

Study Abroad/Student Reflections

A “Pura Vida” Summer in Costa Rica

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Upon returning to the Memphis airport on the third of July 2011, having been out of the country for a month, the thirteen other students from Arkansas State University and I were exhausted, ready to see our loved ones, and to eat anything other than rice and beans. It was a bittersweet feeling to be home. We had just completed a study abroad program in the extraordinarily beautiful country of Costa Rica.

Though we were happy to be back in the United States, we were all going to miss living in that tropical paradise. Costa Rica is truly a marvelous place. The people are welcoming and humble; their love for and celebration of life is contagious. In addition to studying abroad to learn Spanish, there is something I would recommend to every college student. It is an experience like no other.

From the moment one first steps foot in the airport to the last goodbye, one repeatedly hears the phrase “Pura Vida!” The direct translation from Spanish to English is “pure life,” but this expression has a much deeper meaning than that. “Pura Vida” is a way of life; it signifies a profound happiness and joy



Costa Rican Celebration “Paint the Streets”

rooted in the culture and people of Costa Rica. We spent two weeks in the province of Heredia and two weeks in Monteverde. We spoke Spanish, danced

Salsa, lived with host families, and ate “gallo pinto” (black beans and rice) on a regular basis. We expected all these things when we signed up for the trip. However, I believe we all took from Costa Rica much more than we anticipated we would, and I’m not referring merely to the coffee, countless tee-shirts, and other random souvenirs that we stuffed into our suitcases before we left. Each of us had a variety of unique, enjoyable, and enlightening experiences, experiences that I know each of us will hold in our hearts and treasure for the rest of our lives.

Of the many memorable experiences I had, I think my favorite was on Sunday, June 26, when I got to be part of a major cultural event during our stay in the Monteverde region. Corpus Christi, meaning “the body of Christ,” is a Catholic holiday celebrated by many Costa Ricans. The event commemorates the last supper on the day before Jesus’ crucifixion. At 5:30 a.m., I joined another student and her host family to help “paint the streets” for the Corpus Christi parade in Santa Elena. We worked until 9:00 that morning, decorating sections of the street with flowers, grass, mulch, and twigs. I really didn’t know how things would turn out, but the results of our efforts proved to be absolutely beautiful. With other families and members of the church we created pictures of angels, peace signs, crosses, and other holy images. It felt great to be a part of something that meant so much to the community, and it was a marvelous way to meet and get to know the local residents. After we finished, I was filthy from working, so I went home, got cleaned up, and returned in time to watch the Holy March. People gathered in the church behind the priest and then followed him around a block as he led them in song. Everyone walked alongside the rows of decorations that lined the street until they made their way back to the church where a special Sunday worship service was held.

After watching the march, I decided to have lunch in a small café directly across the street from the church. I ordered a refresco, a popular Costa Rican beverage made with milk or water and fresh fruits, such as mangoes, strawberries, and papaya. As I sipped my delicious drink – this one prepared with my favorite fruit, guanabana – I listened to the singing coming from inside the church where the worship service was in progress. As soon as the service ended, I watched help-

lessly as our beautiful art work got swept up into giant trash bags. The festival may not have lasted long, but it was a wonderful experience, my best day in Costa Rica. I had truly come to know what Costa Ricans mean by "Pura Vida."

About the Author:

Hailie Allen is an undergraduate double major in psychology and Spanish at Arkansas State University. She went to Costa Rica for her abroad study in summer 2011 where she experienced importance of local cultural norms and values. Her email is amber.allen@smail.astate.edu.

Saturday Diary: Far from Nepal, Pittsburgh Felt Like Home

Deepak Adhikari
Agence France Presse
Kathmandu, Nepal

When I arrived in Pittsburgh in the end of March, I got a new address: 10 Allegheny Center, Apt. 115. Here, on the North Side of this bustling city, I sought to create a home away from home.

A framed picture of Pittsburgh at night adorned the most expansive white wall, but I wanted to make my Allegheny Center apartment Nepali, too. I hung posters from Nepal--of Kumari, a living goddess; of Swayambhu, a Buddhist temple in Kathmandu; of Nyatapola, a temple in the ancient city of Bhaktapur. I uploaded Nepali songs to my laptop and hummed them as I cooked Nepali food.

A neophyte chef, I've experimented these past few months, often mixing the wrong ingredients and condiments. Now that I've nearly mastered my native cuisine, it's time to leave!

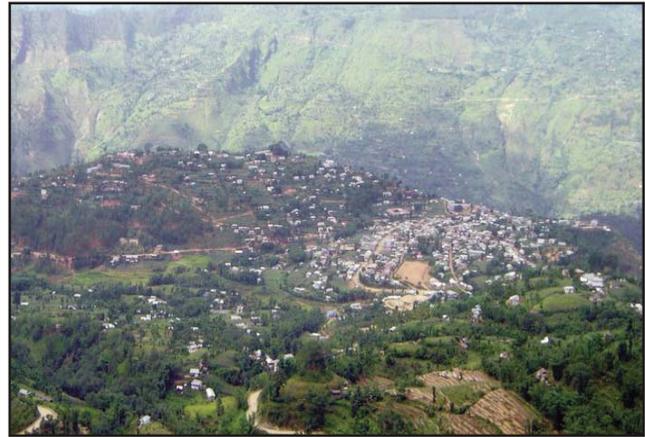
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Almost five months after setting foot in the United States for the first time, I have realized how significant these things are. The things that I took for granted in Nepal.

I must admit, though, I have fallen in love with Pittsburgh, which has a similar topography to my hometown of Phidim. Phidim, an idyllic hamlet in eastern Nepal, has two rivers. I spent many childhood days on the banks of those rivers.

Here in Pittsburgh, I walked over the Allegheny River every morning on my way Downtown to work at the Post-Gazette. The soaring yellow bridges

are a far cry from the rusty and rickety suspension bridges in Phidim, but a river is a river.



Phidim Bazar of Nepal

I am thankful to the strangers who showed me the way when I got lost. One gave me a ride when I was nearly stranded at the Greyhound station on my return from a trip to Harrisburg.

It is both challenging and rewarding to explore new places. You are acutely aware that you can run into trouble any time. But the rewards of overcoming trouble are sweet like a song.

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I have published a number of articles in the Post-Gazette, and I have come across an unusual reader (Bill, I hope you are reading this). He has been quite a critic of my write-ups: exhorting, condemning and at times suggesting story ideas. I call people like Bill "familiar strangers;" they pop up on the Internet, never revealing their true identities.

I've met all sorts of people in Pittsburgh. Coming from the country that hosts the highest mountain in the world, it turned out, was not always easy. You have to walk tall.

I'm often asked if I've climbed Mt. Everest. I offer a polite no.

I did grow up in the foothills of the Himalayas, and the glistening mountain played a backdrop for my childhood. But life was tough. It is not easy to appreciate beauty when you are rubbing shoulders with poverty and hardship, when you belong to the tumult and deprivation that is today's Nepal.

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A local physician and philanthropist mailed me, asking for some unusual assistance. He wanted me to help him gauge the credibility of a nonprofit group working for the street children in Nepal. In Nepal, many of the so-called nonprofit organizations, channeling foreign