

Mangoes or Monos? A Visit to Costa Rica

In July of 2025, I spent two weeks in full-immersion Spanish classes in Costa Rica while living with a local family. The atmosphere reminded me so much of the enthusiasm for learning that permeates our Academy that I thought I'd share a bit about the experience and its parallels.

I retired last year with a long list of pursuits for both hand and mind once I was no longer working for someone else. To be clear, it is not a bucket list. It is a possibilities list (see the movie *Last Holiday* with Queen Latifah), things that I felt if I threw myself into, I'd find joy and fulfillment. I've spent more time with family, traveled, took up piano again after a 50-year break, taught classes at ALL (sign up for chess in the fall – it'll be fun!), started building a social network to augment the old one, and am working through several others.

One objective was to find a Spanish immersion program in another country. My wife and I adopted our now fully-grown kids from Chile, and that sparked an initial incentive (there's nothing like receiving care instructions for a new baby in Spanish to build enthusiasm to learn the language). When speaking with our curriculum coordinator Henry Tamzarian, he recommended the *Intercultura School* in Costa Rica, where he visited several years ago, first by himself and on a later trip with his daughter. I booked it.

Friday 4 July, 2025

The trip starts with a bit of a hitch. About 9pm the night before a 3am wake-up alarm, American Airlines texts me that the first leg of tomorrow's flight is delayed, and is expected to land in Miami four minutes after my connecting flight will depart. I call the airline, to my surprise get through to a live human being after only a short wait, and grab the last seat on a route through Dallas. I then call Costa Rica and inform them in my as yet unimproved Spanish of the new time and arriving flight, and reset my alarm for 2:15.

Saturday 5 July, 2025

Upon landing in Costa Rica, American texts me again, this time that my checked bag has liked Dallas so much that it is still there. I run into another interesting problem when completing the lost luggage form, one which I have also encountered at immigration when the agent asked me where I was staying. There are no street addresses in Costa Rica, except in the big city, and I will be nowhere near one. Directions instead refer to a landmark, like a church or the big tree in the center of town. I provide what information I can about a yellow house across from a bus stop, and expect to be wearing the same clothes for the next fortnight.

I've worked with the school to arrange transportation for the two-hour ride from the airport to my host family's home, and have my first lesson in conversational dialogue, with the driver, in rain that pours so hard that his windshield wipers short out from flooding about halfway through the trip.

On arrival, I meet my *familia tica* (Costa Rican host family). Emilce is a sprightly, thin energetic woman in her early 80s, and she introduces me in turn to her daughter Mileth (56), and

Mangoes or Monos? A Visit to Costa Rica

grandson Carlitos (18), and subsequently to another daughter, Annabelle, who runs a restaurant next door called *Amor di Mama* (smart woman!), along with her husband. After a dinner of sauced meat, with what I soon learn is an obligatory and ever-present side dish of rice and beans, we talk while the movie *Independence Day* plays on the television in Spanish.

I retire to my small but clean private room, with its own entrance that requires ducking under a laundry line. It's rustic, but enough. For example, a fan rigged to the ceiling takes the place of air conditioning. Toilet paper is to be disposed of in a plastic-lined and covered basket that is periodically emptied. Shaving requires walking back and forth between the bathroom and the bedroom where the mirror hangs on a wall. You figure out pretty quickly that the reason that the shower has only one knob is that there is only one temperature, cool, which I will grow to be quite happy with after many days in a row of extremely humid 85 to 90-degree weather.

Sunday 6 July, 2025

The next morning is still the weekend.

I fell asleep last evening to the roar of motorcycles and ATVs, preferred transportation, roaring up and down the street. This morning, I wake to a glorious symphony of birdcalls and whistles.

While church services play on the TV in the background, I dine on a breakfast of *gallo pinto*, ham and eggs with a fresh tortilla, and a side of rice and beans. Breakfast also comes daily with a dish of fresh fruit, in this case, bananas, and, since I don't drink coffee, a glass of water, which is potable throughout Costa Rica.

I then walk the town to locate the school for the next day, where we are to arrive early for orientation and placement. After about 45 minutes that include a few wrong turns, I find the school, only 7 minutes from the house, having gotten in my exercise.

