

# Cultural Notes

## SCHOOL

- Attendance: U.S. schools require 180 days of attendance whereas in Spain 200 days are required. Mexico requires 205 days and Chile 235.
- Grading system: In the U.S. we use a grading system based on letter grades and percentages A=90-100%, B= 80-90% etc. The majority of Spanish-speaking countries use a system based on numbers 1-10 (10 being the best grade).
- In Spanish-speaking countries students take between ten and twelve classes at once. These classes do not meet every day. A geography class might meet three days a week and a music class twice. As a result, student schedules vary from day to day.
- Students address their teacher as *profesor* or *profesora*. Some will shorten it to *profe*. Students wear uniforms and in many schools when the teacher enters the classroom, the students stand. Instead of students moving classrooms it is the teacher who moves from class to class.
- Students generally do not hold jobs. They spend their time studying, being with family and friends and participating in different activities.

## SPORTS

- Soccer is the most popular sport in the world and many Spanish-speaking countries are among the devoted. The word *fútbol* is not football as Americans understand it but rather soccer. *Fútbol americano* is used to distinguish between the two sports. In the Caribbean (Dominican Republic, Cuba, Puerto Rico) baseball is more popular. It was introduced in Cuba over 100 years ago when the U.S. took possession of Cuba from Spain after the Spanish-American War in 1898. There are more than 200 baseball players from Latin America in the major leagues.
- School gyms are rare in Spanish-speaking countries. Students usually have P.E. classes in the school's patio. This is also where they pledge allegiance in lines and have student performances. School based teams are rare so young people join private gyms or sports clubs to practice and compete. They also participate in music and art lessons at private institutions outside of school.

## HOME/FAMILY

- In Spanish-speaking countries it is not uncommon for three generations of a family to live under one roof or in the same neighborhood. Young single adults tend to live with their parents longer than they do in the U.S. due to economical or employment reasons or simply because the family bond between generations is very strong. In Spain 77% of youth under the age of 30 live with their parents.
- Surnames (*apellidos*): Some Spanish-speakers use more than one last name. Their dual last names come from both their mother and father. In the U.S. if John Smith and Nancy Jones get married and have a child, he or she would end up with a name such as Chris Smith. It's not the same in Spanish-speaking countries. If Juan López Martín marries María Covas Valdez, their child would end up with a name such as Mario López Covas. The matter of Spanish surnames might seem confusing at first, but that's mostly



- When the tomato was brought to Europe, the French called it “the apple of love” while the Germans called it “the apple of paradise”. As the tomato traveled to England the mystery increased. The British believed that the tomato was poisonous, a myth that traveled to the American colonies and was believed by many until the nineteenth century.
- Potatoes come from Perú where there are over 250 different kinds!
- In Mexico there are over 2,000 different types of *chiles*! After salt, chili peppers are the world’s most common form of seasoning. With twice the Vitamin C of most citrus fruits, *chiles* are nutritious. Their hotness is measured in Scoville heat units. For example, a bell pepper measures 0 while a jalapeño measures between 3,000 and 5,000 Scoville units. The hottest *chile*, the *habanero*, measures 500,000 Scoville units!
- Chocolate comes from the cacao (kah KOW) tree which was discovered 2,000 years ago in the tropical rainforests of the Americas. The scientific name of the tree is *theobroma* which means “food of the gods”. The pods of this tree contain seeds that can be processed into chocolate. The first people known to have made chocolate were the Maya and Aztecs of the ancient cultures of Mexico and Central America. These people mixed ground cacao seeds with chili peppers, cornmeal and various seasonings to make a spicy but bitter, frothy drink. The word chocolate comes from the Aztec word *xocoatl* which means “bitter water”. Aztecs believed that wisdom and power came from eating the fruit of the cacao tree. They also believed it to be a health elixir which nourished and fortified the body. Chocolate played a special role in both Maya and Aztec royal and religious events. Priests presented cacao seeds as offerings to the gods and served chocolate drinks during sacred ceremonies. The Aztec emperor, Montezuma drank thick chocolate dyed red. The drink was so prestigious that it was served in golden goblets that were thrown away after only one use. He liked it so much that he was purported to drink 50 goblets every day! The Aztecs traded with the Maya and required they pay their tribute in cacao seeds—a form of Aztec money. A slave could be bought for 100 cacao beans and 4 cacao beans got you a rabbit for dinner. The Spanish conquistadors brought the seeds back home to Spain, where sugar vanilla, nutmeg, cloves, allspice and cinnamon were added creating a new delicacy. The Spanish managed to keep chocolate a secret from the rest of the world for almost 100 years. Today it is still one of the world’s favorite flavors.
- *Churros* are long slender doughnut-like pastries fried in hot oil. In Spain the sugar is sprinkled on after being fried. They do not add cinnamon like the Mexican *churros* but instead dip them in rich, thick chocolate.
- Meals in Spanish-speaking countries vary. It is common, however, to have a light breakfast like a roll, yogurt and either juice, tea or coffee. In Spain chocolate and *churros* qualifies as breakfast. It is uncommon to eat cereal, eggs sausage or ham.
- In Spain lunch is the main meal of the day. This large midday meal is served between 2:00pm and 4:00pm while dinner is light and served around 10:00pm. Students return home from school and most businesses are closed during the midday meal time. This 2 hour lunch is used to socialize, relax, talk with family and resolve conflicts. Students return to school and businesses reopen after 4:00pm or 4:30pm. Banks normally close at 2:00pm and do not reopen again in the afternoon. For hundreds of years in Spain people would take an afternoon nap (*siesta*) after the large midday meal. With modern-day pressures this tradition is phasing out. Some businesses are switching to the nine-to-five schedule of the U.S.

