

Cherian Armstrong

Cherian Armstrong Instituto de Cultura y Lengua Costarricense
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Foremost, please allow me to thank the Committee once again for this fabulous opportunity. My three weeks in Costa Rica were amazing. I arrived at the airport in Alajuela, very near to the capital city of San José. There I was met by my mother and sister of my “Tica familia”. Costarricenses are called “Ticos” because they often add tico or tica at the ends of nouns as terms of endearment.

As we entered into the traffic of the city, I experienced the constant anxiety I would have whenever driving in Costa Rica. There seemed to be no rules of the road as drivers turned sharply to avoid the “huecos”. (holes) It became readily apparent why there is a high rate of accidents.

Our first stop was a mall that looked very similar to any mall I have ever visited. We enjoyed cold drinks purchased at the food court. Then my family accompanied me to the bank at the mall to exchange United States currency for colónes. Here the similarity to the USA ended. At the bank, I displayed my passport to the armed guard through the glass pane of the locked door. It was unnerving to enter past the security guard and to have the door locked again behind me. My family and my teachers at the Institute warned me about the “ladrones” (robbers). Despite the warmth and friendliness of most Ticos, there is a constant concern about thieves.

After the mall, we drove to an open air market. There I discovered many new fruits and vegetables. At a small trailer like one would see at a carnival, my sister purchased a plate of pork, yucca, and salad for our dinner. Yucca would become one of my favorite foods.

We drove home in the dark. Because Costa Rica is so close to the equator, sunrise and sunset occur at the approximately the same time throughout the year. Sunset was at 6:30.

The home of my family was located in Tacaes, a thirty minute ride from the airport. My home was beautiful, and my family could not have been more kind and generous to me. I lived with my mother, Lidia and my two sisters, Maureen and Karla. Maureen was an air traffic controller and Karla was an instructor at the Institute. My other sister, Carolina, and her husband, Henry, lived just a few doors away, as did aunts, uncles, nieces, nephews, and cousins. I had opportunities to meet many members of my extended family as both Carolina and Maureen celebrated their birthdays while I was there.

I began school on Monday. The first day, I took the bus to the Institute accompanied by my brother-in-law, Henry. He walked the mile up the hill with me to where my school was located. On each side of the hill were coffee and sugar cane plantations. Unfortunately, these abundant farms provided cover for ladrones. For the remainder of my school days, I went with my sister Karla by car in the morning, and I returned home by cab in the afternoon.

The school and its surroundings were breathtaking. I soon had two new friends, a librarian from Virginia and an ESL teacher from Chicago. Our first seminar included an overview of the culture of Costa Rica. We were strongly encouraged not to use English at all as our reason for being there was to learn or improve our Spanish. In three weeks, my ability to speak Spanish improved immensely, and,

most importantly, my ability to understand what others were saying to me increased dramatically.

From my open air classroom, I had a lovely view of the green, lush landscape and mountains of Costa Rica. I attended classes in the morning from 8:00 am to 12:00 pm. These classes, conducted entirely in Spanish, improved my grammar skills and vocabulary. For the first two weeks, my classmates were three school psychologists from North Carolina, Virginia, and Illinois. The third week my classmates were a teacher from Germany and an art curator from Washington. Each week our instructors changed, and a comprehensive exam was given each Thursday.

At 12:30, there were seminars. These included traditional games of Costa Rica, discussions with local teachers, lectures, and films. There were also two grammar sessions. It was interesting to note that educators and parents are struggling with the loss of play among children. As in the United States, imaginative and active play is being replaced by television and video games.

Education in Costa Rica is obligatory. At the age of five, all students must be enrolled in school. There are rolling admissions, so that students enter at their fifth birthday. School is free, but there are also many private schools. Education in English begins in Kindergarten. “Kinder”, which included grades K and 1, is from 7:00 – 10:30 am in public schools and from 8:00 am – 12:00 pm in private schools. “Escuela”, grades 2 – 6, is from 7:00 am – 12:30 pm in public schools and from 8:00 am – 3:00 pm in private schools. “Colegio”, grades 7 – 10, is from 7:00 am – 3:00 pm in public schools and from 8:00 am – 3:00 pm in private schools. Public education for grades 11 and 12 are free, but not mandatory. Seventy percent of the population attend and complete studies at the university. School is year round with one month off at Christmas and two weeks in July. Students with learning disabilities or struggling learners receive extra support in the afternoons in addition to their regular morning classes. Students with severe cognitive or physical challenges attend separate schools.

I had the opportunity to work in a school in Alejuela one day, as well as to visit Holga de Vida (Homes for Life), an orphanage. I discovered that many of the challenges we face in the United States with education and social services for children are similar.

Costa Rica is considered the most advanced of the countries in Central America. It has been a democracy for two hundred years. There is no army, and the focus of the government is to improve education and the infrastructure. Health care is socialized. The five greatest industries in Costa Rica are: microchips, ornamental plants, tourism, pineapples, and coffee. Sixty-five percent of the country is considered middle class. Ten percent are wealthy. Fifteen percent are poor. Many of the poor are from Nicaragua and El Salvador. Most of these immigrants work for the coffee plantations picking coffee beans.

My report would not be complete without sharing the beauty of the rainforest and the other natural resources of Costa Rica. During my time there, I traveled by sky tram through the rainforest, boated on the Sarapiquí River, visited two volcanoes, and enjoyed the spectacular La Paz waterfalls. My family also took me to Sarchí, famous for its woodworking and furniture, particularly handpainted ox carts and to Zarcero, where there is an amazing park filled with imaginative topiaries.

For my final weekend, my family took me to the famous Tambor resort on the Pacific Coast. It was a wonderful way to end my travel to Costa Rica.