UNC Charlotte
Niner International
Country Guide

Learn more about where you’ll be living from a UNC Charlotte student who has already done it.
Which city and country did you live in abroad?

I lived abroad in the capital city of Cantabria, Santander. Located in northern Spain, Santander is a beautiful city where the sea meets the mountains. Santander is filled with parks, beaches, shops, and enough restaurants to satisfy any foodie.

What is the climate like in that location?
(Describe the weather when you were there. What are some things students should take with them to prepare for the weather in this location?)

I happened to study and live in Santander during one of their worst winters--it snowed for the first time in 10 years while I was there. It was chilly nearly the entire 3 months we were there so make sure you bring a winter coat-- or you can buy one there, they're super stylish and European. It also rained. A lot. On top of the rain, it was really windy so I would recommend bring a strong umbrella that can withstand the wind. Toward the end of the trip, the weather warmed up and it was perfect for laying on the beach with friends after class.

What was the city’s public transportation like?
(Describe how you got to and from the city center or the university day-to-day. Did they have a subway line, buses, could you walk most places? What were the costs of these transportation options? Were they easy to utilize? Did they have Uber/Lyft available in this city? Did you have any challenges navigating through the city?)

Santander is no Madrid so you won't find Uber or Lyft in the city, however, they do have very efficient modes of public transportation convenient for wherever you live. I lived in the center of the city so it was very easy for me to walk almost anywhere. On nice days, I would walk to the university which was about 30 minutes from my apartment. Thirty minutes in Europe is considered close so I would say it was a very walkable city. On the cold or rainy days, or the days I woke up late, I would ride the bus to the university. The buses are a little confusing to navigate at first, and the routes ever changing which was a challenge, but they are efficient. The beaches were a hike.

Describe the types of food that are common in that city.
(What were the types of foods you could find at most restaurants? What were some delicacies of that city? What were your favorite or least favorite foods?)

I may be biased but Santander has some of the best churros con chocolate in all of Spain. It's a must to visit Avila at least 100 times while spending a semester there. Besides churros, tortilla was one of my favorite foods. It's like an omelette but thicker and it's delicious. You can eat it hot or cold but I prefer hot. On the otherhand, a food I didn't like were croquettes. Croquettes are extremely popular in Spain and loved by everyone except me. They can be described as fried rolled food with different ingredients in side of them. Because I lived with a host family, I didn't eat at restaurants much, but the food my host mother cooked was delicious.
**Are there any particular restaurants you would recommend students try if they are in that city?**

(If possible, list the name of the restaurant and a link to the website)

Avila is a must for churros--it was one of our favorite spots. 100 Montaditos is a great, cheap, place to get tapas and hang out with friends. And if you're looking for a cute place to study and meet with friends, Santa&Co is a cafe that is very popular amongst Los Carolinos. The decor is so cute and the drinks and food are even better. We didn't really eat out much which is why this list is so short.

**Was it easy to travel to nearby cities and countries?**

(If you traveled in your personal time, what modes of transportation did you use (e.g. bus, train, airplane, etc.). How did you book these travel plans? Online? Local bus station? Generally what was the cost of travelling in that region? Where did you stay (e.g. Airbnb, hostels, hotels) when you travelled?)

Fortunately I was able to get really cheap flights from the Santander airport to the cities outside of Spain I went too. Other people would take buses to Bilbao, which is about an hour away, and then flew to other countries because the airport in Bilbao goes to more places. But I took all of my trips by flight. I would walk to the bus station and then catch a bus to the Santander Airport (a 15 minute bus ride as the airport is outside of Santander) and then take my flights. I stayed in hostels for all of my trips and loved it. They're cheap and a great way to meet people. Traveling within Spain from Santander is easy and fairly cheap. You can take day trips to Bilbao or do weekend trips to San Sebastián, Madrid, or Asturias.

**What are some of the differences between U.S. culture and the host country culture?**

(Are there any gestures or differences in communication style that is different from the US that you noticed? (smiling, eye contact etc.))

One of the main differences I noticed quickly is the meal times. Spanish people eat dinner at 10 or 11 at night which is late in terms of U.S. culture. Spanish people are also very affectionate and will greet you with a kiss on both cheeks--even if you're just meeting for the first time. Communication styles are pretty similar to the U.S.-- you don't have to avoid eye contact or anything like that. You'll find most of the cultural differences are subtle things.

**Generally, how would you describe the locals in the host city?**

(Were the locals friendly and helpful? Would you recommend approaching the locals for help?)

The locals in Santander were so friendly and helpful. If you ever need help, don't hesitate to reach out. It was so easy for us to strike conversation and work on our Spanish because they loved that we were trying to communicate with them in their language. Even if we butchered the sentence, they would smile as if we'd said it perfectly. They loved talking to us about where we were from, what we were doing in Spain, and many other topics.
Are there any cultural events that you attended during your stay that you would recommend to students (e.g. festivals, holidays, etc.)?
(How did you find out about these events?)

While we were in Spain, Carnival took place and we went to the parades and the various events which were super fun. Carnival is a huge fiesta leading up to lent. People dress up and party in the streets and it's a great time. If you have the opportunity to travel to bigger cities, I definitely recommend to get the full experience. Everyone talks about Carnival so you'll know when it's happening. There will also be signs all around the city.

