

Fall 2017 Las Cruces Biological Station

Recently arrived...

My initial impressions of the OTS Las Cruces Biological Station is that it's an extremely well-maintained facility with really welcoming people. I arrived on a Saturday night, but this Monday the director of education programs (Rodolfo), as well as the GIS tech (Yerlyn), introduced me to everyone. It's a beautiful property, and I'm excited to explore further. I have begun to work with the horticulturist on the property, Greg. He has given me some insight into what I'll be doing, and today I began categorizing and data cleaning palm tree information from their database. The goal is to create a geographically correct map, which helps visitors observe and visit the palms in the area (the station has the second largest collection in the Americas, second to Florida). This involves me hand-transferring data from the database to a spreadsheet, finding their locations in the gardens, and adding location to the type of palm. I'll be working with conservation (any side projects provide more background knowledge about rainforest ecology). Also, if I can get to it, it'll provide experience with matching field data to GIS data. GIS and fieldwork were two things I hoped to work on.

I am experiencing some degree of isolation. I arrived on a Saturday night, and then Sunday the research station was empty. Before I came to Costa Rica, I had some concerns about being lonely. The staff here is very kind and welcoming, and so far meals have been very social. However, between meals, I find that I am often working alone. I may choose to have desk space closer to people, but given that the majority of the staff is doing their own research projects (I am as well), it's a fair amount of time by myself unless coordinating with Yerlyn or Greg. I'm still a bit concerned about it, as it is a very independent project. I would prefer not to travel alone, so I'm unsure how many opportunities I'll have to leave the station grounds.

2 weeks in...

Things have begun to follow more of a routine here after week two. This work hopefully aligns with the professional goals of understanding the field data to desk and computer data process that exists in GIS work everywhere. I hope to gain some better understanding of conservation and or biology, in order to be able to have better conversations in the future regarding partnerships between GIS analysts and biologists or field data gatherers. I have spent a fair amount of time gardening with the local horticulturist as well, and in doing so, believe I'll gain some knowledge there as well.

My personal goals are mainly around branching out and pushing myself beyond my comfort zone. I think that I have done a good job of trying everything at least once and trying to say yes to every opportunity. However, I think it has been challenging in pushing myself in this way because the station has turned out to be fairly quiet. I think that my personal goals have shifted, and I hope to utilize the downtime and the time I have alone in a way that will help me learn and grow.

I aim to drink coffee every morning at 9:00 with the women I work with at the station (all Tica). It has been challenging, but I've tried my best to use every opportunity to speak Spanish that I can. It is difficult, however, because much time is not spent with others. The station is quiet, and for the most part, people are working on their own projects. However, when I do come in contact with others, I try to converse in Spanish for the most part.

4 weeks in...

Typically, I get to work at 7:30/7:45. I take a coffee break with the women who work at the station at 9:00, trying to get a better hang of the Spanish language. Then, I work till noon, lunch break, then work usually 1:00-3:30/4:00.

Right now I'm working on finishing research to supplement existing data for palm tree accession records. In the next few days, I hope to get ArcMap installed on the office computer, and

begin plotting the GPS points found in the field. Sometimes, I help out in the garden with the horticulturist, planting and watering and maintaining garden areas.

Honestly, I have had a hard time getting out and exploring the areas around the station. Due to the isolated nature of this region, as well as the tropical storm that swept through, it has been difficult getting around. I hope to explore this weekend more and try to use more opportunities to get out.

I currently live in a "cabina" which is cleaned and maintained by staff at the station. It's small and clean and the perfect size, with a bathroom, kitchenette, desk, and balcony. The option to live in the garden is very plush in terms of lifestyle. The research station can be fairly empty at times, and it is pretty isolated from any community. San Vito is particularly not close by.

Keep in mind that if you are the only intern coming to the station, you will be fairly isolated. Aside from the occasional tourist or researcher that comes through, the rainy season is very quiet. Similarly, the town of San Vito is also very quiet. It is a little bit more of a stretch or push to explore by yourself if you are the only intern at Las Cruces.

With regard to finances, other than \$7 per laundry load, I have spent almost no money. Much less. Almost none. I spent a total of \$11 going to Pasa Canoas (Panama border), and the food is already paid for. The food is incredible here, and I honestly would rather eat here than eat out. Travel is inexpensive if you take a bus, but the taxis here are not cheap.

I suggest future interns ask if another intern is coming. It has been a really big shock for me to go from being incredibly busy with work, friends, school, and significant other, to a quiet lifestyle where I'm up at 6:00 am and the sun sets at 18:00. Since dinner is at 18:00, after dinner it is dark and there is nothing much to do except return to the cabin. Since the garden is a good deal outside of town, it is not easy to get to/from town after 5:00 unless you call a cab (which is pretty expensive).