## BODY LANGUAGE

- Greetings: In Spanish-speaking cultures, body language accompanying greetings and good-byes is different. Men greeting men shake hands if they don't know each other but embrace and pat each other on the back if they do already know each other. Women greeting women shake hands if they don't know each other and kiss each other on the cheek (both cheeks in Spain) when they know each other. Men and women greeting each other kiss on the cheek if they know each other.
- There are two ways to address someone in Spanish; two ways to say "you". The informal you is *tú*. It is used with friends, family, people your own age, children and pets. The formal you is *usted*. It shows respect and is used when talking to people you don't know well, older people, people in positions of authority and people working in their profession.
- Personal space: In conversation, Spanish-speakers may not only stand uncomfortably close, but may also pat your arm or shoulder. If you are put out by such gestures, it will only cause offence to try to retreat into your own private space.
- Gestures:
  - Tapping your elbow indicates a person is very tight with their money.
  - To beckon someone, turn your palm down and wave your fingers or entire hand wave your palm down. Curling your index finger up back and forth is vulgar.
  - Making a circle with the index finger and thumb to say "okay" is also considered vulgar in Spain.
  - Say "Let's eat" by bunching your fingertips (including your thumb) together, bringing your hand up close to your mouth and then extending it forward bending your arm at the elbow.
  - With your palm up and your fingertips rubbing together (including your thumb) you indicate that something is "expensive".
  - To say "Be careful" (*¡ojó!*), move your index finger below the center of your eye and pull the skin downward.
  - Move your index finger left and right and click your mouth (like tsk tsk) to say "no".
  - To say something tastes delicious (*¡Qué rico!*), kiss the bunched fingertips of one hand then quickly pull your hand away extending your fingers.
  - Respectful behavior requires that you avoid yawning or stretching in public.

**WHERE IS SPANISH SPOKEN?** Approximately 500 million people speak Spanish as a native language in the world today. It is the third most widely spoke language behind Chinese and English. Here is a list of places ranked in order of the number of people who speak Spanish (according to 1990 figures). [Notice where the U.S. falls.] (The U.S. is actually at 41 million now.)

Mexico	106 million
Colombia	44 million
Spain	44 million
Argentina	39 million
United States	31 million
Venezuela	25 million

Peru	25 million
Chile	16 million
Guatemala	14 million
Ecuador	13 million
Cuba	11 million
Bolivia	8.7 million
Dominican Republic	8.5 million
El Salvador	6.8 million
Honduras	6.8 million
Nicaragua	5.5 million
Paraguay	4.5 million
Costa Rica	4 million
Puerto Rico	3.6 million
Uruguay	3.4 million
Panama	3 million

- This little rhyme to the “Ten Little Indians” helps students learn the Central and South American Spanish-speaking countries. The first verse goes in order running down the map from Mexico to Panamá. It does not include Spain, the U.S. or the Caribbean Islands of Cuba, Puerto Rico or the Dominican Republic.

