

Here's my Study Abroad Story

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Major: Spanish, Health and Human Rights

Program: The Middlebury Program is a direct enrollment program, meaning students take classes at a local university with local students (as well as a half credit course with the program). The program has a strict language pledge and stresses the importance of community immersion. The program is very small, consisting of 5 to 15 students any given semester, one staff member in Montevideo, and one staff member in Buenos Aires that oversees all of the programs in South America. There is no on-site program base—Middlebury wants its students to get out in to the community. That being said, the on-site staff member is an amazing person who is available 24/7 for advice, coffee, and anything you may need. Middlebury offers various cultural events in Montevideo, ranging from a bike ride along the beach to a tour of the legislative palace. Additionally, Middlebury offers one big trip a semester (included in the program price). During my semester, we went to Cordoba, Argentina.

Students have the option of directly enrolling in three different universities—two private and one public. I attended Universidad Catolica de Uruguay, and loved that there were never more than 20 people in my classes. My favorite class was Ecotourism. I learned about the beautiful array of wildlife, flora, and fauna in the country and went on an overnight fieldtrip to a nature preserve!

Typical Day: Just like at CMC, my typical day varied depending upon my class schedule. On an energetic and optimistic morning, I would wake up around 8:30, eat a small breakfast and walk or bike the 2 miles to school. On a lazy day, I would jump out of bed, grab an apple, and catch the corner bus. The Middlebury Program host families provide breakfast and dinner, and we are expected to prepare our own lunch. Due to this, I had the opportunity to wander the local food markets every weekend and receive cooking lessons from my host mom. I would often bring a packed lunch to school to eat in between classes. I found that the other students were very warm and receptive and I quickly made friends at the university. Some days I would stay at the university after classes, chatting with classmates or studying in the library. Other days, I would return home and spend time with my host parents and “sibling” exchange students. At night, I enjoyed dinner with my host family and explored the city.



Highlights: It is really impossible to choose a highlight from my incredible semester. Montevideo is a small, safe city that receives only a moderate amount of tourists. Due to this, I found it easy to immerse myself in the culture and meet the locals. My friend and I had a catch phrase that I believe sums up my experience—"aprovecha cada momento". I made a pact to take advantage of as many cultural opportunities as possible. Whether that be relaxing at a local bar with a mixture of Uruguayan and international friends, diving in to the icy water on a cold winter day, or catching a local soccer game, there was rarely a dull moment.

While the true highlight of my experience was getting to know Montevideo like the back of my hand, I cannot ignore the amazing 3 weeks of travel at the end of my semester. After my program ended, I spontaneously decided to add on a month to my stay, and traveled from Uruguay to Argentina to Chile to Peru, all in bus. I learned to travel on a tight budget and completely live in the moment, as it was impossible to plan ahead more than a day in advance. Above all, it was fascinating to explore the similarities and differences between the cultures and, due to my emphasis on immersion in Montevideo, I was able to have rich conversations with the locals in every country.



Challenges: As with any international experience, I had to make various cultural adjustments. These adjustments ranged from minor, such as differences in food and meal times, to larger adjustments in social and political views. My host father genuinely believed that women could not play soccer, and to this day, I still question his opinions on race, homosexuality, and a slew of other topics. That being said, I greatly improved my Spanish debate skills, as I got in to regular, heated debates with him. Somehow, I left at the end of the semester with an odd bond (I think he admired my attempt to defend my own views).

Advice:

1. Have no expectations. It is impossible to know what to expect out of a study abroad experience. The fewer expectations you have, the easier it will be to adjust to and embrace the culture, and begin a sure-to-be amazing and enriching experience.
2. Get out of your comfort zone early on. While it may be scary, the sooner you attempt to immerse yourself in the culture and experience new things, the richer your experience will be. Sign up for a club, lean over and talk to your classmate, try to make a new food.
3. Make friends with locals. This is the best way to fully immerse yourself in a culture and, in my opinion, the most important part of study abroad.
4. Speak in the local language, even with other exchange students. You will rapidly improve your language abilities and the local people will have a ton of respect for you. It may seem uncomfortable for the first week to speak in a different language with a native English speaker, but it quickly becomes natural.
5. "Aprovecha cada momento": Live in the moment. Treasure every tea with your host mom, walk to school, and cultural excursion. It will all be over before you know it.