Jonathan at Puebloespañol Immersive Spanish Course



June 14-21, 2024

Introduction

About a year ago, Marna shared with me that one of her friends had attended, and loved, an immersion course in Spain that specialized in teaching spoken Spanish.

No tenses.

No conjugation.

Simply speaking.

The goal of the school was to familiarize people with conversing in Spanish and gain confidence through practice with native speakers from Spain.

I loved the idea. Marna encouraged me to attend. “You loved Spain when you there in Sanlúcar and when we visited. You should sign up. It’s my gift to you.”

Díos mía!

I signed up, and now, June 2024, the time for my one-week class had arrived. I was excited. Also, I wondered how my Spanish would perform.

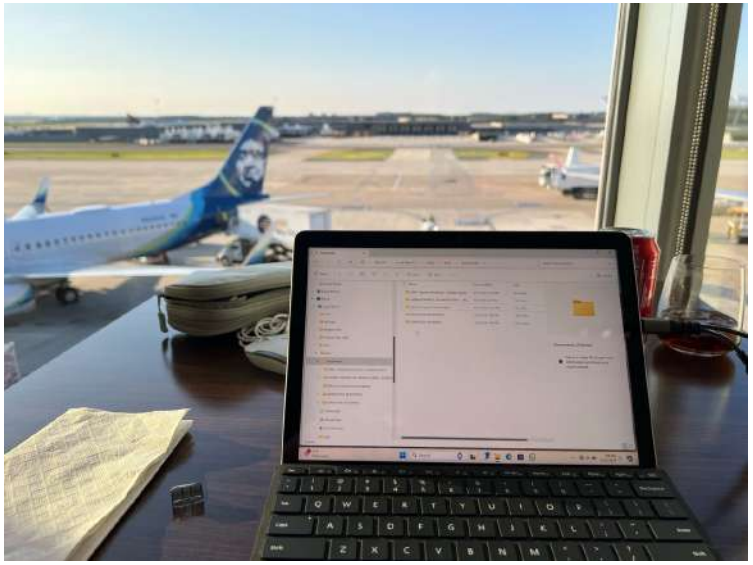


Getting There

My Iberia Airlines Business class was its usual restful self, and the staff were professional and patient with my Spanish. I slept for five hours, awakening well before landing, and feeling in the darkened airplane to be an attendee at a pajama party. Breakfast was tortilla, fruit, roll, and good coffee.

I strolled through baggage claim with a smirk, delighted to be hauling only a carry-on and my mini back pack. The taxi ride to my hotel showed me that the clutter, confusion, and dust from previous visits was replaced by well-maintained neighborhoods and modern infrastructure.

Good for Spain.



My view at Dulles International Premier Lounge



Iberian Air Airbus 330

My Hotel

I stayed at Hotel Jardin Metropolitan in the Cuatro Caminos section of Madrid, a 15-minute taxi ride north and a little west of city center.







