

Shannon Stephens  
Final Cuba Essay

Amazing is the best word to describe my time in Cuba. The country was beautiful. The people were welcoming. The coursework was insightful. The experience was priceless.

Walking down the steps onto the runway in Havana was the moment that everything became real. I am by no means an outgoing, courageous person. It was surprising to my family that I was even thinking about studying abroad, never mind doing so in a country where the day to day communication would be a challenge and very little about the political and social environment was known. I am so proud to say that I did it. By no means was it easy. I had days when all I wanted to do was jump off the Malecon and start swimming for home. I became frustrated when I was having trouble understanding what was being said and I disliked speaking because I knew my grammar and word choice was wrong. I hate being wrong. As the weeks passed, I gradually relaxed and started to have small, basic conversations with the workers at the center. I learned that people are more than happy to sit with you and work through a conversation, no matter how many times you need to try rephrasing something or resort to hand gestures, because they want to help you. The Cuban people love their country and they want visitors to love it as well.

I learned that there are so many little parts of my daily life that I take for granted. Since returning from Cuba, my plate is always cleared; I only take what I will eat. The amount of food that goes to waste is astounding. I still carry a little bit of toilet paper in my purse (just in case) and I don't use nearly as much as I used to. For the first few weeks after returning home, I would still hesitate a little before

brushing my teeth with tap water in fear of getting sick. Access to clean water is not even something that used to cross my mind.

I learned to always gather my own information and draw my own conclusions. This is why the trip to the U.S. Interest Section was so important. If we had not been living where we were living or had not had a chance to spend time getting to know the Cuban people like we did, I think that I would have believed almost all of the information that was presented to us during that visit (falsehoods such as “The embargo is effective and should stay in place. The Cuban people are all actively communist and pose a huge threat to the United States and democracy worldwide.”) Were it not for this trip, I never would have thought twice about those five “terrorists” from Miami.

I hope that in the future I will be able to put all of the knowledge that I gained during this trip to good use. I hope that the relationship between the United States and Cuba will start to be mended. More than anything, I hope to return to that amazing country and the people that welcomed the timid little gringa into their lives.