In my downtime I spend a fair amount of time outdoors. Because I live at the station, I'm able to walk everywhere in the garden. I like that it keeps me active. I do yoga and work out after work with a woman who lives at the station. I do and have gone on several hikes in the surrounding areas. Given the flexibility of the internship, I theoretically have plenty of time to explore wherever I like. However, it takes a long time to reach other destinations due to the geography. I had some time to explore before I arrived at my internship. There is a waterfall hike nearby in the forest which is really enjoyable. Other than this, I haven't explored much outside yet.

6 weeks in....

One cultural difference I've noticed in the workplace is that the workplace culture is on a different time frame from the U.S.. Employees tend to arrive at work around 6:45/7:00 and leave around 4:00. The days are long, but there is a coffee break in the morning and the afternoon, and a lunch break as well. People here tend to work a little more like I do, where personal relationships matter and things don't need to be rushed - but at the same time, employees here are hard workers. It's a nice balance.

I've enjoyed that I've had a lot to do, I've always loved staying busy. I like that I've been given a practical application and project for GIS skills, as it helps provide portfolio work. I also have really enjoyed working with my hands, whether it be helping in the forest or transplanting species from one section of the garden to another. One challenge is the problem solving; since I have been independent of a superior or director, I have been operating on my own in terms of assignments and goals and the degree of work I'm producing.

I'm proud of the fact that in 4 weeks I finished hand cleaning 1,710 palm accession records with 12 columns each. It took a lot of time, but I was able to come up with a rough map sketch with 100+ located palm trees within 5 weeks.

This past weekend I observed some cultural clashes with the group that I had lunch with. There is a horticulturist at the garden, and when he and some "gringo" friends invited me to lunch

at a local soda, it was very challenging to translate for the Americans to the people who owned the soda. The orders were difficult, people didn't speak any Spanish, and it was difficult to get everyone everything that they wanted.

I did my best to translate and apologized for all misunderstandings. It was difficult to manage, I think the next time I would probably make sure I was helping with each individual person who was ordering. I was frustrated at the irritation of the Americans when the Spanish-speaking server didn't understand their English, and I would like to save them both some headaches next time - I didn't realize the limits of their Spanish. Mine is not perfect, but I can describe the words I do not know.

I find that I'm learning how to be truly on my own, learning how to go do things by myself (or with Mehana, the station pup). It's been a good taste of what post-college could be like - working and operating outside the environment of a University. I hope that working here will make future endeavors in the US easier, as I'll be able to speak the language at least :)

Especially in a small town like San Vito, it can be challenging I found to break out and meet people in the community that are not Gringos. I have been trying to break out of these very separate groups, Gringos here have a reputation. It can be difficult to go to San Vito and really push myself out of my comfort zone when talking to strangers in a small, tight-knit city. The greatest reward has been people appreciating my attempts to learn Spanish and the welcome that I've received by locals who have opened themselves to me and my stumbling bumbling Spanish.

8 weeks in....

I went into this internship pretty specifically for GIS, and have gotten really good experience doing just that. However, there are a bunch of different ways to apply GIS, and I'm looking forward to that. I suppose informally I have gained information on possibilities for career paths. I've talked to different researchers here that come through the station. None of which have been GIS analysts themselves, but all have said that it is a well sought out position. I'm excited to continue building a resume of different ways to apply GIS.

In terms of my cultural learning, after getting closer with the people who work at the station (which is really one of the only ways to get to know the culture), it is interesting to see how the culture around family, relationships, marriages, etc. is different from that in the U.S. as well as how it is the same. I didn't really have any impressions before I left, just that I needed to learn more Spanish in order to get to know people. One note I would stress is that it is really important to know the language of the place you're going to, in my opinion. After talking with the staff, I think they really appreciate that. In my very personal opinion, it should be the job of the visitor to learn about the country and respect the language and culture they're visiting.

I don't really have a specific aspect of Costa Rican culture that I find frustrating. First of all, I'm in sort of a bubble at the station. Second of all, people here are incredibly nice and easy going, I haven't really felt frustrated by the culture. The most rewarding is that by kind of throwing myself into learning Spanish better and really making the effort to speak to the people that work here, I have gotten to see an entirely different world than some of the interns that have been here, as well as all of the visitors that come and stay for short periods of time.

When I think of my experience with culture shock, I think my experience here could probably be most accurately described as a checkmark. When I first got here, I had been traveling around the Northern half of Costa Rica. The areas I visited were often very tourist driven, and I think I had a hard time feeling like I was really immersed in any other kind of culture. So, when I arrived at OTS Las Cruces and found not only a U.S. student group but also a U.S. horticulturalist, I don't think that I felt anything was that different. Strangely enough, though I had begun to immerse myself in the culture, I think that my valley was more due to lack of exposure to culture, and instead of having culture shock - I was pretty done with being around Americans. I missed my friends, I

didn't feel like I was getting the chance to do things or meet people, and the first couple of weeks I felt very stuck. I worked and got a lot done, but that's essentially all I did.

