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When I applied to study abroad in Costa Rica for the Spring 2015 semester, I wasn't sure at all what to expect. I knew I would be living with a host family and studying my Spanish for three months, but being told about the program and actually experiencing it first-hand are extremely different. At first, speaking Spanish all day every day was a difficult task because I was used to only speaking the language in classrooms. However, as the days went on I became closer with my family and more comfortable with my second language. After studying abroad, I feel immensely more comfortable interacting with native Spanish speakers, and I know I'm on my way to becoming fluent in the language.

Living in a foreign country for three months was the scariest thing I've done in my life so far. It was my first time out of the country, I didn't know any of the other students very well, and I wouldn't have said I was very comfortable speaking the language. The language barrier between my host family and I was difficult for me to get used to at first because of how much Spanish I was hearing and speaking for the first few days. I slowly became more comfortable with it, and began noticing more about my surroundings instead of focusing on the way I was speaking.

One of the first things I noticed about the culture of the Costa Ricans was that the women of the families did most of the house work, similar to the way the United States was in the 1950s. My family in the United States isn't set up this way, so it was a little different to get used to. My host mom made dinner every night, she did all the laundry, all the cleaning and on top of all of these things, she was still working and going to school at night. She seemed to balance all of the responsibilities she had extremely well, but I was confused as to why she didn't have more help around the house. When my professors in Costa Rica explained the "machismo" culture in the country, it made more sense to me, however, it wasn't a culture that I was used to.

Never being out of the country before this experience, I would say that my world views were limited prior to studying abroad. I understood that each country had its own culture that could have been similar or different to my own, but I didn't know the specific aspects of these cultures. Only getting a little taste of the culture in Costa Rica has made me want to experience more cultures because I want to expand my knowledge even more. Experiencing a culture different from my own has made me realize that I take certain things for granted such as always having running water and having hot water when I shower. Having these experiences has changed the way I look at my own life and I'm thankful for the daily amenities I have in my home because people in other cultures and countries don't always have the same opportunities as I do.

From history classes I had learned before about the relationships countries form with one another, but it was very interesting to experience it in a foreign country. In history classes that I've had in the US, I really only learned about the United States part of the history stories. In Costa Rica I took the Central American History class and learned things that I never would have heard in a typical history class in the states. For example, when students in Central America are taught the continents in the world, they are taught that North America and South America are just "America." In the US, we're taught that the continents are separate, even though they are connected by the land bridge that is Central America.

To me this was very shocking, but at the same time it makes sense to me as someone from the United States. We are very much an independent country, and we have so much pride in ourselves that we call ourselves "America" when in fact the two continents together in addition to Central America are all part of "America." However, for the United States, we appear to want to be less involved with other countries and more independent, which can be

good or bad. Negatively, it could affect the relationships with other countries if we don't want to be accepting of others, but it also shows that we don't need much help from others and instead we can help them. The problem with this however, is that countries don't always want the help that we offer. We often intervene even if it's not in the best interests of others simply because we seem to think that we're powerful enough to solve the problems that everyone else has.

Learning about these in a foreign country really opened my eyes to the way that the United States approaches international affairs and the way we handle relationships with other countries. While we may believe that we are doing what's best for these other countries as well as for ourselves, we can be harming these relationships that we have worked to build, instead of furthering them.

Another thing I experienced while in Costa Rica was the lack of recycling as well as the lack of care for the environment when it came to properly disposing of trash. It was a very difficult for me to get used to because I recycle so much at home, I never litter, and the streets are typically always clean no matter where I am. I know that as a country Costa Rica is a little behind the United States when it comes to recycling and helping the environment, but they're taking the proper steps to educate the population to change these bad habits.

Because it's a newer idea in Costa Rica, the decision to not recycle or to litter affects not just the country itself, but the United States as well. When items aren't disposed of properly, they can sit in landfills for years, get washed into the ocean, and contaminate the environment. The world's environments are all one, so if one part of it is destroyed or damaged, it changes the way other parts of the environment function. In this sense, the decisions that Costa Ricans make when they are harming the environment with unhealthy trash disposal habits, it affects the United States as well as everyone else in the world.

