Background

For those of you with a fairly advanced level of Spanish and a desire to partake in one of the most well known universities in Spain, Universidad Complutense Madrid (UCM) is definitely a school to consider. With an enrolment total of over 85,000 students and a campus comprising of all of the ‘Ciudad Universitaria’ district of Madrid, UCM offers just about anything a foreign student might want to consider during an exchange abroad. Whether it be participating in multicultural programs, making connections with Spanish locals, fully immersing yourself in one of the leading Spanish universities and cities, or trying a completely new learning outlook on issues you’re interested in, UCM presents an interesting option as to studying abroad in one of the most beautiful and diverse countries in Europe.

Spain, as a study destination, has everything an exchange student may be looking for. Being a popular destination for nightlife, and overall lifestyle, Madrid boasts an attractive city for living and enjoying your time away from home. This is mirrored in the warm (though hot in the summer) climate that makes going out for a ‘caña’ (or beer) all the more refreshing. If that wasn’t enough, Madrid, situated near the middle of Spain, presents a great opportunity to travel throughout the
country and get to know vastly different provinces such as Andalucía, País Vasco, Galicia, and Catalunya among others. Madrid, in its entirety, simply presents the perfect opportunity to familiarize yourself with life in Spain’s capital and throughout the country. Through attending one of the country’s leading universities in UCM, you’re almost guaranteeing yourself the best Spanish experience you can possibly imagine!

Preparation

Being a soon-to-be exchange student in Spain also requires you to prepare adequately for your exchange semester. For starters, you need to check Spain’s requirements for studying in the country. As a Canadian citizen, you’ll need to apply for a student visa, which as of 2015 will cost you $125. This type of documentation is the first thing one should get in order as it may take over a month to process. This will ensure that you’ll be prepared time-wise should any delay with the documentation come about.

Secondly, you should get in touch with your respective UCM coordinator, as there will most likely be some sort of documentation the school will require you to fill out. Again, like with the student visa, it’ll be better to have this done as soon as possible as any delays in the registration process for UCM could equate to a few more weeks before your process is finished. In order to make sure that you’ll be in good standing before you make the trip to Madrid, it is essential to make sure that you take care of the school’s registration process early as it can prove to be quite complex and lengthy at times.
Thirdly, if you wish to have your accommodation settled before you get to Madrid, it is also important to start searching ahead of time as flat owners will most likely require you to wire them a down payment in order to secure the place you want. In addition, if you wish to live on residence, specifically in one of the university's 'Colegios Mayores' (Spanish term for university dormitories/residences), you will need to get in contact with a UCM Colegio Mayor administrator as soon as possible as vacancies are few and competition for the main dormitories is great. The main webpage can be found by simply googling UCM Colegios Mayores and clicking on the first link. However, it must be said that although room cleaning, laundry, access to facilities, and breakfast/lunch/dinner is included, the price to live in a dormitory is pretty steep. Coming in at almost €900/month, this is a fairly expensive alternative to living in a shared flat for around €200-500/month. Having said all that, it is not uncommon to arrive at a hostel in Madrid and start looking for a flat in person. From what I've seen, this is the best way to ensure that you're happy with the place you've selected as online pictures of flats can sometimes be deceiving.

One more slightly urgent thing you may want to keep in mind is to make sure that you are always on the lookout for cheap plane tickets. Through patience and perseverance, you may just be able to find a great deal that will not necessarily be a last minute one.

Another important (though not as urgent) thing to prepare for is the climate in Madrid. With this, you have to keep in mind that Madrid, being situated right in the middle of Spain, is a city that is subject to fairly big swings in temperature. It is
important to pack for both a cold and hot climate. Now, you might be asking yourself if you’ll even need to pack for two climates if you’re only studying at UCM for one semester. The answer is yes; UCM’s semesters, being about 5 months long each, will expose you to multiple seasons that may vary greatly. Pack for every scenario and you’ll be thankful for it.

Furthermore, you need to ensure that the accessories and appliances you’re bringing to Spain will be compatible with life in Madrid. If you don’t have one already, make sure to buy an electrical converter to ensure that you’ll be able to charge your accessories using the different European outlet. This is important because it is extremely difficult to find a Europe to North America converter in Europe. The electrical converters you do find are the opposite way around.

