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Major: Elementary Education and Spanish Education Double Major

Sites of experience: Costa Rica and Nicaragua

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I spent the last three and a half months immersed in the culture and language of Costa Rica. During my spring study abroad program, I lived with a local Costa Rican family who provided housing, meals, and much love. I was enrolled in a ten week academic semester. The program was two five week phases, a two week service learning project, class field trips, and a week spent in Nicaragua. My fifteen weeks in Costa Rica were more than enough for me to fall in love with the country, but not nearly enough time for me to experience all of the amazing things that the country has to offer.

When I left the United States in January 2014 I was scared, nervous, and unsure of my decision to journey to a new and unfamiliar place. But after my three and a half month stay, I was sad to leave. Every day I spent in Costa Rica provided opportunities to learn and grow as a person. Whether learning the local currency, improving my Spanish, or trying the new food my host mom made for dinner, I always was discovering interesting things about my new way of life.

I explored lush national parks, coffee plantations, volcanoes, and gorgeous white and black sand beaches. Since I lived in a town close to the capital city of San Jose, I was able to use public transportation alongside the locals on my weekend excursions. My host family, the Villalobos, provided helpful travel tips and insights on my destinations. They also opened their family and religious life to me so that I experienced the typical “Tica” way of life.

I also had supportive academic and advising staff. My professors provided hands on activities that made this past semester my most productive and enjoyable. The staff made an effort to know every student on a personal level. Their close faculty-student relationships created a great academic experience.

I also was lucky enough to have sixteen phenomenal students as my teachers in Costa Rica. Though diverse, our group molded together and formed lifelong friendships. We all supported each other in our academics, language acquisition, and travel. I am certain that all of us would highly recommend the program and if given the chance would return to Costa Rica in a heartbeat.

Through my interactions with the locals, I broadened my cultural attitudes and left Costa Rica more open minded. Costa Ricans live in a society that they describe as “machismo”. Machismo essentially means that men are placed higher in society, have more power and a louder voice in the communities and homes. The role of a woman is to get married, have children, and raise the families. Walking through the streets of downtown San Jose I often felt that men looked at me just like all the other women in their society. Since women in Costa Rica are seen as less powerful, objections are often ignored. I saw some signs of machismo in my home. My mom always cooked and cleaned the house in the afternoon, while my dad watched television and relaxed. When we ate meals, my dad was always served first. Whenever he wanted a snack or hot coffee he would simple tell my mom and she stopped what she was doing to serve him.

Being a young, independent woman from the United States, this idea of machismo was very uncomfortable for me. I did not appreciate the stares, the cat calls in the street, or the way my dad sometimes talked to or treated my mom in the house. At first, this machismo really upset me. I did not understand how women lived every day in this kind of society. However, the more I observed and asked my host family or the academic staff to explain, the more I understood. People in the United States learn that all people are created equal and deserve equal rights whether they are male or female, black or white, Catholic or Protestant. Costa Ricans have been

raised and educated to see that their cultural attitudes are correct as well. Their way of life just happens to be different than ours. Who are we to say that our culture is the only correct one? Seeing this different way of life allowed me to understand different cultural values.

Where I did not embrace Costa Rican gender roles I did appreciate the freedom in Costa Rican. Costa Rica has no standing army. This situation has prevented military coups. Costa Rica has had a stable democratic government for more than fifty years. Political stability and democracy have allowed Costa Ricans to live free and happy lives. They are known as some of the happiest people in the world. Costa Ricans even refer to their way of life as calm or “tranquilo”. This happy way of life does not exist in the countries nearby which have suffered many years of revolution, violence, and political oppression.

Costa Rica has great relationships with many outside countries including the United States. Costa Rica and the United States have a strong trade partnership. Costa Rica exports bananas, coffee, and beef to the United States. However, economic prosperity has also stressed Costa Rica’s environment. The high demand for agricultural products has caused many of Costa Rica’s forests to be converted to farm lands. Costa Rica is now working hard to preserve its natural environment. But we, as consumers, also have a role in checking wasteful habits, to minimize the destruction of land and animals habitats.

