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Journeyer's Journal: 2008

Forging Connections

by Colby R. Long

Living in Heidelberg, Germany for two semesters has not left me homesick as I originally expected, but rather Fernweh, the German term which means travelsick. After four days of class during the week, I feel this need to pack my bags and hop on a train to any country of my choice in Europe. The main problem I observed while in Heidelberg is not that the students miss home, but that they are frustrated with themselves for not seeing more attractions and not visiting more cities. There is this unsaid shared sensation to touch as many areas of the European map and quickly glance at as many possible cathedrals and statues before we head back to the US, but in reality all there is to be seen in Paris could not be viewed if we were to dedicate every weekend solely to that city. I did not learn this lesson until the second semester, but what I eventually learned was that finding all the castles and cathedrals is not what truly matters, because they all start to blend together in your memory; what is of greatest importance is the people you meet along your journeys.

The trip that I made the most friends was during my spring break traveling alone in Spain. I had the opportunity to spend my free time with twelve of my good friends in Greece, but after our fieldtrip to Madrid I was left with a taste of Spanish culture which I desperately wanted more of. Before my decision I considered the possibility of boredom and anxiety that may come with traveling alone and the loneliness that might creep in

while spending my twentieth birthday without friends. These thoughts made me hesitant for a while, but every memory of my recent week in Madrid reassured my decision.

With enough clothes for four days on an eight day journey smashed under an inflated soccer ball, my Kelty backpack was over-stuffed leaving just enough room for some toiletries, an I-pod, and the book "Brave New World." A thirteen-hour train ride from the Heidelberg station put me in the beach town of San Sebastian. Intentionally scheduled, I met the sandy shores of Northern Spain just as the distant traveling swells in the Atlantic Ocean met the end of its journey, crashing ten-foot waves on the beaches. After greeting the family who owned the hostel which I chose to lodge in and throwing my backpack on my bed, I grabbed one of their rental surfboards and wetsuits and began paddling out into unknown water and unfamiliar waves. After assessing the situation I concluded that the possibility of falling asleep in the midst of ten-foot waves could have devastating results, and therefore chose to paddle back to the shore. I had slept very little on that train the night before, but had whimsically chosen to surf any way.

Feeling discouraged about my surfing experience and uneasy about my choice to travel solo, I moped back into my hostel wet and cold. Just as my Spanish Spring Break seemed to take a downward turn towards regret and frustration, I met my first set of friends while peeling off my wetsuit on the balcony. I entered a conversation with a seventeen-year-old high school student named Mark, and a recently graduated Philosophy major named Ingrid. These two San Franciscans immediately lifted my spirits, and true to Spanish custom, late that night at eleven o'clock the three of us headed out for what the Spanish would consider an early dinner. The three of us felt very comfortable with each other

from the start, and our conversation ranged from our religious beliefs to which country we though had the best coffee.

My next day was spent surfing a bit smaller waves, watching sharks swim in the local aquarium, and climbing a mountain which had a giant statue of Jesus on the peak. After an eventful day of sightseeing and petting the numerous stray cats, I returned to my hostel with the surprise of a glossy yellow lemon cake holding three random birthday candles. The night before I had answered Mark's "How old are you?" question with the reply that I "am nineteen tonight, but I will be twenty in a few minutes when it turns twelve." I was shocked that people I had only met the day before spent their evening baking a cake for me. After thanking them many times we moved out to the balcony to celebrate, and invited two Italian girls who had just checked in. They accepted, but because the Italian girls did not speak English and neither Mark, Ingrid, nor I spoke Italian, the five of us spent that night speaking the limited Spanish we knew over lemon cake and cold milk. Sadly, I had to leave my party early to catch my next train, but I got the emails of all four of my new friends. Before running off, Ingrid and I had just enough time to write down some of our favorite books that we suggested one another should read.

My next stay was in Barcelona. I had no problem staying occupied wandering through the busy city full of the dreamlike architectural designs of Gaudi. After two days of running from one tourist attraction to the next, I needed some time to relax, so I stretched across the long leather couch in the TV room of my hostel. I knew that if another individual entered the TV room either I, or the Spaniard on the second couch across from me, would have to sit up and make room. Just as I was masticating on the Spanish man's

possible reactions to the third guest entering the room, he turned toward me, held the remote out in my direction, and said in perfect English, "You can change the channel if you want, I don't understand a word they're saying." I was startled out of my misjudgment and quickly realized he too was from California. In fact, after talking for a while I learned that he lived in Santa Barbara, only a half hour drive from my house in Camarillo. The strange coincidence continued to get bizarre when Tony told me that he played soccer in Camarillo. We then realized that we knew many of the same people from different soccer teams. Being only two years older than me and having some of the same friends back home, Tony and I got along right from the start. We exchanged email addresses so we could meet up again once we were back in Southern California.

Barcelona was so enjoyable that I almost extended my stay and skipped my last stop in Malaga, but the slight tan I had thus far received encouraged me to seek out the more direct sun rays that could be found in Southern Spain. A Southern Californian experiencing his first German winter is guaranteed to take drastic measures to chase after the sun, even if it ultimately means enduring a thirty-hour train ride back to Heidelberg.

Picasso's birthplace turned out to be more than comfortable. Never did I feel more at home in any European city than in Malaga. The blue Mediterranean waters, heated by the sun and surrounded by green mountains made the landscape almost confusingly similar to the Malibu terrain.

Upon entering the multicolored "Melting Pot Hostel" I was quickly greeted by a dog jumping up on me, a young man grabbing my backpack for me, and another middle-aged Spaniard offering me a free pizza, which I had watched him take straight out of the oven.

Overwhelmed by hospitality, I just smiled at the front desk worker, Edgar, when he said, "Make yourself at home, pay whenever you want, and here are the keys to your room."

After finding my bunk bed, I started to unpack next to my sixty-year-old roommate who was putting sun block on his brown leather-like skin. He looked at me and spoke in slow but clear English, "and where do you come from?" I explained that I was studying in Heidelberg, but he began to laugh before I could finish my explanation. Unsure and confused about his seemingly inappropriate reaction, I allowed him to interrupt, "The world is truly a small place. I too live in Heidelberg." I could not believe what he said. My roommate, a sixty-year-old man on holiday, had come from the same small city in Germany to the same small city in Spain as I had. The next day the man told me about the marathons he used to run. Somehow a bet came about from this conversation. The old man, Martin, bet me a Coffee that I could not make it to the top of the highest mountain in Malaga, which we could see from our hostel, in less than two and a half hours. I took him up on the bet, barely made it to the top in time, and then asked him to meet his end of the deal once I returned. We both decided it would be more fun to get together for a coffee back in Heidelberg, so we exchanged email addresses and sure enough a week later I was having a cappuccino with Martin in his home town.

These memories of meeting people on my journeys not only remain the clearest and mean the most to me personally, but they also have guaranteed future adventures. Like this following up with Martin in Heidelberg, I have stayed in contact with many others whom I have met this year overseas and have made plans to reunite with them. Ingrid will be staying at my home this coming summer for a few days and a German waitress whom I

have become friends with will be staying with me later in the year. I have enjoyed the culture and history that I have gathered throughout my journeys more than I could express in writing; but the relationships I have made will always remain more important and more meaningful to me for the rest of my life.