Lastly, you do not need to worry about the type of payment methods you’ll be using in Spain as debit, credit, and cash are equally accepted almost everywhere. I never knew of anyone who brought traveller’s cheques so I’d recommend bringing some cash and creating a bank account in Madrid in one of the main banks such as Santander or BBVA in which you can transfer money to. Although in comparison to Vancouver, Madrid has a far more modest cost of living (something which is heavily apparent in the lower costs of the food, utilities and rent), always make sure that you have a financial cushion as student life in Spain is extremely active, leading you to spend more than your intended budget on random nights.
During Your Exchange

One's arrival at Madrid, at first, may seem intimidating and may even cause you to rethink your decision. Fact is that although Madrid is a huge and bustling city that may make you feel small and lonely upon your arrival, it will quickly start to feel like home once you get to know people and once you start to familiarize yourself with the so called ‘barrios’ or districts of Madrid. The key is to, first and foremost, attend the university’s orientation session. This will help you familiarize yourself with the university and may even help you make some good friends during your first week on exchange. Afterwards, it is recommended that you familiarize yourself with your respective faculty as trying to memorize the campus will most certainly be overwhelming. UCM’s main campus spans many miles and is massive, leading to many students (including locals) getting lost and having to ask for directions. For all these reasons, it is recommended that you be in Madrid at least a couple weeks prior to the start of your academic semester. This will help you start your exchange on the right foot.
Life in Madrid is especially exciting because there is almost always something to do on any given day. Due to all the main night clubs and bars having a specific day in which they offer free entrance, there will always be an opportunity to go out with friends without breaking the bank no matter what day of the week it is. With this in mind, it is still advisable to make sure to keep track of your wallet, both literally and financially, as there are many pickpockets present and going out daily may add up and surprise you in the long haul.

In regards to which district you may want to live in, there is no clear-cut favourite when it comes to Madrid. Some students prefer to live in the barrios of Ciudad Universitaria, Moncloa, or Arguelles in order to keep within close proximity of the university. Others prefer to live in the center of Madrid, near Sol, La Latina, or Atocha in order to stay close to the nightlife and main activity in the city. Lastly, others choose to live farther away from the center, around the periphery, in order to prioritize their finances. This choice could pay off in the form of rent coming in at as low as under €200/month. With this said, there are other barrios in Madrid that I haven’t mentioned that may be chosen by students (such as Islas Filipinas or Bilbao) that offer a quieter neighbourhood to reside in should you not want to bring all the noise back home.

As far as getting to know people as an exchange student, I’d advise on integrating yourself with one of the main social groups in Madrid (such as CityLife Madrid, Be Madrid, or ESN) and attending their social events. You’ll quickly learn
that there are many other people out there in the same situation as you that are just as ready to make friends as you are. Most of these organizations will also organize trips which you can readily attend with friends should you just pay the fee. These trips include cities within Madrid such as Salamanca, Ibiza, Sevilla, Cordoba, and many more, as well as other countries that may be of interest to you such as Morocco, Portugal, and France. This is an excellent way to travel in a big group and make many new friends while exploring new places.

**Country Information**

As far as Spain goes, there are few countries with as much diversity and activity as this Iberian country. Whether it be the climate, food, way of life, or architecture, you’ll quickly discover just how different each and every province is in relation to the others. Not only this, the country’s activity is heavily apparent in the vast array of festivals and cultural events that you’ll have the liberty of going to and experiencing. From Valencia’s Fallas, to Pamplona’s San Fermin, to Madrid’s San Isidro, to Buñol’s Tomatina, there are plenty of festivals worth going to and participating in.
UCM Information

UCM, in general, is a school that hinges on a very traditional lecture-based learning environment. Usually, the teachers will read off of their PowerPoint slides and supplement the course with articles and class activities. The slides will often be on the school's online student website called ‘UCM Campus Virtual.’ Some of the courses will also have a lab component where you will be required to attend a computer-based session in order to complete some instructor-guided assignments. Overall, the classroom environment is conducted in a come and go basis as students and teachers alike may not come on time nor stay until the very end of the class.

The grading scheme is usually not based solely on exams. Most courses will require you to complete a group project, most likely in the form of a class presentation. Certain classes may even require to complete more than one group project. Again, class presentations seem to be very popular among UCM courses. Attendance and other small assignments will probably make up the rest of the grading scheme before having to take the final exam that will most likely be worth around 20-50% of the final mark.

Most teachers hold office hours and encourage their students to go see them in person should there be any confusion with the course material. As an exchange
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student, going to at least one office hour session is extremely advisable as this will
give you an opportunity to familiarize yourself with your instructors and explain
your situation to them.

Post-Exchange Reflection

All in all, it must be said that going to UCM and Madrid on exchange has been
the best decision of my life. With my initial goal being to completely immerse myself
in a predominantly Spanish university and experience Spanish life at the capital, I
feel like I’ve definitely achieved what I’d set out to do, growing on a personal and
academic level, all while making connections locally and internationally.

If there was something I wish I had known at the beginning of my exchange,
it would be to take advantage of Madrid’s dynamic
life style to the best of your ability. Experience the
culture, eat the food, go out as often as you can,
and immerse yourself in situations you may not be
totally comfortable with. By doing this, you’ll find
that you’ll grow as a person, make many new and
interesting connections, and learn more than you
ever thought about Spanish culture. At the end of your trip, you’ll look back and be
satisfied at having made the most of your semester abroad!