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GRAY, ADAM

Experiencing Life in Costa Rica

Belleville student explores Central American country for two months

By Jennifer Bell

The Intelligencer

Adam Gray was as prepared as he could be for a two-month journey through the mountains and jungles of Costa Rica.

But he still received a major culture shock the moment he stepped off the plane in the central American country.

"I'd never been outside Canada and the U.S.," said the young Belleville man of his recent solo adventure south. "And in spite of doing plenty of research, and taking a Spanish course, I really wasn't ready for the trip."

Gray, an Algonquin College theatre arts graduate, knew he was heading to university for more schooling. But he also knew he wanted to experience some of the world before settling into a career.

"I figured if I didn't do it now, I probably never would. So when a friend of mine suggested going down to Costa Rica to explore the country, I started making plans."

As it turned out, Gray's friend didn't make the trip. So the 22-year-old decided to go it alone.

He returned home in early February, a little thinner, but otherwise in good health from a mostly-vegetarian diet and plenty of strenuous exercise.

And although Gray's plan to work on a screenplay amid the inspiration of a foreign country didn't quite pan out, he calls the trip "the experience of a lifetime."

Despite a bad beginning — his backpack was lost by the airline in San Jose, the capital city — Gray quickly adapted to the relaxed, casual atmosphere of the mostly-Spanish population.

"Life there is so different that you can't imagine unless you actually visit."

Gray learned, through his research, that it was "relatively cheap" to travel through Costa Rica.

And although he stayed at a couple of hotels, most nights he camped out in a tent or hammock, with fellow travellers he met along the way.

"When I look back on it now, I really left a lot to chance," he said of his journey. "I had a fair idea where I was headed, but often I'd join up with some other fellows on the spur of the moment."

The people he met, says Gray, were mostly young men, like himself, exploring the country on a shoestring budget.

"They usually were very fluent in Spanish, so I was able to rely on them quite a bit. In fact, I didn't need to speak Spanish much at all."

Gray's parents, Linda and Garry, were worried about their son's travels.

"I did try to talk him out of it," said his mother, "but once we realized he was determined to go, we thought it best to help him be prepared as possible."

Weekly phone calls home were a necessity, said Gray.

"I checked in every seven days, so hopefully that kept them from getting too nervous," he smiled.

Gray, who travelled through the central and southern part of the country, sometimes hiked as much as 20 kilometres in a day.

He also climbed both a dormant volcano — with a lake in the centre — and Costa Rica's highest peak, Mount Chirripo, at 3,810 metres (12,500 feet) during his travels.

Chirripo, he said, went from a temperate of 90 degrees Fahrenheit at the foot to below zero at the peak.

It was so cold, he said, that a propane-powered cookstove the youths he climbed with refused to work. Instead of eating cooked beans and rice, the group had to be content with dry granola.

Beans and rice — dietary staples of the country — were what Gray and his friends lived on for most of his two months in Costa Rica.

"It did get a bit monotonous, but it is very nutritious."

There were a few nights spent in the jungle amid creatures such as iguanas, but Gray said he had no inclination to kill and roast the large lizard, as did other

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members in his party. "I'm not that adventurous when it comes to food," he joked. Hundreds of monkeys and exotic birds, including the brightly-colored toucan, were a common sight as Gray made his way through lush jungle. He travelled lightly, storing everything from a tent to mosquito netting in a backpack weighing about 27 kg.

And more often than not, he slept with the surf pounding in his ears, or amid the cacophony of a tropical paradise. "I never realized how noisy the outdoors can be. It's different, though, than the sounds of a city. It's still peaceful."

Gray plans to head to university this fall to pursue a film career. But he'll look back at his eight-week journey "as probably one of the best forms of education I'll ever have."