



Aidan
from Georgetown
to
Brazil

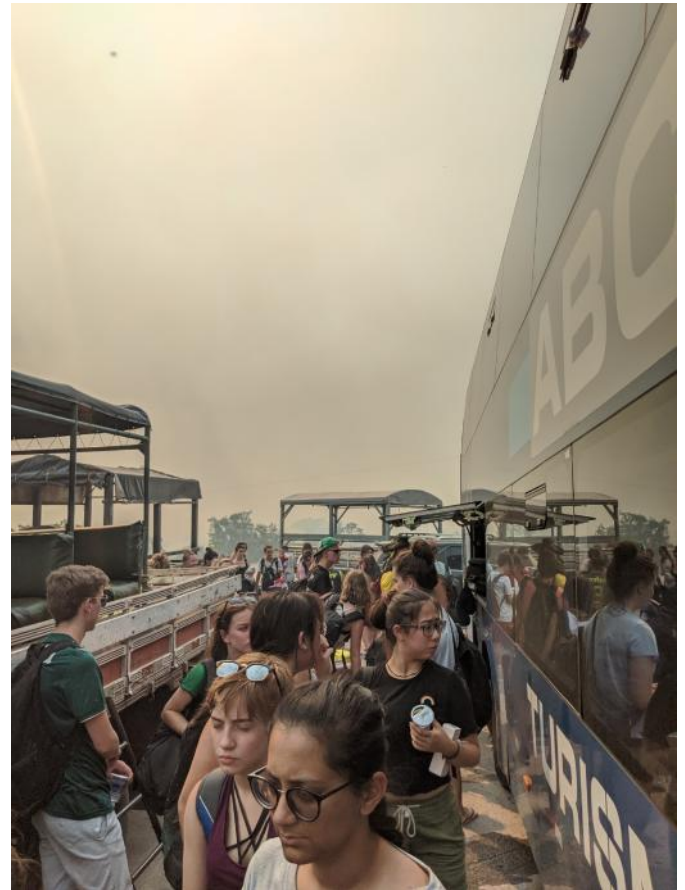
*“From Scuba Diving to Forest Fires,
We did it ALL in the Pantanal”*

Ever since I first went on Exchange, one of the things I look forward to most has been the trips. I've been on one trip so far, and it has been absolutely amazing. I went to the south of the Amazon Pantanal and Bonito regions. The trip started in Sao Paulo; I had to fly there from my city, Recife, all the way in the Northeast. Once I got to Sao Paulo I went have dinner with the rest of the students. I was the last student to show up other than two of my friends who are from another city in my district. They were caught in traffic and missed their flight. They showed up fairly late that night.

It was really nice to get to know all these new people. When I first showed up, I was greeted by some familiar faces and a bunch I did not know. When I look back on that moment now and think of this group of people, they are some of the closest friends I have in Brazil, the guys who I met on the first nights in our rooms. While we were out at dinner, they easily became some of my best friends on the trip.

The first day of the trip was uneventful, to say the least. We were on a bus for about 16 hours. My best friend on the trip was Tendija or Ben ten as we called him. Because we were up late the night before we decided to sleep. Sleeping was so easy; we got on the bus and went to the back and slept for about 6 hours. During the rest of the bus ride, we did things from having a dance party to watching movies; it was quite fun, but we didn't even make it all the way to the Pantanal. That night we stopped in another hotel where we met up with everyone else who had flown to Campo Grande instead of busing from Sao Paulo (I decided to take the bus because you had to pay for it anyway) once again we were greeted with new faces and new friends.

The next day we got back on the bus heading to what was called The Farm Hotel. It is a hotel on a ranch in the Pantanal. They had cows and horses and chickens and pigs and we also saw things like armadillos, crocodiles and much more. But to get there, we had to get off the bus because we needed to go down some dirt roads where the bus couldn't fit. So, we unloaded the bus and loaded onto these old rickety trucks. From there we drove down the road looking at the wildlife that we were surrounded by. As we were almost to the hotel, one of the trucks broke down. We had to cram onto two trucks instead of three. It was super cramped, but it was still kind of fun. After we unloaded our bags from the trucks, we all lined up to get water from the mess hall and then we took our bags to our rooms.



