

Experience Abroad Reflection

By: Felipe Sarmiento Gómez

My experience abroad during my LiA turned out to be one of the most enriching of my Laidlaw experiences. It was daunting to face the decision of where to conduct my project. I had a few certainties, including I wanted to keep working with cocoa-growing systems. However, this still left many options. I could go to Africa where most of the world's cocoa is grown, or to Southeast Asia where cocoa has a strong presence. I was eager to explore new cultures and see how cocoa was intertwined within the local communities. I researched a lot of places, but none of the organizations I found quite suited the work directly related to cocoa that I wanted to do. I was in a standstill, and the deadline came closer.

Among a bit of frustration, I coincidentally came across a LinkedIn post of a UofT alumn that was completing an internship at Nortico Cacao Farm, a startup in Costa Rica focused on sustainable production of cocoa. This caught my eye. I researched more about Nortico and I started to realize this was what I was looking for. Initially, I was trying to avoid going to a place in Latin America, since I was trying to look for something new (given that I am Colombian). Nonetheless, here would come my first lesson: each culture is unique in its own way. It is very common to homogenize Latin American countries in a single culture because it makes sense, we share a lot in common: language, food, weather, music... But my time in Costa Rica showed me that this does not mean each culture does not have new things to learn, new vocabularies to discover, new values to appreciate, new ways to live and see life.

After this brief introduction, you'll find some pictures of my time in this beautiful country. I write about the stories behind these images and the lessons I keep from them today.

Monumento Nacional Guayabo



During my time in Costa Rica, I had the opportunity to visit Guayabo Ceremonial Center, an International Historic Civil Engineering Landmark constructed between 300 BCE – 1400 CE by Indigenous peoples. We were conducting a workshop on cocoa to showcase Nortico's work and highlight the cultural and historic importance of the fruit for Indigenous cultures. This was beautiful for me, as I was both learning and communicating the cultural value of a plant that I have mainly studied from a scientific perspective. I particularly loved hearing how Nortico's mission connected to ancient cultures and local families, that decades ago built on their ancestors' legacy and cultivated cocoa. I also got the chance to visit the construction and got to know more about the rituals and ways of life of Indigenous cultures, which helped me build a sense of admiration and respect for the land I worked at.

Coffee and friends



What you see in the picture is a delicious Costa Rican coffee (which I can see *may* be able to compete with Colombian coffee) and a tasty corn and cheese tortilla with 'natilla' (similar to sour cream). This was at a friend's house in a little get together that I remember fondly. It was warming seeing how, as in Colombia, coffee in Costa Rica is an essential part of social connections, but that instead of an arepa, it was paired with tortilla con natilla. Likewise, the stories I heard about Costa Rica had similar situations with their own 'tico' (that's how we call people from Costa Rica) touch. What I saw this is the uniqueness of feeling the brotherhood of the Latin American region, while maintaining a sense of respect and appreciation of the uniqueness each culture has.

La Feria



The 'Feria' is the farmer's market that is set up Fridays and Saturdays in the town centre. Growers from all over the region come to sell their fresh produce. I came here for groceries, and it felt like home.

Not only were the products fresh, varied and deliciously tropical. I got to meet the farmers I want to support through my career. What stands out is their kindness and their love for their products. It is more than just getting food, it is supporting the local economy, acknowledging the effort and the gifts from these fertile lands. Among migrations to the city and labour shortages in the fields that feed us, these people are not only producers or merchants. They are a key element of society that gets often overlooked, and I learned to value them as such.

The trusting sloth



In a dark and rainy night, we were driving back to town, coming back from a friend's house. Suddenly, we quickly stopped, and the conversation was interrupted by a bunch of awes. A sloth was slowly but surely crossing the road. We went down from the car to admire this creature that is a country symbol, also ensuring that other drivers stopped while it was crossing. Another motorist also stopped and helped us covering for the sloth. I had been close to two months in Costa Rica, but this was the first sloth I saw. This moment encapsulates the Costa Rican environmental stewardship I learned from and came to truly appreciate. It is an essential part of the local culture, and it is seen all around. I believe that the sloth feels this, and thus has the trust to cross the road at its slow pace, knowing Costa Ricans will stop and protect it.