

In the spring of 2021, my AP Spanish class was blessed with the opportunity to travel to Costa Rica for a cultural learning experience through Academia Tica. While I was overwhelmed with excitement for this trip, I never expected to return home with a renewed appreciation for life, learning, and vast culture. Throughout my week spent in San Jose, Costa Rica, my senses were refreshed by the sights and sounds of the unfamiliar. We studied the Spanish language while conversing with our professor, Santiago, applying what we practiced through the city's markets. Our local friends exposed us to the heart of Costa Rican culture daily by introducing us to foreign dishes and practices. Remote hikes through the flourishing rainforest, exploration of historical landmarks around the area, and classes teaching everything from Costa Rican cooking to dance inspired a sensitivity to the value of hands-on learning experiences. Even more, a local elementary school, Escuela Patio de Agua, invited our small group of international students to visit their classes, interact with the children, and teach them about our home and the English language. When we entered the first classroom, every child's face lit up with joy, excitement, and eagerness. It was clear that the time we took to be with them was of extreme significance to their hearts. They intently observed us from their desks as we made our way to the front of the class to introduce ourselves. Some smiled shyly as we passed; others spoke excitedly to their friends while the teacher hopelessly attempted to quiet them. By the end of the day, even the most cautious children clung to our arms, urging us to stay, begged for photos, and presented us with small tokens of love such as a favorite pen or colorful eraser. This experience awakened a joy in me that I had never felt before. Seeing young students longing for knowledge about the world around them while appreciating the little material things that they own genuinely caused me to rediscover my own love for both learning and sharing the wisdom that I may already possess. The entirety of my time in Costa Rica served as an inspiration to expand my mind and open my heart to the unknown world around me. Everything that I observed in Costa Rica was new to me. I spoke a new language, ate new foods, found new friends, and explored new adventures. Through it all, I returned home with a stronger, more independent, cultured mind and a longing for learning. I became excited about all opportunities to learn through exploration, allowing myself to encounter authentic, first-hand experiences through which I can discover the world.