

Abroad During the Pandemic

2020. A new year that everyone was looking forward to. A new year for travels, new experiences, new jobs, graduations from high school and college. A new year of living life to the fullest. Year that practically came to a halt before it could even begin.

2020 was my year. I would get the opportunity to study abroad in Madrid, turn 21, and work towards several certifications to help further my career, and I would start my last year of undergrad at the University of San Francisco (USF), all very exciting moments. The one thing I was most excited for was studying abroad.

I knew I wanted to study abroad ever since I heard that this was even a possibility for college students. I knew I wanted to study in Europe and was going back and forth about what country I wanted to live in for 5 months. I've been fortunate enough to be able to travel to Europe many times to visit my family in Romania, so I was familiar with the European culture and was comfortable with the language barriers that come with traveling. I finally made the decision to go to Madrid, Spain. I arrived in Madrid with high hopes, a one way ticket and the excitement that comes with being abroad.

The first month abroad was amazing and everything I had hoped for. I was able to visit Barcelona, Lisbon and Porto in Portugal, Budapest in Hungary, and Paris, France. Looking back I am so thankful our first weekends were jam packed with traveling, because that would become the extent of our abroad journey.

The last day of January, the world got the news that Northern Italy had become the new hotspot for the COVID-19 virus. The number of cases were still "low" so nobody in our program was worried of the virus reaching Spain. Soon after, as the virus was spreading through central Italy, we received warning about traveling to northern and central Italy, but it was only a recommendation. Italy soon started getting hit with the virus pretty hard, and we were now seeing a few cases in Germany and France. No one was worried about the virus, and we were told it would not reach Spain.

This virus was not something that the Spaniards cared about or even knew about. I was living in a homestay with a Spanish family, and when I told them about this virus that was spreading very quickly they did not even know about the gravity of the situation in Italy. This virus was not in the news, it was not talked about at schools, or at work, it was not common knowledge for the people in Madrid. They only got information about this virus through us, the kids, and our parents who were anxiously calling and texting us about the news. "Its fine, its just a flu" this was the common mentality for the study abroad program and our homestay family.

Mid- February came, and panic had finally arrived. Many of our friends in the study abroad program in Florence, were sent home, only 3 weeks into their abroad semester. The Coronavirus was now all that us students were talking about. What schools are pulling their programs? Who is getting sent home? Are we getting sent home? We all had so many unknown

questions, yet besides the moment of panic discussions, everything was normal. Our professors, programs assured us that we would be able to finish our program abroad and we would not be sent home. The virus was now a lingering thought in the back of every student's mind, but besides that everything in Spain was relatively normal. We continued planning trips, roaming the city, going shopping, eating at restaurants, going to bars and clubs, no one was worried.

Spain started to worry when people were testing positive for COVID in Valencia, Barcelona and south of Spain. Now the virus was on the news and stores were running out of hand sanitizer and disinfectant. Still my homestay family was not worried and said that if we were sent home we could continue to stay with them until the semester was over. At this point, the parents who were in the States, were panicking. "Be safe, wash your hands, be careful in the metro", they wanted to know if and when we were coming back. The general response of students was, " I'm not going back until I'm dragged out of the country, it's not bad here I'll care when Spain cares"

Spain started to care when numbers started increasing rapidly, doubling overnight. Now schools were making statements about the virus, news stations started giving warnings and recommendations to people, grocery stores started emptying. Even though numbers were increasing in Spain and specifically Madrid, there was no visible change to society. We were still able to do the same things as before, and the general population didn't seem worried because "Spain has good healthcare" they told us.

On our own, our program was continuing to share information about what schools in what countries were being sent home and every day it was more and more. Trying to be optimistic and logical about the situation, the abroad students from the USF, we came to the conclusion that we would not be sent home until the kids in Barcelona were sent home, or if USF emails us to leave. Still we were not too worried.

Beginning of March, I realised I can be as hopeful as I want about staying abroad, but the reality of the situation is that we would be sent home. Still, everyone tried to remain calm and be optimistic to not scare others around us. One by one our friends were booking flights home, but we continued to stay in hopes that the cases would plateau and our adventure could still continue. Knowing that there was a possibility to be sent home, we went out to bars and clubs almost everyday, taking advantage of the insane nightlife Madrid had to offer.

Reality finally hit, and within 24 hours I felt, excited, happy, sad, mad, anxious, nervous, and was in denial. We started getting emails from USF saying they recommended for any abroad student to return back to the states. I had practically waited my whole life for the opportunity to be abroad, so I decided that I would stay until it was absolutely necessary to leave.