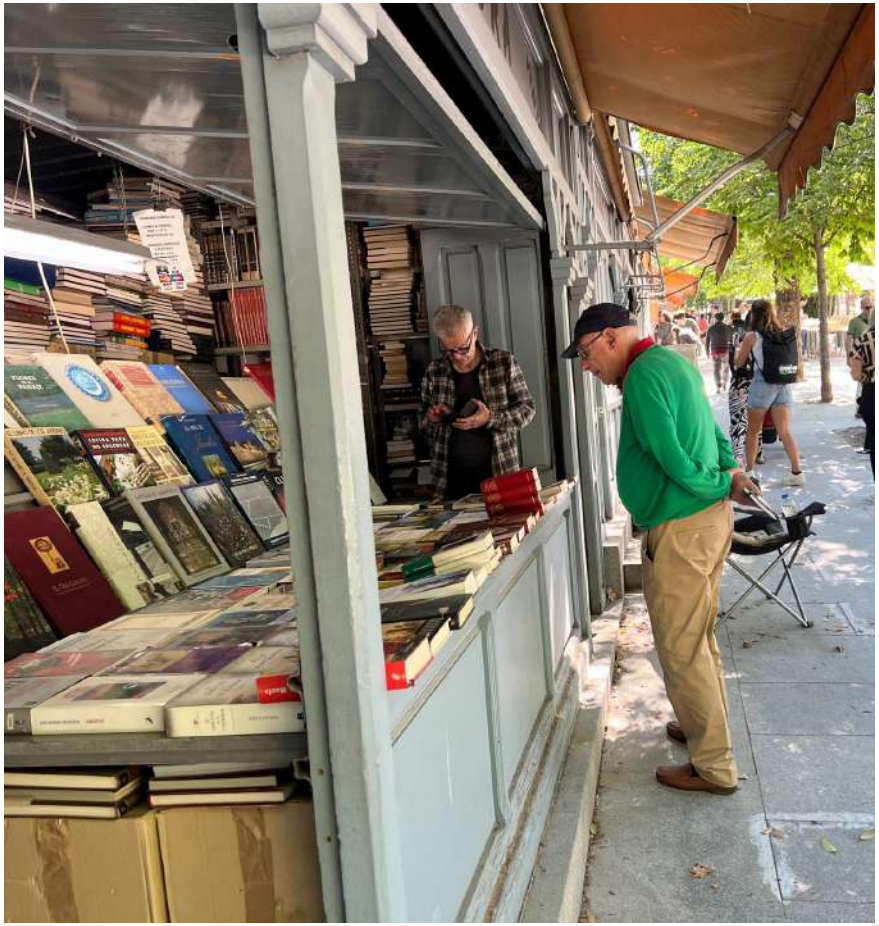
First Looks

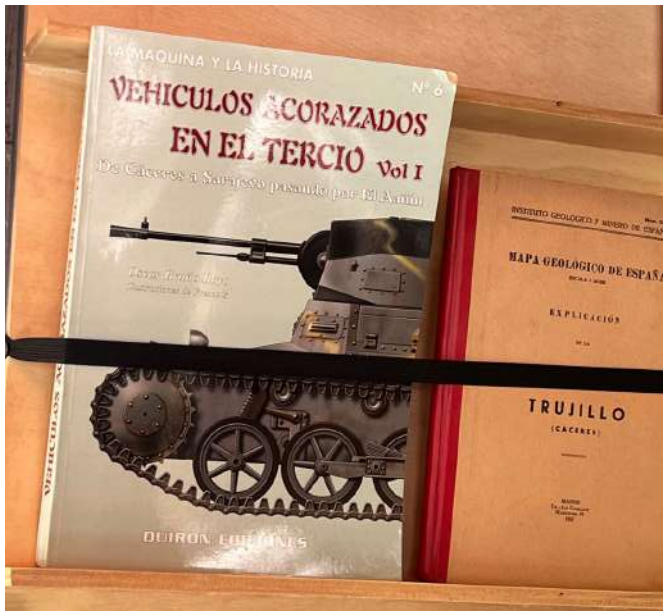
My top sights in Madrid did not include El Museo de Prado, because I'd been there before and had my fill of all the beautiful paintings.

What to see? There were no tank museums, but there was a Naval Museum and a Royal Tree Park and the giant Retiro Park behind the Prado. I decided on Retiro, and enjoyed the wide and shady walks, the company of other visitors, and a fine meal of calamari sandwich and beer at a café beside the magnificent pond.



Outside the park, I strolled down a street of booksellers.





A book about tanks

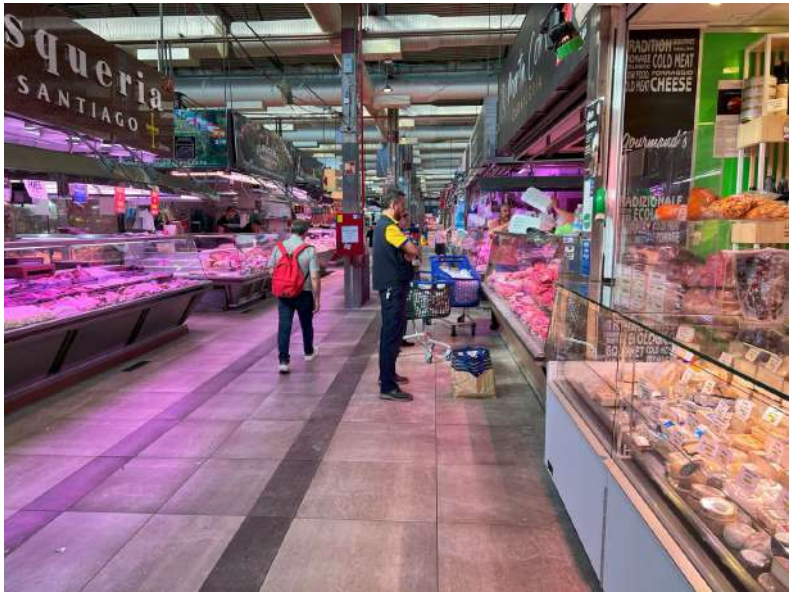
June 13th, my first full day in Spain, started off well with a delicious breakfast a short walk from my hotel, at café Granier. After checking out the pastries, I answered the rocket-powered, curt questions from the woman tending customers: *Hola, que quire? Café? Con leche? Azucar? Para aqui? Oh, y churro? Tarta de mazana? Ha, dos? Y gran café? Ha, sí, Americano, mucho café* (Of course, you are American and love lots of coffee). I accepted my large coffee with sugar, yummy apple tart, and crusty churro, and joined a half-dozen others, at their tables, munching.







