

My first day at the American Chamber of Commerce of Trinidad and Tobago:

It was 3:00am Sunday January 11th when I arrived in Trinidad after a long day of traveling. My flight had been delayed for hours but Melissa Pierre from AmCham was still patiently waiting to pick me up from the airport. After a brief introduction we loaded my bags into the car and headed down the highway towards the Port of Spain. Out my window I could see that the moon was full and I could almost taste the air which was balmy and smelled just the way I'd imagined it might in such a place. Though as we drove through the city and arrived at my new home for the next six months, I realized there was little else I could have imagined before I actually arrived and began this incredible abroad internship experience.

I had one day to rest and adjust before I began at the American Chamber of Commerce of Trinidad and Tobago. I feel my first day here in T&T can best be summarized with my very first journal entry of my trip.

“Where to begin...Wildly intense emotions are flowing through me. Sitting here I am amazed by my surroundings, though I am able to put myself back into familiar comfortable settings. Lounging in bed with my girlfriend Kassi, hiking my dog up the canyon, home in VT with my mom and brothers, and back to the many wonderful memories of my inspiring father almost brings tears to my eyes. Reflection has provoked these natural emotions of love, family, friendship and a life that has taken me to where I am today; Trinidad and Tobago.

I will be starting my internship tomorrow with the American chamber of Commerce not really having a clear understanding of my specific or expected responsibilities. I am only sure of my individual abilities and confidence in most social and working environments. Although, I am in a place completely unknown and different from anything I've experienced before. It's both exciting and terrifying at the same time, wrestling one another into an almost surreal feeling of incomprehension. How did I get here? What is going on? I kind of laughed to myself at this unique sentiment. I am really here, actually sitting here in the Caribbean, in T&T, in the Port of Spain, in Woodbrook, in my small apartment! Crazy!

I just had a quick visit with the family who owns the house that my apartment connects to. They are so friendly and have been very welcoming. Sean and Dinnora Anthony, they have a 1 year old son and a 3 year old daughter. They are going to take me out this afternoon to go shopping for groceries and give me a feel for my surroundings. Once again the feeling to have my beautiful girlfriend here to hold sweeps over me, just 3 months until she visits!

It was a great afternoon. Driving around Port of Spain is much different than I imagined. Most of the buildings are small and built close together. Rusted tin roofs, hand painted signs, concrete houses, definitely having an old or worn feel to most of the buildings makes up the majority of the area. We went to Shop Smart (Costco T&T style) and got some essentials for the first couple days. We then went to Sean's parent's house, a beautiful home in a slightly more rural area. They gave me more fruit that they grow in their yard, mangos and 5 finger fruit. We had a small "lime", which is basically a term for hanging out, and had a few beers before we left.

When I got back to my place I was fed a traditional Sunday meal of a curry beef with macaroni pie, beans, and callaloo, a green leaf plant much like spinach while I watched some NFL Playoff football. Funny I haven't had television for about 2 years and now I have cable in T&T. Sitting here again I miss that familiar comfort and companionship you come to rely on without even realizing until it's no longer there. I feel a bit sad and lonely but I understand that this is normal and to be expected in the beginning, (good thing I read my handbook, I bet Monya would be proud, ha-ha) and I know that these feelings will change. There are limitless experiences and opportunities awaiting me. I love you family, friends and kassi!"

My first day of work at AmCham began with a rather intimidating first walk to get their. I felt like a fish out of water. The busy narrow streets were alive with people and the roads raged with fast moving traffic. This diverse and culturally rich country left me feeling like every single person watched as I moved along making my virgin trip to work. (Input email snippet) Though as soon as I made it to the office all apprehension melted away as the cool A.C. went to work.

AmCham is a relatively small office of only 6 employees and I was introduced to everyone I would be working with. I couldn't tell if they seemed impressed, surprised, or worried that I had walked to work all by myself on the first day. They were all extremely friendly and welcoming as I was given the tour around and taken to my own office. It was

very nice and I certainly had more room than I would ever need. It was very important for me to assure that I would become an asset and not a burden to AmCham. To start off my internship I sat down with Melissa the Trade and Communications Officer and my on site mentor, and Desiree Gobin-Seecharan the Executive Director and we began to arrange a work plan, agreeing we could try to meet every week or so to give updates and get feedback on the progress I was making. I wanted to make sure I could be as useful and efficient as possible with my 6 month period and I also felt it was equally as important to find out what their needs and expectations were at the time. This way together we could evaluate how we can positively and mutually benefit one another the best. By doing this I discovered that they had just lost a full time employee in the office, the Member Services and Events Coordinator, only a month before I arrived at AmCham. This positions responsibility was now being divided between Melissa and the HSE Coordinator Celine Lestrade, adding a heavy burden to their already busy work load. This current situation would allow me the opportunity to work closely with them both to fill this vacancy, while concurrently working towards my individual goals as well. I wanted to gain hands on international business experience, learn more about the operations of Amcham and its role in the Western Hemisphere, and just as importantly I wanted to learn about T&T while taking in as much of this stimulating new culture as possible.

