

The Spanish Experience – Great With A Few Minor Complications

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Torrejon Air Base – Madrid, Spain

We did two “tours” if you will, in Spain. The first was in Madrid, the second at Rota. We began on the wrong foot in Madrid. We arrived in the summer and it was hot! When we checked into our temporary lodging, neither the elevator nor the air conditioning was working, and we were housed on the top floor. Not the best conditions to set the mood at a new location. I remember calling David Glaser and yes, I complained about the conditions and we had “words”. He told me that he had bigger problems to deal with, like faculty members who had no idea how to get where they were supposed to be going. We exchanged notes a week or so later, apologizing to each other for “losing it” over the phone and all was well. Now we had to find a place to live for six months.

We had been used to using the services of the housing offices on the bases to help us locate a place to live so we went there first. Each time a call was made on our behalf, the landlord told the housing office folks that they would not consider renting to anyone for a stay shorter than a year. The housing office finally arranged for us to meet with someone willing to rent to us. We met outside the base and the first question he asked was, “How long will you be staying?” I did not want to lie. I told him “about six months, perhaps a bit longer”. He turned and started walking toward his car. I caught up with him and explained how much we needed a place to stay and that we would be super tenants, that the rent would be in his account on time each month without fail and that we would not bother him to take care of any minor repairs or problems. We would handle it all. He reluctantly agreed to allow us to move into the apartment, which was in the historic city of Alcala De Henares, birthplace, of Cervantes. The location was convenient, only a few kilometers from the base.

It was hot and on the first night we opened the rolladens and windows to get some air. The living room had a very wide picture window. In the middle of the night, we heard a loud noise. The straps holding the rolladen had broken and it came crashing down to the floor! Here we are on the very first night after I told the landlord we would not bother him, wondering how we would handle this. We did it, we tied knots in the straps and managed to get it back up in place.

We were there about four weeks when there was a knock on the door on a Sunday morning. There stood the landlord with his wife. He told us that he was concerned if we were doing OK since he had not heard anything from us. I reminded him of our agreement to take care of things on our own and he went on his way.

Unfortunately, there was in this beautiful historic city, a core of communist sympathizers who were not overly fond of Americans. One morning shortly after we moved in, we woke up to find that our nice BMW had been keyed down the side, a nice deep scratch. Back in 1989, faculty temporarily assigned to Spain, if they had a vehicle, it was registered in Germany and carried the old USAREUR license plates that clearly identified them as American. Within a week or so of our arrival, the license plates, front, and rear, were stolen. We were told there was a bar in Madrid that had lots of American plates on the wall. Bring one in and get a free drink!

This created a bit of a dilemma. How would we get on and off the base with no license plates? Torrejon was a Spanish base, and the Americans were tenants or guests. The security guards at the gates were Spanish military. There was one American security police person on duty at the gate but he or she stayed out of the way unless there was a serious problem with an American coming through the gate. We had no choice. I had a class that night and had to drive through the gate. If stopped, I would explain what had happened. Strange thing is that we drove right through. Apparently, the Spanish guards did not bother to check and see if there were plates on the vehicle.

Always ask your students for help

I told my students what happened and one of them, an American security policeman told me to wait after class and he would help me out. He took me to his office and produced a set of USAREUR license plates, typed up a "registration" and told me I would be OK. I asked where he got the tags from and he told me that Americans coming from Germany would on occasion, abandon their old cars and the security police always kept the tags, as well as those from vehicles that had been in accidents. Apparently, I was not the first person to have my plates stolen. I don't know how much truth there is to the rumor, but we were told there was a bar in Madrid where one would get a free drink if they brought in an American license plate and the walls were covered with them! Another faculty member new to Torrejon had a similar experience a few weeks after we did.

I called Kristine Leypoldt, our incredibly resourceful logistics coordinator to let her know what happened. She told me that she could sign the papers for me in Heidelberg to get new legitimate tags but that the Germans did not allow them to be sent via mail, that I had to wait a few weeks as there was someone from Heidelberg who would be driving to Torrejon. Two weeks later the tags that my student gave me were stolen as were the tags of another faculty member who had arrived from Heidelberg. The new tags arrived in a day or two and I did not put them on the car. I made Xerox copies of the tags, pasted them on cardboard and put those on the car. Now they could steal all they wanted. I would just replace them with fresh Xerox copies! The rest of our stay in Madrid was pleasant. We had a great ESO. Unfortunately, I cannot remember her name (I guess I don't get the extra points). We did see lots of the area but did not attend a bullfight. While Soonja and I respect the cultures of all the countries we visit, we are not able to accept the idea of what we consider the torturing of animals. Yes, we

know that the meat goes to feed the poor, but we still find it unacceptable. By the way, I put the real license plates on the car the day we left Torrejon headed back to Germany.

