

PRESHCO

Programa de Estudios Hispánicos en Córdoba

HOUSING OPTIONS

Before outlining the characteristics of the two primary options offered by the program (1. Private Residence; 2. Student Residence/Dormitory), it would be good to review some general points on residential life. After reading this description, please rank your housing preferences on the Housing Application Form and answer the questions.

You will most likely find living in Spain exciting and culturally enriching. Your Spanish will certainly improve—if you speak Spanish and resist the temptation to hang out with other Americans. Due to urban characteristics and the congenial openness of many Spaniards, there is much more community life expressed in streets, parks, and plazas than in the US.

Due to the extremely high cost of urban real estate, most Spaniards live in coop/apartment “pisos” which—depending on the city—may be of four to eight floors in height. In the historic quarters of some cities there are independent historic homes, but these are out of the price range of most. Recently, Spain—as most everywhere—has experienced urban sprawl, some of which has included the building of free-standing houses far removed from the center of the city. Due to these various realities, middle-class homes and apartments tend to be smaller than in the US. Individual rooms are usually smaller and one small closet (either “built in” or a free-standing “armario”) per person is the norm. As opposed to the ubiquity of the “king-sized” bed, the largest bed that can normally be purchased without special order measures 150 centimeters in width (58.5 inches). Most individuals sleep on what we would call a “twin” bed measuring between 90 centimeters (35.1 inches) and (rarely) 105 centimeters (40.95 inches) in width. The standard “cama matrimonial” (“matrimonial bed,” more or less our double-bed) measures 135 centimeters (52.65 inches). Bunk-beds (“literas”) are common in Spain.

Electricity and gas are also much more expensive in Europe than in the US. Gasoline for an automobile runs about \$4.00 US per gallon. Due to the high cost of electricity, Spaniards can be quite frugal in terms of bulb wattage and the like. Hall lights in dorms and public buildings are frequently on timers. Until very recently, central heat and cooling was virtually unknown. Most everyone depended on electric fans for cooling and small space-heaters for warmth. Modern buildings are more apt to have some sort of central heat (although central cooling is still not necessarily the norm). In the case of most regions of Spain, temperatures are mild (certainly as compared to the extremes of heat and cold of such US cities as Boston and Chicago)—another factor that led to the non-essential nature of central heat and cooling. Andalucía in general is considered rather warm—especially Córdoba and Sevilla. Therefore, traditionally architecture and building supplies (marble, tile, etc.) were selected for their ability to retain cool temperatures. Consequently, interiors in historic homes are relatively cool—even in the hottest of weather. While this feature is great in the summer, it does make for situations in the winter in which it is cooler inside than outside a home. The mildness of weather—including the frequency of beautiful blue sunny days even in winter—makes life in Córdoba much more outdoor oriented than is the case in most US cities.

Spanish meal times and servings differ considerably from those common in the US. Breakfast, usually at about 8:00 for those going out to work or college study, consists of coffee, tea, milk or a chocolate-flavored drink; some rolls, bread or toast; and sometimes juice (although the latter is not common). Most people take a break at about 11:00 for a cup or coffee and a very small snack. Lunch—the important and substantive meal of the day—is served anytime between 14:00 and 15:30 and generally families take this meal together. Some people take a “merienda” at about 17:00 that again consists of a small snack. Dinner is usually light (unless it is part of a formal social event) and is usually taken at about 21:00.

Most students relish Spanish cuisine and delight in “paella,” “gazpacho,” “jamón serrano,” “tortilla española,” olives, hearty “cocidos” and crusty bread—not to mention Spain's many famous “tapas.” At the same time, one of the most complex of housing issues for some students will be that of food. The Spanish diet caters to meat and fish-eaters. Vegetarianism is rare in the extreme in Spain. Vegetarians should identify themselves in hopes that we can locate a host who will be willing to prepare vegetarian meals. A student residence/dormitory is not generally the best choice for vegetarians—at least in terms of diet.

