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CIEE: My Story

To me, the beauty of study abroad is living the extreme: doing things I never dreamed I would do and also surviving things I never imagined possible and things I always feared. In the end, realizing my dreams and my fears is what made going abroad the best experience of my life, because not only have I lived better than I ever had, but also have survived the worst, making me a stronger and better person than when I left.

During my two semesters abroad in Latin America, I lived in two of the most different cities and had two very different experiences. After a year in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic and Buenos Aires, Argentina, I will go home changed.

This year, I lived the extreme: I rode a motorcycle on a major Dominican highway. I went paragliding in the mountains of Argentina. I went to one of the biggest concerts in the Caribbean for three days straight. I went to one of the biggest political marches in South America. I attended a tiny private Jesuit university. I attended one of the largest and most chaotic public universities in South America. I ate rice and beans almost every day and never got tired of it. I ate the best steak and pizza and pasta of my life, and ate something different every day. I contracted a parasite and got sicker than I've ever been. My health returned--then I got food poisoning. I lived mere minutes from the Caribbean Sea and a half hour from a white sand beach. I explored the Andes Mountains and the salt flats. I lived in a country where people stared at me wherever I went, because I was a minority. I lived in a country where I blended in like a native, because I was part of the majority. I lived in a country that rejects its ethnic heritage. I lived in a country that clings desperately to its ethnic heritage. I lived in a city that could be in Africa, but is Latin America. I lived in a city that could be in Europe, but is Latin America. I learned to dance *merengue* and *bachata*. I learned to dance *cumbia* and *lambada*. I taught impoverished children in the Dominican countryside. I taught impoverished children in the inner city in Argentina. I learned to squeeze myself into a *guagua* (bus) with fifty people. I learned to squeeze myself into a *subte* (subway) car with a hundred people. I came home to *apagones* (blackouts) when I had a paper due the next day. I missed classes during the frequent *paros* (strikes). I went to Ecuador. I went to Uruguay. I'm going to Brazil next month. I met people I'll never see again. I met people who are now friends for life.

But the irony is that in the end, living the extreme is what makes me appreciate the happy medium: my life at home, the life I left behind, the life I was bored and tired by before I left. There is nothing sweeter than going back to normalcy, because now I can appreciate it so much more: enjoying

modern comforts, stability, and reliability, living in my own culture, being with the people I love. I had to experience the best and the worst of the world, to have fun and to struggle in order to appreciate my life in the United States.

So I could have spent my junior year sipping Starbucks and talking to my friends across the hall on Instant Messenger. Instead, I went abroad.