Departing café Granier, I absorbed blue sky, morning breeze, and the energy of commuters striding to their Metro station. The feeling was that of a neighborhood, underlined as I passed two young fathers, each holding hands with a pair of happy daughters. A market stood across the street and decided to explore. Inside was a traditional set-up, just like in Europe back in the day, and in Morocco, since time immemorial – row after row of meat, fruit, veggies, and a sprinkling of cafés serving lunch and beer to customers on bar stools.





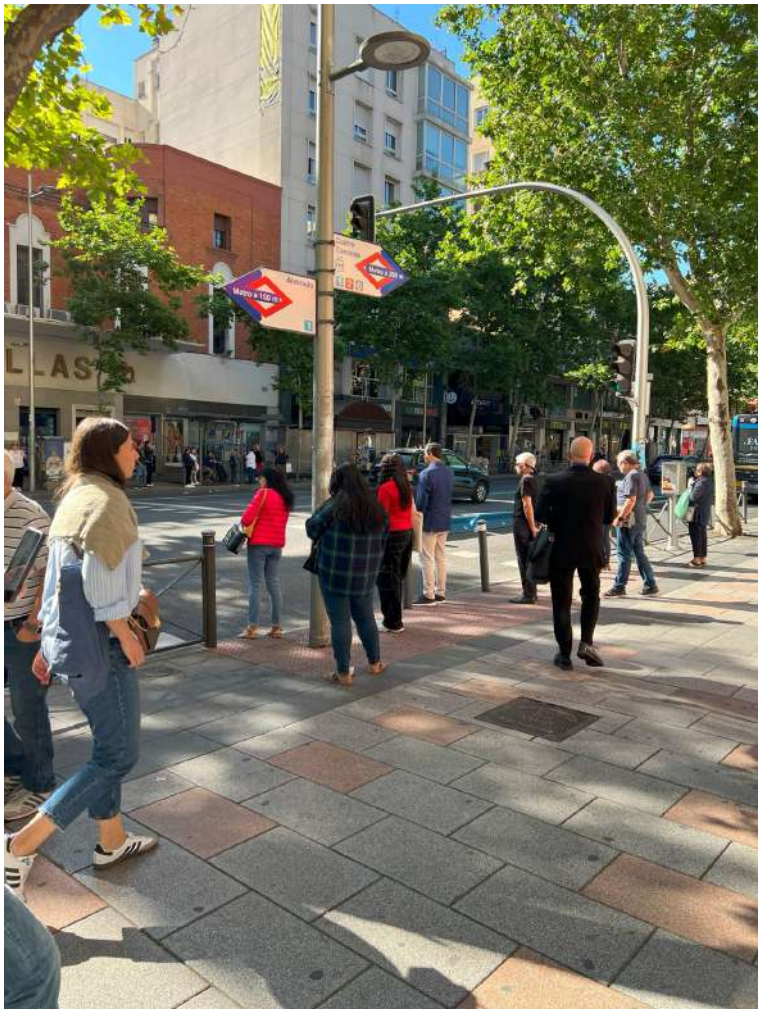


As I wandered the sprawling market, I paused to take a photo next to a cheese shop. The owner murmured a polite “hola.” It was a neighborly greeting, and we began to chat. He declared proudly that, “This is the largest market in Europe.” I must have looked disbelieving, because he smiled and added, “Of single story.” I agreed that it was huge, and also very clean. He beamed and added, “Look up. We are only one story and the roof is glass. The sun shines in, and it is bright.” He made an expansive gesture with his arms. “I love this place.”



Walking the neighborhood and city center, I was delighted to discover the city full of amiable people, always open to a little conversation. I found their accent was very clear to me, and I guess mine was for them, because they kept speaking Spanish even if they were fluent in English.

From this point on, all my conversations were to be in Spanish. The “immersion” had begun.



I rode a taxi to center city and explored the Royal Botanical Garden, a tranquil enclave overlooked by stately apartments.

