I was lucky enough to have two international experiences in my time as an undergraduate IARD major here at Cornell University. They were very different experiences, and though only two years apart, came at rather different times in my life. My first experience came in the summer of 2009, after my freshman year. I travelled to a small organic farm on the Atlantic coast of Costa Rica, just North of the border of Panama. I only spent 5 weeks on the farm, though I originally planned to spend two months there. I learned several valuable lessons, though they were not the ones I thought I would be learning when I found the program online. My second experience was in the drastically different climate southeast of Edinburgh in a small town called East Linton, Scotland. I worked there for nine weeks on an organic vegetable farm in the summer of 2011. This was a fully functioning farm with many different types of crops, multiple polytunnels and greenhouses, and a vegetable box delivery scheme. I learned a lot about organic vegetable production and about what it is like to work full time on such a productive farm. Before I get to Scotland, however, I should describe my unique experience in Costa Rica.

_Punta Mona Organic Farm, Costa Rica_

I found Punta Mona Organic Farm through a friend who had worked down the beach at a Sea Turtle rescue program two summers before. She said that her and friends from the rescue program had visited the farm and it seemed like a really nice place that I would enjoy staying at. I found the website online and sent an email to see if I would be able to work there during the upcoming summer. The 4 weeks it took for them to get back to me might have been an indication that they were not the most organized group I could have chosen, but I was young and naïve about such things so I went ahead and booked
my flight. Getting from San Jose to Manzanito, (the nearest town to Punta Mona) was fairly easy and cheap. Once I arrived in Manzanito I was supposed to take a boat to the farm. The boat ride to Punta Mona took about 10 minutes, but when I arrived I was charged as much as it cost me to get all the way from San Jose to Manzanito. Not understanding, I asked the man in charge of the farm why it was so much and he gave an answer to the effect that the locals on the boat with me didn’t have to pay and that the captain needed to pay for the gasoline. Trusting that the man running the organization wouldn’t lie to me upon my arrival I paid and assumed that everything was ok, despite his insistence that I call him “Turtle”. It later turned out that he had been stealing money from the organization for months from various places and was fired quickly upon the owner of the farm finding out. The reason for the owner’s delay in noticing the missing funds was quickly apparent. Padi was a 70-year-old Jamaican man with an enduring love of dominoes and an even greater passion for Guaro, a Costa Rican hard liquor. Needless to say, the experience was not the one I was hoping for, but it was a valuable experience none-the-less.

I worked the first day with a head gardener named Jenny. We planted Biriba and Guanabana seeds in the small nursery (Figures 1 & 2). I found that she was happy to have someone who actually wanted to work and learn on the farm, so she led me around the property and showed me the amazing variety of tropical fruit trees. There were different varieties of Cas, Mango-steen, Pineapple, Banana, Jackfruit, Guanabana, Biriba, Coconut, Cacao, Soursop, Durian, Avocado, Mango, Breadfruit, Eggfruit, Papaya, Starfruit, Lime, Lemon, Miracle Fruit, and others I’m sure I’m forgetting. Most people only pass through Punta Mona for a short period of time, and as a result the farm was a
mosaic of half-finished agricultural projects and structures in need of repair. I was
couraged to start a project of my own, but I wasn’t offered any kind of mentoring or
assistance. The general idea I had of the farm was one of large initial investment, great
potential, and severe lack of organization and motivation.

Figure 1: The Greenhouse

Figure 2: Guanabana & Biriba seedlings that I planted
My suspicions about the farm were confirmed over the next week, as I saw Jenny’s initial excitement at having a willing helper turn into avoidance at having to work more than 4 hours a day. The other “interns” tended to spend most of their time relaxing in the hammocks and reading, and I saw them mostly at meal times. I got along well with the other people staying at the farm, despite our differences in work ethic. They were all happy and pleasant people, and perfectly willing to help if asked (and perhaps reminded). The most knowledgeable of the interns was a graduate of the University of New Mexico named Darla who is still farming in Costa Rica today. I learned more from her than anyone else in the end, mostly through conversations we had in the kitchen. I spent a lot of time working in the outdoor kitchen cooking group meals because oftentimes that was the only place where I was guaranteed to have something to do. It also didn’t hurt to get first choice of food from our full time local cook Ileana. I learned about the plants and fruits of the area through cooking with them, and I got to practice my Spanish since Ileana didn’t speak any English. In this way I realized that just because someone is in charge doesn’t mean that they are the best person to learn from. In fact, I’ve found many times that the person in charge of everything is either too busy or too out of touch with what’s happening in the field to be a good teacher. Turtle was absolutely useless in this sense, whereas Ileana was a great source of knowledge despite being the lowest employee on the totem pole. The same was true of Ileana’s father Miguel, who didn’t speak a word of English but knew more and did more on the farm than anyone else. In the end I decided to leave the farm early since I wasn’t learning as much about tropical agriculture as I’d hoped, but I didn’t leave feeling completely jaded about these types of programs. I met a lot of people who had done interesting work and knew of more legitimate places in
Reflection Paper

