

Hi. I'm writing in the dark on the second plane. It's pretty peaceful up here. Distant town lights look like sparkly freckles on the earth below. It's quiet and dim in the cabin. A few people's reading lights illuminate them and their books like spotlights. This feels like the "Great Before."

I don't know what to expect once we hit the ground. I know some moments will be chaotic and overwhelming. I know other moments will be peaceful and spiritual. I know that no matter what, it will change me, and I embrace and welcome that experience.

Earlier, my mom told me "you've been waiting for this adventure for a long time." I think she was right.
3/11/22

In the days before the trip, my anxiety was at an all time high. Each morning when I woke, my teeth were sore from grinding against each other. My prescription bottle of stomach medication was nearly empty. Intrusive thoughts cluttered my mind – What if no one likes me? What if the plane goes down? What if something horrible happens to me in the middle of the rainforest? I had completely convinced myself it was going to be a miserable time.

The plane landed in San Jose, Costa Rica around 11 pm. Our group waited against a concrete wall outside customs for over a half an hour for the bus that would take us up into the mountains. We nervously made small talk, everyone in a state of anticipation for the week to come. Eventually our tour guide and local expert Tomas arrived with the bus, and we ate Little Caesars pizza in a central market in the nearby city of Alajuela.

Few words were shared that first night. We all were in a state of shock. I laid awake on my mattress staring up at a small skylight in the cabin's roof. Through it, the moon illuminated the sky, and I remember feeling much calmer than I expected I would.

The next morning we all introduced ourselves for the first time over a traditional Costa Rican breakfast. Tomas took us on a tour of the farmland, and we got to feed the goats, sheep, and chickens. We ate what he called 'love fruit' fresh off the vine – it was the first time I had ever eaten straight from the earth. I wasn't in my head as I had anticipated, I just enjoyed the small yellow fruit, and everyone's laughter as we threw the peels to the nearby goats to eat.

Each night on the trip, we would have a lengthy discussion as a group about how everyone was feeling. We



all got a chance to vulnerably share about our experiences so far, and ask questions we didn't necessarily have the answers to – Can we rely on capitalism to save us? What is our responsibility in this society? Do we have time to save our planet?

The first discussion brought a familiar rising of anxiety in my stomach. But instead of shrinking inside myself, I shared with the group how I was feeling. Other people mentioned feeling that physical manifestation of anxiety too. On the bus ride back to the lodge, we bonded over how our stomachs would twist into knots and the kinds of breaths that helped slow us down.

After lunch, as we ate on the porch, the first cloud began to roll in. As it approached the porch, the beautiful vista views faded and we were completely engulfed in a cloud. The cold misty air coated our skin and we couldn't even see a few feet in front of us. As a kid, I always dreamed of touching a cloud.

3/12/22

As the early days went on, the group bonded quickly. The lengthy bus rides between destinations without cellular service granted us the opportunity to have vulnerable conversations about ourselves. We talked about everything from our childhoods to our mental health journeys, all while soaking in the incredible rolling hills around us. It was on the bus where I felt truly present for perhaps the first time in my life.



On the second day, we visited La Paz Waterfall Gardens, a park and wildlife refuge up the road. The carefully crafted tourist experience that we spent a large portion of the trip budget on left a sour taste in some of our mouths. It felt constructed, and less like the genuine Costa Rica we had been lucky enough to witness while driving through the small towns. Tomas took us behind a waterfall, and I felt called to stick my head underneath it.

The first precious drop of mountain water falls upon my hand – outstretched to meet the mossy wall of lush green ferns. Immediately I crave more. I hold my mouth open beneath the dripping vine – outstretched to catch and consume this healing holy water. Still, I crave more. I remove my hat and extend my head under her stream, the droplets landing and rolling down my head to my neck.

There she is. Here I am.

My hair and head are slowly soaked completely through as I am baptized and born again beneath this waterfall. The heavy stream of thoughts slows to a drip as I truly, deeply breathe for the first time. Alive, refreshed, free.

3/13/22

I was shuddering, curled up tight on my seat on the bus ride home. I was completely soaked through after my waterfall baptism, rain jacket spread over my legs. But I was smiling wider than maybe I ever had; my window rolled down despite the chill.

On the fourth day, we went zip-lining and truly connected as a group. After each of us traveled down one of the lines, we would all wait at the bottom for the next person, cheering each other on and checking in with each other as we went. We weren't allowed to bring our phones up the mountain, so we took in the quiet chirping birds and the whirl of the wire as our metal harnesses carried us down.



Today, driving back from the zip-lining place, I kept looking at the spectacular houses and the people living in them. I was feeling a strong spiritual connection to the collective – like a spiritual being experiencing a physical body. I was struck by a new level of gratitude – a gratitude for being alive. Sitting outside the zip-lining facility with Jo and Gabriel, I said something I never thought I would: “If I died right now, I would be satisfied. Today would have been a good last day.”

For someone who has always feared death and faced existentialism, that simple statement was a profound realization. To feel that level of peace and fulfillment was something entirely new, and for that I am grateful.