Mexico and Guatemala  
 El Salvador and then Honduras  
 Nicaragua, Costa Rica  
 And then there's Panamá. Ay!

Colombia and Venezuela  
 Ecuador, Peru and Chile  
 Bolivia and Argentina  
 Paraguay and Uruguay. Ay!

- Spanish-speakers are the largest minority group in the U.S. They make up 14% of the U.S. population. Spanish is the second most spoken language in U.S. Most Spanish-speakers live in California, Texas, New York, Florida and Illinois. There are high concentrations of Puerto Ricans in New York and Cubans in Florida.
- Puerto Rico is not a country nor is it a state in the U.S. but rather a territory of the U.S. Puerto Ricans are American citizens but cannot vote for the president or have representation in Congress.

## NUMBERS

- Dates: The way dates are expressed in Spanish-speaking countries differs from the U.S. They begin with the smallest increment of time and work up. Instead of December 4, 2007 they say the 4<sup>th</sup> of December of 2007. It is written 04-12-07 as opposed to 12-04-07. Days of the week and months of the year are not capitalized and the calendar week begins with Monday and ends with Sunday.

- In the English-speaking countries and Mexico (among a few others) the use of the comma and decimal are opposite the majority of Spanish-speaking countries (as well as the majority of other countries). Example 1.5 (1 ½) gallons would be written as *1,5 galones* and 2,350 people would be written *2.350 personas*.
- Metric system: Spanish-speaking countries use the metric system. 1 kilo = 2.2 pounds (written 2,2) and 1 liter = 1.057 quarts (written 1,057).
- Celsius is used in Spanish-speaking countries as opposed to Fahrenheit. To convert Celsius to Fahrenheit multiply the Celsius degree by 9/5 then add 32. Example:  $40^{\circ}\text{C} / 9 \times 5 + 32 = 104^{\circ}\text{F}$
- Phone numbers: In the U.S. when we tell someone our phone number, we say each number individually 5-2-1-2-4-3-8. In Spanish-speaking countries telephone numbers are expressed single-single-single-double-double 5-2-1-24-38 or all in doubles 52-12-43-85 (depending on how many numbers there are).
- Military time: In Spanish-speaking countries the 24 hour clock is used for public events such as concerts, bullfights, sports events, radio, television, invitations, train and plane schedules. Instead of 8:00 am and 8:00 pm, it would be 08:00 and 20:00.
- Calendar: Rome occupied Spain for over 700 years. Spanish is a romance language because it originated from the language of Rome which was Latin. (Other romance languages include French, Portuguese, Italian and Romanian.) The original Roman calendar contained ten months and began with *Martius* followed by *Aprilis*, *Maius*, *Iunius*, *Quintilis*, *Sextilis*, *September*, *October*, *November* and then *December*. *Quintilis* was renamed July in honor of Julius Caesar and *Sextilis* was renamed August in honor of Caesar Augustus. The later months were named based on their position in the original calendar **Septem**ber means 7 (*siete* in Spanish) and was therefore the 7<sup>th</sup> month, **Octo**ber means 8 (ocho), **Novem**ber - 9 (nueve) and **Decem**ber- 10 (diez). When two more months were added to beginning of the calendar (Ianuarius and Februarius), it offset the already existing months so that September became the 9<sup>th</sup> month instead of the 7<sup>th</sup>, October the 10<sup>th</sup> instead of the 8<sup>th</sup>, November the 11<sup>th</sup> instead of 9<sup>th</sup> and December the 12<sup>th</sup> instead of the 10<sup>th</sup>.

## LEISURE TIME

- Life in Spanish-speaking countries is in many ways opposite life in the U.S. It is unhurried, loud and smoke-filled. Nothing is done in a hurry but whatever needs doing gets done. So, if a waiter does not come to your table immediately, you should not condemn him for poor service but accept that he does not appear to be in any hurry because he assumes that you are not in a hurry.
- Most people enjoy an active social life out of doors in the cool of the evening and into the night. Do not be surprised to see young children still up at midnight.
- *Telenovelas* are common among the youth. Unlike soap operas which continue forever, *telenovelas* last only a few months. Their episodes are called chapters just like a novel.
- The *quinceañera* marks a young girl's transition from girlhood to womanhood. It takes place as she turns 15 (*quince*). Families rent a banquet hall and host elaborate parties complete with tuxedos and formal dresses, catered receptions, a live band, limousines, and formal wedding-like cake and invitations.

