

Beyond Borders: A Journey of Self-Discovery and Connection on the Baja Peninsula

Student Diplomacy Corps 2024

By: Isabelle A. Harry

From the moment I was born, my twin sister has been my constant companion. Through every school, every move, and every transition, she has been my unwavering support. As I stood alone at the gate, ready to board my flight to San Diego International Airport, I felt a profound sense of separation. The idea of venturing so far from her side for the first time was both exhilarating and daunting. This opportunity with the Student Diplomacy Corps represented more than just a trip—it was a chance to discover my own identity apart from the close bond we've always shared. The anticipation of flying independently was a mix of excitement and apprehension. The thought of navigating a new city and engaging with unfamiliar faces on my own stirred a blend of emotions. It was a pivotal moment, a step toward personal growth that came with its own set of uncertainties. As I boarded the plane, I felt a heightened awareness of the weight of this journey and the significance it held in my quest for self-discovery. Upon landing in San Diego, the city greeted me with a mix of excitement and overwhelming newness. The airport, a bustling hive of activity, seemed to mirror the jumble of emotions I was experiencing. The initial pang of loneliness was palpable; for the first time, I was truly on my own. The familiar comfort of my twin's presence was absent, and I had to navigate the unfamiliar terrain of an independent adventure.

Making my way to baggage claim felt like stepping into a new world. The crowd was a blur of faces, and I was uncertain about who to look for or where to go. The sense of isolation was real, but it was also a moment of personal challenge and growth. Then, amidst the sea of travelers, Sydney appeared. With her large duffel bag in hand, she looked just as lost as I felt. I assumed she was part of the same program, and our shared uncertainty quickly sparked a connection. Waiting together, Sydney and I struck up a conversation that became a lifeline amidst the unfamiliarity. Our mutual apprehension turned into a shared experience, and as we talked, the initial loneliness began to fade. When the rest of the group

arrived, the feeling of being part of something bigger than myself began to settle in. Meeting new people and starting to build relationships provided a sense of belonging that was both reassuring and exciting.

When I first encountered everyone, I was immediately struck by the incredible diversity within our small group of nine. They were from all over the world, whether it was just an hour's flight away from me in New York or a ten-hour journey from Spain. Each person brought their own unique background, perspectives, and personalities to the table.

Our group leaders, Victor, Breeze, and Ashley, were a huge part of what made our journey so special. Victor was always at the forefront of our adventures, encouraging us to step out of our comfort zones and try new things. He had a way of pushing us just enough, like the time he got us to try cow brains—an experience that was both thrilling and nerve-wracking. Victor's constant drive to explore the unknown taught me that real growth happens when you're willing to take on challenges, even if they seem a bit scary at first. Breeze, who everyone fondly called "Tarzan," was the ultimate adventurer. He brought so much energy and excitement to our group, whether we were swimming in the ocean or hiking through tough landscapes like San Lino. Breeze had this knack for making every moment feel like part of a grand adventure with his fun facts and interesting perspective, but he also knew how to be a comforting presence when things got tough. He showed us that it's possible to embrace the wild side of life while still feeling safe and supported. Ashley, on the other hand, brought a different vibe to the group. With her sharp wit and infectious humor, she could make any situation lighter and more enjoyable. Ashley was so easy to talk to, which made it comfortable for everyone to open up and share their thoughts. Her jokes weren't just about getting laughs—they really helped us bond and connect on a deeper level. Ashley's down-to-earth nature and genuine interest in everyone made her a key part of turning our group of strangers into a close-knit community.

My initial feelings of nervousness quickly gave way to a deep sense of connection as I began to appreciate just how remarkable this group of people was. The bonds we formed were strong and genuine, and even though our daily interactions have become less frequent, those nine individuals have carved out

an irreplaceable space in my heart. The memories and friendships we built together are truly special and will remain cherished for years to come.

As our group traveled from San Diego to Mexico, I felt a mix of anticipation and excitement. Leaving behind the familiar sights and sounds of the DMV area, with its fast-paced rhythm and urban environment, I was eager to immerse myself in the vibrant contrasts that awaited us in Mexico. The transition was striking—from the organized grid of neighborhoods and modern landmarks of Washington, DC, to the dynamic streets of Mexico, alive with a burst of colors, sounds, and smells that were both exhilarating and unfamiliar. The slower, more rhythmic pace of life in Mexico, combined with the warmth and hospitality of the people, offered a unique perspective that was both challenging and inspiring. As we journeyed further into the Baja Peninsula, the dramatic landscapes, pristine beaches, and vibrant marine life provided the perfect backdrop for our expedition.

Our time in Kino, a small coastal town where we stayed at Prescott College's Kino Bay Center, was one of the most memorable parts of our trip. The center plays a crucial role in sea turtle conservation. For just one day, our group participated in a project that involved tagging and measuring sea turtles, a critical part of monitoring these endangered species. Early in the morning, we headed to the beach, where marine biologists briefed us on the tagging process. As I carefully handled the turtles, I felt a deep connection to the natural world and a sense of responsibility to protect it. This hands-on involvement in conservation efforts not only solidified my interest in marine biology but also highlighted the importance of research and data collection in preserving endangered species.

