



Sleep a little,talk a lot

You stay for free in this Spanish program, but it's not all songs and games. It's also a week-long gabfest

Elizabeth Payne, The Ottawa Citizen

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Rolling through the Spanish countryside inside a brightly coloured bus, I began to wonder about the adventure I was embarking on.

I had signed up, along with seven other Ottawa women -- most of them members of a longstanding book club -- to spend the next eight days speaking English to Spaniards wanting to improve theirs as part of a popular program called Pueblo Ingles. We anglos would stay, free of charge, at a well-appointed rural Spanish resort and be plied with food and wine in exchange for conversation. A lot of conversation.

It sounded too good to be true the first time I heard about it. But the more I learned about Pueblo Ingles as the trip approached, the more apprehensive I became. The schedule seemed rigorous. Aside from a siesta (which, it turned out, we would need), there was virtually no time off from sun up to sundown -- and long after -- each day. I usually have no problem keeping up my side of a conversation, but even I didn't know if I could take the pace at Pueblo Ingles.

The program was designed to give Spaniards wanting to improve their English a chance to do so -- intensely -- close to home. During the week, participants log more than 100 hours of conversational English at breakfasts, lunches, dinners, one-on-one conversations, conference calls, role playing, presentations and skits. Plus, they get used to listening to English spoken with a variety of accents. Officials with Pueblo Ingles say the intense week is "worth several months of traditional English classes."

One writer called it "the world's biggest talkathon." But to me, Pueblo Ingles resembled a cross between summer camp and reality TV, with a touch of speed dating thrown in. The bus trip even had the feel of a journey to camp, with better luggage and more exotic scenery. Thankfully, there were no songs. Those would come later.

Our travelling companions were other anglos from Canada, the United States, Australia and Britain, including a former NFL player and his wife, a psychologist from Atlanta; a balloon artist from London whose clients included David and Victoria Beckham; a video journalist living in Brussels; and a Colorado woman who had just spent a year travelling around the world volunteering everywhere from animal sanctuaries to orphanages. Our Canadian book club contingent included two architects, a handful of journalists, a lawyer, an accountant and a former teacher.

Some of us brought pictures from home (I carried a photo of skaters on the Rideau Canal) as conversation starters and we were all armed with copies of Roch Carrier's The Hockey Sweater.

We were joined on the bus by a few brave Spaniards who had opted to ride with us rather than drive four hours from Madrid to the picturesque village of La Alberca in mountainous western Spain. As the driver loaded our luggage on the bus, we were instructed to find a Spaniard and begin talking. We introduced ourselves nervously and began the first tentative steps of what would be dozens of hours of talk, laughter and bonding before we said goodbye a week later.

Many of the Spaniards were from multinational companies, although they also included a young doctor, a pharmacist working on developing AIDS drugs, a self-described computer geek, and the head of security for a Spanish petroleum company whose job sent him around the world and included negotiating to free kidnapped employees. Twenty-four Spaniards were signed up.

With all the Canadians involved, I couldn't help but wonder what the results would be. I pictured Spanish business meetings peppered with "eh"s, "um"s and "sorry's" -- Canadian, eh. And then there were the small crew of terrorism intelligence officers with the Guardia Civil (Spanish civil guard) who joined us at the hotel. I couldn't imagine how Canuck-speak might find its way into their jobs.

But it turned out that the Canadianisms didn't have a chance. By the end of the week, most of the anglos were speaking a tortured form of Spanglish complete with elaborate hand gestures and were absolutely sold on the Spanish way of doing things -- late lunches and dinners, lots of red wine, afternoon siestas and late nights.

Some of the Spaniards spoke excellent English, although they tended to brush off any compliment with a modest "not really." Others, including one senior member of the Guardia Civil, began the week as reluctant English speakers but relaxed as the week went along. One Spaniard's stock reply to any English statement was: "Of course." When one of the anglos asked him: "When you say 'of course' do you mean 'yes' or do you mean you have no idea what I just said?" He replied: "Of course."

Pueblo Ingles was launched at a resort near the restored village of Valdelavilla in central Spain in 2000 and has since expanded to two other Spanish locations, including La Alberca, a perfectly preserved 15th-century village that has been declared a national historic monument. The programs run weekly through much of the year.

Anglos are screened to make sure they have what it takes. The majority come from the U.S., with the U.K and Canada accounting for the next largest groups. Pueblo Ingles looks for participants who are "open, adventurous and enthusiastic with endearing personalities."

Officials with the program caution journalists not to characterize Pueblo Ingles as a free vacation for anglos -- "it often creates misconceptions about the program (there is not a lot of free time) and may attract the wrong type of people."

It's true that everyone in the program works hard. The day begins with a wakeup call at 8:15 a.m. and ends some time after midnight for most participants (long after midnight for many of the Spaniards who seem to have a superhuman ability to function with just a few hours of sleep). In between, Spaniards and anglos engage in 15 or more hours of conversation. By the end of the week you have learned most of the details of their work

and family lives -- who has children, who is married, how they celebrate Christmas, where they travel on vacation, how they manage to work Spanish hours (long lunches and late work days) and raise families, even the details of the births of their children. (When Paloma, one of the Spanish participants, pretending she was an anglo during a telephone session, was asked whether she would return to the program she replied drily: "Je-ez, of course, I haven't learned the grandparents' names yet.")

But many anglos take part in the program more than once. During our week, there were several who had been to Pueblo Ingles before, one who had been six times. It may not exactly be a free vacation, but it certainly is a rewarding one.

"On the last day some of you will cry," program director Jeremy "Jez" Beckett, told the anglos when we gathered to meet and eat paella in Madrid before heading on the program. "You don't just learn about other people, you learn about yourself." Many were skeptical. "Right, I've been to retreats before," was what Texan Trudi Spring Allison thought when she heard that. But on the last day she was among participants wiping away tears as she said goodbye.

And what do you learn? Plenty about Spain, how Spaniards live, their history, culture and customs and how they view the rest of the world. ("You are so lucky you speak English," more than one said to me.)

But also about yourself. We Canadians were often flattered by Spaniards who told us how warm and friendly they thought we were and how much they would love to visit our beautiful country. But it was hard not to feel extremely unglamorous next to people who could not only dance and sing beautifully but managed to be more polite and wittier in an unfamiliar language than most Canadians are in their own. And then there was lovely Lourdes the Spanish firefighter who was a jawdroppingly beautiful dancer.

In contrast, we "book club women" as we came to be known were invited to surprise the Spaniards with a rendition of Stompin' Tom Connors' The Good Old Hockey Game. We were joined by Christine, the "master of ceremonies" during our week who is from British Columbia, and Roy, another Canadian participant. Let's just say there is not going to be a rush on Stompin' Tom CDs in Spain based on that performance.

"And they say Spaniards are weird," one Spaniard whispered as the others applauded politely.

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IF YOU GO...

More information: See www.puebloingles.com

When: 2007 programs begin in January and run throughout the year with multiple programs each week during the summer.

Special programs: Pueblo Ingles runs programs geared to doctors and teens.

Cost: There is no charge for anglos during the week on the program. They only costs include the flight to Madrid and a hotel during and after in Madrid. We spent about \$1,000 each, which included return flights from Ottawa and three nights (one before and two after the program) in modest but comfortable accommodations in central Madrid.