Jessica Baxter’s Jamaica 2013 Study Abroad Trip

During this study abroad experience of a lifetime, we learned so much about Jamaican agriculture and were pleasantly surprised to learn just as much about Jamaican culture during our brief stay on this beautiful island. Upon arrival to Jamaica, we were greeted by our bus driver and liaison. They helped us learn throughout the trip of various things about Jamaican culture. For example, we learned several folk songs and history about the historic places we drove by. During the first day, we drove across country from the airport to the University of the West Indies (UWI) at Mona. We saw many unfinished houses with rebar sticking out of the tops of the houses. Interestingly in Jamaica, people do not like having mortgages so they only build as they can afford materials. We also saw several farm animals, such as goats roaming on the side of the road. These goats were owned by people and it is a common practice not to fence their animals in because most likely they don’t own any land of their own.

(05/14/13) Once we arrived at UWI, we settled into our dorm room which would be our home for most of the next two weeks. That evening we had a welcoming dinner, serenaded by a local UWI collage band, which sang some Bob Marley songs and taught us a few Jamaican dance moves. In the morning, we walked across campus to get to the hall where we ate most of our authentic Jamaican meals, while we stayed at the university.
(05/15/13) Next, we went on a bus and walking tour of the campus and then made our campus IDs. We saw some of the remains of the aqueducts that were used when UWI was a former sugar cane plantation. We also were able to tour their chapel, which had beautiful stain glass windows and architecture.

We visited the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries which is comparable to the USDA in America. One of their main goals is sustainability for the farmer to be able to use the soil over and over again. Right now they are importing a lot of food but they want to try to use what they grow internally to try to cut down on importing so much food and increase sustainability. By 20/20 they want to be a major driver of agriculture. After that we went to the Caribbean Agriculture Research and Development Institute, CARDI, which started in 1975. They seem to focus on a lot of research, such as improving how tuber agriculture is done by using trellises instead of individual stakes.

(05/16/13) We went to a coffee farm in the Blue Mountains where they told us about the lengths they had to take to prevent pest and fungus such as the Coffee Borer and the coffee leaf rust from ruining the crop. Now they are moving towards using more organic fertilizers than inorganic due to the dry period lengthening. They are reusing the outside of the coffee berry, the pulp, as fertilizer now, which I believe is an excellent thing to do. Before the trip to see where the coffee is grown, I did not realized making the coffee into the familiar form we all know so well in the grocery
store took so many steps. If the Coffee Board deems the coffee unfit for consumption, they make sure to pull every bag off the shelf that is made by that farmer. The regulatory board looks at the size, color, and how much moisture that the coffee bean may have. When they told us we were going to see the BBQ I was not expecting what I saw. The coffee beans were laid on concrete out in a big square, three inches deep, and covered to let them dry not too fast and not too slow. Once the moisture is down to 17% it is piled in a heap until the moisture is about 10 to 12%. This drying process is done after the coffee berry has been picked, put in the pulp remover machine, then it is fermented a little to remove the silver sugary membrane covering of the bean. After the beans are dried then workers, mostly women, sort the beans. Once this is done trucks transport it to the Regulatory board where they check the quality of the coffee using highly skilled/trained taste testers. The testers use their palate to see if there is any mold present. If the beans were not processed correctly and some of the pulp was left in, it would ruin the quality of the beans.

(05/17/13) At the Agriculture Export Complex, the next day, the speaker told us that the United States is Jamaica’s largest target market and the U.S. has higher regulation standards than other countries such as Europe. In the U.S., there is a greater chance imported pests could survive compared to Europe’s colder climate where pests are less likely to survive.

In Port Royal at the fort, we learned a little bit about its history. It was designed to be in the shape of a ship. Before an earthquake occurred and made the ocean recede it was designed to be able to protect Port Royal.
At the Bob Marley Museum we learned that he was a family man and a very talented musician. We also were given a tour of his house. He loved to play football, which is the same thing as soccer in America. When the doctors found that he had cancer on his big toe and told him he needed to have it amputated, he refused due to his Rastafarian beliefs and he knew if he did he would never be able to play football ever again.

