

Costa Rica/Nicaragua Study Trip
Aimy Steele
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From the moment I found out that I would be able to attend the Costa Rica/Nicaragua study trip, I was elated. I have always wanted to attend a study trip to Costa Rica to learn more about the natural resources, the school system, the commerce, and the overall way the people of Central America interact with those from other parts of Latin America. What I walked away with was much more than that. I left with an experience that is unparalleled to all of the trips I have taken in the past.

For this journey, I would like to formally acknowledge and thank the following education partners for making this experience possible Wells Fargo, Carolinas HealthCare System, Bank of America and UNC Charlotte for their support of the 2016-2017 Council Scholar program.

The Preparation

We began our journey with a 2-day orientation in Chapel Hill sponsored by the World View organization. For those teachers and administrators who went on the study trip with me, this was a welcomed orientation. For those who knew about the Latin American culture either through previous in depth interactions or previous travel, the two-day orientation served as an update of the current status of Latin America. This was the case for me and several of those traveling with me. As a former Spanish teacher, I spent years teaching and learning about Latin America culture. The most I'd ever taught on Central America dealt primarily with Guatemala

and Honduras due to their rich Native and indigenous heritage. The orientation was a welcomed refresher. Aside from learning about the culture and landscape of Costa Rica and Nicaragua, we also were able to spend time learning about each of the 20+ people on the journey to these amazing countries with us. Additionally, we spent time with the tour guides who were stationed in Costa Rica and they provided real time information about our itinerary, what we would experience, and answered any questions we had about our pending journey.



(Members of my cohort from North Carolina)

The Journey

The journey out of the United States began on an early morning flight from Raleigh, North Carolina to Miami, Florida. From there, we flew to Costa Rica. The flights were short and the conversation from our colleagues was rich, similar to the name of the country we visited, Rich Coast.

Upon disembarking from the flight, the climate became very evident. It was hot, sticky, humid, and slightly wet as the rain poured down sporadically in the tropical environment. We felt this although we had not yet exited the front doors of

the airport. The first cultural experience we had included the customs clearance process as well as the exchanging of currency to local Costa Rican money, Colones. I was used to this process as I have traveled extensively but it was comforting to be on the side of the experienced traveler as compared to those who have never traveled before. Inexperienced travelers made me not only feel like a veteran traveler but it also made me feel more confident about my contributions to my cohort on this particular trip. I speak Spanish fluently so I offered my language skills in the currency exchange process and people called me often to help them with purchases in the airport, eventual negotiations in the market while in town, and various conversations with the host families with which we stayed. I was happy to offer my services and I did not feel as though it distracted from my learning at all. Instead, my language ability provided me with a better understanding of the environment as well as the culture. I felt like I was finally experiencing what I had been teaching for years in an authentic manner. I was in for a treat for sure.



(My host grandpa with his prized Buecas)



(My host family honors the patriarch)

The People

Aside from the initial experience with my cohort of travelers, the most impactful experience I had was by far the one with my host family and all the people of Atenas. This town was truly remarkable. Everyone was Latino and there was not an American in sight, other than us of course. From the time I met the mom of my host family, I was able to speak to her in Spanish. She was relieved and so was I. She took me to her home where I met her husband, son, and all her neighbors who happened to be her siblings and parents. WOW! She lived on land with her siblings and their spouses and children as well as her parents. Although I have seen this occur in the United States, it seemed different in Costa Rica. The family was close knit, looked out for each other, and seemed to know everything about each other. It was quite charming and refreshing.



(My Host Family)



(Vegetarian homemade cuisine in Costa Rica)

Their lifestyle was also refreshing. In their 3-bedroom home, there was only one television. I never saw it either. There was me, the host family, nature, beautiful granite countertops and marble floors, tile walls, and books. Although I had my computer, more emphasis was placed on spending time with the humans in the

home or going to the family neighbors' homes in order to talk and fellowship. This practice occurred daily after returning from our busy day out in the country meeting the demands of our itinerary. Overall, the people were nice, curious, and happy to have us. My host brother in particular had a great deal of questions about life in the US for teens but he seemed very aware of what was already going on in the US because he had an active Instagram account. The Wi-Fi in Costa Rica is not restricted, therefore, he had full access to anything on the Internet. I was quite impressed with the speed and availability of the Wi-Fi due to the rural setting where we resided.



(Aimy enjoying coffee on a farm)

The Economy

The economic landscape of Costa Rica and Nicaragua were vastly different from each other and the US in general. There is a marked sense of purposeful economic development in the business community of Costa Rica. In addition to the agricultural base such as coffee, various fruits, and multiple vegetables, Costa Rica has a thriving economy consisting of tourism, engineering, and technology. The

government uses an organization called CINDE, Essential Costa Rica, who focuses on the development of Costa Rica's businesses throughout the country. They focus on equipping businesses with the various tools, human capital, and on the ground resources needed to launch their businesses in Costa Rica. CINDE is a centralized company that provides all their services at no costs to the business looking to open in Costa Rica. This is especially attractive to those who have no idea of what to expect when transacting business in another country. This was the second time I saw this type of entity. The first was in Singapore.

