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In the days leading up to my departure for Costa Rica, I experienced a wide range of emotions. I felt uneasy travelling with a group of students whom I had only met a handful of times, and anxious about whether I would be able to understand my host family. On the other hand, I was beyond excited to have the opportunity to experience life in a new place and improve as a Spanish speaker. I felt ready for the adventure, but nothing could have prepared me for the experience, which truly changed my life. I had anticipated the country to be underdeveloped and somewhat dangerous for fair-skinned human beings like myself. In addition, I greatly underestimated the beauty impeccable beauty of Costa Rica. Upon arrival in Costa Rica, I quickly realized how hard it was going to be to leave the tropical climate and relaxed lifestyle. I knew I would miss the coffee, *gallo pinto*, mangos and plantains, but I had no idea how incredibly difficult it would be to leave the people with whom I had grown so close in just two short months.

I was truly blown away by the welcoming nature of every *Tican* (Costa Rican) and immediately felt at home with my host family. Thinking back, I can honestly say that some of my favorite memories of Costa Rica were conversations with my host family at the dinner table. We were always asking each other questions and learning from each other about our different cultures and life experiences. I will never forget my feeble attempt to explain the rules of baseball as we all sat together watching a Spanish broadcast of the Brewers one night, which would be difficult to do English and proved to be nearly impossible for me to do in Spanish. In a similar way, my host dad – who was an avid fisherman – was fascinated by the concept of ice-fishing and just could not fathom that the ice on frozen lakes in the Upper Midwest was able to support the weight of snowmobiles,

trucks and ice shacks. It was very eye opening for me to consider how these familiar hobbies could seem so foreign to people who had no experience with them.

The exchange of cultural practices was something I very much enjoyed, and I feel as though I learned as much – if not more – about the culture of Costa Rica and Latin America from my host family than I did through the Latin American culture class I was enrolled in while abroad. My family taught me about various Costa Rican traditions, including *la romería*, an annual pilgrimage made by Ticans – on foot – to a sacred Catholic church in the province of Cartago. Hundreds of thousands of Catholics walk to Cartago every August 2nd, a journey that can just a handful of hours for some, or as much as several days for others. It was very inspiring for me to see pictures of the streets filled with happy, faith-filled *Ticans* walking in unity and fellowship. I knew I would learn a great deal about Costa Rican culture, but getting to hear various anecdotes from my host family made the experience more personal and memorable.

Not only did the study abroad experience transform my perception of Costa Rica, but also provoked new sentiments about my experience in the United States' education system. On the very first day of class, we were informed that America was a continent – not a country. I had never really considered the fact that the way in which labeling continents as "North America" and "South America" alienated the countries of Central America and island nation in the Caribbean, which in turn disempowers and diminishes those who inhabit these countries. Furthermore, we were taught that it was incorrect to say *familia americana* (American family) when referring to our family back home in the United States and instead should use *familia estadounidense* (United States family). I had never considered the use of "American" to describe something associated with the United States

to be pretentious or exclusive, but in a way that is how it is perceived throughout much of the western hemisphere. The host family that I came to love was, after all, as American as my own family back in Minnesota.

While it's true that as a nation we – the United States – have much to be proud of, on occasion this pride inhibits our abilities to critically analyze and reflect upon our own society. A Latin American history course that I took while abroad revealed to me the ways in which Latin America is presented in United States history curriculum. The continued fight for freedom and opportunity endured by Latin American countries is all but left out of United States history books, and the horrific acts or mistakes made by the United States government are rarely acknowledged. It was a very eye opening experience to view the United States as an oppressor, and the course really challenged my perceptions of capitalism, socialism, and communism. It's truly a shame that United States history textbooks do not mention the exploitation of Latin America by greedy North American investors and companies, nor the fact that the United States governments supported conservative dictatorships in Latin America on several occasions throughout history. Had I never had the opportunity to study abroad in Costa Rica, I never would have learned any of this information, which I now find so mind-boggling. As an aspiring teacher, I know that this experience will forever serve as an inspiration for teaching the value of critical thinking to my students.

In fact, I feel that my summer abroad will have a tremendous impact on my professional life. Although I'm uncertain of whether I will eventually teach Spanish or English as a Second Language, the immersion experience dramatically improved my Spanish fluency and knowledge about the culture of Spanish-speaking world, which will

greatly raise my effectiveness and credibility as a Spanish. In addition, not being able to use my first language caused me to realize what life is like for English language learners in the United States. If I choose to teach ESL in the future, I will be able to empathize with my students having experienced what it is like to live as a minority in a totally new environment. I also had the chance to tutor English courses in a public elementary school in the local community, which once again offered me the opportunity for cultural exchange, but also provided me with valuable experience. I learned a lot from the students and their teacher, and gained more confidence as an ESL tutor and teacher.

Over the course of my summer abroad, I was fortunate to catch glimpses of macaws, toucans, monkeys, crocodiles, sloths, and many other exotic animals. I zip-lined at breakneck speeds above the rainforest canopy, fished in the Pacific Ocean, visited some of the most breathtaking waterfalls and volcanoes on the planet, and made life-long friendships. People whom I met in Costa Rica and memories that we shared together will forever impact my life, and continually remind me that there are good people in all parts of the world.



I amassed hundreds of pictures of incredible waterfalls, breathtaking ocean sunsets, and images of volcanoes and of the vast rainforest canopy, but the friendships I made – especially with my host family – are what really made my experience amazing and the most meaningful to me.



Over the summer, I got very close to my host dad (Victor), and one weekend he took me fishing in the Pacific Ocean where I was lucky enough to catch a puffer fish!