

Both Feet

By Alexzia Plummer

This essay intends to answer the questions I never thought to ask before studying abroad. Before studying abroad, I did the standard research on my prospective countries. During my searches, I didn't run across much guidance or advice for minority students. Even simple statistics on the racial make-up on England or Costa Rica were not readily available to me. At each of my study abroad orientations, I had to ask the awkward but necessary question: What's it going to be like as African-American student? I want to share my experiences on two separate study abroad experiences, semesters in England and Costa Rica, in order to help at least one African-American student in the future.

The biggest shock about studying in Leicester, England was the diversity. It was different than anything I had ever experienced or expected. Leicester has the largest Asian population of any city in England. I had to confront my own ignorance, because this Asian population wasn't predominately the Eastern Asian I had envisioned (Japanese, Chinese, Korean, etc) but Asian from the Indian subcontinent. I had to question my assumptions on what Asian meant. I also had to admit that I didn't know much about religious diversity. I had never had a Hindu friend before my semester in Leicester nor had I ever lived in city with sizable Hindu, Muslim or Sikh populations.

While England does have a diverse citizenry, it has a larger white majority than the United States. The Black population is only at 5%, while in the US it's about 12%. As England's diverse population grows, its media and entertainment are slowly reflecting the shift. Even though US media and entertainment seems rather whitewashed compared to its actual population, England is even more so. There seemed to be a struggle between the traditional English identity as white and the reality of different ethnic English identities.

I didn't encounter any overt racism or discrimination. I may have been the only minority in some instances, but I never felt threatened or out of place.

I didn't have any trouble finding other Black people while I was there. It is a predominately white country, but Leicester did have a good number of Black people. I immediately found an Afro-Caribbean society (they don't call student organizations clubs.) I received helpful information, like where to get my hair done. I also had the opportunity to meet people. It was an interesting experience being a foreign Black. Just as there is



Alexzia Plummer (right) with KU students on a hike in Costa Rica

distinction between African and African-American students here in the U.S., in England I didn't fit into the Afro-English grouping. A minor frustration occurred when other Black people would ask me where I was from. They never seem satisfied with just "American." I explained to them that because of slavery I couldn't rattle off any one country of origin. I found some Black English to identify themselves with their countries of ancestry (Nigeria, Barbados, Jamaica) even if they were born in England.

Because Leicester is a predominately white university, I did encounter some of the same ignorance that I did at KU. This usually crept in within my living situation. The experience in the residence halls gave me flashbacks of my freshman year of college in which I meet people who had never had any substantial experience with any minority. Among my block mates, I felt completely accepted and welcomed as a person, but I could tell that I was the first Black friend for many of them. There were a few minor flashes of their ignorance, but they were just ignorant and not malicious.

Like any study abroad student, I did feel some pangs of loneliness and culture shock. I could usually go to my fellow American students for comfort. Sometimes, I did feel quite separate from them too, because while we could discuss our common bonds as Americans, I was still a minority among them. This did get me down at times. I would sometimes experience what I call Black people withdrawal, just wanting the company of one person who could better understand my perspective. I comforted myself with the knowledge that I could re-enter my comfort zone as soon as I got back to the States, and that the study abroad experience would enrich my life despite the uncomfortable feelings of loneliness.

For my semester in Costa Rica, I did lot more research on the racial climate, keeping mind what I had failed to ask before going to England.

I found that Costa Rica has an even smaller percentage of Blacks, around 2% or 3%. I found through research and actual experience, that the largest percentage of Blacks live in the

Limon province on the eastern coast of the country. This province sometimes gets the bad rap as dangerous, almost a nation-wide “bad side of town.” It is a poor province and it does have a large Black population. I didn’t feel any less safe there than I did in San Jose. Of course feelings are relative to everyone. I tried to be as cautious and careful wherever I was, I didn’t want to fall for that false sense of security that comes with familiarity. Whenever I would feel the symptoms of Black people withdrawal, I would plan a weekend trip to the Limon. I was actually ecstatic to find hair weave and hair oil on sale in a super-market in Limon. Signs of blackness. It was a wonderful feeling to just to be able blend into a crowd. I also found it fascinating to experience another part of the African Diaspora through the Afro-Caribbean culture of Costa Rica. Although the culture was different than mine, I did find signs of similarity. I thoroughly enjoyed going to carnavales, a Columbus Day celebration celebrated in Limon.

