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Travel Writing and Costa Rica: Study Abroad

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Life in the Clouds

Travel isn't always pretty. It isn't always comfortable. Sometimes it hurts, it even breaks your heart. But that's okay. The journey changes you; it should change you. It leaves marks on your memory, on your consciousness, on your heart, and on your body. You take something with you. Hopefully, you leave something good behind. Anthony Bourdain

As I sit at home and drink my Costa Rican coffee, all I can think is “What a journey!” Roughly 2,107 miles from home, it’s safe to say we weren’t in Kansas anymore, a reality that I was continually reminded of throughout our 12-day expedition. A sense of freedom was evoked along the way, from my daily responsibilities of work, parenting, and everything in between. I’d left my worries in Kansas City, eager to embrace all that was to come. My first trip out of the country, flying over the ocean and mountain tops, the view was spectacular, even from my middle seat. Along with our teacher, 2 Donnelly students traveled with 17 KU students and 2 KU professors, to Central America, not entirely sure what to expect. I’d experienced a whirlwind of emotions the days prior to the trip, but the most profound would be excitement, followed then by anxiety. I was anxious about flying, with this being only my 3rd time, about leaving behind my daughter, and anxious of course, about not having any idea of what life would be like in a country completely foreign from all that I knew. Excitement for apparent reasons such as traveling, trying new foods, and meeting new people. But more so for the knowledge I’d

gain and the experiences I'd endure exploring new cultures. The lasting memories and many friends made effortlessly along the way, made the trip even more unimaginable. From hiking through the clouds to planting a tree to "Save the Planet," this Study Abroad was an adventure, difficult to describe with words, or even pictures.

I have learned the necessity of traveling. Not only for the "break" from life, that we all need from time to time, but also, to be more understanding of other people and cultures. Traveling enables us to become more open minded to others' beliefs and ways of life, no matter how different they may be from our own. According to travel writer Tim Cahill, traveling should be viewed as a step toward international harmony. I feel that if the knowledge, beauty, and experiences of others can be shared from a personal experience, unity can be created and fulfilled one step at a time. I have learned that traveling brings both challenges and opportunities. This enables you to get closer to finding who you really are. There will be times that you are weary and uncomfortable, not sure what to expect. But those changes develop your personal growth. You learn to adapt to your surroundings in the moment itself. No matter how equipped you may think you are, you can never really know what to expect. Nor be 100% prepared for everything that may come your way. Traveling also provides education that you would never be able to get in a classroom. Similar to a hands-on learning project, it is required to adequately grasp the knowledge and information intended. You will be able to detach from the technology driven society norms and step back into reality. You are forced to re-evaluate your life, observing others and the things they do differently. When traveling, you notice things about you and your home you would change and things that you are satisfied with and come to appreciate.

I have not traveled much throughout my 27 years of life. I've mostly traveled only for work, so when the opportunity arose, I jumped on it. I knew this would be a once in a lifetime chance that I'd forever regret if I didn't take it. I'd never really even imagined myself traveling to another country but here I was, on my way. I am so happy that I took this time to really expand my horizon. Traveling to Costa Rica allowed me to realize that the only limits life has, are the ones I put on myself. I now know what another small piece of the world has to offer, and I am ready and eager to experience everything that comes with it. I am no longer afraid and holding myself back. I am ready to experience the world, with my daughter Kamrynn by my side, so that she too can experience the beautiful wonders of this world we live in.

Prior to the trip I had to educate myself on Costa Rica, most importantly, the country's actual location in relation to the US. Costa Rica is pretty much directly south of Florida about 2 hours on a plane. The flight from Kansas City was 6 hours total, two hours to Atlanta and then four to Costa Rica. Before starting the physical journey to Costa Rica, readings and discussion sessions were held, regarding Costa Rican history and literature. We also had a meet and greet at Mary Klayder's house, the leader of the program for the last 16 years. We ate a traditional Costa Rican meal, Gallo Pinto, and were able to meet with alumni that had gone on the trip previous years. Mary had photo albums made of each of the trips she's led, in handmade albums from Costa Rica.

