

Letter to Future Students

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My time in Costa Rica was thrilling, beautiful, unreal, expectation defying, at times scary and uncomfortable, but unfailingly amazing. I gained from it an intuitive understanding of the natural world that I didn't have before. It gave me perspective on my own way of life through the hands-on experience of another culture. But, most importantly, I learned a lot about myself. Despite the struggle of gaining all this knowledge, it was by far worth it and one of the best things I've ever done.

My expectations of Costa Rica were in some ways accurate and in other ways totally inaccurate. As I expected, I encountered many bugs and several snakes; the food was amazing; I learned a lot; and I made many new friends. One aspect of the trip that I had not expected was how far I usually was from the monkeys I studied. I had this idea that I would see them all up close and would be able to easily pick up on the subtle behavior of each individual. This was not the case. Most of the time the monkeys were high up in a distant tree, partially obscured by foliage, and asleep. It was not exactly the up-close and active situation I had been picturing but incredible, nonetheless.

There were many things I feared about this trip before going. I was afraid of encountering giant bugs and spiders, of being attacked by a jaguar or snake, of losing my phone and somehow being unable to contact friends and family. I was afraid of not getting along with my fellow field school students and being socially alone and unsupported. I was afraid of getting sick, of losing my glasses, of the extreme heat, of losing my luggage, and of being stranded somewhere without the ability to speak an adequate amount of Spanish. Once arriving, I found that some of my fears were unfounded; others, though a definite risk, were totally outside my realm of control; and some I just had to face and turned out not to be as bad as I thought.

I found solutions to some of my fears that worked well for me. If you are someone who is not excited by the prospect of getting close to giant bugs while removing them from your room, I would highly recommend investing in a Critter Catcher. The Critter Catcher's long arm allows you to stay about two to three feet away from whatever variety of creatures you wish to remove. I used it in the removal of spiders, beetles, cockroaches, lizards, geckos, and various insects I have yet to identify. The Critter Catcher worked very well, and, upon their outdoor release, all critters appeared to be unharmed by the catching mechanism. I also found a waterproof phone case on a necklace cord as an indispensable piece of equipment. It protected my phone from the rain, kept it always within reach, and most importantly laid to rest my fear of dropping my phone into some unseen or irretrievable place. With this phone case I was able to take tons of pictures that I would not have been able to otherwise due to the time it would have taken to remove my phone from a bag or pocket or my unwillingness to risk dropping it.

I also learned that, due partially to their rarity, jaguar attacks were extremely unlikely, which put my mind to ease a little, but that a bite by a venomous snake was worthy of great concern

and vigilance. There are many species of venomous snakes at La Selva, and you must remain constantly watchful for snakes both outside and inside the buildings.

The positive experiences I had while in Costa Rica are too many to count. I swam in the ocean and sat on the warm sand of tropical beaches. I saw many amazing animals such as sloths, an ocelot, colorful frogs, a wide variety of birds, all four of Costa Rica's primate species, and many others. I saw how chocolate was made from cacao fresh off the tree to a bar. I went zip-lining through the jungles of Manuel Antonio. I toured mangroves and rivers further inland. I experienced the rich cultural history of Costa Rica displayed in the Gold Museum. I learned about the properties of many native plants. I made close friendships with my fellow students, and I had the pleasure of learning and laughing with our guides and the local peoples we encountered.

Despite the overwhelmingly positive nature of the trip, it also had its negative aspects. The heat was often suffocating. I was drenched in sweat more often than not. It became something I had to learn to accept. On that same note, I didn't really feel clean the whole time I was there. Usually I had dirt or sand somewhere on me, bugs that I needed to brush off, a leaf in my hair, and the aforementioned sweat covering my entire body. I was uncomfortable. The walking was hard, usually 5 to 20 miles per day, and I accumulated many blisters, rashes, sunburns, and bug bites. The stress of constantly being watchful of things that might harm me also took its toll. It is hard to be in a situation so completely foreign and so far from your family and friends. I had days where I had both physical and emotional break downs from the relentlessness of my activity and situation. Despite liking both rice and beans, it was also be hard on my system to suddenly find those as my staple foods. The constant presence of insects in my room, outside, landing on my food, and on my person really got to me. I found solace in my zipped shut mesh tent I slept in, which I highly recommend. Having a place that I knew was completely shut off from the insects allowed me to relax and recharge. It was all really difficult to push through and face, but discomfort was a small price to pay for the life-changing experiences I had the privilege to be involved in.

