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GLBL1000

July 28th, 2025

Growing up, my family said I had eyes of wonder. I never truly knew what they meant, but they always said that from the moment I was born, I was curious, more curious than most in our tiny town. Pritchard BC is where I've called home for all my life, a little farming town an hour outside Kamloops.

Where I grew up, everyone knew each other, and no one really went further than the 45-minute drive into Kamloops for things such as groceries. Back then, my world was small and my community was even smaller. However, it never stopped me from being curious. I had the privilege of having parents in this community who recognized the importance of exposing me to travel and diverse cultures, and that it was essential to expand my horizons beyond our community. I was 3 when I was first put on a plane, and the flight attendants were surprised by how calm and quiet I was.. They fawned over how well-behaved I was, and one said I was a natural traveller. Little did they know that comment would go a long way. By the time I was ready to be put in school, I begged my mother to take me to a school where I could learn Spanish. Sadly, growing up in Canada, there are no Spanish immersion schools; however, my mother took my passion for learning languages and cultures and ran with it, eventually enrolling me in a French immersion program. I was thrown into an entirely different culture from my own.

The way the teacher acted and taught was quite different from the English teachers, and eventually, I started to notice a divide between me and some of my English program peers. And while I was still young, looking back now, this was my first interaction with what culture can be. While culture can be something that divides different countries and nationalities (Culture with a

big C), there are also so many subcultures within a community and country, especially in Canada. There are different age cultures, French vs English vs Indigenous. Other minorities, such as the LGBTQIA+ community, have their own cultures, rural vs cities. These are what I all consider little c cultures. Although being in an immersion program was my first introduction, I didn't start putting the pieces together till later during my year and a half of studying abroad with TRU. Within this time span, I learned a great deal about not only myself but also about other cultures. I travelled to over 13 countries in my time studying abroad, spending almost every other weekend in a new place, each with amazing and kind people who enthusiastically shared their cultures with me, making me feel welcomed and at home. However, the country that truly impacted me was Indonesia.

I was in Australia, sitting in my dorm room, looking for places to travel, when someone suggested doing a volunteer program instead. That way, I would not be totally alone and could be doing something useful on my trip. So, I sat down with my laptop and started searching. A couple of hours later, I landed on a page called Green Lion, which had many volunteer opportunities, including a turtle sanctuary on the Island of Nusa Pendia. At first, I wasn't sure, but I applied anyway. After my acceptance, I hopped onto a plane and arrived in a new country. When I arrived, everything about this was out of my comfort zone; everything was different, from the language to the climate, cultural norms and standards. And while I was completely overwhelmed on my first day, the people I met could not have been more welcoming and understanding.

Over the next few weeks, we shared stories, food, homes, and experiences, learning about each other. While we came from different backgrounds in the three weeks I was there, it felt as though that did not matter; we were each other's support system and family. In those short

few weeks, I gained a whole new perspective on intercultural communication, while I always knew about cultural differences. It was a whole different perspective to be working in a different country and culture with 20 other people all from different cultures around the world it made me gain a new found understanding of how important it is to zoom out of your own perspective and look at the whole picture once and while something you've done or have said will not always be taken the way its intended and its important to understand its no ones fault but it is our job to be understanding and empathic of these types of situations.

Indonesia also taught me something more personal. It's okay to be on your own. Growing up, while everyone told me I was quite independent, it is a totally different thing to move away or travel somewhere abroad on your own, especially as a woman. At first, I was very resistant to going to Indonesia; I wouldn't know anyone, and I was afraid of isolation. But coming out of the experience, I am so glad I went on my own. Not only did I learn the importance of independence, but also the importance of taking care of oneself. I also find that if I went with someone else, I would not have made the deep connection that I did.

While there is much more I could say, and so much from my experience that I will forever carry with me, the one thing that stuck with me was the importance of intercultural understanding and independence. This is something I have already chosen to share when speaking at Study Abroad information sessions. While volunteering in high school, but it is also something I hope to teach in the future when I become a teacher and perhaps inspire other students to step out of their comfort zone. Because I know it is something I will definitely continue to do for myself.

