

## **Study Abroad Story: Kristen Morris**

### **Brazil and Costa Rica**

I'm Kristen. I'm a senior here at Valpo. I'm an IECA and Spanish double major with a minor in French. My first study abroad experience was in Brazil. I went for an entire year after I graduated, so I took a gap year through the Rotary International Program. And then, my second study abroad experience was actually here at Valpo. Fall of my junior year, I went to Costa Rica for a semester, the San Jose program.

Um, I would say that there are a lot of similarities between both of my experiences with Brazil and Costa Rica. The culture is very warm and open as compared to the US or more specifically for me, coming from New York. In Brazil, you greet everyone and anyone even if you don't know them. You do hugs. Where I lived in particular, Rio de Janeiro, you do two kisses, one on each cheek. In some places, it's one. In some places, it's three or four. It can vary. So, it's... it's quite different than the culture in the US where you might maybe only hug your close friends. That was probably one of the biggest adjustments for me in the beginning, but I got used to it. And of course in the reverse culture shock process, it was very strange for me to not be doing that. When I was coming back after my entire year there. So if you are in a room with say 10 or so people and you're leaving, you will go around to each of those people and hug them and kiss them and say goodbye. It's considered rude unless there's a very vast amount of people to just stand up in front and say, "Ok, bye! See you later!" It's very personal to them that you go around and address each person individually.

Some of the major adjustments that I had was living so, so far from home in a place where I didn't really know the language. I went to Brazil with some very basic, basic Portuguese terms and a little guide... guide handbook of the language. Uh, luckily I was living with a host family and I think that definitely, not only prepares you better for integrating into society so to speak, but it also helps you of course learn the language because you're interacting with a family. You have that personal connection that you might not have if you're living on your own or if you're living in an apartment with other students. Uh, so when I was in Brazil, I was attending a high school since that's what I could do through my program, so I was going to school everyday. All of my classes were only in Portuguese. Uh, it was a bit of an adjustment. But I.. I made friends in my classes and they also spoke a bit of English, so that definitely helped me integrate the first month or so while I was learning Portuguese because we could communicate. And they could help me with some things and I could help them with some things. Um, but...It's definitely a different kind of thing when you're in another country, living with a family, trying to integrate yourself, but you don't really have a grasp on the language.

Something else that was interesting for me, but a little bit difficult, was living with my first host family. You kinda think, you know, they're going to accept you and help you... But, you have to remember that they are also living their own lives as well. So in my first host family, the mom had a profession that kept her busy almost all day and the father stayed home, but he was out a lot. And the host brother that I had would be at school all day. So I would leave with him in the morning, we would go on the bus to school, his school was right around the corner from mine, but if I needed something, I would really have to speak up and let them know because they wouldn't because I didn't really even see them that much unless it was the weekends. Uh, so that really... It forced me to be more vocal about things, but it also pushed me to integrate more with the friends that I was making at school because once I started meeting more people and interacting with more people and spending more time with them, it was a lot easier to have them help me. Of course, with people your own age and that really helped me with my language a lot, even though it wasn't exactly positive at first because I wasn't getting to know my family as much as I would've liked. Over time, you know, you do realize, hey, they have their own lives and you're becoming a part of it and they're not becoming a part of you... if that makes a little bit of sense.

But it did force me to be a little more outgoing which was totally the opposite of what I was before in the US. I was always very quiet, shy person, afraid to speak up, to give my opinion... what have you. Um, but, when you are in another country and you can't necessarily always communicate, you kind of just have to. So, during my time abroad, not only was I forced to speak up and communicate in English, but in a language that I was only beginning to learn how to express myself in. So I would say that I definitely underwent a very large personality change. Um, when I came back to the US, I was more outspoken, more outgoing, less afraid to speak up for sure and just more comfortable... um... interacting with people. Not that I wasn't before, but... but being in such an open culture and where you have to express yourself in order to part of the world, it's important. But it did also prepare me pretty well for Costa Rica I feel like because of course, Costa Rica was only half the time. It was only a semester. But, having had the experience of living in another country for so long, learning another language, uh... I had already been studying Spanish for... about 6 years at the point that I had gone to Costa Rica, so I was much more prepared even language wise. Uh, and a little bit more for the culture like they're openness and comfortability levels with even each other. So, it... it helped me be a lot more confident with my Spanish when I had to use it in a real world situation and also even back at home now when I'm working my jobs. If I have Spanish speaking customers that I need to help, it's a much more easier experience.

I think that my transition to Valpo after my study abroad was much easier than it would've been if I hadn't that experience, only because I am from New York. I live a little bit more than 800 miles away from Valpo. I did choose this school for its language program, so I have absolutely no regrets about that. I love Valpo. Uh, but it was easier because I had that experience of being

away but also being abroad so it was nice. And it was also a little bit of a smooth transition into what I will call the “midwest culture” so to speak. Um, it... it’s nice. I really like the atmosphere at Valpo. And I think that studying abroad beforehand and having all of the experiences that I did with another culture, with my host family, with my friends, with other international students... I think it really prepared me for entering into a different environment within the US. With a university that has different cultures on campus, with a totally different culture than the east coast. I think without that experience I would’ve been a bit more homesick. Um, and... I think it was also a smoother transition into my classes because I knew that whatever it was that was thrown at me, that I would be okay because i had already gone through such a large experience... in Brazil with my classes, with interacting with other students and with other cultures.