Learning Spanish in Costa Rica

AJ Pressland Fund Bursary for Language Study Abroad

Course Report: Aug-Sept 2014

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Why Spanish, why Costa Rica

I’ve been considering travelling to Latin or South America for every summer since I started university. I dreamt of trekking through the Andes, exploring the tropical rainforests, visiting the glaciers of Patagonia and experiencing the vibrant cities and places so rich in culture and vitality. However, each time I hesitated because of a certain key issue – my lack of any competence in Spanish. I knew that I would get nowhere near as much out of any such trip without being able to communicate well in the countries I visited and be able to venture off the top tourist trails to experience more of the authentic cultures and localities.

Through a variety of excuses, this never came together until I finally began studying at CULP in the first year of my PhD. I thoroughly enjoyed my Spanish lessons with my enthusiastic and effective teachers there and, by the end of the year, I felt confident enough to make an initial foray out to the region I was yearning to visit. Costa Rica had been warmly recommended as a wonderful country where I could learn Spanish in beautiful surroundings and where the Spanish language is spoken at a slower pace and with very clear pronunciation – perfect for an inexperienced Briton eager to learn.

What I hoped to get out of the experience

My ambition for the trip flitted sporadically from evolving into a convincing Costa Rican to just having a go with the language and becoming confident and able to deal with everyday situations while, of course, having lots of fun. In the end I realised the former was a fantasy, at least for now, and the latter consisted more of emphasising the fact that I was certainly not just a gringo (English-speaking, particularly American, foreigner), but a more exotic variety of tourist wanting to speak in Spanish. Rising from near-scratch to a solid basic competency in the language thanks to my Spanish teachers at CULP, I felt comfortable that I could at least survive without using a single word of English. Even so, as the trip drew closer and apprehension suddenly appeared, with a belated flourish of energy I revised and tried to cram in all the knowledge that I’d learned and subsequently forgotten over the summer. Did I remember any of the rules for pronunciation? What was I meant to say when I greeted someone for the first time? How far would speaking French with a Spanish accent get me, if anywhere? Did I even know the Spanish word for taxi?
The experience
As soon as I stepped out of the airport, I was bombarded by a multitude of taxi drivers calling out in a mixture of both Spanish and English trying to get me into their cab. As I travelled into San Jose with the most persuasive of them, I launched into some broken Spanish and began to realise how far I had to go to convert my classroom, predictable-scenario, language skills into real-life ability. I at least managed to get to my hostel and check in, so that was a start I suppose.

I caught up on sleep and took a bus to the coast; a fantastic journey through the country’s central highlands and then right along the seafront down to my destination: Puerto Viejo de Talamanca.

Wandering around town to find where I was staying, I immediately met some friendly locals who directed and even accompanied me to look for the place. I had decided that if I really intended to improve my Spanish, I should stay with a host family. Elena, who owned a travel enterprise, and her assistant Rosa were both warm and welcoming women who spent lots of time patiently chatting to me in Spanish over dinners and advised me on places to visit and made my stay in Puerto Viejo all the more enjoyable.
The school
The school was a large wooden cabin set on the edge of the rainforest. It was the perfect setting where we could have lessons outside and see the magnificent blue Morpho butterflies and hummingbirds flitting past. I was allocated a tico (Costa Rican) teacher, Elmer, and had one-to-one lessons each day. These were intensive and stretching, but from day one my confidence and ability to chat freely improved massively. This developed as I was challenged more and more over the weeks spent there and by the end I was happily having conversations with locals on anything from surfing and the local effects of tourism to the subject of my PhD; albeit at a simple and slow pace. The individual lessons meant I could progress at the fastest possible rate, but these were also supplemented, not only by my own outings and experiences, via trips jointly organised by the teachers for all the students to nearby villages and museums where activities were designed to make us interact in Spanish in new situations.

Environment and Culture
Living in such a beautiful environment was an enormous privilege. Cycling to the nearby villages of Manzanillo or Cahuita, I would never fail to see plenty of animals; toucans flying across my path, howler monkeys making a racket nearby, or sloths
lounging in the trees. The beaches were no less impressive, my favourite being Punta Uva, stunning sandy expanses bordered by topical forest and the sea was full of wildlife too; on my first day a turtle swam along just offshore, poking its head up above the surface.

There were several cacao plantations around and one day I visited the nearby chocolate museum to learn about its production and taste the deliciously unique flavour of crude dark chocolate.

The area was also full of banana plantations, in part a legacy of the United Fruit company (a corporation dominating the economies of many Latin American countries during the early 20th century) which brought over migrant workers from Jamaica to work on the Atlantic railroad and subsequent banana plantations. There have been numerous books, including Carlos Luis Fallas’ novel *Mamita Yunai* and Carmen Lyra’s *Bananos y Hombres*, denouncing the major interference and exploitation by this company and the harsh conditions endured by workers on these plantations. Due to racist laws in force until 1949 the Afro-Caribbean population was prohibited from travelling outside of Limon Province on the Caribbean coast, and so to this day there is a concentrated population in these parts which remains isolated from mainstream national culture. There was evidence of the disparity of wealth between the local Afro-Caribbean and Latino populations in Puerto Viejo even for a short-term tourist such as myself. However, optimistically, with the rise in tourism to this region of the country, more money will be invested and this in turn should filter through to
the entire population. There is a strong sense of identity amongst the local community. A lively parade celebrating the Afro-Caribbean culture took place on Sunday afternoon, where colourfully dressed locals processed around the town, accompanied by loud timpani bands.

Wonderful local sodas (small local restaurants) provided casado or rice & beans, the national dishes of Costa Rica, often with a Caribbean twist. Local ladies, Isma and Lidia (to name but a few), were extremely warm and welcomed a good conversation while serving the meal.

The place was so captivating, I met many travellers who had decided to settle, cancel their return flights and make a living in this relaxed coastal village; a very appealing prospect!
Surviving with Spanish

Despite the temptation to remain in Puerto Viejo for the entirety of my trip, I decided to make an impromptu visit to Panama, a mere half-hour drive away. Panama was an unexpected delight, as I’d never actually considered going there. I took local transport all the way to the town of Boquete, on the slopes of Volcán Barú; a beautiful location with a much-welcomed cooler climate and fresh, non-humid air. I stayed in a guesthouse and had plenty of opportunities to practise my newly-reinforced Spanish. One of the highlights was setting off at midnight in a group all wearing head-torches to climb the 3474-metre ascent to the volcano’s summit – the highest point in Panama, from where it was possible to see both the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. We arrived at 4am and were overjoyed to be unexpectedly let into a cosy shelter by the local policeman tasked with guarding the remote communications pylons. Sunrise at 6am was magnificent and well worth the lack of sleep and tough return journey.

I found the region of Panama that I visited to be much less touristy than Costa Rica. When I went to stay on a locally-recommended group of islands, I was the only non-Panamanian tourist about. I thoroughly enjoyed this chance to explore less-known parts of the region; something that would have been extremely difficult to do without being able to negotiate the various local buses, taxies and sporadic boats needed to get there – decent Spanish was absolutely necessary, and what a reward.
Reflections

I wish to thank the AJ Pressland Fund for generously providing me with financial support for this fantastic opportunity. The trip has allowed me to strengthen my Spanish immensely while being a wonderful enriching experience. I'm now continuing on with courses at CULP, aiming to complete the advanced level by the end of the year. The experience has reassured and invigorated my desire to become fully-fluent in Spanish, explore more Hispanic cultures and learn more about the various hispanohablante regions of the world.