

## **Mr. Alejandro Tobon**

Here is my simple tip to having an awesome experience in college: stay in frequent communication with your advisor, make friends with your classmates and peers, network, ask questions and explore all the resources available at school. I know that sounds like common sense, but as we now know, common sense is not that common. It may be difficult to take that first step, but once you catch momentum, the journey is unbelievable.

It was in a follow up with my advisor that we realized I would be one credit short of graduating. One credit! How does that happen? It simply does. But it turned out to be a blessing in disguise. That same week, as I was contemplating my options on how to fulfill that requirement, through my everyday social interaction, I learned about Dr. Deborah Girard and CCRI's travel abroad opportunity. We met several times to explore and evaluate the opportunities together, identify which one made more sense based on my interest and goals, and we made a plan of action to make it all happen.

It's an understatement when I say that I more than just fulfilled my 1 credit requirement during the summer of 2012 in San José, Costa Rica. It was way more than I expected, I gained a priceless life enhancing experience at so many levels. It was educational, inspirational, and motivational. It was amazing and unforgettable. In my opinion, studying abroad is not a luxury; it's an incredible and exceptional opportunity that you cannot afford to miss. I highly recommend it not just because the benefits are plenty and the splendors are many, but because we live in a global community which also means a global marketplace.

This was a unique opportunity to exponentially learn inside and outside of the classroom. You could read about it all in a book or watch a film, but to live it first-hand is powerful. By being in a foreign collegiate institute, living with a culturally different family, and interacting in a new societal environment, my academic experience was extremely enriched. I felt my linguistic intellect develop even more, and my mental cognitively improve. All my senses were enhanced and in tune. My advice is to keep an open mind and integrate in yourself into the cultural fabric because that way, you will be just like a sponge soaking in the unbelievable amount of treasures in the unfamiliar world around you.

I grew up playing sports and valuing overall wellness. I also achieved the rank of Eagle Scout, valuing the outdoors and service. My parents fueled the passion of service to others inside of me. I merged these passions into my vision and determined I wanted to become an Osteopathic Doctor who has a genuine relationship with his patients and who practices integrated medicine to achieve optimal health. This was one of the reasons I chose San José, Costa Rica.

The country values preventive healthcare and it has a commitment to environmental sustainability. They also abolished their military over 60 years ago. I yearned to absorb this, immerse myself and fortify my aptitude in terms of global perspectives in the areas of natural health. Geographically, Costa Rica also appealed to me because of its rainforest, coral reefs, mountains, volcanoes and beaches. I explored all this and more. I also learned about their history, arts, music, dances, politics, inside jokes, traditions, customs, museums, and their spirits thanks to the lovely and engaging conversations with my Tico family during our meals. Pura Vida! It's the Tico slogan. I love it. It's so fitting to my attitude.

My typical day began with breakfast, which always included natural 100% juice from one of the many exotically delicious fruits found in Costa Rica. I walked to the University, which was 10 minutes away. I took two classes. The first was Alternative Approaches to Health which was a broad introduction and basic understanding of the fundamentals of non-conventional medicine such as acupressure, acupuncture, aroma therapy, massage therapy, breathing techniques, martial arts, yoga, herbs, etc. Sometimes we had class outside at the local park so that we could apply our classroom knowledge. We also went to a marketplace to buy the natural herbs and ingredients, visited an acupuncture office, and went into the rainforest to visit a native indigenous tribe.

The second class, Advanced Spanish for Medical Professions was a 5 hour class. We discussed the Costa Rican Socialized HealthCare system. We practiced how to correctly take a patient's information, discussed their home remedies, and we also did a series of class presentations to improve our Spanish medical terminology. We visited the public hospital and went to a local supermarket to observe the food and produce and draw conclusions of its role in the current state of health of individuals. On the last week of the semester, we all hosted a campuswide health fair to share our knowledge with each other.

Of course I also had extra curriculum activities; I went rafting on El Rio Pacuare and did an 18 mile trek that was full of breathtaking views of nature and natural waterfalls. On the trek, I saw cable bridges that the indigenous people use to cross the river to go to the nearby towns for supplies and trade. I went to the Doka Coffee Plantation and tried a delicious variety of "community" coffee from Costa Rica's Tres Generaciones. I checked out El Volcano Poas, 2500 meters above sea level. I went to La Paz natural resort that had gated areas you can walk through that included a beautiful butterfly garden, and different parrots and tucans that you can hold on your arm; I hiked to a ginormous waterfall. I went 11,000 feet above sea level to see the highest and most active volcano of the 200+ volcanoes in Costa Rica, Volcan Irazu; I ate at an organic and sustainable restaurant overlooking the Orosi Valley; I experienced the annual holiday celebration of the volunteered annexation of Guanacaste; I went to the Provincia Alajuela to do some Canopy (Zip Line!) and I also did bungee jump.

The host family took me to their farmer's market, we went to the movies, saw a small concert, went roller skating, and went on regular errands. With each of these experiences and all the conversations I had, it helped to shape my goals for my career and my future. That is one of the most valuable opportunities that study abroad experience offers.

In the end, I acquired a wider worldview and augmented my cultural awareness as well. Without a doubt, I can say that I experienced a tangible and remarkable transformation through the personal growth. I was challenged to expand my comfort zone even more. I honestly believe that I honed my skills, gained new perspective, more understanding, more appreciation, and developed a competitive and insightful edge that will serve me well in my career.