While the turtles were a highlight, the rest of our time in Kino was equally enriching. We spent several days immersed in marine biology, with a mix of lectures, fieldwork, and hands-on activities. One of the most thrilling aspects of this was scuba diving, which allowed us to explore the underwater world firsthand. Diving into the crystal-clear waters of the Baja Peninsula was like entering a new world. The vibrant coral reefs were teeming with life—schools of neon-colored fish darted between corals, while larger creatures like sharks and rays glided gracefully in the distance. Through these dives, we were able to observe the intricate relationships between species and the delicate balance of marine ecosystems.

In addition to diving, we visited several islands, each with its own unique ecosystem. These excursions provided further insight into the diversity of marine life in the region and the importance of preserving these habitats. Whether it was studying the behavior of marine mammals or exploring tide pools teeming with life, each activity deepened my understanding of marine biology and fueled my passion for the subject.

Beyond the scientific aspects of our trip, the cultural immersion we experienced was equally impactful. Traveling through the Baja Peninsula, we engaged with local communities, learning about their traditions, customs, and ways of life. The people of the region have a deep connection to the land and sea, and their knowledge and practices have been passed down through generations. Our journey also included visits to historical sites and natural landmarks, such as a cardon forest in Sanora with the biggest cactuses I've ever seen. These experiences further enriched our understanding of Mexico's history and the deep cultural ties that bind the people to the land.

Our time in Kino also taught me some unexpected lessons, particularly about the value of water. Unlike at home, where clean, running water is something I rarely think twice about, Kino had a limited supply, and that scarcity was a daily reality for the local community. We had to be extremely careful with every drop, whether it was rationing water for drinking, using it sparingly for washing, or simply being mindful of how much we used for basic tasks. This was a stark contrast to my usual habits, where I might leave the tap running without a second thought. Living in a place where water was so precious really opened my eyes to how much we often take this resource for granted. It wasn't just about cutting back; it was about understanding that in some parts of the world, people live with this kind of scarcity every day. The experience made me more aware of my own water usage and the impact it has on the environment. I found myself thinking more critically about how much water I actually need versus how much I typically use out of convenience. This shift in perspective was profound, making me realize that conservation isn't just an abstract concept—it's a necessity for many people, and it should be treated with the seriousness it deserves.

I left Kino with a much deeper appreciation for water as a vital resource, understanding that it's not something we should ever take for granted. This experience has stayed with me, influencing how I think about water use in my daily life, from taking shorter showers to turning off the tap while brushing my teeth. It's a small change but one that I believe can make a significant difference when adopted more broadly. The lessons I learned in Kino continue to remind me of the importance of being mindful of the resources we have and the responsibility we all share in protecting them.

In Loreto, staying with a local family presented a unique set of challenges and rewards. Initially, the fact that none of my host family members spoke English felt intimidating. It was a reminder of how reliant we often are on language for connection. However, this barrier quickly turned into one of the most enriching aspects of my trip.

Communicating through gestures, shared laughter, and the occasional use of a translation app became an adventure in itself. I discovered that the essence of communication extends far beyond spoken words. We navigated our interactions with creativity, often using visual aids or context to bridge the gaps. This process of finding new ways to connect was both humbling and empowering. One of the most touching moments of my stay was when my host dad, with a sincere smile, said in Spanish, "Mi casa es tu casa. Si alguna vez necesitas algo, estamos aquí para ti," which translates to, "My house is yours. If you ever need anything, we're here for you." This simple but heartfelt offer of support was deeply moving. It wasn't just about providing a place to stay; it was an open invitation to be part of their lives. The sentiment behind his words spoke volumes about their generosity and the genuine care they had for me as a guest.

Despite our limited verbal communication, my host sister and I formed a surprisingly deep bond. We shared stories about our lives, with each of us using our native languages and relying on the help of translation apps when needed. Our conversations might have been a bit fragmented, but the emotional connection we built was profound. We exchanged cultural insights and learned new phrases from each other, turning our differences into points of connection. My host family's openness extended beyond just words. They included me in family activities, shared their local customs and traditions, and made sure I

felt comfortable and at home. This level of hospitality went beyond mere courtesy; it was a true reflection of their warmth and the strong sense of family they fostered. This experience reminded me of the universal nature of kindness and the ways in which love and support can transcend cultural and linguistic differences. The host family's generosity left a lasting impression on me and added a deeply personal layer to my journey in Mexico. Their warmth made the trip not just memorable but profoundly meaningful, illustrating how genuine human connection can bridge any gap.

This journey has been more than a geographical adventure; it has been a profound personal exploration. From the initial separation from my twin sister to the intimate connections I formed with new friends and a host family, every moment contributed to my growth. The challenges I faced—navigating a new city alone, adapting to a different culture, and understanding the value of precious resources—have all taught me the importance of resilience, adaptability, and empathy. As I look back, I realize this trip has not only broadened my horizons but also deepened my appreciation for the world around me. The friendships, lessons, and experiences I've gained will continue to influence my journey ahead, reminding me of the beauty of embracing new challenges and the strength found in human connection. This adventure has underscored that while stepping out of my comfort zone can be disconcerting, it is precisely through these experiences that we grow and discover our truest selves.