

Michele French ES'71: Expanding International Horizons



By the time Michele French began SYA Spain, in 1970, she had already lived in Mexico and Europe, but, she says, participation in the program offered her an opportunity for a multicultural educational experience that was previously unknown to her. “In a way, I enjoyed a new level of independence,” she recalls.

It was French’s mother who first became aware of School Year Abroad. “Although we had been living in France at the time, my mother wanted something

more formal in terms of an international education for my brother and me,” says French. “She did some research and came up with SYA.”

French remembers being eager to get started. “At the time, my brother and I were being tutored because we did a lot of traveling with my mother,” she says, “so the idea of being in a classroom with kids my own age was very appealing to me.”

As one of the first girls in SYA, French found few distinctions between the genders. “It didn’t seem dramatically different, although the staff and faculty were a bit more protective of the girls,” she says.

After speaking Spanish in Mexico, more obvious now were some differences in the Spanish language. “It was similar to an American traveling in England,” she says. “The language is basically the same, but the accent and certain terms differ between Mexican and Spanish.”

Culturally, there were also differences between Mexico and Spain. “The Mexican people seemed a lot more open, rowdier; the Spanish were more reserved,” she says. “This could have had much to do with that fact that Spain was considered almost a Third World country under the dictatorship of Generalissimo Franco.”

It was through language that French became aware of Spain’s sensitive political climate. “The government prohibited local citizens from speaking in their native Catalan, although they would do so in their own homes,” says French. “It was just one example of Franco’s rigid, fascist regime.”

Indeed, French witnessed such oppression firsthand. “A group of us were going to see a concert featuring folksinger Pete Seeger and some local Catalan singers,” she recalls. “We soon found ourselves running from police on horseback and from water cannons, which were used to disperse the crowd, because the government disapproved of the performance.”

Such troubling impressions, however, were countered by many positive experiences. “As students, we would go to class and in the afternoon enjoy getting together at a café to talk and drink coffee,” she says. She made many Spanish friends and went with them to discos for afternoon dance parties.

French frequently took public transit with her girlfriends to wander through the Gothic parts of the city, Barcelona's oldest sections, constructed during the Middle Ages. She even engaged in her favorite hobby — horseback riding. "I managed to get together a few students and we'd go to a local stable for riding and lessons," she recalls.

She has fond memories of her host family, who, French says, included her for all family dinners as well as other special occasions. "At times my host mother would worry that I didn't take a sweater to school, but I assured her that I knew how to dress," French says, laughing.

French eventually settled in Mexico, where she has become a successful jewelry designer. Her jewelry is particularly praised for its distinctive international style, with Middle Eastern, Iranian and Indian influences.

Her lifelong love of traveling and living in other countries has made her a strong advocate for programs, such as SYA, that provide such experiences. "Every student should have the opportunity to travel abroad," she says. "Our world is simply too interconnected today for students not to be aware and appreciative of other nations and cultures."