I often feel it's the perspectives we gain from these new experiences that gives us a

I had done a good amount of research before I came but everything changes when you have actually arrived in the office and are beginning your unfamiliar tasks. I first

wanted to get to know more about AmCham, the employees, its member companies and what we specifically do to be the “preferred private sector business organization for the stimulation of free and fair trade and investment within the Americans and the Caribbean.” It wasn’t long after I did some reading and got a brief rundown from Melissa that I got thrown to the sharks. I was given a membership directory and a list of companies I was to begin calling to set up meetings with a visiting business looking to meet potential clients. Matchmaking is an offered service for those interested in meeting AmCham member executives both here in Trinidad and the US. I also began making calls to find members interested in advertising in AmCham’s Quarterly publication called Linkage. Neither task came easily as I called and called with little success, but my language skills clearly developed as my time progressed. I slowly began to learn the common rules, values, and norms as I continued to speak new people. Greetings, farewells, formal and informal, it was all very different and in time these improved skills began to have positive results in and out of the office.

Trinidad and Tobago is an English speaking country, although it was difficult to understand clearly when I first arrived. The fast paced island dialect spurred from a British decent, often combined with an Indian influence and cultural slang was much like a different language when spoken freely between Trini’s. It did often vary in and out of the office as well. At work it seemed easier for me as the talk was mostly professional, though it did get more difficult in social settings outside of work because of the more informal setting. At first there was always a difference when they spoke to me because they knew they would need to slow it down and speak more clearly. I didn’t mind

because I could barely understand a word when they spoke to one another, and could they probably tell from my lack of response or input in some cases. Though as time progressed and I became accustomed to their heavy accent and the way they communicated, I was having no problem comprehending and holding conversations.

As I began to adjust to this new country and the office environment at AmCham, I soon settled into a relatively regular daily routine. I must emphasize the word relatively because both life in and out of the office has been very diverse and is always changing. We are always involved in numerous different tasks or meetings throughout the week. Whether it's being involved in matchmaking, advertising, event planning (Calypso competition, golf tournament), attending 1 of 7 different committee meetings, helping organize and set up larger membership presentations and receptions outside of the office, there always seems to be a transforming workplace. Arriving at 8:30am, having only to walk 5-10minutes to work, I have yet to really become bored or feel like I'm stuck doing the same repetitive tasks. They could also tell you at AmCham how much I love the local cuisine. The office location gives you an amazing variety of food all within steps from the front gate. Arabic, Chinese, and bbq, though it's the curry, roti, doubles, soup, and all of the traditional local Trini food that is the best.

Though as 4:30pm quickly rolls around my evenings are typically just getting started. I've always been active and I've found that exercise after a day in the office is just what I need. The first few months in T&T I began a daily routine of either going to the National Stadium down the street with Kelvin from AmCham, or going running at the Park Savannah just up the street from AmCham. It's a large open field where lots of

people gather after work to play football (soccer), cricket, run around the perimeter, or just come to lime with friends. The stadium closed when it began renovations for the Caribbean games in April so I began playing football Monday, Wednesday, and Saturday evenings with some friends I met and I began to run more at the North end of Savannah. There is a road that winds up Chancellors hill, which is next to the botanical gardens, and it's got a spectacular view of Port of Spain from the top. Typically during the week by the time I get home, shower, and cook dinner it's 9 or later so I rest and get ready for the next day. Though I was also fortunate enough to be located a block off of Aripita Avenue which is probably the best (and safest) spot to go out and get dinner, drinks, go dancing, or lime with friends, if that's your style. There are lots of opportunities to get out and enjoy a healthy social life and experience the Trini culture; either way you're bound to get a "whining" lesson at some point, especially if you are here during Carnival season.

As beneficial as this internship experience has been it hasn't come without its challenges both in and out of work. At AmCham we are always on a tight schedule and managing your time is very important. I am in and out of the office, going to meetings, working diligently on multiple tasks simultaneously and there are always deadlines to meet. Out of the office, while adjusting all alone in a completely new country and culture is very difficult, it is also very important because being content and comfortable will help you stay positive and productive. I've learned that it is when you encounter these difficult times that you are able to learn more about yourself and how you react to the pressure that could be bustin' pipe (a Trini term). Properly reflecting on the challenging situations in and out of work will allow you to see the events around you as they truly are. Take

your time, be patient, try not to over analyze, move forward, and stay optimistic. More often than not, by taking a moment to relax you will find these challenges to be manageable and nothing to be over anxious about. I am grateful for this internship experience because it is also from these times when I was taken out of my comfort zone that I feel I benefited personally and professionally the most.

