

Spain Travels

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The cool air runs through the plane as the doors open on the plane. It was a ten-hour flight from our windy city departure in Chicago. Grabbing my belongings, I pick up my worn leather bag that was full of memories from past travels and ready for another that awaits. I look up to see my lifelong friends ready to get off the cramped plane. We had to deal with the typical crying baby during the flight but the free drinks and food being on an international flight lead us to forget quickly. Our faces share the same tired expression as we shuffle single file out of the plane. There are three of us all together and have all found the perfect time to travel to a new destination with our busy life's. With work and families, it was hard to find the perfect time for something like this, but we managed to pull it off. We have done almost everything together and shared many experiences through our lives starting from a young age. We had all been together from grade school, and throughout school journeyed the country playing baseball and exploring all along. Spain was new to us, but we were no strangers to the adventure and possible bad decisions that were associated with it. Walking into the terminal I look over to Jordan with a smirk on my face and ask, "you speak any Spanish", knowing very well we both got less than average grades in Spanish class back in high school. "Que es esto, that's about all I got" he replies. We all share a laugh but hearing the blustering conversations as we walk through the airport that we may be in a little bit of trouble. Stepping outside we need to grab a ride to the hotel that we will be staying at for the night. A frail old man comes up to us and asks, to our knowledge, for a few dollars. We all generously give him some American dollars to see if this could possibly be what he is asking for. He smiles graciously at the dollar bills, nods, and walks away doing the same to others as they walk down the stairs toward the street. Our next feat will

be calling for a cab. Jordan pulls out his phone to pull up the Uber app and we both stare at him in disbelief. “Dude, you know we don’t have service, right?” Carson asks. Jordan is the group blonde. The one who is a victim to the constant friendly bullying from the group. Kid is smarter than anything in school but couldn’t stay alive more than a day in the outside world. Jordan is the sports star of the group having won a championship in baseball and letting us know about it every chance he gets. Hell, he even wears the ring to show it off. Jordan was raised in a small town in the same area that we all grew up in but never left the state until college. Was one of those BBQ chip eating Mountain Dew drinking kids. Kind of kid that house more hours on Xbox than he does outside, but still shockingly was the most athletic. Hopefully you get the idea of what we have had to deal with for the last 15 years. Still staring at Jordan with the look of doubt and utter confusion on our faces, we shake our heads knowing he will not get far and come up with a gameplan on how to get a cab. If you haven’t noticed yet, this is a group of people who roll with the punches, a kind of last-minute planning, figure it out when it becomes our problem type. So, there is no chance that we have thought this far ahead in our planning process. “Welp, let’s give it a shot boys.” Carson says while raising his hands in the air at random cars passing by. Something you can’t look away from almost. Embarrassing enough to make us feel awkward as Carson is now jumping up and down spitting random Spanish words which were very likely to be curse words, but not awkward enough that we didn’t get a little laugh out of it. Carson is the glue of the group. The most outgoing, friendly, on his toes type of guy, who has a solution for everything. Not a care in the world and almost exudes self-confidence. Locals are smugly looking at us knowing we are Americans. I’ve seen people look at me that hated me for sure. Hell, some of them even wanted to kill me at times. This was that look. Stupid, stupid Americans. I don’t think Spaniards ever really hated Americans, but for sure hated us. A blue

van not knowing what he is about to get himself into, stops and we throw our hiking bags in the back and load into the van. “Hola, como estas” I try to say to the driver as we pile in. The driver puffing his Marbrolo Red as we take our seats, a soccer game blaring over the radio. The only thing missing is a damn bull running down Pamplona. We are here, this is Spain at its best.

Immerse yourself in the culture, right? I’m a local now, I believe it, literally convinced myself that I am from this country, and I live here. I just pulled off the best Spanish of my life, not trying to boast but I play this off as if its normal business to me. The driver turns around and looks me dead in the eyes, serious as all hell. “What the hell did you just say to me? You just called me a bitch, didn’t you? You really called me a bitch in my own van, in my own country, who the hell do you think you are?!” Not giving me a chance to explain myself as he is now screaming directly at me. “You Americans think you run everything, don’t you! I’m tired of this” as he is grabbing for his waistband and pulls a knife. “You say some dumb shit like that again and I will kill you right here, do you understand?” Trying to muster a quick reply, sweat now dripping down my face and probably a few seconds away from needing to change my pants, he burst out in laughter. “You should have seen your face!” he exclaims. Our looks change drastically from pure fear to confusion. “I’m Charlie, you boys like to party” he casually says as if he didn’t just prank us into thinking we were about to die in a street in Spain. “What the hell was that you asshole” I say to him trying to figure out what just went down. “Oh, stop being a baby it was a joke, you almost pissed yourself didn’t you” Charlie replies thinking what just happened was a normality for traveling to Spain. “I said, do you guys like to party” insinuating he knows a good time. “Yeah, yeah, we do I guess what do you got? You going to try and shank us when we get there or what” Carson says to Charlie trying to defuse the situation as we start driving away from the airport. “Oh, let it go man, your still on that? Americans whine to much man” Charlie says.

