

Mi Experiencia en CASA Chile



I decided to study abroad because I made a commitment to improve my Spanish and knew that the only way I would actually get to where I wanted to be was to make myself wildly uncomfortable and do something I'd never done before. I dug myself into a hole before I even got on the plane because despite my lofty goals, I was overwhelmed by a profound insecurity of my own language skills and convinced myself that I wouldn't be able to both practice my Spanish *and* sip fruity cocktails. However, what past Sophia didn't know was that in a few months she would

be making brunch plans with her Chileans friends, being invited to parties, and getting dressed up for the Santiago Philharmonic, all while (mostly) speaking Spanish.

Despite my nerves with the language barrier, I knew there were certain things that I could do from Day One that would set me up for success, like clearly communicating that I want a relationship with my host family so I can practice speaking, actively finding ways to get to know my program group and other international students, and joining communities on campus primarily comprised of Chileans. All of those things were extremely overwhelming and very VERY scary. It felt like freshman year all over again introducing myself to international students at orientation. The first couple of weeks with my host family were awkward and I was absolutely terrified to speak to my Chilean classmates.

Don't listen to that voice in your head telling you to just stay at home. I invited new friends out to lunch, some of whom I haven't talked to since and others that I now have standing ice cream dates with once a week. I started opening up to my host family more and more and began to ask questions about my grammar/vocab and now I cook for them on occasion and we indulge in a few glasses of wine together on the weekends. But the real game changers were two groups: La Comisión Acogida (CAUC) and La Selección de Natación PUC. The former is a student-led group at the Universidad Católica that organizes activities for international students. They do day trips around the city, trips to nearby towns (I went to Pomaire with them and made empanadas and clay pots, coolest experience ever), and they even take you surfing on the coast. I went to a couple events with them and it was an amazing way to both practice my Spanish and get to know the country better with Chilean students who actually wanted to get to know me. The latter is the swim team at la Católica. I'm on the varsity team at my university and I knew that I wanted to find a team in Chile, more to make friends than to commit to something ultra-competitive, and joining the team at la Católica gave me access to a close-knit community bound by a common goal of team performance.

The sports culture in Chile is primarily focused around club soccer, but even then it doesn't compare to the energy and intensity of sports in the US, so even if you just played in high school



and want to work out consistently, I'd encourage you to check out the teams at either la Catolica or at la U de Chile. Practices and competitions are flexible and give you access to some incredible groups of individuals. In my case, I tried out for and made the swim team and began practices with them after the first couple weeks of class and I even got to compete with them at the end of the semester. Socially, however, the trick is to invite your

teammates/classmates/club members to do things with you. Be annoying about it. Chileans are known to be a little more reserved and chances are they would be super excited to receive an invite from the new American. By the end of my semester I was hanging out with my teammates pretty regularly and not only was it awesome language practice but I also made some incredible friends I'll never forget. It doesn't have to be sports, it could be a club or even a salsa group, but I highly encourage you to find community outside of your program, your country, and your language because you'll learn so much more about the culture and the language than you ever would in the classroom.

Studying abroad with CASA is special. The activities and experiences I mentioned above did not include trips or individuals from the CASA program because the program is its own side of the coin, and I firmly believe that having both allowed me to make the most out of my time in Chile. We had four organized trips with the program, two day trips to Valparaiso and Isla Negra and two Thurs-Sun trips to Patagonia and San Pedro de Atacama. Outside of the trips, we had class every Friday with a local professor to learn more about Chilean culture.



From the other American students I've met here, no other program provides such comprehensive trips and lectures and as a student it alleviated a lot of stress knowing that everything was planned out in

advance by the program administrators. Out of all the trips we took, I was absolutely floored by how beautiful San Pedro was and it was by far my favorite trip we went on together. A large reason why I loved the trip so much was because I had never been to the desert before and all of a sudden I was in the driest place on Earth. On top of that, the Atacama desert is especially remarkable because although it may seem arid and a little lifeless, there are a huge range of locations available for sightseeing that go beyond walking in the sand. We were able to see flamingoes, go swimming in hot springs, see the geysers at El Tatio, and even get to know the locals, all activities that I know I would have been too stressed out to plan on my own. Beyond the activities, however, each trip gave us all an opportunity to bond as a group. For me, one of the things that makes a trip so special is the folks you share it with and each time we traveled as a program group I felt myself grow closer to each individual in the cohort.

Because of this, almost all of us chose to travel together in smaller groups for our "spring break," a one-week break the students at La Catolica get at the end of April. I went to Peru with two friends where we stayed in Lima, Cusco, and Machu Picchu. Some



highlights include, but are not limited to: an amazing food tour in Lima, rooftop bar views in Cusco, and an unforgettable two-day hike in Machu Picchu (one of the seven wonders of the world!) it's a great way to expose yourself to other Latin American cultures. I absolutely fell in love with Peru and all of our tour guides were extremely knowledgeable, making the trip all the more special.

The biggest piece of advice I can give you before going abroad is to say yes more than you say no. Say yes to the trips, the nights out, the concerts, the everything. Make yourself uncomfortable. I was dreading going abroad the entire semester leading up to my flight because I'm terrified of the unknown and forever a perfectionist, but by taking those uncomfy risks and being willing to make mistakes I was able to meet all of my linguistic and cultural goals and also make memories and I know I'll never forget.