

## EPISODE 8: THE ERASMUS EXPERIENCE!

**C:** Okay, the Erasmus experience. Okay, so did you go on Erasmus?

**A:** Um, depends. I did not go on Erasmus, I studied **abroad** cause in the US the program is not called Erasmus, but if we're taking the expression "to go on Erasmus" to mean "study abroad in another country", then yes sir, I did.

**C:** And where did you go?

**A:** Uh, I spent my first semester in Granada, in southern Spain.

**C:** Right.

**A:** And then I went home for a couple of weeks and I realized "Oh my God, I have one semester left in Central Illinois, maybe I could **figure a way** to just go back to Barcelona second semester and not return to *Champaign-Urbana* for my last semester of undergraduate". So, I went to Barcelona thinking I wasn't returning to *Champaign-Urbana*, but then I went back to do 6 years of graduate work there, so clearly my plan didn't work.

**C:** Was it ... It was your plan all along to try to get away, I mean you wanted to...?

**A:** I wanted to study abroad, I mean, my undergraduate degree is in Spanish Philology, as well as Music and Philosophy, very useful for jobs, so I mean it was kind of a given that if you were to study Spanish, of course you would go study abroad.

**C:** Okay. I did not want to go abroad at all.

**A:** No?

**C:** No. I mean, part of my degree I was studying French and we *had* to, well we were *meant* to go abroad, and I was really resisting it, I didn't want to go.

**A:** So, should I make the obligatory "Americans make fun of France for no reason" comment here? I mean, it sounds like you didn't want to go to France? Or you didn't want to go anywhere?

**C:** I didn't want to go anywhere. I was really happy where I was, I was probably a little bit scared of going abroad.

**A:** Sure.

**C:** And then when I got— I went to the South of France—

**A:** That's the best part to go to, I think.



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C: And I think the first thing that struck me was just, it was really warm at the end of September. I thought, “this is better than the summers in Ireland”.

A: Yeah!

C: When I got—First impressions for you when you arrived in Granada?

A: First impressions... so, my first impression would be even before getting to Granada, so this was 1998. Flight... I think we flew directly from Chicago to Madrid, and then in Madrid you got into a bus, you know, a coach, you know a... like **a greyhound**, as we would say in the US, a regular big old bus to go from Madrid down to Granada. And this is back a) when you could still smoke most places, b) when people could still smoke on buses, and c) when they love that black tobacco, I forgot... I forget the brand that it was, uh... Ducados. And so, we were— me and a couple of other people on our way to our — were just enclosed in this bus with that black tobacco smoke for what feels like 8 hours, was probably 4 hours, might've been 2 hours. But it was... it was a nightmare. But— so that was my first impression. Like, Spain = smoke.

C: Okay. For me it was like, when I got there, I was in the South of France, it had taken me probably — most of 24 hours to get there, two flights, a train, a bus... And when I finally—

A: Ireland is theoretically close to France!

C: Haha, theoretically.

A: Yes!

C: But it took forever. When I got there, I was exhausted. And it's mentally exhausting just listening to people speaking another language 24 hours a day.

A: That's for sure a thing.

C: It was... I really wanted to switch it off and just say, “no, no, can everybody speak English for an hour, please?”

A: I'd say you could be an American, just asking everybody to only speak English! There you go!

C: What frustrated me was everything I had learnt in the previous five-six years of, like, seriously studying French was all **out the window** because nobody spoke like that.

A: There's a wonderful Eddy Izzard routine about this, about the vocabulary he learnt in French class about the monkeys under the table, and he's like “when in hell am I gonna come across a monkey?” He's like, “why do I need to know this?”

C: Well, I've got a good story about that, because my first Catalan class—now, I studied Catalan all the way to *nivell C*— the very first class I had in Catalan, one of the first words I learnt was *una puça*. Now, do you know what *una puça* is?



A: No.

C: Something that a dog might have and scratches itself.

