

No need to dream about a White Christmas

Spanish exchange student learns new ways of celebrating Christmas

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Waver Hills High school junior Ana Santamarina has never had a white Christmas — until this year.

Santamarina, 16, is an exchange student from Coruna, Spain, near the sea. It doesn't snow there.

"It's just realizing that the snow is a lot of work, like you have to shovel and fix driveways and there's a lot of accidents and stuff, but it's fun," Santamarina Fernandez said. "I get excited every time I see snow."

Santamarina Fernandez said last week she was excited to see her first white Christmas. She also excited to take part in another holiday tradition: Christmas cards.

Her host family, parents Tammy and Greg and daughter Brittany Haas, went out traditional family Christmas cards this year with photos of the family.

Santamarina Fernandez said there's not a tradition in Spain, so she was fascinated by the process. Santamarina Fernandez said she was also excited that the Haas family added her in their cards to college.

While participating in her Christmas tradition, Santamarina Fernandez discovered another difference between Christmas in America and in Spain.

Santamarina Fernandez said Christmas at home in Spain is complete with ornaments, but she said in Christmas trees are slightly different.

Her family's tree is with ornaments the store with no lights behind them. She enjoyed seeing ornaments while she was in the tree with every ornament something.

Santamarina Fernandez said she had to adjust to more

High school exchange student Ana Santamarina Fernandez loves snow and autumn leaves, two things she doesn't see in her home city, La Coruna, Spain. Her host family, parents Greg and Tammy Haas, and daughter Brittany Haas, plan to take her skiing sometime this winter.

Santamarina Fernandez and the Haas family will visit the Haases' relatives in Wausau this Christmas.

The Christmas cultural exchange goes both ways though. Tammy Haas said she's learned a lot about Christmas in Spain as well. She said the traditions aren't that different.

"They have a holiday called The Three Kings, which occurs on Jan. 6, so their gifts come then," Haas said. "But she said they also celebrate Christmas with a traditional Christmas tree."

Haas said she's learned that Americans put up more decorations. Also, while holiday baking is a tradition in both America and Spain, she said the focus is different.

"Their traditional holiday baking is more to do with main dishes and ours seems to be more to do with cookies and candies," Haas said.

This is Santamarina Fernandez's first time in the United States. Because of that, she's had to adjust to more

than just the different holiday traditions. Haas said it took Santamarina Fernandez a while to get used to bitter cold Midwestern weather and traveling in snow.

Santamarina Fernandez said another challenge she's faced is getting used to speaking English all the time.

"In Spain, I was considered to have a high level of English, but when I got here it was like, 'Oh my God, I don't know anything,'" Santamarina Fernandez said.

That was when she arrived on Aug. 21. Now Santamarina Fernandez said her English has gotten to the point where she understands pretty much everything she hears. She said she's now able to watch movies and read books in English — something she used to find challenging.

She said it was extra-challenging getting used to American English, because in Spain, she learned British English.

"I found out that you talk

very fast," Santamarina Fernandez said. "I feel like I can understand more than I can talk."

It isn't just America Santamarina Fernandez has been learning about. She said her trip has taught her about herself as well.

"I feel like I'm more mature now than when I first came here," Santamarina Fernandez said. "I'm learning a lot by myself and really being independent. This experience, I think, it's really changed me."

She said being away from her family and friends, and having to change all of her rou-

ties taught her what parts of her life back home she missed most, and what was most important to her.

One thing she's learned about herself is what she'd like to do with her future. Santamarina Fernandez said she'd like to visit more countries and learn more languages.

"For my future, I want to study business and marketing," Santamarina Fernandez said. "I want to work for a company and also get the opportunity to travel more. I'm really interested in learning languages and going to different

countries."

After this year, Santamarina Fernandez will have one more year of high school back in Spain. Then, she'll be off to college.

She said she'd like to spend some time studying in a different county in college, too, in order to learn different cultures and different languages.

"I think that is the best way of learning a language," Santamarina Fernandez said. "Also, every time you travel, you know a little bit more about yourself."



Santamarina Fernandez sits on a beach in her home city La Coruna, which is located on the coast of Spain. She said while she's been here in America, she's been getting used to seeing farmland and trees from her window, rather than the seashore.



Ana Santamarina Fernandez is shown with her host family at St. Bridget Church, the day of the Packer-Viking game. From left are Santamarina Fernandez, a Vikings fan, Packers fans Greg and Tammy Haas, and Vikings fan Brittany Haas.