

## **Study Abroad Costa Rica 2015**

### **By Ricky Coppedge, Tour Director**

#### **Itinerary**

Monday, June 15 <sup>th</sup>	Earth –La Flor
Tuesday, June 16 <sup>th</sup>	Earth –La Flor
Wednesday, June 17 <sup>th</sup>	Rancho Margot
Thursday, June 18 <sup>th</sup>	Soltis Center
Friday, June 19 <sup>th</sup>	Soltis Center
Saturday, June 20 <sup>th</sup>	Finca Luna Nueva
Sunday, June 21 <sup>st</sup>	Hostel Cibeles
Monday, June 22 <sup>nd</sup>	Earth- Mercedes
Tuesday, June 23 <sup>rd</sup>	Earth- Mercedes
Wednesday, June 24 <sup>th</sup>	Hotel Ciudad Purida
Thursday, June 25 <sup>th</sup>	Casa Colon
Friday, June 26 <sup>th</sup>	Fly Home

#### **Recap of Experiences**

The first two nights were spent at Earth University in La Flor. The campus is 8,000 acres of native ranch and farm land. There are many operations underway at the campus, including mango growing, rice production, cattle operation, horse operations, and habitat restoration. One interesting feature on the campus is the AD Astra Rocket Company. The company is producing rocket engines for NASA utilizing hydrogen power. There are also mobile wind turbines begin produced at the company which is an interesting project for students to see developing.

The third night was spent at Rancho Margot. This unique hostel and ranch is a self-sustaining farm that produces it's own water, power, and food. Students were able to see first hand the operations that occur on the ranch. There is a guided tour that takes students through crop production, electricity production, swine, dairy, and soap production. The rooms are located in a converted stable of sorts, where there are bunk beds per each stall and a communal bathroom. It is located outside of La Fortuna, and very accessible.

The fourth and fifth night was spent at the Soltis Center. The group arrived late, so they were not able to go on a pre-coordinated farm tour. The students did wake up early on the second day and went to a dairy where they were able to milk and make cheeses and yogurt. The dairy was called Chrisly, after the owner. The students were able to go zip lining and before they left hiked through the jungle to a waterfall owned by Texas A&M University.

The sixth night was spent at La Finca Luna Nueva, which is located less than a mile from the Soltis Center. There was a tour of the farm that gave students the opportunity to see medicinal plants being grown, and to hear of the benefits of each of them.

The seventh night was spent at Hostel Cibeles outside San Jose. This was counted as a travel day, and students held class at night. On the way to the hostel the Espiritu Santos Coffee Plantation was visited. The plantation is a Co-Op where many farmers work, and there is a coffee shop located here. Students were able to see coffee production from the ground up and sample coffees grown on the plantation.

The eighth and ninth nights were spent at Earth University- Mercedes; which is the main campus. The main campus is comprised of 15,000 acres and has an extensive academic complex, sports complex, dormitories, and a hotel for visitors to stay in. Students were able to see different student projects and tour the various farms located on the campus. On the last night students were able to experience Inauguration, which is a sort of pep rally for their annual games. Students were able to get first hand experiences with how the university works and to see the successes of the University.

The tenth night was spent at Hotel Ciudad Puridad, outside of Limon. Originally the group was to head to the Caribbean coast at Tartugua, but due to flooding they were unable to reach the area. Students were given this night to relax and play by the beach and ocean, which was very much needed for them.

The eleventh and last night was spent at Casa Colon in downtown San Jose. Students were able to have the night off to look around and eat dinner as a group. The trip from Limon to San Jose took around eight hours due to many road closures because of flooding.

#### Implications:

During this study abroad experience to Costa Rica students were immersed into a different culture with different practices. The focus of this experience was sustainable agriculture, and Costa Rica is an immensely proactive country that has set out to boost ecotourism and sustainable practices.

The country as a whole philosophizes the idea to use what you have and to reduce waste. This ideology can be seen throughout the country on farms and in cities. It is commonplace to see recycling bins at every refuge location. The flushing of hygienic paper is discouraged; instead the paper is to be placed into a wastebasket. The utilization of plastic is minimal, but instead glass bottles are commonly used. In most areas you will not see litter along side the roads, but instead communal refuge areas to be picked up by someone.

On a large percent of the farms visited the utilization of methane gas from animal waste was utilized. Farmers and business owners used anaerobic digesters to create gas from animal waste. This gas in turn was utilized to heat stoves, and in one instance to power a generator to power lights. Other animal wastes were utilized in the composting process.

On the Pacific side of the country there was one area that utilized wind turbines and a hydroelectric dam to generate power for the country. A large man made lake is the center point for one area, which the hydroelectric dam is situated on. The Rancho Margot had two hydro generators that generated power for the ranch.

Grain crops were minimally grown, but instead the use of taro, sugar cane, rice, and banana leaves were utilized to feed livestock. This was a very interesting experience, because these plants were able to still give livestock large amounts of protein. In the United States it is unheard of to produce livestock using any of these products.

The majority of the farms visited were almost, if not completely, self-sustaining. They grew their own produce, livestock, and rice. The farms generated their own power and provided their own water from sources located on the farm. There was little to no dependence on outside sources for farm production.

#### Recommendations: Pros and Cons

The places that are highly recommended to return to would be both Earth University locations, Texas A&M Soltis Center, Rancho Margot, and Finca Luna Nueva. It would be recommended that more time is spent at the Earth Universities, especially the main campus in Mercedes. It would be nice if students were allowed to mirror students at the campus, perhaps to be aligned with a student and to attend classes, and see the projects that student is working on.

It would further be recommended that due to Finca Luna Nueva's proximity to Texas A&M Soltis Center that students do not stay the night here, but instead take the farm tour, and eat lunch or dinner at the farm. This would minimize the amount of moving around.

The hostel Cibeles and Ciudad Puridad should be removed from the overnight stays to be able to dedicate more time to staying at the educational centers. If the trip was placed in reverse, where students landed in San Jose and then traveled to the Pacific side of the country this process would be more adventurous because Earth University-La Flor is located next to the airport in Liberia. The Soltis Center is a nice half

waypoint for the trip, because of the laundry service and the proximity to La Fortuna, which provides various entertainment values to the students. The town is relatively safe due to the tourist attractions.

The last recommendation would be the chance to visit more local farmers, which Texas A&M Soltis Center can arrange for this trip. Students would be able to see individual operations taking place in a foreign country to obtain more realistic experiences of farmers in Costa Rica. Texas A&M Soltis can arrange for various farm tours and should be utilized to coordinate a larger portion of the trip to alleviate some of the planning work on Texas State University Staff.

#### Conclusions

This study abroad experience provides students with real world based experiential learning that affords students the opportunity to step outside of their comfort zone and see agriculture from a different point of view. Costa Rica is a safe and renowned country, because of their already existing tourist attractions and destinations, but more so because of their growing ecotourism interests.

The experience provided students with a direct view of sustainable agriculture from individuals whom are immersed in the process. Students are able to discuss with producers in the country whom utilize both traditional and emerging practices in Agricultural production, and to hear their successes and failures. There are technologies that are foreign to the United States that students would otherwise never see if it was not for opportunities such as a study abroad program like this one.

The wealth of knowledge afforded to students from experiential learning programs allow for greater learning outcomes and greater authentic learning opportunities. The knowledge and practices that students learn from these experiences influence their drive to further their education and incorporate new ideas and practices into their fields of study. Experiencing other cultures provides a student with a unique experience to step outside of what they know and to embrace what they could learn and do.