Describe any culture shock that you experienced while abroad.
(If culture shock was present what would you recommend for future students to avoid or lessen the shock?)

I had been to Spain before so I didn't really experience culture shock. I will say that I was a little overwhelmed the first week because my host mom only spoke Spanish and I found it very hard to communicate with her. But as time went by, it became very easy to communicate with her. Host moms are also very involved so be prepared for them to do everything for you--it can be a lot at first but it's all out of love.

Did you find it difficult to meet locals of the host city? Why or why not?
(In your experience were the locals open and welcoming of tourists? Where and how did you befriend the locals during your stay?)

We were each assigned conversation partners--people who go to the university we attended--and my conversation partner introduced me to her friends which is how I met locals. Without her, I think it could've been difficult because we didn't have classes with the locals. We also would meet locals who were servers or working in the shops by striking up conversations. People will talk to you; you just have to be bold and initiate the conversation.

What type of housing did you live in (e.g. homestay, dorm, apartment, etc.)?
(Why did you choose this style of housing? Did you have access to a kitchen? How often/what was the process for doing laundry (in house or local laundry mat)?)

I lived in a homestay and loved it. A homestay was required for our program but I wanted to do a program with a homestay because I felt it was the best way to improve my Spanish and get an authentic Spanish experience. My host mother cooked all my meals for me although I'm sure I could've cooked something for myself if I wanted too--I didn't want to though, her cooking was amazing. She also did my laundry once a week. Dryers are rare in Spain so my clothes would be hung outside to dry which means it could take a couple of days for them to dry but my host mom was very strategic with when she washed clothes so I never ran out.
Describe your accommodations.
(Did you have access to hot water? Wifi? Did you live with roommates?)

I had my own room, access to WiFi, and hot water for a shower. I was the only person living with my host mom although her grandchildren would spend the night sometimes which I loved. My room had a bed, a desk, a dresser, and a closet. My room was right next to the living room which is where I would go if I wanted to watch TV--my host mom loved watching Friends dubbed in Spanish and I grew to love it too.

Where was your housing located in regards to the city center or host university?
(How long did it take, using public transportation or walking, to get to classes every day? How long did it take to travel to the center of the city or any other major locations in that city?)

My house was directly in the city center. I had a bus stop right outside of my house that I would go to if I wanted to ride the bus to school but most days I would walk. My house was right near the tunnel we would walk through to get to the university. It was a straight shot through the tunnel and took about 20-30 minutes to get to campus. If I wanted to go anywhere in the city center it would take me about 10 minutes walking. If I wanted to go to the beach I could either walk about 40 minutes or ride the bus--I almost always rode the bus.

What was the cost of living like? What ways can you keep costs low in that city?
(Compared to the cost of living in the city of Charlotte was it more or less expensive in that city? Were there any student discounts you took advantage of?)

Compared to Charlotte, I felt like the cost of living was fairly cheap. Because we had host families who cooked for us, we rarely ate out which saved money for other things like shopping and churros. We also would walk a lot which saved money on public transportation but students got a discount for the buses which made that extremely cheap too. Living in Santander is fairly cheap--it can get expensive, however, if you like to shop because there are a lot of stores there with a lot of cute clothes.

Are you expected to tip servers or taxi drivers abroad?
(If so, what was the common tip rate? Was it the same rate as here in Charlotte (10-20%)?)

In Spain, you aren't expected to tip servers or taxi drivers abroad. If you tip, they'll think you left money on accident and run back out to give it to you. The only time we ever tipped is if we went out to eat in large groups.
How did you communicate when you were abroad?
(e.g. did you use your own phone, did you only communicate if there was access to Wi-Fi, did you purchase a phone abroad, etc.)? (Would you recommend any helpful apps? Maybe whatsapp or a currency exchange app?)

My phone carrier, Sprint, has a free international plan that I used. I also downloaded Whatsapp to communicate with the people in my study abroad group, my host mom, and people I met from Europe. I mostly communicated through iMessage and FaceTime with people back home though. I definitelit recommend downloaded Whatsapp, a curency exchange app, and Moovit which is an app for public transportation and getting around cities.

What would you recommend students bring to be able to charge their electronics?
(Describe the electrical outlets, tips to keep in mind, etc.).

You'll need a European converter and if you plan on traveling to the United Kingdom or Ireland, you'll need a special converter for those places as it's not the same as a European one. I recommend bringing adapters as well. Sometimes when I was tight on outlet space I would plug my devices into my laptop to charge and plug my laptop into the adapter--that way I could charge multiple items at once. I also recommend getting a portable charger as they will save your life if you're out all day and don't have access to outlets.

What do you know now about the location or program that you wish you would have known before going abroad?

I think the biggest shock for me and my entire study abroad group was the weather. We were expecting warm, sunny, weather and got the complete opposite. Santander is in northern Spain and it does rain a lot there so be prepared for that. Depending on the winter, if you go during the spring semester, it could also be really cold. I definitely recommend checking the weather before you go so you can be fully prepared.

What’s your first and last name?
Satoria Ray

Which semester and year did you go abroad (e.g. fall 2016, summer 2017, etc.)?
Spring 2018
Which program did you participate in?

Semester in Spain

What was your student level when you went abroad (e.g. freshman, sophomore, etc.)? If you would be open to being contact by other UNC Charlotte students who are interested in your experience abroad, please provide your contact information (email, phone number, social medial, etc.)

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