I spent my semester abroad in San Ramon, Costa Rica during the fall of 2022. The planning of my semester abroad began my freshman year when I discussed with my academic advisor to go abroad the spring of my junior year at Clemson. Things were set until the beginning of 2020, where my plans took a bit of a turn. I saw so many of my friends and classmates have their abroad experiences taken away by the pandemic. Entering into my junior year in the fall of 2021, I still was not confident I would be able to go abroad the next semester, so I changed my plans and registered to spend my first semester of senior year in Costa Rica. I chose University Study Abroad Consortium (USAC) program in Costa Rica because I felt this program would offer me experiences closer to what I would want to do and where I would want to do them in the future. I knew the programs offered in Argentina and Spain were highly recommended and were more popular compared to Costa Rica, but this only encouraged me further to go somewhere other students did not want to go. I also thought that the culture in Costa Rica would be more similar to experiences I’ve had in my previous travels (this was not the case).

Once I had registered for all of my classes and received my information for my homestay, I packed my bags, left my family, and imagined what my life would be like for the next four months. I felt incredibly nervous from the moment I left my house. I just didn’t know what to expect from my host family or what my day-to-day life would be like. I didn’t know if my Spanish was going to be good enough or if I would like the other students in my study abroad group. I felt like I forgot everything I had learned about how to speak Spanish or how to make friends, but all of my feelings changed the second I got off the bus in San Ramon. I spent about an hour sitting with the other students I would be studying with as we road in the bus, and then we arrived in town where I met my host mom, Yolanda. She immediately made me feel at home with her, and speaking with her was so much easier than I thought it would be. She helped me to understand the culture of Costa Rica by explaining all of the holidays they celebrated while I was there, taking me to town parades, teaching me Tico phrases, and making me comidas tipicas everyday. So much of the Tican culture surprised me. I had ignorantly thought that it would be similar to Mexico, but I couldn’t have been more wrong.

Costa Rica is famous for being relaxed and carefree and I realized that this is true. No one is ever in a rush, everyone always has time to say hello and have a chat, and it is perfectly normal to sit in a café for hour and hours just talking. One aspect of the culture I was really surprised by was the lack of consumerism. Growing up in the United States, I was so used to seeing people constantly buying new clothes, accessories, decorations, gifts, etc.; but in Costa Rica people only buy what they need when they need it. Online shopping is also not prevalent in San Ramon because no one has an address. My address was “70 meters west of the pharmacy.” It was honestly refreshing to see people really taking care of the things they had and shopping from local vendors whenever they needed something new.

Adjusting to life in San Ramon did not come without its struggles, however. For my entire academic career studying Spanish, I had been speaking Spanish the way I would speak English. I never really failed to get my message across, but Yolanda would not let me get away with incorrect grammar or English expressions translated into Spanish. She would correct me constantly and explain new expressions used in Spanish. She always pushed me to think in Spanish and take my time to practice correct grammar. It was frustrating at times, but I vividly remember the first long conversation I had with Yolanda where she didn’t correct me, and I had never been more proud of myself because of how natural it felt.

My academic accomplishments also filled me with immense pride throughout my semester. My original academic goals were to try my best and push myself to avoid using resources in English. As my classes progressed, I realized my skills were stronger than I originally though, and so I changed my goals to have the highest grades in each of my courses. The difficulty of my grammar and literature classes drove me to try my absolute hardest and give all of my energy to expanding my understanding of Spanish language and culture. I am incredibly proud to say I achieved my goal of having the highest grades of all of my classmates in each of my courses.

My time abroad affirmed my passion for language, travel, and culture. I was so scared to enter into something new in a place I had never been before, but it was honestly one of the most rewarding experiences I have ever had in my entire life. I will keep the memories and knowledge from my time in San Ramon forever, and I hope to visit again in the future to catch up with Yolanda—and hopefully eat her food again.