



## New Beginnings...

## That Started in an Old Castle



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I remember it as if it was yesterday... I was handed an all too intimidating map and was told in Spanish, “Alyse, put your bags in the taxi and tell the driver to take you here,” as she pointed to the circled castle on the map. With apprehension and definite jetlag I asked, “Why am I going to that big castle next to the Cathedral?” The response was, “Well, that’s where you’re living, of course.”

Before I tell you more about how I ended up at this castle, first let me back up a little. As a curious, 18-year-old sophomore, I embarked on my much anticipated study abroad experience to the mysterious and unfamiliar destination of Seville, Spain. I packed my two large suitcases with everything I deemed necessary: a trusty Spanish dictionary, some reliable travel guides, and of course, lots of clothes. What would this experience be like for me? Did I prepare enough? Will I understand the Sevillian accent? So many questions raced through my preoccupied head; I couldn’t imagine what my life during the year abroad would be like.

There was a lot of time to dream about those questions while I boarded the planes, (all three,) until I eventually arrived in Seville. I reflected on my goodbyes, those I made to my family, to my friends, and to my country. With a stomach full of butterflies and a heart full of eagerness, getting ready to meet my new host family, I promised myself that no matter what lay ahead of me, I would make the best of my cultural submersion ... But for that moment, that simply meant getting the taxi driver to take me to this circled castle on the map.

I did as I was told and asked the taxi driver to drop me off at the *Alcázar*, as it’s called in Spanish, a word I probably mispronounced on the first attempt. However,

catching on quickly, all I had to do was point to the spot on the map and he knew where to go. Taking only minutes to get there, I was dropped off in the heart of the city. The cab driver told me that the road we were on ended and therefore he had to drop me off at our current location on the side of the road. He pointed to the nearby “sidewalk” (one of the many cobblestone paths that line the city), and waved his hand through the air while mumbling what I presumed to be directions. But, in my nervous frenzy, as soon as he dropped me off I did what I knew best... asked for help!

It was the peak of the afternoon and time for my first Spanish lunch with my *señora*. But, I was afraid I may be already late and was now starting to worry. This would be my first attempt of the year using my Spanish to get around. I felt the pressure in my gut and the soreness in my body as I continued to carry my backpack and oversized American suitcases along uneven European cobblestone roads. With great anticipation, I tried to track down the first person I could to ask where this regal “Alcázar” was that my cab driver couldn’t get me to.

I asked a friendly looking Spanish couple, smiling and in an almost belittling way, told me that it was very close, just up the road and around the corner. “You can’t miss it” they assured me. There was no time to waste; I was on a mission. Tick tock tick tock. “Just up the road and around the corner” right? Or was it “turn here, and down that road, and then at the corner?” Quickly, I learned this whole speaking Spanish business required ears that pay close attention in Spanish as well. But, as luck would have it, I was heading in the right direction. Soon, right before my eyes lay a fortress protected by a sign that read “Residents Only.” There it was. Built in the late 1360s, this historically royal and

grandiose UNESCO World Heritage site is recognized as the *Alcázar*, but for me, this was my new “dorm replacement”, my new home at last.

Now at the main entrance, I walked up the narrow pathway and followed my nose toward the front door and the lingering aroma of lunch. I stopped at the door; well, “door” as we would know it. Really, it was a large gated wall lined by iron rods, which, in fact, completely lacked a door knob. Ding Dong. As I waited, my heartbeat accelerated with every passing second. The door opened and I was warmly greeted by a 5 foot tall Spanish Grandma. She had bright blue eyes sparkling behind thick glasses. She dressed very modestly and wore a white apron over her casual clothes. With a big smile and two outstretched arms she pulled me in. “*Alicia come here, how are you?*” she asked me in b.

We didn’t exchange a handshake, but rather two kisses on the cheek, as is accustomed in Spain. I took a sigh of relief as she assured me I was just in time for lunch. Next, I was introduced to the present family members: Ana, Javier, Luis, Diego, and Turko the dog. During our first lunch together, the kitchen was filled with love, laughter and *lots* of food. With every bite, I relished my first touch and taste of authentic Spanish culture. At once I could tell this journey abroad would be filled with many new beginnings that would translate into new experiences and memories of a lifetime.

From the outside of the Alcázar walls, I was living in a historical monument, but from the inside, I was learning and living the rich Spanish culture. As the semester progressed, my host family and I shared many fond memories together. Some memories were under of the lush orange tree that grew in the garden just outside my bedroom, while others include joking about who would pick up the daily bakery bread that was delivered to our front door. And how could I forget seeing my laundry being hung dry in

front of the neighbors... and the city. Granted there was the occasional lizard on the wall and cockroach on the floor, but the company was hospitable, the food was divine and the experience was one of a lifetime. Overall, after living with my host family in the Alcázar, learning the language was only half the fun.