



QUEER  
*STUDENTS*  
**ABROAD**

STORIES OF MENNONITE &  
BRETHREN LGBTQ STUDENTS  
STUDYING ABROAD

A Program of BMC for LGBT Interests



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# QUEER *STUDENTS* **ABROAD**

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# INTRODUCTION

HAYLEY BROOKS

When I was preparing to study abroad in China with Goshen College, I had a lot of doubts and questions about the ways I would experience China as an out lesbian. I met with the professor leading the trip about my concerns and what support he and his family would be able to provide me while in China. Goshen doesn't have any institutional support for lgbtq+ students going abroad; I was expected to fill in the gaps and to know how to navigate an unknown culture as an out lesbian by myself. I talked with many of my lgbtq friends about their experiences and the ways the school did and didn't support them through these complicated and difficult experiences. I also tried searching the internet for different resources and realized what I craved was stories.

I didn't think much about that until I started this position with BMC and had several lgbtq students from Mennonite and Brethren colleges ask about studying abroad. I realized that the resource I needed at the time, and the one students needed now, was a collection of stories. These stories are as varied and complicated as the students who wrote them and the countries they visited. There is no singular lgbtq experience while studying abroad and I hope that you come to see that after reading these stories. Whether you are a student getting ready to study abroad and want to know how other lgbtq people navigated studying abroad, a parent of a child who is leaving soon for the semester, or a professor interested in knowing more, this collection is for you. Some of these stories are light-hearted and funny, others are heady and complicated; all of them reveal something larger about human interaction between cultures and the ways we bring all of who we are to the ways we experience the world.



# MOROCCO

CLARE MAXWELL



When I arrived to Morocco in the fall of 2012 on Goshen College's Study Service Term (SST) program, I remember two overwhelming feelings about my place in that country. The first was that being a woman in the U.S. meant something incredibly different than being a woman in Morocco. The second was that being American meant something entirely different as well.

For my first seven weeks in the country, I stayed with a family in the city of Meknes. The youngest daughter in the family, Yasmine, was a year or two younger than me, and we ended up spending every evening together. Yasmine was a fashionista to the first degree, and rebel against her strict Muslim upbringing. When we left the house in the morning, she would wait until we were around the corner from the house, then yank her hijab off to go bareheaded for the day. At night, she would stay up talking to her boyfriend for hours, speaking in the quietest of whispers so her family couldn't hear. When we were alone in the house, she cranked up Justin Bieber and Carly Rae Jepsen music videos, and danced around the living room, tossing her hair like she was a backup dancer. She had never left Morocco, but the music videos, and the testament of her older brother who worked in Italy and send home gifts of sundresses and perfume, gave her a strict view of what others' worlds might be like.

I believe, as both an American and a woman, I was a bit of a disappointment to Yasmine; I wore no designer clothes, had no flashy boyfriend, and would rather watch the news than the top 40 music video channel that her father outlawed in the house. In her efforts to make me more acceptably feminine, she plucked my eyebrows, painted my nails, and even tried to get me to meet her boyfriend's brother. I laughed at her efforts sometimes, and told her that, if she ever made it to the US, or Europe, she would find something completely different than what she was expecting. She maintained that I didn't know what I was talking about. Despite the spats, we enjoyed each other's company.

I never told Yasmine that I was bisexual, although we constantly debated other topics about romance, relationships, and gender roles. She was con-

stantly thinking about a husband, preferably someone French or maybe Italian, while I told her that I never wanted to get married. She expressed a love for a sort of classic Hollywood glamour, I talked about finding beauty in the bizarre. Only once did we actually talk about “non traditional” sexuality. I asked her if Morocco had a gay or lesbian community. Even though we were home alone, she looked around her before answering, as if to see if anyone might be listening in on our conversation. Once satisfied, she explained that there were a group of men in the city who dressed up like women for private social gatherings. I asked her what she thought about such a thing.

“Oh no one else does anything about it, no one stops them. But of course we think it is haram,” her eyes narrowed “and I’ve seen them, they are not at all pretty.”

I found this to be an odd response. Yasmine, who held on to only the barest bones of Islamic moral ideals, and wanted so desperately to be as sexy and glamorous as an American pop starlet was using the idea of “Haram” (being religiously impure) to condemn the actions of a group of men who, from what I could tell by her description, also just wanted to be glamorous and sexy. Then again, she also had strong ideals for masculinity. Whether those ideals were inspired by traditional Moroccan gender roles, or the fantasy of the handsome future French husband, these men were clearly breaking the rules.

I don’t know if she ever found her perfect European man, but I hope if she’s ever made it out of Morocco, and has been gifted with different perspectives on what being a woman in the modern world means.

For the second half of the semester, I moved out of Yasmine’s house, and went to live in a village in the Middle Atlas Mountains with Zack, another Goshen student. If my ideas on identity were perplexing to my hosts in the city, they were almost incompatible with my rural family. Tazouta was a town of about two thousand people, and I am pretty sure I was the only adult woman within an hour’s drive that wore blue jeans and didn’t cover my hair. Instead, the local Tamazight (indigenous North African) women wore handkerchiefs or hijab, and an ankle-length robe called a djellaba whenever they left the house.

