

Ellen Hoitsma ES'71: The Best of Both Worlds



The daughter of a Phillips Academy mathematics teacher, Ellen Hoitsma remembers the day when her father said her entire family would be living in Barcelona by the time she entered 10th grade. “And if my Spanish became strong enough,” she recalls, “he told me I could attend SYA as one of the first female students.”

It was 1970, and after the excitement of acceptance into the program, Hoitsma wrestled with insecurities.

“I was naturally apprehensive about the idea of living in Spain, being away from all of my friends, but also recognized that it was an awesome opportunity for me and for my family,” she says now.

She was further encouraged by a learning opportunity during the summer prior to her departure for Spain. “I was very fortunate to be able to study Spanish with Ángel Vilalta, SYA Spain’s language teacher, who happened to be teaching Spanish at Andover that summer,” she says. “Thanks to him, I benefited from a crash course in Spanish that helped me feel a little more secure about my entry into the program.”

Upon starting SYA Spain, where her father would be teaching, Hoitsma became far more confident than she could ever have imagined. “I had the best of both worlds,” she says. “I was able to study abroad while living with my own family because of my father’s teaching role at SYA Spain. I began by exploring the city with other students in the program — Susan McCouch was one of my best friends. But eventually I made friends with Catalan students, including a Spanish boyfriend.”

Everything about Barcelona was new and thrilling to Hoitsma. “The Spanish art, music, dance, food — all of it was a novel experience for me despite exposure to them back home,” she says. She especially enjoyed trips to the countryside with her fellow students, trekking and skiing in the Pyrenees.

Even the one difference in her yearlong Spanish residency — the fact that, unlike her fellow students, she lived with her own family — turned out to be a positive one. “It gave me the security to spread my wings,” says Hoitsma. “And thanks to Susan, I got a glimpse of what it was like to live with a Spanish family.”

Hoitsma believes Spain’s political landscape further enriched her SYA stay. “It was a very exciting time to be there,” she says. “Beneath the rigid conservatism of the regime of Generalissimo Franco, Spain’s dictator, this Catalan city — resentful of the government’s repression — was alive with political and social ferment.

“The conservatism played to our advantage, because it meant the city streets were very safe for women simply because people were terrified of committing a crime.”

Hoitsma’s awareness of her host country’s turmoil was heightened on many levels. Her Catalan friends, in particular, in private frequently questioned the dictatorship. “And SYA teacher Mr. Vilalta raised our awareness of popular demands for political change,” she recalls.

Gender issues also figured prominently in Hoitsma's daily life. "There was a sense that having girls in the program was a learning experience for everyone," she says. For example, she participated with other SYA girls in groups led by Señora Vilanova focusing on Spanish customs for women, as well as cooking and shopping trips.

Years later, Hoitsma discovered what the addition of the first girls meant to the boys. "I discussed the program with several D.C. male alums who were in SYA Spain at the same time," she says. "According to them, the boys were happy to have the girls in the program because, in their view, it softened the tone, made it less male-oriented."

Eventually, SYA Spain influenced Hoitsma into choosing teaching as a career. Today, she's a third-grade teacher at The Park School, in Baltimore. "I'll often use my Spanish to capture the attention of my students," she says, laughing. "More than anything, SYA cemented my desire to encourage children to explore the world and become lifelong learners themselves. I want them to become solid global citizens."