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Pedraza, Segovia



Perfecto! This is the place to learn Spanish

In Segovia, north of Madrid, **Yvonne Gordon** immerses herself in the local life and language

I found a snake in my room,” said one of the volunteers in Spanish. We were sitting around a table in the hotel. Nobody showed any signs of panic. We were all quite relaxed, but we were also trying to work out whether she was telling the truth.

The hotel was Cason de la Pinilla, a peaceful spot on the edge of Cerezo de Arriba, a village in the Segovia province of central Spain, about 70 miles north of Madrid. It had a large open garden with views over green countryside to the mountains beyond. With few distractions, it was the perfect spot to concentrate on improving our Spanish, which is why 11 of us had taken over the place for a week.

Five of us, the “students”, had signed up for a full Spanish immersion at Pueblo Español. We’d spend eight days with native Spanish speakers — five “volunteers” plus the programme director, Cecilio Muñoz — to improve our language skills. Pueblo Español runs these week-long immersions in various places in Spain throughout the year. I had chosen this one to see an area of the country that I’d heard was beautiful but hadn’t visited.

Back to the snake. The reason nobody

was panicking was that we were playing a game in Spanish as part of the programme. Each person had to make three statements about themselves, two true and one a lie. The volunteer who had said she’d seen the snake had also said she had recently driven a car at 135mph and ridden a 450m-high zip line. Since she was retired, two of us thought the car was the lie and another two thought it was the zip line. The lie was, of course, the snake. The game was a good test of our Spanish speaking and listening skills, and fun too.

Everything on a Pueblo Español immersion trip is in Spanish; no English-speaking is allowed. If we didn’t understand a word, the volunteers explained it in Spanish. The whole idea is to speak — and listen to — the language all the time (you need to be at an intermediate level to take part). For one-to-one

conversations with the volunteers we could walk together or sit in the hotel or garden. Exploring the village of Cerezo de Arriba, which has 130 inhabitants, offered a glimpse of local life. One morning we dropped into the village bar, Café Bar Benito, for a coffee and chatted to the owner, Mati, who told us she hasn’t left the village in 50 years. I asked her questions and although I didn’t fully understand all her answers — a mix of her speed and my lack of vocabulary — I got the gist.

The rural setting was relaxing. It was quiet except for the sound of sparrows chirping. On the third evening, the clouds cleared to reveal the snow-covered mountain peaks of La Pinilla — lit up in gold by the setting sun. A white dog the size of a St Bernard lazing in a green pasture under the snowy peaks made the scene look more like Switzerland than central Spain.

During the week we visited towns in the Segovia province. The first was Pedraza, a

Our Lady of the Pillar basilica, Zaragoza



historic medieval village with long, thin cobbled streets where terracotta plant pots line windowsills and storks nest on the bell tower in the main square. The focal point, the 13th-century Castillo de Pedraza, is surrounded by a defensive wall with turrets, a moat and a huge iron gate (£5; grancastillodepedraza.com). The Basque painter Ignacio Zuloaga once lived in the castle and the rooms are set up like those in a historic home, plus there is a museum dedicated to the artist in one tower. In the village there are artisan craft shops such as Hada Haro, which sells colourful hand-painted clothing and watercolours with fused-glass appliques (hadaharo.com).

We also visited Sepulveda, a medieval town with ornate churches and an impressive gorge that reaches down to the river Duraton. Sipping coffee on a terrace in the Plaza de España, I noticed the few tourists we saw were Spanish — a nice change from some of the busier tourist sites. We visited the city of Segovia to see a Roman aqueduct and a cathedral, wander the streets and eat at El Sitio, which specialises in dishes from the Segovia region, such as *cochinillo*, a suckling pig roasted whole (£22; elsitiorestaurante.com).

There were times when the language was challenging, but it became easier — by day four I was much more confident

Need to know

Yvonne Gordon was a guest of Pueblo Español, which has eight days’ full board from £1,836pp (puebloespanol.com), and Zaragoza Tourism (zaragozaturismo.es). Fly to Madrid



Cason de la Pinilla

speaking than I had been on day one. I was learning a lot: looking at my notebook at the end, I had some nice new words that have (hopefully) sunk in like *arcoíris* (rainbow), *el rebaño* (flock), *desfile* (parade) and *ser acogedor* (to be cosy).

I also learnt *montaña rusa de emociones* (emotional rollercoaster), *travieso* (mischievous), *fracaso* (failure) and my favourite, *desaprendido* (unlearned). Hopefully I won’t need those again. At the end of the week, we were surprised to learn that we had spent 100 hours working on our Spanish during the eight days.

When the programme was over, it was time to put my learning into practice. I met a Spanish friend and we travelled to the city of Zaragoza in northeastern Spain for the weekend. We’ve known each other since university, and we alternated between the two languages over the few days as we explored. Though I cheated a little by taking a guided tour — of the two cathedrals, the Our Lady of the Pillar basilica (free) and La Seo (£6; catedraldezaragoza.es), plus the 11th-century Islamic Aljaferia Palace (£4; reservasonline.aljaferia.com) — in English.

I did, however, try to bargain for some books in Spanish at the Sunday market, chat to a guy in a shop about his 3D printing and order meatballs, plus spinach and leek pasta, in La Republicana, one of the traditional tapas bars in the narrow streets of the lively El Tubo district (mains from £24; larepublicana.es). In the handsome Mercado Central, I ordered breadcrumbs with grapes by mistake, and got three sausages when I thought I was ordering one, but it was fun to figure things out (mercadocentralzaragoza.com).

Overall my Spanish improved and I was happy to be able to understand and make myself understood. The bonus was learning more about Segovia, and getting a glimpse of daily life in some special places off the main tourist trail, which led to deeper connections with the place and its pace.