I lasted about a week before I started wearing the same. At first, I kept up my American appearances, wandering around with long, red hair

blowing every which way in the freezing mountain air. I was treated as an oddity. Tazouta was a gender divided village. My hosts, Fatuma and Mimun, lived in two different worlds. Mimun spent his days running the local grain mill, while Fatuma was largely in the kitchen, a small vegetable garden patch, or washing clothes at the spring. When men visited, Mimun hosted them in the large front sitting room. When women came, they joined Fatuma in the back room, which was cozier with a wood burning stove and a tiny television. Clearly a woman, but clearly deviant from local gender roles, I fit in neither at the mill or in the back sitting room – I felt like I was the only member of a third gender, for whom no social rules existed. After a week of discomfort being looked at as an outsider in both places, I decided it was time for a change, and somewhat reluctantly started tying a scarf around my head when I went out.

By the end of my time in Tazouta, I was wearing a hijab and a djellaba every time I left the house, and kept a kerchief on underneath for wearing around the house. I want to be clear: no one asked me to do this, but I could almost hear a collective sigh of relief as my hair disappeared. I was in the women’s gang now, and the women around me were more than happy to voice their approval. I stopped going to the mill at all, and instead spent a lot of time indoors, in the women’s world, doing women’s chores.

I had a love/hate relationship with the experience. I loved feeling in place with the women around me. Laundry day, previously a dreary chore, became the highlight of the week once I realized that it provided a natural gathering point for female bonding. The little spring in the village was always filled with singing and laughter when everyone congregated to do the washing. Since women mostly stayed at home, being out and active made us feel slightly ecstatic. Doing chores also gave me the feeling that I was contributing to my host family’s life in some small way, instead of just being a baffling not-quite-woman that they were now obliged to look after. The hijab, after just a couple weeks, became a part of my own female identity.

Yet in other ways, the role chafed. The first time Mimun came home from work late and upset and demanded a cup of tea from me before even saying hello, I sat in mute confusion for about thirty seconds before I could respond. Having Zack around was a further complication. Though we tried to make it clear that our relationship as a friends and classmates,

most people in the village assumed that we, the only two Americans for 50 kilometers, were married. This meant that I was supposed to do his laundry, obey his orders, and make sure he always had tea. To his credit, Zack offered to do my laundry when we got back to Indiana, and listened to a lot of my rant about the learned helplessness of the local men, who it seemed couldn't perform the simple task of making a cup of tea by themselves. Yet he never felt the same discomfort with the gender based distribution of tasks that I did. Then again, no one in the family ever made any demands on him. Yet as indignant as I was, I couldn't shake the little feeling of pride every time Fatuma playfully tugged at my hankerchief and told me "*Eeehhh Habibti, inti mra Tamazight!*"

"Oh my dear, you are a Tamazight woman!"

The moment I left the village again, and returned back to the city for a few days before leaving Morocco, the sense of belonging that the hijab and djellaba had brought quickly dissipated. I stayed with Yasmine again for two nights, and she was utterly aghast that I had taken up wearing them voluntarily.

"But you're not even Muslim!" She protested, "You're American!"

Meknes and Tazouta are only a couple hour's drive apart, but they were two separate worlds, and my place as a foreign woman was radically different between them. Where in one I was an object of somewhat misplaced admiration, in the other I was an outlier ready to do a lot of things I never thought I would in order to be a part of the community. I never had the chance to have a serious conversation with my host families about my sexuality. In both cases, of course, I was afraid that they would think I was disgusting, or more specifically haram for such a thing. Yet there were other reasons. For Yasmine, I wasn't quite ready to shatter her illusions of what sex and romance in the "West" always looked like. We lost contact with each other eventually, but I hold out hope that she eventually had the chance to get to other places, and keep expanding her view of the world. Sometimes I regret not having pushed her harder, and been more honest, perhaps a little bit more of my own version of an "American woman" was. Yet for the women of Tazouta, I felt no desire to ever try to put some of my ideas on them. For all the faults I have found in gender segregated societies, I have also found a great sense of joy in women's spaces, and a deeper sense of commonality and cohesiveness

than in groups of women back in the US. Even if sex was never involved, this community had much more to teach me about love and fulfilment in relationships between women than I could have possibly imagined before arriving. It wasn't my place to try and change anything. I'm grateful for the small moments they gave me where I got to be Tamazight.

