

Don't overlook Valencia

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Before last summer I had traveled extensively in Spain, but had never been to Valencia. That was remedied when I arrived there in June to lay the groundwork for biology studies in the Iowa State University's "ISU on the Mediterranean" program. This six-week program offers courses for ISU credit in Spanish, Engineering and Business, taught by both ISU and University of Valencia faculty.

With a population of more a million people, Valencia is the third-largest city in Spain (after Madrid and Barcelona), but is not on the radar screen of most American tourists. That's surprising given Valencia's location on the Mediterranean Sea, miles of clean beaches, year-round mild climate, friendly people and world-renowned symphony, opera and museums.



The first thing I noticed about the city was its cleanliness, beauty and prosperity. It has palm-lined boulevards with flower-filled medians, and distinctive architecture that includes buildings from the 12th century to the present built upon the city's Roman ruins.

A recent addition to the city's skyline is the awe-inspiring City of Arts and Sciences (L' Ciudad de las Artes y Ciencias), a huge futuristic complex of four buildings designed by the worldrenowned Valencian architect, Santiago Calatrava (of Milwaukee Museum of Art fame). This complex is the most popular tourist site in Spain after the Prado in Madrid, and it contains an interactive science museum, a planetarium, a

multifunctional arts complex, an IMAX theater and the largest aquarium in Europe.

One of the highlights of my stay in Valencia was the "old city" (ciutat vella) of twisted streets, plazas, churches, and sidewalk cafes and bars. It exudes a Spanish charm that is refreshingly free from the tourist kitsch, ubiquitous fast food chains and garish sports bars that pervade the "old towns" of a number of European destinations.

I spent several afternoons wandering the streets of the old city, sitting at outdoor cafes reading and peoplewatching, eating the Valencian specialty, paella (saffron-flavored rice with vegetables and meat or seafood), and drinking horchata, a popular milk drink made from water, sugar and tigernuts.

The soul of Valencia resides in the sea, and it has a refurbished inner harbor that was the site of the 2007 America's Cup sailing race. Beaches stretch for 10 miles north and south of the harbor. I found the north beaches (La Malvarrosa and Las Arenas) - lined with a long boardwalk with restaurants and cafes - to be more crowded than those on the south. Public transportation provides easy access to the beaches.

The Turia Gardens is a five-mile-long green belt that encircles the old city. The gardens are surrounded by ancient walls and buildings and spanned by magnificently detailed bridges.

Valencia has many other well-kept parks and gardens, including the Botanical Garden (Jardín Botánico), which is the oldest botanical garden in Spain - established in 1597 - and one of Europe's largest. It takes up four acres in the "old city" and includes more than 3,000 species of plants. The Jardín Botánico is a teaching facility for the University of Valencia, and would be perfect for introducing students to principles of plant

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The Cathedral stands on the site of a mosque and was built after Valencia was reconquered from the Moors. Climbing the 270 steps of the Miguellette Bell Tower (octagonal building in foreground) offers a panoramic view of the city.



The Plaza del Ayuntamiento is in the heart of Valencia and is surrounded by the town hall, post office and other office buildings.



The Calatrava-designed "City of Arts and Sciences" is the second-most popular tourist attraction in Spain.

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biology.

Valencia is known for its agricultural production of citrus, especially oranges, which are exported all over the world.

I spent much of my time in Valencia meeting faculty members from a variety of biological disciplines at the University of Valencia. They were enthusiastic about hosting ISU students in their research labs. Working in a research lab will allow ISU students to be participants in the "Valencian experience", rather than mere observers.

To further enhance participation, biology students will be required to take a Spanish language course and to live with a host Spanish family for the duration of the program. In fact, I will be joining some of the biology students in an introductory Spanish course!

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Steve Rodermel is a biology instructor in the "Summer in Valencia" Program. The Opera House in the City of Arts and Sciences is in the background.





Valencia, Spain, has broad avenues lined with palm trees.

Details

WHO: Steve Rodermel HOMETOWN: Ames DESTINATION: Valencia, Spain TRIP DATES: June 10-21 DESTINATION BEST FOR: All ages and interests