Things got a lot better around week 3 or so when the director of the station, Rebecca Cole, returned to the station. She grew up in Costa Rica for a time, but spoke fluent Spanish and English, and has lived in the U.S. since high school. I think that she provided a much-appreciated opportunity to sort out my projects here at the station, as well as opportunities to leave the station and explore Costa Rica. Around this time I started really getting to know more people, asking about families and lives and culture here. It's been incredibly rewarding, and the more I get to know the people here the more I feel like I have some degree of community. Like I said earlier, I really think it's important to know a language when you travel. It's one thing to know how to say, "where is the bathroom" and "the food was really great" and "please, could you clean tomorrow at my house?" It's a whole different matter to understand what Costa Ricans are struggling with on a personal basis, whether it be the legalization of Uber, the migration of Nicaraguans to CR to work, the cheapness of Panama to the south, or the fact that it's apparently common to have infidelity in a marriage. So as of now, week 8, I am a lot happier to be at the higher end of my checkmark.

My experience here has been nothing like I ever would have expected.

Professionally, I never realized how much work I would get done here. I have been able to gain really valuable experience in GIS, gathering field data, horticulture, and how to run a botanical garden. My work here was pretty independent, and while I did have to coordinate with other people that worked at the station, this internship was very self-led and motivated. That being said, I feel that I've gained the knowledge of how to work without much guidance, which isn't to say that the staff wasn't helpful - they were always there to provide help if I needed it. I chose this internship because I hoped that it would give me more independence moving forward after I graduate this spring, and it fit the professional concentration that I hoped for moving forward. In addition to all of those benefits, it really solidified for me that I do enjoy GIS, and really hope to pursue it in the future.

Cross-culturally, I have been exposed to Costa Rican culture in unorthodox and unusual ways. I think that the botanical garden is located in an isolated area, outside of town; therefore, my experience has been less with a city or town, but with specific people. The people who work at the botanical garden have been more than welcoming, and since I am able to speak Spanish with the staff, I was able to build relationships with most of the people here. Unfortunately, when I picked out this internship, I wasn't aware of the fact that it would be during the rainy season. While I am from Oregon (and used to the rain), coming here in the fall is very different than being here during the spring. Keeping in mind that it is the offseason, the station is slow, and often times I found myself lonely. There is a community of what is called "Ex-Pats" or ex-patriots, and they are all former Americans who have moved to Costa Rica. While they are extremely welcoming, the grand majority of them are much older than me, and they tended to speak English and keep to themselves. In order to get the best cultural emersion that I could, I told myself I should never say no to any opportunity. Through this, I have been fortunate enough to visit a local indigenous community, explore the primary tropical forest, go to the beach, and learn how to dance the bachata. Overall, though it has been different than what I may have expected, I felt very welcomed here, and I have learned so much about myself, Costa Rica, and the profession I hope to go into.

10 weeks in....

I think that as an International Studies major, I have spent a lot of my time in school critically analyzing different Latin American countries and their cultures. My impressions changed because while I knew that every Latin American country is different, Costa Rica was like none of the countries that I had studied. I had to learn a lot about the country moving here, and it all came from spending time with people.

At the end of the day, no matter if it's European culture or central American culture, people are just living their lives. I think that's an important thing to recognize, as sometimes studying

various groups or cultures can give us a sense of "othering" towards the people that we study. Whenever I study marginalized indigenous groups, I feel like I'm studying a specimen in a box, analyzing how it eats, what it eats, where it lives, etc.

I know that sometimes I forget in studying groups and learning their history and politics, that though they may have a different type of house or dress, people are people. They wake up, get dressed, eat breakfast...I think amidst all the time spent analyzing marginalized groups of the world, and labeling countries as "developed, developing, or undeveloped", we lose sight of the humanity of the "other" groups.

It seems that we in the U.S. spend so much time comparing what we have materialistically to what others have in the U.S. and around the world, but this creates a hierarchy of things owned, to where the more things you own or can own, the better or smarter or more "developed" you are. But I personally don't think you can compare cultures until you live both, and experience both.

Learn Spanish. It is your gateway into the community, the staff, and the culture. Don't be afraid to continuously try and try to speak Spanish at the beginning, because it will pay off later. It's one thing, traveling the country and knowing all the tourist phrases like "where is the bathroom", but to be able to converse freely without the interruptions of Google Translate can be such a valuable tool to get the most out of your stay.

Don't say no (too often). Obviously, there are things and situations that will make you feel uncomfortable. But don't be afraid to step into the uncomfortable and spend some time there. The worst disservice you can do to yourself, in my opinion, is being rigid and unopen to new opportunities. It's the best decision I made here, was just not to say no.