

Geovany Alvarado
February 24, 2020
Travel-Writing
Costa Rica

Genesis

Being back home after my eleven-day journey at Costa Rica is a bit unsettling to say the least. What can I say, the trip was one hell of an experience, after all, every day in Costa Rica was a new day, and nothing was ever dull. The beauty behind the trip was its unpredictability which made every waking day invigorating. My prior experience in leaving the country was small and limited. I traveled to Honduras around a decade ago to visit family that I have never met, which included my brother and grandparents from both sides of my family and to see where my parents grew up. The trip was unique and memorable since I got to see a huge portion of my family that I never thought existed. But it was anything unlike my Costa Rica trip, where I was traveling with a group of strangers at the time rather than family.

While the trip to Honduras was great and all, looking back, I was under a constant leash as to where I could go and do, and everyone had curfews to follow. In retrospect, it was not all that bad since at the time I did not have much consciousness of what I was bound to and capable of, so I thought that I had free will to what I got to see and do but in a way it worked out for me, but now that I am aware of making decisions for myself I knew that I had not experienced a trip to myself, no friends, no family. Those who travel often do so to escape the shackles of life and temporarily leave behind loved ones but after the trip the epiphany that I had was that I did not travel to escape the daily routine of life, but I traveled so life wouldn't escape out of me. It may sound selfish, but I think the point of the trip was to be egotistical and to enjoy life's

commodities alone, and in this case, time to myself and time for solitude. But this revelation of mine slowly settled in as time went on during Costa Rica and a truth that I have to accept.

This all reminds me of two authors and their short narrative, Sherry Turkle's, *A Flight from Conversation* and William Deresiewicz's *The End of Solitude*, in which they both wrote the importance of isolation. They imply that solitude is critical to self-construction, in which taking time off from the rest of the world can allow you to hear yourself and make some realization that you not yet have concurred. They go on to explain that solitude nowadays is rare to come by due to the constant connectivity of each other and the news via technology. Initially reading the works of both authors, I thought to myself that I was exempt from the grasp of technology and cellular devices and thought that I can live without my phone, but after my trip I concluded this could not be further from the truth. This realization came after the numerous times I subconsciously grabbed my phone to look into Facebook's newsfeed without any reception or signal while at Costa Rica. I would constantly see the same post from the same people without anything updated on the newsfeed. It is weird how to use to the lifestyle we are with such devices, as it were an extension of us, an extra limb so to speak when you truly think about it. However, we more often not abuse the capabilities of technology that distract us from what's in front of us.

Prior to the trip, us students in the study aboard class had to meet up once every week on KU campus in Lawrence, Kansas. The purpose of the meetings was to inform ourselves of a bit of history and background of Costa Rica and for us students to get assigned reading and writing assignments that coincide with what we learned.

It was beneficial for us to get a better understanding of the country we were going to visit rather than coming in without any hint of knowledge. One of the readings that stuck out to me the most

after all it was a class that we were earning a grade for. During the times we had to attend class, I met Mary Klyder and Martha Caminero. Mary was the professor of the travel writing class. She introduced herself to the class by stating that she managed the class for many years (I believe she said more than 20 years). She came off very welcoming and enthusiastic about this year's trip and was thrilled to share her prior experiences in Costa Rica. She had a lot to tell the students but one of the things she said that stuck out to me was the monkeys on the beach. She warned that us about the adorable white-faced capuchin monkey

However, the most crucial part of the meetings in my opinion was getting to know one another. I knew that from the start that we were traveling with strangers and the eleven days were going to belong if we did not have personal connections. The meetings were a perfect time to interact and engage in conversation, so my expectations were high when it came to establishing relationships and engaging in small talk.

I was nonchalant about the whole ordeal up until the last week prior to January 2nd. I was imagining the new obstacles, challenges, failures, accomplishments, family, and so on into the year of the new decade. It felt almost surreal to imagine that the age of being in my 'teens' was coming to halt. Since my birthday was in February, my time of being 19 was fading away. The word nineteen has a negative connotation to me. As soon as you turn 19 your days slowly subtract itself throughout the year. It's that age that the transition to going into adulthood is

considered by society as soon as you hit 20. The federal government thinks being 21 is the age of being an adult. You know this by seeing a sticker reminding customers that the legal age to purchase alcohol or tobacco is 21 within gas stations. While most students graduate high school between the ages of 18-19, the word twenty does not have a ring to not having the suffix teen. If there was the word 'twenteen', I think most people would not bat an eye. Now I'm not saying adulthood is all that bad at all, rather the opposite but I'm saying that world will see you as another collective member of society, just another run of the mill person that has been grouped with rest of the world and it all truly starts at the age of twenty.