- Young people dress up more formally than in the U.S. when going to concerts, parties, on a date, for a walk in the park or visiting family. Jeans are popular and are worn with nice shirts or blouses; never with old or torn t-shirts. Sweats are not worn in public.
- For fun young people gather in a plaza, café or park to talk, listen to music, have a snack or enjoy an informal game of soccer.

## SHOPPING

- Whereas there are usually large commercial centers like malls, small specialty stores operated by families are still very commonplace. The ending *-ería* indicates a place where something is sold, made or repaired. A *librería* sells libros (books), a *joyería* sells joyas (jewelry), *zapatería* – zapatos (shoes), *panadería* – pan (bread), *pastelería* – pasteles (pasteries), *relojería* – relojes (watches), *tortillería* - tortillas, *carnicería* – carne (meat) etc. A couple of these have made their way into English like *cafetería* which sells café (originally a coffee shop) and *pizzería* which (naturally) sells pizza.
- U.S. currency honors different presidents and historical events. In Spanish-speaking countries currency images also honor a country's history or culture. In Venezuela the *bolívar* is the official currency named after Simon Bolivar, the Great Liberator. Guatemala uses the *quetzal*, a rare and exotic bird found in the rain forests. Costa Rica uses the *colón* named after Cristóbal Colón (Christopher Columbus). Honduras uses the *lempira* named after an indigenous leader who unified the different tribes against the Spaniards. Spain used the *peseta* until 2002 when it was replaced with the *euro*. The twelve countries that use the *euro* all have the same notes but the coins have one common side and one national side. A portrait of King Juan Carlos I is found on Spain's national side.

## DRIVING

- Driver's licenses: In all Spanish-speaking countries in order to get a driver's license a person must present identification documents, a health certificate declaring them in good physical and mental health to drive pass a test. In Argentina you can drive a moped at 16 and a car at 17. In Spain you can drive a moped without passengers at 14, with passengers at 17 and drive a car at 18.
- Driving in Spain is not the safest form of transportation. The speed limit on the highways is 120km (75 mph) but you'll see cars speeding way above the limit. If you sit out in the fast lane doing the speed limit you'll soon have a large BMW or Mercedes flashing you to get out of the way. Jumping red lights is a national pastime. Don't brake suddenly as a light is turning to red as the car behind you intends to get through that light! It should be no surprise that Spain's road death toll is among the highest in Europe.
- In Mexico City to reduce air pollution automobile owners are required to leave their cars home one day a week. The last digit of the car's license plate determines which day of the week is prohibited. When the air pollution level is extremely high, cars must stay off the road twice a week.

**HOLIDAYS/FESTIVALS:** Since there are many Spanish-speaking countries, it is impossible to mention all of the holidays and festivals. Here are a few:

- *Tomatina*: How would you like to participate in a giant food fight with tomatoes? There

is a festival in Buñol, Spain called the *Tomatina* that is just that! The town council hands out more than 130 tons of ripe tomatoes and for two hours people battle it out throwing tomatoes at each other.

