PRIVATE RESIDENCE OR FAMILY

Students live and take all meals in a private home with a Spanish host or family. PRESHCO has researched, cultivated and maintained relationships with families over a long period of time and they are carefully selected before being part of the program. The “family” may vary in number but there are always several Spanish-speakers. Some are headed by traditional parents in their forties 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.

IMPORTANT REMARKS

You will most likely find living in Spain exciting and culturally enriching. Your Spanish will certainly improve if you concentrate on speaking Spanish and resist the temptation to spend your time with Americans. You will find that there is much more community life expressed in streets, parks, and eating establishments than in the US.

Living in a “piso”: Most Spaniards live in co-op apartments or “pisos” which are several stories in height. In the historic quarters of some cities there are independent historic homes, but these are out of the price range of most. In Spain and in the rest of Europe, 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. Most individuals sleep on what we would call a “twin” bed, which is most likely what you will be offered in your familia. Bunk-beds (“literas”) are common in Spain.

Use of Resources: Electricity and gas are also much more expensive in Europe than in the US. Spaniards, therefore, are very careful in terms of bulb wattage, hot water usage, and turning on air conditioning. Hall lights in 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. More modern buildings are more apt to have some sort of central heat. In most regions of Spain, temperatures are mild compared to the extremes of heat and cold in the US cities.

Andalucía in general, and Córdoba in particular, is considered rather warm. Therefore, architecture and building supplies were selected for their ability to retain cool temperatures. Consequently, interiors in historic homes are relatively cool even in the hottest of weather, but of course that is also true in winter! However, the mild weather—including the frequency of beautiful blue sunny days even in winter—makes life in Córdoba much more oriented towards the outdoors.

Meals in Spain: 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 school, 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 of 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 18:00 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. Although vegetarianism is rare in Spain, we have identified host families who are willing to accommodate a variety of diets: vegan, celiac, diabetic, halal, kosher, lactose intolerant, etc. In Spain, a family serves 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. It is much less common to 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 in cooking, 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.

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.

Using Spanish: 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 are in the minority. Unfortunately, what often find that students undermine themselves 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. Nonsmokers 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 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/).