The economy was not so developed in Nicaragua. From the roads to the construction of stores and various buildings to the relative absence of modernized landscape, Nicaragua was economically deprived as compared to Costa Rica. This did not seem to impact the people who chose the country to visit nor the people who lived there who accepted this reality. Whether knowingly or not, the economic structure of Nicaragua seemed to be normalized by all those who either visited or lived there permanently. This was disheartening to me as I continued to observe the lifestyles of the "pobres", the country's poorest population. As I interacted with the children who were in the most extreme poverty I had ever observed, my heart was heavy with how I can help to improve their situation long-term. Economic development is the heart of helping the poorest population to come out of impoverished situations.



(Landscape of Nicaragua)



(Aimy sitting on a volcano in Nicaragua)

The Landscape

Tranquil, peaceful, serene, and beautiful is what I use to describe the landscape of Costa Rica and Nicaragua. There were trees, lakes, oceans, mountains, flowers, and a multitude of colors that shown through our windows and tour buses daily. The most striking differences between Nicaragua and Costa Rica were the volcanoes. I sat on a live, active volcano and it was the most amazing experience I have ever had. When I returned from the study trip, I began communicating with a different team than I had originally expected to work with for the lesson plan implementation project upon my return. I worked with my 4th grade team to design a lesson on Ecosystems with emphasis on informational text structures. The lesson was particularly impactful for students due to my pictures of being on the side of a live volcano. The picture alone created more credibility and buy in from the

students as we worked through the activities in the lesson. We discussed landforms, the creation of various landmasses over time, and how different land arrangements impact the climate and environment over the years. The students and the teachers were engaged and seemed to enjoy the “real” connection I had with the landforms of Costa Rica and Nicaragua. I was able to talk about the beautiful botanical gardens of Costa Rica and compare them to the same gardens in the Charlotte areas. They were able to see the benefits of keeping the natural landscape of Costa Rica’s gardens in comparison to the manicured rows of North Carolina’s gardens.



(Aimy with students from school in Nicaragua) (School in Nicaragua)



(Celebration of the Annexation of Nicoya from Nicaragua)

The Schools

By far one of the most touching things I did while visiting Costa Rica and Nicaragua was seeing the schools in action. The schools looked vastly different from schools in the Concord, NC and Charlotte, NC areas but they held children who were EXACTLY the same. Children typically are the same in every country I visit, no matter what continent I travel to. From Asia to North America, students' behavior and interaction with teachers remains the same. Buildings, school structures, and teachers vary slightly. There was, however, one marked difference I noticed between Costa Rican schools and schools in Nicaragua and that was the level of funding. Schools in Costa Rica received a significant amount of funding from the government as well as supplements from the local townships. They seemed to have order and structure similar to the US. In Nicaragua, however, the local community groups and advocacy groups are responsible for the schools. They are very poor

The Impact

These were the overall takeaways I wanted to have from my study trip. As a result of these outcomes, the impact on my K-5 elementary school was tremendous.

- An understanding of how environmental and sustainable education is innovatively approached and taught in Costa Rica;
- A new perspective on Urban Education in Costa Rica;
- An enhanced awareness and understanding of a different culture and education system;
- A strengthening of connections between North Carolina and Costa Rica and Nicaragua;

- A collaborative community of teachers who will use their experiences on this program to implement their learning in their classrooms and schools.

I not only achieved all of the above but so much more. I now have a newfound appreciation for both countries, Costa Rica and Nicaragua. I have been able to share my experiences with my staff during our Culture and Climate team meetings on a monthly basis and during staff meetings as we discuss various cultures and experiences outside of our own. During the Culture and Climate as well as staff meetings, we are able to explore sensitive topics surrounding race, economics, and equity. Staff members ask thought provoking questions and I have been able to contribute to the conversation using the experiences gained in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. I have also encouraged staff members to take trips that are aimed at enhancing their worldview. Several staff members have commented of their expanded viewpoints as a result of my travels. Additionally, my students are in awe at the lesson they received as well as the ongoing questions about all my travels. They are excited about seeing themselves as a traveler, especially since many of them have never traveled outside of our city, their birthplace.

This trip, made possible by generous donors, has significantly impacted me and for that I'm grateful. I will use it to further embed the need for worldwide collaboration and exchange on ideas that work to make the entire world progress toward ending poverty. Environmental sustainability, economic growth, and human exchange are the bedrocks for our world to grow. Thank you World Council Scholars Program.

Link for pictures: https://drive.google.com/drive/u/0/folders/0B-lpjPHZ4Z_BRmNqa01oVjFHSjQ