I spend the day at the beach, which you can literally access out the back gate of the school, finding a bit of shade and lathering on sunscreen. It is typical this time of year for it to rain every day for an hour or two, but the rain is easy to get used to, and people take it in stride.

Standing on Emilce's patio in the afternoon, and helping her rake leaves, I startle at another sound, at first thinking it might be a gunshot, but then realizing it has come from the roof. I think perhaps a troublesome teenager is throwing rocks. Seeing me jump, she laughs, picks up a mango, and points to the tree overhead. "They fall all the time."

Indeed, one evening there must have been twenty that dropped, and I soon cease reacting. Dona Emilce tells me a story about them. Around the corner from her house on the main street is a chicken joint called *Pollolandia* (chicken-land). One of her guests, experiencing an evening where yet another of several mangoes had dropped and drummed on the roof, looked up and declared "*Mangolandia*." She will repeat that story four or five times before I leave, cackling every time.

Mangoes or Monos? A Visit to Costa Rica

I close the day with the family watching *Nace Una Estrella*, the junior version of a Costa Rican singing contest. We all try predicting the winner, and are only interrupted once by a pleasant surprise, the arrival of my luggage.

Monday 7 July, 2025

Monday at 7am delivers an interesting blend of students milling about. The first thing I notice is how many kids there are. There are other adults, but I soon discover that many of them are parents. While some are dropping children off for the week, the majority, like Henry with his daughter, are also attending classes.

The placement process is a bit intimidating. You're called into a room with one of the *profesors* or *profesoras*, and are immediately bombarded with progressively harder questions until your Spanish proves inadequate. I find out I'll have classes beginning that afternoon (classes alternate between morning and afternoon each day), and that I should return at noon for a mandatory orientation and to learn my instructor.

I spend the morning at the beach (yes, it's a big perk), purchase a lunch of meat, rice and beans from a roadside cart just outside the school gates, wash my dishes with cold water in a communal sink, and find my assignment. I'm in an intermediate class with adults (yay!), two from Switzerland (62M and 27F), one from San Diego (55M), and one from around the corner in Franklin, MA (21F). Our instructor Biron works with us to be sure that we understand the rules of the classroom: be respectful, speak in Spanish, and ask questions if you don't understand something. We start.

It is intense at the outset, and I can pick up about 1/3 of what Biron is saying. We make progress through our four hours, and are assigned homework. During one of the *pausas*, or breaks, I learn that there is a special tour this evening. The turtles are starting to come ashore to lay their eggs. There is no rain forecast for tonight, so it will be a good time to go.

Forgoing both homework and dinner, I leave my daily luggage in the office, and cram into a bus in a tiny seat where I'm shortly wedged in next to an ice chest. My knees are closer to my nose than even today's typical airline flights, and the road is peppered with potholes the size of moon craters. Luckily, a couple of hours of jostling are punctuated by views of new and interesting sights, like white roadside cattle, many scampering dogs, and an occasional seemingly misplaced building, like an 8-pump, 24-hour gas station next to ... well, nothing.

We unfold from the bus, spray down with insect repellent outside a little ranger station, and proceed most of a mile to and down the beach, at one point removing our shoes to cross a small stream. Our guide instructs us to turn off our flash as he'll point out the turtles with a red light, and to stand only behind them so as not to scare them back into the ocean.

Mangoes or Monos? A Visit to Costa Rica

We find a mom, and watch her over most of an hour lay her eggs, pat them down to protect them, and then sweep debris over the site as camouflage. She then returns to the sea at a much faster pace than that with which she sought out a nesting place. The whole thing is amazing.

Mother turtles somehow know to return to the spot where they were born to lay their eggs. They know how far onto the beach to go, based on the dryness and temperature of the sand. It would be fascinating but disheartening to return to the spot when her babies hatch, as only about one in 10,000 survive the predators who assemble and wait for them two or three days ahead of hatching.

We spot about another dozen turtle-moms on our walk back. That's about right for this time of year, but in October, during rainy season, there may be 1000s on the beach at one time.

We retire to the ranger station for the best fresh pineapple I'd ever had, and some *Choco-Wow!* cookies as a substitute for dinner.

