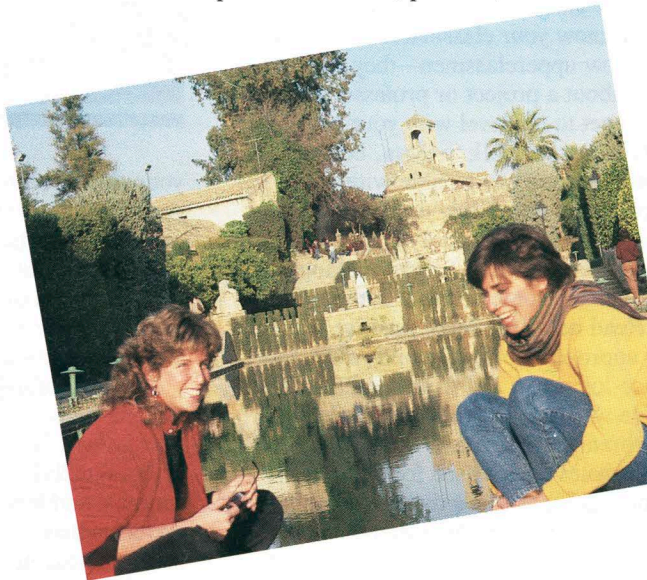
During the spring of 1984, I had an opportunity to do just that in Spain, through the Division of International Programs Abroad (DIPA) study center in Madrid. As a junior international relations major, I already had an academic background in the politics and cultures of many nations. I had memorized dozens of political theories, patterns, and

trends, but I lacked an actual understanding of another culture. I wanted to be able to describe an average day in the life of a Spaniard.

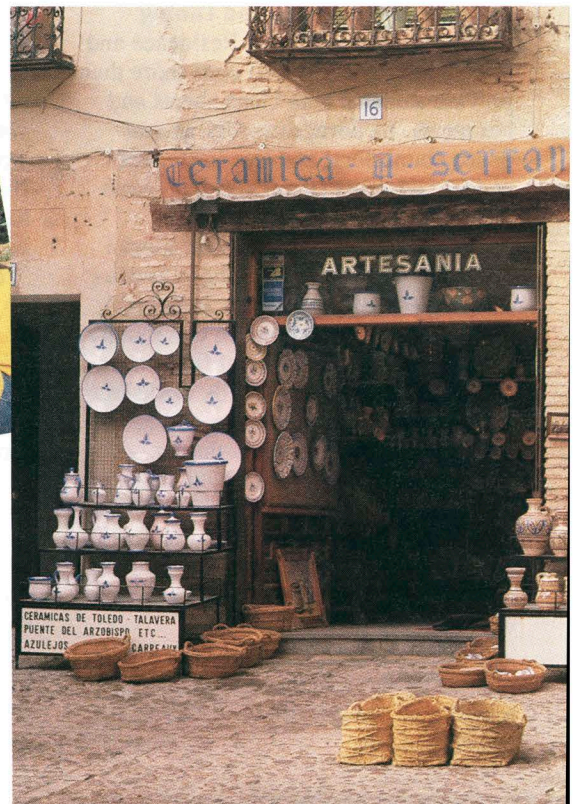
As a participant in Spanish society, I observed a side of the country that is portrayed in neither travel brochures nor magazines. It was a personal, as well as a cultural, discovery that will remain with me for the rest of my life.

**T**he program began with an extensive orientation period and 13-day “traveling seminar.” This touring, two-credit mini-course took 22 students from SU and other American universities to several major Spanish cultural centers. The seminar’s purpose was to serve as both an educational experience and an orientation to everyday life in Spain.

We embarked, anxious and exhausted from the long flight overseas. Along the route, our orientation began. We received from the nine DIPA staff members literature explaining exactly what we could anticipate from our new envi-



*Hillary Cohen (above, right), an international relations major who graduated in May, was enrolled during spring 1984 in the SU study abroad program in Spain. The semester began with a 13-day traveling seminar, which visited, among other places, Cordoba (above), Toledo (right), and Segovia (far right). Pictured with Hillary is SU senior Jill Siskind.*



# SPAIN

Story and photographs by Hillary Cohen

ronment. We were told about everything, from transportation, restaurants, and important sights to tipping and prices—a complete guide to everyday life in Madrid.