# GUATEMALA

RANDI B. HAGI

## Qué mango

There were about 15 of us stuffed into the nine-seat minivan careening around Guatemala's back roads. Children squirmed on laps, the driver's assistant collected fares, and I sweated wherever my skin touched the seat, another person, or itself. Anna and I were accompanying Yanira to her small Mayan village for a night's stay; the 24 other Americans from our college had split off with their own teenage hosts. Our trek took us four hours through the jungle, nearing the Mexican border by my estimate. This was the most direct route from the boarding school to Yanira's family and hometown, and it was dusk by the time we unstuck ourselves from the faux leather seats. Anna was typically quiet, with a sweet voice that sounded polite until you recognized her wit, but she was especially reticent after the long ride. Yanira motioned us down a fork in the road. She seemed to speak decent Spanish, but mine was mediocre, and Anna's vocabulary and perfect grammar were forced through a thick American accent. I was unclear as to how long we'd be walking, or where exactly we were.

"I have to use the bathroom of the woods!" I announced in Spanish, Yanira laughing as I ran behind a bush to pee. A few minutes down the road, we approached a thatch-roofed pavilion housing about a dozen soldiers in fatigues, some with semiautomatic rifles, and a large black pickup. Sweating recommenced. I didn't know what to make of these men, but Yanira smiled and spoke K'ekchi' and we were soon motioned into the truck. A board lay across the pickup bed against the back of the cab, where the three of us sat, facing the soldiers who lined the rim, smiling and chatting and relaxedly holding their weapons. I didn't want to show fear by asking Yanira if this was a normal part of her journey home. We sped down the road.

And then, the stars.

Going fifty, sixty miles an hour down a dirt road, in a foreign country, surrounded by heavily armed men I could barely communicate with, after



a day of cramped travel, dozens of miles from the nearest source of light pollution, I saw the stars. Bright multitudes slowly shifted as we sped underneath them, my arm brushing Anna's lightly as the road jostled us.

I was entranced. Calmed.

After a while, we reached Yanira's village; the truck let us off, Yanira exchanged a few laughs and waves with the soldiers, and we walked up a short hillside to her house. Anna took long strides, her slim legs hardened by the Appalachian Trail and volcano hikes on which she regularly out-distanced me. The wood and thatch abode had a dirt floor, bold chickens, and a metal griddle over an indoor fire, upon which Anna and I tried to make tortillas. I snapped an underexposed photo of her as she coaxed the dough. The family's gentle matriarch made many more tortillas, and fried ours along with the batch. After we sat down, though, all our lumpy, misshapen patties ended up on mine and Anna's plates. Yanira was the only one of her siblings and mother who spoke Spanish, so we just smiled and nodded and showed them our cameras, books, and clothes. I caught Anna's green eyes a few times over the dinner table; we weren't close enough to give much comfort beyond acquaintanceship in this new place, but her expression was kind.

They had set up a full-size wooden frame with a thin mattress for us. The rest of the family shared beds or stretched out in hammocks, and I laid quietly, waiting to drift off.

I felt too awake, self-conscious, like the exhilaration of star-watching had translated imperfectly into my body, or the homemade chicken soup was giving me indigestion, or the bed was too firm, or –

I was turned on.

Laying on a wooden pallet next to a sleeping nursing major in a nice Mayan family's small house, for the first time, I was near a girl and felt turned on.

The realization kept me awake then, immobile. Anna was definitely, unquestionably straight, as I had identified up to that point – although my gender identity had been a troublesome question since puberty, I was definitely a female body who had just celebrated my fifth anniversary with a male body.

But, I couldn't sleep. I was platonically lying next to a woman in a very Christian, traditionally-gendered, heterosexual country, feeling warm and sweaty and soul-itchy and like I was a complete jackass. But I held tight, internally, to the feeling of laying near enough to Anna to feel bodily heat but not bodily touch, and silently watched a more complete sexuality awaken.

# SENEGAL

JAKE SMUCKER



Three months before I left for Senegal, I found out homosexuality was illegal there. Just as I wondered how you could possibly enforce a ban on a sexual identity, I read about same-sex Senegalese couples being arrested for kissing. I scowled at the Wikipedia article on my computer screen. It hadn't even been a year since I realized I was genderfluid, and now I would probably have to go back in the closet for three months.

Two months before I left for Senegal, I realized that my group's orientation sessions were not going to give me any information on how to survive in an overtly homophobic environment. I was irritated. LGBTQ people were not considered in the PowerPoints or the smaller discussions, but at least I knew what a djembe was.

My red hair was finally long enough to have fun with, and I had just gotten my ears pierced that year. I was ecstatic because my physical appearance felt right, and I didn't hate the way I looked anymore. On my femme days, I loved wearing eyeshadow and mascara. There were so many color combinations and techniques—it was like I had discovered a new art form. I could wear dangly earrings if I wanted, or more androgynous studs. Exploring my identity was exciting.

But one month before I left for Senegal, I felt small. I sat in the sterile lounge in the sociology department, waiting for Isaiah and Holly Simons, the leaders of the Senegal group. I fidgeted with my hair, wondering if they'd tell me to cut it.

"Don't be ridiculous," I told myself. "They're a social worker-sociologist husband and wife team who have proven themselves to be LGBTQ allies."

Isaiah and Holly came in, greeted me, and sat down. I burst into speech.

"So I'm genderfluid," I told them, "and I was researching homosexuality in Senegal, and it's illegal."

