

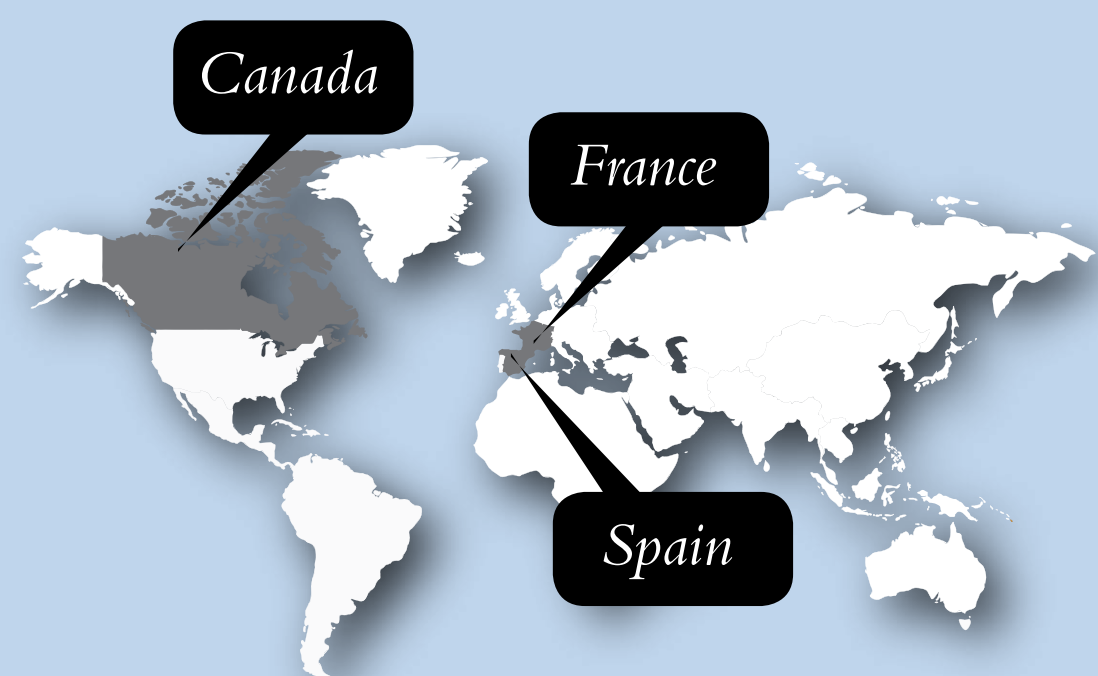


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Last summer I embarked upon one of the most defining experiences of my life to date: my Burch Fellowship. Never having traveled alone outside of the United States, I was setting out on a learning experience that would not only hone my woodworking skills, but also develop my self-confidence, increase my ease of interaction with strangers, and heighten my already intense desire to travel.

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My fellowship began in mid-May when I departed for a far-away, exotic place: Canada. Okay, so not so far-away and exotic—with its skyscrapers and colorful crowds, downtown Toronto looks much like New York City, and the log cabin in rural Ontario that was to be my home for the next four weeks much like my own log-cabin home outside Hillsborough—and yet it was new and exciting. I lived and worked with internationally renowned woodworker Michael Fortune, quite possibly the most skilled artisan I have ever met. There I learned a whole host of complex woodworking techniques, from steam bending—a technique that allows one to bend solid wood into crazy curves — to cutting and inlaying veneer maple leaves into curved chair backs, a technique known as marquetry. I also had the opportunity to meet the retired Governor General, Mrs. Adrian Clarkson. She is a client of Michael’s and the recipient of a breathtaking dining room table and a matching set of exquisite dining room chairs, the latter of which was the in-shop project I was so lucky to be a part of.

As my time in Canada wound to a close, I began to prepare for my next big adventure — France — and became simultaneously ecstatic and terrified. The idea of traveling across a nation where I knew no one and whose language I didn’t speak was at once invigorating and unsettling. Before I knew it, however, I was getting off a plane in Charles de Gaulle airport, crossing my fingers that I would make my train. After a two-hour ride and a five-minute freak-out when I arrived at a train station devoid of a smiling family holding a “Laura” sign, I was safely in the home of the next master craftsman I would study with, Richard Petiot. This portion of my apprenticeship was especially unique, because Richard is an instructor at a woodworking school, and I was provided the opportunity to watch young craftsmen in action and to see how a woodworking educa-



tion is conducted in France. And, what’s more, I learned how to make a Louis XV leg, one of the many styles of the rich French woodworking tradition. I also toured a furniture production factory and saw the entire construction process divided into stages, an enlightening experience that showed me another, distinctly different shape a career in woodworking could take.

My time in France ended far too quickly, but I could not be too sad because next came Spain! As my bus pulled into the Sevilla station after the six hour ride through endless sunflower fields from Madrid, I felt much calmer than I had pulling into that station in France. “You know Spanish fairly well,” I said to myself. “You’ll be fine.” The next thing I knew I was in the car with my host family, asking the father what he did for a living and totally unable to understand his response. His and his wife’s subsequent attempts to explain it to me proved no more intelligible, and finally they had to resort to hand gestures to help me understand. Who knew that the Andalusian accent was so strong or that it was possible to speak so quickly? I felt like a foreigner who’d studied British English my whole life and then landed in Mississippi on my first trip to the US; I felt like they were speaking a different language. (And I was worried about French!)

I became accustomed to the accent that pervades Moron de la Frontera—the small town outside Sevilla that was my home for the next month—fairly quickly, though. There I worked in a small shop owned and operated by a younger woodworker, Sebastián Sierra. In Seba’s shop I saw

work done on one of the huge, intricately carved “paseos,” or floats that carry the Christ and Virgin Mary statues during the “Semana Santa” parades. I also did a lot of carving and learned that Spain, too, places heavy importance on staying true to details and techniques of the past.

I can now recognize some of the key styles from important periods throughout Spanish history, including the dynamic Barroco one.

Perhaps as rewarding as my time in various shops learning unique skills, was the time I spent with my

host families and with the people of these various cultures. When back here in the States in May, little could I imagine that before long

I would be dancing around a kitchen with Michael’s wife, Janice, singing 80s songs into a spatula at the top of my lungs. Or that I’d later be playing “this little piggy” with Sophie, my 5-year-old sister in France (with whom I couldn’t communicate otherwise). Or that I’d accompany Seba and the rest of the shop guys to a crowded bar to watch Spain score a triumphant World Cup victory over Saudi Arabia. And these are just a few of the many unexpected but wonderfully fulfilling experiences I had during my Burch summer. Not only did the Burch Fellowship afford me the opportunity to improve my woodworking abilities, but it also allowed me to develop relationships with beautiful people in interesting places. Yes, I learned about the woodworking practices and mentalities characteristic of each region, the objective of my Burch Fellowship, and I loved doing so. But more than that, I discovered and participated in those cultural traditions; — of family, language, and day-to-day life — that make each place so unique and delightful. The tastes of life I was so lucky to receive this summer served to whet my appetite for these beautiful and diverse places, and I cannot wait to return!

