

OSP STUDIES ABROAD!

2022 Costa Rica: A "Pura Vida" Lifestyle



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On the morning of May 13, 2022, the University of South Carolina Opportunity Scholars TRIO Program traveled from Columbia to San Joaquin, Costa Rica. Twenty first-generation scholars and three accompanying OSP Study Abroad program leaders embarked on a project centered on mental health research in the Central American nation. The eight-day excursion revealed how the environment, community relationships, and Costa Rican culture all impacted mental health in the region. The scholars and staff alike were impacted by the experience. The findings are reflected below.

The goal of PSYC 360 course was to analyze the similarities and differences between Costa Rican culture and history, U.S. culture and history, with a specific focus on attitudes about mental health and access to treatment. Secondary goals of this course include gaining a global outlook, increasing awareness of cultures different from their own, challenging assumptions, growing out of their comfort zone, and developing problem-solving skills. Several students commented on the ways that their time in Costa Rica impacted their view of themselves and the world around them.

Students commented on the kindness they experienced from strangers and how it inspired them to be more intentional in their relationships. Students noted that they were able to step outside of their comfort zone and adapt to the casual pace of Costa Rica in addition to being open to trying (and liking!) different foods. Students experienced the country's Pura Vida ("pure life") motto first-hand and how the attitude influenced the state of mental health in Costa Rica. The lecturers and readings provided information about the availability of mental health services however, I believe students learned more about the attitudes about mental health from conversations held outside of the classroom.

Visit to Feria del Agricultor

Pictured: Zoe McDonald, Jaheem McLaurin, Nyaw Too and Sarah Teal



During the week of study, students were introduced to cultural events and learning activities that provided insight into the local culture. Planned excursions in the Central Valley region allowed the scholars to see the spectrum of societal experiences for Costa Ricans. Two of such events were the visit to the open market called, "Feria del Agricultor" and Hogar de la Esperanza, which serves as a shelter for the homeless.

While at Feria del Agricultor, OSP scholars were introduced to an open-air market where shoppers could find fruit, vegetables, and other fresh food items. Farmers and vendors accommodated the requests of inquisitive students and allowed them to try the foods native to the area. The scholars were surprised to discover that familiar foods tasted and were priced differently in the market than in American grocery stores. Upon returning home, a few have shared that fruit does not taste the same since the visit.

Two days later, the academic cohort visited Hogar de la Esperanza. This "home of hope" is a nonprofit centered on meeting the needs of the homeless in the area. The center is populated by those recovering from dependencies and physical illnesses. Students heard the life stories and struggles of the residents, organization partners, and ministry leaders. In the debriefing period, scholars expressed an appreciation for the efforts of the shelter and the residential community.

Although first-generation scholars can benefit greatly from a study abroad experience, they have some of the lowest participation rates among U.S. college students. Now providing the third global education opportunity for OSP, the OSP program has been successful at creating an international experience that affirms students' strengths and encourages their

educational pursuits through cultural immersion. Much of the cultural immersion process came from exposure to varied excursions, guest lectures, exploration of the local town, experiencing different cuisines as well as living with a host family. Being fully immersed allowed for more consistent language development and building a sense of inclusion within their new home for the week-long global education experience.

While scholars learned the English translation to mean “pure/simple life”, scholars recognized that for locals, Pura Vida is a way of life! Pura Vida embraces how everyone, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, religion, or mental health status, deserves to live a purposeful and meaningful life. To embrace Pura Vida means being grateful for what you do have and less of a focus on what you do not have in life. Through their experience abroad, both scholars and professional staff were able to define Pura Vida for themselves and enact those same principles as they transition back to the University of South Carolina.



OSP Scholars and Staff at the Columbia Metropolitan Airport