Isaiah and Holly grimaced in what they thought was a sympathetic way. I could see the trajectory of this conversation. My queerness could be cel-

ebred here in the US, but it was inconvenient in Senegal. I took a breath and sucked in all the courage I could from the cool air in the lounge.

“So what should I do? Do I have to go back into the closet?” I asked.

“It’s unfortunate that that’s the social climate in Senegal right now,” Holly said, “and I know that we have LGBTQ students that are going. Obviously, we can’t ask you to go back into the closet, but—” she trailed off.

“It’s okay, I figured as much,” I said. “So, here I present more feminine some days, and more masculine in others. How exactly should I present myself in Senegal?”

They looked at each other. “Masculine,” Isaiah said, nodding. “Dynamics between men and women are different in Senegal compared to the US, but that’s another discussion—one we’ll have when we get there.”

I hadn’t been in the closet for six years, and my mental health was stable.

One week after I arrived in Senegal, I was overwhelmed. Each day my senses were attacked by tides of new information, and these waves only touched on the churning vastness of Senegal’s culture. I was supposed to drink in all of this new information and remain impartial to it, but I was drowning.

There was the language barrier, since none of us were fluent in French or Wolof (the most widely spoken language in Senegal). There was Senegal’s complicated relationship with French colonialism. There was the idolization of the West, and droves of people leaving Senegal for better prospects in Europe. There was the presence of US Christian missionaries, who refused to learn the local languages, in a country whose population is over 90% Muslim/Islamic. There were poor people, people in the middle, and fabulously wealthy foreigners with Senegalese vacation homes that were empty most of the year. There were new experiences with food, water, and even how to bathe and use the bathroom. There were huge, densely populated cities and smaller villages in the middle of the desert. But this is all normal in a study abroad experience.

I craved time to myself, away from the constant stimulation. As a sensitive introvert, having to be “on” all the time was exhausting. In Senegal, being on all the time was required just to understand what was happening. I desperately wanted to be okay. I wanted to have a good experience. I

wasn’t prepared for the downside of SST, but what were most unsettling were the unexpected upsides.

My living situations for both halves of SST were astoundingly good. I received more generosity from strangers than I ever had in my life. I played with my 5-month-old host sister. She was just learning to crawl, and we would climb up and down the stairs while I sang a jazzy bass line that always made her dance. I wanted everything to be black and white: either it was all good, or it was all bad. I hadn’t realized yet that most of the time, life didn’t work like this.

For the most part, I could remain impartial and not judge Senegalese culture by the standards of my own (Isaiah and Holly called this “cultural relativism”). Certain things made me very uncomfortable, like the Senegalese gender politics and the consumption of primarily non-Senegalese, Western media (for example, so many people my age listened to US pop music). Isaiah and Holly were right about the value of cultural relativism, though—I realized it wasn’t fair to expect Senegal to suit my preferences.

Of course, there are several social issues in Senegal that I firmly believe are exploitative and unjust. Even though I knew it was not my place as an outsider to come in and focus exclusively on the flaws of Senegal, I could not have a culturally relative attitude towards the criminalization of homosexuality. If I had been gay, that would have been easier, because at least I would have existed. There were no genderfluid people. The concept simply did not translate.

I began thinking of myself as a stick figure drawn on a dry erase board. Each day, I was erased more and more. Even with all my resilience, I began losing myself, and flickering in and out of existence. I could feel my depression intensifying, and I knew it was a problem that I wanted to die. Many times, I contemplated throwing myself from the roof of my host family’s house, but I concluded that the fall would probably not be enough to kill me.

I could not focus on any of the new information I was supposed to be learning. Isaiah had us turn in responses to prompts he had written, and I was supposed to be very insightful in the midst of living in a constant state of fight or flight.

My host dad gave a sermon in church one Sunday where he condemned

homosexuality. My response to the prompt that week was an angry, emotional one, with me trying to process how his sermon had hurt me. Isaiah told me my response was inappropriate, rude, and judgmental. Why couldn't I practice cultural relativism?

I finally realized that the current dosage of antidepressants was not doing enough for me. I was able to talk to Holly, who contacted my psychiatrist back in the US. Fortunately, I had brought extra pills with me and doubled my dosage.

Studying abroad in Senegal was a bittersweet experience. I learned so much that I would never have been exposed to otherwise. I can say that, looking back, there were positive outcomes—but these came at a price.

What if I had not insisted on meeting with Isaiah and Holly before I left for Senegal? I would have been even less prepared, because despite not being the only LGBTQ student in the group, how to cope with Senegal's criminalization of homosexuality was not even mentioned in passing. This was not just an oversight on Isaiah and Holly's part—we had numerous presenters and former students come to talk to us, and no one thought this was important enough to talk about.

If I had not done research on my own, I might not have brought extra antidepressants. I even had several close friends in the group with me who knew what I was going through, and I still wanted to jump off my host family's roof.

One month after Senegal, despite the benefits of the experience, I could not honestly say I would have gone if I'd known how bad it would be.

