

Casa de la Solidaridad

Introduction

I studied abroad in El Salvador from mid-June to mid-July through the Casa de la Solidaridad summer program. One thing that surprised me about El Salvador was how friendly the locals are. I rarely interact with strangers back home, so it shocked me how everyone greeted me with a smile wherever I went.

Housing

There are two houses for Casa students: Casa Silvia and Casa Romero. Casa Silvia has more double and triple rooms while Casa Romero has more single rooms. Casa Silvia is more spacious inside the house while Casa Romero is more spacious outside with its large courtyard. During my stay, Casa Silvia was livelier while Casa Romero was more peaceful, which just depended on who happened to be staying in each house, so it will probably be different for future students. Neither option costs more than the other, so it is based entirely on preference.

Finances

Aside from tuition, program fees, immunizations, flights, visa fee, and books, I spent about \$300 during my trip in El Salvador. I spent about \$100 on meals and snacks. I could have easily spent a lot less on food since most meals were provided, but I was craving ice cream and cold beverages all the time because of the heat. Ice cream is very cheap in El Salvador, as most things are—at Sarita, a single scoop only costs \$0.95. One thing I highly recommend is to get your hair cut in El Salvador if you are a guy (none of the girls cut their hair here, so I can only speak for the men). The barber who works just a little bit down the street from the Casas does a pretty nice and thorough job for just about \$1.50 to \$2.00. Everyone I know who went there, myself included, had a positive experience. Generally, the only things that are more expensive in El Salvador are things that are imported from the U.S. and other countries. However, I also had to spend quite a bit of money (a little over \$60 in total) on a stool sample, consultation, and antibiotics when I got traveler's diarrhea, so it pays to be cautious. There is no exchange rate since El Salvador uses the same currency, and I always went to the ATMs near the grocery store (La Despensa de Don Juan) to withdraw my money. I budgeted my money by never carrying more than \$10 to \$20 on me at any time except for when we went shopping for souvenirs or went to purchase antibiotics because I never really needed any more than that for anything. It is also much safer to carry less money just in case one gets robbed.

Academics

I highly recommend taking notes in a journal throughout the trip because many of the papers ask one to reflect on what he or she has seen or heard. Some studying was necessary for the one test in the Spanish class, but for the most part, the professors emphasize participation in class and through papers. I have no idea about my overall grades, but my Spanish professor just gave me letter grades for each assignment.

Student Life

The campus is pretty large—it took me a while to figure out how to get to my classes on my own. I did not spend that much time on campus since I just went straight to class and back every day, but it was definitely a lot different from Santa Clara. There were a lot of trees at the UCA, which provided a lot of shade, so it definitely did not feel as sunny as Santa Clara, which was a good thing because it was already quite hot there. Food was available on campus, but I never purchased any since we usually had dinner waiting for us in our houses. We did not have access to the computers and Internet there since we were not official UCA students. It might be different for students in the semester program.

Social Life

The way the program was structured allowed me to get to know a lot of students from other universities in the U.S. as well as Salvadoran students through the Romero program, some of whom were living with us as well. I also got to know a lot of the people who worked at my praxis site. One advice I have about making friendships with the local is to be cautious with one's response when offered food. Many Salvadorans do not have much to give besides food, and offering food to them is like offering a piece of one's self, so rejecting food can cut off a relationship before it even starts. Even though it is important to be cautious to prevent traveler's diarrhea or because of other food restrictions, it is also important to be cautious about how one communicates those reasons because it can come across as rude and unapproachable. Another thing is that Salvadorans usually mean what they say and do not say things just to be formal or courteous. When they ask how you are doing, they are actually expecting a genuine response. When they invite you to something and you accept, they actually wait for you to show up.

Religion

Most Salvadorans are either Catholic or Evangelical. I never really discussed religion with the locals, so I am not sure how open-minded they are about people from other religions. Catholics and Evangelicals can find services for sure near the Casas. In fact, there is an Evangelical church right across the street from Casa Romero.