Madrid cases rose, 500 to 1000 overnight. 1000 to 1500 overnight, and the cherry on top 1500 to 3000 overnight. Half of Spain's cases were in Madrid alone. This was the only time where you could see physical change in people and in daily life. There were less people on the streets, in stores, going out, however it was still relatively normal.

This all happened a week before Semana Santa, Holy Week, our program's 2 week vacation for easter. We had high hopes that if we could last 1 more week in Madrid we would be fine and we could be relaxing on the beach in Mykonos, since Greece's COVID cases were low and there were not any travel restrictions.

We then received an email from the abroad program, that all schools country wide ranging from preschool to universities would be closed for 15 days and the situation is being monitored. If we felt uncomfortable being in Madrid we could return to our home country, or take this time to self isolate for 14 days. At this point everyone knew it was a matter of when we were being sent home.

March 11th, a Wednesday. The last true day with all the USF kids all together in Madrid. At the time we didn't know we were being sent home, so we went along with our day. We explored Retiro Park, went to a rooftop bar with a view of all of Madrid. And finally we ate at our favorite restaurant Oven Mozzarella Bar on Gran Via. Yes our favorite restaurant in Madrid was an Italian restuarant. Then we got the email.

Now thinking back, how ironic was it that a virus that caused the outbreak in Italy, would be sending us home while we were eating pizza and pasta.

The email said **"With the new information we received regarding U.S. travel restrictions, we are recalling all USF students in Europe. As a student in Madrid, you should be aware of possible border closures and depart from Madrid as soon as possible. This is an urgent matter....You must return to the U.S. immediately."**

We were speechless. This moment I remember so vividly. Everyone was crying, people were laughing cause they were in denial, people were still being optimistic about the possibility to stay, people trying to look at the bright side. We walked on Gran Via, the main street in Madrid, and tried to take everything in, the people, the culture, the sunset, the view, the architecture, everything we possibly could. I was shocked, numb and in denial. It didnt feel real that my abroad experience was coming to an end.

Regardless, then and there we decided, still hopeful and naive, that we would plan one last trip, visit our friends in London, hop over to Dublin for Saint Patrick's Day (even though the parade and all the festivities were canceled) and return home. One last hoorah!

That same night, Wednesday the 11th of March, the night that we were supposed to book our flights and airbnb in London and Dublin, my dad called me. Reasonably so, he told me I had to come home the next day which I told him was not possible because I had to pack up my whole life I had created in Madrid and I could not do that in 6 hours.

Now I will tell you honestly, I am a Taurus, I am very stubborn and usually try to argue things my way. I proposed flying back on Saturday , but agreed to fly home on Friday morning. That way I

would have one last full day in Madrid, would have enough time to pack and would bring peace to my parents. I bought my one way, last minute ticket home for \$500 dollars, and didnt argue which was strange and different for me. 3 hours later at 3am Madrid time we got more bad news. Another email labeled **URGENT**, demanding all USF students to be home before the weekend. Shortly followed by Breaking News from the United States, Donald Trump's speech. Trump had made the announcement that as of Friday, all US citizens must return home for border close. This followed with him saying that those entering the States before will not be subject to long TSA lines and CDC controlled tests and quarantines, that would be mandatory starting Saturday.

I quickly checked flight tickets out of curiosity, and they had increased from \$500 to \$3000 one way. I am still thankful for my dad's phone call and am glad that I was not that stubborn.

Thursday March 12th, my last full day in Madrid. I was stressed and still in denial and numb at the fact I was being sent home. I had actually packed my whole room in 30 minutes the night before. My roommate and I decided to go shopping since clothes were much cheaper and better quality in Madrid than you would find in the States. We went to 5 stores, including two ZARAs. Overnight, no one was on the streets, no one was shopping, Madrid looked like a ghost town. I wish I would've taken more pictures of it, but I was trying to take everything in.

The one thing I noticed that really impressed me with ZARA was their sanitation and how they reacted to the virus. All the workers in the store had masks, were wearing gloves and were carrying around spray bottles of disinfectant. At this point, we were allowed to try clothes on in the fitting rooms, which we did. The interesting part is after, if you didn't want to keep the clothes, instead of the workers taking it from you, you would place it in a bin where they would later disinfect the clothes before putting it back on the floor for customers. Another cool feature that the store had was a self checkout station where you would scan, take off the sensor and bag the clothes yourself. I'm not sure if this was specifically done as a result of COVID, but the workers really encouraged shoppers to use self checkout for less human contact.

