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Fancy a free holiday victimising the Spanish?!

by Richard Morley



"I suppose the three taboo subjects of Religion, Politics and Sex are off the menu". The organisers and experienced Anglos wondered what she would talk about after the second day!

The film star, the politician and the chief of police arrived courtesy of their respective chauffeurs. The rest of the twenty odd Spanish came with us, in a four hour coach trip to the mountains near the Portuguese border. But whatever their position in real life, for one week they would all be equal. They would be our victims.

Why are we "victimising" the Spanish and who are "we"? Let me explain...



The Spanish half of our group have all been learning English and have passed an audition to gauge their level. They can all ask "How do you do?", "What is on the menu for tonight?", "Where is the

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Chemist?" and hold up their end conversationally in reasonably good English, but no one has taught them that the answers could be, "Gradely", "Bubble and Squeak" or "Next to Woollies". That's our job.

"We" are a raggle-taggle bunch of volunteers chosen from every corner of the English speaking world. The answers to those questions could be delivered in accents ranging from broad Scottish to South Island Kiwi, deep southern states American to prim and proper home counties. It's very different from what they learned in the classroom.

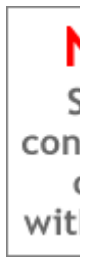
We are instructed that we are not there to teach, but to give them a taste of the "real" English speaking world. Slight grammatical and syntactical errors will be corrected, but if they don't know the word, or the sentence is ambiguous or nonsensical, they have to rephrase or try another approach. Communication is the name of the game and a businessman at a conference or tying up the latest Spanish purchase of a foreign company cannot expect to have everything explained.

So, from nine o'clock in the morning to at least ten thirty at night, for eight days in a row, us "Anglos" flit from Spaniard to Spaniard talking normal, everyday English, whatever our English might be. To even think of speaking Spanish is a hanging offence. This is why the venue, the week and the company that organises it is called "Pueblo Inglés". And why they are held in some of the remotest parts of Spain. One venue does not even have a mobile phone signal. A fact that greatly upset the five engineers from Vodafone. "Do something about it then", we suggested, while also reminding them that "vodafone" began with a "V" and not a "B".

What do we talk about? A prim and proper Canadian librarian once stated, "I suppose the three taboo subjects of Religion, Politics and Sex are off the menu". The organisers and experienced Anglos wondered what she would talk about after the second day! No subject is banned if the two having the conversation are happy with it. Likewise, neither are any words. Spanish executives at an international conference could expect to hear English in its crudest four letter terms and be expected to understand. And it amazing just how early on in the week those words become quite regular currency.

However, we are not expected to rough it. The organisers arrange for us to be comfortably housed and well fed and watered. The food is good, there is wine with every meal except breakfast and the bar is well stocked. However, we are expected to stay reasonably sober as the days are long and the students have paid the price of a good vacation to come and practice their English. We are expected to give value for money.

However, much has been written about the value of a little alcohol in the speaking of foreign tongues. Something about breaking down the inhibitions and ridding the mind of that mental barrier of translating in the head. So it is not surprising that the conversations really start to flow when the booze does likewise. I remember being with a group of five Spanish executives who, realising it was half past three in the



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morning, were really proud that they had been speaking English non-stop for five hours. But none of us were strictly sober!

By the end of the second day most of the Spanish are complaining that their brains can take no more. However, on the morning of the fourth day they are excitedly telling us of the dream they had in English. All Anglos begin their week speaking in slow, measured phrases. By the end of the week our victims are telling us to get on with it. Proof, if any were needed, that the system works.

I have just completed my seventh week as a Pueblo Inglés volunteer. I can't wait for my eighth. But why would people with challenging jobs give up valuable vacation time to come to Spain at their own expense to talk to Spaniards? Well, even the organising company are hard pressed to answer that one. They remain amazed that in the past five years over three thousand of us have done so and that their books are crammed with yet more eager Anglos. About the only thing the Anglos have in common is an ability to use the internet, as that is the only way to register. We have retired bankers, young backpackers, teachers, truck drivers, nurses and bakers. In fact, a complete cross section of ordinary people. Some are academic, others practical. Some just like a good natter.

A side effect of being a volunteer is that you become such an expert on all things Spanish. From how to make the best tortilla patatas to the Spanish attitude to sustainable energy. If you want to start an argument, ask each student which region produces the best wine. If you want to get serious, ask about ETA. The politician gave me chapter and verse and the police chief told me how they were dealing with the problem. One day, the actor might play either of them in a film. But he will do so in much improved English.

Richard Morley is a regular visitor to Spain, traveling to different parts of the country to victimise Spaniards with Pueblo Inglés. For more info on the program [listen to our podcast with Richard](#), and visit [the Pueblo Inglés website](#). Talk to Richard about his experiences [in the NFS Forum](#)...

February 1st, 2007 | In: [Spain Travel](#) | [Comments: 5](#)

Comments:

Comment from [Franko](#)

Time: February 1, 2007, 9:19 pm

A nice article... interesting to me as I always think about what it takes for an English person to learn Spanish!

Comment from [Pedrito J](#)

Time: February 2, 2007, 12:14 am

I would love to have some time to go there, seems fantastic!

Comment from [Marina](#)

Time: February 2, 2007, 10:52 am

Before recording the podcast I didn't completely get why people would pay a ticket from Canada or other far places just to come to victimise the

Spanish in the pueblo. However after talking to Richard and reading the article I understand that for people interested in Spain, their people and culture the experience must be very authentic. As you get to know people from all walks of life.

Richard have a great time in your next Pueblo Inglés!!!

Comment from [richardksa](#)

Time: February 3, 2007, 12:20 pm

Franco, The insights you learn from these very clever people about learning a language are very useful for when you learn one yourself.

Incidentally, the guy on the left in the small picture is me is full victimising mode

Comment from [El Jardinero Zurdo](#)

Time: February 3, 2007, 11:00 pm

I enjoyed hearing about this program. It sounds really interesting and tempting, but unfortunately (I discovered) they don't want people who can speak Spanish (perhaps you get to keep going, Richard, because you're a "regular" and got into the program early?). This, from the Pueblo Inglés site ([here](#)):

If you're fluent or anywhere [near] fluency I'm afraid it's a no. Sorry, but we promise the Spaniards Anglos that don't speak Spanish - it's vital to the program.

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