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St. John Newman

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My summer adventure began before I even landed in Uruguay when I hopped off the plane at New York's JFK Airport. Coming from suburban Naples, I panicked when I landed at the airport, alone, having to figure out how to navigate the Airtrain, find food, and find my baggage. If New York was a completely different culture to me, then Uruguay was going to be a more significant shock. After passing the first night in New York, I met my other group members at the bright and early time of 5am. I knew instantly that I was going to have a great time with my group; everyone was very outgoing and friendly. After sharing stories about the places from which we came, I realized that we ourselves came from very different cultures, even if we were all from the same country. The airport representatives then called our zone number to board, and even before boarding, I knew that my adventure had already started.

After two flights and a layover in Panama City, we finally arrived around one in the morning in Montevideo, the capital of Uruguay. I still remember vividly when this tiny woman came up to us and kissed us all on the cheek. Her name was Florencia, a name that took me many days to remember, and she was going to be our in-country leader. The kiss on the cheek was the first main cultural difference I experienced. Not only did men and women trade kisses on the cheek instead of a handshake to greet one another, men and men did, as well. That kiss was my greeting to Uruguay.

The next morning was rough; we had to wake up early. But, as soon as we started our activities, my excitement replaced my fatigue. As part of our orientation to the country, we toured the city and had the opportunity to appreciate its quaint, colonial, and beautiful architecture. We had the opportunity to go to a center called Instituto Nacional de la Juventud (INJU), or in English, National Institute of the Youth. We went there almost every day while we were in Montevideo to learn different cultural dances, songs, and interact with other youth from Uruguay. One such dance, known as Capoeira, is a mix of martial arts and dance that slaves used to dance as a form of defiance towards their master. I remember how foolish I probably looked while trying to learn the dance, but it was still a very rewarding experience. Almost every day in Montevideo it rained while temperatures hovered in the 40s. It was not the most favorable of conditions but, still Montevideanos had their famous street market on the Sunday we were there. That was one of my favorite experiences while in the city; seeing animals, clothes, fruits and vegetables, and all sorts of strange items for sale in the bustling *feria*. We also had the opportunity to visit an area of Montevideo called Peñarol that used to be a busy train station when the British were heavily involved in the Uruguayan meat industry. Now, it is basically a ghost area that has turned into a slum, somewhat like the *favelas* in Brazil. However, my favorite moments in the city were when we had free time to explore all the different plazas, stores, and talk to locals.

Our last day in Montevideo was spent at a NGO, or nonprofit organization, for disadvantaged youths in Montevideo. At first, it was a very awkward experience; neither

we nor the Uruguayans knew what to do. However, they were kind and one wanted to play *ajedrez*, or chess, with me. I remember thinking, "What is he asking me to play?" Then he brought me over to the chess set and I understood; I think that moment made me realize that language is no barrier, only a failure to want to communicate.

After familiar city life, we moved to the ranch, or *estancia* in Spanish. As a Suburban Naples teen, the ranch really shocked me. It was extremely muddy and there was poop everywhere. The first night we got there, it was very dark and we went on this nature walk as soon as we got there. Several kids fell into the poop and mud because it was hard to see and it was extremely slippery (I myself eventually fell one day). I remember the first night I almost cried because the water in the shower was so cold and the ranch owner forgot to turn on the hot water that night. But despite the poop, mud, cold, and rain, there was a homely and warm feeling the ranch provided to me. I loved the hospitality that the people who ran the ranch gave to us. They were so excited to show us the life of the Gaucho. We learned about taking care of the different farm animals, walked the animals, learned about organic farms and the environment of Uruguay, and, most importantly, we learned how to cook their amazing food. Every afternoon, we had cooking lessons with the wife of the rancher, Andy. Andy taught us how to make *tortas fritas*, a mix of a cookie, a biscuit, and crunchy bread. Like almost every other snack food in Uruguay, they were served with a bowl of *dulce de leche*, a caramel spread that made me gain a few pounds. Our final night at the ranch, the ranch owners threw us an *asado*, or barbecue get together. I was impressed by their kindness and patience because the barbecue took over three hours to prepare, but it was well

worth it. The assortments of cow, pig, and lamb meats that we tried were heavenly. I loved every single meat, even the ones that looked disgusting. The asado summed up my stay at the ranch; although the ranch did not look accommodating, just as the meat looked disgusting, it was actually amazing.