The ride back to town is as bumpy as the ride out, but we decide entirely worth it. Back at school it is so late that even the guard has left for the night, so homework will wait for morning, provided I can get into the office a few minutes before class.

Tuesday 8 July, 2025

Up early, breakfast is ham and eggs again, this time with a dish of fresh papaya. I have not been in the habit prior to this trip of eating enough fresh fruit, but everything here is so fresh and delicious that I suspect it will positively alter my habits at home.

The rhythm of class is growing familiar, and I find a couple of classmates to hang with. I haven't found anyone my age (65) yet, but the 62-year-old from Switzerland also recently lost his wife to cancer, so we have a pretty quick and immediate bond.

Dinner with the host family this night is meat, with a side of rice and beans, and some *papas fritas* (French fries). Afterwards, a small group of students collects at a local beach bar for karaoke night. It's a mix of regulars, like Jimmy, who shows up every Tuesday to belt out anything from Frank Sinatra to reggae, folks who could be on *The Voice* or *American Idol*, a father-daughter duet that's well done but cringey as they work through inappropriate lyrics from *Grease*, and a few struggling incompetents like me (*House of the Rising Sun*, by *The Animals*.) Everyone is loudly applauded, regardless of performance level.

It seems as if homework has once again fallen by the wayside, but class isn't until tomorrow afternoon, so there's still time. Isn't there?

I see an interesting sight walking back to my host family's home. It feels quite safe to walk here, but it seems extraordinarily out of place to spot riderless horses clip-clopping down the main street at 10:30 at night, with no owner in sight. They're just roaming free.

Mangoes or Monos? A Visit to Costa Rica

Wednesday 9 July, 2025

This morning is great fun, and homework is once again going to have to wait. I've signed up for a tour on a *quadraciclo*, or 4-wheeled ATV. I'm joined by two women, also from the school, and each with their 12-year-old sons riding tandem.

Our guide, Andre, gives us neck scarves for the dust, helmets us up, tells us that we will definitely get *sucio*, or dirty, and after giving us simple operating instructions, leads us to the top of a mountain, where we see spectacular views of the entire crescent of the beach, and the surrounding coastline.

On the way back down, I spot what looks like large black plastic trash bags or clumps of tar on some trees, and ask about them. Andre explains that they are (massive to me) termite nests.

We spend time watching howler monkeys play in the trees, drive to a river bank, and switch to 4WD. Andre instructs me in Spanish to "follow as close as you can."

I do, but don't understand that the instruction is only for the river crossing. It isn't until I've been pulled from the mud two times, one of which leaves me tangled in barbed wire like Steve McQueen at the end of the *Great Escape*, that I deduce he meant not in the muddy section.

We pull into a gravel lot by the beach. I hand Andre my few, now muddy belongings that I had in my pocket, and we all jump in the surf, fully-clothed, to rinse off.

I have just enough time after the tour to shower, wait unsuccessfully in a long bank line that serves only two people in half an hour, chow down on some Argentine empanadas from a little booth operated by a couple of British ex-pats, walk to school, and finish enough homework to be able to participate in class.

After class, I find out that our guide Andre is the *novio*, or boyfriend, of Fabiola in the office. I tell her that I'll get her money tomorrow (the reason I was at the bank) for a tour that commences on Friday. I return to the bank, and after six tries, am able to withdraw enough from an ATM for the tour. I return home, and lock the money in a file cabinet that doubles as a safe, and after dinner return to the same bar as yesterday evening, this time for open mic night. A really good band covers every genre of music in both English and Spanish, and you can sing along if you know the lyrics or bring your phone.

There I meet more classmates, including a shirtless, tatted California English teacher who, in order to countermand AI, requires his classes to leave their phones at the door, and write out their daily essays by hand to turn in before they leave. He's an interesting person, with yet one more view on learning

Mangoes or Monos? A Visit to Costa Rica

Thursday 10 July, 2025

After a breakfast accompanied today by fresh mango, and a class exercise on the imperative tense in which we cook up *patacones*, or fried plantains, today is largely uneventful, except for one precursor of future trouble. In the afternoon, I try surfing.