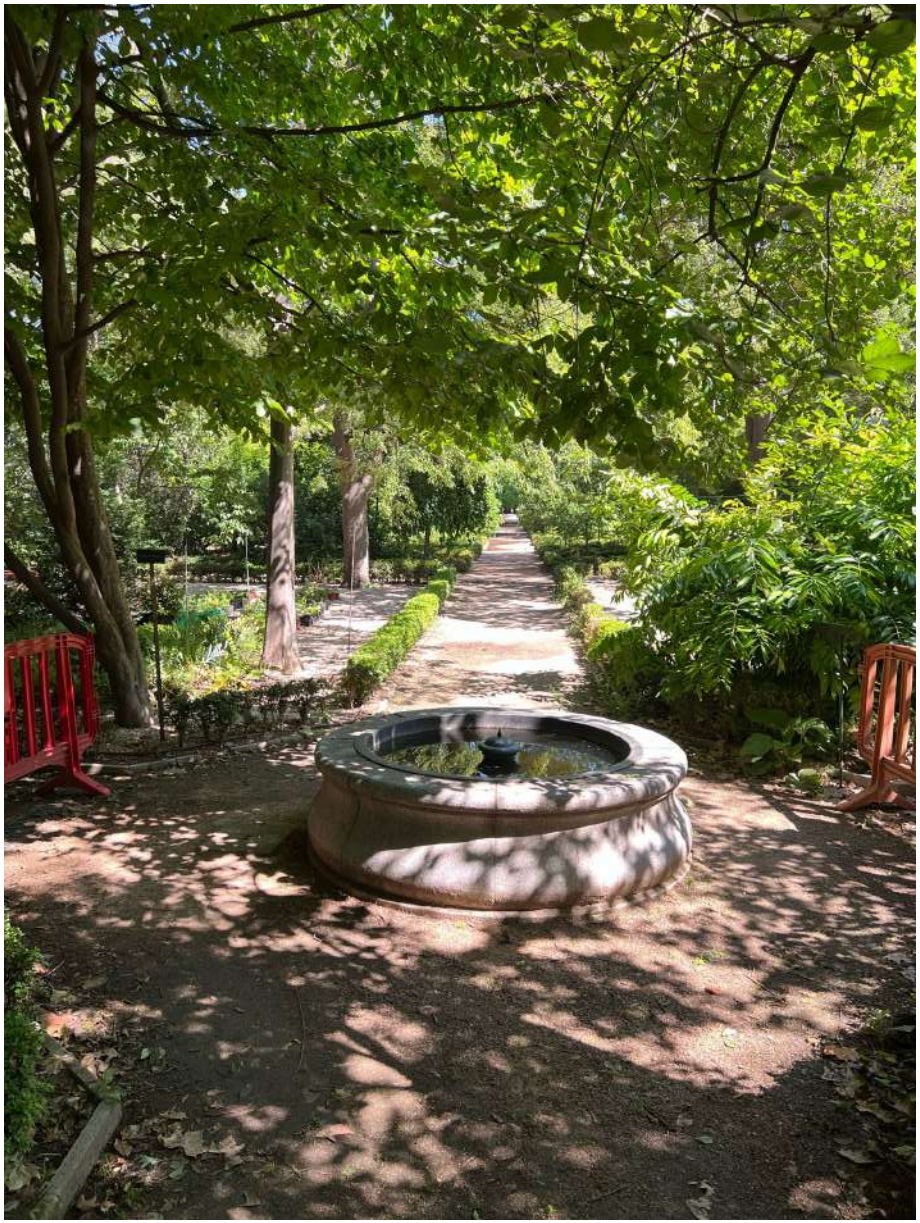












On the way back to the hotel, I stopped to resupply my M&Ms, which might not be available in the small town where the school was located, and then at a *farmacia* for hand cream, figuring the air would be dry in the mountains. A kindly sales lady showed me two displays of hand cream, and I picked out a small tube. She smiled – person to person – like the cheese vendor, and we exchanges all the customary courtesies and good-byes, reminding me of Vienna.

Feeling the need for more coffee, I guess because I was American, I stopped at a bar and ordered one to go. The lady serving me grinned when it looked like was leaving without it.

"El café," she reminded me.

I laughed, and said, "Ah yes, I was wondering why I was here."

She smiled and bid me good day.



After checking out of the hotel, I hung out with my tablet on the second floor of the local McDonalds, munching lunch and enjoying the view of Cuatro Caminos (Four Corners) plaza. At 3:00, I gathered my luggage and took a “mad Thadeous J. Toad” taxi ride to 8 Orense, arriving a half hour before our Pueblo Español class pick-up.

Two others were already there, and by 4:00 we were all gathered, met the manager, Julia, and were off in two cars to the Cason de la Pinilla rural hotel. Because it was Friday rush hour, even the excellent Spanish superhighways were clogged until we broke out into the wild and rocky foothills of the mountains.



Nestled in a valley, just outside the town of Cerezo de Arriba, lay our hotel. It looked like a marooned vessel in a sea of rolling countryside, accustomed as I had become to Madrid and its continual rush of people.





We were at altitude, making the air chilly in the morning, though the days were sunny and warm outside.

The eleven of us settled on chairs and couches arranged in the cozy living room. Our rooms, simple and well lighted, were located on either side of a hallway off the living room and the entry lobby.

The dining room lay on the other side of the living room. The food was varied and excellent. Bedtime of 11:00 came none too soon for the fatigued students, and likely for the volunteers as well.







Our Group

Our leader, invited each of us to introduce ourselves. Then he led several “getting to know you” games among students and volunteer teachers. The ice was breaking by dinner time, and vino helped the process.

He gave us three guiding principles to be observed for the duration of the course:

(1) speak only Spanish, even if alone with one other person

(2) arrive promptly for all activities, to ensure we keep our daily schedule

(3) have fun.



The Volunteers

Under our leader, five volunteers came from different parts of Spain and worked closely with the five students, trading off during the course to share their Spanish in a knowledgeable and friendly fashion.



