

Eleanor Smith – Almería, 2016

I spent 3 weeks in the Almería province of Spain, volunteering in two guesthouses in the desert, with the aim of improving my oral Spanish communication skills. Whilst my plan was initially to spend the entire time working in just one guesthouse, a last minute group cancellation meant that I was relocated to a neighbouring establishment halfway through my stay. However, in both places, I was completely immersed in Spanish, as the vast majority of guests and volunteers spoke no English. I had a variety of duties, including food preparation, preparing breakfast, washing up, weeding and fruit picking. This variety of work was incredibly useful, because it vastly improved my vocabulary of household, everyday language which I had never used before. I was also exposed to a large variety of accents and speech patterns: over the three weeks, I met people from Catalonia, Valencia, Madrid and Andalusia. The Andalusian accent in particular was difficult to understand at first, but with the constant practise, my listening skills improved hugely. Everyone was incredibly friendly and very ready to talk, which made it very easy to gain confidence in my spoken Spanish.

As well as being very beneficial for practical language skills, the cultural immersion was also hugely invaluable. I was able to spend a weekend in Granada, and I found the mixture of Islamic and Christian influences in the city fascinating. I visited La Alhambra, the Albaicín (old Moorish district), La Catedral de Granada and el Palacio de los Olvidados, including their recent exhibition about the Spanish Inquisition (including their torture instruments). And of course, I indulged in the Andalusian tradition of free tapas with a drink! I was even lucky enough to meet two Mexican girls when I was there, so I could continue to practise Spanish. I was also invited to spend the night at a volunteer's flat in Almería, and we watched a film on women in Spanish flamenco music, with a focus on the historical challenges that have faced them and the continued misogyny in the industry. It was really illuminating, and provided another perspective on the flamenco industry, different from the image projected to tourists.

Not only did I experience the traditional aspects of Andalusian culture, but the people with whom I was staying were part of an alternative sub-culture, which promoted an ecological and sustainable style of living. Off-grid solar panels, organic vegetable gardens and no Internet became my new normal for these three weeks, and the rural location of the guesthouses in the middle of the Spanish desert made it very easy to explore the beautiful surrounding countryside. Andalusia's main industries are agriculture and mass tourism, so it was a real privilege to be able to talk to people who are reacting against the negative environmental effects that these industries cause. Not only did I learn a lot about the Spanish way of life, but I also picked up some tips on how to make my life at home more sustainable.

To conclude, the experience was extremely valuable on both a practical and cultural level. Having only visited Spain a couple of times previously, and never on my own, I feel that my confidence in speaking the language has improved and I have a greater understanding of the local culture. With my year abroad rapidly approaching, returning to Granada or Almería definitely feel like attractive options now!