The instructor is good. I am not. I fall about ten times, and when I finally am able to stand on the board, one of my legs immediately seizes up and tosses me into the water. The bottom is sandy, so there are no injuries, but I can barely move as I lug my board back up the beach and trudge to my *tica* home. I'm very weak.

I think maybe I'm sick, but there's no nausea. It's not until the following Monday, after some additional problems, that I will find out what's going on.

Back in my room, I shower, drink lots of water, nap, and, fearing a stomach bug, ask for just chicken and rice for dinner ("No beans? Are you sure?"). I get my chicken, fried but nevertheless delicious. Feeling better, I study for my weekly Friday exam, pack for my weekend trip, and go to bed early.

Friday 11 July, 2025

Today dawns hot and humid again, and I learn a little about the weather. The spell we're in now is hotter than normal, more like "summer weather." When there is no rain for a few days, as we've experienced this week, when rain does eventually arrive, it will do so in a torrent. In the interim, the days grow hotter and more humid.

Friday's exam is fun, relating a summary (much shorter than this one) of what we've done during the week and what we thought of it. I pass, hang out at a smoothie bar, find more empanadas, and board a small bus where I find a mom, daughter and granddaughter from Texas, and three twenty-something women who've been all over the world, in large part due to governmental or military spousal connections.

The "three-hour" ride to our first stop, the *Baldi Thermal Baths*, takes about four and a half hours.

Our guide speaks only heavily accented Spanish, so we're still immersing. He's also pretty unclear with his directions, and would have been in English as well, once we check in. You need to walk up a hill and rent a towel, then back down to reception to rent a locker, the key for which is back up the hill at the towel location, then change and find the baths, further up the hill.

The baths themselves are kind of like a *Disney World* for spa lovers. There are something like 26 pools, increasing in heat as you work up the mountainside. We go our separate ways and hang out, working off the effects of another bumpy ride.

Mangoes or Monos? A Visit to Costa Rica

Afterwards, reversing the process of check-in, we go to a nice buffet, once again walking back up the hillside. I have a couple of drinks to cool down.

I'm embarrassed by the next part of the story, but will relate it anyway in hopes that my stupidity might be a lesson for others.

I get back to the hotel, and set my alarm for the next morning. About 11:30, I hear a crash, feel a pain along one leg and hip, and discover I am on the floor. It's never happened before, and I have no idea what's going on, but conjecture I fell out of bed. I stand up, cross the room to check the time, walk into the bathroom, and hear another crash, this one accompanied by a pain in my arm, which is halfway into the shower basin where I've knocked the plastic door off its track as I blacked out for a second time. I have no recollection of falling – only of waking up and wondering what happened.

I should have called someone at this point, but instead have a sip of water, and go back to bed to try to sleep. I don't much, wide awake wondering and Googling if something really dangerous might have happened to me, but snag maybe an hour before morning.

Saturday 12 July, 2025

Today dawns hot and humid again. When I wake, I feel good enough to get up, drink some more water, exercise, and head to breakfast, where I'm silent about what happened.

Our driver shuttles us to a boat launch, tells us that he'll meet us on the other side of the lake at our hotel (the *Quetzal*), and leaves.

With about thirty other passengers, the boat carries us in pouring rain for a little under an hour at the pace of maybe a slow swimmer, the weather completely obscuring the view of the volcano *Arenal* that we've come to see and that was touted as part of the tour.

Upon landing at the far side, we encounter a great deal of confusion. Several bus drivers wait in another gravel lot, and one by one come onto the boat to extract passengers, who exit with their backpacks or luggage that they pull from a pile up front. Our driver is not among them.

It looks like we're going to have to ask someone for a ride, and perhaps pay for it, when a somewhat jolly fellow comes onto the boat and asks for the nine people from *Intercultura*. We are only seven, we say, but are glad to have found him. The hotel is not here. It's a couple of hours away, and he's going to take us there.

Rolo, our new friend, conducts a class on wheels on par with the best classes at the school. During the course of two hours over twisting, turning, bumpy roads, he points out areas of interest, shares local facts, and quizzes each of us in turn about our backgrounds and interests, all in perfectly enunciated Spanish.

Mangoes or Monos? A Visit to Costa Rica

I discover through his questioning that I'm traveling with teachers, a junior in high school a counselor for troubled kids, a nurse, and a not-for-profit worker promoting better worldwide economics and agriculture.