3/14/22

My anxiety has manifested as severe hypochondria and a fear of death for over two years. Yet, in the middle of Latin America, I had found inner peace. I had reached a level of calm that allowed me to be completely still. I couldn't believe it.

Day five was the best day of my life. We journeyed down an extinct volcano to Laguna Hule, an old volcanic crater now filled with lush water. The rocky hike was difficult, and you couldn't look away from your feet for more than a few moments without tripping and scraping your knee. The path forced you to move carefully and slowly, and we had many conversations as we neared the lagoon.



Once we hit the beach, our professor cautioned us that while we were welcome to swim across, the journey was tiring and difficult, and we may not be able to make it. I had already set my mind to making it to the other beach, and I set off almost immediately. On the way there, the swim felt difficult. My legs cramped and my breathing became shallow less than halfway across. I found myself trying to control the situation, and panicking when I felt I might fail. I neared the beach, and crawled through knee deep mud up to the bank, collapsing in the sand and breathing heavily.

I was already dreading the journey back. The windy current faced our bank, making the exhausting journey back seem even more daunting. Once I got back in the water, I just floated on my back and began to speak to Mother Nature. I told her to give me strength and help me let go of control, and she listened. I felt the current lift me and hold me aloft as I pulled away from the group

and took off across the lake, the first from that pack to hit the far shore.

On the hike back up the hill, Gabriel and I talked about thought spirals and how anxiety manifests, and shortness of breath as a symptom. The lagoon swim forced us out of our heads and into our bodies. You were focused on taking deep breaths, the water flowing past your body, and the bank in front of you. To be relieved of your chaotic negative headspace is such a gift. It's something I desperately want to take back with me.

3/15/22

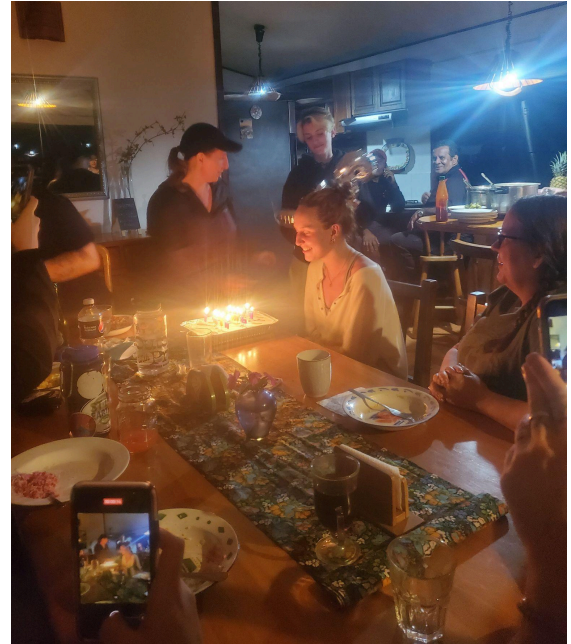
The second half of the trip, the group just began to feel like family. Each morning, we ate breakfast together on the porch and took in the view. We spent the day soaking in each and every second of our experience, laughing on the bus in between stops. Each night, we ate together and discussed our days, before heading to bed – exhausted and ready to do it all over again. Our only focus was to learn and take it all in. We felt so taken care of and comforted by the experience that my thoughts began to drift to my inner child.

12 year old you is fascinated by the beautiful nature and incredible food. 14 year old you is so proud you've opened up and made friends you already trust. 17 year old you is amazed you felt free enough to leave the country. 20 year old you is surprised the world has opened up again. All of them are grateful.

3/16/22

The last day of the trip was my 22nd birthday. We spent the entire day at the beach, enjoying the sunshine and each other's company. I floated in the ocean, letting the current take me where it desired. I felt so uplifted, not just by the waves but by my new friends around me.

Back at the house that evening, everyone surprised me with a rum cake and a note each of them had written to me. The letters were so kind and genuine, despite each of them only knowing me for seven days. As I blew out the rainbow candles, I only had one wish – to remain this grateful for these people and the beautiful world I get to live in.



I'm back in Missouri, and it's incredibly difficult. The whole journey back was so rushed and fast-paced I didn't even process it. It doesn't feel real to be back here. Waking up in my dark room, no birds chirping, no beans and rice cooking on the stove, no foggy mountain view, no chosen family. I'm not the same person I was when I left, so it feels really weird to be back in this place.

I guess what I have to remember is the person I became there did come back with me. The person who felt that community and joy and peace is still within me, and I can find her again. It's okay to be freiving this experience, it means I had an incredible time. I wrote about the Great Before, but now this is the Great After.
3/20/22

The weeks following my arrival back into the United States were incredibly difficult. The vulnerable community we had created in Costa Rica and the beautiful nature felt so far away, and it felt as if I would never be that happy again. My stomach aches and tooth pain returned, and I spent the days in a gray melancholy fog. Just the thought of Costa Rica was enough to make me cry.

But reading my journal back reminded me of one thing I had felt the entire time – gratitude. I was grateful not only for that experience, but the moments I have back home where I feel that peace again. Whether it's walking through Blackburn Park while a gentle breeze comforts me, or grabbing coffee with a friend and laughing our way through the morning, those moments still return to me. And I try to catch them, witness them, and be grateful for them.