

Education Abroad Returnees of the Month November 2017

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Spanish Studies Abroad: Havana, Spring 2017

Most interesting class and why? Did you take classes in connection to your major or electives?

All the classes I took at the University of Havana were related to my two majors, Spanish Literature and Latin American Studies. The courses I took concerned the history, culture, cinema, and literature of Cuba and were perfect in aiding my understanding of the country. My favorite was the class I took on the history of the Cuban revolution because it was a subject I had previously misunderstood. And getting taught the information from the perspective of an afro-Cuban woman was tremendously unique and eye opening. My professor, Paula Ortiz, was such a kind and welcoming woman who served as a mentor to me during my time in Cuba. The course on Cuban Cinema was another favorite of mine. We analyzed the hidden political and social commentary in Cuban films that were otherwise heavily censored.



How was education abroad different than anticipated?

I didn't realize just how different life would be in Cuba vs. what I had experienced living in the United States. Resources and everyday luxuries I was accustomed to were no longer available. For example, I had to pack an entire suitcase full of toilet paper with me to ensure I wouldn't run out because there was frequently a shortage in Havana. Surprisingly, the suitcase didn't even last me the full 5 months! My style of living was a huge adjustment. I remember my first time visiting a supermarket upon my return to the U.S. was such a shock because I hadn't been to a fully stocked store in so long. I anticipated things would be different, but there are so many unexpected differences in a second world country.

Number one way the experience contributed to your growth



Though a cliché, I feel like I grew so much during my time abroad in Cuba. I consistently saw the struggles of my friends, host mother, and others to survive in a communist country where everyone was equal, yet equally underprivileged. I learned to be happy with less and cherish the company of good friends over nice things and social media. There was very little Internet connection; at most, I was able to connect my phone or laptop to the Internet for an hour total a week. And it was

wonderful! I prioritized emails to family and friends, research for class, and downloading a few news articles and cut out all the unnecessary browsing. It was so cleansing and I came back to the U.S. much less dependent on my cell phone, although we will see how long I can keep that up for haha!

Favorite local hangout, and why?

My favorite spot to hang out in Havana was an espresso bar called “Café Maminé”. The first Cuban friend I made, Jorge Luis, introduced me to the shop the first week I was there and it was my go-to spot for the rest of my semester! A spiral staircase led to a cozy loft with low tables and pillows to sit on. Some of my fondest memories were made sitting upstairs sipping a hot “café con leche” discussing everything from philosophical theories to pop culture with fellow students, both Cuban and American. Like most locations in Cuba, there was no Internet here! Just genuine human connection and the company of a good book.

Most interesting/delicious cuisine tried

“Ropa Vieja” is an amazing dish of shredded beef and sautéed vegies over rice. The food in Cuba was yummy but otherwise pretty basic because of all the restrictions on trade; not much entered the island and most resources were exported. A typical meal consisted of pork, rice, black beans, and plantains. The “finer” meats such as chicken, beef, and seafood were reserved for tourists and could only be found in higher-class restaurants. So the rare occasions we did go out to one of these places, Ropa Vieja was always my go to dish.



Most meaningful experience abroad

The most meaningful experience I had in Cuba was during our spring break trip to the eastern part of the island. While there, we hiked the Sierra Maestra mountain range and stayed in a cabin at the base of the range. This is where Fidel Castro and his revolutionary guerrilla troops hid out during Batista’s dictatorship. We followed in Che Guevarra and Castro’s footsteps through this expansive, mountainous jungle and learned about their experiences and tactics in this pivotal part of the revolution. It was a Spring Break like no other!



Sum up the experience in three words

Left comfort zone



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