(05/18/13)-(05/19/13) On the weekend we rafted down the Rio Grande River which was amazing. I found out that to become a rafting guide it may take three to ten years of being an apprentice before you are allowed to take customers out by yourself. I also learned that they sometimes take people out to fish. I had the opportunity to steer the raft and learn the correct way to do it while keeping your balance. It was hard work but it was definitely worth it. Many of the guides have been doing this for years but say they wouldn’t encourage their children to follow in their footsteps. On Sunday, we took the bus down to get some Boston Jerk Chicken, Festival Bread, and spicy sausage. Also, when we went to the Jerk place we got to see how real jerk is prepared over a fire and smoked with a piece of tin on top. We were able to try breadfruit and jerk pork while we were there. Then we had a picnic out at the bay and swam in the ocean.
(05/20/15) On Monday, I was able to eat a Guava Berry for the first time and drink coconut water straight out of a coconut. Both, I thought, were very good. I also tried the coconut Jelly and the inside of a coco bean. At the College of Agriculture, Science and Education (CASE) most of the structures such as greenhouses are either sturdy enough to withstand hurricanes or are able to be taken down and stored until the storm passes. For the animals, they had trenches where the waste can be sprayed into and drains into a sealed container where they produce bio gas/fertilizer. (05/21/15) The next day we saw how bananas and pineapples are grown and packed to be sold to the local market. They did export bananas in the past until a hurricane damaged the crop. They improved their drainage system because if a flood comes and the water stays for more than seven days then the plants won’t last. They have lines going above the banana plants to help give the plant support when the heavy bananas are growing on the tree. There is also a cable line that they use as support as well. How they went about gathering the bananas was very interesting too. The use guide lines to transport the chosen bunches of bananas that they want to harvest. Also, the way they talk about the banana plants is very interesting. They personify them, for example, some of the trees and a full developed adult “Grandmother” tree, a partially developed “Mother” tree and a “Daughter” tree just sprouting up. Since one tree can only produce one bunch of bananas, it must have replacement generations. I didn’t realize pineapples didn’t come from trees because I guess I just never gave much thought into where they come from. I knew you could start pineapples form the suckers, which is the top green part of a pineapple that you can get from the grocery store. I was shocked of how many pineapple plants they had growing out the field. Unlike bananas, which are a year round crop, pineapples are not, but they just have plants at
different stages of growth. Watching the demonstration of how to cut the pineapple was really interesting and the samples of pineapple was so sweet and juicy.

(05/22/15) We toured Best Dressed Chicken, formally known as the Jamaican Broilers. They are vertically integrated and they are the largest poultry processing facilities in the Caribbean. About 100,000 birds are processed each day. Outside inspections, from the Ministry of Agriculture, Ministry of Health, etc., were used to keep the facility running smoothly. Visiting this production plant gave me valuable insight to how the chicken that I eat is being processed. I also thought it was neat how they graded the birds. We also took a tour around Ebony AgriPark where we saw how the yellow and white yams were being grown. We were privileged to eat a mango called Eleven picked straight from the tree. Then we saw how the papayas and the Scotch Bonnet Peppers are grown.

(05/23/15) On Wednesday, it was the Labor Day in Jamaica. We went to a pre-school and helped paint, rake, and weed in the fenced in play area. I helped paint the tires cream and mint green and we painted different patterns on them. Then I helped paint the walls of the school bright yellow. It was so fun to interact with the little kids and letting them put their hand prints on the tires. I thought this was a great way to give back to the community after all the warm welcoming’s we received everywhere we went. After that we rested then went to watch part of the UWI Games, which is kind of like their own mini Olympics. We saw a Women’s basketball game.
The Next day we went to BODLES, which is the main research facility in the Ministry of Agriculture. First, we learned about Apiculture, the bee keeping industry. This industry is currently thriving and attracting young people. It is the most advanced in the Caribbean. There are over 2,000 bee keepers and 42,000 hives in the country. We also saw a demonstration of Artificial Insemination (AI) from start to finish using Jamaican Hope cattle. Next, we went to Longville Park Farms, were we ate farm raised tilapia and to see their fish Hatchery and several ponds which held feeder fish and different types like the Taiwan Red and the Jamaican Rad Tilapia. This farm is 400 years old and used to be a dairy farm. After all this, we went to the Pegasus Hotel and had a farewell dinner. It was very bitter sweet.

We woke up at five am and traveled to Ocho Rios and checked into the Riu Hotel, the next day. Then we went to the pool and the beach after breakfast, and the day after we climbed Dunn’s River Falls. It was very fun, I loved it. After we were done we went back to the hotel, had lunch, and then went snorkeling. I saw several sea urchins and a bunch of little striped fish and a couple bigger silver fish. Then our whole group and a few other people, who were staying at the Riu, played some water volleyball. Later that night the whole study abroad group ate at the Asian restaurant. Then we spent one more day at the hotel, went to the craft market, and all had dinner together for the last time.

This experience has been an experience that I will always cherish for the rest of my life. I knew I was traveling to Jamaica to learn about Jamaican agriculture but I’ve learned so much more than I expected and never knew about. I learned more about the Jamaican culture that you can only learn if you have truly spent time in the non-touristy parts of Jamaica. I knew this was true after spending a little time at the Riu Hotel. When you are at the resort, you are mostly just around more tourists so you don’t get to experience much of the Jamaican culture. It was a very eye opening experience that helped me to think on a global scale. Since I had never been out of the
country before, this trip helped change my perspective on the way I look at the world.