After a stop at our hotel, a quick exploration of the small town, and a pre-ordered lunch, we head off for zip-lining or *canopy*. Though we have trouble with one short-tempered guide out of maybe a dozen, sailing through and at times high over the trees is exhilarating, with one run of almost a mile.

In the evening, in much more comfortable temperatures than at school, a guide hands us individual flashlights, and leads us on a ninety-minute nature walk in the dark. Our first sight is a younger cousin of a boa constrictor ("These only grow to about 3 meters. Boas grow much longer.") The snake is in a tree at a distance of maybe twenty feet, and we are told not to worry.

During the rest of the walk we see scorpions (they are bioluminescent and glow in the dark under a blue light), a green pit viper (poisonous, but at least 25 or 30 meters above us in a tree), colorful birds, a glass-winged butterfly, a couple of walking sticks (including one disguised not just as a stick, but as a leaf), ants hauling around chunks of green leaf, a giant beetle, a giant moth, and a tree sloth. This last is unusual, as the *osos perezosos* tend to sleep 18-20 hours a day, and this one is awake and moving around in the treetops.

We return to town for a nice dinner at a three-story restaurant with a live tree in its center, and retire for the night. I have a peaceful night's sleep with no recurrence of the prior night's problems, though I find out later that three of my traveling companions got very little rest, huddled together in a single bed as the other one in their room was wet.

Sunday 13 July, 2025

Waking up Sunday I enjoy an even better orchestra of birdsong than in town, and after a breakfast of *tipico* (another name for *gallo pinto*), we board the bus for a fascinating tour of a farm that grows and processes chocolate, sugar cane and coffee.

The process for each is surprising, and the approach to learning, by doing, is engaging. For example, a young boy from Texas smashes open a chocolate gourd at the guide's behest, by throwing it against the ground. We each taste the slimy beans inside, both the slightly sweet exterior, and for the brave, the bitter interior.

We experience the mixing of dried and crushed chocolate nibs with oil, cayenne, cinnamon and vanilla, the grinding of sugar cane stalks to produce juice, and the roasting of coffee. Each instance is followed by a tasting (I passed on the coffee), including a shot glass of sugar cane squeezings mixed with fresh lime juice and *contrabando*, Costa Rican moonshine.

Mangoes or Monos? A Visit to Costa Rica

Our trip back to school is uneventful, but we do find amazing views that we missed on the trip in during the rain and fog. We get to try some new food (a sweet corn pudding reminiscent of flan) and drink (*guarana*, a Brazilian specialty), and spot some wildlife, including an *iguana* lounging in a tree and several *colibri*, or hummingbirds. One interesting sight is simply a couple of old guys sporting cowboy hats as they chat on their porch in rocking chairs as some bony horses graze in a hilly front yard.

Monday 14 July, 2025

To be sure that Friday's blackouts weren't serious, I skip class on Monday to visit a local doctor within 100 yards of my home stay. I walk to the front metal door just as it rattles up, am ushered inside with a smile, and am sitting with the doc in about two minutes. An EKG and lab work rule out heart issues, and I'm diagnosed with simple dehydration, a relief! They pump me full of fluid via both IV and a mango smoothie, tell me to drink more water and electrolytes, and send me on my way. The entire experience is thorough, professional, courteous and quick.

I up my intake of liquids as instructed, and feel better and fully energized all day, though starting a new week of classes, and a new subject area, provide the same sense of uncertainty that often accompanies first facing anything new.

One of my new friends, who has switched from staying at the school last week to a homestay after hearing how mine went, stops by so that we can head to dinner. As he's standing chatting with Dona Emilce and me, a mango crashes onto the roof and he jumps. After hearing the explanation, he considers it a moment, and asks, "*mangoes*, or *monos*?" It could easily be the latter, monkeys playing in the trees, as later in the week I spot one climbing in the electrical lines over the house.

I dine with him and another friend, stick to water, and enjoy the meal and conversation thoroughly.

Tuesday 15 July, 2025

Not much happens today. I spend the morning studying, recording my memories for this summary, and enjoying a chocolate, banana and peanut butter smoothie at a *mercadito* that provides great shade.

