

BARCELONA JOURNAL:

Learning and Living in the World

STORY AND PHOTOS BY KRISTINA LANE



Kristina Lane stands on the grounds of the Royal Palace in Barcelona. The palace, located near the Pedralbes campus of the University of Barcelona, is where King Juan Carlos stays when he visits the city.

At the seaside end of Barcelona's most famous boulevard, La Rambla, soars a statue of Christopher Columbus, his right arm stretching west, his outward gaze fixed on the horizon. The statue represents the pervasive mindset of Catalonia: a country must always look toward and appreciate other cultures and nations to learn and grow.

During a 10-day stint to northeastern Spain as part of an international seminar based at the University of Barcelona, I discovered this mentality is shared and taught by many at the university. Since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, it's a phrase I've also heard in the United States, during interactions with sources and colleagues. After I returned from Barcelona, it resurfaced at a news conference on foreign students and international studies. Dr. Judith Kipper, senior fellow at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, says American students must travel abroad and learn that they "live in the world" and not just in the United States.

Reflecting on my Spanish adventure, I can say that I tried to do just that — to live in the world, taking Barcelona for a classroom: I spoke the language, asked questions, read up on the city's history and explored the culture. In doing so, I learned more in 10 days than I did in some forgettable 12-week international-relations courses I survived as an undergraduate. And I discovered that what both the Spanish and American policy-wonks were saying was true, that delving into another culture is the best way to learn, and hopefully, to understand.

TALKING THE TALK

Barcelona is a polyglot, where the natives often speak at least three languages, including Spanish, English and Catalan, one of the romance languages that sounds something like a mixture of French, Italian and Portuguese. Dr. Carmen Barbosa-Torralbo, the leader of my seminar and director of the Brethren Colleges Abroad program in Barcelona, spoke all three languages fluently, as well as Italian and French. She said one of the first tasks American students studying at the University of Barcelona undertake is language immersion. In addition to formal classroom training, students are assigned to live with a family in Barcelona, with whom they learn to speak Spanish on a daily basis. Barbosa-Torralbo says the language often overwhelms the American students at first, but it takes little



The inside courtyard of the University of Barcelona.



BARCELONA: QUICK FACTS

- Second largest city in Spain, founded around 230 BC
- Capital of Catalonia, 1 of 17 autonomous communities
- Population: 1.5 million
- Languages spoken: Castilian Spanish (official) 74%, Catalan 17%, Galician 7%, Basque 2%
- Religion: Roman Catholic 94%, other 6%
- Government: Parliamentary monarchy



Often considered Antoni Gaudí's most famous work, La Sagrada Família is a massive, unfinished temple in Barcelona's Eixample District. The construction of the temple, which is funded solely by donations, began in 1882, and is expected to be finished sometime this century.

time for most to become adept at speaking and understanding. Once they do, she said, their confidence climbs, and they finish their studies not wanting to leave Barcelona.

During my first few days in Barcelona, I too experienced the language trepidation Barbosa-Torralbo mentioned. Though I studied Spanish in high school and college, I found myself stumbling on phrases, jumbling pronunciations and asking natives to slow down or to repeat themselves. I've never been so acutely aware of language and how vital it is to accomplishing the most basic tasks. I felt it when I needed to order extra towels from the

hotel concierge, when I was buying a cup of coffee and when I got lost wandering the city and needed directions. Still I forced myself to speak Spanish. After about a week, my discomfort gave way to some measure of confidence, and my speed and pronunciation improved.

Had I lapsed back into the comfort of English, I wouldn't have connected as well with the locals, something I realized one morning at breakfast. I checked in with the hostess in Spanish, who kindly thanked me and was then met by a group of Frenchmen trying to speak to her in French. Figuring she didn't speak



A statue of Christopher Columbus stands at the base of Barcelona's bustling thoroughfare, La Rambla. The statue points west across the Mediterranean Sea, acknowledging Columbus' discovery of the New World.

French, they switched to English and increased their volume several notches, still unsure if she'd understand. Somewhat irritated, she responded, "Yes, English, thank you," and marched off.

CULTURAL MOSAIC

As I padded around Barcelona, I noticed how the city has been, and continues to be, influenced by a host of other cultures. Before Spain existed, different groups dominated Barcelona, including the Romans, the Visigoths, the Franks and the Moors. Each group made their mark, which is clear in the architecture of the Gothic Quarter, where the city was originally established.

Steve Gonzales, a seminar participant and law instructor at the University of LaVerne in Southern California, says he believes the traces of history make Barcelona one of the most compelling cities in Europe, especially for American students.

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France, Italy and North Africa also have made an impact on Barcelona.

Lourdes Montoro, an associate professor at the Official School of Languages in Barcelona, said that in many ways France has influenced Barcelona more than other parts of Spain have.

Gonzales says this ability to borrow from other cultures is one the city's strongest assets.

"Barcelona seems to be much more 'European' than other Spanish cities. Its proximity to France and Italy and its centuries of seafaring life have given it a feeling of being more connected to the great ports of the Mediterranean, such as Marseilles, Genoa and Venice, rather than the rest of Spain," he says. "It is very international, safe, proud and open to visitors. I can't help but wonder if some of the effects of finding the 'New World' rubbed off on Barcelona more than the rest of Europe."

Today, according to Barbosa-Torralbo, the city is also seeing an increased presence of



Barcelona's grand Paseo de Gracia is often compared to New York City's Fifth Avenue. Shown here are two of the Paseo's most famous buildings, Casa Amatller (at left), designed by architect Josep Puig i Cadafalch, and architect Antoni Gaudí's Casa Batlló (at right). Both were originally built as private residences during the modernist art movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s.

South American cultures with waves of new immigrants, particularly from Ecuador.

WINDOW ON THE WORLD

By the time the seminar drew to a close, I felt it wasn't enough time, that I'd only scratched the surface of Spain. The place had sparked a curiosity in me to explore, learn and understand more about it and the rest of Europe.

It's that kind of curiosity that needs to be stirred up among all Americans, according to Kipper. At the Washington press conference, she said Americans have become increasingly

afraid of other cultures since Sept. 11, and that the fear needs to be quashed.

"We in America are afraid, not because we're threatened, we are afraid because we don't understand the world in which we live. We are ignorant. We don't understand other people's culture, language, way of eating, food, dressing, whatever it may be. And it's absolutely vital to be living in the globalized world for us to do so," she said.

Based on my experiences in Spain, I can say that Barcelona, with its eclectic culture and rhythm, seems like a perfect place to study abroad and quash any fear. ■