To start a new decade going to outside international borders, without family, with a group of students that I do not know well was unfathomable at the time. Yet the thought of traveling to Central America was too alluring not to go. However, those weren't my initial thoughts, I mainly focused on the whole process of getting to Costa Rica. With all the meetings, readings, assignments, renewing a passport, going through all the paperwork, and so on made it rather unappealing. However, a professor of mine who went to last year's trip, as well as attending this year, Mrs. Console, made me picture being at Costa Rica while at the same time explaining what she had experienced a year before. Providing me insight to the activities she had done with last year's group such as hiking mountainous terrain, seeing exotic animals, zip-lining through the forest canopy, getting to swim on the beach, as well as having splendid and delicious food and so much more. It was almost foolish not to go, to see what life is beside the daily norm of work and school. But none of that were the main reasons, what convinced me the most was that simple fact I may not have the ability nor the convenience to travel as I got older.

The details of the trip were merely the cherry on top, but I took a moment to ponder on that thought and picture what I will be doing post-graduation. At the end of May, I will graduate from

Donnelly, and will transfer to the University of Kansas City Missouri where I will be heavily invested in trying to establish my career. And while pursuing higher education, I plan on moving out shortly after I attend University.

All in all, I would be occupied with rigorous schoolwork and would have to be frugal with my spending. On top of what was expected, I also thought about any unexpected mishaps that most people don't consider such as an illness or children. At this point, I convinced myself that it was well worth the effort and money to take a once and a lifetime opportunity. If it was already much of a drag to prepare for a trip now, I can only imagine what it would be when I got older.

Upon arriving at the airport, I began to question what I expected from this trip. I wondered what I will learn from this trip. What did I expect to gain out of it? How will this trip shape me? All I could get was more questions than answers, however, questions like those kept my curiosity of what's to come quenched so I decided to not answer any of my questions but instead reflect on it later. All that thinking led me to not double check my documents, specifically my passport, so as I come toward the machines where they print out boarding passes, the machine needed to scan my passport. I take out my black folder and reach in to take out my passport. I open it up for a quick glance and realize that I looked a lot younger. Since I was already late, I rushed to scan my passport just to be told that my passport has been rejected or expired or something along those lines. I get frustrated, not knowing that the passport is the one I had a decade ago which meant it has expired. After several attempts in scanning my passport, I inspect closely at my photo and information on the passport to realize that I brought the wrong one. I thought it that there was no way that I have brought the wrong passport, so I frantically look into my binder where the truth started to settle in, I had left my damn passport at home. I

make a phone to my mother and tell her the news and plead with her to bring it. Now I knew that I wasn't getting on the plane, so I talked to someone who worked up front where they ring you up for your luggage and explain my situation to this one woman. Thankfully, this woman was calm and reassuring. She gave me good news that there is a flight taking off in about an hour to the initial destination I was planned for. I was relieved to hear the news and after 30 minutes of waiting, my mom drops off my passport and proceeded from there.

As I arrive in San Jose, Costa Rica, and get off the airport terminals, I see the students from KU. Most of them I recognize from our meetings but some students I did not recognize at all. As I look at the faces of every student, I see the expression of exhaustion and fatigue from the airplane trip. Sure, there were faces of contempt and slight excitement, but it was fair to say that we all wanted some rest. As the bus pulls in, we all meet our tour guide Tatianna and our bus driver Francisco. Tatianna enthusiastically leads us to the bus while Francisco quietly puts our luggage away as we enter the bus. As everyone sits down, I find a seat in the back and take in the moment of arrival. From this point forward I start categorizing people into two categories, extrovert and introvert.

Labeling people, it was not as simple as black and white, everyone had their quirks that made them unique on their own but anyway you put it some people were outgoing and social while the others were reserved and quiet. Creating those groups, my intention in doing so was to establish social coherence with each person on the trip. Knowing that we were all going to be on this trip with each other, I might as well form unforgettable experiences with the people I have traveled with. Approaching everyone the same manner does not achieve the same result. Depending on the person, a combination of listening, talking, tonality in voice, and wordplay all contribute to an engaging conversation or small talk.

Everything from then on became a series of unfolding events into what transpired a concrete bond with each other and subtle development of myself. Our activities included a variety of things that were planned on the itinerary. Truthfully, I have hardly looked at it to savor the unknown of the trip. It was up until we all had to leave our suites, I would ask what we would be doing. Knowing what we were going to do at that moment left me wondering how the activity will go and the anticipation was what I was looking forward to. I've come to learn from all the trips the majority of the bus rides did not last more than 1-2 hours so much of the anticipation faded pretty quickly.

Throughout the eleven-day trip, the whole group endured much of excitement, joy, tranquility, sleepiness, and neck pain from the bus rides. Much of what we felt was from all the activities we have done. However, there were several highlights of the trip that I remember fondly of that captured the astonishment, and beauty of Costa Rica and the bond that intermingled every one of us.

One of those highlights happened to be the hike in San Carlos in Arenal National Park on January 9th where we all started our day by going to La Fortuna, a small-town northwest of the capital, San Jose. Our plans for going into the town were simple, to go out and enjoy the time spent there. We all disband into small groups looking around the city to see what we can eat. Being with Caleb, Natasha, and Paola we all decided to eat out a local eatery. We initially had trouble picking the most appealing place to eat and the most affordable. Prior to picking our food, we asked to look at the menus to get an overall idea as to what was available to eat and what was expected to pay, so we were persistent to say the least until we all agreed on a place. Since, our trip was nearly coming to an end, we all wanted our own funds to last us to the very

end of the trip and to try new dishes that we have not eaten before. Finishing our food, we went back onto the bus to start the next activity in which we were planning the hike to Arenal Park.

