

TRAVEL

College alumni travel Spain

BY CORINNE ABATT
SPECIAL WRITER

Traditionally, college students make study trips abroad. Today, the alumni are following in their footsteps.

Our Miami University (Ohio) Alumni College in Spain in March was the first of more than 30 such groups scheduled to explore the history, economics and culture of Spain's Andalusia region this year. The Michigan State Alumni College will take place there in early August.

Our 22-member Miami group was paired with 18 Lehigh University alumni. This turned out to be a compatible combination of 50-and-older adults, all there to learn about the history, economics and culture of the area.

Travelers in each group quickly found common bonds - the quirks and charms of a professor they had had; in Miami's case, the demise of old Harrison Hall; rules and regulations, now passed; and half-forgotten college songs.

Home base was the four-year-old Hotel Ciudad in Ubeda (OO-bee-dah), population, 32,000, a four-hour drive south of Madrid.

Both Miami and Lehigh were accompanied by a Spanish-speaking leader. In charge of the entire program in Spain was a charming 26-year-old graduate of the University of Granada, nicknamed Nani, who was proficient in English and adept in human relations.

Early buffet breakfast was followed by a lecture from one of two guest teachers, both of

whom live and work in Andalusia. Then we were off to visit the sites and see the activities they spoke about. This included the fine examples of Renaissance architecture in Ubeda and in the nearby towns of Carzola and Baeza as well as the better-known tourist meccas of Cordoba and Granada. On two evenings we attended live music and dance performances.

It was fascinating to see the many combinations of Moorish and Christian architecture. Nowhere is this more dramatically shown than in the Great Mosque of Cordoba, now the Holy Cathedral Church, covering 19 acres.

The earliest part of the mosque, dating from 786 A.D., was built over a Visigothic basilica. Additions to it were made in 848 and 961. The Christian kings installed a royal chapel within the mosque in the 13th century, and a cathedral was built inside in the 16th century. Even though the Christians removed 300 of the more than 1,000 marble pillars supporting the double arches, it is still a breath-taking monument to the building style of the Moors.

A well-maintained old Jewish quarter and the only synagogue remaining after the expulsion of the Jews in 1492 are both well worth a visit.

Granada, a beautiful city at the foot of the Sierra Nevada mountains, was the last stronghold of the Moors in Spain. The majestic Alhambra that they left behind was a com-

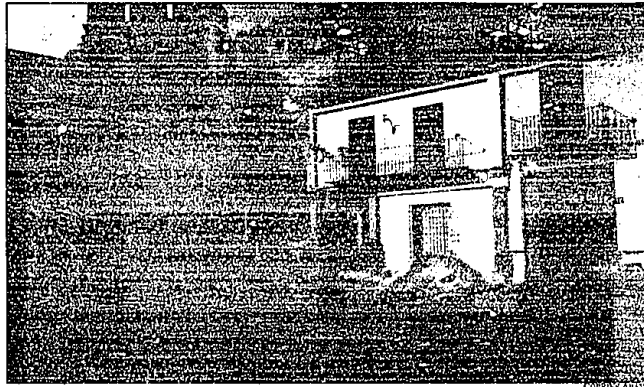
plete walled city. In addition to the palace and gardens of the rulers, there were fine homes for the more affluent within the walls.

We had to believe our guide when he told us that the Alhambra "is the most visited monument in all of Europe." Crowds notwithstanding, especially on Sunday when we were there, this is a breath-taking piece of history.

To the Moors with a desert heritage, green symbolizes paradise. Before the construction took place, they built an efficient system of canals to bring water from the mountains to the terraced gardens and into the living quarters of the palace. Shrubs and trees such as cypress and cedar are planted and pruned to form green walls and archways for outdoor rooms that flow one into another in seemingly endless and varying patterns, resplendent with fountains and pools.

March was too early to see much bloom in the extensive gardens, but I was there before in October when they were ablaze with color.

The Courtyard of the Lions, in the baron section of the palace, built in the 14th century, is considered one of the finest examples of Moorish architecture. The fountain in the center surrounded by 12 lions was given to the Moorish ruler by the Sephardic Jews as a sign of peace. When the Moors and the Jews left Spain in 1492, the Spanish "Reconquest" was complete.



Baeza: The figure in the fountain square in Baeza is the wife of Hannibal. She was a princess and is still considered one of the town's most illustrious inhabitants.

The oft-told story is that as King Boabdil and his mother departed from Granada after surrendering it to the Spanish, he cried. Watching him, she remarked, "Don't cry as a woman about what you could not defend as a man."

