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Experiencing Myself in Belize: Adventures of Studying Abroad

South Water Caye
Belize, C.A

April 18, 1994

Another beautiful day...we went snorkeling today after class. This water is absolutely fantastic...I believe I am overcoming a deep seeded fear of the “Deep Blue.” Today, Heidi spotted a nurse shark on the reef and pointed it out to me while we were in the water. Surprisingly, I was anxious to see the shark, and felt a bit disappointed after it left. I’m feeling a growth and change inside of myself - something I believe this secluded caye has brought out. Although I am excited to get home, I dread the day we have to say good-bye.

Caribbean coast, Mayan mountains, tropical jungle, Creole food...words cannot explain a three month stay in Belize, Central America. The journal entry above celebrates the aqua-blue waters off an island in the barrier reef where I spent the latter part of my Spring ’94 semester. After telling professors and classmates about snorkeling following class and lying on the beach in the late afternoon, the first question asked was, “What did you actually study down there?” To try and explain, one must move from the classroom to the outside world. From there, the Central American experience presents itself in full.

The study abroad program, Belize: The Adventure Coast, is sponsored in part by Colorado State University and The University of Belize. In February 1994, I united with fifteen other students in Ft. Collins, Colorado, to finalize plans for the trip. We then loaded two university vans and headed south of the border for a week long road-trip through Mexico. The deep brown eyes of children playing near the rivers, or the packs of skinny malicious dogs overtaking streets at night, are visions I clearly remember. This marked the beginning of an experience that would forever open my eyes to the plush comforts we, as Americans, enjoy.

Mexico is a country rich in culture. I found this to be especially true along the southern coast of the Gulf, where the pride of the people is reflected as great hospitality. After we arrived in the small town of Santiago Tuxla late one evening, locals opened the local discotecha in our honor. Only after being spun across the dance floor by an older man for most of the night, did I find out the next morning that I had been dancing with the mayor of the village.
Once in Belize, we settled in a local resort near the capital city of Belmopan, where we had strong connection with the Belizean government. Our group met several politicians and also received a lecture one afternoon by the former prime minister. We even waved to Queen Elizabeth on her whirlwind tour of Belize, the former commonwealth known as British Honduras. Our stay was coordinated by Ann Belisle, a transplanted Canadian, whose husband Richard Belisle (a local Belizean) is the immediate assistant to the Minister of Natural Resources.

Although national radio announced our arrival several times, much of our notoriety came from two members of our group one evening during a televised talent show in the town of San Ignacio. After listening to the music of the local talent, we were shocked and amazed to hear a heavily accented voice announce, "...and now what you've all been waiting for - from Colorado, it's Crockett and Jesse!" Then with incredible humor, Crockett and Jesse performed a song of Spanish nonsense for the cheering crowd, as well as live national television. Later on in the trip, we would be identified as the "Crockett and Jesse" group from Colorado.

Our travels included the entire county of Belize and parts of Guatemala. We visited Belize City in the north, and attended lectures on the history of Belize, as well as learning about recent business and residential development pressures. Our group also spent a considerable amount of time in the capital city of Belmopan. In Belmopan we examined the government, paying special attention to the natural resource department. We then went to San Ignacio and focused our attention on eco-tourism and the impacts tourism has on nations such as Belize. We learned the names and many medical uses of plants and trees in the tropical forests from our guides. We also spent four weeks in Mountain Pine Ridge, an area with unique mixtures of tropical hardwoods and Caribbean pine. After conducting a series of plots in this area, we compared the difference between the granite soils of the upland and the limestone based soils of the bottomland. After class we enjoyed cave spelunking and swimming in Rio On Pools, a granite based river much like those found in the Rocky Mountains - without the bite of frigid water.

One of the semester's main projects was visiting a rural schoolhouse in southern Belize to present several topics dealing with environmental education. We students worked in pairs with groups of children as young as four and old as sixteen. Since many of the children spoke a low Creole dialect, they had a hard time understanding our flippant American tongues. We relied on activities, visuals, and games - anything we could do to get our point across. By incorporating...
teaching with an understanding of their culture, we sought to stress importance of Belize’s natural resources and create an awareness of the current demise of many local ecosystems. It was an excellent learning experience for all of us.

Throughout the semester, we traveled to various Mayan archaeological sites, ranging from small temples to the mysterious and impressive city of Tikal, Guatemala. We studied the history of ancient Maya not only in the classroom, but by visiting sites and talking with leading Meso-American archaeologists. In the ancient city of Caracol, we witnessed the uncovering of a new found burial. I stood in wonder and fascination as I watched the young archaeologist brush dust from the bones of a fetal bound human body. The experience was overwhelming as I realized these ancient people actually existed. They lived and breathed like any of us. Fascination and mystery surrounded each site we visited. It was as if the ghosts of the Maya empire were still standing atop of their magnificent temples.

Off the coast of Dangriga, the white island sands, the palm trees and the aqua blue waters provided (by far) the best classroom I have ever experienced. It was the perfect place to end our Belizean adventure. On this small island, we were able to seclude ourselves and reflect upon the trip and its meaning to each of us. Although I was away from home for only three months, I will never again think of Iowa in the same way. I am now in tune not only with the culture of another country, but I recognize the culture in each new place I visit. Yes, even Iowa has culture. This new found appreciation compels me to continue my travels abroad, but Iowa will always be home.

Megen J. Dvorak

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