International Experience: Aquiares de Turrialba de Cartago

My international experience took place in Aquiares, Costa Rica, a small town that exists within the Aquiares Coffee Estate. While there, I worked on a project to establish a small, organic produce farm within the neighborhood. I’ve worked on farms since high school and now, studying International Agriculture and Rural Development at Cornell University, I’ve had countless opportunities to learn about how local produce can benefit communities in a number of positive ways. The goals of this garden were not only to provide a source of healthy, healthily-grown produce to the town, but also to increase employment opportunities for women in the town and circulate capital in the local economy. I went to Aquiares with all these things in mind, but the experience affected me in ways that I could not have begun to imagine while I was preparing to leave the States.

I worked alongside three new friends that became like aunts to me: Karla, Laura, and María. In the mornings, we met and toiled in the garden under the hottest Costa Rican sun. We dug drainage ditches, planted seeds, transplanted baby cabbages, and excitedly talked about our hopes and dreams for the future of the garden. It was interesting do something I was very used to—growing vegetables—in a very different context. I learned from my peers every day, about everything from Spanish words to dance moves to new songs, to how they cultivate their plants differently, to medicinal uses for common herbs. I threw myself into their culture any way I could, seeking something utterly different from my life at Cornell. They cooked me traditional
food on Costa Rica’s Independence Day, introduced me to their families, and threw me a surprise party complete with a mariachi serenade on my last week in Costa Rica.

The most satisfying thing was not the first harvest, or counting our earnings, or even getting to compare pictures of the bare earth at the beginning to the explosion of produce that was growing by the end of my time there. Truly, the best feeling came from being waved at as I walked down the street, women poking their heads out of their houses to request lettuce, cabbage, or everyone’s favorite, cilantro. It was a signal not only of the garden’s success, but also of my integration into a foreign community with different beliefs, customs, and language than what I was used to.

As the garden expanded and its plants grew bigger, so did my own group of friends in the community. I went on long hikes through the forest with my host siblings, triplets my age, and their own friends. I was fascinated by their knowledge of the natural world around them, and felt privileged to see their passion for protecting it. I learned to cook Costa Rican food from my host mom who became my best friend there, and talked about natural resource conservation with my host dad.

Another aspect of my experience was the essential role of coffee. Being in a community that was centered around the production of coffee gave me the opportunity to learn more about its cultivation and processing from a new perspective. My host father worked in the mill every day, and I got to see the machines they use to dry the coffee berries, husk the skins off, roast the beans, and grind the finished product to taste it for quality. Every day, coffee pickers passed the house with their empty baskets strapped across their bodies, fresh from a long day of work. Among them were women and small children, and I admired their work ethic even more on the day that I joined their ranks and spent the morning picking with my host siblings. We strapped
baskets around our waists to keep both hands free, and donned long plastic ponchos despite the sunny weather, because the coffee plants were still soaked from the last night’s rain. I sang to myself while I filled my basket as fast as I could, trying not to drop too many non-ripe green berries into what should have been a purely red harvest. My fellow pickers, which also included María from the garden, and her son, my friend Lorenzo, were impressed with my first-time efforts. After watching them, I don’t know why. They were amazingly fast, filling basket after basket and emptying them into huge sacks. We ate gallo pinto among the coffee plants, under a bright sun and blue sky, after a morning of physical labor, all of us friends. I felt bonded to them in a new way, but simultaneously so ashamed of the American perception of coffee: overpriced, frozen Starbucks drinks shrouded in foam, latte art, the only thing keeping students awake through finals week.

I liked coffee picking, but I don’t have to do it every day. It’s not my livelihood, and the cash I could earn with each basket filled wasn’t going to buy the next meal for my family. I was not a kid who grew up traveling from field to field, growing up on rice and beans. This is why the most challenging part of my experience was not adjusting to another culture, or even improving my Spanish and learning to laugh at the mistakes I made due to the language barrier; It was confronting my own privilege, the wealth that I was raised on, and what that means for my perspective as I venture into my future and foreign domains. It was the most valuable lesson I learned: to be grateful, not guilty, humble and never judgmental, and use my opportunities for education and travel to be a positive force in the world, for myself and others.