

# *¡Vale!, ¡Vale!*

Studying in Spain for six weeks, six Canterbury students give distance learning new meaning.

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Felipe Siebrecht '12, Toni Mora, Sam Haddy '13, Pablo Casanovas, Lydia Molina, Mason Page '12, Nacho Fornaris, Carlos Remartinez, Carmen Planas, Joe Najm '12, Lindsey Marra '12, Tom Harrison '12 photographed in Palma de Mallorca on March 17. The city's cathedral in the background.



*“Experience, travel – these are as education in themselves.”*

–Euripides

Twenty-four hours after arriving in Mallorca, one of the four Balearic Islands off the east coast of Spain, Julio Omaña, his daughter, Abby, and I enter the gates of Colegio San Cayetano in Palma, the island’s capital. The sprawling facility that 1,500 students in grades K-12 call school is dotted with palm trees and well-manicured lawns. The walled campus is perched upon a hill and dominates the neighborhood in which it resides. A large sign proudly identifies the private, coed Catholic school, which is ranked number one in the Balearics.

We are a bit early for our 9:45 appointment to meet Tracy Aristide, co-director of San Cayetano’s exchange program and a three-year teacher at the school. The halls are empty and quiet. We wander upstairs to explore, and within a few minutes music emanates from the hall’s loudspeakers. Only later do I learn that music replaces the bell that signals the end of classes.

Quickly, students dressed in smart gray and blue uniforms spill out energetically into the hall. Among them are five faces we recognize, Canterbury students Sam Haddy, Mason Page, Lindsey Marra, Joe Najm, and Tom Harrison. (Felipe Siebrecht was on a class retreat.) To them, Julio and I are familiar faces from a world they left four weeks prior to complete the

Canterbury-San Cayetano Exchange Program. Handshakes and *bolas* all around. We are as excited to see them and share their world for two days as they are to share it with us.

The Canterbury-Colegio San Cayetano association came about through a friendship between Tracy Aristide and Alison Hawkins Yez, a former Canterbury Spanish teacher. The two met while students at College of the Holy Cross, and they studied for a semester in Mallorca. As fate would have it, Tracy met a Spaniard while studying, married him a few years later, and returned to Mallorca to teach. When Colegio San Cayetano was looking to expand its exchange program into the United States, Tracy drew on her Canterbury connection, Julio Omaña, whom she had met during a visit to Canterbury years earlier, to inquire about a possible exchange.

“Canterbury was certainly interested, because it is a great opportunity for our students to both play host and later spend six weeks going to school in Spain,” says Julio. Colegio San Cayetano already had exchange programs established in Germany and England.

San Cayetano’s mission is to “educate and train people with

a Christian sense of life, with a consistent scale of values, and under the utmost respect for ideas, material things, and the environment.” It values its Catholic roots and requires its students to take religion classes. On this particular day, Felipe Siebrecht and his host, Toni Mora, were on a full-day class retreat, which Felipe described as “a great day.”

The school’s history dates to the end of the 19th century, when a farm house on the property was converted to a residence for male novitiates (Ligorinos). In 1910, they merged with the Order Teatina. In 1960, the Order acquired a portion of an adjoining estate which contained the Provincial College of San Alfonso. Soon, the nursery school opened with two students, but it was not until a few years later that the school officially opened. The school quickly prospered and added impressive buildings to accommodate the burgeoning student body. Today, a few priests teach at San Cayetano, and Fr. Pablo, a Teatino, serves as headmaster. Interestingly, the school contains a small chapel, built in 1926, dedicated to the Divine Motherhood of Our Lady.



Joe Najm with his host family. Miriam Casasnovas is a preschool teacher at San Cayetano, and all five of her children attend the school.



Lindsey Marra, Joe Najm, Mason Page, Tom Harrison, and Sam Haddy with their San Cayetano English class. The Canterbury students were required to participate in Spanish.

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As time nears for the start of the next class, we meet Paula Noriega, a veteran teacher at San Cayetano and co-director of the exchange program, and Tracy. Paula’s English class is our first destination.

Immediately, differences between Canterbury and San Cayetano are apparent. At San Cayetano, teachers move from room to room, not the students. When a teacher enters the room, students stand. On the two days we were there, teachers began their class with a prayer (Hail Mary and the Our Father, in English). The average class size is 25-30 students. Not so evident to the eye is San Cayetano’s tri-lingual program, which promotes the study and use of Castilian Catalan and English from preschool through high school, and German for the high schoolers. In addition, students call their teachers by their first names, something that took the



Mason Page and Tom Harrison enjoy lunch with Alecco, one of their many new friends.

Canterbury students some getting used to. “When I first started doing it, I thought I was being rude,” says Sam Haddy. “I even called my host mother, Chus, by her first name.”

Paula’s lesson is a review of the British system of education. Her students answer her questions in English, but when it comes time for the Canterbury students to respond, they do so in Spanish. Some of the San Cayetano students have a

very good command of English, including Jill, who approached me after her religion class to discuss her interest in photography.