Three years after Senegal, I am still angry. Asking someone to go back in the closet and remain impervious to the homophobia of the country they're studying in is too much to ask. Nobody told me I should consider another destination for my study abroad semester.

Three years after Senegal, I am also grateful. I learned so much about the world and about myself just by visiting one country. I had shown incredible courage and strength. Although overwhelming in the moment, three years after Senegal I realized just how transformative the experience was. I am who I am because of Senegal, and for that reason, I wouldn't change the experience.

I only recommend studying abroad while LGBTQ after thorough research of the destination and the assurance of travelling with emotionally supportive friends. Make sure to know any expectations others might have of your behavior in advance. If unsure about your well-being in an anti-LGBTQ country, there is no shame in choosing a different destination. It doesn't mean you're close-minded or that you hate that particular country, just that you're looking out for yourself.

If someone had told me these things, maybe I wouldn't need three years after Senegal to heal.

# CHINA & U.S.

YULI WHITEMAN

Before going to college in America, I knew that I wasn't straight but didn't know (and wasn't ready to admit) that I was gay. Being gay was kind of swept under the rug and wasn't really one of the biggest issues that I was thinking about when first coming to Goshen College. I kept up with my studies and neglected the slowly consuming feelings I had for my same-gendered friend. I wanted to come out but the timing wasn't quite right and I wasn't ready to. I figured I should get used to American society before beginning that part of my journey.

Goshen taught me many things about gender and sexuality that I hadn't even considered before. Like people who didn't identify as a man or a woman but felt somewhere in-between or not at all. I thought, then what pronouns should I use? My American friends helped me learn all about the various identities, in regards to sexuality and gender.

At the beginning of sophomore year, I started to feel like the "phase" of liking women wasn't going away and that I should probably come out. I knew I was in a safe and positive community and yet there was this inner conflict.

Are you really sure they're chill with you being queer? Really sure?

This anxiety built up until I just felt like I had to rip it off like a band aid and get it over with. Slowly I started to come out to my closest friends who were all fine and rejoiced in my decision to finally come out. I felt safe.

About halfway through sophomore year I had come out to my friends as queer and was feeling comfortable identifying as so. A friend and I had planned to come out over the Christmas break.

At college I felt no rush to come out because the community at Goshen college made me feel safe and secure enough that I wouldn't lose or fracture any friendships because of my sexuality. I started to see myself as "Yuli who is also queer" instead of "queer Yuli". No longer was I confined by my sexuality and I could focus on moving on and not feeling like I had to hide or lie.



Later that year, I can't remember the event name, I told my coming out story to the students and staff in attendance. There were tears but afterwards there were hugs and words of support. At a time when I needed support from others, I truly received it tenfold.

I went abroad to China on SST in 2014 and my host mother bluntly asked if I had a boyfriend. I told her I didn't because I was focusing on my studies (an answer that satisfies most grown-ups). To my surprise she then asked if I had a girlfriend. I didn't have a girlfriend, but it allowed us to discuss things much more openly and honestly. My host mum was very receptive during that whole conversation and asked many questions. I have been very lucky to be surrounded by a positive community in numerous places all over the world.

Nowadays I identify as gay and the journey to identifying as so has been a long one. I'm happier and am surrounded by people who love and support me. I'm thankful and grateful to the Goshen College community for making my journey a happy one.



# PERU

STEFAN BAUMGARTNER

During my time on Study-Service Term, my classmates and I were assigned to write one to two themed personal reflections every week. This particular reflection was my “Action-Reflection-Response,” a reflection that you could choose to do at any point during the six-week Study portion. It included more planning than other assigned journal reflections. We had to start by noticing something about Peruvian culture that interested us and then we were supposed to do some kind of action that was out of our comfort zones to better understand that concept. Then, we would reflect on what happened when the action was done and, with our new-found understanding, speculate how we might respond differently in the future. I chose to write my A-R-R the second to last week of Study in Lima, Perú after understanding the culture better as well as having a more established relationship with my host parents.

## **Week 5B, Action-Reflection-Response**

To begin, I think my Action-Reflection-Response will be a little different because I do not necessarily have a critical event, more a series of events that made a critical impact. I will be writing about my experience dealing with being gay in Perú. I will discuss the various events that fed into my initial opinion of Peruvian culture in that sense, reflect on the ways I was proven wrong or misguided, and finally how I have responded and wish to respond in the future.

Firstly, I will start off with my initial opinions of Peruvian culture and how they deal with homosexuality. I came into Perú pretty much knowing I would not be coming out to any Peruvians. My friends who have come to Perú for SST told me I should not, and I prepared for that. But I do not think I was prepared to be so extremely closeted. I was annoyed and somewhat hurt in how heteronormative Peruvian culture is. At first I solely saw heterosexual couples everywhere, engaging in what I consider way too many public displays of affection. Then, in Spanish class, my teacher insisted that [my one female classmate] was the only one that could even read sentences with “novio” or “esposo” in them. A simple sentence was out of the question. It seemed like everywhere there was

heterosexual this, and gender stereotypes that, and thus the absence of the possibility for gay people, people like me.