In addition to palaces, churches, Roman ruins and exciting history, Spain is filled with olive trees. Its 300 million olive trees make it the world's largest producer of olive oil. That and tourism are the mainstays of the economy.

Today, the advent of the Euro is creating a sort of boom economy. Our guest lecturer, Andrea

Pezzini, told us that Spaniards who have been hiding unreported money are spending it as fast as possible before it comes time to exchange their pesetas for Euros. "You will notice there are no cars older than four years," he commented matter-of-factly. And while there is no population growth in Ubeda, there's lots of housing construction to meet the demand for new residences.

A lively evening of discussion with three young couples from the area gave us insight on some of the problems facing this new generation. Among their concerns were: 17-percent or higher unemployment; the reluctance of

unemployed people to seek job training; discrimination against women in the job market in spite of government regulations to the contrary; and living conditions of migrant workers. Sound familiar?

Our common bonds stretched from our university groups to the Spanish people themselves in many ways. All of us came away richer for the interchanges.

Footnotes for travelers: Major highways are good and well-marked. Bottled water is readily available. Meals are well-balanced, attractively presented and NOT spicy. Supper time is 8:30 p.m. or later.

GREAT ESCAPES

Great Escapes features various travel news items. Send news leads, story ideas or your own travel adventures to Keely Wygonik, Observer & Eccentric, 30251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, 48150 or fax to (734) 951-7279 or e-mail to kwygonik@oe.homeconim.net

UP NORTH

Every summer, regular as the season's turn, residents of southeast Michigan head Up North for recreation, relaxation and inspiration.

We'd like to know where you go when you go Up North. Tell us about your favorite Up North spot. Is it a beach house on Lake Michigan, a resort around Traverse City, a cabin in the deep woods, a river cottage near Lake Huron, a bed and breakfast on Mackinac Island or a hideaway in the UP? Do you enjoy boating on the Great Lakes, golfing on the designer courses, hiking the rugged trails, biking the back roads, antique hunting, fudge eating or simply watching the sunset on a beautiful bench?

Tell us in 50-75 words about your favorite Up North place and if you have a photograph send it along for a travel story about Michigan's special paradise.

Send your stories and pictures to Keely Wygonik at the Observer & Eccentric, 30251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150. Or e-mail your comments to kwygonik@oe.homeconim.net.

TV VISIT

DiscoverAmerica, a television series that takes viewers to destinations throughout the United States, Canada, the Caribbean and Europe, will feature the Blue Water Area of Michigan in an episode scheduled to air Sept. 17.

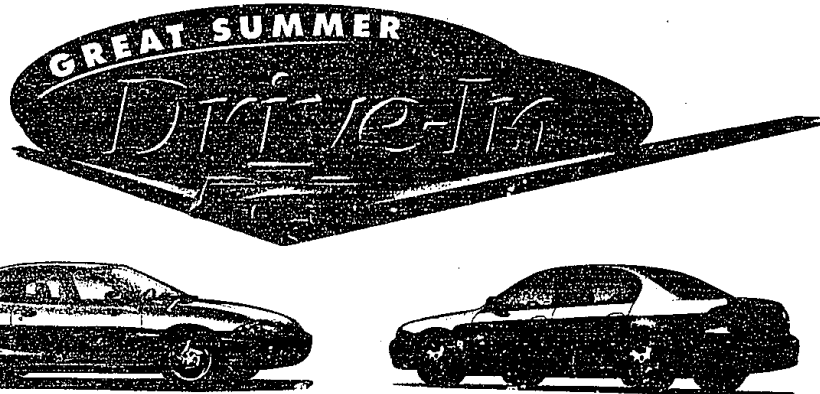
The Blue Water Area links Michigan to Sarnia and Ontario. The area boasts more than 30 miles of coastline, woods, and trails area and many festivals and celebrations.

BACK TO BASICS

Mission Point Resort on Mackinac Island is offering a family package that includes three days and two nights in a Family Double Room, one dinner, breakfast each morning, admission to historic Fort Mackinac a horse-drawn hayride and a round trip on Shepherd's ferry. The package is available through Sept. 5. The package is available only Sundays through Thursdays. For more information, call (800) 832-7711 or go to www.missionpoint.com.

WHERE TO GO

The West Michigan Tourist Association will send you a free four-color West Michigan Travel Guide. The guide lists lodging, attractions, festivals, recreation and even includes a two-page map of Michigan. For your copy, call (600) 422-2084 or visit www.wmta.org



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