

The trip was a four week medical Spanish immersion course. The 6 hours of lessons a day for four weeks greatly advanced my command of the Spanish language. The morning was devoted to medically-related Spanish. We covered how to take a comprehensive medical history of all the major organ systems. We also practiced on the Costa Rican equivalent of standardized patients. The class work covered Spanish speaking inside and outside the clinic. The second half of the day was devoted to learning basic grammar and practicing our conversational speaking. Furthermore, part of the course was devoted to learning tropical diseases like leishmaniasis and malaria. We even took a trip into the rain forest to further learn about tropical diseases (although this particular trip really seemed to be more of a sightseeing tour with classwork involved). We also had the opportunity to speak with the Costa Rican doctor that ran the program (Dr. Tristan) to learn about the health care system in Costa Rica in general. We even took a tour of San Jose's main hospital.

A home stay with a Costa Rican family reinforced what I learned in class and I became a much more proficient speaker. My family was instructed to speak zero English to me and they did not. In addition to room and board, the family was invaluable engaging me in conversation. Eating traditional Costa Rican food and watching soccer with my host family really added my to immersion experience. In this respect I feel my experience was far different from the other girls, who all lived together with another "family" who really did not open up to them the way my family opened up to me.

On the weekends we had a chance to witness the natural beauty Costa Rica is known for, in addition to practicing the language skills we were learning in class. The entire country has a rich cultural heritage and well-preserved environmental areas. With everything we had done in class, I was able to make my way around the entire country without needing to speak a word of English.

Wherever a physician practices in this country, he/she will face a patient population that speaks primarily Spanish. There are patients seen in Eric B Chandler and St. John's that speak zero English. I have personally seen 3rd years who spoke no Spanish try to interact with these patients and it is impossible for them to do anything. Thus, the ability to communicate with this population is paramount. This trip has empowered me with the capacity to communicate with Spanish-speaking patients (for the most part) without requiring an interpreter. I can do a decent history and physical on my own, but more complex things (like explaining diseases or explaining treatments) I would still probably need help.

If one were considering this program I would say this: the program is great for someone looking to primarily learn Spanish quickly. There is no real clinical aspect of this course. Furthermore, if one does not have any prior Spanish-speaking knowledge, they must remember to keep their goals realistic – you can only learn so much in 4 weeks. The only formal Spanish training I had was in high school and one year of medical Spanish at RWJ. I knew a few words and could conjugate verbs in two tenses and that was it. Now I am a far more proficient speaker. I think someone with an intermediate background in Spanish would gain the most out of this, it was the extra boost I needed to move from being a useless to useful speaker (from a medical standpoint).

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