

Discovering Islam in the Iberian Peninsula



Photo by Alexandra Schaffer

FSU Department of Religion Professor Adam Gaiser, back row, middle, kept his students actively engaged with Valencian history throughout the teaching of his course.

Learning Islamic history on tours through Valencia's streets and religious sites

By Alexandra Schaffer

Florida State University Department of Religion Professor Adam Gaiser offered a popular class for students during FSU Valencia's Summer 2022 session, Islam in the Iberian Peninsula.

"Taking this course made me see Valencia in a new light, a light I would've never been able to turn on without Dr. Gaiser or this class," says Janelle Flores, a senior criminology major.

Gaiser's teaching covers the history and development of Islam throughout Valencia and its surrounding region. The class lessons also compare the historical and modern presence of Islam in the city of Valencia through architecture, foodways, art, and culture.

Gaiser earned his doctorate in history of religions with a focus in Islamic studies in 2005

from the University of Virginia. He uses his personal experiences from when he lived in the Middle East to create interesting and historically accurate classes that create excitement for his students.

"If you're studying religion, actually what you're doing is studying people," Gaiser says, "because religion is what affects people in so many different ways, and it influences almost everything that they do."

Outside of the classroom, students traverse the city, immersing themselves in the history they are learning. Gaiser helps them explore places such as the Valencia Cathedral, built between 1252 and 1482.

The site was previously a Roman temple, a Visigoth cathedral, and during the 8th century, a mosque. The cathedral houses numerous artifacts, including what some people claim is the Holy Chalice, the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper.

"We went to the cathedral, and Catholic churches are all about relics, right?" Gaiser says. "And relics are basically like body parts

of saints. So, we're looking at body parts in the church. I love doing that. Here's a finger. Here's a shroud. Here's the arm of St. Vincent behind the altar."

Other excursions included a walk up the 207 steps of El Miguelete Bell Tower and a trip to La Almoina Archaeological Museum, with displays showing Valencia's history from its founding by the Romans in the second-century B.C. to the Middle Ages.

The learning throughout the summer session leads to a final assignment: a self-guided tour of Muslim Valencia. Students in the class discovered the most important Islamic landmarks in Valencia and walked to each location to curate the route.

The project highlights about 10 historic Muslim sites, with descriptions of their historical impact and drawing attention to the Islamic influences on modern Valencia.

Editor's note: For more of the interview Alexandra had with Adam Gaiser, please go to the website listed on the back page.

Venturing into the Valencian streets



Photo courtesy of John Felkner

FSU Associate Teaching Professor John Felkner, fifth from right, regularly took his students on excursions through the city, including a class favorite, a bicycle tour.

An urban planning course took students into the city to explore design and landscape

By Alexandra Schaffer

Florida State University Associate Teaching Professor John Felkner used the cityscape of Valencia to his advantage when teaching his Planning and Urban Development class during the Summer 2022 session.

Felkner is a faculty member in FSU's Department of Urban and Regional Planning and he centered his course material on Valencia's metropolitan landscape and city government decisions as well as historical influences that have led to the city that students see today when they study abroad.

The course explored urban design and environmental and transportation planning.

"European cities are in many ways more advanced than American cities, especially in transportation planning, but also in sustain-

ability planning and commitment to more sustainable planning," says Felkner, who has a Doctor of Design degree in urban and regional planning from Harvard University. "Europe is really exciting to look at from an urban planning point of view. There's a lot of positive energy over here. There's a more widespread political consensus about support for sustainable planning"

A main focus of the course, Felkner says, was to bring students out of the classroom and into the city to fully experience the topics being taught within lessons. A typical class day included walking tours of the city, class visits to important urban locations, and other excursions to help show students the development throughout history to the city's modern layout.

A bicycle tour of Valencia was one of the students' favorite excursions. Students rented bikes, saddled up, and cycled through the city's almost labyrinth-like streets to gain a fuller understanding of the sprawling area. The tour took students through the Turia Riverbed Park, various neighborhoods, and even local buildings.

"The bike tour was a super fun way to explore the city of Valencia and be able to visually learn about the city's urban planning," FSU student Avery Long says. "We were able to see a unique form of architecture in Valencia that highlighted sustainability through an apartment building with each individual unit containing a garden."

Felkner hopes to return to Valencia to teach this course again, and he believes students would benefit from studying the issues from a European perspective.

"This is a privilege for me to be able to teach in the city because it's just amazing—it's incredible," he says. "Valencia has so much value in terms of its history, its historical preservation, its transport, its sustainable planning, food systems planning. The city is very progressive in terms of sustainable planning and transport planning."

Editor's note: For more of the interview Alexandra had with John Felkner, please go to the website listed on the back page.