My buddy Chris and I had the same idea right away and went straight for the pool. It is a small pool; we hadn't even seen it yet but we knew they had one, so we looked for it. As soon as we saw it, without saying a word to each other, we jumped in while wearing our clothes. It was just that hot a day; I believe it was 42 degrees Celsius. After the pool we changed, got some lunch then split up into groups for activities. My group went for an educational hike where we learned the trees, the plants and the animals that are from the Pantanal. I really enjoyed this. It is the exact type of thing I love to do in Canada except now it was an entirely different ecosystem.

Afterwards we went fishing. I am pretty good at fishing but, compared to everyone else there, I was amazing. I taught 5 people how to fish and personally caught two piranhas and a catfish. While we were fishing we were laughing the whole time because the crocodiles kept trying to eat the fish that we had caught. Tendija wasn't catching any fish and the crocodiles were coming up to where we were standing, so he decided to use his rod instead to smack the caimans to keep them away. That night we had a bit of a pool party with all 65 exchange students. It was crazy and just so much fun with lots of dancing and swimming and yelling for that matter. The Mexican guys had bought a huge horn which they blew occasionally. Overall an amazing night.

The next day we got back in our groups and my group went horseback riding which was a lot of fun. We were told we could do what we want so I walked around and talked with different people. I moved my way up and down the line of horses and talked to people about where they were from and what kind of things they like in their country; it was really cool learning about different countries.

That night we went on a nice Safari. We drove around for most of the night and saw lots of horses and birds. We also saw a monkey. We still had plenty of time, so we went to a section of the farm we hadn't been to before and a bunch of us got to feed the animals. We only got to do this because the sun was still up and we were waiting for the night animals to come out. While looking for the night animals, we drove around quietly with a guy pointing the light into the forest. All we saw were mosquitoes and a caiman crocodile, but we had already seen plenty of those.



The next morning, I decided to wake up extra early to watch the sunrise. I was the only one who did this, but it was amazing. After the sun came up I just fell back asleep, in my hammock, right where I was. Later someone came and woke me up. We all have breakfast packed up and left.(sunrise from hammock pic) The scariest part about my trip happened the that day. As we were leaving in the trucks, we saw smoke. The night before going on the Safari, we had been warned that there was a fire, but it was super far away. We could barely see a glow in the distance but coincidentally the smoke from the fire was what made the sunset so beautiful. We were told that because we were leaving the next day it wouldn't be a big deal and we didn't have to worry about the fire. They were wrong

The fire was right on top of us; it started on just one side with very light smoke but as we went down the road the smoke got heavier. The fire got worse and we started to see a lot more flames. The fire had clearly jumped from one side of the road to the other and both sides of the road we're on fire. This beautiful lush environment, full the wildlife that we had just seen flourishing days before was now burning down. The smoke got so bad we poured water on her shirts and covered our faces to stop the smoke from getting in our eyes. When got on the bus, everyone was quite rattled. we talked about what we had seen and how sad it was to see this amazing piece of wildlife, that we had cherished just a few days before, go up in flames. I had the realization that we were probably the last group of people who were lucky enough to see this area, because all of it was going to burn. We now had a unique experience that would stick with all of us forever.

When we got to the bus, were we could get water, we washed off our faces and poured water into our eyes. Then we loaded onto the bus and we're on our way to Bonito; everyone acted like nothing happened which was odd but makes a lot of sense. We were still trying to enjoy the trip. Everyone being down and upset because of what happened just would have prevented that, and I think everyone just had the same feeling.

Once we got to Bonito we went to our hotel, went to our rooms with our new roommates and then went out for dinner. We and walked the streets and the stores of Benito until it was late and time to go back to the hotel. We did this every night we were in Bonito. One of the days we were in Bonito we went to another hotel that all these different attractions. We weren't staying at the hotel, but we were going to do all the activities.

