

As a new freshman student, I wanted to try something completely different, so I decided to go on a summer research exchange program to Brazil. What better way to try something



new than to spend a summer in a tropical country?

In the weeks prior to my departure for São Paulo, Brazil, everyone either told me how dangerous the country is or how “everyone likes to party”. Therefore, while boarding the plane at O’Hare, I have uneasy feelings about where and why I am going. When I finally land, my queasiness only gets worse. Out the bus window from the airport, I see São Paulo—the largest city in South America. It is also a city with concrete architecture like cold war era East Berlin. There are barbed wire and black spray painted signatures on all the buildings. Trash and homeless people line the streets. This is nothing like the tropical rainforests and beaches I was expecting.

Soon, however the landscape changes, and the bus soon takes my fellow exchange student, Sierra, and I through kilometers and kilometers of rolling fields of sugar cane and cattle until we finally reach the city of Pirassununga. The landscape is beautiful with lush green hills, but I know that huge rainforests were cut down for this farmland. Pirassununga is the city containing the branch of University of São Paulo, USP, that I study at. The houses are like concrete blocks all connected to each other. Each house has a gate with

barbed wire on top separating the road from the front door. I am especially taken aback by the amount of garbage everywhere. People do not have garbage cans, but instead place plastic grocery bags on the road for garbage pickup, leading to litter strewn all over. The university is also nothing like I expect. USP-Pirassununga is a massive farm, with small yellow buildings with labs and classrooms spread throughout, and a single bus connects them all. Coming from a massive school like Purdue, I am surprised to see the small buildings and the one cafeteria, which serves rice and beans every day.

The first week living in the campus dorms is rough. Since I am staying in Brazil for multiple months, I must do taxes, fill out paper work, and register with the police, all with only knowing beginner Portuguese and not knowing where anything is in the city. On top of this, it is non-stop



raining hurricane style. Soaked and completely lost, Sierra and I ask a woman in a church for directions. The woman decides to take us in her car to meet her daughter, buy us coffee, help us with all our errands and take us back to campus. This experience with a complete stranger allowed me to realize how incredibly nice and friendly Brazilians are. I continue to be amazed by the kindness of most Brazilians when I meet some USP students. With me speaking a little Portuguese and the students speaking a little English, I meet some friends who help me and let me hang out with them. Even my professor and laboratory assistant are incredibly friendly and welcoming. From meeting students, professors and towns people, I soon learn that despite the economic crisis facing Brazil, Brazilians continue to be welcoming, open and happy to share.

I soon go back to the city of São Paulo and see that it is nothing like when I first saw it out the bus window. São Paulo is full of vibrant neighborhoods, beautiful wall art, parks, street musicians, and very diverse people. Yes, the city has aging architecture, but the culture and diversity radiates to every corner. Despite being in Brazil, São Paulo is home to large Italian,



Japanese, and German ethnic groups. Besides ethnic diversity, Brazilians also celebrate individual diversity and acceptance—whether it be gender, clothes or artistic ability.

Continuing to travel throughout the country, I see more places that are amazing. Indeed, Rio is a gorgeous tropical city, with mountain rainforests,

amazing beaches, and colorful neighborhoods. It is also true that Rio has incredibly poor favelas and is highly dangerous to foreigners. But, two hours south of Rio is a breathtaking island straight out of “Pirates of the Caribbean.” The island, Ilha Grande, is a mountain rainforest island with no cars. The only method of transportation is hiking through jungle trails or by boat. The town had small, colorful, colonial style buildings, cute restaurants and once again, super friendly people, who seemed to move by their own clock. On the other side of Brazil is a farming city, home to Foz do Iguaçu. Foz do Iguaçu is a massive waterfall, ten times the size of Niagara Falls, in the middle of the last remains of the Atlantic Forest. I hike through the forest and then take a speedboat underneath the falls and get soaking wet. Despite traveling all over, there is still so much more I want to explore, such as the Amazon and Bahia.

By the end of my exchange program, I realize how glad I am to have overcome my initial fears about going to Brazil. I reflect upon beautiful scenery and vibrant cultures of the different places I traveled to. Most importantly, I highly value my time at USP, because I could do research in an international lab and meet so many amazing and valuable friends. Finally, my advice for anyone considering traveling or studying abroad is to not let your fears get in the way of having adventures. Be willing to ask for help from strangers, to meet new people, to try unusual things, and to always have an open mind.