

How Costa Rica Changed My Life (by Angela Catalano, Spring 2019)

Four months ago, I landed in San Jose, Costa Rica, and embarked on a journey that would be transformative. Before I talk about all the ways that this experience impacted my life, I want to note some important things that I did before leaving the US which allowed me to make the most out of my time abroad:

1. I identified the personal goals that I wanted to achieve during my time abroad and physically wrote a list of them, along with how I would go about meeting each one. By setting clear intentions for growth and having already planned how I would carry them out, I was able to achieve all of my goals because they were at the forefront of my mind each day that I spent in Costa Rica. I referred to this page often, and when I came home, I was able to look back at my intentions and see how much I'd progressed since I wrote them.
2. I foresaw challenges I thought I might face, and I planned how I would deal with them. I knew that along with all of the amazing adventures I would have, there would also be difficult times that would test me. For example, one of my goals was to improve my Spanish, but I knew that this might not be easy or comfortable. With that in mind, I thought of people who I could talk to about these concerns – people that I knew would actually be helpful, such as my sister who is nearly fluent in Spanish due to her studying and practicing it for many years. Her wisdom about the process of language acquisition helped me put less pressure on myself, which made it easier for me to speak to people and make mistakes without overthinking it. Foreseeing difficulties and having specific methods of dealing with them made overcoming obstacles quicker, and ultimately made me a stronger person because I learned to go through the discomfort and experience it consciously instead of just avoiding it.
3. I applied to as many scholarships as possible. It's worth the effort of writing essays and filling out applications, especially if it's the difference between being able to go abroad or not. The specific scholarship that helped me go abroad was the [Gilman Scholarship](#), which can support nearly any study abroad program. (If you would like more information or tips on applying, click the link or send me an email. 😊)

So now on to how Costa Rica changed my life. I feel like I could write a book about this, but here are some of the biggest changes I've experienced...

1. My confidence (in so many aspects of life) has grown so much. Being thrown into a country, school, and family totally unfamiliar to me gave me the chance to be my completely authentic self. I was able to become close with truly wonderful people who made me feel accepted and loved, and who inspired me to be my best self because they had so many traits that I admired. I didn't feel like I needed to waste my energy worrying about how I was being perceived by the people around me, which made me feel free to express myself genuinely. I experienced how great it felt to let go of caring

so much, and now that I'm back home I still live in the way that makes me feel my best and I don't worry about pleasing others *nearly* as much as I used to.

2. Before going to Costa Rica, I had never considered living outside of the US because I thought I would miss home too much. However, I fell in love with this country and to my surprise I honestly never felt homesick. I started feeling like I'd found another home, and while I still love where I live in New York, in Costa Rica I experienced a state of being unlike any other. Surrounded by breathtaking nature, a culture of people who appreciate the beauty in life, a very charming sense of disorganization, and the most amazing mangoes I've ever had, I felt less worry and more freedom than ever. I felt completely aligned with where I was, and I realized how many possibilities exist beyond what I had ever been previously able to imagine for my future. I met young ex-pats from the US who had started their dream businesses and lives in Costa Rica, and it helped me see that I don't have to let my mind/fears make me conform to what's expected of people my age – I really can go for my wildest dreams, and that realization honestly freed me.
3. My Spanish got a lot better. This was one of my main goals and it was definitely accomplished.
4. I now have a beautiful family in Costa Rica to come back to, and so many friends that I met throughout the country. I genuinely feel like I have a second home now and I'm so excited to go back.
5. I got lots of experience traveling alone. After my studies ended, I spent the last month of my time in Costa Rica 'alone' (but spending time with lots of different people along the way), staying with hosts on [Workaway](#) in remote parts of the country. While most parts of the country are very safe, it was still important for me to make sure I was staying smart and aware while traveling solo. Relying on myself to get where I needed to go and be safe while also having a good time left me with so much more trust in myself and a huge sense of independence. I know a lot of people are wary of traveling alone (especially women, understandably), but it's definitely not impossible and by getting this little taste of it, I feel way more empowered to continue solo traveling in the future. I can't speak for others but for me, the benefits completely outweigh the risks (I'm not an expert and I can't give a sufficient amount of advice here, but what I'll say is -- do a ton of research. There are lots of resources online for traveling safe in specific places, and for solo traveling in general).

Overall, I left Costa Rica a happier and better person, and I'm so grateful I was able to study there. I never thought that I would want to be away from home for a whole semester, but after this experience my entire vision of my future has changed, and now I know that I want to travel more, become fluent in Spanish so I can use that in my psychology career, and keep pushing myself to do things that aren't uncomfortable. I hope that sharing my experience encourages others to study abroad, and to use their power to create the experience of their dreams.

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