

The Costa Rican Cure to Giving Up (my semester abroad)

By Gabriella Cisneros

I'm not someone who gives up easily. But in my freshman year of college, after so many years of taking Spanish classes, I was no longer sure I could continue with a Spanish minor. I felt like I was improving very slowly, or maybe not improving at all anymore. However, as a Mexican-American, I also felt a need to understand and speak the language of my heritage. And giving up was too easy.

So that's why I tossed myself into a sink-or-swim Spanish immersion experience in Costa Rica for five months.



Photo credit: Natalie Eddings

SEPTEMBER



We saw a REAL soccer game! Our stadium snack: green mango slices with salt, lime juice, and vinegar.

I met my new housemate, Natalie, who was from Tennessee. We got into the routine of eating breakfast with our host family every morning and dinner with them every night, attending classes in between, and occasionally getting sort-of lost in the city. During this time, we would practice our Spanish and also learn more about the people who would act like foster parents to us for the next few months.



We studied Spanish at a local café. We ordered juice.

I didn't realize how attached I would become to Mama Tica (the name all study abroad students called their host mom), but four months later, when she stood with me in front of the cab that would take me to the airport, I leaned my head on her shoulder and clung onto her petite frame, tears catching in the corners of my eyes as I regretted not appreciating her more during our time together.



The Costa Rican Independence Day celebrations were nonstop! Everyone had so much pride in their country.

In month one, what I most learned was how difficult it is to talk to people confidently and amicably when the language you're speaking is not your own. It's strange to think you can "own" a language, but learning and practicing a second language made me realize that I really take for granted how much I rely on language in my everyday life just to feel "normal."

OCTOBER



By October, walking to the grocery store was a regular, weekly chore, I was excitedly planning every weekend adventure, and I already moved up to my Intermediate Spanish conversation class. My housemates, Natalie, Priscila, Deb, and Kadesha already felt like my sisters. Plus, I made a great friend named Madison through my study abroad program when she was in search of someone to visit Volcán Poás with her. Near the end of the month, our group stayed in Panama for the weekend, where we lazed around on beaches and became acquainted with some intensely orange starfish on the aptly named “Starfish Beach.”



In this month, I was more comfortable speaking, partially thanks to my intensive Spanish language courses, partially because my host family didn't speak any English, and partially because when I traveled on weekends, I was usually the only one who asked for directions.



I felt my first (and only) earthquake in October. Maybe it was a metaphor for my Spanish-speaking progress: kind of shaky but not bad enough to make my world come crashing down.



NOVEMBER



Most study abroad students were missing the autumnal colors we left behind in the United States, but I was thoroughly enjoying the sunshine and even the occasional (okay, daily) rain. Plus, November was my most hectic and most exciting month abroad. My marine biology class went on two field trips: one to the Caribbean coast (Manzanillo) and one on the Pacific Coast (Cuajiniquil). We snorkeled around nurse sharks, identified sea urchins, lifted up rocks to find sea squirts, and got very sun burnt in the process. In the same month, I dropped my camera in a river, saw a concert in Dominical, witnessed turtles laying eggs around midnight (twice), and read an original poem in Spanish for the school talent show.



In this month, I realized my time in Costa Rica was quickly running out. I also realized how much my Spanish skills had improved! I knew I wasn't completely fluent, but I was gaining more confidence in my actions as well as my speech.



I've always felt like speaking aloud (even in English) was difficult, but when I had to overcome the same barriers in a language and culture I was still learning, other aspects of my life suddenly seemed so easy. I was able to problem solve situations more effectively, and I was less afraid of trying new things or experiencing new things. November was monumental...in the smallest ways. Ways that built up into the grand, spectacular, magnificent month of December.

DECEMBER



My last month abroad. I still had so many unfulfilled plans, so many places to go, so many things to see. I traveled to Cerro Chirripó and did the two day, 24 mile roundtrip hike to the highest point of Costa Rica. And I did it all alone.

On my wait at the bus stop to return home, I met a local woman who didn't speak English, and we became fast friends. The next weekend (my last in Costa Rica) I traveled to meet her in her home town and we hiked Cerro Dantas together through the muddiest conditions I'd ever experienced. Back in San José, I saw a bunch of movies during a film festival that was going on, shopped for last minute gifts for family back home, and finally attended the going away dinner with my study abroad program.



Looking back on it all, I can think of a million stories to tell. Everything I did, saw, and learned seems so out-of-this-world. I can't believe how far away it all feels now. And yet, I can see how everything that happened there has made me who I am here. "Theres" and "heres" are always changing. Where is home? I wonder. I've lived in Wisconsin my whole life, but I lived in Costa Rica for the second longest period of time. Sure it was only four months, but I'm proud to say my second home is a place of rambunctious monkeys, silly-looking sloths, thousands of waterfalls, six different types of rainforests, extraordinary mountains, cerulean seas, majestic sea turtles, delicious gallo pinto, fried plantains, Musmani supermarkets, and some of the friendliest people I've ever met. Four months abroad and a lifetime of stories.

Let's give it up for never giving up.



For more details about my time abroad, visit the personal blog that I kept:
<http://unachicaencostarica.tumblr.com/>

You can also check out the blogging I did for my study abroad program, CEA:
http://www.ceastudyabroadblog.com/?author_name=gcisneros

And maybe watch this video I made (I wrote the poem that is listed in the video's description, and I read it over the video for the talent show at my university in San Jose):
<https://vimeo.com/145467796>