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### **Study Abroad Reflection: Santiago de Compostela**

Studying abroad in Santiago de Compostela was one of the most meaningful experiences of my college years. From living with a host family to taking classes in Spanish, meeting students from around the world, and traveling across Europe and North Africa, I was constantly learning and growing in ways that went far beyond the classroom. In this reflection, I will share some of the things that made my time in Santiago so special, especially the city itself, the academic experience, the people I met, and how the trip helped me develop both personally and professionally.

One of the biggest parts of my experience was living with my host family, Maite and Gerardo. They lived in the newer part of the city, close to the Universidad de Santiago de Compostela, which made getting to class easy. From the very beginning, they made me feel welcome. Sharing daily life with them helped me improve my Spanish and understand more about daily life in Spain. Whether it was sitting down to dinner together or watching Spanish TV in the evenings, I learned a lot from simply being a part of their home. They also taught me about the local culture in Galicia, and I appreciated hearing their stories and recommendations about places to visit in the city.

Learning about Galician culture was something completely new to me. Galicia has its own strong identity within Spain, and I loved discovering its unique traditions, music, and food. I quickly learned that the Galician language, Gallego, is an important symbol of pride for the

region, and many signs and conversations included both Spanish and Gallego. I also enjoyed trying traditional dishes like pulpo a la gallega (Galician-style octopus) and learning about local festivals like the Día de Galicia and the celebrations for Santiago's feast day. Music was another special part of the culture, and it was common to hear the sounds of gaita, the Galician bagpipe, during festivals and events. Experiencing these traditions first hand helped me appreciate how diverse Spain is and made me feel even more connected to the place I was lucky enough to call home for a few months.

Santiago de Compostela itself is a beautiful city filled with history. It's most famous for being the final stop on the Camino de Santiago, a pilgrimage that brings thousands of people from around the world. Learning about the religious and historical meaning behind the Camino helped me appreciate the city in a new way. I often saw pilgrims arriving in the main plaza, tired but proud, and it made me think about how special the city is to so many people. I also loved exploring the old town with its narrow streets and stone buildings, and the main cathedral is one of the most impressive I have ever seen. Walking through the city always felt like stepping into the past, but it also had a lively and modern side, especially around the university.

My classes at the Universidad de Santiago de Compostela helped me a lot with my Spanish. Being in a classroom where Spanish was spoken the entire time pushed me to listen more carefully and become more confident speaking. One unexpected thing I enjoyed was learning about Gallego, the regional language spoken in Galicia. Before coming to Spain, I didn't know much about it, but I found it interesting to see how languages and cultures exist side by side in different parts of the world. Understanding even just a little Gallego gave me more respect for the identity and pride of the people in the region. The classes were challenging, but they helped me grow a lot, especially in terms of communication.

Outside the classroom, I also had the opportunity to intern in Santiago. I worked as a marketing intern focused on hospitality and tourism. This gave me a closer look at how important tourism is to the city, especially because of the Camino and the many visitors Santiago receives every year. I helped with promotional materials and learned about how local businesses attract tourists while trying to keep their own culture alive. This experience helped me see how marketing works in a real-world setting and gave me skills I know I will use in my career.

One of the most exciting parts of studying abroad was traveling. From Santiago, I was able to visit Morocco, Portugal, France, and Switzerland. Each place had something different to offer. In Morocco, I learned about Islamic culture and visited markets and mosques that were completely different from anything I had seen before. Portugal felt a little more familiar but still had its own unique language and traditions. In France and Switzerland, I enjoyed seeing famous landmarks and trying new foods. These trips opened my eyes to how big and diverse the world is. Every new place taught me something, whether it was history, language, or simply how people live in other parts of the world.

Traveling and living abroad also helped me meet people from many different countries. In Santiago, I spent time with other international students from programs like Erasmus. I met people from Italy, Poland, Japan, and Mexico, and talking to them gave me a better understanding of how different and similar our lives are. We shared meals, talked about our countries, and even tried to teach each other words from our native languages. These conversations helped me grow more open-minded and curious about the world. I realized that even though we come from different places, we often want the same things: to feel connected, to learn, and to have fun. The friendships I made during the program were another big part of what made this experience so great. I met several other Clemson students while abroad, and we

quickly became close. Going through all the new challenges together—figuring out how to get around, taking classes in a new language, and dealing with cultural differences—brought us closer. I know that these friendships will last far beyond the program, and I'm thankful for the shared memories we now have.

Looking back, I can see that this experience helped me grow in many ways. Living in a different country made me more independent and adaptable. I learned to be okay with not always knowing what was going on, and I learned how to ask questions and get help when I needed it. My communication skills improved a lot, not just in Spanish, but in general. I became more comfortable expressing myself and listening to others carefully. Professionally, the internship gave me experience that will be helpful in future jobs, especially in areas like tourism, customer service, or marketing.

In the end, studying abroad in Santiago de Compostela taught me much more than I expected. It wasn't always easy, there were times I felt homesick but every challenge helped me grow. I gained confidence, improved my Spanish, made friends from all over the world, and saw places I had only dreamed of. Most of all, I learned that stepping outside of your comfort zone is worth it. I will always be grateful for the chance to study in Santiago and for everything I learned during my time there.