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SDC 2016- Chile: How to Get to Easter Island

This summer I was blessed to receive a scholarship to go to Chile and Easter Island for 4 weeks. I was given this amazing opportunity from the Naples Council on World Affairs and would not have been able to experience these beautiful places without their generous assistance. Being able to travel with the Student Diplomacy Corps and learn from the in-country representatives was such an eye-opening and intriguing experience. The students in my group, along with our group leader, Brian, were all so amazing and I am so lucky to have been given the opportunity to meet and grow strong friendships with this group from around the country. Participating in this program was an opportunity that I will cherish for the rest of my life and I am so very grateful to the Naples Council on World Affairs for making it possible.

My domestic flight from Ft. Myers to JFK International Airport in New York was the first time I had flown alone. I was nervous at first and began to wonder how I would spend my summer with strangers in a foreign country. When I arrived at JFK and began to meet my group I was put more at ease. They were all from different states across the country far from Florida but were incredibly friendly and charismatic. Our flight from JFK to Santiago, Chile was about ten and a half hours. When we arrived we met our in-country representatives, Pablo and Claudio, which was when we first began our immersion in the culture, through their Spanish speaking. Throughout our three days in Santiago we learned about the indigenous groups of Chile, such as the Rapa Nui (Easter Island), Mapuche, and Aymara. We were given the freedom to explore the city in partners and find directions by asking locals, which led us to be immersed in the culture and learn Spanish. After our short time in Santiago we were transported to our home stay in La Ligua, Chile.

On our way to La Ligua, we were all very nervous to meet our families and live for twelve days in strangers' homes. Once we arrived I met my mother Lidia, my father Carlos, my sister Isabella (12), and my brother Sam (17). I was immediately welcomed into their home and went to school with my siblings to meet up with my group. We would work on translating old Chilean myths into English or go on day trips where we learned about textiles, pastries, or land conservation. We all once went to this rocky beach area named Los Molles and it was one of the most beautiful places I've ever been where we overlooked the blue water and climbed rocks. We cleaned garbage in forests and gave presentations to the children of the school about our lives in the United States. I made great relationships with my family and the students from the school, Adonay Pukalan. I was able to bond with them through sports and music which showed me how similar we really are. I also did many activities with my family such as take a hike up this big hill overlooking the town with my brother and his dog, Sasha. Once, my family brought me all the way into the Andes Mountains to see snow for the first time, but due to a snow storm we were not able to go up the mountain to see snow. It was moments like these where I was shown how kind and loving my host family was and how they truly welcomed me into their home as one of their own. They did anything to make sure my short time in their home was full of cultural immersion and interesting

experiences. Living with a foreign family showed me how even strangers from around the world can love and treat you like their own child. This led me to understand that despite the differences of our lives, we all are ultimately the same in many ways. My group was very upset to leave La Ligua at the end of the twelve days because of the lasting relationships we made without families and classmates.

We then traveled to Valparaiso, Chile, which is a harbor city known for its beautiful street art. We lived in a nice hostel and played card games with one another. We visited various locations in the city such as the Chilean Congress building, one of Pablo Naruda's homes, and an Easter Island museum. We also took a boat ride around the harbor to see the city and saw sea lions on a raft. We were sent in partners one day to explore and photograph the cities' street art. Experiences like this allowed us to really understand the city from a local perspective rather than that of a tourist.

We then traveled back to Santiago to the airport to fly to Easter Island. When we landed after our five and a half hour flight we were given flower necklaces and welcomed with such hospitality by the in-country representative, Tito. During our 7 day stay in Easter Island, which is actually named Rapa Nui because of the Rapa Nui people who live on the island, we learned about the civilizations which lived on Rapa Nui and the origins of the famous Moai statues. We had Rapa Nui language lessons and learned how to speak basic phrases, which I thought was a very incredible experience. I found myself practicing the language to the locals, despite my very limited knowledge, and thought about how special it was to be learning a language spoken by less than 6,000 people. We went on various excursions such as a long hike to a fishing hole where we caught over 60 fish and cooked them on a makeshift grill, which was the best fish I've ever eaten. We then went to Anakena Beach, one of the two sand beaches on the island, and it was so beautiful with such clear water. Another trip was horseback riding where we traveled along the coast for approximately 12 miles, stopping only to eat or visit caves along the ocean. We visited the Moai quarry, Rano a Raraku, where the Moai statues were carved out of the volcanic mountain, but it still remains a mystery how the 80 ton statues were moved across the island. We also were able to go swimming in the clear water, and thanks to a kind tourist from Santiago I was able to use a snorkel to see the neon colored fish, which I thought was such an incredible part of nature to see. Visiting Rapa Nui and experiencing all the amazing parts of the island was a "once-in-a-lifetime" experience that I am so blessed to have been given.

After our reluctant departure from Rapa Nui we flew back to Santiago for the concluding segment of our trip. There, we did various activities, such as visit the ceramics town of Pomaire where we learned to create pottery on a spinning wheel. We went to the Natural History museum, watched a movie at the theatre, and just explored the city as a group. As we saw the end of our trip approaching, we were very upset that we would soon leave Chile and each other. When we finally departed back to our separate lives in the United States, we were un eager to leave but thankful for the memories we had with one another. I am so lucky I was able to have such an amazing group of friends to travel with for a month in Chile and will continue to keep my contact with them despite our distance.

This trip allowed me to step outside my comfort zone and try new things. I touched a huge tarantula we found in the wild, I ate raw fish liver that was just gutted by Tito, and was in a flash mob in the middle of crowded Santiago. By trying all these new and sometimes difficult things I was able to create a summer filled with such exciting stories and memories. I learned that by stepping outside my comfort zone I was able to fully immerse myself in the culture of the people around me and experience everything I possibly could in the short time I visited Chile and Rapa Nui. This trip has also led me to understand a culture very different from my own and see how the problems with peace in our world stem from our lack of knowledge about different cultures. One of my favorite quotes by Mark Twain that exemplifies this idea states that “travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness”. This trip has shown me how in order for us to grow as a peaceful society we must learn and understand cultures different from ours. I am so thankful I was able to go on this trip and am so grateful for the endless memories and knowledge I gained from traveling abroad.