Friday March 13th, the day of my flight, I headed to the airport very early to ensure I would get on my flight in case of overbooked flights. 90% of the people that morning were study abroad students. Even though there were more people than usual at the airport at 4am, it was still relatively empty. I went through security in 2 minutes, no temperature check, no questions asked, and I waited at my gate. Normally at the airport people weren't wearing masks, however this was the first time I saw people wearing them.

My flight had 1 quick stop in Lisbon before heading to San Francisco. The flight from Madrid to Lisbon was half full. Only when I arrived in Lisbon was where I was asked my first COVID related question. A worker asked me where I came from and what I was doing there. I responded that I was studying abroad in Madrid. He proceeded to ask "how was it?". I didn't know if he meant my program or how Madrid was in regards to the virus so all I said was "good, its fine, not the worst " In hopes that they wouldn't read into what I said and try to quarantine

me. He put a little red sticker on my passport that said security (that no one had looked at even in the States) and let me board my flight.

Flying during this time was interesting. My international flight was half full, masks were not required and none of the safety precautions we have now (July 2020) were applied. It was a common thought throughout all the passengers, including myself, to wipe the seats and every surface with Lysol wipes or hand sanitizer. That was the extent of the sanitation.

Once I arrived back in the United States, I expected chaos and to be heavily questioned by Customs and the CDC. There was a long line at customs, but nothing out of the ordinary. Next to the US citizens line was a line for Mobile Passports that was completely empty. I asked a worker if it was open and they said yes and to go right ahead if we had the Mobile Passport app and finished declaring our items. I had downloaded the app, filled out my information and declared what I needed and walked straight to the Customs Agent. Instead of waiting an hour for customs in the normal line, I went through in under 3 minutes. I was very surprised considering the announcement that Donald Trump had made about the borders closing. The agent asked me routine questions about where I was coming from, why I was there, why I am coming back and if I was bringing any fruits, vegetables or livestock with me. No questions about the Coronavirus, no temperature check, and I was not told to self isolate myself for 14 days.

I was lucky. Although my dream of studying abroad was taken from me, I did not have to deal with crowds of people, and most importantly I did not contract the virus. Others from the same program as me had to wear masks and go through customs for hours. Others from the program had gotten the virus, some with symptoms, some without. Now I was in the same position as everyone else, complete lockdown with news that ran 24/7 about the virus and constant reminders of what the new normal would look like.

The one thing that is terrifying about this virus is that people are asymptomatic and I think it is super important to talk about the mental health that goes hand in hand with the virus and the fear about contracting it. This virus does not really discriminate on age or gender. There are young, healthy people contracting the virus and whose bodies are deteriorating, its not just those who are older and are at high risk. This virus, and essentially the unknown of how long this pandemic will last, has caused an increase of anxiety and panic attacks in people, as well as other problems in regards to mental health. I can only talk about my experience with anxiety and panic attacks, but I wouldn't be surprised if cases of depression have increased as well.

In Madrid, as I mentioned I stayed with a Spanish family. There was a mom, 11 year old daughter and 8 year old son. They were all high risk due to having intense asthma, and allergies, but the son was even more at risk because of the fact that about a year ago he had a life threatening pneumonia. Having just been all over the city, with the stress about school, the virus, getting home before the border closed, and the fear that I would transmit the virus to the family, had triggered intense anxiety and panic attacks. I was never one to have bad anxiety, maybe once before a final but it was very mild and it was controllable.

The scary part is that during an episode, my head would get hot and it felt like I had a fever even though I didn't and I would have trouble breathing. Those symptoms are very similar to what the COVID symptoms are and overthinking became a vicious cycle and you almost convince yourself you have the virus. Days before I left Madrid, I started having more consistent episodes of anxiety. There was a period after I got home, for days at a time I had anxiety and panic attacks for no real reason but for fear of the unknown. I called my primary doctor for advice about healthy and natural ways to calm myself down and that is when she told me that what I was feeling was normal and that she received so many patients with a new found anxiety that the Coronavirus had triggered.

This virus has affected so many people physically, mentally, emotionally and has forever changed the world and how we as a society function. The only thing we can do now is work together to stay healthy, find a vaccine and try to be positive. Although there are still cases, Madrid and other parts of Europe have started to open up and life is slowly starting to return back to normal. This is exciting and something we all should work together for. I am excited and looking forward to the day that I can return to Madrid and Europe and finish my travels safely and Coronavirus free.