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In a whirlwind of motion, I spent two months in the city of San Isidro, Costa Rica studying abroad with a unified group of students from UW-Eau Claire; learning to collect moments and experiences instead of materials and items, learning to let go and let myself be fully immersed, and learning to love, no matter the communication lapses and cultural barriers that may exist.

I didn't expect that culture shock would impact me. I thought myself invincible, or culturally advanced, or already accustomed or exposed to "diversity." Yet, when I arrived, when I stepped out of the airport into a world with palm trees, Spanish everywhere, and taxi drivers seeking customers and colones, the reality that I was not in my small hometown in Northern Wisconsin became clear. In the next few weeks of change, two specific instances clarified this even more deeply. The first was the natural, "Pura vida", way of life that was a part of the little things in each day. Part way through my study abroad experience, I caught a strong cold and couldn't shake it. My host family went to their backyard garden and picked eucalyptus leaves from their casual eucalyptus tree, boiled them and had me breathe in the steam to decongest. It worked like magic and contrasted with the medications I was accustomed to taking in the United States to treat such a cold. The second instance was the modes of transportation around the country. From catching buses, to taxis, to walking and becoming accustomed to the lack of sidewalks and cars whizzing by. It was an adventure, always, when leaving the house. It gave me the opportunity for growth in becoming more self-assured and confident in traveling around the world. These two experiences and more taught me to listen first and seek to humbly learn and understand from those around you to truly grow in understanding the world's diverse cultures and environments and practices.

In my Latin American Civilizations course, part of the focus was on political systems and more specifically how the United States has played strong and often covert roles in Latin American governments to influence the power roles in the countries in the name of deterring communist governments. I learned how powerful the United States really is in the world after taking a metaphorical step back and learning history from another point of view, the view of the underdog. However, I also saw what a society looks like where a middle class is very small and virtually non-existent and saw the social institutions that perpetuate the large gap between the upper and lower classes. One turn around a corner in the capitol of San José and there are children either begging or trying to sell candies to make a living while taking the next right could lead you through the high gated housing communities with the large guard dogs who growled ominously from behind walls. Yet, above all this I learned of the global relations between China, Japan, Costa Rica and the United States and how the world is becoming closer through the technology of today that connects countries previously, figuratively, "worlds" apart.

United States involvement in other countries affairs, particularly in Latin America, whatsoever the political opinion or persuasion of an individual, has brought about certain negative attitudes and ways of thinking in Latin America towards the U.S. Through my Latin American civilizations course, I learned a great deal of the various ways the United States is perceived today due to

actions performed years ago. For instance, when the William Walker invaded and set himself up as president in Nicaragua so that Costa Rica took action to try to free their “brothers”, to quote Juan Rafael Mora. Or in 21st century elections, despite the Monroe Doctrine, the U.S itself used its power to influence elections more to the political right, misunderstanding, perhaps, that the political right in Latin America tends to usually be the dictators whereas the left is more akin to U.S democratic style. These interventionist actions by the U.S, whether necessary or unnecessary and regardless of opinion, have undoubtedly had an impact on the psyche of Latin America, or at least, in Costa Rica. There are movements now gaining traction among youth to try to reform politics where money is power and ultimate authority and independence from the influence of large countries like the United States.

This study abroad experience has taught me to be very flexible and creative in finding solutions. During the week we lived with our host families about twenty minutes from the capital of San José, yet on the weekends we were encouraged to travel and explore the country. In several of these trips, usually in booking hostels, we encountered unexpected challenges. Sometimes it was wandering a beach town in the hot one o'clock afternoon sun in search for our hostel, or finding our reservations were only for two instead of twelve, or finding taxis to the appropriate bus station. In response to these difficulties, I learned the skill of creative solutions and being flexible with experiences being adventures and how to remain calm and cool in a disorienting situation.

A disorienting aspect of my study abroad experience was the different concepts of time between the United States and Costa Rica. I had tried to do research ahead of time in an attempt to accustom myself ahead of time to the differences and yet when I arrived and felt the Costa Rica time concept was something altogether unexpected. There, they have the concept of “La hora tica” or Tico time (Tico/a is an affectionate abbreviation by Costa Ricans for “Costarricense” or someone from Costa Rica). This time concept is where ten minutes late or more is the norm to any appointment, with the exception of work, school, or medical instances. A relaxed view of each day exists, especially on the weekends, where time with people takes precedence over any work or schedule so that a day that had a plan completely changes unexpectedly. This was especially disorienting for me as an individual who enjoys plans and follow through on them. I was continually reminding myself to let go of my home culture to fully embrace and immerse myself in Costa Rican culture. Through this experience, I saw Costa Ricans’ value of people and conversation and human connection over a constant drive to be productive and a time is money attitude. I observed a relaxed and gentle flow to life that accommodated for family and made home a priority. I grew to deeply admire this culture and way of life. This dilemma opened my eyes to how intercultural misunderstandings and communications based in something even as simple as a concept of time, if not purposefully navigated with a desire to understand one another, can and do lead to strong repercussions. With this, I am able to see how the decision to listen first to understand and then to speak to establish trust is key in an ever more connected world.



“Through my study abroad experience, I was able to realize the beautiful truth of how small I am in this great big world, and yet how each of us have an impact and our decisions as individuals matter and influence the world, so that united together there can be positive change.”



"My host family was truly welcoming. I felt deeply cared for, loved and a part of the family. I am eternally grateful for this study abroad experience for in this life I now have two families."