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Face to Face in Costa Rica

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Field Notes from Abroad: Face to Face in Costa Rica

While conducting an interview with my host mother, we talked about a few key cultural differences between Costa Rica and the United States. First off, she shared with me her perception of the United States as a place where the people are constantly on the go. Through her brief travels to Arizona, Nevada, Las Vegas, New Orleans, California, Texas and Florida it seemed to her that the environment was a lot more competitive and the people were more stressed. In response, I told her that the first thing I noticed when I came to Costa Rica is that the people here are a lot more relaxed, spend more time at meals to socialize and relish in life, and in turn are a lot younger than they appear (my mother of 60 years seems in appearance and energy ten years younger, and I found this to be the case with the other host moms, family members and friends). I would say that this is a huge difference in lifestyle; I have learned to relax more and become more open in sharing stories, thoughts and experiences with the people around me.

Another cultural difference here is the type of food, but a similarity between my host mom and I is that we love to eat and cook big meals to share with others. One of the strangest things I noticed is that mayonnaise and ketchup are used together as a condiment for just about everything: salad, bread and even fruit! Also, fresh bread from the bakery, rice, beans, chayotes (a vegetable very similar to the potato) and fried plantains are a frequent occurrence at the dinner table. It took me a little while to get accustomed to some of the combinations, but I found that white cheese and fried plantains are delicious together (however, I still haven't grown fond of the fried plantains with sour cream).

My mother found a few things strange in my eating habits as well. I love peanut butter and eat it with just about anything, she found it interesting how many ways I utilized this condiment because not many people eat it here. However, the combination that I think is most "normal" in the United States (bananas and peanut butter) she thought was absolutely strange! Another big cultural difference is the times meals are eaten. I am used to eating pretty late at night, sometimes around 8 or 9 in the United States (if not dinner, at least a snack while I am doing homework). Here in Costa Rica, the majority of the people eat breakfast around 7 or 8, their largest meal is lunch which is eaten around 12 or 1, then they have coffee and bread or leftovers from lunch around 4 or 5 for dinner, and then do not eat

for the rest of the day. I am definitely not accustomed to this as I usually eat breakfast, a smaller lunch, a snack, dinner which is the largest meal for me, and sometimes a late night snack after that. It is still taking me a while to get accustomed to this schedule because I feel pretty tired in the middle of the day after eating such a large lunch!

I think the interview experience helped me realize more the differences after talking to my mom about them. I think after a while the culture shock wears off and you become accustomed to these changes without thinking about it (other than the meal schedule which is still pretty different for me). Also, talking to my mom about the stress and fast pace of life in the United States was great to hear because I always believed that you don't have to be pushing yourself and stressed-out to be successful or considered "hard-working". Being here and talking to my mom helped reinforce my beliefs in this, because the people here work just as hard and are successful but seem to be more relaxed and just enjoy life. My family is so positive and they hardly ever talk about money or their obligations such as doing chores and going to work, and this is definitely the type of attitude I hope to bring back with me to the United States so we can all start looking a little bit younger :)

Felicia Weller

Interviewed: Isabelle Mora-Steller, Host Mom on 10/25/2010