



Matthew Dearstyne, Mathematics

This past semester I had the opportunity to study abroad with Best Semester's Latin American Studies Program (LASP). I had been interested in the program every since one of my friends returned from it over a year ago, so when I finally arrived in Costa Rica on January 12 I could hardly believe that I was finally there. The program lasted three and a half months. For the first month I lived in San José, the capital city of Costa Rica, home to about 2 million people. Every other morning I would leave my host families house and walk fifteen minutes over to the LASP office for our Core Seminar course, where various speakers talked to our group (there were 33 of us) about Latin American topics such as culture, politics, religion, etc. During the walk it would often occur to me that it was still January; it's easy to forget that when you're wearing shorts on a 70 degree day. While I missed my friends at home, I can't say I envied the Roberts students braving the icy walk to Pearce while I strolled up the Costa Rican hills, surrounded by mountains on all sides.

Each afternoon I would walk with my classmates to a town called Curridabat, about 45 minutes away from the LASP office, for our daily Spanish classes. At the beginning of the trip we were divided into different classes according to our speaking ability, but even though some were better speakers than others, we were all in essentially the same boat once we realized that conjugating verbs on paper in class is much different than living with a host family who speaks no English.

After the first month all of us took a 10 day trip to Nicaragua, which borders Costa Rica to the north. Despite the proximity, the two countries are quite different. While Costa Rica has had a history relatively free of violence (it abolished its army in 1949), Nicaragua has been plagued with conflict for years. The results of these historical differences soon became apparent to us as we heard lectures about the growing corruption of the government, the expansion of poverty throughout the region, and the questionable actions, at least in the eyes of many Nicaraguans, of the United States government in the past. We also experienced these differences first hand; while most of us were with middle class families in Costa Rica, many of us were sent to live in Nicaraguan communities which, by our standards, are extremely poor. I was sent to a community called Jiquillio, and while the conditions were definitely not what I was used to, the love and generosity of the people that welcomed me into their homes overwhelmed me. In fact, when I left after only six days, I didn't feel like I was leaving strangers behind, but family.

The trip to Nicaragua was followed by two more weeks in San José, during which we took a course entitled Faith and Practice in Latin America. During these two weeks we spoke with seven or eight people, some *gringo* (from the United States), some *tico* (Costa Rican), about the diverse expressions of faith in Costa Rica and the entire region. We heard from a wide range of people, everyone from North American Christian missionaries to a Mayan priest (who thankfully assured us that the Earth is *not* coming to an end in 2012).



This seminar was followed by a community project, during which each of us was sent to different Costa Rican communities to live and work for a month. I was sent to a town called San José de la Montaña, where I was to work on an organic farm with a man named Roderick. For me this month was one of the most difficult, but also one of the most rewarding parts of the semester. I arrived at the farm on a Tuesday afternoon and we wasted no time getting to work; ten minutes after my bags were out of the car and into the house I was outside with Roderick preparing soil for planting. Whatever my expectations had been for this experience, they were shattered within twenty minutes, as I carried (or attempted to carry) thirty pound sacks of manure from the horse's stables to the garden. While I woke up the first few mornings barely able to stand, after a week I soon became accustomed to the rhythm of life on the farm, getting up at 5:30 to feed

the animals and spending the day watering, weeding, preparing soil, planting, harvesting, cutting, chopping, etc until dinner time at 6:00. While I do not miss the horse and geese who tried to bite me at least once a day or the feeling of constant exhaustion, not a day goes by that I do not think of my time on the farm and miss Roderick and his family. I learned a lot while I was there, but the most important lesson I learned was to appreciate the work that people like Roderick do all over the world so that we can have food on our tables. I think this idea is best summed up in the way Roderick would always start his prayers before we ate: "Dear Lord, bless this food and all the hands that have touched from the time it was a seed until now."

The final part of our semester was a 10 day trip to Cuba. For most of the semester we were not sure whether the trip was going to work out, as we waited to hear from the Department of the Treasury whether or not they were going to grant us a license to visit the island. Thankfully, they finally did. Cuba is like no other place that I have ever visited, and I would assume is, at this point in time, relatively unique in the world. Due to the United States blockade of Cuba, many of the U.S. influences seen in countries all over the world are absent there; you won't find a McDonalds or a Starbucks walking through the streets of Havana. In Cuba we had the extremely rare opportunity to live with host families, and that turned out to be an invaluable experience which I will never forget. Living in people's homes gave us the time to talk with them about their lives and their country. We also had the opportunity to hear various speakers, including a member of the Cuban parliament and a member of the Ministry of Education. While the issue of Cuba is often a hot topic in the United States, through hearing these people speak each one of us learned that issues are rarely as black and white as they seem. Obviously Cuba has problems, problems that began before my parents were born and which as impossible to understand in a ten day trip, but in my opinion it is important to remember that there isn't a country in the world which is problem free, and that we should be slow to judge something which we fear because we do not understand it. On our last night in Cuba our tour guide, a man named Ariel, said something

which I will never forget. Someone asked him what we as citizens of the United States could do to help the Cuban people, and his reply was this: "Just tell your friends and your family that we are not as evil as some say we are, and that this is not as evil as some say this is." I include that quote here not to provoke any emotion, but simply to fulfill his wish and to provide some food for thought; the same food for thought that I was forced to chew on during my time there.

After Cuba we returned to Costa Rica for one day and flew back to Miami the next. While I was in Latin America I felt like I had always been there, yet when we returned the 108 day trip felt like it had just begun. While I have tried to convey in words some things that I learned there, one more thing I learned is that words can only convey so much. That is why I encourage everyone who has the chance to study abroad to do so, not necessarily in Latin America, but anywhere in the world. While we often hear that technology is constantly making the world smaller, we should not forget that the world is an enormous place that is home to more than six billion people, with more and more being born each day. We should realize that we are global citizens, and that our fate and the fate of our children are intricately linked to the fate of every other person on the planet. You can look at pictures of the world, and read articles written by people who have experienced a small part of it, but nothing compares to experiencing it yourself. So, to students: if you can, study abroad. Learn about and immerse yourself in a culture that is not your own. Do things you would have never imagined yourself doing. I guarantee that you will not regret it. And to parents, faculty, staff, and other adults: encourage the young adults that you know to take advantage of the opportunities that they have access to, opportunities that a few generations ago were not available, so that they can explore and learn about the complex and beautiful world which they belong to.