

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



A ceramic workshop in Úbeda

the volunteers, Manuel, puts it 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 verb is or the subjunctive."

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 rest of the week I am suddenly able to understand the conversation when someone arrives at breakfast and refers to anything about getting up or getting dressed.

Over the next few days, we have a guided tour of Baeza, explore olive

fields, learn how the Jaén province is the world's olive oil capital and explore the neighbouring World Heritage Town, Úbeda (pictured main).

We do group games and comedy sketches. Every challenge provides laughs. For example, when we divide into teams for a building challenge with sticks of spaghetti, it takes me a while to realise we're building the tallest tower (*torre*) not a bull (*toro*).

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 our heads will melt. We'll think, "I can't speak any more Spanish," and other days, we may feel like we're unlearning everything. He's leaving on day three, "but if you want to cry, just call me", he says. I have my brain melt on day five — I suddenly can't understand anyone and what I think I've ordered for lunch turns out to be something else.

But it passes, and overall my Spanish comes on in leaps and bounds until at the end of the week, we're all chatting away. It's sad to say goodbye to new friends made. Watch out, Marcos, you might be getting that tearful phone call yet...

## WHAT TO PACK

You need a minimum conversation level for the programme. Brush up on your Spanish as much as possible before going and do bring any grammar or reference book you might need during the week — to check on any grammar issues, for example.



## GETTING THERE

Pueblo Español ([puebloespanol.com](http://puebloespanol.com)) runs Spanish immersion programmes from March to November. The eight-day programme costs €1,950 and includes more than 100 hours of conversation with native Spaniards, single room and board, 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, and the surrounding countryside is full of olive trees.

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**Y**ou were speeding. Can you show me your driver's licence?" I'm in a town in southern Spain and have just been stopped by the police. Talking in rapid Spanish, the officer asks for documentation which I don't have. To make matters worse, there's an open wine bottle on the seat beside me. The officer calls for back-up and soon the sheriff arrives, pointing a gun.

All is not as it seems though — 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, 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 one word of English.

Every day, myself and four other 'pupils', from England, Australia and Germany, join five 'volunteers', from Spain and Colombia, to converse and improve our Spanish. We're based in the Andalusian town of Baeza (pictured left) and what's

unique about this language programme, organised by Pueblo Español, is that there are no grammar classes and the volunteers are not teachers.

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 pupils and volunteers. Conversation is casual, alternating between the volunteers chatting away in Spanish at 100 miles an hour, and then us pupils taking what seems like 10 minutes to get a complete sentence out. Usually, it's a happy combination of both. When we don't understand a word, it is explained in Spanish, never translated to English. I never even hear the accents of the other English-speakers.

The first morning, I have a one-to-one conversation session with Paola, from Colombia, so we walk around the town. Baeza is a World Heritage Site and the old town has the remains of historic walls plus

a network of tiny streets to explore and a huge cathedral which dates back to the 12th century.

Back at the hotel, conversation is interspersed with group activities and then lunch. By the time of the first break at 3.30pm, we've been talking in Spanish for six-and-a-half hours and only half the day has passed. Later, we divide into teams for a game, to work out what items we'd need to survive on the moon. A couple of us have matches on our list — which causes much amusement (you can't light a fire without oxygen). The activities are fun — and it's a nice way of learning, without grammar books.

This is the idea behind Pueblo Español — that you improve from a minimum level by being immersed in everyday life rather than classes. "Grammar is important but you have to learn a language in context," says organiser María Goyanes. The volunteers are from different parts of Spain, with different cultures and *convivencia* is at the heart — conversing, to put the language into context.

On learning grammar terms, one of

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