

Erasmus Report, Spain, Madrid

Complutense

I think a year abroad is as rewarding as it is scary, so I have decided to make this report more of a guide to help you avoid the mistakes I made and have an even better year. I will be honest; from what I understand I had a more difficult time than the typical Erasmus experience, so I hope I am still able to relate how good it is and not scare you off from one.

Preparing to go

Accommodation

I was nervous about my grades, so I left accommodation plans until after results. I was still able to find a place although it's better to do this earlier. The university will not offer you housing but I used a service Complutense had on their website: housing anywhere. After some time searching, I was still able to find a decent place. Overall, there were issues, but it was manageable. One big piece of advice is to check that the room has windows as Madrid is notorious for renting properties without them. I lived a 20-minute walk from the mathematics faculty and close by to a metro station which made travel very convenient.

Language

My Spanish level entering Spain was quite low and regardless, I think unless you are fluent, you will struggle at first, at least speaking to Spanish people. Unlike in school, Spanish is spoken very quickly and, just as you get with any other language, they shorten words or use alternative phrases that can seem incomprehensible at first. As long as you keep practicing you will catch on quickly. I found that at first it was easier to practise Spanish with other Erasmus students as they had a similar level and would pronounce things more clearly. The most important thing is to expose yourself to it. And whenever you need a break and want to talk in English, most of the Erasmus students will be proficient at it.

Travel

You should try to get the "Abono Metro". It is €20 a month (although sometimes they even do discounts (for example during my year it went down to help with the cost of living crisis) and it lets you travel unlimited on busses and metro, as well as certain "Cercanías" trains that can take you to towns around Madrid. You will soon find out that the metro in Madrid is amazing, with few delays and air conditioning on all lines. The whole public transport system there is great, and everything felt really close by to me (at least compared to London).

University

The university system in Spain is vastly different to Warwick, so be prepared to adapt. Firstly, it is closer to secondary school, with the same classes everyday and no big lecture halls. However, you get to pick your teachers and when you want the classes (morning or evening). I personally went for morning classes to have free time in the evening to go out or rest.

Now here come the really weird parts, that I will admit caused me a lot of distress. Firstly, it is the norm to fail exams there (I was told that around 5% of students pass all their exams on the first try), and some students may even skip some in order to defer it to the retakes and have more time for the

current exam period. You will soon understand why, as exams are solely up to the professor and there are no adjustments to account for harder or easier exams.

This leads me to my next point that professors have an enormous effect on the course and its outcome which should not be surprising however, the difference between good and bad teaching is much more significant than at Warwick. For example, Francisco Gallego Lupiañez who teaches Topología Elemental has a 70% fail rate for his exams. All this is to say I recommend asking to change your classes if you are as unlucky as me to get some really disheartening classes. As well as exams, professors obviously have an impact on the quality of teaching and what resources they provide. For example Jose Maria Rey Cabezas who teaches Análisis Numérico provided clear and concise printed notes however this is not the norm, and many professors tend to provide little information, even regarding exams. I can go into more detail however I felt like I had a particularly bad year, where even professors who I was told by home students at Complutense are some of the best, left me very frustrated and anxious about the whole system there. However, I will omit most of this because I feel it may be unrepresentative of the whole situation and was more of a one off. For instance, one of my professors made half of the questions on the final exam about prerequisite content which we had obviously not practised nor prepared for, as well as it being an uncharacteristically difficult exam compared to previous years.

Hence, I would like to end this section with a recommendation to try sign up for Historia de las Matemáticas with Marco Castrillon Lopez as this is the perfect module for your year abroad. Firstly, the professor is very charismatic and welcoming, making his classes very engaging. He speaks very clearly and concisely but with a style of speech geared towards young people which is great for practising Spanish. The assessments include a presentation, essay, and exam so you will be able to practise your public speaking and writing in Spanish. And lastly, Marco Castrillon Lopez is very welcoming to foreign exchange students, something that will help put you at ease during your time at Complutense.

Overall, I think my advice is don't take the full load of classes (I did, and I regretted it), change classes if necessary (I didn't and I regretted it), and be prepared to face a lot of challenges. Make sure to talk to other students to find out you're not alone and get a better grip of the system.

Outside of Classes

Societies

Unfortunately, societies aren't really a thing in Spain. There are one or two (like board game club) but most of it is faculty sports teams. During my time there I joined the university's basketball team, which was a great way to meet people and learn a lot of Spanish too. I think it is worth mentioning how much kindness I experienced on the team; during the first month or two, other players would explain to me what the coach was saying as he did not speak any English. My time with the team was the biggest highlight of my time in Spain.

Erasmus Student Network

The Erasmus Student Network (ESN) is a charitable organisation that runs tons of events (a lot of them free) for foreign exchange students which is a perfect for meeting other students just like you. The events organised range from sport to clubbing (including free entries into clubs). I found a lot of really cool people this way, and going to their events regularly really helped me during my time in Madrid.

Smart Insiders

This company organises trips to towns and cities in Spain (and even outside of Spain to places like Portugal and Morocco) as well as many other activities. I used their services to get free entry to the Palacio Royal (usually costs €12). This is a good way to meet likeminded people and gauge ideas for what to do during your stay.

Overall

Overall, it was a great experience; I learned a lot of Spanish, found new friends and connections, found out what it's like to live in Madrid, discovered a lot about myself, learnt some more mathematics, and above all I challenged myself. It wasn't easy for me, but I persevered and I'm glad I got to do this. Be prepared to have a good support system for yourself and don't be afraid to reach out. I had to use Warwick's Wellbeing services as some of what I had to deal with just felt overwhelming. Remember you are not alone and if you have any questions, doubts, or anything else regarding the year abroad, I will put my personal email in the useful links section below.

Year abroad is one of the coolest experiences you can have, you won't be able to stop talking about it. Especially about Spain, where people are so relaxed, enjoy life, and welcome you to enjoy it with them. I will be back in Spain in the future for sure.

Useful Links/Resources

housinganywhere.com

The website I used to find my housing. Not ideal as you cannot view the properties in person but is perfect if you aren't able to travel to the area beforehand.

Wuolah.com

This is the website where you can get lecture notes, past exam papers, and anything else that may be necessary for your modules. Was truly a lifesaver when preparing for exams or catching up on missed days.

smartinsiders.com

The website for smart insiders.

jampno@gmail.com

My email address that I check regularly. Doesn't matter what it is or when it is, I will try to help you out.