

During my 15 days abroad it's safe to say that my life was changed. Being around people from 28 countries from every corner of the globe I learned more than I ever could in a classroom in triple that time. I made friends that, as cheesy as it may sound, will last a lifetime. I would like to formally thank the IPA and my fellow participants for making this opportunity all I dreamed of and more. So here is my in-depth account of the trip, though words may never do it justice.

After a 9-hour flight from Atlanta and 11 total hours of traveling I was beyond exhausted. But that exhaustion did nothing to dampen my first impression of being in another country, especially one as beautiful as Spain for that matter. Getting off the plane my breath was taken away. Yes, the sun rising over the tree line surrounding the airport was beautiful, but the real reason was that the air was different. As I would soon learn a lot of things were different, and it wasn't the rest of the world that was different as it was my narrow-minded American concept of what is normal and what is not. I would love to say that I soaked up the landscape of Barcelona in the car ride from the airport to the University where we would be staying, but I was fast asleep next to my to-be roommate and friend, Max O'Hara. Later that night was the opening ceremony where before the presentation of the countries we all stood around in tightly knit circles just as isolated, if not more, as our respective countries. Determined to break my deep-rooted shyness, Max and I approached a group of boys that we would soon get to know and eventually room with. Alex from Sweden, Oran from Ireland, Jack from Australia, Mitchell from Canada, and Konsta from Finland. Initially, we talked about the one thing that teenage boys from across the world have in common, soccer, sorry "football." It's safe to say we all slept well that night.

Early the following morning (we had all more or less adjusted to the time change) we took a bus to Barcelona and began what may have been my favorite day from the entire trip. A bike ride to Camp Nou, the home stadium for F.C. Barcelona, topped off with a tour of the breathtaking stadium and its +90,000 seats. After that we continued our bike tour and made our way to the shore of the Mediterranean, it was quite the view. After lunch we took a boat tour of the coast of Barcelona, which was also pretty breathtaking, although this had nothing to do with the air. We then visited the Gaudi church in Barcelona, although under construction, it was still quite impressive. To end the day we had a dance after dinner that was more funny than awkward, although it was quite awkward.

The next day we got on the road early with Spain's main amusement park, Port Aventura, as our destination. We were blessed with perfect weather for our day in the park as we were throughout the trip. Throughout the day we all made our way through the park, walking and waiting in lines with the 250 foot Shambhala: Expedition al Himalya looming over us. Though we did have beautiful weather, that many hours in the sun is still unbearable. Luckily we found a water ride that left no part of your body dry. Dripping wet, we immediately got back in line for Tutuki to get a last ride in before we had to meet up at the bus. We all enjoyed our last night in Barcelona, hanging out and telling stories far later than we all realized.

Despite six hours of travel the fourth day remains one of my favorite days of the entire trip. Our guide told us that Mount Montserrat is thought to be carved by the hand of God and that statement doesn't seem very far off. After taking an interesting cable car-like contraption up the side of the mountain (in addition to the hour bus ride around tight mountain roads). The view from the top cannot be described in any words that I know of. Looking out for miles and miles to see rolling hills and more majestic mountains covered in green shrubbery, and if you strain your eyes you can just make out the Mediterranean Sea. We snapped back to reality with a lengthy bus ride to our next destination, Bilbao. That night we arrived and got settled into our rooms that had a beautiful view of the city, though nothing could rival Mount Montserrat.

In the morning we got more than we bargained for when it came to our journey to paintball. There was no quarrel with the half hour bus ride, but there were some complaints regarding the 45-minute uphill hike to our destination. However, once the game started and paint started flying everyone forgot about our exhausting hike. We were all decked out in camouflage with protective gear and masks, except for Max who deemed all of our gear unnecessary and went on to play in his shorts, shirt, and opted to wear the mask. Three different courses complete with fences, castles, brick walls and other means of cover served as our battleground. Lucky for me I had the crazy commando on my team and we went on to win two of our three games, go yellow! Since we had no time to return to the hotel after paintball, before lunch we were quite literally hosed down just outside the restaurant to clean up. Later that day Olivia and I both actively combated our fear of heights going on the 50 meter hanging bridge in the city. Once on the bridge our friends did little to help us cope with our fear, bringing attention to the holes in the floorboards and testing them by jumping while we tried to control our breathing. There was a beautiful reunion between the ground and us when we got off of that elevator.

