

Dimitri Sotos

No sleep, not that night. As I lay in bed the night of June 4<sup>th</sup>, 2018, I knew I wasn't getting any sleep that night. I knew what was awaiting me the next day, what I had been so excited about for months, but was now giving me the most anxiety. I was about to embark on a trip that I was ready for, but I wasn't at the same time. I was leaving for Costa Rica that morning, and I was freaking out

As my dad drove me to McDonald's to get breakfast, I was playing it off like everything was great, but on the inside, I was secretly hoping that something would happen, so I couldn't go. As my dad zipped through O'Hare, I got more and more anxious about what I was about to do. And as he dropped me off at my terminal and got out the car to give me a hug, I held onto that hug a little tighter. As I watched him, and my sister pull off, I knew I was all by myself this time.

After navigating O'Hare Airport and standing in the wrong line for 20 minutes, I made it to the lounge. While I was nervously messaging friends and family to let them know that I was safe, I was so scared. As more of the people I was traveling with began showing up, things started to get a little easier. What I never realized was that this trip was about to change my life.

I was going to begin this paragraph with a joke about airline food, but I can't really complain about a bag of veggie chips and a chocolate bar, so sorry to disappoint. But after hours of flights and layovers, we landed in Costa Rica! For whatever reason, I never took into account the fact that I would need to know a decent amount of Spanish until I was already in a country where the primary language was Spanish. When I met my host family, they were very kind and were so understanding of my little knowledge of the language.

As the weeks progressed, we had the opportunity to visit schools, where I met so many amazing students. They wanted to show us the things that interested them, and they wanted to learn about us and be our friends. I had one interaction with a student that had the most impact on me. I had a student come up to me and ask me if I hated Latino's. As you can imagine, this took me by surprise. When I told him that I didn't, and asked him why he thought I did, he responded with "because Donald Trump is your president". Regardless of your political affiliation, this was shocking and heartbreaking that this young child was scared to come up to me because he assumed that I hated him.

The school observations were great, but perhaps my favorite moment was when I went ziplining. We went zip lining through the canopy at Manuel Antonio National Park. The experience of being in nature and seeing true beauty was one of the best things I've experienced. I remember when we were going across the longest zip line, I saw the sun break through the clouds and lit up the canopy, and for the first time in a long time, I felt truly at peace.

Having the opportunity to study abroad was one of the best experiences of my life. It was my first time traveling without my family, however, I was able to make it through. I'll never forget the laughs, the food, the time spent with great friends, I'll forever cherish those memories. Going to Costa Rica taught me the meaning of Pura Vida (pure life), and I intend to live my life that way.