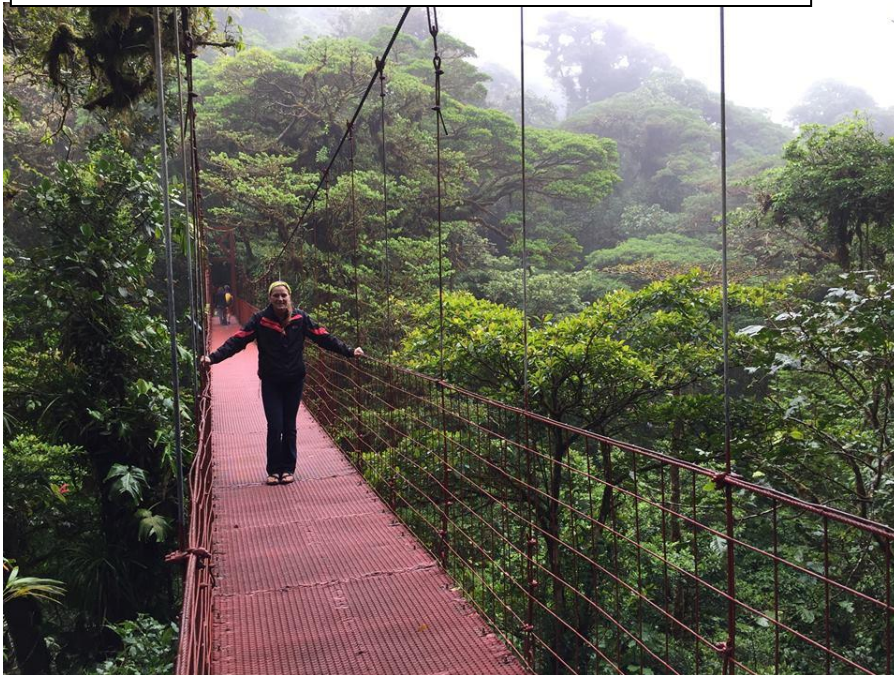
My stay in Costa Rica taught me many other valuable lessons. After I graduate from UW-Eau Claire, I plan to be an elementary school teacher who works with children that may not speak English as their first language. Many of my students will come from diverse family backgrounds, and they may have different values. With my new acceptance and appreciation of different ways of life, I will be able to approach each student with an open mind, I will have the opportunity to learn from them just as they learn from me.

My adventure in Costa Rica taught me to expect the unexpected; I will need this flexibility in my classroom. Why I say this is because my brand new iPhone 6 was stolen from my purse on a public bus while I was out shopping in San Jose. I had been shoved on a crowded public bus during the rush hour and was distracted with my bags and with talking to my friends. When we got off the bus I reached for my phone. My purse was un-zippered. My phone was gone. I felt so vulnerable and confused because I had no idea how I was going to get a new phone or how to find my stolen one. Since my cell phone was my main means of communication with my family and friends back home, I was very upset and worried. My friends helped calm me down and reminded me that it was not the worst thing that could happen. Phones are replaceable. If this problem had happened in the United States, it would not have been as stressful. I would have known exactly how to fix the problem. However, I was in an unfamiliar place and had no idea where to even begin.

I was lucky that my parents were coming to visit a few weeks later. They brought a new cell phone. After I had solved the problem, I reflected on how I had reacted to the situation versus how my host family reacted. I realized that I was so upset not only because being robbed is never a good feeling, but also because I practically live on my cell phone. Our society has all kinds of electronic gadgets. We even have special cases that constantly charge your phone so that you never have to go a second without it. I am guilty of this over-reliance on electronics. When I came home crying, my host parents seemed confused at my emotions. It was only a cell phone and I was not physically harmed in the process. They were concerned about my safety and seemed to care very little about the stolen item as I could easily replace it. This experience made me realize that if I focus more on the things that matter, like my health, safety, and well being, and less on materialistic things, I will live a much happier life.

Americans are stereotyped throughout the worlds as being materialistic. No matter how much Americans may seem offended by this stereotype, or deny it, there is some underlying basis. My reaction to having my cell phone stolen made me realize that the stereotype is true. Living in Costa Rica, where society is less materialistic and more “tranquilo” has taught me to better appreciate people more than material things. The simple human joys in ;life are the most important.

Cloud Forest in Monte Verde- Costa Rica has so many beautiful places to visit. It is important to conserve these areas for future generations and the rest of the world to enjoy.



My Costa Rican host family-they cared for me so well and taught me so much. It very hard to leave them.