Luisa was born and raised in Barcelona, and often spoke of the difference in customs and language between that city and the “Castellano” Spanish of northern Spain. She was into healthy living, in mind, body, and spirit.



Marcos, from Madrid, served a year and a half as a Spanish Marine. His final professional position was Manager of Purchasing for a 40,000-person Spanish defense company. He and Luisa took great joy in humorously bugging each other. He strictly admonished students who used even a single English word, and Diana dubbed him “Señor Estricto.” The nickname stuck.

Carla was detailed-oriented in our one-on-one projects but always open to suggestions – as long as they followed Cecilio's instructions.

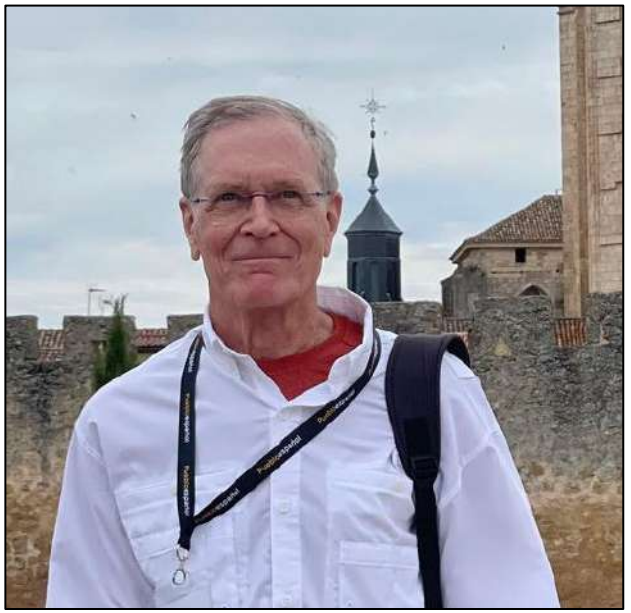
Alicia was Carla's buddy, though did most of the talking, at a breakneck speed that she joked about. On the last day, she gave me two short, simple books from the well-stocked shelves of the hotel, so I could continue on my Spanish.



Mercedes was born and raised in Malaga in the south of Spain, though did not have the "leave off all s's" Andalusian accent. She trusted me to see a draft of the prologue of her envisioned novel.

The Students

As **Juan**, I became known for making people laugh, and ended up being selected as first speaker for reporting on our “group” and “one-on-one” activities. I was also selected as the main character in a comical play that half of us put on for the other half, maybe because I appeared to be the most knowledgeable in Spanish and relaxed in front of everyone. I was teased for some of my expressions, but gently and in an endearing manner. At one point, I mentioned my writing, which resulted in conversations and advice to Luisa and Mercedes, both wanting to write books. Marcos complimented me by purchasing the e-book version of “New Girl on the Island.”



Rita came from Scotland but had no Scottish accent because she lived in England, Singapore, and now Madrid.



Diana was early in her language career, and soldiered on with modesty, grit, and a smile for everyone, even when Marcos bugged her about pronunciation. Much to everyone's amusement, she forbade Marcos from asking questions when she gave her presentation.



Laurel came from Hungary and was a marketing manager, shuttling from country to county in Europe. She had been studying Spanish for only weeks, but had an impressive vocabulary and accent.



Esther was from Australia and after our program was moving on to another course in Italy. She loved train travel and had been on many railroad trips.



Every day we participated in activities, usually one hour long, and carried out in pairs, small groups, or all of us working together. The activities exercised our speaking skills, thinking skills, and senses of humor.

My favorite one occurred in June 16, early in the program. We divided into small teams, mine including Mercedes, Carla, and Esther. Each team's goal was dream up an alternate use for a mesh-sided trash basket and present their idea to the other groups.

My group came up with the idea of the "Limpia2." This was a dual-use cleaner, in which a toddler places their grungy toys at the end of the day, and takes along to the evening bath. Basket and kid are immersed in the sudsy bath water, and both end up sparkling clean. I hammed up our presentation to a laughing audience.