Upon arriving, Tatianna and Mary tell the group to look out for animals, particularly the White-Faced Capuchin monkeys. At one-point Mary light-heartedly suggested if anyone found the monkey's, she would offer to buy the lucky person a drink, so we remain vigilant from the beginning of the trip. As we take in the lush green scenery of the park, we come across a metal bridge suspended from a big sized trench. Tatianna quiets everyone down to advise the group to not make in any noise for a couple of minutes. Tatianna informs us that the animals are active in the late afternoon, so we may have a chance of viewing exotic animals by listening to the direction of sounds. That meant no speaking, laughing, playing music, anything.

I'm sure it was not only me, we all just let nature take hold of the moment for us to connect. A simple moment yet a beautiful one that captured what Costa Rica was all about. A simple moment yet, it holds of great significance to me. Unfortunately, we hardly saw any animals, so it was a bummer for all of us and thankfully no one got the free drink Mary offered however, we did see hundreds of ants across the concrete boardwalk depicted in the documentaries. Where the ants formed a long line carrying leaves to their routes back into their homes and tunnels. It is something I have never seen before and made me forget about the exotic animals.

The beauty of Costa Rica is in the details of nature but behind the soothing calm nature of the trip is not without its astonishments and the best moment of the trip that when we all went to Manuel Antonio National Park for a swim to the beach which was located just south of the city of Quepos, Puntarenas. With it being the last three days of the trip, we all had our anticipations bottled to visit and enjoy the warm sands of the shore and the salty waters of the ocean. Prior to

our swim, we hiked around the park as we usually do when exploring new and unknown places early in the morning. Unlike the hike in Arenal Park, where no exotic animals were seen, we all finally got to see the White-Faced Capuchin monkeys in action. Swaying from tree to tree high up from the ground was marvelous to say the least. It's not to say that I have never seen any monkeys before, it's just that I have never seen monkeys move around so freely in their habitat compared to viewing them in zoos where it takes the authenticity away from seeing them in their natural habitat.

After some time, we get to the beach at around 11 in the morning to finally drain our anticipation of excitement. We gather our stuff to the shores of the beach and switch into our swimming trunks. We placed most of our gear and clothes to the back end of the shore near the trees, just for us to be greeted by the White-Faced monkeys were a small group where they hung just above our supplies. Mary warned us from the very beginning that although the monkeys are adorable, they can cause trouble, so I was finding myself remembering what she said in that instant. Those nearby scared and shooed the monkeys away with one monkey standing out from the rest. The monkey was persistent in trying to grab something, so I thought that it was the perfect moment to record this once in a lifetime opportunity. This mischievous monkey was unwavering in its mission to take something, but no matter how many times we shooed it to go away, it would come back until it had enough of us. After several attempts later, the monkey set its sight to taking a pink backpack and stood its ground with it hissing at anyone who got close and throwing what seemed to be a monkey tantrum all while I'm recording, asserting its dominance over us. In a quick dash, the monkey attempts to grab the backpack by the shoulders strap, with little success due to it weighing more than him. Cleverly enough, it opens us the backpack and pulls out a pair of headphones and a banana while going back into the trees. I

could not believe what I have seen, let alone captured on camera but it was a hilarious moment where we were all astonished by. With that occurring right in front of me I decide to shove all my stuff inside my backpack under a log and some rocks. I soon shortly after took a swim in the clear blue waters and enjoyed the time spent there with the friends that I have made.

Of course, none of this would not have happened if I worried about my family, worried about schoolwork, worried about everything else that mattered. I did speak to family and relatives but majority of the time that I spoke to them was after the day has ended to give them an idea of what is there to enjoy and to lower their concerns for me. Another reason the trip turned out extraordinarily well was we were all able to connect and enjoy the times together. The trip was only as good as the bonds and interactions we have all made with one another. Sure, we had moments of tension within some members of the group, we all cannot expect a utopia of friendship without some sort of disagreements and tension since it is highly unrealistic. Ironically enough, the ups and downs within the groups is what made things memorable and perfect. We were all able to be authentic to ourselves and allow differing opinions to meet other viewpoints and perspectives. We were all able to put our devices down and enjoy the hell out of our moments. We all initially had our phones in our faces longer than creating conversation, but it quickly changed after the second or third day. Even those who were the quietest eventually could not resist sociable approaches, after all humans are social creatures, it is in our nature to be amicable. Solitude was very much present but not in the context of individualization but rather an isolated group charting into unfamiliar territory experiencing things together one step at a time. We were foreigners to a country that we were mostly unfamiliar with, yet familiar to us Americans. All in all, it is a trip that I surely won't forget about the experiences, and especially those within the trip.