I was not ready for how it would affect me. I was annoyed and defensive, but mostly it quickly diminished me in a way I have not felt in a long time. It affected my confidence with the language and how I interacted with Peruvians, I think there was a subconscious thought that they could never fully understand me because they are so in denial about the existence of people like me.

But then, I sent my [coming out] letter to [my SST leaders] and my whole world opened up. Maybe that was the critical event. [My leaders] explained that [our country coordinator] already knew [that I was gay] and helped accordingly, that one of our speakers identified as gay, that there is indeed a gay culture alive and well in Lima.

It was a breath of fresh air, a recognition. I pushed further and actually sent my letter to [the country coordinator] and I came out to [my Spanish instructor]. I was overwhelmed by the positivity. I realized that they were not the oblivious ones, I was. I started noticing and reinterpreting various cultural things. Yes, young couples are everywhere, but not all of them are heterosexual couples, some are same-sex couples. And who knew? Some of those nicely dressed men on the Metropolitano are [maybe] in fact gay. [My Spanish instructor] was not obviously being heteronormative, she probably just did not want to offend anyone by making them read a sentence that did not match with the majority and more acceptable sexual orientation. And even if she had a sense about me, just like a teacher in the States, the culture is not at a place where it is appropriate to ask your student their sexual preferences. That is okay.

[My country coordinator] went on to say that Lima is similar to other big cities in that they must adopt an open mind for diversity. In a city, you must learn to coexist with people that are vastly different from you. And with that comes shared values and acceptance. No, Perú is not necessarily at the point of the majority agreeing with this controversial civil unions bill, but more and more individuals are open to living amongst and loving their gay neighbors.

And there it was. I literally just came out to my [host] parents. They are incredibly wonderful. I knew they would be, but there is always that fear that gets in the way.

Even before this moment though, I wept about their capacity to love me when writing in my personal journal last week. Just like [my Spanish instructor], they accepted me long before I came out to them. They love me no matter what. There is such a thing as love, and it is powerful. But what do I do with this experience?

Especially going into service where I definitely will not be coming out to people, it is about time I let go of the fear that people will suddenly turn on me if they assume or find out I am gay. That really is an irrelevant fear that is holding me back to my family's motto of "tranquilo." Another thing I have learned is that I am strong and I do not need to prove anything. I simply can be my hard-working, smiling, joyful, not-afraid-to-go-out-on-a-limb, loving self. That is enough. And it always has been.

How will this change my outlook on Peruvian culture? Culture is made up of individuals, and individuals are humans just like me. I do not need to reveal my sexual orientation to be recognized as a human being, my true self. It is time to let that old life of worry go and it is time for me to stop apologizing for being human.

# COSTA RICA

JOSIH HOSTETLER

## **Pura Vida: Learning to Be Without Worry**

During my decisions about going to college I was adamant that I would have some sort of international experience in my studies. As a prospective student I was invited by the Goshen College admissions department to a dinner and speaking series with former Costa Rican President, Óscar Arias. President Arias spoke about the time during his first presidency where he had worked to bring peace in Central America. I was hooked, and knew I wanted to go to Costa Rica for a Study Service Term (SST) through Goshen College.

SST typically took place during the second year at Goshen, but my first year preceding had been a somewhat turbulent time for me. I had lost a close friend from high school in an accident right before finals, come out as gay man to my family and the college, and was pressuring the administration at Goshen to move the LGBT group (PRISM) on campus from a “support group” (with all the loaded meaning) to a student group with its own budget and student direction with a voice in student government. In the midst of this it was requested that I meet with one of the academic advisors on campus regarding my upcoming SST.

I thought it was a little odd that I would be meeting with an academic advisor outside of my major, but I thought, “Well, maybe everybody meets with an advisor before they go on SST, maybe advisors are just randomly assigned.” It was not random, the person I met with began by asking me about how the effort was going to move the support group to a student group. (Again, a little odd knowing I was there to speak about SST.) After we spoke about the group, the advisor asked if I had any knowledge about being gay in Latin America. I explained that I had researched that Latin and Central America are not monolithic in their treatment of LGBT people, but that Costa Rica was one of the more progressive countries when it comes to gay rights. The advisor told me that was true, but having been there that it was necessary for me to be discrete, and not come out to my “host parents.” I thanked this person for the advice, and left the office. In retrospect, I am sure that this advisor was trying their best to prepare me



for living in a different country, and I was glad for the opportunity, but I was upset that I was the only one to have that “talk.”

Time finally came for me to go on my SST, and I was looking forward to just living in a new, warm place for a while. (It was January in Northern Indiana after all.) I packed an all-too-large suitcase (it barely made weight) and met the rest of my group at the college before we all took the bus to the airport. After the flight to San Jose, Costa Rica, we all rolled out of customs and were driven to a hotel near the airport to stay the first night. I had been to Puerto Rico a few times, so the language, food, and “heated” showers were not new to me, but the part about being in a different country was. The next day we met our host families, which in my case were a younger couple without children.