IARD International Internship

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Costa Rica to do what I wanted to do. I learned a valuable lesson in checking out a place thoroughly before signing up to go. I also learned not to trust someone just because they are in charge, and I learned to learn everything you can from the people who are actually doing all the work. Overall I had a good time and an experience that was important to me, but I would not recommend Punta Mona as a place to really learn about tropical agriculture to other students.

Phantassie Organics, East Linton, East Lothian, Scotland

I arrived in East Linton after spending 9 months studying abroad in London, so the peace and quiet was a welcome relief. Lesson number one from my study abroad experience is that I don’t like living in cities. I happily traded in my 13th floor studio apartment in Islington for an old caravan and a drafty outhouse. The farm itself consisted of 5 acres of fields, a 1 acre walled garden which also produced vegetables and soft fruits, two large polytunnels, and a large greenhouse with about a quarter acre more field attached. They also had several houses full of organic hens that we put in every night and let out into a large yard every morning. The work was 9 hours a day, four days a week, in the best and worst weather Scotland had to offer. I much preferred the cooler climate to working in the humidity of Costa Rica’s coastline, so if I work in the tropics I know to head for the mountains next time. I really enjoyed my time at Phantassie Organics because not only did I have the chance to meet many interesting people, but I also learned a lot about running a farm. Unlike in Costa Rica, I finished each day with a sense of accomplishment from having worked hard at something with a purpose in mind.

My first few weeks at Phantassie were spent learning the ropes from the head grower, Liz. In the mornings I had to water everything in the polytunnels, seed house,
and net tunnel. The crops in the polytunnels as far as I remember were flat beans, tomatoes, basil, summer squash, zucchini, spinach, and mixed salad greens. The seed house usually had a few trays of lettuce, kale, or beans. The net tunnel had an assortment of all types of crops waiting to be planted. After the watering was done I would move on to the next task, which was different depending upon the day. Sometimes it was using the hand hoe in between rows of spring onions, lettuce, or rocket in the walled garden. Other times it was planting rows of crops along string lines in the walled garden, or watering the plants in there (Figures 3 & 4). We harvested in the afternoons for the vegetable boxes that went out in delivery vans for customers, or for large orders from restaurants or local markets. The weekends were always a big rush to have everything ready for the Edinburgh and Haddington farmers markets, and I usually helped in the barn weighing out and labeling all the different items. The crops in the summer included flat beans, broad beans, zucchini, summer squash, cucumbers, beets, carrots, turnips, purple sprouting broccoli, kale, chard, rhubarb, spring onions, mixed greens, herbs, lettuce, cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, celery, radishes, potatoes, blackcurrants, redcurrants, raspberries, green and purple gooseberries, and eggs from our hens.

I also had the chance to work at the farmers markets on the weekends, which helped me to really understand the effort that goes into these markets and the risk that farmers take in going. We had to bring such a large amount of our produce so that people could see what we had to offer, but we rarely sold out of more than a few things. Most of the crops wouldn’t last too much longer after the market, so if we didn’t sell them we were losing money. One of the purposes of the market was really to advertise for our vegetable boxes, since that was a guaranteed amount of money. I particularly enjoyed the
Edinburgh market because we got paid ten pounds an hour to work and got a free ride into the city for the rest of the weekend. I also managed to make some extra money repairing the cable system that lifted the vents in the greenhouse. Opposite to my experience in Costa Rica, Ralph and Patricia (the owners of the farm) expected hard work but also paid fairly. Ralph also does wood turning and teaches the WWOOFers how to make a bowl, which is a nice souvenir to bring home. Ralph, Patricia, and Liz were wonderful people to work for and I would highly recommend Phantassie Organics to anyone looking to learn about organic agriculture in the future.

Figure 3: String line planting spring onions
Figure 4: Mixed Greens and lettuce in the distance inside the walled garden.