We share small talk with Charlie as we make our way deeper into the town. The streets are dimly lit overflow water from a recent rain is stagnant on the edge of the streets. Running through the brick laid roads adding a sheen reflection from the headlights of Charlies van. Looking out the window it seemed as if everyone had a cigarette hanging out of their mouth walking the streets, men, women, young and old. Chimneys is what these people were. As we entered the lively center, we knew our night was going to be great, music filled the streets, people dancing outside bars, the hardest decision we had to make was where to start. Charlie sees our excitement and decides to drop us off at his favorite bar. “You guys will have a great time here, I promise, my favorite of all time”, says Charlie. We thank him for the ride and start our adventure. Wondering through the local bar we see the diverse culture that we set out for in the beginning. The bar overlooks the ocean with a stunning view under the stars. As we take a second to soak in the atmosphere and try to take in everything we are seeing, we are interrupted by the bartender. Her lipstick cherry red, asking us what we would like to drink, or what we comprehend from her very laid-back Spanish accent. “Your choice, surprise us” Carson says the bartender. “Here on vacation, I see” she replies noticing the three pasty Americans that are standing out like a sore thumb in the middle of the bar. Doesn’t help that Carson and Jordan are 6’4” towering over everyone. Carson chuckling, “yes how could you tell? We are open to recommendations to have the best night in Spain, you have any?” “Yes of course, give me a second and we can work something out” she replies. High hopes we continue to take in our surroundings and try to get our bearing. The bright stars are beaming off the wavy ocean. The cool ocean breeze, fresh and free of the pollution that we are accustomed to in Chicago was a relief. It was almost as if the wind was layered with salt from the sea. A gentleman calls to us from behind, “Hey, you the guys that are looking for an experience or something like that?” “Uh, yeah I guess that would be us” I say

not knowing if this is what the bartender worked out for us. “Follow me” he says as he walks towards the back of the bar. Without any hesitation and leaving everything we have learned from horror movies behind us, we follow the suspicious man towards the back. He leads us to a small hallway that heads down a narrow set of stairs. Not wanting to interrupt the man we awkwardly walk behind him not saying a word. He opens a door at the bottom of the stairs, and we walk into a small room with a table accompanied by some chairs, and along the wall are a handful of men in black suits. Realizing we may have made a major mistake we turn for the door before sternly being stopped by a mountain of a man wearing dark black shades. “Please, please, sit down” the man says now in a demanding tone. We look at each other with a loss of words, and unable to comprehend what is about to happen. Carson frantically blurts out to the man, “this is some kind of mix up, I don’t think we are supposed to be here!” The man looking at us with a stone face once again tells us to sit, as if they know who we are and there is no possible way they have mistaken us. We are helped to our seats by the men in the suits, and we are now all sweating and in a major state of confusion and fear not knowing what is to come. The man that escorted us to the room takes his place at the table and pulls out a deck of cards. An older man, who has seen some stuff in his time. Well-seasoned if you will. “I’m going to tell you what is going to happen tonight gentlemen. We are going to play a little game of blackjack, easy enough” he says. “Um, yeah I guess so, I just don’t get why we are here” I reply trying to get an answer from our escort. “You are here because you chose to be, is that good enough for you? Listen, you all know how to play blackjack, the only change we will be making tonight is if you lose, you lose everything. The goal is to beat the dealer, if that happens you are free to go” he says in a sarcastic manner. Jordan panicking now frantically says, “what do you mean by lose everything, man? That doesn’t sound like a game I want to play!” You guys really don’t get it do

you? Let me put it a little simpler to you Americans, you win you live. You lose, you die. Do we all understand now” he says in a stern voice again, prompting us to realize that we have made a major mistake. Before we could say another word in our arguments we are being restrained by the men in suits, our wrists and ankles taped to the chair arms and legs and a piece of tape to cover our mouths. “Alright, no questions I see, lets get the game started” He deals us all a hand with all the cards face up to allow us to see our hand. Looking at Jordan he asks hit or check? Jordan knowing what he has already shakes his head yes and dealer throws him a card. “Oh dang, that’s a bust my friend.” The men in black throw a bag over Jordan’s head cut the restraints free and drag Jordan out the door. The dealer moves his attention to Carson. We are creating a commotion restrained to the chairs not knowing what is going to happen to our friend who just got taken away. The dealer looks back at the us and says the same thing, “hit or check?” Carson, ridden with hatred for this man shakes his head to check. Once again, the dealer asks the question to me. I look down at my cards and see an ace and a jack. I calmly shake my head to check and await the dealer’s hand. The cards seem to come out of his hands in slow motion as he flips his cards over. The dealer seeing, he must beat at least Carson, jokingly says, “I guess ill hit.” The card flips over, and the dealer is now at 20. Carson’s head sinks as the men come up to take him away. I am furious at this point, not knowing if my friends are now dead over a rash game of blackjack and not knowing what is about to happen to me. The men walk over to me and rip the tape off my face. “Where are you taking them”, I frantically yell. “This isn’t fair you can’t do this to us!” The dealer calmly looks at me, “You know the rules, you know what is going to happen. I don’t know why you are so angry, you beat the dealer, right?” Before I can answer my face is sealed with the sticky tape again. A bag gets thrown on my head and my restraints are being cut off. I am set with defeat as I start getting drug outside. The sand now running through

my feet and the sound of the ocean in the close distance allows me to run to multiple assumptions of what is about to happen. My feet fell the cold ocean water and the men stop dragging me, I am forced onto my knees and in all helplessness realize this is the end. My eyes close in despair for what is about to happen, and I wonder in the brief moments I have of what went wrong. The bag gets ripped off my head and my eyes meet Charlie immediately standing in front of me. “Hey, you won my friend, I told you that you would have a good time, right” he says as if I should be excited. I am struck with disbelief and sheer confusion as the lights from an overhang turn on, a crowd starts cheering and the music starts blaring. I turn my head to the left as far as I could and see the large group of people running towards me shouting in excitement, leading the group are my friends. Charlie rips the tape off and yells, “I got you good, didn’t I my friend”, as the party arrives too great me.