

Pura Vida

Enjoying the "Pure Life" Costa Rica Style

By Elizabeth Hopkins, Guthrie, Okla.

Small islands appeared from the blue-green Caribbean Sea as four Oklahoma State University students neared one of the world's most beautiful countries, Costa Rica.

With more than 60 volcanoes, seven types of forests, and 5 percent of the world's plant and animal biodiversity, a world of opportunity and *pura vida* lies within Costa Rica for anyone wanting a cultural experience.

"Hola! Bienvenidos!" came from every direction.

"Becky, look over here," said Adele Tongco, coordinator of international programs in agriculture for the OSU College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources.

Near the immigration gate in the San José International Airport, Tongco pointed at a billboard of tourists traveling through the canopy of the rain-

forest, just one example of the many learning experiences students soon would enjoy.

They explored the forest canopy and learned about treetop ecology, as well as experienced various forest environments, from rainforest to cloud forest to tropical forest.

Why was Tongco with a group of students in Costa Rica?

"I have taken students to study abroad in Costa Rica and Thailand," Tongco said. "[This] exposure gives students new knowledge, not only of another country but for certain, the students acquire new knowledge that has not happened in a classroom."

This past summer, four students joined Tongco on a five-hour airplane ride to Costa Rica as part of CASNR's newest international agricultural study abroad program. They traveled to learn about the country's rural development and agriculture on a field trip coordinated by native Costa Rican and CASNR alumnus Eliecer Vargas.

"OSU has such strong ties with these two countries," Tongco said. "Through such activities as study abroad programs, the alumni were able to develop collaborative activities with their alma mater."

Some of the activities included intensive farm and project visits combined with lectures by scientists about carbon sequestration, sound management of renewable natural resources, conservation of biodiversity and practical, sustainable development.

"Through lecture and project visits, students were offered a unique opportunity to understand what it takes to implement sustainable agriculture and promote wise use of natural resources," Tongco said.

Students learned about organic coffee and vegetable farming, as well as cooking and eating organic products from farms and villages they visited. They also had the chance to pick, roast, grind and package coffee.

"We traveled through winding roads up a mountain to observe a milk and cheese farm and an organic banana and cocoa production [facility] where we actually did some processing of cocoa: picking and tasting fruit; roasting and threshing cocoa pods; and grinding and cooking the cocoa," Tongco said.

Students interacted with indigenous people and shared their experience in forming cooperatives for their eco-enterprises, such as an iguana conservation-breeding farm and a banana vinegar plant.

Tongco, originally from the Philippines, has traveled the world after receiving her bachelor's degree from Central Luzon State University in Nueva Ecija, Philippines, which is 90 miles south of where she was born.

"I have been to Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, China, Turkey, Indonesia, Costa Rica, the United Kingdom, Mexico and Guatemala," she said. "Each country presents a unique experience in the richness of its culture."

Tongco came to the United States in 1972 to pursue her doctoral degree in agricultural education at OSU, following in her father's footsteps.

"My father is an alumnus of OSU," she said. "When he retired in 1975 from CLSU, he was a professor and department chairman of animal science."

"My mother was educated at Columbia University in New York as a Fulbright-Hays Scholar, where she received her master's degree," Tongco said. "She was also the dean of the largest college of arts and sciences at Central Luzon State University."

The Tongco family's educational success does not end with Adele. Not only did her husband, Alejandro Tongco, graduate from OSU in 1988 with his doctorate in general engineering, but also her daughter Tara Tongco graduated in 2001 with her journalism and broadcasting Bachelor of Science degree from OSU.



Above: Becky Dillsaver (left), Adele Tongco, Leah Dillsaver and Jana Morris tour CATIE University's botanical garden.

Right: Palm trees along the Caribbean coast were a familiar sight when students participated in environmental awareness tours. (Photos by Elizabeth Hopkins)

Tara Tongco, is a communications specialist for CoBiz Inc. in Denver.

"There are three generations of OSU alumni in our family, and a total of four OSU graduates including my husband," Tongco said.

In addition to the OSU graduates, Tongco's son, Brent, graduated in 2003 from Loyola University in Chicago.

He currently works as a senior account executive for Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide in Denver.

Although Tongco's children did not have the opportunity to study abroad in Costa Rica or Thailand with their mother, both had the chance to study in Europe. Tara Tongco also studied at Kaliningrad through OSU's study abroad programs.

When leading study abroad trips, Tongco said she encourages students to ask questions and absorb as much of the culture as possible.

"It's encouraging how excited she gets about everything and in return gets everyone else excited," said Jana Morris, a plant and soil sciences graduate student.

Morris attended the Thailand trip, as well as the Costa Rica trip, along with three other students who went to both countries with Tongco.

"I wanted to know about the cultures and how their structure is compared to the rest of the world," said Leah Dillsaver, environmental science graduate student.

"She made the programs interesting to us and geared it toward the whole group even though our areas of study are so diverse," Dillsaver said.

Students became close with Tongco and built a relationship with her because she is a lot of fun, Morris said.

"Lifelong friendships develop, and the experience of learning and being together for almost two weeks creates some bond," Tongco said. "It just ignites the education of the students."

Tongco also said she feels close and comfortable with students and she becomes a "mother" figure when traveling with them.

"She actually took care of us," Dillsaver said.

Tongco said reading testimonials of students is the driving force behind her desire to make a difference in a student's college experience.





OSU student Becky Dillsaver picks coffee as one of the team challenges at an organic farm in Costa Rica. (Photo by Leah Dillsaver)

"[Thailand] was a trip that I will never forget," said Jennifer Walker, animal science alumna. "It opened my eyes to another world that is on the other side of the globe. Their lifestyle, beliefs and way of life is unique to their country and amazing to learn about. Some day I hope to return and study there."

Thailand and Costa Rica are just two of the international study opportunities CASNR offers.

Tongco coordinates study abroad programs and encourages students to study abroad in places such as Mexico, Honduras, China, Italy, Germany, Peru, France and Scotland.

"Students from all majors may join the trip," Tongco said.

Students can learn more about the study abroad programs through fliers, classes and other students.

"The popularity of the trips mainly comes from word of mouth from previous students who have gone on international field trips," Tongco said.

To learn about a new culture and alternative sustainable agriculture, as well as earn three credit hours, experience the *pura vida* of Costa Rica. ☺