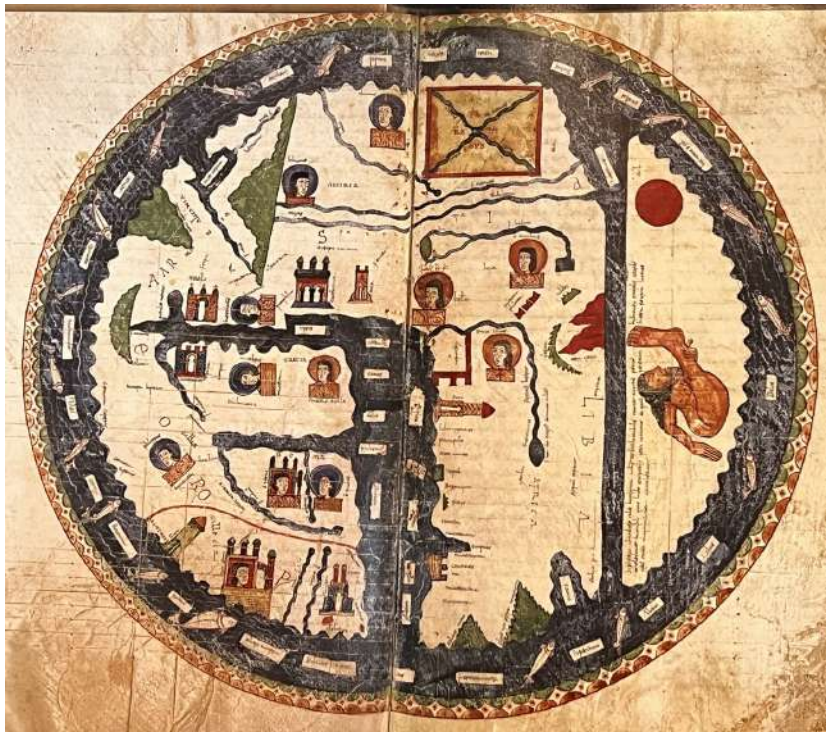
June 18 (Tuesday) we rode an hour to the city of Osma, at the northern edge of the Moorish conquest of Spain. The city was retaken by the Spanish in 1011. All was peaceful, because it was a weekday, and the place was too far off the beaten paths to be crowded with tourists. We had the main square and the cathedral to ourselves.





Inside the cathedral were a book of choir music, an ancient map of the world, and rich furnishings.







La Crema (the lotion)

After our tour of the cathedral, we rested at the main square and a comical feud between Marcos and Luisa was finally put to rest. The feud arose when Marcos discovered he had received a sunburn and a red face when lounging by the pool at the hotel. He blamed Luisa for not loaning him her suntan lotion. Luisa shrugged and said he should have asked. The feud simmered over dinners and lunches, and this day Luisa bought Marcos a big tube of the lotion and he gleefully accepted. Everyone clapped.



Cerezo de Arriba, the little town adjacent to our hotel, was nearly deserted, with only one person visible, if any, when we explored. There were about twenty cars parked at the well-kept homes. We figured everyone was inside watching the soccer world series, but the truth was more serious. This once-prosperous village had its own church, school, and town hall, but when the snow stopped falling, the local industry of skiing disappeared. Mountain biking appeared to be a possibility for resurgence. Meanwhile, we walked the deserted and perfectly clean streets and greeted any people, cats, and chickens we came across.