During study abroad, my eyes were opened to the different types of people and cultures that are in the world, and it's changed what I want to do with my Spanish major. While taking classes in Costa Rica and speaking the language with my friends and family, I realized that I liked the language more than I liked the history or literature of the language. Because of this, I changed my major from Spanish Liberal Arts to Spanish Linguistics. In addition, when choosing classes for my Sociology major, I've focused on taking classes that will work well with my Spanish major such as Sociology 321: US Race and Ethnicity. Having an understanding of the way Spanish speaking individuals interact in the United States I believe is crucial to any job I have that is Spanish related because I would be working with these individuals every day.

In addition, I improved when it comes to being more accepting and understanding of people without judging them. In the world today there are numerous stereotypes and preconceptions of groups of people or types of people that harm the way these people can effectively live in society. If they are being discriminated against simply based on their race, gender, or their looks, they are already being swept under the rug and given less opportunities than others in society even if they have the same qualifications and education. Because of study abroad and being immersed in a country where for the first time I was the minority, my view on this issue is just stronger now than it was before in the sense that I believe the discrimination going on in society today shouldn't continue even more so than I did before.

While I was abroad, the culture shock was something that was difficult to get used to at first. Being immersed in a new country with a language that I wasn't fluent in, with people I barely knew, and a new culture was overwhelming. For me, the hardest part was getting used to having my host family do everything for me again. I grew up as very independent, and even when I am living at home with my family, I do most things for myself. Living with my host

family where my mom cooked dinner every night, she did my laundry, made my bed on the weekends and even cleaned my room when I was going traveling was very strange for me. I wanted to still be somewhat independent, but I didn't know how to ask for that independence without offending their culture.

I thought that the easiest way to do this would be to offer to help my host family out with chores such as washing the dishes and helping out with dinner. I often washed my own dishes even if my host mom said that I didn't have to because I wanted to help somehow. Having my host mom do so many things for me made me realize just how dependent some cultures are on their wives, sisters, and daughters to take care of the chores around the house. At the same time, however, I do realize that I was a guest in the home and that may have been part of the reason why they did so many things for me, but I believe it's polite to be a helpful house guest. Not every culture is like that of the culture I'm used to in the United States, however, and it was interesting to experience another culture while studying abroad.

My decision to offer help to my host family showed them that I am a friendly and helpful person, which could challenge the views that they may have on those from the United States. For example, if someone has a negative view on a certain race or culture and assumes that all people from that culture act in the same manner, it could be hard to prove them otherwise unless they have a first-hand experience. By me being respectful and helpful, those negative views – which I don't believe that my host family has – would have been challenged by my actions and impacted the way that they see me. This experience could then be shared with others, who could also change their view on a certain culture or people, which could change the globe and the way people are portrayed. Everything we do has an impact on someone else, and it's important to remember that when traveling, offering help to others, and living your everyday life.



Living with a host family was one of the best experiences I've had, and one of my favorite parts about studying abroad in Costa Rica. They helped me improve my Spanish, cared for me as if I were their own daughter, and they are some of the nicest people I have ever met. The fact that they let me into their home and were so kind and welcoming was what made me feel so comfortable in the country, and I can honestly say that I know I always have a second home in Costa Rica if I ever need it. Making this sort of connection with strangers was amazing and something I will always remember and be thankful for, and I hope to have the opportunity to have the experience in the future again.



The students that I traveled to Costa Rica with are now some of my best friends and I wouldn't trade a single one of them for anyone else. Living with these seventeen students for three months in a foreign country really made me more welcoming to people because these were the closest people I had to a United States family while abroad. Traveling with them every weekend, taking classes with them, and sharing our experiences with one another kept me from being homesick. I now know that I have sixteen more friends that I can call whenever I need anything, and they'll always be there to reflect on our journey in Costa Rica.