

SIESTA TIME? OR NOT

The Siesta has been, for centuries, an integral part of the traditional cultures of Spain and much of Latin America. This two-hour, sometimes three-hour, midday rest period is considered 'sacred' by a number of Spaniards and Latin Americans, but is seen as a major Spanish obsession by many in the non-Hispanic world. Surprisingly enough, in an attempt to ensure that their economies and productivity are up to par with the rest of the world, these countries that are so closely associated with the envied afternoon break are beginning to relinquish this aspect of their cultures.

The word 'siesta' refers to a short nap taken in the afternoon, often after a midday meal. It comes from the Latin 'hora sexto' or 'the sixth hour', so, counting from dawn it is midday. It is unclear exactly when and where the practice of this tradition started, but most sources agree that it began in the Southern region of Alentejo in Portugal where it was known as 'sesta.' Spaniards, however, adopted the custom and consequently it was spread throughout Latin America. Unlike popular belief, the siesta also became part of various non-Hispanic cultures in the Middle East, North Africa and countries such as the Philippines, China, Taiwan and Greece. Although the siesta does not form a rigid part of these cultures like the Spanish-speaking countries, an afternoon nap still weaves itself into the lives of these individuals. In many of these places it is taken in a similar fashion: after a meal or snack. In Bangladesh, India, it is called 'bhat-gum' or rice-sleep, which is taken after eating rice, while in South Asia, a massage and light snack precede this rest. Chinese and Taiwanese people simply take it after lunch.

On a visit to Venezuela, for instance, one is advised to shop before 12noon or anytime after 2pm, since within these hours the atmosphere constitutes that of a typical 'Trinbagonian' holiday; almost no one on the streets and most shops 'locked up tightly', with little evidence of human activity. Argentina experiences a similar situation, where the towns are almost lifeless for about two to three hours at midday. In larger cities however, such as Buenos Aires, the normal 9 to 5 work schedule applies as entrepreneurs claim that they lose great sums of money due to siesta time.

Ironically, in Spain where this tradition was really fueled, the government recently enacted regulations that applied to federal agencies which changed the working hours. This strove to implement a workday that is in sync with most of Europe and North America, hence seeking to abolish the well-known Spanish siesta in that country. One source stated that 'in cities siesta is hardly part of life. There is just no time for it.' A nationwide survey revealed stunning results that less than 25% of Spaniards still take siestas. The same is happening in Mexico, as its government saw it fit to pass a law in 1999 that requires employees to work eight hour shifts between 7am-6pm, during which they are permitted a lunch-break of only one hour.

Governments that are removing siesta time claim that this change is for the benefit of the population at large as the siesta time forces persons to end their work days too late, sometimes 9 or 10 pm in the night. The law itself allows public employees a right to

finish their workday before 6pm. They also claim that the more economically advanced countries of the world follow this strategy and are more productive, so the elimination of siesta time will work in favour of these countries earning themselves a worthwhile place in the global market.

A number of intellectuals beg to differ with this, proposing that a siesta is scientifically more beneficial to individuals and the economy than not having one. Amongst these persons is Mark Rosekind who is a former N.A.S.A. scientist and is now the founder of Alertness Solutions in Cupertino, California. He enforces that in our bodies there is a timekeeper called the circadian clock, which operates on a 24hr rotation and every 12 hrs there is a dip. This means that it is natural for the body to yearn a nap at midday and he suggests that it should not be deprived of this short sleep. After his research, he concluded that the siesta improves performance and alertness, which actually generates more worker productivity. In a poll conducted by the National Sleep Survey, results showed that 65% of adults who work the regular 9 to 5 workday are victims of fatigue that affect worker productivity and the way they relate to family and friends. According to Rosekind, the Hispanic countries 'had it right all along.'

When this concept of the midday break was forming part of Hispanic culture, its original intention was to allow persons to spend time with family and friends. In this light, siesta time did not only constitute a nap but an opportunity to build stronger social bonds and good family life. In most Latin American countries, people work in the same town in which they live and the bulk of siesta time is spent socializing, with a short period of napping. As a result, mothers who are career moms are still able to establish solid family lives offering time to their children, and all adults are able to return to work in the evening relaxed and more alert hence able to produce more after satisfying the biological clock.

Regardless of what arguments may arise on whether siesta time is beneficial or not, it still forms part of the Hispanic culture. Although laws may be enforced to remove siesta time, there will still be persons, like homemakers and those living in smaller towns that are not seriously affected by the industrial sectors in those countries, who will carry on the tradition because it has become a way of life for them. The concept does sound like the ideal dream of any employee; a long break in the middle of the workday to take a nap and be rejuvenated. Until that happens at home, one should take the opportunity to visit a country like Venezuela that still observes siesta time and experience first-hand the unmistakable siesta calm, half-way through the workday. Don't forget to eat before you sleep!

For more information about the Spanish As the First Foreign Language (SAFFL) initiative, please contact the Secretariat for the Implementation of Spanish (A Division of the Ministry of Trade and Industry) at 624-8329 / 627 – 9513 or fax us at 623-0365.