It is said that travel writing, and literature can enlighten travelers to the soul of a place. I particularly enjoyed reading the literature because I was able to learn about Costa Rican culture and writings completely different from what I normally read at home. Many themes of the readings were so specific, that only native Costa Ricans or travelers to the area, would know about them. One topic that I found most interesting was Las Bolas translating to "The Balls,"

referring to the lithic spheres found all over Costa Rica. These ancient stones were created by a civilization long ago, originating in South Costa Rica. The pre- Columbian settlement called Diquís, housed an assortment of 300 spheres found near indigenous cemeteries. Las Bolas could have been created any time between 600 B.C. and the 16th century. The only way to estimate this is based on ancient artifacts buried around the stones. The spheres vary greatly in size and their purpose is still unclear. There are myths concerning the stones that they were delivered from aliens and possess some sort of spirit. They claim that the stones derived from aliens because of their nearly perfect spherical shape and felt that the earlier indigenous tribes could not have possibly created something so perfect. I find this ironic because people would rather believe in extraterrestrials than to give credit to people that were declared savages and ignorant in the eyes of their conquerors.

During the preparation for our trip, one of the readings included was a short story called the “Mystery Stone” by Rima de Vallbona, an author and blogger from San Jose, Costa Rica. The reading was an excerpt from a book by Barbara Ras, entitled “Costa Rica: A Traveler’s Literary Companion.” This story portrays a history of the balls and the myths that sometimes come along with them. I initially read it before the trip and found it interesting, learning a small piece of the culture and history of Costa Rica. Upon my return I read it again and was able to feel a great connection with the story. It began with a woman by the name of Berta on a guided tour bus entering the province of Guanacaste, heading to visit her cousins in Liberia. She made note of the beautiful flora and fauna along the way, although she was a Costa Rica native herself, residing in Escazu, a province of San Jose. She is now a foreigner, looking in on her own country. I too embraced the beautiful trees and colors of Costa Rica, now wondering if we could’ve traveled the same path on our journeys. The tour guide makes mention of the lithic

spheres sighted from the bus, giving a bit of history and the myths around them. Berta stated that her reason for the trip was to remove herself from her vigorous daily activities and enjoy a sense of “gratifying lassitude” with her dearly missed family. I was especially excited for my trip for this reason in particular. I was able to leave home, school, work and everything else in the states, and have a sense of freedom and stress-free life. No worries or concerns because I was detached from them all, just awaiting the daily adventures to come. Upon her arrival in Liberia, as she entered the guest room, she became overwhelmed with the magnitude of scents and sounds coming through the open window. The peaceful scene allowed her to relax and fall into a slumber, only for a nightmare of falling spheres to awaken her with great distress. This scene of serenity is a sacred one for me, as I often travel to the lake to grasp those nature induced sights and aromas. The elevation of my senses allows me to free my mind of all its clutter and find a happy, relaxing place. Later that evening, she is informed that there is a lithic sphere in the home and it is then sat on the ground. It begins to roll, starting and stopping, twisting and turning as if it has a mind of its own, as the cook, Juana looks on in disapproval. She warns that the sphere is not a toy to be played with, and that there is a spirit inside that knows when someone is going to die. As Juana continued with more stories of the bad omens that entered the house along with the sphere, the cousins blew her off. As the ball continues to perform, they notice that it seems to have eyes that continually stop on Berta, sending chills down her spine. She ends the night reflecting on her visit in her diary, from the family fun to the aromas and even to her earlier nightmare, wondering if it will continue. The next morning Berta was found lifeless in her bed, cradling the lithic sphere, everyone wondering how it got there.

Upon finalizing the steps to make this trip a reality, I began to ask myself questions. Why did I want to do this? What did I expect to gain from it? I wanted to be immersed into a culture

that I knew nothing about and a language that I was only slightly familiar with. I wanted to learn what things would be different, and what the same. I'd hoped that by being out of my normal element and daily routine that I'd learn more about myself and find my purpose. I wondered what new things I'd endure that would bring me happiness and provide some sort of clarity in regard to what my future may hold. In essence I've gained all of the above plus more.

