Now you’re talking: SPAIN

Learning a language can take a holiday to the next level, says YVONNE GORDON on a Spanish immersion in Andalucía

Y ou were speeding. Can you show me your driver’s licence?” It’s a town in Spain. You’re pulled over by the police and you’ve just been stopped by the officer. Talking in rapid Spanish, the officer asks for documentation which you don’t have. To make matters worse, there’s an open spice bottle on the seat beside you. The officer asks for back-up and soon the sheriff arrives, pointing a gun. All he wants is his licence — this is a comedy sketch in Spanish, my role is a speeding driver and the sheriff has a toy gun. It’s all part of a week-long Spanish immersion programme, which involves everything from one-to-one conversations to talking on the phone, acting in theatre and even giving a presentation in Spanish. For eight days, we are not allowed to speak any English. It’s all part of a week-long Spanish immersion programme, which involves everything from one-to-one conversations to talking on the phone, acting in theatre and even giving a presentation in Spanish. For eight days, we are not allowed to speak any English.

Every day consists of five ‘volunteers’, from Spain and from England, Australia and Germany. We’re based in the Andalusian town of Baeza, in the province of Jaén. It’s a busy week and there isn’t a lot of downtime. Organiser Marcos tells us early on that there will be a point, a few days in, when you suddenly can’t understand anyone and what I think I’ve ordered for lunch turns out to be something else. It’s a busy week and there isn’t a lot of downtime. Organiser Marcos tells us early on that there will be a point, a few days in, when you suddenly can’t understand anyone and what I think I’ve ordered for lunch turns out to be something else.

You need a minimum conversation level for this programme. People who arrive and are still using their phrasebooks are not allowed to attend. Instead, mornings are spent having one-hour one-to-one conversations, in Spanish, with the volunteers. We can sit in the hotel, go for a coffee, or explore the town and we can talk about anything, the main point is that we talk and listen and that is how we learn. At meals we sit evenly divided between English-speaking and Spanish-speaking tables. It’s a busy week and there isn’t a lot of downtime. Organiser Marcos tells us early on that there will be a point, a few days in, when you suddenly can’t understand anyone and what I think I’ve ordered for lunch turns out to be something else.

Kids of 10 and 11 speak a language perfectly. “Language is made to be spoken,” he says. “Kids of 10 and 11 speak a language perfectly. But they don’t know what a word or the situation is.” It’s challenging at times. I learned Spanish in university but had forgotten a lot of vocabulary. One morning, volunteer Marixa gets me to describe everything I did from waking up — like taking a shower, dressing, brushing my hair. I don’t remember all the words, so it’s frustrating, but for the most of the week I am suddenly able to understand vocabulary. I can suddenly understand when someone gives me a breakfast and replies to something about getting up or getting dressed. Over the next few days, we have a guided tour of Baeza, explore olive fields, learn how the Jales prunes are the world’s crisps of capital and explore the neighboring World Heritage Towns, Úbeda (携手 more)

GETTING THERE

Pueblo Español (puebloespanol.com) runs Spanish immersion programmes from March to November. The eight-day programme costs €595 and includes more than 100 hours of conversation with native Spaniards, single-room accommodation, activities, guided tours and return transport from Madrid. Flights are extra.

WHEN IN BAEZA

Baeza and its neighbour Úbeda, both World Heritage Sites, have some of the best-preserved examples of Renaissance architecture in Spain. The old part of Baeza was built in Roman times. The town is in the centre of Jaén province in Andalucía, which is one of the best-kept countryside in full of olive trees.

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