Race/Ethnicity

Being Asian was a little bit awkward in El Salvador because most Salvadorans have never met an Asian in person. Everyone assumed I was Chinese or Filipino. Even though I politely corrected them, they would continue to say things that I would consider a bit racist (e.g. whether I know Jackie Chan or martial arts). However, I tried not to be too offended considering that they live in a country that is rather homogeneous. Since there is not much diversity in El Salvador, I am not sure if there is a racial or ethnic hierarchy there. I am assuming Salvadorans have higher socioeconomic status than non-Salvadorans, similar to whites compared to minorities in the U.S. At first, I thought that we Americans have a better understanding of race and ethnicity, but then I realized that many of us assume all Hispanics are Mexicans and all Asians are Chinese as well, and we do not have as much of an excuse due to our diversity.

Gender/Sexuality

Machismo definitely played a huge role in this community. I noticed, for example, that the doctor whom I was shadowing hugged only the girls and just shook hands with the guys. I noticed that the vast majority of the patients at the clinic where I worked were female, since men are expected to work and, as a result, do not have the time or even the patience to go see a doctor unless it is really necessary. Everyone assumed I was straight even though I am gay. I chose not to be openly gay in El Salvador because of what I have read about the prejudice despite the laws prohibiting it, so I do not know exactly how the locals would have reacted. Since I was only staying in El Salvador for a month, I did not want any potential tension or conflict to ruin my stay and prevent me from connecting with the locals, so I chose to hide my identity. I cannot say I recommend doing that, but I would advise that future students think about what matters more to them. I never claimed I was straight or denied I was gay, so I did not feel like I was being unfair to myself. I just left it ambiguous and did my best to avoid the topic of my sexuality. I already felt some uneasiness as an Asian, so I did not want to throw my sexuality on top of that.

Socio-economic

I come from a very poor family in the U.S., so it shocked me when I was regarded as being in a position of privilege. I felt extremely self-conscious whenever I walked around my praxis site with my Nike shoes. The health promoter I was accompanying also pointed out that just my shoes alone could cause tension in the community. It was not just because they were nice shoes; it was because they were Nike shoes, the shoes that poor people have to assemble in sweatshops and only the relatively wealthy can wear. It was really frustrating to me because they were the only pair I owned. Initially, I felt like an identity was being imposed upon me, but then I realized that depending on my perspective, I really am in a position of privilege, such that even as poor as my family is, I am still miles better off than nearly everyone in El Salvador.

Ability and learning considerations

El Salvador's infrastructure is absolutely terrible for anyone in a wheelchair. The roads are in bad condition, drivers do not even stop for pedestrians, and there are stairs everywhere with no alternatives at the UCA. If they cannot even cater to people in wheelchairs, then I am doubtful that they have any accommodations for differently abled learners. Even though I generally do not have any learning difficulties, I struggled to even hear my public health professor because of how quiet she was and how loud the birds outside were. I do not recommend El Salvador for anyone who is differently abled. At the very least, I recommend that they do some more research and communicate to the staff about their needs.

Leisure

Since I was in the summer program, I did not have as much free time to go out and do things in El Salvador apart from the stuff we did as a group. I recommend John's Coffee or The Donut Place for anyone who needs a place to hang out and use Wi-Fi. One event that takes place during the summer program is the annual record-breaking pupusa-making in the park—they try to make the largest pupusa in the world every year. The Catholic church by the park is also a

must-see; even if you are not Catholic, it is a very beautiful church. Since the summer program is very rigorous and exhausting, I would just recommend laying in the hammocks in either of the Casas and journaling during one's leisure time.

Shopping

There *is* a mall in San Salvador; however, I never got a chance to visit it. There is also a really cool thrift shop near the grocery store. Many of my friends have found really nice things for dirt cheap there, such as North Face jackets. I do not know if students will have trouble buying items there since I never really tried to buy any clothes there. For women (and men), I recommend buying handmade jewelry because it is dangerous to wear expensive jewelry in El Salvador.