

AHAsoc: Placement guides

A Coruña (Spain)



A Coruña (the only official form of the name, if you were wondering) is a brilliant city and a really great place to get an authentic experience of life in Spain. Something beyond sun, sea, sand and sangría (although we do have all four here, thank you very much).

Travel

There is a huge fleet of autobuses urbanos in Coruña, making getting around pretty easy and quick. One trip costs 1.06. You should buy a bus card (from the office in Plaza de María Pita) as soon as possible, which will cut the fare nearly in half. The grumpy lady there told me that I had to be empadronada (frightful business involving photocopies of DNIs and NIEs and leases and all the rest) to get my 'Millennium Card', which I later found out wasn't necessary (you can get one if you pay a 7-8 euro supplement). There are ALSA-type buses going to other Galician cities, although the train is generally both faster and cheaper (despite the fact that we still don't have AVE).

As for airports, you can fly directly to La Coruña (ClickAir will get you here from Heathrow for about 60 euros) or come via Santiago de Compostela (the slightly cheaper option – Ryanair services SCQ from Stansted). If you are coming from the meeting in Madrid, you can come with RENFE (I used my British 16-25 railcard to get a discount... seemed to work), fly to SCQ (Ryanair again) or get an ALSA bus.

A note: do not buy a bike unless you are very fit/keen! Coruña is covered in hills, has no (useful) cycle paths and is full of crazy drivers. Also, although I am told that bike theft is rare here, mine was stolen.

Money

I opened a CaixaGalicia account in the end, purely because the town was riddled with branches (useful, as Spanish banks are rather cheeky and charge you for taking cash from an ATM owned by another bank). This is a Visa Electron account. You will need to some form of photo' ID (technically this should probably be your passport, but I've just been using my provisional driving licence all year) to use your card, as there is no chip/pin system here.

You should buy a Carné Xove (joven) as soon as possible as it will give you discounts on transport, tourist stuff and all manner of useful things. It costs about 7 euros. You can use your St Andrews card for some student discounts (at the cinema, for instance) but RENFE and most museums won't let you get away with that.

Studying

If you want to study whilst on your placement (to keep up a second language or just make some friends) then your best bet is the Escuela Oficial de Idiomas (near Riazor) which gives very cheap classes. The only problem is that you will need to sign up right at the beginning of the year (or beg a lot). If you have got a Stevenson Scholarship and need to enrol at a university, the Centro de Linguas at the Universidade da Coruña (<http://www.udc.es/centrodelinguas/ga/index.html>) is

probably the easiest way to do so. I originally tried to sign up as an *oyente*, but a) found the university very unhelpful, and b) was working during class hours anyway.

Accommodation

A Coruña is one of the more expensive cities in Galicia but still far, far, cheaper than Madrid etc.. I was amazed. Excluding bills, you can get a spartan room for 100 euros a month, and a really nice one for 200 a month. The 3-bedroom flat in which I was living costs 400 euros per month total (so about 135 each), plus (low) bills and a 10 euro comunidad payment for someone to sweep the staircase.

Don't worry about finding a flat right next to your school/uni. The public transport here is excellent and it's much nicer to live in the town centre. If you would like advice about the different barrios etc. then please don't hesitate to email me (eng2).

Websites such as easypiso.com yield lots of results. What I personally did to find my flat (and this could easily have gone very wrong, but I hope it will give you some idea of how casual the entire process is) was to contact *coruñenses* on the CouchSurfing.com website, asking them if they knew anyone who was in need of a flatmate.

If you want to wait until you get here before agreeing to anything (probably advisable), ask your school to book you into a hostel. Lots of people will put up 'I'm looking for a flatmate' notices around town (lamp-posts etc.) and on the notice-boards of shops and bars. It's also worth heading up to the university campus (take the bus 'E - Universidad') and looking on the notice boards there. I only ever went to the Filoloxía campus, but there were always people looking for flatmates on their boards.

I have heard terrible tales from my flatmates about a few scam estate agents who charge you fees to view 'amazing' cheap flats which turn out to be total holes. Just a heads up.