- *San Fermín*: This is a two week festival (July 7-14) in Pamplona, Spain that includes the running of the bulls and bullfights. Additionally the streets are filled with music, dancing, enormous puppets and papier-mâché figures of kings, queens and ponies that run after the children clobbering them with powder filled sponge balls as they parade through the streets. The children run with a mixture of delight and fear. But everyone has a good time.
- Christmas (*Navidad*) is a holiday that lasts through January 6<sup>th</sup>. It is normally celebrated among family whereas New Year's Eve is celebrated often among friends. Christmas dinner is a feast never eaten until after midnight on Christmas Eve. Christmas Day is spent at church, at feasts and singing in the courtyards. The 12 days of Christmas actually refer to the 12 days between Christmas and Epiphany (January 6<sup>th</sup>). This is Three Kings Day (*El Día de los Reyes Magos*). It isn't Santa that brings the gifts in the Spanish-speaking countries but rather the Three Wise Men (or Three Kings). Children write letters to the Three Kings and leave hay and water for the camels instead of milk and cookies for Santa. Instead of filling the children's stockings with candies, the Three Kings fill the children's shoes. This is the traditional day to exchange gifts.
- December 28<sup>th</sup> is *Santos Inocentes* equivalent to April Fool's Day. People play tricks on each other and stick paper cut-outs of little men to each other's backs.
- New Year's Eve in Spain is spent with friends gathered together with a bag of 12 giant grapes. There is a tradition begun about 100 years ago of eating twelve grapes at the twelve strokes of midnight. This is a fun ritual, only spoiled by the fact that it is almost impossible to buy seedless grapes in Spain! It's almost impossible to finish eating the grapes by the time the clock finishes chiming but for every grape you get right, you will get a month's good luck. Everybody starts the New Year with a full mouthful of grapes. Everyone also eats *roscón*, a sweet, donut-shaped bread (though much bigger than a donut) covered in glacier cherries and sugar. A plastic toy is buried inside the mixture. The traditions vary for the person who finds the toy. They either get good luck for the next year, are deemed the king or queen of the party, have to buy another *roscón* or, in some places, have to do the dishes after the party. ☺
- At first glance, the Mexican custom of *El día de los muertos* — the Day of the Dead — may sound much like the U.S. custom of Halloween. After all, the celebration traditionally starts at midnight the night of Oct. 31, and the festivities are abundant in images related to death. But the customs have different origins, and their attitudes toward death are different. In the typical Halloween festivities, death is something to be feared but in *El día de los muertos*, death is celebrated. The holiday continues through All Saints' Day on November 1<sup>st</sup> until November 2<sup>nd</sup>. Elaborate altars with photos, flowers, food are made to welcome departed spirits home. Vigils are held, and families go to cemeteries to clean up their relatives' graves. They spend the night in the graveyard singing, dancing, eating and praying. The most traditional food eaten is the *pan de muerto* (bread of the dead) which can conceal a miniature skeleton.
- *Cinco de mayo* is not Mexico's Independence Day. That is September 16<sup>th</sup>. About the time of the American Civil War, the French invaded Mexico looking to collect on a debt. Many battles were fought during the four years that the French ruled Mexico. *Cinco de mayo* celebrates the Mexican victory over the French at the Battle of Puebla in 1862.

## MISCELLANEOUS

- Mexican flag: The Coat of Arms in the center of the Mexican flag was inspired by an Aztec legend regarding the founding of Tenochtitlán. According to the popular legend, the Aztec people, then a nomadic tribe, were wandering throughout Mexico in search of a sign that would indicate the precise spot upon which they were to build their capital. The war god Huitzilopochtli had commanded them to find an eagle perched atop a prickly pear cactus growing on a rock with a serpent trapped in its mouth. After two hundred years of wandering, they found the sign on a small island in the swampy Lake Texcoco. Here they founded their new capital, Tenochtitlán, which later became known as Mexico City, the capital of Mexico. Tenochtitlán had causeways linking it to the mainland, aqueducts, sewers, irrigation systems and "floating gardens". Today it is the most highly populated city in the world.
- *San* is the name of many cities in U.S. It is short for *santo* (saint or holy). Many cities began as missions and were named for saints. *Santa* is the feminine form. Santa Fe (Holy faith), Santa Cruz (Holy cross), San Francisco (Saint Francis), San Diego (Saint James), San Jose (Saint Joseph), Santa Bárbara (Saint Barbara), San Antonio (Saint Anthony) etc.
- Legend says that the Canary Islands (part of Spain) are the mountain peaks of the lost city of Atlantis.
- Punctuation marks: Upside down exclamations points and question marks are used at the beginning of exclamatory or interrogatory sentences. Example: *¿Cómo estás?* = How are you? *¡Qué fantástico!* That's fantastic! It sure makes it easy to know how to inflect your voice through the sentence.
- The expression "to tie the knot" to refer to getting married comes from a Mexican tradition. The ceremony of "*el lazo*" is part of the wedding and symbolizes the union between the bride and groom. The couple says their wedding vows and then the priest puts a rope around their neck in the form of an 8.
- Venezuela come from the impression the first Europeans had when they saw houses rising on stilts out of the water of the Sinamaica Lagoon near what is now Maracaibo. The houses reminded them of Venice, and so they called the place Venezuela or "little Venice".