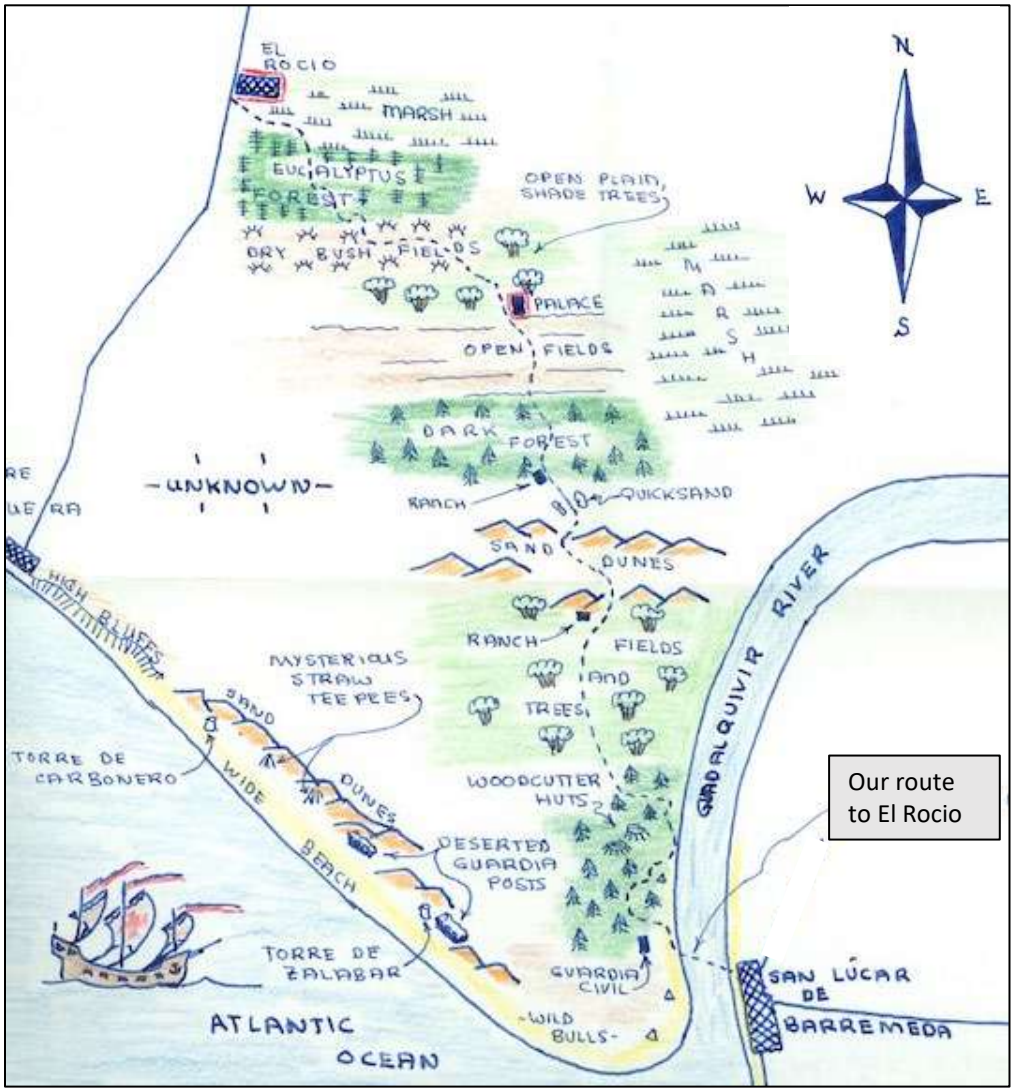


The big event on June 19 comprised student (and Marcos) presentations. This was a high point of the course, showcasing imagination, organization, and public speaking in front of the entire group. We had worked toward this event since arrival, helped along the way by the volunteers. All were well received with resounding applause. I was drafted to go first – to break the ice, I think.



In my presentation, I described my 1971 participation in the pilgrimage to El Rocio in the wilderness across the Guadalquivir River from Sanlúcar de Barrameda.



