

Costa Rica

By Whitney Shinkle, World Savvy donor and volunteer

Costa Rica. To most people I know, the phrase “I’m spending the summer in Costa Rica” conjures up images of long, sun-drenched days spent lounging on the beach, learning to surf, or exploring Central America’s rainforests, preferably by zip-line. However, in May 2006 when I learned that I would be spending the summer interning with the Costa Rica office of the International Organization of Migration (a global research and service organization dedicated to investigating the causes and impacts of various international migration trends), I did what any self-respecting master’s candidate in conflict-management and humanitarian emergencies would do. I checked the CIA World Factbook website for the reader’s digest overview.

Now, maybe the staffer at the CIA’s Central America desk was just a bit piqued at having missed a promotion to field officer when he wrote the Costa Rica entry, but he/she seemed to have a somewhat different take on the country. Despite its 180+ years of significantly non-violent democratic history (especially impressive given the neighborhood), the introduction rather emphasized its early noted disease from mosquito-infested swamps, brutal heat, and pirate raids. Well, I didn’t hear about any pirate raids during my stay, and modern medicine has definitely curbed a lot of the disease, but the heat, at least in the small Pacific coast town where I was staying, was still pretty brutal.

There are several other salient features that the savvy traveler picks up soon after arrival. First, there are no long summer days in Costa Rica. Given its equatorial closeness, the daylight lasts more or less 12 hours long all year round. Second, there are no, or very few, street addresses of the recognizable sort with street names and numbers so you’d do best to start being very aware of the notable landmarks near your lodgings. In the big cities, citing a nearby pharmacy, bar, or KFC ought to suffice for any taxi driver, and in the smaller towns, note your relation to the local bank branch or bus stop. Ice cream shops are also a good marker. Third, those of us hailing from the United States are not, as I heard many Ticos (Costa Ricans) firmly but politely remind one of us, Americans, but North Americans. All of us from the Northern Territories (Canada), to the Tierra del Fuego (Argentina) are Americans.

During my 12 weeks in Costa Rica, I felt simultaneously that I barely had time to scratch the surface of the country and that I got fairly immersed in it. As one of the most stable and prosperous countries in the Central American chain, Costa Rica has developed into a heavy tourist destination. Though this has helped prop up the economy, it has also prompted several unwelcome changes, including environmental degradation and human trafficking. A visit to any of the more well-known areas of Costa Rica reveals the large number of North American and Western European tourists. Unfortunately, some of these tourists are also propping up a healthy sex tourism business. Our project was intended not only to find out the nitty-gritty details of who, what, when, where, why and how the trafficking of human beings was being conducted throughout Costa Rica, but also to raise awareness to this issue among the resident and tourist populations, and help build capacity of local organizations to address the issue.

Though the duration of my stay was far too short to fully complete a study of this size, I was able to finalize the research instruments and interviewing tools that would be used to

continue the work after I left, and to initiate the first series of interviews with local government officials, religious/community leaders, service providers and tourism agents. I was encouraged by the attention most people I spoke with were prepared to devote to learning more about trafficking, though struck often by the difficulty people had separating human trafficking from other types of legal/illegal migration or exploitation (most commonly commercial sexual exploitation). And it was certainly mortifying to watch a series of American tourists cite their motivation for visiting Costa Rica as being “the waves and the babes” during interviews conducted by a local news agency reporting on the well-known prostitution plaguing the town where I was living (prostitution itself is legal in Costa Rica).

Though the subject of my trip there was a serious one, the much more meaningful interactions I had with the local residents due to my work with a local organization guaranteed several memorable moments. First I must note the genuine enthusiasm with which any and every Tico greeted a North American speaking even the most god-awfully slaughtered form of Spanish. So many Americans visit without even making an attempt to learn the most basic words, that the merest hint of Spanish study is often treated as a sign of the speaker's basic decency. On the other hand, you can always fill any dead conversation space with “que calor!” (what heat!) or, my personal favorite, “moscas feas!” (ugly flies!- thought this must also be accompanied by distracted hand waving).

While I must admit that I ended just about every day for the first several weeks with a pounding headache after trying to think in Spanish all day, I have gained an enormous respect for many of my fellow international students who spend every day engaged in very high level reading, thinking, speaking and analysis in their second, third, even fourth or fifth language. My moderate growth in understanding also encouraged me to attempt many more adventures on my own and, while I can't recommend the driving in Costa Rica - both the drivers and the roads can be erratic at best - you can almost always find someone who will let you ride on the handlebars of their bike if you're just going across town (or even double up on their horse if you're really lucky). Furthermore, though you may have several inordinately long and frustrating waits for any bus going anywhere, you will almost definitely be able to find some fellow passengers to play street-soccer with in the event that your bus gets stuck in a dry river bed.

In short, there is truly some sort of odd, traveler's-balance to the experience of living in a foreign country, though sometimes you have to squint a bit to realize that that square peg is really actually quite round. For every day closed with a headache, there was another day borne along by the fact that you got off your bus in the right town instead of the one an hour away because you couldn't communicate with your seatmate in Spanish. For any homesickness for real bread products, there was someone offering you a totally unrecognizable but incredible fruit. For every beach now cluttered with tourist detritus there is another being preserved in its isolated purity in a national park. Though there are those living in almost unimaginably awful circumstances, having been forced or deceived into hideously exploitative situations, there are many others who are benefiting greatly from being able to migrate and work legally in Costa Rica's more stable economy. And for every birthday party or wedding that you miss while living thousands of miles away, for every phone call you can't make because there is no cell phone tower in the boonies, for every email you have to catch up on when you return, there is a new friend to be made wherever it is that you are standing.

So the images are true. There is blinding sunlight, though only for 12 hours and try to miss the rainy season. You can learn to surf from dawn until dusk, though frankly if they came out with bathing suits with padding like bicycle shorts I think I'd buy one. You can explore a half dozen rainforests by zip-line, but they really do mean it when they tell you not to try and flip upside-down. Since you can avoid the pirates, the mosquito-borne disease, and even the brutal heat (if you stay in the mountains), I absolutely think you should go. If not there, somewhere equally unknown to you. Open a map; find a dart; keep an open mind. My only request is that you learn more about the situations on the ground wherever you do travel, so that you don't continue to convey the image of inconsiderate or ignorant travelers from the US, who see nothing wrong with traveling for "the babes."