

Cross Cultural Experience

When I arrived in Costa Rica this summer my host family picked me up from the airport and drove me to their house in Alajuela. As we passed through the city square, I listened. I listened to my family explain the history of the city's buildings, I listened to the sounds of the people in the street and I listened to my own thoughts, converting Spanish to English as fast as I could. I talked, but barely; there was just too much to take in all at once. As we drove into the country, I watched. We zoomed around curves without lines of any sort and beside cliffs without any railing. There were dogs in the street, houses arms reach from one another, people walking inches from cars on the road, and no speed limit signs or police to enforce them even if there were. It was almost too much for me to handle. If only this place were more like America, I thought, everything would be so much better.

Two months and dozens of incredible stories later, my family and I were zooming around the curves of the mountains once more. After spending months with my new family and friends, sounds had become words and English had become as much a memory as the need for railings on the cliffs that we drove along each day. The dogs in the street became friends I would look forward to visiting, and I, myself, became one of those people walking inches from the cars on the road as I made my way to volunteer at the National Children's Hospital in the mornings. At last my family arrived at the airport once more, but this time they were dropping someone off. It was almost too much for me to handle. As we cried together, I realized how much I had learned from them and everyone and how much I would miss them all. If only America were more like this, I thought, everything would be so much better.

I would say my world turned upside down when I got home from Costa Rica, but it's probably better to say I just started really seeing it for the first time. Even six months after returning, I am still trying to make sense of the differences in values and the differences in myself. I tried to explain this disconnect to my friend Zoe and she said me: "Some people just get it. They have traveled the world and seen what life is like for other people. They have seen need, difference and culture in a new way and when they come back, especially from a non-industrialized nation, they come back different. They get it." By saying this she had described in moments the exact feeling I had been trying to put into words for months. It won't be easy, but that is the kind of person I want to be. I want to get it, and I think I'm beginning to.