I found it hard at times to live in a city with so few Black people. Sometimes I just ached to see a reflection of myself. I had felt prepared for the experience, growing up in a predominately white town and attending predominately white schools, but this situation was even more severe. Some days I would make a game of it and count how many people Black people I would see in a day. I don’t think I ever got past 10 while I was in San Jose. Because there are so few in the capital, they aren’t really represented in media like television or radio.

I didn’t experience any overt racism or discrimination. Although part of a really small minority, I didn’t feel unwelcome. I found the Ticos to be friendly and polite, I didn’t have to face any rude racial remarks. I did run across a weird phenomenon. More than once, Ticos would think that I was Dominican. Even with my awful accent in Spanish, my dark skin seemed to associate with me the Latin American country with a large Black population.

One thing that I am thankful that I was warned about was the use of the word “negrita.” Ticos are more open with physical descriptions than North Americans, they won’t hesitate to call someone by their hair color, weight or skin color. “Negrita” can be a form of endearment and is never meant to offend. Likewise, an Asian student was called “chinita.” Knowing that these racial descriptions are harmless was helpful to me. Plus they open up a whole new creative category for pripos. My most memorable one I received was “Morena mi reina”

I didn’t experience the annoyances that white girls often experience, the unwanted advances of Ticos. It seemed that that the country had bought into the European ideal of beauty. Anyone with white skin, blonde hair, or light colored eyes always garnered attention. The ugly side to this

fascination with North American girls is that it bought into the stereotype of American girls as promiscuous. White female students would often complain that Ticos would assume they were easy just because they were American (white.)

I had a wonderful experience with my host family. They completely accepted me as a person, but I knew that had almost no experience with Black people. I was their first Black student. They all wanted to touch my natural hair. My host mom marveled that I could get tan lines. My host mom tried hard to connect (“Our National Soccer team has five black players!”). I didn’t find it too hard to live through the ignorance of my family because they were such warm and loving people. Part of studying abroad is confronting the misconceptions other people have of you, whether it is based on nationality or race.

The only real letdown of my experience wasn’t the country or its citizens, but the other American students I studied with. I made some good friends but I also had to deal with the annoyance of ignorant white people at an already stressful period of my life. I was the only African-American in my group. It felt like freshman year of college all over. I was again confronted with people who had little to no experience with anyone different from them. Along with representing my country, I felt trapped in the token minority role. This stress could have been avoided if I had a different attitude and not taken it personally. I spent a lot of mental and emotional energy unnecessarily. My advice is this: Before leaving decide what you want your role to be. Without question you will be educated on your host culture and in return the host citizens will learn about your culture through you. Educating your majority comrades from North America is optional. In the end, you’re not there for them; you are there to expand yourself.

Even though there were inconveniences during both semesters, I would definitely do it all over again. I grew as a person over those semesters in a way I don’t think would have happened without studying abroad. A little bit of discomfort couldn’t dampen the richness of experiences I had. And I the end, I always got to come home to my comfort zone filled with the people who mattered most. Along the way I had to confront my own pockets of ignorance while I was faced with the ignorance of others. In a way, I got a glimpse of race relations in other countries. More than that I had the privilege of experiencing college in two other countries. I would encourage anyone to study abroad. As my little brother says “Only a fool tests the water with both feet.” Consider my testimony as your test. Now you can study abroad equipped with all the knowledge I didn’t have.