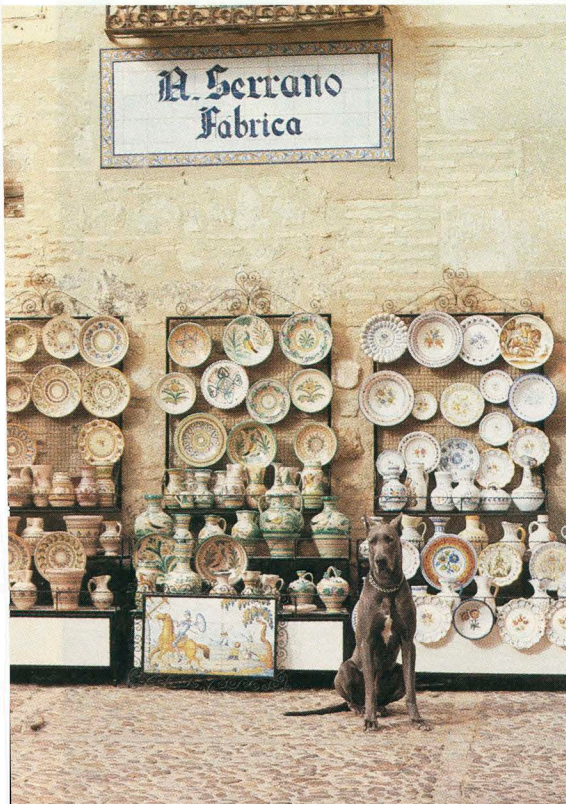
The big question, though, was the language. I had studied Spanish for several years, but colloquial Spanish contains many terms and phrases not found in standard textbooks. Fortunately, we were issued vocabulary lists to use until we had achieved proficiency. In a matter of days, we had learned the basics, and our prior fears had subsided. It is amazing how quickly you acquire a language when it is necessary to ask for food or directions to the restrooms.

Toledo, the first stop, was a perfect city to begin. Its small size made exploring and investigating manageable. We were all eager and enthusiastic to try new foods, attempt to speak the language, and get involved in the Spanish way of life. With the help of professors and the local café, of course, we were taught the proper

way of eating *tapas* (small portions of food) and drinking Spanish wine. We all enjoyed our first lesson and were overwhelmed to learn that we had just eaten octopus and squid! It was unanimously agreed upon—everything was going to be an adventure.

Although its size may be small, Toledo is rich in Spanish culture. Our professors lectured on Spanish art, history, and literature. We visited painter El Greco's house and the Cathedral of Toledo, observed early Arab influence in Spanish architecture, and learned about the Jewish presence in medieval Spain. These were only to be samples of the many sights and events ahead.

As the seminar continued on to Cordoba, Seville, and Granada, our classroom on any given day might have been a cathedral, an ancient garden, or even a short train ride. Regardless of the city we were in, we were continuously encountering the new and unknown.



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**A**fter completing the traveling seminar, we proceeded—somewhat apprehensively—to Madrid, where inevitably we would separate, each of us spending the remainder of the semester living with a Spanish family.

Madrid, I learned, is a fast-paced city with modern high-rise buildings, wide streets, and beautiful fountains. Its size hardly detracts from its neighborly and personal qualities, as people are constantly meeting in their local *tascas* (cafés). Madrid is easily distinguishable from other parts of Spain; it is the only place I know of that has a New York City rush hour at 3 in the afternoon, when everyone is hurrying home for the midday meal.

We attended classes at the Instituto de Cooperacion Iberoamericana, a building shared by several American universities, and carried a normal course load of 12 to 15 credits. Courses and credits were similar to those offered at SU, but the classes were smaller and conducted informally, taking advantage of Madrid's cultural and social environments. A majority of the assignments and coursework were held outside the classroom, at museums, exhibits, other Spanish educational centers,

cafés, and nearby towns. Course topics included language (Spanish, naturally), art, and history. There was also a communications class that visited Spanish television stations and a United Press International bureau, plus a unique anthropology course that consisted of living with a peasant family for a week.

One concern on our minds from the moment we had been accepted to the program was living with a Spanish family. Although we had had an opportunity to read previous comments and descriptions of each family, a great deal of individual discovery was inevitable. When there is a language barrier a chance for misunderstanding exists, and living with a family entailed taking a personal risk.

In addition, it was necessary to recognize that any living situation was going to differ drastically from a similar circumstance in the United States. I lived in an apartment with a widow and her 18-year-old daughter, approximately 25 minutes from the institute. One girl in the group and I shared a small room, where we were extremely limited in space. Bringing an entire wardrobe and expecting to have our clothes washed as often as we liked were just

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not feasible. Making the best of the situation and our surroundings was essential.

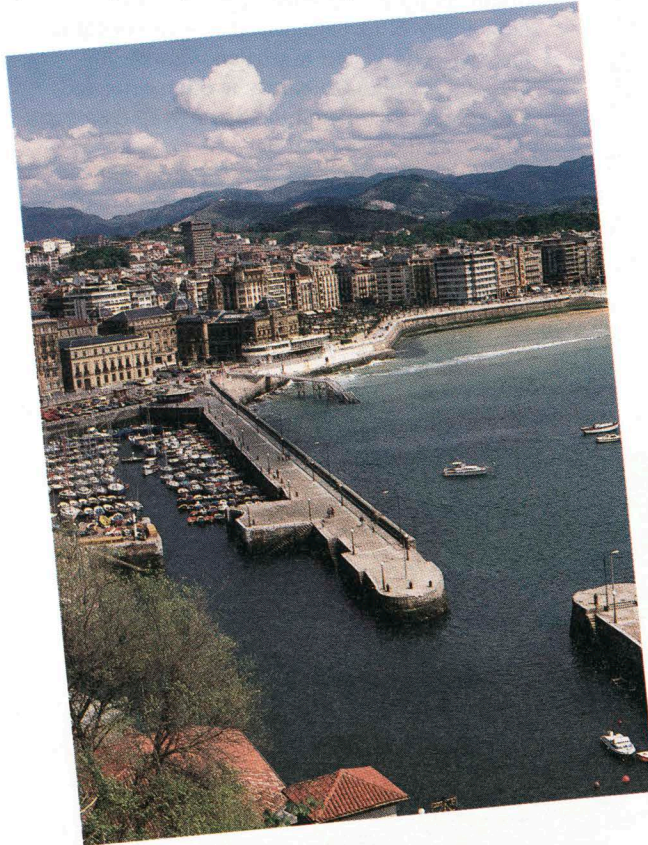
I was determined, though, to get the most out of my study abroad experience. After all, what better way is there to understand a culture than to actually partake in it as a member of the Madrileño family? As time passed, though, I became a part of the family, as a friend and a participant. I never hesitated to ask questions, seek advice, or request anything I might have needed throughout the semester. And I used the time at home to gain further insight into the Spanish way of life.

