

Edited by
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ES Travel

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 liferaft. 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 meals, conversing and going on excursions together. On the first day, I arrive later than the others and am bowled over by the high level of Spanish in the group – until I realise that it's the volunteers who are doing most of the talking. The non-native Spanish speakers are feeling just as intimidated as I am.

At every meal, we're seated beside a volunteer so there's no chance to slip into English. It takes a day or two to get



Break the language barrier

my ear attuned to Spanish again but I am soon joining in the conversation, as are the other pupils. If we don't understand a word – or the menu – the volunteers patiently explain it in Spanish.

Mornings consist mostly of hour-long conversation sessions. We're paired one-to-one with a volunteer and we either stroll through town, go to the shops or have a coffee at the hotel. We're given suggested phrases to work on but the conversation can be about anything, so I learn about life in Colombia from one volunteer and about a photography hobby from another. The town is small enough to navigate on foot – Baeza is a World Heritage site and there's a 12th-century cathedral and the remains of old walls in the Old Town, so some of my conversation sessions are combined with a walk through the old streets.

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 newcomers 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 at the heart.”

Marco tells us that there will be a point, probably on day three, when our heads will melt and we'll think, “I can't

take it any more. I can't speak Spanish”. We will feel like we are unlearning and forgetting. “We have a special cure on Sunday night for that,” he grins.

The “cure” turns out to be queimada – a traditional drink from Galicia where the spirit orujo is mixed with lemon peel, sugar, cinnamon and coffee beans and set alight, while the maker recites a spell. It seems to work – after one or two glasses, my Spanish seems to improve markedly for the rest of the evening.

The week is challenging but fascinating. We're doing what we'd do in daily life but in Spanish. Guided tours provide a break in routine – we visit the neighbouring Unesco World Heritage site town of Ubeda, and partake in an olive oil tour in the province of Jaén, the world's largest olive oil producer.

The programme is so busy that there isn't much time for things such as



Group sessions: learn Spanish in the cafés, tapas bars and late-night haunts of Baeza, with its 12th-century cathedral, below, and historic old town



checking email or messages but the disconnection from electronic devices is an unexpected bonus. You are fully immersed in Spanish but in the most interesting way – it never feels like studying or learning and there's never a dull moment. Having volunteers from so many different places allows us to experience varying accents and learn about different cultures to boot.

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 (puebloespanol.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.

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