(Side note. Whilst vetting potential flatmates, it is probably worthwhile mentioning any objection you may have to soft drugs. This might sound like a ridiculous point, but I quite honestly know about two young Spaniards who don't regularly smoke marijuana, and it's probably not ideal to be moving in with a porrero if you can't stand the smell. Some of the other lectores I've met here were rather uncomfortable with their living situations for just this reason.)

Also, try to make sure that you're not next to a long-term building site! It seems like everything is being redeveloped here and this was another reason that friends of mine had for moving.

It is actually possible (although not really very pleasant) to survive the winter in La Coruña (or anywhere else on the coast) without heating, so don't let the lack of it put you off a flat too much. The interior (Ourense, for instance) is an entirely different kettle of fish and experiences some of the most extreme temperatures in Spain.

For internet and landline, I can personally recommend Jazztel (cheap, with very quick installation), although obviously these things change.

Mobile phones... the most popular network were probably Movistar (Vodafone and Orange coming close second).

Obviously, try to live with Spaniards. You will probably end up with a couple of guiri friends anyway, and it feels less guilty speaking a bit of English when you know you will return to a hispanohablante flat every night.

Work

The ~700 euros from your placement are plenty to live on, especially with the dirt-cheap accommodation prices here.

Do some private classes if you can. You can charge 10-20 euros an hour (people will willingly pay that), so even a few extra sessions a week can cover your rent and give you some pocket money. All of my contacts were made through the school where I was working (teachers, friends of teachers, kids who were already in my classes etc.) so make sure that everyone knows how eager you are to get started with them.

Worthwhile places to visit in the town

Torre de Hércules: an old Roman lighthouse... just so you can say you've done it. Amazing views of the entire city.

A Repichoca: a great little bar on C/ Orillamar, full of hippies and Galician folk music.

La Tetería: a Moroccan-style tea-shop/bar in the old city.

La Jamonería Leonesa: the best place to get a big plate of tetilla cheese and cured ham.

O Recuncho de Maite: on the road parallel to C/ San Andrés, between Plaza de Espana and Plaza de Pontevedra... really generous, greasy raciones.

La Bombilla: a hugely popular tapas bar on C/ La Franja. Cheap, quality food. Really busy, though, so get there early (around 21h).

And of course try the local delicacy: pulpo! I'm told the best is to be found in O'Fiuza (C/ La Torre – get there early!), but a night out in Lugo (or really any city but La Coru' – not sure why we don't get so many here) will yield some rather classy tapas. If you're a bit squeamish, start with a few shots of the (in)famous licor café.

The Museo de Bellas Artes (squirrelled away just south of zona Plaza de Espana) is free and definitely worth a visit.

Casa del Hombre ('Domus') – middling interactive science museum. The modern building just off Orzán with the statue of a lardy gladiator outside.

Casa del Agua. Swimming pool and gym (address should appear on your water bill!).

Casa das Ciencias, in the centre of Parque de Santa Margarita.

The Fundación Pedro Barrié de la Maza and Fundación CaixaGalicia (both near los Cantones) both fund free art exhibitions, movie nights and concerts, so it's worth looking at their programmes once in a while.

If you can, stay for San Juan (technically the 24th of June, but celebrations begin on the 23rd). All-night partying on the beach, bonfires and free sardines. You will probably run into some of your ex-students and embarrass yourself.

If you're a football fan, a Dépor (Real Club Deportivo La Coruna) is a must, and you may be able to sign up for free tickets at your school. Their home stadium is Riazor.

Falas galego?

Galician is pretty easy to understand and I actually found the whole business quite fun. Depending on how provincial your area is, you will hear it in varying degrees. The only people I know who speak it regularly are the teachers at the high school, although everyone will use the occasional word. It is used on lots of official documents, but there is usually a *castellano* translation. Apart from that, the Galician accent is really easy to understand and people tend to speak quite clearly.

The Dreaded *Proyecto*

Get started early! Also, have a quick look around for recording equipment before you leave home. I wore out a pair of shoes trawling for the appropriate machinery and, after visiting every electronics shop in the city, ended up settling for an atrociously squeaky microphone. Plan ahead!