A: Like a festering wound.

C: No, like a—

A: Ah, like a *pulga*.

C: Like a flea.

A: Oh, okay, yeah.

C: Like a flea. Now, I would say flea is probably not an A1, first class word.

A: Uh, think about it, with a capital F on it, and...

C: It's a bass player.

A: A very, very, very famous bass player. So, maybe, for anybody who likes The Red Hot Chili Peppers, Flea would be in A1.

C: Flea is *una puça*.

A: *Una puça*.

C: And then— if you've got— *una puça*, *unes puces*, you put it plural and you change the C, the spelling... Coming back to the Erasmus! Hehe. So, you were there, the language obviously was a bit, you know, um...

A: I mean, yes and no. The thing is, I studied— I started studying Spanish at 12 years old, which was pretty common in the US. Now I think in most civilized places in the US it's, uh, it's probably around 6 or 7 years old.

C: Right.

A: Um, cause at my Junior High School I was very lucky to go to some excellent public schools. I took zero advantage of these opportunities, but I went to some amazing schools with some great teachers. And at 12 years old you had to choose between, uh, French (because people had always used to study French), and Spanish, 'cause it was useful, and Hebrew because we had a large Jewish community. Not religious, but culturally Jewish community. So, you had to choose between those three. So, Spanish was the clear choice because I found it the most useful. So, from 12 to study abroad at 21 years old, my Spanish was good. Nothing prepares you, though, for the accent of an elderly, toothless man speaking to you with zero consciousness of you, you



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know, maybe not speaking perfect Spanish, and that accent down in the South, it gets difficult for a little bit.

**C:** And how about **paperwork**? When you— was that easy or difficult to get your—

**A:** Um, it was easy because it was all then— I guess maybe here is where you get into the difference between a “Study abroad” program and an Erasmus program in terms of organization and, um, nomenclature (nomenclature meaning the jargon or the words used to describe the official elements on it). We had a guy, Miguel Ángel, who I’m still in touch with thanks to Facebook, he’s the program leader there and he was in charge of all the students from *UI, University of Illinois from Champaign*, there were like 25 of us, so all of those things were **spoon-fed**, because he did it— and we had to do it! Ourselves. But we had very specific directions. Fill out these sheets, go to this place with this amount of *pesetas*, these many photos, don’t be stupid.

**C:** Okay.

**A:** And so, it was— it was just, you know, they “mama birded” it to us, so to speak.

**C:** I remember I loved the idea that— trying to open a bank account in France you needed an address, but to get an address you needed a bank account hahaha. And then you had to go to Social Security, and Social Security said “no, no, we need your address and your bank account” hahaha, so it was like going in a triangle of places and just never getting anywhere.

**A:** I would imagine that having happened in Spain. That definitely would’ve happened to us if we didn’t have everything facilitated through our “Study abroad” program for sure.

**C:** But I think those are the experiences where you really learn the language, cause that’s when you’re really up against— you’re facing, you know, people saying “no” before you open your mouth and going...

**A:** Well, the— I— okay, so thinking about what we’re kind of touching on here, right? Are idiosyncrasies of living in another country or things that we’ve learnt, whether it’s studying abroad or living here. I’ve learnt time and time again in this country that, you go to certain places, especially if you’re dealing with public servants, which is in the US the way we would say *funcionario*, it’s a public servant, civil serv— civil servant! Sorry, and— and we think that’s, I guess we think, the category of “public servant” or generally people in the government in general. And you ask them something and they say no, and you ask again, and they say no a little less forcefully, and you ask them a third time, like, “oh, yeah, I guess so, it’s fine.” So, insistence, you know, is quite important, perseverance is definitely important, in those kinds of paperwork situations.

**C:** I remember signing, uh, something in the bank, uh, and they said to me “that’s not your signature”.

**A:** Hahahaha.



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**C:** I said, “excuse me?” I had to do it again, and again, and again. At about the fifth time they were like “eh, it’s getting closer now”.

