The Traveling Scientist

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Surrounded by rushing people shouting different languages to each other could either be intimidating, or a challenge. I decided to take this challenge head on at the start of my summer after my Sophomore and Junior years at Lake Forest College. During the summer after my Sophomore year, I went to Argentina to work at an equine veterinary clinic called Kawell Hospital Equino that I found through a family connection. In June of 2011, I independently flew to Argentina and found my way to the clinic. On site, I observed doctors toiling over horses during emergencies, surgeries, and sports rehabilitation. I was in charge of monitoring horses after surgery, taking vitals of sick horses, administering laser and ultrasonic therapy. I was also part of the team that swam the horses in the pool, which involved taking them through an aqua treadmill. While this may seem like a typical veterinary internship there was a whole other factor—everything was in Spanish. During all of the surgeries the lead vets were asking for tools and showing us organs and ligaments while providing commentary in Spanish. When we talked to the owners about what was wrong with their horses, we did it all in Spanish. As a Spanish major, I was able to understand most of what they said, but it took me a few days to feel confident enough with my Spanish skills to contribute to conversations. There was also a different culture based around horses in Argentina. The treatments and the view of the horses were different in Argentina than what I was used to in the United States. When my six weeks at the clinic were over, I was sad to leave the intern team and all of the veterinarians, yet felt so fulfilled with my experience that I knew I had to seek out a similar experience the next year.

The following year I found a program in Madagascar where I could be a volunteer as part of AZAFADY, a conservation research team, in the rainforest. Again, I arrived in the airport after over 24 hours of traveling and was overwhelmed by the initial chaos of the landing. I made my way to a taxi and then to a hotel where I met the volunteer supervisor who took me out to the bush. The other volunteers and researchers from the United Kingdom and the guides at the campsite in the bush immediately helped me set up my tent and showed me around campsite. The camp consisted of two shacks for latrines and bucket showers, a long house for eating, and a clothesline. All water was provided from the nearby river, which was carried in buckets back to the camp by one of the guides. I was warned of all of the possible parasites that I could pick up by being in the bush and I was strictly told to take malaria pills.

The first night we went on a night transect though the forest looking for reptiles and amphibians. That night seemed magical to me; I saw a leaf-tailed gecko among other geckos, a tree boa, the smallest chameleon in the world, frogs, and we even saw some lemurs slumbering in the trees. I spent the following two weeks conducting behavioral studies and species diversity studies on reptiles, amphibians, and lemurs. In Madagascar, language between the scientists, volunteers, and local guides was not an issue, but the Malagasy language spoken by the locals was like nothing I had ever heard. We took Malagasy lessons each day to learn to say basic phrases, which was much appreciated by the locals.

In Madagascar, I was challenged by a different set of living conditions than when I was in Argentina. While the culture of the locals was different in Madagascar, I was surrounded by Brits. Although, I had been camping many times before, those two weeks were the longest that I have ever lived in a tent. There was no electricity, thus finding the exact angle at which to leave the solar charger to charge my camera battery was just another small challenge. My diet consisted solely of beans and rice, three times per day, every day. By the end of the two weeks in Madagascar my system was so accustomed to beans and rice that when I got back to the United States, I was unable to eat meat or dairy products for weeks without getting sick.

A few of the sifaka left in the fragmented forest in Madagascar.

In both, Argentina and Madagascar, I was able to get experience traveling abroad while enhancing my experience as an undergraduate biology student. I also learned many tips while traveling abroad, such as, adding seasoning to bland food and accepting the initial intimidation caused by landing in a new country by yourself. I am so thankful for the friends that I met and have been able to keep in touch with people all around the world. These experiences helped me grow as a student and as a scientist. I learned more about my goal of becoming a veterinarian, as well as learning to collaborate with people of diverse backgrounds around the world united by their common interest in biology.

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