From these challenges I faced at AmCham and in Trinidad and Tobago I learned many important new things. Though possibly the most valuable was having the opportunity to interact and communicate in an unpredictable international business environment and in a wildly different society. On almost a daily basis I was involved in or learning about advertising, marketing, trade and investment, economics, finance, event planning, matchmaking, management, and public relations not only for AmCham but for myself and my country as well. Having been exposed to the many facets of the business world I feel vastly more capable and prepared to continue my education and start working in a similar environment. These experiences have taught me how to approach my work more efficiently, I gained more confidence in new professional and social settings, and I acquired another perspective of life which will certainly always have an influence on how I will now perceive and appreciate my surroundings. It is important to keep in mind that my positive feedback is largely a direct result of dedication and hard work, keeping an open mind, and allowing my initial impressions to change throughout the course of my stay in Trinidad and Tobago.

When I first arrived and began to meet new people everyday there was a constant theme in all conversations. Crime and the constant danger that is present in the country.

Impoverished areas thrive with violent drug and gang related crimes that have in recent years begun to get spread and become increasingly more common. Even locals don't go into certain areas and as an American they are sure to express their concern about my safety any chance they get. These negative views had an enormous influence on my initial impression of the country and my daily life. I was always on alert and did very little on my own around the neighborhood especially after dark. I kept trust in those that I knew formally and didn't go far beyond that. Looking back it was that certain level of fear instilled by those initial impressions which dictated much of actions day to day, but these feelings would drastically change throughout the course of my internship.

As my time progressed I began to realize many things about T&T that you could only learn if you spent a relatively significant time here. Yes there is crime and danger present in the country, but if you are aware of this I feel it is no different than anywhere else in the world. I found that there are many incredibly friendly, welcoming and unique people that are more than willing to share their culture and beliefs with you, but you still must be a good judge of character to pick and chose wisely. If you are smart about your actions and keep your friends close, you will allow yourself to gain more from your experience and will be overall more content. This is just one aspect where my impressions of the country changed during the course of my internship at AmCham, and would be one of only a few characteristics of my journey that would have been helpful to know before I arrived.

Personally I don't think there is much I would have liked to know before I arrived in Trinidad and Tobago. I believe one of the primary elements of an internship experience like this is figuring things out on your own and creating your own insights and

impressions on the work and the country. Everyone is different and sees the world in from a different perspective and that's what is so exciting about come to a place like Trinidad and Tobago. Everyday you learn something new about yourself, your surroundings, and it is times like these that open your mind to the other life stories happening right now all around the world while we all go about on our own path. I feel it is far too easy for most to remain comfortable and to not take that risk to see what else is out there. I can honestly say that taking that extra step you will see a positive alteration in the way you observe others and the way you live your own life. Though with that said, I suppose I could think of a couple tips I could give the next person who might be stepping into a similar pair of T&T shoes as an Intern with The American Chamber of Commerce.

First things first, budget wisely. Make sure to be financially stable and have some extra curricular funds for transportation and travel. There are always lots of amazing places you can travel in Trinidad and getting over to Tobago is a must. It's only \$100 TT Dollars (about \$17 US, a 6:1 ratio) by Catamaran and this is truly a tropical paradise. I recommend checking out the book *A Rough Guide to T&T*, it did give some great insight into what you can expect with maps, helpful info on the different type's of public transport and safety tips, but like I said earlier, nothing works as good as figuring it out on your own. You will need a new cell phone unless you already have a phone with a SIM card you can change and this is very inexpensive. Food is relatively cheap but its easy to spend a lot when you are going out for lunch or dinner often. Entertainment is abundant especially around Carnival season January and February. There are always Fetes (large outdoor parties) and places to go out if that's your style. Housing is relatively expensive per month, I pay \$2,400 TT (\$400 US) but this may vary on your location and

setup. Living in an annex connected to a families home as been extremely beneficial in the adjusting process and are always a great resource. Be prepared to have vagrants asking for \$ and trying to sell this and that, you are a tourist in their eyes and they think you have \$. What they don't know is that we are often students with thousands of dollars of dept just trying to get by like everyone else. Be smart when you are out, don't walk the streets alone late at night, simple things, don't look like an easy target. The culture is very different, different ways to meet, greet, and say goodbye. For example, as a greeting they say "how are you going?" instead of "how are you doing?" and also as a greeting they say good morning, good day, or good night depending of course on the time of day. As far as AmCham goes they are really great, the people are friendly and if you work hard and show them you are there to help, everything will go smoothly.

Other than that, the IE3 Handbook was a very helpful resource and really gets you to start thinking about what you will encounter and how to cope with the drastic change in lifestyle. I was able to look back and relate to the topics they touched on and I found the information used from previous experiences was exceptionally valuable. It's truly difficult to express how this internship experience for IE3 Global internships with the American Chamber of T&T as has affected me.

The opportunities I had in and out of work were amazing and I was able experience more than I could have ever imagined. It was from these experiences that I have gained perspective, and from these new perspectives I have gained pertinent life knowledge, skills, and memories that I will carry with me forever.

