

## Studying Abroad in São Paulo, Brazil

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As a first-generation Mexican-Cuban American studying at American University, studying abroad was one of my many ‘firsts’ in college. I chose to study abroad in São Paulo, Brazil during the 2018 spring semester. I chose to study abroad in Brazil for many reasons. Currently I am majoring in International Studies with a concentration in International Development and Human Rights, my region of focus is Latin America. My regional focus was the first reason I choose to study within Latin America, but what made me choose Brazil was the fact that I would learn a new language. Additionally, CET’s emphasis on poverty and inequality stood out to me and was the aspect I admired most about the program. Overall my experience within the CET São Paulo program was filled with many ups and downs: I struggled with a language barrier, my shifting identity, different cultural norms, and the little things no one ever really tells you about.

Growing up in a bilingual Spanish speaking household I thought Portuguese would be easy to pick up – I was wrong. Out of four languages Portuguese was by far the most challenging yet was the most rewarding to learn. One of the largest forms of culture shock was not knowing the language and using my Spanish to get through the first few weeks. As time went on and as I learned more Portuguese adjusting became easier, but throughout that time not being able to communicate or express my thoughts clearly was frustrating. Another challenging aspect when I studied in Brazil were the cultural norms. One cultural norm that I constantly encountered was the lack of directness. When my roommates would ask me for a favor, like getting a class of water they would always pose it in a question like: “*Você gostaria de me pegar um copo de água?*” which means “Would you like to get me a glass of water?”. The lack of directness at times created confusion, because as a Latinx and American I was always addressed in a manner that was so direct there was no room for confusion. I decided to look at the glass half full for two reasons: The first being that Brazilians are naturally welcoming and that they want everyone to feel at home. The second reason was that I chose to study abroad in Brazil because I wanted to immerse myself within a different culture, and to do so I would have to stop using an ethnocentric perspective and assimilate as best as I could. The different cultural norms and the little things that no one prepares you for, like where to buy toilet paper or how to do your laundry are aspects you learn how to do over time. Being new to a country means not knowing things like the geographical landscape, the language, or what the Brazilian version of Benadryl is. But if I have learned anything at all, it’s that it all takes time and patience.

My experience studying in São Paulo as a first-generation Latina meant not only getting accustomed to new cultural norms, but also performing well academically in a completely new environment. I did it before when I selected to attend American University in Washington D.C., leaving behind all my friends and family to pursue my academic interests. If I did it then I knew I could do it now, after all I was a Junior in college and knew how institutions of higher learning operated. My identities as a woman of color and first generation posed some challenges but mainly gave me an advantage. I was raised in a bilingual Spanish speaking household and because of it Portuguese did come easier, as well as majority of the Brazilian cultural norms like greeting each other with hugs and kisses or sharing the food of your plate. The

challenging aspect that was difficult for me to grasp was my shifting identity as a brown woman. In the United States I am brown, there is no denying it. However, in Brazil I was viewed as a white woman. The reason why the way in which people perceived my race differently, was because in Brazil race is viewed as fluid, it isn't concrete - it is a spectrum. As a woman who is brown but considered to be light skinned and have wavy hair I was read as a white woman in Brazil. This was a complete game changer, because I now had white privilege and it resonated throughout my entire experience in Brazil. I was not only treated better because of my new-found privilege, but because I was an American who spoke multiple languages. I wasn't only treated better, but I was more comfortable in spaces that I knew I wouldn't be as comfortable in, if I were in D.C. Grappling and dissecting these aspects while I was in Brazil was difficult. I was trying to find my place in Brazilian society, which was an American exchange student, but needless to say I took great comfort that even though my race shifted I was a part of one of the most diverse societies in the world and welcomed by my friends.

My recommendation to other students who want to or are looking into studying in São Paulo are:

- Speak to someone who has previously been in the program
- Try to know basic aspects of the language – I recommend duo lingo
- Go in with an open mind, but do some research
- Only bring one carry on that's packed, use the other one for souvenirs
- When it comes to cultural norms, try to go with the flow
- Things will be difficult and will get frustrating- It is okay to cry
- When experiencing culture shock/reverse culture shock- adjust, lean in to the discomfort, and learn how to make it work for you
- Hang out with the Brazilian roommates- They are single handedly the most incredible people you will ever encounter (They are also loads of fun!)

I had an incredible experience during my semester in São Paulo, I was able to learn about poverty and inequality, while being sensitive to the local population. I received invaluable opportunities to visit places like an indigenous village and ask first hand questions. I also came back knowing a new language, but most importantly I got the opportunity to meet incredible individuals from the on-site CET staff in São Paulo, to the amazing Brazilian roommates.