

Megan Bauer

Latin American Studies – Language Emphasis Major

Spanish Liberal Arts Minor

Location: San Isidro de Heredia, Costa Rica

Time abroad: May 29 – July 23, 2015

Expected graduation date: May 2017

Scholarship: Viennese Ball Award \$250

## **I Overview:**

I entered into my study abroad experience not knowing what to expect. I had always wanted to study abroad in college, but I had never planned on that experience being in Costa Rica. I also had never planned on majoring in Latin American Studies, which is the reason I ended up in Costa Rica. Honestly, I went into Costa Rica only knowing that it was a tropical country without a military, and that it was one of the most stable Latin American countries. But this knowledge is incredibly general and could never suffice to tell what Costa Rica is truly all about. But once in Costa Rica I was able to learn about its people and history, and the way of life. While Costa Rica is its own country with its own traditions, this experience was fundamental in understanding Latin America as a whole. In Costa Rica I learned just how different each Latin American country is, and that Costa Rica was a very unique place to be.

While I am not much of an adventurer and chose not to partake in certain wilderness adventuring excursions, I had adventures of a different sort. I learned more than I ever realized at the time in the classroom, but also outside of school — simply living with a host family, and going on trips with a group of classmates, almost all complete strangers to me at the start. I didn't realize how much I had grown until I returned home to find that I was a much more confident individual, with a more open mind than ever. For all these reasons and any more, my time in Costa Rica has proved to be an invaluable experience.

## **II:**

A huge cultural difference to adapt to in Costa Rica was transportation and directions. In Costa Rica, only the largest cities have street names, but the locals don't understand how they

function, thus, they don't use them. Everywhere else, there are no street names or street addresses. In my Costa Rican culture class, we discussed this concept, but still, it was one of the most difficult elements for myself to adapt to. When I would take a taxi home, my host-mother instructed me to tell the taxi driver that my address was, "The house next to and below Mr. Lico's." It baffled me to think that a taxi driver could possibly know every individual in a community. In Costa Rica, points of reference are paramount for directions. Some examples of points of reference are: churches, schools, bars, plazas, etc. But beyond this, there are also points of reference that no longer exist, but are passed down through oral tradition. My own "street address" so to speak included the phrase "camino antiguo" or old road. This road no longer exists, but is still used as a reference. Unless you are from the area, this is very confusing. Furthermore, "up" and "down" are used at times in place of "next to" and "close to" or "far from" because Costa Rica is such a mountainous country. Generally, town centers are in valleys and houses are further in the mountains, so up and down are used to reference how far you are to the town center.

What this cultural aspect ultimately taught me about Costa Rica is that the locals are well aware of their surroundings and that much is based on close communities. But beyond this, Costa Ricans aren't afraid to ask for directions. Costa Ricans aren't ashamed to ask for help or to speak to strangers like many U.S. residents are. Somehow, asking a stranger for help in the United States is seen as bothering someone and indebting yourself to someone else. In Costa Rica, it's not like this at all. Costa Ricans don't travel long distances frequently like many U.S. residents do, thus they are more immersed in their own communities. They know where every restaurant is, they know where all the big families live. Although street names are not routinely used, large extended families that live together often have roads named after the family. For example, three

students in our study abroad group lived with the Azorfeifa family, whose road was named after themselves.

### **III:**

One of the things I was originally interested to see in Costa Rica was the impact of the Catholic Church on the country. I was already well aware that the Catholic Church has a huge influence on Latin America as a whole. I myself am Catholic, so I was interested to see what differences there would be in the church's influence in Costa Rica versus an increasingly secularized United States. I actually lived with a Christian host family, rather than a Catholic family. I believe I was in the only non-Catholic household. I never heard my host family complain about Catholics or anything of the sort, but my host-mother did mention that she didn't like the gruesome imagery used in crucifixes and other artworks in Catholic churches. I learned that recently many Costa Ricans are leaving the Catholic Church for different Christian denominations. I found it interesting that there was a Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in the town center. While Costa Rica is growing in religious diversity, the Catholic Church definitely still has a huge influence on the country.

I marveled at how every other car had a rosary bumper sticker on it, and how despite not being Mexico, many still wore hoodies and other items with images of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Many public buses also had images of Jesus with the crown of thorns inside. When people talk on the phone, a typical exchange is as follows: "Hello, how are you?" "Life is great, thanks to God." It is very common for friends to wish each other blessings. This is a large difference in the United States where more and more, it is expected that one only discusses religion inside church buildings. But the Christian faith is really integrated into the culture of Costa Rica.

One of the school trips we took was to the Basilica of the Virgin of the Angels, where I learned of the great faith of Costa Ricans and just how important Catholicism is in Costa Rica. Every year on August 2, thousands of Costa Ricans make a grand pilgrimage to this basilica. It's customary to walk from your house, wherever it might be, and to sleep on the plaza outside the basilica. Inside the church, instead of walking to the altar, pilgrims walk on their knees, to show humility. Inside the basilica there is a miniature museum where individuals who believe that Mary worked a miracle for them, have left a small charm or token to represent their gratitude. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of self-reported miracles demonstrated by these little charms and items. Seeing all of the charms and learning about the pilgrimage had a profound impact on me.

Other noticeable characteristics due to Catholicism's hold on Costa Rica are that abortion and gay marriage are illegal, with no real signs of either of those things changing soon. While many Costa Ricans are not "practicing" Catholics, meaning they don't attend church regularly, their faith is very real. One of my professors is not a practicing Catholic, but he does make the pilgrimage every year. All of these aspects were very interesting to me.