Class is better today. As with learning any language, and I've confirmed this same phenomenon with dozens of others over time, comprehension (input) is much easier than speaking and writing (output). I have progressed from understanding 1/3 of Biron's conversation on Day 1, to about 90% of Iris's, our current instructor's, and she speaks in a rapid-fire patter. I still struggle sporadically, forgetting the word for "bring," or using the wrong tense, or forgetting special verb conjugations.

Mangoes or Monos? A Visit to Costa Rica

Sometimes in Spanish you can get by “Spanishifying” an English word, like *flexibilidad* for flexibility. It doesn’t always work, but it’s usually better than Ben, our Australian friend, who, intending to say he moved houses due to an infestation of cockroaches, told his classmates that he had a surfeit of crocodiles. Learning can be funny, as well as fun.

This evening is karaoke night again, and a different but still engaging mix of generations and backgrounds. We hear American classics from James Taylor to Radiohead, Mexican mariachi, Spanish love songs, and a raucous Polish anthem that sounds like a war chant as twenty or so screaming young men jump up and down in place as they sing.

Part of my commitment to lifelong learning is saying yes more often, so I find myself cajoled into a duet of Elton John’s *Don’t Go Breaking My Heart*. I needn’t have been concerned. I may not know the lyrics, but the entire crowd does, and enthusiastically encourages us.

Wednesday 16 July, 2025

Today is more studying, and also learning more about my Swiss friend during a long lunch. After losing his wife as recently as November, he is already extending through action the quest for fulfillment that he and his wife had started together. He’s been in Costa Rica for seven weeks, six of them at the school. He’s also spent thirty days mountain biking north of the 80th parallel, climbing most of the Swiss Alps (but not the Matterhorn as it’s “too touristy”), and hiking and cycling around Chile. Next year, he plans to travel the length of the Andes from Colombia to Patagonia, staying for a month of that trip in a Mapuche (indigenous South American) village.

Evening is a pizza party for my host family. I order enough to have plenty of leftovers, and after being told wait time is an hour, turn back toward my host home. On the way, I hear a chorus shouting my name from inside a small open-air restaurant. I have to say it’s nice to have a personal fan club, and I feel like I do here, having built a friendship with the twenty-somethings from Virginia.

We talk through life – it’s amazing how many connections there are between people forty years different in age – and I pick up my four pizzas and carry them back for what seems like an hour but is probably no more than ten minutes. I can’t help but be reminded of a 1977 William Friedkin film, *Sorcerer*, in which Roy Scheider of *Jaws* fame carries a box of explosives on a tortuous journey through the jungle.

The party is fun. I think we were supposed to have nine, but end up with perhaps eleven, with a lot of coming and going. I meet moms, daughters, sisters and brothers, cousins and in-laws ranging from sixteen to eighty-something. Every conversation is a chance to practice Spanish. By the end of the evening, I’m exhausted after so much careful listening and trying to express myself clearly.

Mangoes or Monos? A Visit to Costa Rica

Thursday 17 July, 2025

Today is hot and humid again, with very few clouds and even higher humidity. Class covers one of the more difficult subjects, and we are all challenged to pick it up. Luckily, our *profesora* has done a very smart thing, warning us that everyone struggles with today's concepts.

Afternoon is more hanging around with friends, and studying. I share a glass of wine with my host-mom at night, enjoy watching the kids play with a new quad-cycle, and learn after dinner that I will be seeing dolphins the next morning before a final class and graduation.

Friday 18 July, 2025

Today is the last day of classes! Our guide meets me at school, and we stop on the way through town to pick up a Netherlands family of four, a Danish guy, and a fresh *pina* (pineapple) and *sandia* (watermelon).

The guide is totally *pura vida*, a universal Costa Rican expression with meanings that range from "living the good life" to "it's all cool with me." In this case, it perfectly describes Alfredo's chill laid-back attitude.

We walk barefoot through light surf to a small boat that can probably carry a dozen when full, ferry a man to his boat, and head out to sea.

