

The hum of the plane's engine could not drown out the incessant streams of worries and nervous thoughts running through my head. I couldn't tell you if it was the far away country, language barrier, unrecognizable food, or one of a hundred other concerns I that I was fixating on most. Anxiety to meet my Costa Rican host family built as I frantically ran through Spanish verb conjugations and practiced an impressive introduction, flawless in grammar and pronunciation. I let out nervous laughs pressing on my lips while making small talk with seat mates. After landing in Fort Lauderdale where many small children disembarked the plane to realize their dreams in Disney World I boarded another plane to San José where I hoped to realize dreams of my own. Looking out the small plane window I wondered to myself how and even if my life would be changed upon returning to this country in two months.

I held onto worries during my last leg of the journey, until the same small plane window revealed a first view of one the world's most beautiful countries. The landscape was strikingly different than anything I had ever seen. Waves of stoic mountains towered over smaller series of hills, all covered in incredibly lush green foliage. My nerves were calmed in the presence of such uninterrupted beauty, a common theme throughout the remainder of my time there. I understood for the first time the reason why phrases such as "llévela la suave" which means "take it easy" and "pura vida" meaning "the good life" are used daily and truly describe the lifestyle of ticos, the people of Costa Rica. I learned these phrases and their innumerable uses first hand from Marta Rimerá Gomez and her family, who became my own family, quickly and irreversibly.

Marta, who I lovingly know as "mama tica," welcomed me into her home where I had my own bedroom with a desk, small closet, and a bed. After reciting my well-rehearsed introduction she hugged me, corrected my mistakes, and laughed, telling me to "llévela suave." She made me feel at home right away and I quickly found that life in Costa Rica was not too different from life

in the States, except the occasional cockroach and inability to flush the toilet paper. Every morning I awoke to birds singing outside my bedroom window and the chirping of the gecko that I am certain lived in the bathroom. I drank rich coffee and read the morning newspaper with my mama tica before heading to class for the day. The majestic mountains smiling at me from the horizon during the walk to school reminded me that everything was “pura vida” and not to allow the stress of course work to prevent me from enjoying the incredible experience.

Sticking out in the streets with my fair skin and light hair, I explored the city, interacted with women in the markets and made friends with the storekeeper on my street corner. I felt increasingly comfortable speaking Spanish at home and with strangers. I confronted taxi drivers when they tried to overcharge me. I grew accustomed to the innumerable stray dogs, though I occasionally broke down and gave them a snack or an encouraging pat. I came to accept that even running home would not save me from the “aguacero,” a torrential rain that never failed to drench me every afternoon. Though most things grew into habit, the mountains never ceased to amaze me and showcase the beauty of each day.

Arriving to Costa Rica I was excited to learn about bio ethics and how I could make useful comparisons between this country’s health care system and that of the United States. I hoped these studies would make me a better educated and more prepared physician one day. I do believe this expectation was met, although some of the lessons I learned that will truly contribute to my success as a physician were not learned in the classroom, but by interacting with the people I encountered. I made friends with people from Switzerland, Israel, Australia, Spain, and other countries from around the world. I learned about life in the Israeli army, how constant inflation is affecting Australians, and what college is like in Switzerland. These new friends taught me the power of human interaction; how a simple conversation can change someone’s life

or a smile can break any communication barrier. Suddenly the world became more real to me, instilling a new desire to continue immersing myself in diverse cultures and attaining new perspectives on my own life and culture.

I spent a week on an organic farm in the rural region of Limon that focused on community development and women's empowerment. I worked alongside a man named Julio cultivating soybeans, planting pineapples, and weeding; we only paused to retrieve and taste exotic fruits with machetes and dance in the rain while covered in dirt and weeds. He trotted agilely through the trees and underbrush of the forest pointing out snakes, sloths, red frogs, and monkeys while I stumbled clumsily behind. I was amazed by how the joy of his fifty years spilled from him, happily drowning anyone willing to share it with him.

I also spent time in San Francisco, a community accessible only by a forty five minute boat ride through a narrow canal near the Caribbean Sea. This humble community is made up of one dirt road with ten to fifteen homes, a single restaurant and a rickety school house. While there, I painted their school, shared a meal with the people in their restaurant, and played soccer with the children. I came hoping to help these people by volunteering my time to help them reconstruct their school, but the gift of joy the children filled my heart with was much more permanent than the blue paint that now clings to the one room school house's cement walls. Without even exchanging words with me, the children took my hands but captured my heart.

Julio and the San Franciscan people showed me the varying spectrum of cultures even within this one country. Although it may seem that they would feel disadvantaged or discouraged in their isolated and simplistic lives, this assumption could not be farther from the truth. Their lives are overflowing with beauty and love that only grows stronger when they share it with others.

When once again I saw the Detroit Metro Airport out of the small plane window, I collected my bags, though the more precious luggage I carried in my mind and heart, the memories of the tico people and adventures that continue to affect the way I see my own world. I was ready to return to my life in Michigan and attempt to answer the impossible question, “How was Costa Rica?” Though I would answer with exciting tales of white water rafting down the Pacuare River, climbing to the top of the Poas Volcano, and holding hands with a monkey, I would really wish to tell them that the best moments can’t be put in words. You can’t describe the way the mountains caress the San José skyline or impressive grandeur of endless miles of banana trees on a bananera. You can’t explain what it is like to see pure and innocent joy on the faces of children who have nothing by the standards of our society. You can’t replicate the incredible peace in which the tico people live. You can only experience it.