

Letter from Alexandra McLatchie
AFS Brisbane Northside Local Group Scholarship
School Year Program from Australia to Costa Rica 2006
(AUSYPscCRCSH06)
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Dear AFS Northside,

Amazingly the 11 months is up and I now find myself sitting on the plane next to the five other Aussies, just as we were 11 months ago, comparing the goodbyes. It amazed me to find that to say goodbye to these people I'd known just under a year was even harder than saying goodbye to friends and family I'd known all my life, not knowing when we would be seeing each other again and also knowing that this year can never be recaptured. Before I left Brisbane I felt prepared for the inevitable culture shock and occasional homesickness, but it was only half way through the year that I realised that the hardest part of my whole experience would be saying goodbye to the life that I had built for myself, and the people who had helped me do so.

The Costa Rican people are renowned for their friendly, happy nature and their peaceful, egalitarian society. After the abolition of their national army in 1949 (a world first), their new constitution included a progressive labour code, a social security system and a set of social guarantees which, in contrast to their Central and South American neighbours, reduced the gap between the upper and lower classes. This can clearly be seen from their welcoming, accepting attitudes. Take a look at their national bird, the *Yiguirro*, which is a small, common, dull coloured bird who hurts nothing yet nor is it a rare or endangered species, simply a sweet, sparrow like bird seen every other day. I think it means a lot for a country to pick such an unpretentious, little bird to represent them, perhaps a reflection on their simple way of life and the joy they take in living it.

After my first six months, a friend told me about an article she found which further confirms my beliefs. According to research done by the *New Economics Foundation*, Costa Rica is third on the “*Happy Planet Index*” which combines well-being, life expectancy and environmental impact to produce a list of 178 different countries. (Australia is 139th and the US is 150th). From what I could see, life in Costa Rica was a lot simpler but they were happier that way and really didn’t want more. A common saying in Costa Rica which I heard from day one and every day after was *Pura Vida*. The direct translation is *Pure Life* and was used in a wide range of situations to say that everything’s going well, life couldn’t be better.

Of course I don’t think you can leave any Latin American country without feeling a strong connection to their music, dance and food. I have a stack of favourite recipes stashed in my bags, a truckload of CDs of their vibrant, exciting music that I’ve come to love and the dance steps to go with them swim around in my head. I’ve just got to keep working on the hips!

Even within Costa Rica, the different regions have varying cultures. After travelling to the east coast the distinct culture is evident with many looking upon it as another country. The Afro-Caribbean cultures’ origins are from the late 1800’s when around 10,000 Jamaicans were hired to build a railway, and the later immigrants who came to work in the banana plantations. With them they brought a Caribbean flair which has continued to flourish on the eastern coast. The foods are Costa Rican based but everything is cooked in coconut milk giving it a unique tropical flavouring. The music is heavily reggae influenced and their dance is very different from the Spanish style. Their dance has a strong tribal beat to percussion rhythms. There is also a higher crime rate that accompanies higher drug usage.

This beachy lifestyle is very different to that on the western coast which mixes the relaxed, happy, slow paced lifestyle with the ritzy tourism mainly fuelled by the US. But as I learnt from my first day in Costa Rica, it's not just about the beaches. My city is situated in the Central Valley (just about as far away from the beach as possible) and combines a city/country lifestyle. With around 30,000 people it's a decent sized Costa Rican city, surrounded by active volcanos, tropical forests and horse festivals just about every weekend. My city was exactly what I needed. It was big enough to have things to do yet small enough to stay away from the dangers found in the capital city. And although the two hour trip to the nearest beach wasn't exactly what I had in mind, it no doubt helped my Spanish to be away from the English speaking tourism rife at all the beaches.

So now as I jet off to another world, and once again start another life, I'd just like to say thank you Alfonso, Hazel, Fabiola and Alfonsito for making my year so remarkable, thanks mum and dad for letting me and encouraging me take this step and mostly thank you AFS for giving me the most memorable year of my life!

Gracia, Adios and Pura Vida!