

Barcelona, Spain - Summer 2023

*“Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar.” - Antonio Machado*

Over the course of nine weeks, I encountered unfamiliar challenges and immersed myself in Barcelona's dynamic culture, which profoundly reshaped my perspective on daily life and societal values. What began as a clear set of goals—enhancing my Spanish skills, delving into Catalan art, and strengthening my cross-cultural communication—evolved into a broader exploration of how different societies prioritize well-being, sustainability, and community. My work teaching English at Escola d'Adults de la Verneda exemplified this shift. What initially seemed like a language exchange quickly became an avenue for forming connections with individuals from varied socioeconomic backgrounds. Crafting lessons for adult learners required me to move beyond traditional instruction and focus on building mutual confidence and understanding. Through this process, I gained insight into how education serves as a means of bridging cultural divides and fostering a sense of shared purpose.

Spain's prioritization of quality over productivity emerged as one of the most striking cultural contrasts I observed. Life in Barcelona revolves around savoring moments rather than rushing through them. Mealtimes, for instance, are unhurried social experiences, often lasting hours and accompanied by dishes made from fresh, locally sourced ingredients. In the U.S., by contrast, meals often feel utilitarian, frequently relying on pre-packaged, processed options designed for convenience. This distinction became especially apparent in the local markets I visited, where vendors proudly offered seasonal produce and artisanal goods. Shopping in these markets and preparing meals became one of my favorite routines, as I experienced the interconnectedness of food, community, and health.

Equally transformative was experiencing the city's emphasis on walking and public transportation. Living on Passeig de Sant Joan, a residential area designed with pedestrian-friendly boulevards and playgrounds, I experienced the benefits of urban planning that centralizes around residents over vehicles. I quickly became accustomed to walking everywhere. My hour-long evening walks to the beach, in particular, became moments of reflection, allowing me to absorb the city's rhythm and energy. This stands in stark contrast to urban living in the U.S., where cities often prioritize cars over pedestrians, making walking impractical in many areas. Barcelona's focus on accessibility and environmental sustainability served as a powerful reminder of how urban planning can shape not only a city's functionality but also its inhabitants' well-being.

My first night in Barcelona was marked by an unexpected challenge: my phone was stolen, forcing me to quickly adapt to the realities of pickpocketing in crowded areas. However, this initial setback did not diminish my overall sense of safety in the city. Barcelona's vibrant nightlife, with its bustling open-air cafés and lively public squares, created an atmosphere of community and security that I rarely experience in the U.S., where city streets often empty out after dark.

Barcelona's rich history added yet another layer to my experience. I was particularly fascinated by the visionary urban planning of Ildefons Cerdà, whose 19th-century design for the Eixample district emphasized open spaces, accessibility, and public health. Studying Cerdà's work in my painting and architecture course allowed me to see firsthand how his principles continue to shape the city's vibrancy and cohesion. At the same time, Barcelona's unique identity as a Catalan city offered an opportunity to explore the cultural and linguistic diversity within Spain. While my primary focus was on improving my Spanish, I also encountered Catalan regularly, both in conversations and on bilingual signage. This exposure deepened my

understanding of Barcelona as a hub of regional pride and cultural complexity, further enriching my immersion.

Academically, my studies in Barcelona far exceeded my expectations. Visiting landmarks like Park Güell and the Sagrada Família provided tangible connections to my coursework, demonstrating how architecture can merge artistic expression with functionality. Meanwhile, using Spanish in real-life situations—from navigating the city's efficient transportation system to conversing with locals—bolstered both my fluency and my confidence in the language.

On a personal level, the experience challenged me to reevaluate deeply ingrained assumptions about societal values. In the U.S., the pursuit of individual success often overshadows collective well-being, while in Barcelona, I observed a culture that prioritizes sustainability, community, and intentional living. These differences have prompted me to reconsider my own habits and aspirations, inspiring me to integrate elements of Spain's slower, more balanced lifestyle into my daily life.

Ultimately, my time in Barcelona redefined how I understand both culture and lifestyle. It was not the absence of obstacles that made the experience meaningful, but rather the process of adapting to new environments and perspectives. The city's commitment to community, sustainability, and a deliberate pace of life provided an alternative model for living well, one that continues to influence me today. What began as an academic pursuit became a journey of personal growth, transforming not only my understanding of Spain but also my approach to life and my connection to the communities I inhabit.