As a woman, the root of what holds us back from following our dreams is fear. I wanted to take this trip to eliminate my fear of traveling. Fear of being on my own, out of my element. I've grown tired of being complacent with where I am in my life. Tired of being comfortable and just going through the day to day motions. I want more for myself and more for my daughter, Kamrynn, to look up to. She thinks the world of me already but there can be so much more for both her and I. I want her to have the confidence and strength to do whatever it is that she'll love to do. I want her to be courageous and inspired by the steps that I've taken in my life, as she watches along the way. I want her to be able to view the downfalls or setbacks as stepping stones and not a deep, dark pit of failure. I want her to experience a full life with countless opportunities, that I can lead her through. I want her to know the many possibilities that life has to offer as I continue to watch her grow into a young lady. I want her to know that it is ok to be afraid as long as she does it anyway. Kamrynn must know that although she may not always be the first selection in her endeavors in which other people have a say, she should never lose sight of her dreams and goals. Although she may be judged solely by her appearance and viewed as inferior, she must know that she, like us all, is unique and special. She may have to work harder and prove herself more than others, but it is my job to ensure that she will be prepared to face these often-overlooked issues and proceed on her journey with no doubts, only confidence. I know that there will be obstacles along the way. I do not want her to be torn down

by them, but to rise up and realize that she is in control of the outcome of her life. Everyone is dealt a different hand of cards which she is not quite aware of yet, but in due time society will do its corrupting and reality will set in.

I expected the new food and adventures, but never could I have imagined the amount of fun we had and the friendships I've made. Our group of 23, professors included, developed a tight knit bond rather quickly. Over the 12 days we even gained a friendship with our tour guide, Tatiana and our bus driver, Francisco. I was nervous initially, being among one of the eldest of the group, but within the first 2 days we all seemed to have bonded, in one way or another. Not really cliquing up but intermingling with everyone. Whether it be staying up to 2am in the hotel lobby exchanging supernatural stories, hanging at the beach or by the pool, or going on separate adventures and excursions, the groups were always composed of different people but equally fun. While on this unforgettable journey, I broke free from many of the restraints that I put on myself. I tried activities and foods that I would never have tried here at home. I never would have gone ziplining, especially through the rainforests because it is definitely out of my comfort zone. I believe that without the group we had I would have stayed in my shell and regretted not doing so many things when I got back home. Although we had a full and planned itinerary, much of our time was spent traveling on the bus from one destination to the next. This aided in the group cohesion due to the close proximity. We spent our sometimes-lengthy rides snapping photos, telling jokes, singing karaoke, and of course napping because through it all, traveling is still exhausting. There were so many times that I couldn't believe I was there, and the trip couldn't get any better. Yet, there I was, and it always seemed to get better. The countless new memories made along the way will forever be in my heart.

With there being an odd number of girls on the trip, I had the luxury of having a room to myself. I was able to freely communicate with my daughter and family, without the concern of bothering a roommate. I was initially inattentive to the peacefulness that I felt, due more-so to the solitude that I rarely have the chance to experience while at home. I thought it was just me being happy for being on the trip in general, but it was so much more than that. I have always worked at least two jobs at a time since I've had Kamrynn. Now that I am back in school my life is constantly in flux, forcing me to lose awareness of who I am. My mind is constantly going and there seems to be no off switch. This lack of solitude affects not only me, but everyone around me. The constant pull of my mental, physical, and emotional being in so many directions is overwhelming and exhausting. In my life, there is no such thing as "me time." Many people confuse the term "solitude" with "loneliness" but there is a vast difference. While they both equate in essence to physically being alone, loneliness is more of a reference to the negative feelings that are provoked by being alone. The state of solitary promotes peace and allows one to clear their mind of the trials and tribulations faced daily. Your mind is able to reboot and recharge and give you a fresh start or perspective, such as a breath of fresh air. This detachment from the world gives you a deeper sense of you, removing the clouded judgement.

All of the differences aside, to me, Costa Rica felt like home.

Epilogue:

Still, there are times I am bewildered by each mile I have traveled, each meal I have eaten, each person I have known, each room in which I have slept. As ordinary as it all appears, there are times when it is beyond my imagination. Jhumpa Lahiri

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