

Since I was a little girl, it has been a big dream for me to travel to America. In the 4th or 5th grade I heard about an interchange that a school offered in my town. A little before entering my second year at this school (which I go to now) I got an invitation by mail about an information night where they were going to give out the information about the exchange. After that information night, finally I got the motivation to apply. First, we had to write a short message to the principal of the school, taking about why we wanted to apply. That is when the application process started. After that we also did a lot of other things like fill out a Candidate's Application. After that whole process and some other things in between we were called in the principal's office to announce the winners. That day I found out that I am going, I remember I started crying from happiness and I was very excited to begin this journey. On the 14th of April me and my close friend Jarina said goodbye to Switzerland and began our Journey to Panama.

Living with a host sister



After 14 hours, we arrived in Panama City. In the airport I was very openly welcomed by my host family, the way they welcomed me made me feel comfortable and happy in the home and generally comfortable, safe, and welcomed in the family. The first couple of days me and Analida were inseparable we would always be together 24/7 and never got a break from each other. After the couple of days, we realized how much we underestimated this Journey together. That was the first time when we realized this journey is going to be hard and we need to help each other. After being around each other always we realized that we must take breaks from each other. It was very important for us to have our own space and by learning how to communicate with my host sister we were a lot more relaxed, and we didn't stress about stuff. Learning how to communicate was a challenge in the beginning because I have never been in a situation where I must follow a person around and talk about problems that bother me. My host family was very supportive along my whole journey which helped

us a lot with living together.

A normal day in Panama

On school days I would normally wake up at 6:30. Waking up a lot earlier to get ready go to school was new to me because in Switzerland I can wake up 30 minutes before school starts and leave the house 5 minutes before school starts, since my school is in a small walking distance. At the school they wore uniforms. The girls wear a skirt that goes to the knees paired with a polo shirt with the school's logo and black formal shoes. The boys wear long khakis with the same polo shirt and black formal shoes. After getting ready, we would pack our lunches and leave at ca. 7:00. We would get driven by my host mom daily. In the beginning it was shocking for me to see students to get driven to school daily, because here in Switzerland it is very very rare to see kids being driven to school. Normally all the students live near the school or in walking distance of school. Until 14:00 we were at school, after school we would get picked up by my host mother and eat lunch at home which in my case normally Nana, the housekeeper cooked. Nana was a housekeeper, and she would do the house chores. She has worked for my host family for 14 years. I grew close to Nana and for me and the rest of the house she was a regular family member. After lunch we would either do something fun together or stay at home typically, we would go to the mall called the multiplaza or eat ice cream and see the city a bit.

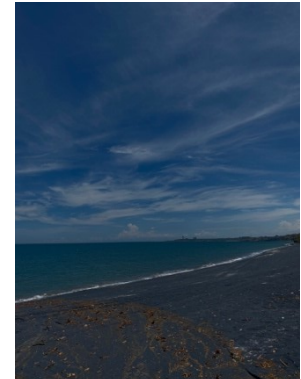
The food in Panama

As you can imagine the food was very different in Panama compared to the food in Switzerland. The thing that I noticed the most was that fast food is cheaper than healthy food from the store. The food was very

rich in flavor which I loved. We usually ate traditional Panamanian food for example Hojaldras (fried flat dough), but we also ate typical Hispanic food like arroz con pollo (rice with chicken).

The Weather

The weather was very different from Switzerland. It was a lot hotter than Switzerland. The temperatures were almost always between 30-34 degrees Celsius. They also have only two seasons in Panama unlike here in Switzerland where we have 4. In Panama they only had rainy season which lasts 8-9 months during the year and summer season which is 3-4 months (mid-February – beginning of May). It was also very humid which made the weather seem hotter than usual.



The Swiss exchange

After 3 beautiful weeks in Panama, we had to say our goodbyes and return to Switzerland. I must admit it was hard to say bye because I had already built connections with many people. As hard as it was, I was ready to see my family which I also missed very much. After 14 other hours on the plane, we made it back. Upon arrival we were welcomed by all of me and Jarinas friends and our families. After greeting everybody we split up and came home. On the home ride I noticed that my host sister was very amazed by the Swiss nature. Her reaction to the Swiss nature shocked me a little. Because all the things that she found very amazing were normal stuff that we experienced on the daily. That made me appreciate what I have in Switzerland. Her coming here meant it was my turn to show her around. In the beginning I felt very anxious, and I micromanaged a lot because I wanted to show her my country and amaze her just like she did to me. I never wanted to do something that upset her or didn't amaze her. After a little while my anxiety grew. Thankfully my teacher and family noticed this early, and they helped me a lot. I must be honest and say it was not easy having a person behind you all the time and having the responsibility of a person. It was amazing having her it also matured me in a way having her.

All in all

During my exchange I learned a lot of things for example expressing feelings, I learned how to speak about things that bother me but also to listen to things that bother other people, which was something that I really had to learn and was essential to our friendship, I also learned that even people that are not blood related to you can be family, even learning something funny or sad about a person was something that I cherish a lot. Nonetheless I can say that I learned so much during the exchange and speaking truthfully even after the little hardships and everything else I would do the exchange in a heartbeat again. I cannot fathom enough how much this exchange means to me and how much all the people I've met mean to me especially my host family and host sister. I would love to visit my host family in Panama again and hope to see them very soon.