My hosts were young enough that they did not want me to call them my host “parents,” that was definitely not hip enough for this couple! I did not come out to them, although I had a sense that they knew, but was never sure. I did share with them that I was not Mennonite, but something similar, but tried to differentiate myself in that and a few other ways.

The wife of the couple really liked ABBA, and I had just fallen in love with it myself, and I introduced her to the musical “Rent.” I think I was one of the few students they had that obtained a video rental store card. I would bring back a new movie to their house each weekend night, so that we could watch movies together, but they would be in Spanish so I could continue learning. We also went to a few plays in San Jose, and I enjoyed their company.

I also found that exploring by myself was very exciting. Since the place where I was living was a long bus ride outside of San Jose, I would often stay in the city after my group language and cultural lessons in the afternoon, so that my hosts would have time to get home and settled, and I would have time to explore. I loved reading local newspapers and magazines, and found that a few of the newsstands carried *Gente 10*, a queer-focused magazine that still exists to this day. I would buy the newest edition as soon as it hit the newsstand. Of course that meant that by the end of the semester I was carrying around a stack of magazines in my backpack! I also found an internet-café that was dedicated to queer people. I also had a couple run-ins with men touching me on the bus, and I was whistled at by a guy. I know to women this is disturbing, but to me it

was liberating.

Following a few months in San Jose, each student took an assignment in a different area of the country for the “service” portion of SST. I was assigned to San Ysidro, an agricultural city in the southern end of Costa Rica. When I arrived I learned that I would actually be living on a farm a few miles outside of that city and commuting to a skilled nursing facility during the day to help with physical therapy. Even though I had grown up in a rural area, I had never lived on a farm itself. It was a new experience, and one that I am very grateful for. Even though San Jose had been lovely, and the host family on the farm where I was living were the warmest group of people, it was a bit of challenge.

I found myself with lots of time and very little to do after my service assignment during the day. I started helping around the farm, helped to butcher a pig, and even had my first real drink. (Homemade guaro should be no one’s first drink!) I even started a journal, a practice that I had thought was a little too insular in the past. It was during this important time of just being, one clear night staring past the palms into the stars, that I discovered that to be my true self I needed to make my own path, and that if options were not available to me at Goshen, it was time to leave and find someplace new.

So with only a few weeks left to SST, I starting making plans to go somewhere else. I ended up transferring to Manchester University the next year, where I would meet a roommate who became my boyfriend, and eventually my husband. It was fitting then that we traveled together to Costa Rica for our honeymoon.

While not every interaction was great, and I was not ever technically “out” to my host families, I think that it was vital that I remained true to myself and had the support of my classmates and in-country faculty. It was as we were leaving for the airport and waiting in the bus that I pulled out one of my *Gente 10* magazines, that one of my classmates said, “Hey, I see Club Avispa [a prominent gay club] advertised on your magazine, did you go there?” I stated that I had not, but wondered how he knew about it. It turned out that the brother of his host family was out and he and his boyfriend took my classmate to the club! Pura Vida...

# PERU

LIZ B.

I am Liz B. I use She/They pronouns, I'm not comfortable with the binary but beyond that I don't have a label. This is the main reason I identify as Queer and not Bi. I am white. I grew up in a rural Mennonite community and went to the Mennonite high school there. I attend Goshen College. I accept my identity as culturally Mennonite, but at this point I am uncertain if I choose to be Mennonite. I grew up in a lower middle class home with siblings. I struggle with Anxiety and Depression. I have ADHD. This is anonymous for my own safety. This is my experience.

I went to Peru still mostly in the closet. I had only told a few close friends and gone to Prism (the anonymous support group for LGBTQ+ students). I was worried about level of acceptance in Peru, but had kept putting off research because I was afraid of the answers. I told myself it wouldn't be a big deal, and it wasn't really...but I'm still struggling to process it. I am exhausted trying to understand what happened and how it affected me. I am tired of worrying that I am making something a bigger deal than it is.

When I arrived in Peru my close (straight) friend was the only one in our group who knew how I identified. The first few weeks there, the topic did not come up among my Lima host family, and I had no desire to change that. As the weeks went on I grew close to my host mother. She cooked me my meals and ate with me and we would stay hours after we were finished talking. She never ran out of patience for me and my choppy Spanish. She was kind and very caring. We made jewelry together and laughed at my host sister's dog. I was managing to get along without the topic coming up.

My classmates had different experiences. Some of them shared experiences of host families/acquaintances expressing micro-aggressions, others shared experiences of ignorant/derogatory/LGBTQ+phobic conversations. Sometimes it was saying how so-and-so used homosexual as an insult. Other times it was talking about how many Peruvians (that we interacted with) used homosexual universally, not realizing that there were bisexual people, or that you could be trans but not gay etc. My impression from my classmates who were telling these stories was that they assumed



they were relating these stories to only straight LGBTQ+ “advocates.” At the time I didn’t speak up because it felt like they were on my side, and I appreciated their voiced disagreement. On one hand it helped me realize that I had to stay in the closet for my own safety, without having to have that conversation with my host family. On the other hand, looking back, it was emotionally exhausting, and my peers didn’t fully understand the gravity of what they were saying.