After a term or two back in Germany, Joe Arden called and asked if we would like to go back to Spain. I told him we were not thrilled at the idea of returning to Torrejon. He told me the assignment was in Rota and we immediately jumped on that one. After our experience in Madrid, to ensure that our license plates remained attached to our car, I drilled holes through the bumpers and used big carriage bolts to attach them. While it would not be impossible to rip them off the car, it would not be easy to do.

Complications on arrival in Rota

After a long drive, we arrived in Rota in March, for the spring term. We met with the ESO and were told that we would need to get temporary Spanish ID's. As we were filling out the paperwork he asked if Soonja was an American citizen. She was not and he told us that might present a problem with the Spanish military authorities. I had to do something which I should probably not admit to. I did not lie on the paperwork, but I did not write as clearly as I might have, and one could have "misread" the information.

We took the paperwork to the Spanish ID office and the woman asked for our passports. I asked if she needed both or if mine, as the sponsor, would suffice. It did but as soon as she saw it, she said we were not legally allowed to be in Spain. She asked, "How did you get into the country? Did they not stamp your passports at the airport?" I told her we drove to Spain from Germany, and they just took a quick look at our passports, waved us through, and I did not give it a thought. She said that she could fix this for us. All I had to do was give her our passports and she would send them off to be stamped and they would be back in a week or so. Of course, that set off an alarm. She would see that Soonja did not hold an American passport.

I told her that one of the things I had been told by representatives of our government was to **never** surrender my passport to anyone, never allow them to walk away with it. She said she understood, and we could solve the problem simply by driving across the border at Gibraltar and getting the passports stamped on our way back into Spain. No problem for us since we had already planned a short trip to Gibraltar before classes started. Off to Gibraltar we went. I do not know how many of our faculty members had driven across the border from Spain to Gibraltar. If you did, you know that it was a huge crossing with many lanes going in both directions. When we crossed back into Spain, I requested stamps in our passports. The border guard at the gate we passed through told us he could not do that, and we would have to go to the office. Here again, we could not get anyone to stamp our passports. Very strange.

We went back to the office at Rota and told the woman of our plight. She then said we could drive across the border into Portugal, and she was sure we could get stamps coming back into Spain. Once again, we were planning a trip to Portugal, but not until the end of the term. She was kind enough to give us temporary ID cards for that term.

At the end of the term, we made our trip to Portugal and were then able to return to Spain, “legally”.

Once again, we had utilized the services of the base housing office to find a place to live for two terms. Because Rota is a beach resort area, there were lots of furnished short-term rentals available. We could have a nice apartment for the months of March and April for about \$400 a month. In May and June and the rest of the summer, the rent would rise to about \$1600 a month, far beyond our budget. We told the young man at the housing office of our plight and he put us in touch with a “friend” of his who had some rentals and agreed to let us stay the full five months for \$400 a month. We had a great apartment with an ocean view, one block from the beach with parking under the building which turned out to be necessary once the tourists and the people who owned the beachfront apartments began to arrive. We were set...until...

The parking area was closed for a day or two for painting and I had parked right in front of the building. There were decorative wrought iron bars on the front of the parking area. I came out in the morning to find the painters spray painting this wrought iron. There was a bit of a breeze and a fine mist of white paint had drifted into the street where it had been deposited on my nice metallic brown BMW. I yelled at the painters to stop but it was too late. There were tiny white specs all over one side of the car. The painter just shrugged his shoulders when I pointed that out. I just was not willing to go through whatever it would have taken to get this problem resolved and I did not have high hopes that it would be.

As summer approached and the local property owners began arriving, the noise levels late at night began to rise. Though our apartment was on the third floor, we could still hear the noise from the street which consisted of kids playing ball, and the old men playing cards under our windows. It was summer in Spain and we soon learned to do as the Spaniards did, and walked the beach at night with them, and slept a bit later during the day.

Despite all the troubles, we loved being in Rota and have always held it in the back of our minds as a final retirement location. I guess that is not going to happen as we plan to stay put in Germany.

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Asian Division – 1985-1987

European Division – 1987-2013