#### **IV:**

I had the opportunity to visit a coffee plantation during my time in Costa Rica with my school group. I found the experience to be interesting. While I don't drink coffee, I know many people do and that it is integral to the economy and identity of Costa Rica. What I was surprised to learn was that many of the workers are from Nicaragua and that they come down to work during the harvest season and then return to their home country. But what was shocking to learn was that even the most experienced coffee picker would only make a maximum of \$30 a day. This was incredible to me considering that few things in Costa Rica are "cheap." Most things

cost about the same, or more than what they would in the United States. I also learned that the particular plantation we were at sells most of their coffee to Japan, since they pay the most because they recognize that Costa Rican coffee is of premium quality. I found myself questioning if it was a good or bad thing that U.S. residents consume so much coffee. On one hand, it provides jobs, but they are high-labor, low pay jobs. I wondered if many coffee-drinkers were aware of the work that goes into their drink, and the low pay that the workers receive. I work at a fast food restaurant in the United States and I thought of the ridiculous amounts of coffee we go through every day, and how prices had gone up within the year, which had made some people unhappy. I wonder what a fitting price for a cup of coffee would be if the workers were to actually make fair wages.

Something that bothered me in Costa Rica was that at the malls, almost all the stores were the same as those in the United States. Also, almost everything was in English. Before going to Costa Rica I assumed that many people would speak English, but this was not as true as I thought it would be. Spanish is by far the dominant language. Natives know English about as well as most non-Hispanic U.S. residents know Spanish — in other words, at a nonexistent, or grade school level. I would have liked to see less of a U.S. influence in the malls, since malls are a center of culture.

**V:**

One of the many disorienting experiences I had in Costa Rica was when I went with my host-mom and host-sister to visit a cousin. Originally, I was told that we were going to go to San Jose for my host-sister to get a haircut. What I was not told was that after the 45-minute bus ride to San Jose (which is only a 9 km journey) we would take another 45-minute bus ride to the Guadalupe area to one of the poorest and most crime ridden neighborhoods of Costa Rica. I was

also not told that my host-mother's cousin was the hair stylist and that the studio was in her house.

I found it interesting that the bus into this poor area seemed to be in worse condition than most of the other buses I had ridden on. But after getting off the bus, my host-mother was irritated because her cousin wasn't at the bus stop to meet us. She explained that she usually never would walk through the neighborhood alone, but she ventured in with us, bravely. The neighborhood was noticeably different from the one I was living in. There were more wandering mangy dogs, broken-down rusting cars sat abandoned in the streets, and none of the houses had windows. These houses didn't have the elaborate gates with a nice lawn behind them. Simple, bars were nailed up to the walls of the houses, many poorly made out of scrap metal, as it was. Piles of garbage graced the corners. Interestingly, there were brand-new sidewalks and curbs. Sidewalks and curbs simply don't exist in the vast majority of Costa Rica, much to my chagrin.

Upon entering the house, I found myself staring at the ceiling, or rather, the lack of. The walls didn't even reach up to the roof, it was simply wall, open space, roof — made out of scrap metal. Electrical wires ran everywhere. Beyond that, the house had decent furniture and everyone wore nice clothes. The house was very narrow, but very long.

A family of six lived in the house, but then a number of cousins, nieces and nephews, and an aunt came over as well. I spent a lot of time that day thinking about how everyone seemed so content together despite the obvious poverty. I also marveled at how the Costa Rican obsession to look good, no matter how poor you are. One of the nieces put on a nice dress and full face of makeup with bright red lipstick, just to walk to the store. I once shared with my host family how in the U.S. people don't dress up as much, which they found hard to believe since they think the United States is a fashion capital, and all the stores in their mall are American. Also, in Costa

Rica there is much more family-togetherness time. The people aren't always on the go like us, but value time together much more. As seen with this family, their true wealth is in each other, rather than possessions or flashy accomplishments in the United States.

## **VI:**

One of the most noticeable effects of my time abroad is that I'm more confident as an individual. I definitely had significant fears before leaving of how I would navigate the airports, local transportation, and communicate daily. I feel less fearful in general knowing that I made it through the experience in one piece! I feel that I can adapt more easily, and that I also have a more open mind. While I might not start adopting most Costa Rican customs into my own life, I now know that there is more than just the "American" way of life. I feel like I have a greater general insight to Latin America as a whole. My Spanish listening skills definitely improved. I feel more inspired to continue with Spanish, in hopes that one day I will be fluent and able to assist Latinos in the United States. Perhaps not coincidentally, during my time abroad, I decided that I would like to pursue a graduate degree in social work. Being an outsider in a foreign country made me realize how difficult it is for immigrants to integrate. I hope that one day I will be able to assist recent Latino immigrants in the United States. While far from an expert, I feel like studying abroad definitely gave me greater insight on the immigration issues the United States is facing currently. Few Costa Ricans leave their country, they have much pride in it, but in my classes, I learned about many of the factors why individuals in neighboring countries leave, such as in El Salvador and Honduras. For these and so many other reasons, I feel that my two months in Costa Rica provided an invaluable experience.

## **VII:**



This is an image of the view from my bedroom window. I was grateful to be living in a house as modern as I did, but I also liked being reminded of the more traditional side of Costa Rica — as shown by the clothesline. Costa Rica is truly a mix of old and new. One of the things I miss the most about Costa Rica is the incredible views and the clouds so close to the mountains.



I chose to include this image because I enjoyed my time in San Jose. I preferred sticking around in town than going to the beaches, which were quite touristy. I liked getting to experience the daily life of Costa Ricans. I also love that you can see the taxis, fast food, and plaza in this picture — a clash of old and new.