During the last weeks of the study portion of the term, the news came on while my host mother and I were talking about the telenovela we had just finished. There was a lull in conversation and I noticed what looked like women protesting on TV. I asked my mother what they were doing. She said they were feminists; they were protesting something. Wanting to talk to my host mother about her opinions of feminism, I asked her more questions about what were they protesting and what she thought of it. Not long into the conversation she looked me dead in the eye and said “See, the feminists and homosexuals are friends.” This made sense to me so I said “yes, of course” and asked her another question about the feminists. At this point she decided to stop talking to me about the feminists and start talking to me about the homosexuals.

To her homosexual was a blanket term for everything sexually deviant, and I mean everything. From bestiality to child molesters, in her eyes anything that wasn’t straight was homosexual. If she knew I was queer she would equate me with a child molester. She also talked about trans people saying that they were just confused about their gender, that they weren’t taught right or that they got confused and weren’t corrected. She said people weren’t born gay. She used bible references and a lot of logic/arguments that I had previously deemed as something that even homophobic people had moved past. Having the conversation in Spanish made it more complicated because I couldn’t understand the nuances and connotations of what she was saying. Things got even more complicated when she asked my opinion (I can understand Spanish much better than I can speak it). I voiced my opinion from the stance of a straight person who had LGBTQ+ friends. Half of the time I spent in conversation was me being stuck over words, trying to figure out how to discuss this very loaded topic with my limited vocabulary. This was definitely not covered in Spanish II. She was very patient and listened well, as she usually was. I did my best to do the same. She didn’t actually personally know any “homosexuals” (or rather know that she knew at least one). We thanked each

other for talking and sharing our opinions even though it was difficult. We said we should continue to talk about it (but we never did). Two and a half hours after I had asked about the feminists, we parted ways and went to bed.

I needed to talk about this (more than I realized) but I didn’t know how or when or to whom. It never occurred to me that I could talk to my leaders, it never occurred to me to call someone at home and talk to them. I tried to talk to some of my trusted classmates with some success, although I remained to them just another “straight ally.” I also have had many conversations with people who I disagree with about topics that are close to me so why should this be significant? So someone was disagreeing with me, big deal. I brought it up and then I left it there.

The next few weeks progressed similar to the first weeks, microaggressions, heteronormative telenovelas, and stories from classmates. When I was on service, I was in a much more rural area, so “homosexuals” hardly came up. Once my host sister called her brother gay as an insult, to which I calmly said “in my country it’s fine.” This felt/feels like a healthy response for me at the time. We had pretty limited TV, and poor to no internet access, so I was pretty cut off from any news other than Peruvian celebrity gossip. One night we watched a futbol game in the Copa America (hosted in the US this year). I wasn’t paying much attention during the pre-game ritual, but I caught the words “moment of silence for the people of Orlando.” I wondered what had happened. I went to bed.

Two weeks later I visited my classmates in Ayacucho, a larger city an hour away by bumpy, nauseating, combi. We went to a juice shop. We caught up with each other. As we were beginning to use the wifi to catch up with people at home, my friend (who was living in Ayacucho) began to fill me in on all the news I had missed in the past two weeks. Orlando came up. I learned about the shooting. We stopped talking. I checked my email. I read an email from the college president in response to the hate crime. I saw an email from our leader of Prism offering his support. I went to the bathroom. I had a panic attack.

I didn’t know how to talk about it.

I didn’t want to drain my classmates’ emotional energy. I didn’t want to be a burden. I didn’t want to be dramatic. I didn’t want to be as vulnerable as I already felt.

# RESOURCES

## **Go Abroad.com**

[LGBT Student Guide to Studying Abroad](#)

## **National Center for Transgender Equality**

[A Blueprint for Equality: The Right to Travel](#)

[Know Your Rights: Airport Security](#)

## **International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association**

[Maps: Sexual Orientation Laws](#)

[State Sponsored Homophobia Report](#)

[Global Attitudes Survey on LGBTI People](#)

## **Tufts University**

[The LGBT Guide to Study Abroad](#)

## **University of San Francisco**

[LGBT Student Guide for Education Abroad](#)

## **Williams College**

[Being Out While Studying Abroad](#)

## **Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE)**

[Identity: Sexual and Gender Expression Abroad](#)

## **Go Overseas.com**

[9 Major Life Lessons I Learned Studying Abroad as an LGBT](#)

## **Carleton College**

[Suggestions for LGBTQ Students Going Abroad](#)

[Print Resources for LGBTQ Students Studying Abroad](#)

## **On Call International**

[LGBT Safety: Advice for Study Abroad Students and Their Institutions](#)