About seven miles out, we finally spot dolphins ("they are here all year round but we don't know where.") We watch them frolic, dive and surface for the maximum 25 minutes that boats are allowed to observe. They are fast! That makes it hard to get a picture, but it's fun to watch several punch up through the water simultaneously, or a *mama* and *bebe* swimming together.

Heading back to shore we spot a couple of turtles mating. Out of a sense of propriety, I take no pictures, but apparently it's not the most common sight.

After snorkeling a bit, enjoying the fresh fruit, and riding back to town, I get in another quick shower, a final round of empanadas, and pull into class only about five minutes late, having missed graduation which was in the morning during the tour.

Our last class exercise is fun, interesting and challenging. We each choose a picture off our phone, and explain it to a partner. That partner must then retell your story and see if they've gotten it right. Some of the miscommunication is quite funny, similar to the "telephone game" we played as kids (or that happens in real life). The participative nature of the exercises is totally absorbing, with interesting stories.

Mangoes or Monos? A Visit to Costa Rica

In the evening, I eat one last meal with my host mom, another student from the school, and his host mom. It's very *pura vida*, just chilling and talking about what's going on in Costa Rica and at home.

Saturday 19 July, 2025

Saturday morning, I eat a final breakfast (yes, with rice and beans), pack up, and go to the airport. My driver is the same one as drove me here two weeks ago, and I have one final two-hour Spanish lesson, in a bit of dialect, learning about traffic, the provision of electricity, the difference in the change of the seasons between Costa Rica and the US, and many other small things. The conversation is much easier than the ride from the airport, as my Spanish has improved, and it's sunny instead of a deluge.

Airport check-in is a breeze, and I receive a compliment, whether engineered or not, that feels great. Asked my destination, I check in using Spanish, and when I tell the agent I was here for classes, he says "Well, you fooled me." I'll choose to believe he meant it.

The waiting area, replete with extensive shopping, is certainly geared to Americans. Restaurant portions are twice what I've eaten on this trip, M&Ms and Doritos are widely displayed and available, under their original non-Spanish brand names, and the conversation around me is predominantly loud, and in English.

I have another breakthrough positive when one of the salespeople, when I respond to one of his questions in Spanish, brightens considerably. Something that simple has brought a smile to his face.

Something similar happens in Miami, waiting for checked bags at the carousel. An attendant approaches me and asks in Spanish if I'm here for a flight from Punta Cana. "No," I tell him, also in Spanish. "Liberia." He directs me to another carousel, despite what the overhead monitors tell us, and I collect my bag.

I have one final postscript that I couldn't make up. There's a meal on the flight from Miami to Boston, either chicken, or a beef salad. I opt for the chicken, and it arrives with a side of beans and rice, and plantains.

Overall, it's been a fantastic trip, and I've learned a few things about learning itself.

In the classroom, participation helps maintain interest. Full immersion was a challenge at first, but it felt like as students, we were being treated with respect, an implicit "You can do this." The activities were personal and relevant (for example, *Two Truths and a Lie*, in Spanish), and that also bumped up engagement. Finally, being forced to speak accelerated learning.

On the tour to Monteverde (ziplines and chocolate), I met a teacher (and former nurse) from a bilingual school in Texas. She said that when she and her husband traveled to a school in

Mangoes or Monos? A Visit to Costa Rica

Mexico, he made the most progress of anyone, not because he had the best Spanish, but because he threw himself into every conversation, trying things out half-baked rather than waiting for perfection. His skills quickly transformed.

That leads me to my final lesson about learning. As I mentioned, upon retiring I committed to saying yes more often, whether to new foods, new experiences, or meeting new people. To be clear, that doesn't mean saying yes to everything, but it also fosters learning.

Yes, I never got a handle on surfing, and I don't yet know how to use the future tense, but I enjoyed fresh fruit for the first time in a long time, discovered new tastes, improved my Spanish, rode a quad-cycle across a river, saw a tree sloth in the jungle at night, tasted sugar cane juice with lime and moonshine, sang karaoke to enthusiastic applause, and made many new friends.

Learning is recursive. Every time you feel that little jolt from learning something new, it inspires you to try something else, and to enjoy and appreciate what you've been doing. It's an excellent reminder of what we do at the Academy for Lifelong Learning, fulfill lives through engaged lifetime learning, with others.