



Sam Houston State University
ARAMFO SUMMER FIELD EXPERIENCE IN SPAIN: Summer 2016
GEOG 4075; Music, Ethnicity & Place in the Land of the Setting Sun: The Cultural
Geography of Spain
Dr. John Strait

There is one consistent truism my career as a geography professor has taught me; no academic endeavor generates more interactive learning, or fosters more awareness of both oneself and the wider world, than does an experience spent immersed in the field with a collection of eager geographers. If the group of participants is representative of an eclectic mix of backgrounds and interests, and the compass is set on a path through one of the most fascinatingly interesting destinations in the world – Spain, the “land of the setting sun,” – the resulting experience facilitates forms of learning that simply cannot be accomplished in any classroom, anywhere. This is exactly what defined our experience this past summer, when my wife/colleague and I co-directed a field course focused on the cultural geography of Spain, one that involved a travel component sponsored and organized by the ARAMFO Educational Foundation.



Our field course offered at Sam Houston State University (SHSU) is officially entitled “GEOG 4075; Music, Ethnicity & Place in the Land of the Setting Sun: The Cultural Geography of Spain.” Participation in the course entailed a 10-day trip in Spain during mid-July, and was followed by a semester long seminar on the main SHSU campus in the fall semester. Our actual trip included brief stays in three Spanish cities – Madrid, Sevilla and Grenada – plus an additional day trip to the coastal town of Cadiz. The

course, like the field experience that served as its foundation, incorporates an interdisciplinary approach, utilizing music, ethnicity, and place as a means to focus attention on a variety of geographical topics, including ethnicity, religion, architecture, art, geographies of food, migration, economic change, urban geography, globalization, political geography, social and cultural dynamics, and many others. The laboratory for our geography exploration, the Iberian Peninsula, has long functioned as a cultural crossroads; facilitating connections between Europe & Africa, the Mediterranean & the Atlantic, and between the “old” and “new” worlds. As a result, Spanish culture and society is largely the product of the interaction of an eclectic range of influences, reflecting the impacts of Roman, Arabic, Moorish, African, Roma, Catholic and Jewish cultural influences. Accordingly, this course places emphasis on understanding how Spain has both impacted and been impacted by the rest of the world.



The motivation for the arrangement for this course is that it offers student participants the opportunity to share a collective experience actually immersed in the material before they even set foot in the classroom. We find this is to be an excellent way to facilitate collective learning, as it figuratively and literally places students in the relative subject matter together. Upon returning to the classroom, students are exceptionally inspired to engage in numerous discussions framed around the collective experiences they've shared with that very subject matter. We are not even to the mid-point in the actual semester, yet my wife and I have already witnessed numerous examples of how a well-organized field component can function to enhance student (and faculty) learning. As a student, a teacher, and/or a scholar, I've been studying and doing geography for over a quarter century, and possess considerable experience with field endeavors. I can honestly confirm that the experiences we shared together this summer in Spain was perhaps one of the best field experiences I've been associated with on any level.



In my view, there are four requirements for an effective field experience involving a group of college students; 1) an interesting laboratory, or place that offers considerable opportunities to learn from, 2) an organized itinerary, with the list of key sites and/or visits being somehow incorporated around common themes or subject matter, 3) a guide with the knowledge of these sites and themes, preferably one possessing the passion and motivation required for effectively communicating this knowledge to participants, and 4), recognition that effectively learning about a place requires one to actually “experience” individual-based self-learning, by offering opportunities for participants to explore a bit alone or in smaller sub-groups, and/or by offering suggestions to participants concerning “where” or “how” to go about learning more on their own (site recommendations, or recommended readings and/or films, references, etc.). Thanks to my good friends (or should I say amigos) at ARAMFO (specifically Dr. Abeer Ibrahim, Director of ARAMFO), our travel component incorporated the perfect balance of all four of these requirements. Our trip to Spain was well-organized and planned, our itinerary involved the ideal collection of site visits, and most importantly, we were blessed to have the perfect guide (Alejandro Varela) that ensured those well-organized plans manifested into a great field experience for all.





What can I say about all that we learned in Spain?

The captivating beauty of Spain's diverse physical and cultural landscapes literally stir the soul. With some of the most beautiful mountain ranges on the European continent, the sun-baked plains of Andalusia, and some of the most charming beaches on the Mediterranean, Spain's natural beauty is timeless. Equally timeless and beautiful are the villages and towns that perch on hilltops, huddle in valleys and cling to coastal outcrops as cultural expressions of Old Spain. Poignantly windswept Roman ruins, cathedrals of rare power and incomparable jewels of Islamic and Moorish architecture spoke to us of a country where the great civilizations of history have always risen, fallen and left behind their indelible mark. More recently, what other country could produce such rebellious and relentlessly creative spirits as artists Salvador Dalí, Pablo Picasso and Antoni Gaudí and place them front and center in public life? Here, grand monuments to the past coexist alongside architectural creations of such daring that it becomes clear that Spain's future will be every bit as original as its past.



Perhaps the key to understanding Spain, and the best reason to visit the place, lies deeper than the beauty evident across the visible physical or cultural landscape. The word from the Spanish language that has more meaning here than any other is “fiesta.” Food, wine and art are national obsessions in Spain, and with good reason, and the entire country has music and song in its soul.



Life there is a fiesta, and is lived with exceptional passion. One can sense this along a crowded post-midnight street when all the world has come out to play. Or in that moment when a flamenco performer touches something deep in your soul while cozily nested in a bar or square somewhere in Andalucía. These are perhaps the best things, or best experiences, we learned and felt during our trip to Spain this past summer. And these are the exact same things that make me look forward to going back again. And I am confident the student participants feel the exact same way.



As a geographer who loves to explore the world, I would highly recommend the ARAMFO trip to Spain. I will certainly be using their services again to assist me in organizing future field courses, to Spain and elsewhere.

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