

GREETINGS FROM ZARAGOZA

For juniors seeking to broaden their horizons, School Year Abroad provides the opportunity to see the world

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HIKING UP THAT HILL
Students participating in School Year Abroad explore their host country's culture and natural beauty.

Photo by Pia Artzer

When Pia and Tess Artzer first arrived in Zaragoza, Spain, it took them over two hours to find cough drops. Now, after spending a few months in their new environment, the twins can give directions to clueless tourists as if they are locals.

The Artzer twins are spending their junior year in the School Year Abroad program, which allows Class 11 students to complete their school year in Spain, France or Italy.

For junior Amelia Earle, the decision to participate in SYA was straightforward. Most of her life, Earle has dreamed of spending a year in Barcelona like her father did in 1989.

"I chose to go to Zaragoza specifically to have a similar experience to my dad," Earle said, "but while still being able to make my own unique memories."

The Artzers' decision to move halfway across the world and leave behind family, school and the life they knew was not as easy as it was for Earle. In the end, the thought of a "dreadful" junior year at St. John's helped push them over the edge.

"If I had to go through junior year, why not do it in Spain?" Tess said. "That way, it can be more fun and a better experience than what everyone had described to me as awful."

Every Wednesday, students in the SYA program travel the country to talk to locals and explore new cities. Thanks to these "interactive work trips," the Artzer twins could fulfill their language goal without added stress from school.

"Even though classes are in a different language, they are not as intense because they are more focused on learning the language and less on the content," Pia said.

Though the twins grew up speaking Mexican Spanish at home, they were not prepared for the various local dialects and accents of Zaragoza.

The language barrier occasionally catches up to them. Tess called one attempt to order cake at a café a "humbling experience."

"It was like my brain was lagging when the waiter was speaking," she said.

Their biggest struggle was adjusting to the distance from their family. Most students can look forward to relaxing after a long day of school, but the Artzer twins found it harder than expected.

"It takes more energy to go home to be with your host family," Tess said. "Since it's in a different language, you still have to think about everything you're doing. It's not like you can completely relax once you're there because you still have to put your brain in Spanish mode."

Despite the language barrier, the host family is crucial to the students' experience.

"I think my relationship with my SYA family is so important because it is a way to learn about different cultures, connect with people while using applied language and have a family in a foreign country to lean back on whenever you need reassurance," Earle said.

At first, the changes seemed almost unbearable. Finding even daily necessities became a struggle.

"There is no CVS where you can just buy everything," said Pia, who later found her cough drops in a candy store. "Living in the U.S., we took everything for granted, and it was rough when we got to Spain. You have to completely relearn everything that you think you know."

When the twins celebrated their first Dia de Los Muertos away from home, they still wanted to preserve familial traditions. They decided to create their own altar, Artzer-style.

"It really hit me that I'm not in Houston anymore because I could not find anything for my altar," Tess said. "The things I would normally put were not there, not even flowers."

They ended up "DIY-ing most of it," using random artifacts they found around the house. But the homesickness hit when they video-called their family and saw the festive decorations and exciting buzz of a family gathering.

"I wished I was there and could just eat the Mexican desserts and good food I was used to," Pia said.

Even their taste buds had to adapt to their new environment. They initially did not enjoy the seafood and bread that their host family served.

"When I came here, I would not eat any seafood," Tess said. "If you gave it to me, I would

immediately put it away."

But after eating the same foods every day, they eventually accepted and began to enjoy them. The Artzers are learning how to make local dishes and adapt traditional recipes from their host family.

The SYA program also runs year-round schools in Rennes, France and Viterbo, Italy. Completion of three years of the language is required for staying in Spain and France, but students can study in Italy without any prior language experience.

To apply for SYA, students first go through an internal application with the School. Prospective participants submit a transcript and personal statement to Academic Dean Jennifer Kuhl in order to demonstrate their interest in the program. After Kuhl approves the application, students progress to the official SYA application and get interviewed by SYA coordinator and Spanish teacher Sherifa Kehs.

SYA works to make sure students are able to continue extracurricular activities while they live abroad. Along with their existing hobbies, students are able to find new passions in their host country. The Artzers were encouraged to try flamenco and soccer while they were in Spain. "It is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and you build relationships, confidence, and independence along the way," Earle said. "I am having a blast in Spain."

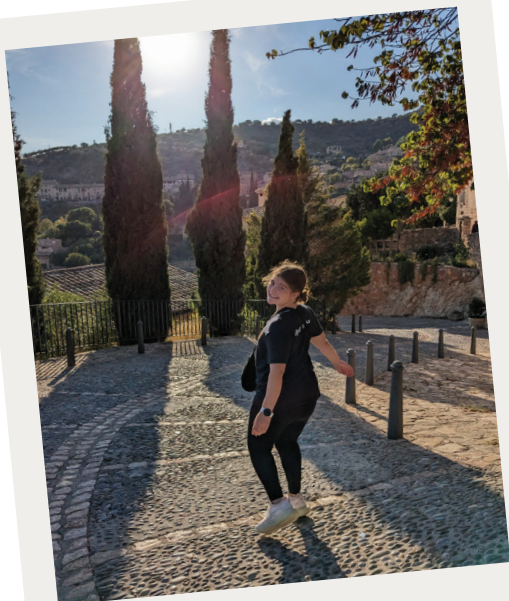
SYA has traditionally encouraged students to limit their contact with family and friends back home, which helps create an authentic and immersive experience in their new country. Pia maintains her connection with family and friends back home through social media. On Instagram, she frequently provides a glimpse of life in Spain, including stomping on grapes to make wine, exploring the streets of Zaragoza and sampling Spanish desserts.

Earle said she "would 100% recommend this to other students."

Tess added: "If there's any bone in your body telling you to do it, just do it."



WHEN LIFE GIVES YOU GRAPES...
SYA students Pia and Tess Artzer are encouraged to try new things like stomping grapes into wine.



SOAKING UP THE SUN
Pia and Tess share their experiences in Spain with family and friends back home by posting their adventures on social media, including this picture of Tess gallivanting through Zaragoza.