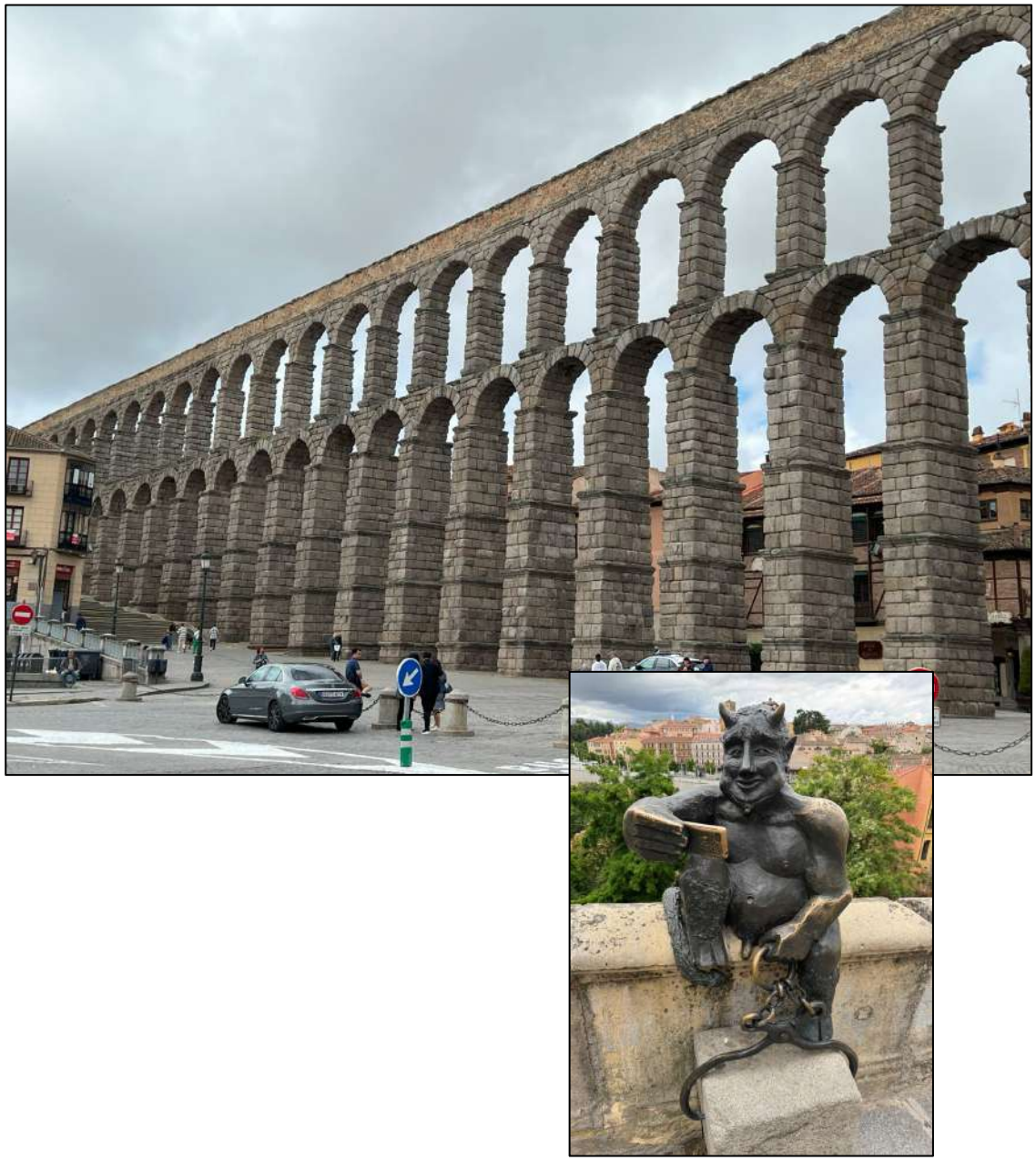


One afternoon, our program director opened the rec room in the hotel basement and we played foosball and pool. I actually made goals in my very first game of foosball, but performed less successfully at the pool table.





On June 20 (Thursday) we visited Segovia, where my favorite sight was its amazing aqueduct. Was it really built by the Romans? Well, legend has it that a young maiden made a deal with the devil: for her soul, he would build an aqueduct in a single night and she would no longer have to lug water to the city every day. Unfortunately for him, daylight arrived when he still had two stones remaining to be installed. She kept her soul and he took a selfie and stomped off. She popped the stones in place and lived happily ever after.



I found I was not the only
“Juan” in Spain.





The castle







Ferdinand and Isabella of Aragon and Castile





Lunch at Restaurant El Sitio featured plenty of courses, plenty of food, and courteous service, as at every restaurant we visited.







June 21, Friday, was our last day with Puebloespañol, and I left with jumbled feelings – joy at experiencing a wonderful course with wonderful people, sadness to say good-bye to our time together striving to improve our speaking skills, and relief at ending the intensity of the long hours.

Our program director presented us with our Certificates and we took a stroll through the town, enjoyed a delicious lunch (including my favorite – tortilla with potatoes), then boarded taxies and returned to our pick-up point in Madrid.

Adios amigos.

Hugs and cheek kisses all around.



Pueblo**español**®

CERTIFICADO DE APROVECHAMIENTO

Certifica que

Jonathan M. Ross

ha asistido y cumplido satisfactoriamente el curso de inmersión lingüística

Pueblo**español**®

con una duración de ocho días correspondientes a unas 100 horas de conversación en castellano.

Y para que conste, se expide el presente certificado en Madrid

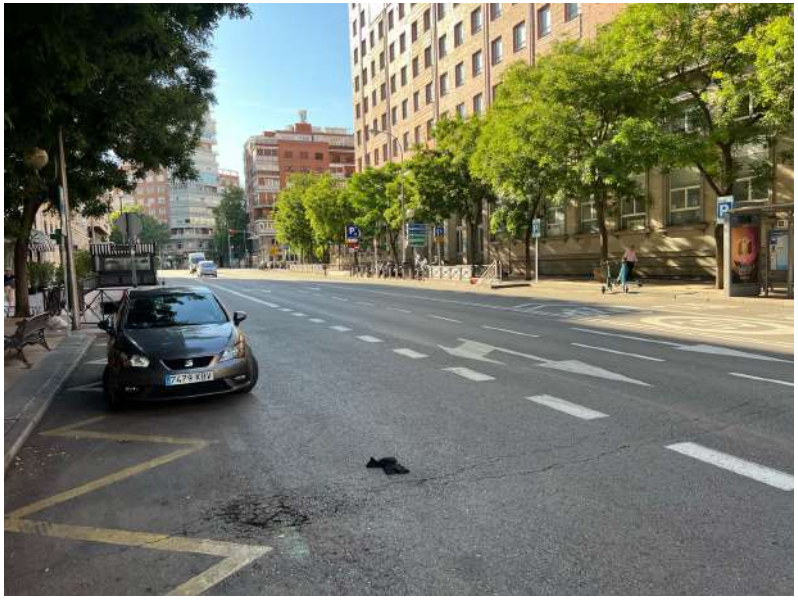
21 de Junio de 2024.

Cecilio Muñiz
Director de Programa

My Hotel in Madrid:
VP Madroño







The next day’s flight home was in coveted Business Class and featured two delightful surprises: a copa de Manzanilla, the “very pale dry white wine” from Sanlúcar, with its familiar tart flavor, accompanied by cheese, Spanish almonds, and crispy mini bread sticks for my aperitif; and a very strong Martín Códax herbal liquor after lunch.







Here is what I learned during a wonderful shared experience during total Spanish-language immersion for 100 hours during 8 days:

- Detailed information on the use of and differences between the verbs “ser” and “estar”
- The need for me to soften my “r’s”
- The need to add melody to my Spanish sentences, much like Italian but more gentle
- The realization that I had retained all my Spanish gleaned from Sanlúcar and Sener.

