

A Spaniard in Denmark - melting the ice

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Discovering the 'Norden' has been one of the most exciting experiences that I have lived in my life. Before going to Denmark in August 2002,

I didn't have many references of the country neither a concept of what Danish life was all about. What I did know about Denmark was what I was told: that it was a country situated in North-Europe, with low temperatures and snow in wintertime, full of blonde people, with a welfare state and a high economic development.

Although there are many Danes and other nordic people who visit Spain looking for the sun and relaxation, there is no special link between both cultures. The short geographical distance between us (three hours by airplane) obviously doesn't mean a short cultural distance. In my opinion, the difference in climate could be an important reason. Denmark is a northern country with only a few hours of light in winter and freezing conditions. However, its summers are moderate with temperatures ranging from 15 to 25 °C. At mid-summer there are only a few hours of darkness. Arriving in August 2002, I was already surprised on my second day with a tropical 30 °C, and I wondered whether I was really in North-Europe. Being an exchange student on an Erasmus scholarship, I had come to continue my Media Studies. For a period of six months, I was one of the numerous international students, representing the whole world. The University of Aarhus, where I signed in, is the second oldest university in Denmark, and equally large. Here I would find myself in a different learning environment. I would also meet the Danes.

Describing the Danes is not easy. Reading the university's student-guide I found that "we are known to be friendly and easygoing". Indeed, most Danes have a high degree of open-mindedness, especially because they travel a lot. So they are very curious towards people with other ethnic and cultural backgrounds. At the same time, Danes are somewhat reserved and fond of their privacy. Thus, they rarely take the initiative to meet new people. To me this was the main shock, coming from warm-hearted Spain. One of my friends, Blanca, who came from Mexico, told me that "they are introvert, a sort of dry people". In Spain, generally in South-Europe, we like to introduce ourselves when we meet foreigners. Here things were different.

Of course I should mention the language problem. Many Spaniards think English is the most important language in Denmark, not Danish. The language barrier played an important role, prohibiting to fully mix with the locals. In addition to this, most of the foreign students, especially the Spanish speaking part, didn't want to learn Danish at all, preferring to improve their English in stead. But for those who really wanted to learn some Danish, there was the 'Destination Denmark-course'. This intensive introductory programme consisted of language and culture courses, social activities and practical guidance. The aim of the course was to provide exchange students like me with sufficient language skills to be able to communicate with our fellow Danish students and teachers, and to cope with everyday life in Aarhus. Having been raised with the Spanish language, Danish was very difficult, especially its pronunciation. However, I met some Spanish speaking people who had learnt the language in just one year. "It is not so difficult as people think. Just try to listen a lot", Eva told me. She was a compatriot from Gijón and had lived in Denmark for almost two years.

All exchange students coming to the University of Aarhus get their own mentor, who is a student of the same faculty, to ease them during the first weeks of their stay and to show them the way. My mentor was Re-becca. She would be the first Dane that I really got in contact with. She introduced me to the university's academic and social life, and to the city of Aarhus. Through her I got in touch with the local student association. Rebecca also helped me with practical matters, such as opening a bank account and registering for the famous CPR-number (social security number). She was even there for me when going shopping.

Where did I live? From the beginning I preferred living with Danish students. I was convinced that being in close contact with them was the best way to learn something about their culture and language. Once



Me (front row left) and my multinational student-friends in the Aarhus City Hall.

you know them, Danes are warm and fun loving people. Sometimes I forgot that they just need some time to open up to a new situation. So it was usually me who had to take the first step. Which wasn't always easy, especially because of my very basic command of the language. Still, I considered myself to be lucky because I lived in a very nice student's dormitory named Vilhelm Kiær Kollegium, known in the area as Trillegaard. Most of my neighbours were Danes: Katrine, Rene, Bin, Brigitte and Thomas. The only other foreigners were a German boy and an Icelandic girl. This gave me the opportunity to learn about local student life. We shared experiences and parties, most of them over beers. Gradually I began to understand more about Danish culture. I especially liked 'Julefrokost' (the Christmas dinner) and the 'Fredags-bar' (Friday bar). After a couple of months I had another, more positive impression of the Danes.

Like everywhere, the best way to meet fellow students is by joining their social activities. Unlike in Spain, in Denmark sports and other student gettogethers mainly take place off-campus. Realizing that sports is the universal language, breaking through frontiers, I contacted the Aarhus Fremad Athletics Club. Being a passionate runner, here I trained and ran races. Feeling equally welcome and finding the same atmosphere as at home in Spain, I made friends with Jakob, Alex, Finn, Bents and Jonas. When I was running I forgot that I was in another country. Also, as I am a qualified athletics trainer, I assisted Dan Madsen at another club called Aarhus 1900, where I helped coaching classes of boys in the age of fourteen to sixteen. It was a great experience.

During my stay in Denmark I met a few Spanish people who lived there permanently. There was Anna López, Ph.D. Law-student, who was married to a Dane. And there was Juan, who worked in a wood factory, also with a Danish partner. Both of them told me that the weather was probably the main difference between the Spanish and the Danish way of life. Climatology surely has an influence on people's characters. However, I think that socializing in North-Europe is not more difficult than in other countries. Definitely finding the North in Denmark, I discovered a culture which was as exotic as mine. I know now that even though the Danes may appear a bit distant and cold, they like to mix with people who are not like them. It just takes time and patience to melt the ice.

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