

"Hola. ¿Como estas?" I questioned in my best Spanish. The Chilean woman before me stared back with a blank expression on her face, clearly puzzled by my strange accent. In a sudden moment of realization, she grinned at me and exclaimed "¡Una Gringa!" ("A foreigner!") Before I knew it, we were understanding each other and communicating even if the looming language barrier remained. I was relieved that my most prominent fear since I stepped off of the airplane that morning wasn't going to prevent me from meeting new people and forming lasting connections. From that initial moment in Chile, I knew that I was about to experience an incredible journey that would change me in countless ways. I am endlessly grateful to the Naples Council on World Affairs for allowing me to go on the trip of a lifetime where I was able to discover not only a country, but also myself.

After the initial shock of being on an entirely different continent somewhat faded, I was able to interact with my group a bit more. States ranging from California to Massachusetts were all represented by our diverse clan of travelers. We brought many different cultures and viewpoints together into a single unit, which made for some interesting conversations. The first day we explored Santiago together, we were all a bit nervous, but we were able to practice our Spanish skills by interacting with locals. Pablo and Claudio, our in-country representatives, guided us during the process of learning the Chilean dialect and vocabulary. Each day, we were split up into groups and tasked with exploring the city by asking locals for directions and information. The first few days in the city allowed me to become more comfortable in a new country and form close bonds with my group members before embarking on the next leg of our journey: the homestay in La Ligua.

Like most of my fellow travelers, the homestay was the portion of the trip for which I was the most apprehensive. Not only would I be staying in a new house, but also living with a new family that didn't speak my native language. Upon arriving in the small town of La Ligua, I met my host family consisting of a younger sister, older brother, a

mom, and a dad. They were all so excited to welcome me to their country and their home. There were a few awkward moments when I struggled to communicate, but my family made me feel extremely comfortable and always encouraged me to practice my Spanish even when I was unsure. My host sister was especially encouraging and she even gave me a journal so I could write down any words I didn't recognize. We formed an extremely close bond by sharing both our varied and common interests with one another. Although she may have never experienced formal school dances in La Ligua and I never had to learn a national dance in the United States, we both connected through common teenage activities such as watching our favorite Netflix series together. This showed me that even though we may live on different continents and speak different languages, we could still form a lasting connection with one another. My Spanish had improved vastly by the end of my stay and I had learned to overcome a challenge that I was once terrified to face. When we finally had to leave, I hugged each of my family members and thanked them for teaching me so much about Chilean culture.

The next portion of our trip consisted of a stay in the port city of Valparaíso. This colorful, hillside town was a picturesque piece of history. I learned so much about Chilean culture while wandering its cobblestone streets, gazing at street art, and boating in the nearby harbor. These few days also introduced us to Easter Island culture, our trip's main focus, with a visit to a nearby museum. Suddenly, our journey to the mystical Easter Island didn't seem like a far off fantasy, but a tangible reality. When we finally arrived on the tiny island in the middle of the Pacific, I was instantly fascinated by the islanders and their community. Our Easter Island representative, Tito, taught us all about his native culture and introduced us to many Rapa Nui words. Rapa Nui, the local language, is only spoken by about 3,000 people. Therefore, it was incredible to be able to share in a piece of the ancient language. The gigantic, stone moai statues inspired a new sense of awe when viewed up close, causing me to constantly wonder about their existence and how the people who created them accomplished such a daunting task. Easter Island gave me

the privilege of living like the Rapa Nui people by participating in various activities such as traditional dancing and cooking. It was truly a blessing to experience a culture far different from my own in such an intimate way.

Upon my departure from Chile, I reflected on my journey and realized how much I had learned about the country and myself. By living in a country far different from my own, I was able to understand a unique culture firsthand. As attaining peace becomes a constant struggle in the world, it is important that people are aware of the situations in other countries. I am extremely lucky to have been able to learn from the Chilean people and accept a different lifestyle. Not only did I explore a new place and interact with its people, but I also faced my fears and embraced a new experience. I will carry this newfound sense of courage and determination with me throughout my life. I am so grateful to the Naples Council of World Affairs for granting me this life-changing opportunity. I would have never been able to travel abroad during high school without their generous assistance. I will carry a piece of Chile with me always as a constant reminder of the challenges I overcame and the lessons I learned. Easter Island is no longer a distant land that I read about in textbooks, but a part of me that I will never forget.