The World is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page. -St. Augustine

I remember leaving Chicago’s O’Hare airport like it was yesterday. I don’t know if it was the excitement or the fact that I was trying to imagine what Spain would be like, how it was different from the United States, or how I was going to change over the next 6 months, but I couldn’t sleep the entire flight. When I finally arrived in the country that was going to be my home for the semester, I couldn’t believe I was there! I decided to procrastinate unpacking just a little bit longer, and just take a walk around my new city, Granada. I remember marveling at the long and winding roads up the mountains, the gestures groups of Spaniards would give to their friends while conversing and drinking coffee at an outdoor café, and the tiny European cars that would almost hit you at the crosswalk. I loved the way that Spaniards looked at shoes and clothing through glass windows as if it was a candy store and how a gelato a day was not looked down upon. I remember writing down all of these new observations and wondering what other differences, similarities, and new experiences I would go through.

In my 21 years of life I don’t recall a time when I was more nervous to be introduced to someone then when I was about to meet my host family. I had just about every thought and concern running through my head in the moments up to meeting my host mother. The moment I met Matilde, or Mati, I knew we would get along great. She had the biggest smile across her face, refused to let me carry my own luggage, and could barely pronounce my name. We talked in the taxi on the way back to my new apartment about my family, friends, and my studies. She told me my
Spanish was very good and she couldn’t believe that I had never eaten Iberian ham before, which would soon change. Amidst all of these changes and language barriers I was surprised at how easy communicating and understanding one another really was.

Despite the challenges that were brought upon me by living abroad, the times that came after these challenges were worth it. Language barrier problems would typically lead to laughing until I cry with my host family, or how my host brother and sisters would make fun of my host mother because she couldn’t pronounce my name until a month before the semester ended. Moments where I could understand jokes in another language, or wear my soccer jersey proud while screaming at a game were times where I realized how much I had grown to love this new culture. Seeing a flamenco show with one of the most famous flamenco dancers in the world was the night where it all changed. I didn’t understand why it took me so long to put everything into words, but I was in love with Spain. It only took me a month and a half to gain a southern Spanish accent, pick out my favorite tapas bars, and to decide whether I preferred Real Madrid or Barcelona as my soccer team of choice.

During my final month in Spain, I made sure that I continued to take long walks up to the gorgeous viewpoints while eating gelato and talking with my new friends. I knew that I would miss my everyday life in Spain because the Spaniards taught me how to have such a passion for life and living in the simplest of activities. It wasn’t the big or monumental things that I did abroad that I knew I would miss; it was the small things like lunchtime. Lunch in Spain was a family affair where everyone would eat for hours, catch up on each others lives, and debate their
passions. I found myself doing things that when I first came abroad, were foreign ideas to me like looking at shoes through the window as if there was candy inside. I grew to love the different foods that at first I was unsure about, and my host family even taught me how to cook with gallons of olive oil.

To students who are thinking about studying abroad or planning on studying abroad, you have the opportunity of a lifetime ahead of you. Even though traveling abroad can be a difficult change at first, you are given the chance to learn about another culture first hand. When you decide to travel abroad as a student, you are given a chance to not be a tourist, but to learn everything about your host country and this new culture. Learn what other college students in other countries think about American culture, break cultural barriers. My advice would be to immerse completely in this other culture, try new things, and meet wonderful people that will be a part of your life forever.

The things I have gained from my experience abroad are things that are almost indescribable. I have a newfound passion for learning about other cultures, traveling, and I discovered how easy it really is to make friends from other countries. I learned that if you immerse yourself in a culture, you gain an appreciation for how people from different countries live and put your preconceived notions in the past. Going outside of my comfort zone and experiencing new things are things that I am grateful I had the courage to do. The people I met from my travels and the things I have gained from living abroad are experiences that can never be replaced.