Despite traditional grumbling about your current dining hall food, you probably enjoy a degree of variety and flexibility in food items and eating times that is practically unknown in Europe. Most of your dining halls have extended meal hours and have special counters for various communities which observe specific dietary traditions. In Spain—and, again, most

of Europe, in both family and institutional settings—there is usually a “plato del día” or main dish that it is assumed everyone will eat. Some larger institutions may have a couple of options in terms of a main dish, but probably not more. A family will also serve a specific meal and will generally assume everyone will eat the same items. Eating is viewed as a pleasant, communal activity and those who eat alone are viewed as particularly unfortunate. Spaniards consume much less “junk food” than Americans and you will very rarely see anyone eating while walking about a city. If you are a particularly finicky eater or must have things exactly as you have them in the US, you might want to think about whether or not you will be able to adjust to life abroad.

Most of the issues US students have with Spanish cuisine deal with the ubiquity of pork, the reliance on what is viewed as an “excessive” use of oil (especially olive oil) in cooking (“fritos” are very common), and a paucity of lettuce-based salads. At the same time, it should be said that we all know that diet is one of the key factors in good health. It may, therefore, be of interest that Spaniards have one of the longest life-expectancies in the world. According to the World Health Organization, who issues periodically the Disability Adjusted Life Expectancy (DALE)—that is to say, expected years of healthy life, Spain ranks 5th in the world at 72.8 years. The US ranks 24th with 70 years.

We can’t emphasize enough the need for you to share with us any issues you may have related to food—not only allergies, but also any eating disorders or concerns. Living in a new environment can be exciting and invigorating; however, as in the case of any change in habit or environment, it can bring with it the possibility of added stress. Students with previous or current eating issues should think carefully about whether or not they will be able to handle these concerns, and, if so, what steps they and the program should take to minimize the possibility of any recurrences of eating disorders. In order to be of help, however, we need to be made aware of your concerns.

One of the most important benefits of studying and living in Spain is the opportunity to “vivir en español.” Our goal of your immersion in the Spanish language is the single most important reason we make every effort to provide housing in which English-speakers make up the minority of those sharing the home or building. Unfortunately, what we find time and again is that students themselves undermine these efforts on our part by speaking English with other US students. Other than keeping you from perfecting your Spanish, speaking English will result in very negative consequences in your success (or lack thereof) in making Spanish friends. When your Spanish peers see you speaking English, they will think—at best—that you are more comfortable with your own compatriots than in getting to know them on their terms; or—at worst—that you are talking about them. Think a bit about what you would do in your own college dining hall if you walked past a table of Russian students speaking Russian (and you did not speak Russian). Would you be apt to introduce yourself in English and ask to sit with them and make them switch languages? Wouldn't you feel a bit uncomfortable interrupting their Russian conversation? Many students arrive in their residences and think they can speak English at first and then later in the semester switch to Spanish as they become more habituated. This rarely works in terms of making Spanish friends. First impressions are important in any context, but in terms of inter-cultural living first impressions carry even greater weight. It’s up to you—from the very outset—to make it clear you want to take part in your host’s language and culture.

Unfortunately, smoking is quite common in Spain. There are, however, many campaigns in place to dissuade smoking—including increasingly heavy taxation on tobacco products and a reduction in the number of places smoking is permitted in public and communal buildings. Smoking norms in terms of individual housing options are described below. Non-smokers who prefer others not smoke in their company need to take the initiative in making this fact known. No smoking is allowed in any PRESHCO classroom or office.

There are, of course, many other aspects of Spanish life you should research before arriving in Spain. The information mentioned here is intended to highlight some of the facets of Spanish residential life that have proven problematic to some students in the past. For more complete information on other topics, consult the PRESHCO Student Handbook which can be found under “For Students,” on the PRESHCO Home Page (<http://sophia.smith.edu/blog/preshco/>).