While in Costa Rica I participated in several service-learning activities, such as removing invasive species, planting wild almond trees, and taking measurements on the growth of some of La Selva's trees. These activities put me right in the midst of what I was learning and allowed me to not only intellectually understand the material but to sense and intuit it on a deeper level. These activities appealed to me emotionally in a way they never would have had I not been hands on and participating. I felt not only was I becoming more informed on many important issues, I was actively making a positive difference. I was addressing the issues. Instead of lamenting our global situation, I was taking action. Despite it being a very small action in each case, it made me realize that there is no barrier preventing me from making some sort of difference. I had an unconscious assumption that many issues were far outside what I could tackle or expect to impact. By participating in activities where I could firsthand see the

immediate positive impact of my actions, I felt that unconscious distance I had placed between myself and change disappear. I felt powerful.

Before departing on this trip, I spent months trying to think of every possible item I might need and preparing for every eventuality. For the most part I felt as prepared as I could have been. I do, however, wish I had spent longer learning and practicing Spanish. I was fortunate enough to have fellow students who spoke fluent Spanish, but without them I would have had a very difficult time communicating with many of the local people. I would recommend learning as much Spanish as you can before going.

I would do several things differently, if given the chance. I wouldn't have brought some of the things I packed. For example, I brought two umbrellas, the first one small and compact and the second large and with a clamp I could hook to my chair. The second larger umbrella turned out to be far too cumbersome to carry and time consuming to set up. I should have just brought the one umbrella. I also wish that after the chocolate tour I had bought way more chocolate! Chocolate doesn't last you as long as you think it will, and when it comes to super amazing handmade Costa Rican chocolate, you want to bring home as much as you physically can. I also would have been way more careful about sitting directly under the monkeys; they can and will poop on you, and that's a situation much better avoided.

To be successful in this course, come prepared to work hard and get your hands and your entire body dirty. Be respectful and friendly to your classmates, faculty members, and local Costa Ricans. You are a guest in their country. It is important to keep this in mind. Be open to activities that are outside your comfort zone. You may learn something about yourself and find something you never thought you would like. Listen to your intuition. If you feel very uncomfortable about doing something, weigh the pros and cons and don't do it if you don't think you could handle it. Be zealous in your daily application of bugs pray. If it feels like something is crawling on you, it's probably because it is. Take lots of pictures! Despite thinking that you will remember every second, you won't, and commemorating it with a picture helps to preserve the experience. Take your research seriously. This opportunity to conduct original research is almost unparalleled. Take full advantage of it. Bring a Critter Catcher, a wearable waterproof phone case, a camelback, rechargeable fans, a compact chair, good quality sandals, puddle boots, and hiking boots, and a zip-shut mesh sleeping tent. These items will make your time in Costa Rica so much easier and enjoyable. Do not be afraid to confide in the faculty members if you are struggling with the physical or emotional demands of the trip. They are there to help you. Fully inhabit each moment you are there—savor it—because it is not as long as you think.

Throughout this course I feel I have gained an excellent understanding of the learning objectives. I have a much better understanding of primate behavior after firsthand observation of it. Through the many activities we participated in, I gained a hands-on understanding of socioecology and conservation. I learned how to conduct original research using the scientific method and, through the various writing assignments, learned how to communicate my

research and results to others. This course has taught me hard work, how to fully focus on a task, perseverance, and how remarkable the natural world really is. These are skills that can be applied to any class and to life in general.

It is a great challenge to convey the vastness and impact of this course. It is, to a great extent, beyond words and explanation. To anyone thinking of taking this course, I strongly encourage you to do so. It has totally changed my life and perspective. This is a class unlike any other. You don't take this course you live it.