**W**ith the encouragement of professors and staff, weekend travel became a regular practice during our time in Madrid. I visited such places as the charming university town of Salamanca, the beautiful Castilla, and the beaches of Peñinscola. It was an ideal way to discover the uniqueness of the country and people. Traveling around Spain illustrated the integration of many ways of life—and the problems that have resulted.

I observed how distinct each region of Spain is—ranging from Santiago de Compostela, San Sebastian, and the Basque country in the north to Barcelona and Alicante on the east coast—each with its own identity and specific traditions. In certain places, for example, a different language or dialect is spoken.

I realized that Spain is not at all the country I had imagined. The bullfighting and flamenco dancing are a great part of Spanish tradition that should never be slighted. However, there

are parts of Spain that resemble the French Riviera or any place in the United States. Spain is as diverse as any other European country, but it continues to be stereotyped and underestimated. A new, exciting, contemporary Spain is emerging out of a nation once oppressed by a 40-year dictatorship.



*Most of the semester was spent in Madrid. Courses given there made use of the city's unique cultural resources, such as the renowned Prado museum (far left). There were also opportunities to travel, both during and after the stay in Madrid. Hillary visited the Plaza Mayor in Salamanca (left) and the northern coast (above), among many other locales.*

One of the most unforgettable experiences I had during the semester, made available through an anthropology professor, was the week that two other SU students and I spent living with a Galician *campesino* (peasant) family, becoming involved in their daily chores and activities. Galicia, in northern Spain, is similar to other regions in that it retains many of its earlier traditions and characteristics. Unlike the Madrileño family, the Galician *campesino* family is often extended and maternalistic, and the Spanish spoken there varies greatly.

Galicia, for the most part, is rural and undeveloped, but evidence of urban penetration is apparent and often contrasting. A family such as the one I spent time with owned a car, tractor, and television set, considering these items to be important symbols of status and

luxury. However, hot water, something we consider a basic necessity, was scarce.

In Galician villages or towns, wealth is measured not monetarily, but rather by the land and animals one owns. Regardless of what material items the family lacked, they were extremely proud and eager to demonstrate their way of life. I took part in the daily chores and learned who and what their family was all about.

That week of living in Galicia was extraordinary, as it deepened my sensitivity and respect for those people who enjoy the essentials in life. In addition, I learned truly to appreciate what I do have, and consider myself lucky to be an American. This was an experience I could neither forget nor repeat.

Any intense experience cannot be fully realized until after its completion. During the course of the semester, I participated



*Near the end of her semester in Spain, Hillary spent one week living with a peasant family in Galicia. The extended family included a head matriarch, known to Hillary only as Grandmother (above), a grandfather, the parents, and three children. The family's daughter and one of the sons is pictured (right) above the farm's back slope.*



in and was exposed to a great deal, but I never anticipated the extent to which this would influence my life.

Returning home was in many ways more difficult than the initial acclimation to Spain; my first week home was spent making plans to return to Spain. I also became critical of everything around me. It was difficult to view things objectively without making comparisons. As time passed, the impact lessened, enabling me to interpret and benefit from my experience abroad. I learned that each country, comprised of such distinct cultures and traditions, views their own customs as superior. Faults are so easily found in other political systems, peoples, and ways of life. Recognizing and admitting our imperfections allow us to accept those in others.

After discussions with several returning students of semesters abroad, I learned that each experience is a personal one. It is not

necessarily the courses, professors, or country that differentiates DIPA's various European programs, but rather the degree to which each individual contributes to his or her experience abroad. Despite a great effort to make the transition into a new culture a smooth one, the program in Madrid demands of the student a great degree of tolerance, adaptability, and self-motivation.

I feel that I took advantage of those opportunities. My semester abroad in Spain gave me a great sense of accomplishment and achievement, and it renewed my self-confidence. Traveling alone, making decisions, and confronting challenging situations require an open mind and an ability to adapt. The DIPA program in Spain gave me the opportunity to test myself and to stand by my own convictions.

An education such as this is priceless.



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