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Study Abroad Reflection

 I studied abroad in San Ramon, Costa Rica during the Spring semester of 2023. Before this trip, I had traveled internationally a few times before, but never for longer than two weeks. Going in, I was prepared to experience some culture shock, but was not quite sure what to expect, besides what I had read about the Tico culture online.

My first impressions of Costa Rica lead me immediately to draw comparisons to the culture of Peru, a country I had visited three times previously. The extensive use of motorcycles, closeness and size of homes throughout the city, presence of stray dogs, and gates on nearly every window, all reminded me of the dusty streets of Cusco I had visited years ago. This comparison did not last long, however, as I came to know my new home as its own culture, not an outgrowth of a pre-established conception in my mind.

San Ramón is a smaller city in Costa Rica, located an hour west of the capital, San José, and an hour east of the Pacific Ocean. The city is divided into small neighborhoods with a beautiful cathedral and park at its center. There are buses that traverse the country as a form of public transportation, but walking and taxis were the primary modes of transport around San Ramón. My host mom lived in a peripheral neighborhood of the city, Los Parques, and did not own a car, meaning that I had a mile-and-half walk across town each day to get to the university. This trek was one of the biggest culture shocks for me, getting to experience how far people walk every day, multiple times a day, just to go to the grocery store, work, or school. In the United States, the majority of people have access to a personal vehicle, or public transportation in cities will drop you off close to your destination. I never thought about walking over a mile to get somewhere I wanted to go back home, but in Costa Rica, a thirty or forty minute walk in the heat of the day was a normal, and necessary occurrence. Spring is considered the dry season in Costa Rica, so days and nights were hot and humid, and I found myself to be tan all semester long thanks to the country's proximity to the equator. On the flip-side, air conditioning was virtually non-existent, and I had to learn to adjust to sleeping in warm temperatures each night, sometimes with mosquitos buzzing around overhead.

I had the opportunity to travel the country nearly every weekend of my time abroad. By the end of the trip, I had visited all 7 of Costa Rica's provinces, and had even traveled "coast to coast" by bus in one day - swimming in the Atlantic Ocean early in the morning, and finishing the day by swimming in the Pacific Ocean. Through this extensive travel in-country, I gained an appreciation for the variation of culture, geography, and industry throughout. For example, the eastern Caribbean province of Limón was famous for its rice-and-beans dish - a sweeter, and spicier, version of gallo pinto, one of Costa Rica's most well-known dishes. When I told my host mom and professors I would be traveling there one weekend, they all eagerly told me to try it, and let them know my thoughts. Differences in industry were also fascinating to see. Cities like Arenal and Jaco, for example, were grounded in the tourist industry with English advertisements for ziplining and hiking everywhere you went. Other regions, however, such as the Cartago and Herredia regions were completely opposite. When my friends and I visited Cachí, a small town located in Cartago, it seemed like we were the only foreigners for miles. In more touristy places, there were a fair number of Costa Ricans who understood English to some degree, so you could get your point across easier if you were struggling to do so in Spanish. During our time in Cachí, however, we found ourselves completely isolated from English speakers, signs, or music. The local industry here was certainly not catered to tourists, so experiencing this was also very neat to see.

By the end of my semester, I found myself very well-adjusted and comfortable in my new culture. Costa Ricans rarely use the "tú" form when speaking, and my Spanish vocabulary had grown to reflect that. I had grown used to eating rice and beans at every single meal, and cold showers with poor water pressure had become a part of daily life. I learned so much about myself through this time and am grateful for the opportunity to integrate this experience into my academic career at Clemson University. The memories and skills I took away are some that will last me a lifetime.