1. PRIVATE RESIDENCE

In this option, students live and take all meals in a private residence shared with a Spanish host or family. The “family” may number one to ten (we are usually able to place students in homes in which there are several Spanish-speaking residents). Some are headed by traditional parents in their fifties to sixties, others by single women in their twenties to sixties, some by young couples (who may or may not be married, who may be of two sexes or each of the same sex), and still others by two brothers who are pursuing graduate degrees and wish to share their home. If you have a particular “ideal” of what family or private residence should be or would have a problem with a non-traditional family or residential

setting, you should describe those thoughts as part of your housing application. Most of the hosts we use have worked with the program for years and maintain a high level of food quality, openness to conversation, and an understanding of your needs and preferences as a US student in Spain. Students living in a private residence normally have a single room and most hosts require (for financial reasons) that two program students be placed in the home.

Living with a family or Spanish host can be a wonderful way to experience home life in Spain. Immediately upon arrival, you will have a core Spanish connection. At the same time, it carries many of the obligations you may—or may not—have at your own home: expected presence at meals (otherwise you need to call ahead), need to respect fully quiet times, expectation that you will not invite friends to eat without permission, discretion in commentaries on food and family life, cleanliness in the use of all facilities (especially bathrooms), etc. Some students have commented that living in a private residence requires more of an effort to interact with the general Spanish student population than the student dormitory option, but that the home atmosphere may compensate for that possible concern.

The private residences range from apartment/condo format to free-standing housing. In the downtown area closest to the Facultad apartments predominate. These are normally modern/functional in structure and decor and most have central heating (not at all the norm in Córdoba). Some of the hosts live in charming—and sometimes even elegant—historic homes (some of which are removed from the Facultad and may require the occasional use of public transportation, and most of which do not have central heat). Some hosts don't smoke; some do. Some permit smoking in common rooms; others do not. Members of the home regularly sit down to meals together—especially lunch (served at about 3 p.m. and considered the main meal of the day). Normally everyone eats the same dishes. Students with special dietary needs or restrictions should make these known in the application form so to avoid misunderstandings and unpleasant situations later on. Hosts provide basic laundry service and furnish the necessary towels and bed linens. Most do not impose a “curfew”—although it would be in their prerogative to do so. They do expect, however, that you will arrive and leave quietly. Normally, overnight guests are extremely frowned upon—if not completely prohibited.

The Spanish hosts we work with are delightful people who take pleasure in their contribution to the program. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that they provide this service to you in exchange for a fee and that this component does shape somewhat the nature of the relationship.

2. STUDENT RESIDENCE/DORMITORY (“RESIDENCIA”)

A privately-run student dormitory (“residencia”)—numbering between ten and fifty residents—is probably the option that most facilities your interaction with a large number of Spanish students your own age. Within this format, you live with Spanish students (normally in a double room and, whenever possible, with a Spanish peer) and take your meals in a common facility. Many PRESHCO students have made lasting friendships with other young people in the residences and it is not uncommon for our students to be invited to the homes of their “compí” (“compañero/a de habitación”) for weekends and special events.

Depending on the facility, students use shared bathroom facilities (although some options offer private baths). Some of the facilities are for women only; others are co-ed. Students requiring a single-sex facility should identify themselves. Some will do your laundry for you (but in accordance to their schedule, which may or may not work well for you); others have facilities for you to do your own when needed. Some facilities expect you to normally be in by midnight Sunday through Wednesday nights (but anytime Thursday through Saturday); others do not. Residences have shared facilities for watching television and the like. Some—very few—have computer access. Smoking is normally not permitted in common areas. Smokers must either go outside or smoke in their rooms (if their roommates do not object). Any overnight guests need to be cleared by the residence manager. If there is space available, guests will normally be permitted a short stay, but usually will be charged a daily fee.

All meals are offered at the residence. There is usually a single “plato del día” at each meal and these are normally posted in advance. Although there are established meal times, students who may be eating elsewhere (with a friend, restaurant, etc.) need not call in advance to excuse their absence. Rooms have door locks with keys held by the resident—not usually the case in private residences.