**A:** Did you just ask them if you could copy what they needed you to copy?

**C:** Haha exactly, yeah. Uh, when you were abroad as well, did you get **homesick**?

**A:** Sure! Yeah.

**C:** What for?

**A:** Um, my family probably.

**C:** Yeah.

**A:** Um, burritos. The late night— late night Mexican food is an important element of— of latin musicians as well, you know, and any musician is definitely quite dependent on late night Mexican food at different times. Um, but, you know, that kind of leads me to something that really helped me, um, adapt well to living in another country, which was: Don’t try to, um, what’s a proper way to express it? Don’t try to replace something with the same thing in another country, replace the role that that thing in your original country played for you. So, if I was searching for burritos, I was never gonna find burritos, and I could maybe try to make Mexican food at home, but the ingredients were lacking. So, I had to see, what’s the equivalent of a burrito in Spain? What do you think?

**C:** Mmm...

**A:** Late at night, I mean, 11 o’clock, not even that late, you need a **snack** or you’re going to eat late night with friends after a couple of beers, where do people go usually?

**C:** Uh, some sort of bar, tapas...

**A:** I would say shawarma falafel. It has the same shape as a burrito. So as soon as I accepted that a falafel with, you know, the cheese and the sauce and everything, that played the same role as a burrito. As soon as I had that— that kind of epiphany, I’m like “oh okay, so I don’t need to do the same thing that I do in the US, I need to find something that scratches the same itch that needs to be scratched as if when I’m in the US”.

**C:** Because for me what— I was homesick for certain things, but then the opposite happened, I don’t know if it’s the opposite, but when I got back to Belfast I was really missing—

**A:** Everything was shite.

**C:** Exactly. I wanted to be back home in the Erasmus.

**A:** I mean, you’re talking about culture shock and reverse culture shock.



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**C:** It's reverse culture shock, and I remember really clearly that I was waking up in the morning and that the radio would be in English, and that really irritated me, I wanted to switch on the radio and hear French.

**A:** Oh, that's—

**C:** That was the thing that just stung every morning, was—

**A:** Related to that, every time, you know, I— I go home to Chicago once or twice a year usually, you know, um, airline prices willing, and for sure the first three days I'm there, my brain is saying to myself as I'm walking on the street, I'm like "they're talking in English... wait, all those people are talking in English!" After a few days it finally shuts off and it's like, "yes, everybody is talking in English", even though not everybody is talking in English, but, you know, by far the *de facto* language on the streets is English.

**C:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah. And the final question: why would you advise somebody to go on an Erasmus? If there are students here saying, "should I go?", what would you say?

**A:** Oh, man. I mean, uh, I could get personal and just say 100% changed my life, like, there's no question. I mean, it's— I think, I think if you were to have the resources to do an actual neurological study, I'm 100% convinced that a person's brain changes after going to live in another country, usually for the better, I would assume. Uh, so I think that it's just, it opens your eyes to everything. Now, if you're talking about a European going to another European country, I'm sure that there's a similar effect, just on a lower scale, but coming from the middle of the US, from a big city but still from the middle of the US, to the middle of, at that point it was the middle of Spain, now in Catalunya, up here in the, you know, a little bit further north... I mean, I think, I *think* it opens your eyes to all the differences, and— but at the same time it forces the similarities of just humanity, you know? That, in the end, all the things we see that are so different, they're kind of superficial.

**C:** So just do it.

**A:** Just do it!

## Vocabulary bank

**Abroad** = In a foreign country

**Figure a way** = To think of how to achieve a goal or deal with a situation

**Greyhound buses** = buses in the U.S. used for long distance travelling

**Out the window** = irrelevant or doesn't exist anymore

**Paperwork** = official written documents

**To be spoon-fed** = provide someone with all the help they need

**Homesick** = wanting to return to one's original home place

**A snack** = a small amount of food (usually not a traditional meal)



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