

COSTA RICA

The CIEE Sustainability program in Monteverde, Costa Rica is the perfect blend of social science, natural science, and cultural experience. It is fast paced, intense both in quantity of work and the demand of information, but it is well worth the investment. The main things that drew me to the program was the ability to study both the biological and social issues that accompany a country seeking economic development while still practicing my Spanish and participating in a home stay.

Though the program does not offer opportunities for independent research projects, it offers an internship within the community that allows for skill development as well as community involvement. The internships are highly variable in theme and in the job description, and because students get to choose their internship, they also can choose to focus on expanding knowledge in certain areas, developing a specific skill, or exploring the solution to a sustainability problem they are wrestling with at home. My internship was with ProNativas, an organization that promotes native plant gardens to reduce the risk of invasive exotics and increase small habitat refuges for the vast fauna found in Monteverde. For my internship, I mapped the plants in ProNativas' showcase garden and collected data on the individual plants to achieve a baseline in the database for future studies. Through this, I learned valuable mapping techniques applicable to potential future research opportunities and developed excel skills while benefiting a local environmental organization.

When not working on the month-long internship, the program is an intense blend of language courses offered through another local institution, field trips to organic coffee farms, the dry forest, pineapple plantations, national parks, geothermal plants, and biological reserves. The field trips for the biology classes were highly relevant to material we learned in class and each issue was dissected from every angle. For example, we toured a pineapple farm and went snorkeling the same week we learned about the sedimentation of corals due to agriculture. That same week in the social science class, we learned about role Nicaraguan migrant workers play in the cultivation of these crops, toured a pineapple farm, and interviewed two Nicaraguan migrant workers. My Spanish class had only two other individuals, so if you are eager for some formal practice, you will get the opportunity.

If you want a break from the Davidson pace, this program is not for you. However, this program is perfect for students genuinely interested in challenging concepts like sustainable development, the unique biology of tropical ecosystems, and the US's role in the development of other countries alongside improving your Spanish.