

**Jesse BaDour**

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Studying abroad has been the best experience of my life. I am so thankful that I could live with a host family and live in an entirely different, new culture. Just by living abroad for less

than four months, I have learned so much about another way of life and about different looks at global concerns. Not only have I gained knowledge from my host family and environment I lived in, but I also changed as an individual during this incredible time. Costa Rica is an entirely different country that I have ever traveled to. I loved how I had the freedom to travel wherever I wanted to on the weekends. Exploring an entirely new land was such an amazing eye opener that I wish I could go back. I am so blessed to have made the many memories, friends and family abroad. Most importantly during this semester I found out who I am and who I want to be.

Costa Rica is a very small country with so much diversity. This land is diverse in their physical environment as well as their species of plants and animals. Costa Rica is as big as the state of Virginia, yet has an amazing array of different landscapes. During the very beginning of our trip, my family took me to Puntarenas, which has a beach. Costa Rica has black sand and white sand beaches, each bringing about their unique yet beautiful qualities (although I do prefer the gorgeous white sand beaches like Manuel Antonio. The following weekend, I went on a mountain hike with two other students, my host sister and my host cousin. The mountains and hills were a pain to climb, but in the end there was a forest with a river. Also, each weekend myself and some other students would plan a trip. Sometimes they were day trips to the market in the capital of San Jose, or a day visit to a volcano. I went to Montezuma and took a ferry over to the peninsula to see the tallest waterfall. It was amazing to climb up that steep cliff using climbing rope. In Guanacaste, there was a feeling of a desert. It was so hot and dry that there was hardly any green around. Costa Rica also has three different types of forests: dry, rain, and cloud forests each allowing different species to live in. The cloud forest had to have been my favorite. This area is where I had ziplined. I also had a “pizote”, or a white nosed coati in english, come walking up right next to my foot.

Walking to class brought a whole different view to my life. I had never really appreciated nature until I started visiting places on the weekends and stopping to notice the birds and beautiful flowers along the way. I loved how our province was known as the flower province. There was so much biodiversity everywhere I went. I have two favorite memories about discovering the natural beauty of Central America. One day, my environmental class went and visited the Toucan Rescue Ranch. I saw an almost extinct wildcat, toucans, two toed and three-toed sloths, owls, otters and more. It was so amazing to see wildlife up close and to see all these species living in this tropical area. Another experience that was probably my favorite had to be snorkeling. The underwater life was so amazing! I never knew that coral is both an animal and a plant. I saw every color of coral reefs from magenta to blue to yellow to green. It was honestly the most breathtaking experience of my life. The environment and specie differences in

this small country is incredible. The United States has so many different environments as well, but people have to travel many hours to see differences, unlike Costa Rica where it might take you only two hours on a bus to see and feel them. I am so proud that Costa Rica has preserved and conserved 25% of its land. Even with this little percentage of land preserved, many animals and plants can have the chance to continue living. I now have more appreciation for differences in natural habitats and the biodiversity that lives there.

I never really understood economics and global aspects, until I lived abroad. I still don't understand how any one culture is better than another. All are unique and all are special in their own ways. Culture provides identity not weirdness. Every since I've been a little child, I've been interested in learning about new cultures and ways of life. I know that governments are also an important part of culture. As I visited two other countries, Nicaragua and Panama, I can tell that power within the government is a very scary thing. For example, Nicaragua is the second most poorest nation in all of Central America. The children are roaming the streets asking for money instead of attending school. Their economy is to shambles as the governmental leaders are replete with money. The difference in the levels of poor to rich are insane. When I took a boat tour through the islands in the Nicaraguan Lake, there were extravagant looking houses with poor houses in the back. Panama was the same way in which their economy is suffering. In both countries everything is very cheap to the traveler. It is sad to see citizens living the way they do.

Although there are corrupt governments all over the world, I had learned about great efforts being made to protect our planet. In my economic class, we discovered topics that need to be worked on in the world that now are major problems. We talked about shark finning, coral reef destruction, the need to recycle, and sea turtle hunting. Every institution in the world needs to realize the importance of the land we live in and that we are not the only ones who live here. The animals and plants that live on Earth now, need to be protected and preserved so that future generations can enjoy what we have now (what I've seen and experienced). Not all global leaders and institutions are bad, with great leadership the human race can better our nations and our world to see another year full of the same biodiversity.

I loved living in Costa Rica. I want to go back as soon as possible. However, one thing that really bothered me about their way of life was the fact that there is no recycling program funded by the government. There is a huge lack of recycling within the nation. Every day walking to school, I noticed garbage and plastic bottles all over the streets and grass. The lack of recycling makes no sense to me since this nation claims to be "green" and wanting to protect their land. It's almost ironic that 25% of the land is preserved yet there are few recycling places.

Yes, Costa Rica has some recycling places, however citizens have to take it into their own hands and drive the items to the plant themselves. This fact and also lack of education are reasons as to why recycling is hardly enacted in this country. It saddens me because I have always done my best and recycle what I can. My family told me they recycled, but I never saw a different box to place it. I really hope their government finds the funds to make recycling plants.

Costa Rica has helped me grow personally and for my future goals. This time abroad has helped push me toward the tourism field. I really want to help plan others vacations abroad. I even want to live abroad again and maybe teach English. When we were living in Bajos de Loaiza, (where we did our service learning), we taught the children English. This taught me that I have patience and want to help others. I want to tutor those in the United States who don't know English and give one on one sessions. I also learned how to be independent and how to plan my own trips. I have an Event Planning Minor and this experience has helped me tremendously. Another beneficial thing I learned is that I should not be afraid to ask questions and to make mistakes, especially when it comes to speaking and learning another language. Studying abroad has helped me see what types of career paths I would enjoy and others that I don't think are as best a fit. I would love to go back to Costa Rica and teach English to students. When my host mother and sister needed help with their English homework, this made me realize how much I loved helping them. I also realized that I would love to travel more of the world and maybe have a job where I can do that. I also enhanced my ability to talk to new people instead of just keeping to myself. It has been amazing to meet so many new people and learn so much about who I want to become.

Costa Rica definitely had some challenges, but the most was the food. I am very used to having fruit and vegetables in my diet as well as variety of meals. However, this culture is in love with the rice and beans. I know that some people came down to Costa Rica not liking beans, I never had that problem, until about two weeks left of the program. It was also very weird to literally have rice and beans all day, at least two meals a day sometimes all three. I didn't think that eating rice would not be that big of a deal, but it was. I physically could not eat anymore. It was also so very odd to eat the same thing for dinner for lunch. Here in the United States, we are so used to the variety of food available. I just found it interesting how there was not as many options of food. My family would rotate the same meals roughly every two weeks. For me, the worst days were Sundays. Like I mentioned previously, I would eat a meal for lunch, then eat that same meal for dinner, and then when Monday came I would open up my lunch box and find the same exact meal I had eaten all day on Sunday. From this experience, I learned how "spoiled" I am. By this, I mean that I am so lucky to have as many food options as I do in

the United States. There is so much variety that we don't have to eat the same meal for lunch as well as dinner. I realize that every culture has their own food and that sharing cultures brings about various cuisines.

Studying abroad sometimes had its challenges. I did miss my family, the food in Wisconsin, and my friends. However living in Costa Rica with a host family and traveling every weekend, I have made great experiences, friends and new discoveries about the world and who I am. The best part of this experience has been growing as a person and loving myself and wanting to explore more of the world.



My family



This picture is taken in Jacó, the very first weekend of traveling. Traveling has opened my eyes to the beauty in every place.