Classes begin at 9:00, except on Tuesday when the day begins at 8:00. After two 50-minute periods, it’s time for a 25-minute break, enough time for students to play a little pick-up basketball, grab a sandwich in the snack bar, play cards, or do some schoolwork.





Lindsey Marra and host Lydia Molina.



Students head outdoors for the first break of the school day.

Teachers at San Cayetano focus student learning on assigning long-term projects rather than lots of daily homework. While we were there, Sam Haddy and Tom Harrison were each working on putting together a 30-minute presentation – in Spanish – on Spain’s modern day history. “We hope we’ll be able to present the project together rather than separately,” says Tom.

The second break of the day, this one for two hours, comes at about 1:00. During this time, most students and teachers eat lunch in 15-minute shifts in the school’s cafeteria. Two more classes after lunch bring a close to the day at 5:00. Although there is no interscholastic athletic competition, physical education is required of each student. San Cayetano’s physical plant includes an outdoor

swimming pool and basketball court, playing fields, a fieldhouse, and a track.

Exchange programs are typically about learning through immersion in another language and the culture of the host country. I was impressed that our students so often and so naturally used their Spanish to communicate with their host family, teachers, and friends. Whether making small talk at a hotel restaurant or chatting on a bus in downtown Palma, our students made valiant and sustained attempts to produce Spanish. “The first week at the dinner table, I was lost,” says Sam Haddy. “However, after a few weeks I was able to contribute to the conversation. We definitely have been immersed in the language. We have been forced to speak Spanish, because not many people outside of the school speak English. If we say something wrong, they correct us, instead of laughing at us. My host mother even helps me learn verb conjugations. My Spanish is surely improving.”

By observing them during class time and break times, I clearly see that the Canterbury students have acclimated themselves well into their new environment and have been affectionately embraced into the San Cayetano family. “Socializing with the Spanish students is easy,” says Lindsey Marra. “Each class is like a family, because the kids have been together since they were three years old. Everyone’s been great to us.”

The feeling is mutual for San Cayetano’s teachers, who have high praise for their new students. “We were extremely happy with the overall outcome of this student exchange,” says Tracy. “The teachers who instructed the Canterbury students were amazed at how well they integrated into their classes and how much of an effort they made to practice the language. Academically speaking, they were willing to take part in class discussions and debates and felt accepted and comfortable enough with their



Felipe Siebrecht works on a class assignment with host Toni Mora.

Spanish classmates to participate. In addition to improving their Spanish, they all made lasting friendships. I think this was a very positive experience for both San Cayetano and Canterbury, and I truly hope we can continue this exchange for many years to come.”

At an English Department meeting to which I was invited, Tracy, Paula, and a few other teachers planned next year’s exchange with Julio. Everyone agreed that the timing of each leg of the exchange is mutually beneficial, and both schools have already identified six to eight students who are interested in participating next year. “Last year, after we announced the exchange with Canterbury, we had more than 60 students express interest,” says Tracy. “We selected our six students based on a lottery of the most qualified candidates.”

Pablo Casasnovas, one of those six students, was very excited about the exchange from the first moment the school announced it. “He asked me if I would send him,” said his mother, Miriam, who is a preschool teacher at San Cayetano. “Of course, I said yes.” When Pablo returned after six weeks abroad, she noticed that he had grown taller, but more importantly had gained a sense of autonomy. Through Julio’s translation,

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she said, “Pablo became more communicative, more expressive in everything – from home to school. He had to reintegrate himself into our family.”

Having Joe Najm as a sixth child in her home was great for her family. “I’ve always had an English speaking *au pair* in my home to help teach my children English and culture, so having Joe here has been a great experience for all of us. He’s very sure of himself.”

When not in school, the Canterbury students explored some of Spain’s major cities with their host families. For example, Sam, Lindsey, Mason, and Tom took a four-day excursion to Madrid. Several of the students also visited Valencia. Kevin Siebrecht, Felipe’s father, traveled to Spain to visit his



Sam Haddy and host Nacho Fornaris.

son. While there, he visited San Cayetano and then took Felipe, his host Toni, and a friend from the school to Madrid for a few days. In addition, Toni’s brother-in-law took Toni and Felipe to Barcelona for a weekend.

“I am so grateful I did this exchange,” says Felipe. “My dad keeps reminding me that he twisted my arm to do it, but I’m glad I went, because Toni has become like a brother to me. I already have plans to return to Mallorca next July – maybe with a few of my Canterbury friends.”

For Fifth Former Mason Page, living in Spain for six weeks gave him an appreciation for a culture that values life at a leisurely pace. He enjoyed four-hour lunches that included lots of conversation, and the ample breaks during the school day. “I see America much differently now,” says Mason. “My experience in Spain gave me a global perspective that I didn’t have before. In America, we’re either doing something or going to do something. In Spain, people are either chilling out or planning to chill out.”

The students returned April 1 and resumed classes April 4. They cemented friendships and started new ones. Says Tom Harrison, “I undoubtedly would do this program again. It was great.”