To speak like the locals you need to live daily life, as Yvonne Gordon found on a course with native speakers in southern Spain.

A box of matches. Flares. A lift. I’m trying to work out what I would need to survive on the moon from a list of 15 items, all written in Spanish. I decide that two bottles of oxygen would be the most important thing. It turns out that matches to start a fire (fifth on my list) would be of no use – there’s no oxygen on the moon. It’s a Saturday afternoon in the town of Baeza in the south of Spain and I am in a group of 10, divided into teams for this game of guessing the necessities for lunar survival. It’s fun – but the important thing is that we are only speaking Spanish. There’s no English allowed, not even to explain words we don’t understand.

The activity is part of an eight-day Spanish immersion course called Pueblo Español, and this is day two. Five “pupils” – two English, one German, one Australian and one Irish (me) – all with conversational Spanish have joined native Spanish-speaking volunteers, four from Spain and one from Colombia, for a week of intensive Spanish learning.

What makes this programme unique is that there are no classes or grammar lessons – it is designed so that the participants live daily life in Spanish, eating and sleeping, and engage in conversation with native Spanish speakers, full-board accommodation in a private room, transfers from Madrid and activities, from £1,734.

Break the language barrier

During the afternoons, we do phone conversations, act in comedy sketches and give a presentation in Spanish, where we are marked on everything from the structure to pronunciation to body language. We also have breakfast, lunch and dinner together each day. It’s the normal chat of people getting to know each other – with the odd stumble as we newbies sometimes get tongue-tied. The volunteers are not teachers and it’s refreshing to be learning without heavy grammatical explanations.

“Grammar is important but a language has to be learned in context,” the programme leader, Marco, tells us. “Conversation puts the language in context. Co-existence with Spaniards is an interesting way — it never feels like a dull moment. Having volunteers from so many different places allows us to experience varying accents and learn about different cultures to boot.”

It seems to work — after one or two glasses, my Spanish seems to work a spell. It seems to work — after one or two glasses, my Spanish seems to improve markedly for the rest of the evening.

Not only do I come away feeling more confident in Spanish but should I ever be stranded on the moon, I know what to include in the survival kit…

Details: Spain
Pueblo Español (pueblosespanol.com) runs eight-day Spanish immersion courses, including more than 100 hours of conversation with native Spanish speakers, full-board accommodation in a private room, transfers from Madrid and activities, from £1,734.

A 12th-century cathedral and the remains of old walls in the Old Town, — Baeza is a World Heritage site and historic old town of Baeza, with its 12th-century cathedral, below, and historic old town.