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Person to Person in Costa Rica

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Field Notes from Abroad: Person to Person in Costa Rica

There are many differences when comparing the cultures of a Tico from San Ramon, Costa Rica and an American from Hawaii. The most surprising things I've found are that almost every day they eat Gallo Pinto (beans and rice) for breakfast, in Costa Rica. Also, it is not uncommon to have unmarried spouses here. Women wear wedding rings both if they have a long term partner, or if they're married; men on the other hand rarely wear wedding bands whether they are married or not. I've also noticed that the dress code here is much more relaxed; older woman are commonly found wearing youthful styles of clothing even in the work place. Another surprise to me was finding how strict the Catholic morals of this city and country are: abortion is illegal, they celebrate Day of Masks instead of Halloween (because it is believed to worship the devil and is heavily frowned upon), and this city of San Ramon in particular, is mainly made up of Catholics, which means there are numerous churches in this small town, and service is available numerous times during the day. This also means that services are always crowded, and it is not uncommon to sit on the floor because of this. Lastly, I found it very strange that racism is another norm here. It is common that people refer to others by their race, using terms such as "Chinita" or "Negrita" for Chinese and dark skinned women. All of these norms are almost drastically different from the lifestyle I'm used to in Hawaii. On the flip side though, my host mom did find it very interesting and very different that in Hawaii it is encouraged to grow your hair out for functions like the annual Lu'au. There is not a similar celebration here.

My host mom and I share a few differences and similarities. First, she is Catholic, like a lot of "ramonences" and I am Christian, but I attend church service in the temple at least every month with my host family while I'm here. Another difference is that San Ramon is a very active and patriotic city, and they celebrate with parades for: "San Ramon," "Independence Day" and

“Lanterns”. I love this about the city because the community really comes together for these large events and there is often a large gathering. For alternatives, they also celebrate a few different holidays; December 9 is “Melcochas de Maria,” “Day of the Angels,” on August 2 and “Day of the Saints” on August 29, all of which are closely related to their Catholic beliefs. Another difference is the food here. Tamales is an ideal food for Christmas in comparison to turkey or ham, though we both do celebrate Christmas and in both countries it seems to be a very important, family-oriented holiday and time of year. They also eat many different parts of the meat that I would not normally, such as the intestine, lining of the stomach, feet of the pig and liver. Even though these are eaten in the United States, here it seems to be much more common, almost a bi-weekly meal. Despite this though, we have a few similarities. In Hawaii we eat rice at almost every meal, just as they do here in Costa Rica. Also, eggs are common for breakfast, as is toast and fruit. In both countries, we enjoy hot beverages especially tea and coffee during the colder part of the day such as breakfast and dinner, and cold beverages during the hotter part of the day such as smoothies and juice for lunch. Lastly another valuable similarity is the importance of family. Here in Costa Rica, it is normal to have the mom stay in the home so that she can look after the children and not have to hire a nanny. This is also common because all meals are held at home, and most school children come home for lunch, which is already waiting for them. In the United States, it is also a valuable concept to have a close knit family, though the only major difference is that it is less common to find a stay-at-home parent, because of our scarce and demanding economy. This was really interesting to me.

This experience and interview has changed a lot of what my perspective is on the world. Now I have a more open mind to countries and cultures I’ve never explored. Despite the geographic location to countries I have traveled, Costa Rica has been a surprisingly unique and wonderful place to study and learn. I have realized that differences is truly what makes life so rich, because it allows humans the opportunity to explore the beliefs and customs of others, to better appreciate and

understand why things are the way they are in other countries. I've also realized that no country is perfect, having strengths and weaknesses; more the reason to explore them and help each other. We wouldn't have a variety of food, languages, music, dance and art without the variety of cultures around the world. After learning a bit of my host mom's perspective and comparing it to my own, I have realized that even though we live differently, we are both good people that live fulfilling lifestyles. We come from totally different backgrounds and upbringings and cultures, but by having an open mind and a heart for learning, we have developed a relationship with each other as well as with the culture of one another. It is truly a beautiful thing to have learned all that I have here so far. And it has made me so grateful for this new home of mine, and even more grateful for my home in the United States because of our differences. It even gives me a broader perspective on the world and on life: of what opportunities there are to better oneself and better the world. We can learn so much more than we think from those who are so different from us, and I'm so glad I am having my chance to do so here.

Interviewee: Noris Mendez Araya (Host Mother)