

Experiencing Costa Rica

This isn't textbook learning

AHS student tells of trip to Costa Rica.

By RACHEL LERTORA
For The Daily Astorian

For high school students, spring break usually means a week free from teachers, classes and learning.

However, that was not the case for me and eight other Astoria High School and 10 Seaside High School students this spring. Personally, I had been counting down to spring break 2015 all year. The nine-day trip was organized by Garret Parks, Beth Cornell and Lee Cain of Astoria High School and Anne Lynes of Seaside High. In total, the group of 31 was made up of students, teachers, moms and in-laws, all eager to experience Costa Rica through the country's beautiful landscape, flavors and people.

Even before the plane landed in San Jose on March 19, amazing sights of the Costa Rican landscape were visible as we flew over the Pacific Ocean, Caribbean Sea and volcanoes.

Beginning our trip on the Caribbean side in Tortuguero, we explored the shores of the turtle beaches. On the fourth day, we kayaked on Lake Arenal at the foot of volcanoes. We also witnessed incredible views of Monteverde while zip-lining hundreds of feet in the air across canyons a quarter-mile wide. We even concluded our trip the last day by whitewater rafting 7 miles of Class 3 and 4 rapids on the Sarapiquí River. In addition to these bucket-list experiences, when it comes to experiencing the landscape of Costa Rica, my favorite activity was horseback riding.

Going where no tourist would think a tour bus should drive, we arrived at a small farm on Day 5 and hitched a ride through the Costa Rican countryside. We rode by horseback for an hour to the bottom of a canyon with natural hot springs. As some of us dipped our feet in the springs, others photographed water spiders the size of an out-stretched hand. As the sun started to set, we gathered our belongings. Fireflies flickered in the trees and stars filled the sky. By the time the horses returned, the sun had set. Riding out of a Costa Rican canyon by moonlight is truly an once-in-a-lifetime experience that I will treasure forever. As the memories of fireflies flicker at the corners of my eyes, cravings for Costa Rican cuisine make my mouth water.

Tasty food

While in Costa Rica, a large portion of my souvenir money was spent on food, despite the fact that the tour included three meals a day featuring Costa Rican staples. Typical Costa Rican meals include rice and beans (served as one dish at breakfast, *gallo pinto*, and separately at lunch and dinner, *casado*), plantains (served fried, baked, glazed and delicious any way), fresh fruit (perfectly ripe) and fish, beef or chicken.

Although the same main ingredients were often used, no two meals were alike. You would be amazed by the endless number of ways that rice, beans, plantains and meat can be transformed. However, my favorite meals were the ones unique to Costa Rica and foreign to me.



JOSE COCOZZA — For The Daily Astorian
Astoria and Seaside students kayak on Lake Arenal in Costa Rica on a spring break trip.



Costa Rica Spring Break 2015

RACHEL LERTORA — For The Daily Astorian

This collage highlights the spring break trip to Costa Rica that students from Astoria and Seaside high schools participated in.

Writer's Notebook



NHAKIRA LAPOINTE — For The Daily Astorian
Astoria High School senior Rachel Lertora, center, poses with new school friends in Costa Rica.

My favorite kind of food is new food. Thankfully, when in a foreign country, new food is not hard to find, especially when following a Spanish teacher who's an expert at sniffing out local food anywhere the bus stops. Out of all the meals I ate, my favorite dishes were *lengua* (beef tongue), pork chop glazed in a passion fruit and, most of all, kebab tacos found in La Fortuna, my favorite Costa Rican town.

On a side street of La Fortuna was a tent canopy with a barbeque, ice chest and a couple of chairs underneath. The

simple set-up was a sign of authenticity to Mr. Parks and sparked my curiosity. A couple was grilling chicken and pork kebabs marinated in a melody of flavors unique to that very canopy tent. We both purchased a kebab for only 1,000 colones (\$1.89) each. They were wrapped in corn tortillas, topped with spicy banana salsa and served on napkins. Food does not have to come from a five star restaurant or be served on fine china to be amazing. With no five star review or porcelain in sight, this was the best way I spent €1,000 the entire trip. The kebabs were so good that Mr. Parks and I circled the plaza twice to buy seconds, our hands still dripping from our first. That evening, friends had been made under a canopy tent and the next day more friends were to be made at a local school.

Language challenge

Real learning happens when skills introduced in textbooks are put to the test outside of classrooms. While visiting a very small school of only 10 students, I put my four years of high school Spanish to work. When we arrived, each student shared their future aspirations to become policemen, movie directors, teachers, artists, soccer players and clothing design-

ers. While visiting after introductions, I gave them friendship bracelets I made beforehand. Actions spoke louder than words when one young girl gave me a gel pen. I was there to give, not receive. Surely this scenario had not been outlined in a textbook. Therefore, I had no automatic reply memorized. Tongue-tied,

New food is not hard to find when following a Spanish teacher who's an expert at sniffing out local food.

I replied with a smile and simple "gracias" hoping she knew how thankful I was despite not having the vocabulary to say so. As we all gathered outside to play soccer with a brand new ball gifted by Mr. Cain, I realized even more how blessed I am to have experienced so many lifetime memories with peers, teachers and new friends that I will remember forever.

In Costa Rica, I experienced much more than I can summarize in 1,000 words. Experiencing Costa Rica through the landscape, flavors and people opened my eyes, mind and heart to the beauty of an amazing country. While I hope to return to Costa Rica, I have also been inspired to experience other parts of the world on my own as I graduate Astoria High School in a few short weeks. *Hasta próxima vez, Costa Rica, ¡pura vida!*

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JOSE COCOZZA — For The Daily Astorian
Astoria and Seaside students and chaperones pose near a waterfall in Costa Rica during spring break.



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