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SIA Excursion to Costa Rica: Pura Vida!

Every two years, the SIA program offers the most amazing class one could think of: an international study trip. When we started the master degree, we were told that this is one big highlight to look forward to! The older students had been to Myanmar in 2015 and never stopped being thrilled about their experiences. So, in spring 2017 around 20 students from the University of Göttingen and the University of Kassel, including me, joined together with three brave Professors to go on an unforgettable trip to Costa Rica.

After a long flight, we landed in San José, the capital, to start our two week study tour throughout the entire country. In cooperation with the *Tecnologico de Costa Rica* the organizers had planned visits to a variety of producers, processors and project sights in order to demonstrate the diversity of land. Costa Rica has a rich ecosystem and great diversity. Within only a few hours, you can go from dry forests to cloud forests to rain forests or you can go from swimming in the Atlantic Ocean to swimming in the Pacific Sea.

We started off by visiting an intensive aquaculture company, while getting used to the mosquitos and the tropical sun. As we got more comfortable, we set out to see an intensive tropical fruit production, possessing 7000 ha of oranges, in Oro La Cruz. As we were on the road every day, we usually stopped at different places each night. On day two this was the Dry Forest Research Station *Horizontes*. It was in the middle of extremely beautiful nature. The researchers there showed us the forest, where we recognized a sign pointing towards *the waterfalls*. The staff was not able to show us the waterfalls (which were dried out) during the tour, but agreed to get up at 4AM to give us a second tour before we had to leave again. As I thought they were joking, I still got up and about 5 students and one guide went for a run in the morning to experience the most amazing sunrise on the edge of a dry waterfall. Quite incredible!

Throughout the next days we visited more mega farms, producing pineapples and bananas. Mega farms are just crazy to observe. You drive for miles and miles and miles and all you see is bananas. The class aimed at a deeper understanding of transforming biodiversity into economic wealth. The monoculture production gave us a great opportunity to discuss our topic with the Professors and among each other. This hands-on experience was more engaging than any theoretical class could ever be. We listened to the arguments from companies, from farmers, from locals, from NGOs, from researchers, from students and from our Professors, which gave us the opportunity to make up our minds and see the pros and cons of different land-use concepts.

As the days went on, we visited smallholder farmers, had the opportunity of riding horses and a buffalo, popped in to a crocodile farm, climbed a volcano, and hung out with a sloth in the Cahuita National Park. Towards the end of our trip it was time to put our rain jackets on, as we went on a boat tour through the Tortuguero National Park. It is a ride through purest nature.. We slept in little wood houses, right in the middle of the rain forest. For all students, I assume this was the true highlight of the trip.

The study tour was a remarkable experience. I cannot really tell why. I think it was the amazing country and it was the fun group, but most of all the amount of information gained. The hands-on experience, the bundle of different field visits and the in depth explanations of the Professors really made it unique.

PICTURES COSTA RICA:











KYOTO

In fall 2016 all SIA students had the unique opportunity to apply for a fully funded trip to, Japan for an international winter school offered by Kyoto University: The Kyoto Graduate Seminar 2016. I had never been to Japan while always being fascinated by it. Therefore, this adventure seemed just right for me – and I applied. Luckily, I got the spot and together with two classmates, one from Mexico and one from Iran, I found myself in December 2016 on a Lufthansa flight to Osaka.

To my astonishment it turned out that Japan is even more beautiful than I have imagined it to be. The Japanese people are very kind, welcoming, and humble. The campus is full of beautiful trees; the city is packed with breathtaking temples, surrounded by ravishing landscape.

The winter school made things even more interesting. It was designed as an international and interdisciplinary program for graduate students. The Kyoto Graduate Seminar was carefully arranged by the Graduate School of Economics, the Graduate School of Letters and the Graduate School of Agriculture. For one full week, we covered a wide range of subjects regarding the possibility and challenges of the realization of sustainability, global collaboration and inclusion. Presentations were given by academic experts from Kyoto University as well as from international universities.

Though all participants were foreigners to Japan, the majority of students came from Southeast Asia. This caused typical class discussions e.g. on environmental consciousness, corporate responsibility, market power, or land rights to take totally different turns. It made me realize that in such discussions Europeans tend to have the individual, the liberty of the individual and Democracy at the top of their heads, while Asians are able to see a beauty in community and collectiveness. My classmates brightened my horizon by challenging me to think differently, to consider solutions that put the community first.

As a class we also visited different sights around town such as the *Kinkakuji* (Golden Pavilion) and the impressive *Kiyomizu-dera* Temple, with over 1200 years of history. Most vividly I remember the beauty of the botanical garden, which presented a place of extraordinary beauty and calmness to me.

One morning we hopped on a bus to visit a local farmers market a bit outside of the city. The Professor explained that there is a trend in Kyoto to start a farm around town, which more and more young people seem to find attractive. The products from the semi-rural areas are highly sought-after from gourmet restaurants and rich private customers, so the farmers can charge a high price for their organic products. These smallholder farmers are very different from the stereotype: They are quite wealthy, not forced to farm but are farmers by choice, not farmers for generations rather entrepreneurs that wish to escape the noise of the city to live balance with nature. Thus, also the market is rather unusual. It is a hip place to hang out and buy organic meat, fish, fruits and vegetables, with pictures of the farmers and a short profile of them in front of their products.

I believe it is the strong international network that makes the SIA program so interesting and authentic. We do not just learn in the classroom, but have a wide range of opportunities to learn in the field, from international Professors and students. This is what made my SIA experience truly unique.

Picture Kyoto:



(Picture 1: Graduation)



(Picture 2: Three participants from SIA)



(Picture 3& 4: Nature in Kyoto)





(Picture 5: The Market); (Picture 6&7: The Farmers Produce)





(Picture 8: Nature Kyoto)