My group started off with river rafting. We joked around the whole way there and once we got to the river we hopped in our rafts and just chilled out and relaxed until we saw a waterfall. It seemed really really huge but turned out it was quite small, probably only five meters high. One time the guide pushed us towards the waterfall. You'd go down and most people flipped. Then the guide helped you back onto your raft. This is how most of the trip went with some different waterfalls and currents and rapids; it was a lot of fun.



After this, my group had free time, so we went to chill out in the river. We sat and talked, just had some fun some fun and ate some good food. Then our group was called to go to treetop trekking. In Canada I've done this a lot, so it was really easy for me, I took this opportunity to help others and push myself at the end of the course. There were two zip lines; the first one and its course brought you to a platform where you could exit and walk down. Or you could do the second one going down to a platform in the waterfall. When you are ziplining down you end up smashing into the water and getting soaked, but it was scorching that day, so everyone did it.

To rap up the day we went and to the archery range and shot arrows for 2 hours. It was cool that Reif and I we're great at it. We helped the people from Taiwan and India by teaching them how to shoot because they had never had an opportunity like this before.

The next day we went snorkelling then scuba diving. My group was the first to go scuba diving. So that we finished in time they made us the first group to go snorkelling as well. We got into wetsuits, were given flippers and given our headgear. Then we all went to the pool to get some training so that everyone understood the rules. Snorkelling was absolutely amazing. There were so many fish, bright colourful plants and much more. We had so much fun snorkelling down the river. My favourite part was when I saw an anaconda; it was a bit scary at the time because I really hate snakes, but it was rather cool seeing one in person.



Once we reached the end of the river, we got out of the river and climbed across a bridge and went to a zipline. We all took turns going down zipline trying to do flips and tricks. It was great, although I did knee myself in the head while trying to do a backflip. I had a small black eye for a day or two, but it was still amazing. Once we finished snorkelling, we got out of the water and ate lunch, rushed to a bus and moved to a different River to again go scuba diving. We could only Scuba dive in groups of 4, so the rest of us played in the lake on wakeboards and stand-up paddleboards and kayaks, knocking each other pushing each other around and play fighting until the next group was called.



When my group was called it was phenomenal; we walked out to the dock, had a fun time and saw the other group emerge from the water. They helped us get into our gear, talked to us, asked where we are from. The guide told us to dive in grab the rope, pull yourself to the bottom and wait there for us; so, I did.

Once I was at the bottom, I had to do what's called an equalization. It's when you equalize the pressure in both ears. You do this by plugging your nose and then blowing air through it. There are many other ways to do this, but this is the only way we were allowed. Then we all went in a group swimming down the river.

The guides held on to the girls and didn't let them swim on their own, but they didn't seem to care about me or my friend Mead, so we got to swim freely. I even went down into a little cave and got down to about 13m deep, almost twice as deep as I had before. I asked before I went down. By that I mean I tapped on the guides shoulder and pointed down the cave. He waved to tell me I was all good to go. Once we came out my two other friends were waiting there with their group. They saw us emerge from the water; it was pretty cool. I really loved scuba diving. There wasn't that much in the river, but it was still cool.



On the final full day of our trip another group showed up with the same touring company, so we had a big party with a professional chef for the barbecue and a DJ. It was really cool. Their group was much smaller but there ended up being about a hundred exchange students. It was really nice to get to meet all the new people and dance and have fun.

Throughout the entire trip my guy friends and I would routinely step up to the side, and someone would say something, and we would just start cracking up. People from all over the world were able to get along over something as simple as a joke. It was amazing that even though I only knew the people in the trip for about 10 days the friends I made and the people I knew felt like I had known them forever. I feel as if I've made some friends for a lifetime. I still text with them almost every day and there are plans to visit each other's cities and to meet up on trips. I think the trips like this are easily the best experience you can have on Exchange. All the fun with your host family, your friends from school and the other exchange students in your city is amazing but it's not the same as a trip like this. That's why I am so excited for the next trip.



If you are thinking of going on Exchange, know that you will make some of the best friends you have ever had in less time than you have ever had and still feel like you have known them forever.

Aidan