After saying goodbye to our new friends at the ranch, we went to the towns of Santa Rosa and San Bautista to meet our families for the next two weeks. I was sad to say a temporary goodbye to my fellow group members in Santa Rosa, but I was ecstatic to finally meet my host family in San Bautista. I could not believe their kindness. My host mother washed all my shoes and clothes as soon as I got there without even asking me. The town was very small, but it was very beautiful in its own way. It was strange to me that random people in the street would come up to me in the street and kiss me on the cheek but, I realized how exciting it is for them to have visitors, especially from the United States. When I attended the high school with my host siblings, the kids were excited because they knew they would have less school work with us there. But, they were also excited to talk about their culture and bought us Uruguayan food and took us to an old train station in the town.

What struck me significantly during the homestay was how surprised the people were that I could speak Spanish. And, to be honest, I think it was because they were very touched that an American had spent time to learn Spanish. A lot of the people in the town sent their kids to another English school in addition to English at the high school. I truly believe my time at the homestay was even better because I could speak

Spanish. I liked being the translator between my American friends and the Uruguayans. The people in San Bautista have inspired me to want to learn other languages like Portuguese, French, and Catalan, because their appreciation for my knowledge of Spanish really touched my heart.

Saying goodbye was hard. The night before we left San Bautista, we had a *despedida*, or goodbye dinner. It was bitter sweet. I prepared a speech in Spanish to say in front of all the people there, and somehow I was a Spanish comedian. I talked about how I enjoyed this telenovela, *Los Ricos no Piden Permiso (The Rich Don't Ask Permission)*, and the entire room was laughing. That was one of my favorite moments of the trip: making an entire group of people from another culture laugh. The next day, after many hugs, kisses, and pictures with the host families and the kids at the high school, we boarded the bus to go to our second ranch stay of the trip.

The second ranch stay was very short, but we had the opportunity to ride horses. I was very afraid of riding the horse, but as soon as I got on the horse, I loved every moment of the ride. We also got to milk cows again and make cheese with the milk that the cows produced. My favorite moments of the ranch stay were when we huddled together around the fireplace and shared our experiences of the homestay. Soon we had to say goodbye to the ranchers again, and we headed to the tourist town Colonia Del Sacramento. Colonia was gorgeous but tremendously cold and windy. We went to the top of a lighthouse and we got to see Buenos Aires, Argentina from the top of the lighthouse. Everyone probably thought I was crazy, but I was screaming because I

wanted to go to Argentina so badly, and in that moment, I could see Argentina. When I came down from the lighthouse, I went to a tourist store to buy an Argentinean flag because I had seen Argentina. For our last meal in Colonia, we went to an *asado* restaurant where we could eat as much meat as we wanted. I was in love with the meat, and ate until I was gorged. The meat helped me to fall asleep as we headed back to the capital, Montevideo.

I woke up and it was already our last day in Montevideo. We went to dinner at an upscale restaurant in the famous Teatro Solis, the national theater of Uruguay. We shared our favorite moments of the trip and laughed over the reflections we had about the trip. This was going to be our third and final goodbye in Uruguay. The last day was a blur; we went shopping, toured the Teatro Solis, had *churros* in the Radisson Hotel, and took pictures in the middle of a cyclone on the famous Montevideo sign. When we arrived at the airport, we found out our flight was delayed because of the cyclone which had winds that almost blew us over in the street. After a 2 hour delay, we finally boarded the plane to go to Panama City knowing that we would not be in New York when we were supposed to be.

The trip was not over yet. We landed in Panama City and found out that we would have a twelve hour layover in the airport. However, Copa Airlines paid for us to have rooms at the Hard Rock Hotel in Panama City and we had the amazing opportunity to walk around Panama City. I was ecstatic that we would be making the most of an unfortunate situation. Panama City was beautiful; it was a metropolis with

many skyscrapers spanning everywhere around the downtown area. We got to walk on the beach and take pictures. Although we did not get to visit the Panama Canal, we could still see it and all the boats waiting to go through. An unexpected pit stop in our trip to Uruguay, Panama surprised me with its modernity and I once again had the chance to practice my Spanish.

We landed in New York and the trip was over. While on the plane returning to New York, a man from Ecuador began to talk to me in Spanish about what I was doing on the plane and I was able to have a conversation with him. But even more amazing for me was that when I fell asleep on the plane, I had my first dream in Spanish. That was perhaps the most beautiful way that my adventure to Uruguay could end.