The following day we drove to San Sebastian and were led through the city and its tiny, symmetrical streets on a guided tour. As the day went on the weather steadily improved and by the time we finished lunch the skies were clear and our stroke of luck continued. We all raced to the beach and hastily changed into our bathing suits before running to the water and leaving our bags with those who chose to tan. We were met with freezing cold, salty water but it didn't deter us from our destination, a far off barge with a slide on it. Each of us went down the slide and were pushed off the barge a fair share of times before making our way back to shore.

In the morning we toured a different area of Bilbao where I found the best food that I ate on the trip, a kebab. The quality of this food cannot be overstated as anyone who was with me at the time can attest to; it was inhaled in less than three minutes. I had time to digest my kebab as we then embarked on a seven-hour bus ride. We were greeted by cold weather at our new accommodations and rushed to get inside.

The cold continued in the morning and was prevalent during our stops along the coastline at various lookout points along the way to the aquarium. Wind coupled with the cold didn't do us any favors, as we were all underdressed. Later that day we

went in the beach and for obvious reasons I was one of the few who actually went in the water. Following our cold beach endeavor we hit one of the biggest malls in Europe, in our beach clothes. My friends and I did our best to go to as many stores as possible while taking in the sheer magnitude of the mall, and we had quite the adventure looking for food. All in all a great day.

A visit to Santiago de Compostela was first on the next day's schedule. My group found a place that served kebabs and because of the hype I made about mine a few days before they all decided to try it out. Of course they lived up to the hype. Later we went to a crowded water park where half of us fell asleep in the sun tanning and nearly all of us paid the price with serious sunburns. Still a pretty great day.

For the next day we had a full schedule with either kayaking or hiking in the morning and the remaining activity in the afternoon. My group hiked first through the forest up the mountain keeping the crystalline lake on our left. There were periodic, panoramic views of the valley and the lake during the hike. After lunch we began the kayaking, and stopped halfway across the lake to go swimming. We later drove to our next destination Valladolid, where we stayed for the night.

The weather continued to impress and we were lucky that it did as we were outside all day at the Castilla y Leon adventure park. We did everything from zip lining to caving to rock climbing at this place only stopping for lunch to refuel for the next activities. That night we had an amazing barbeque that was much needed after such a full and exhausting day.

Madrid was our destination for the next day but we stopped at Segovia and saw the famous aqueduct early in the morning. At least half of the participants stopped in the nearby McDonalds for a supplement to our breakfast (I was one of them). Once arriving in Madrid we were given a tour of the police station where we also ate lunch. Following lunch we visited Santiago Bernabeu, home of Real Madrid. Just like Camp Nou, it was amazing to see such a large stadium and it's scary to think of what it may be like packed with fans of match day. That night we got free time in downtown Madrid to explore the all too interesting sights and sounds of the city at night.

In the morning we walked all over Madrid going to the El Prado Museum and a beautiful park in which we rented boats and had time out on the water. After the park we drove to another police station where we were given a demonstration of the impressive police dogs and got to see all of the police gear up close and personal. We returned to the part of Madrid that we were in the previous night and shopped for a few hours before having a farewell dinner.

The following day we drove to Zaragoza early in the morning. While there we visited the city hall and multiple cathedrals. We then drove more and arrived in Aragon where we stopped at a medieval castle for a tour and afterwards had lunch. The driving continued as we made our way to Barcelona. Eventually we arrived and we went to a seriously impressive water/light show at a fountain that went along with

music that was playing. Getting off the bus last night all participants exchanged positive words to another, in my own words “see you soon” because that’s what it really is, a see you soon. The people I met on this trip will have a place in my heart forever and the memories are unforgettable.