



## “I’m not stupid, I’m just gringa”

I ducked into a small frame shop, away from the business and noise of the main street outside. The owner glanced up as I came in, wiping his hands on his jeans before asking how he could help me. I had a beautifully hand-painted picture of

Machu Picchu from Peru that I was holding. I wanted it framed and was going to give it to my dad for Father’s day. I held it up so he could see and began to try to explain to the man what it was that I wanted.

“hi...um... I have this picture and I want...”

There was just a small problem. I didn’t know the word for framed. You see, the store is in San José, Costa Rica and I am a north-american, a *gringa*, a foreigner.

The shop owner looks at me sympathetically as I pause, stutter through words and rack my brain for something I could use. How do you explain you want a picture framed when you can’t say framed? So logically, I begin trying to show him, my hands outlining a frame around the picture. Luckily, he gets it or at least I think he does. He says something to me, I assume it’s the word for frame so I nod my head excitedly; yes that’s what I want. He begins pulling a variety of frames from under the counter and placing them all in front of me. I look through them and realize I also want matting with the frame, and I would like a color that matches well with the picture.

“um...sir...there is another part that I want...”

Again. I never have had to talk about matting in Spanish; how was I supposed to know what to say? He looks at me sympathetically as before but now it’s obvious he is getting a little frustrated with my hand gestures and inability to communicate what I want. I try even harder to explain, to show him, sending myself even further down a road that I never intended to be on. So frustrating, so humiliating... I can do this in my own country! I can explain that I want a frame, some matting...a picture that looks nice. I can do it...I’m not stupid like it seems right now to this man who flows so easily in his own language, culture, and world.

Some other hand gestures and an accidental key word that slips out of the stream of otherwise unintelligible mutterings helps him understand I want matting. He grabs a stack from a nearby counter and spreads them out in front of me. He looks up and asks me something quickly. I’m in a whirling state and his words float in and out. He repeats it, to help me. Something maybe about picking a color...



I moved to San Jose, Costa Rica in the beginning of January 2005. Little did I know that it would be the beginning of a journey that has taken me places I never dreamed of and has steered my life in a direction I never saw it going. I am becoming a person I never saw or could even imagine. I have had the opportunities to do things most people will never experience and I have the opportunity to become something

that most people will never be. I have also become a foreigner. Most of the things that have shaped my life over the last several years have not been the great “experiences”, the different trips and changing landscape, or even the amazing beaches, mountains, and volcanoes of Costa Rica. What has shaped my life are the things like walking into a shop and not being able to ask for a picture to be framed exactly how I wanted it. Being in a group of people that aren’t my people, that don’t speak my language, that don’t know how well I could do things in my country and don’t really care. I have learned what it is to be inept in easy things, what it is to be on the outside of the circle and the minority among the many.

Four years later, some things have changed. I can walk in a shop now and ask for a picture to be framed. I sit in the University of Costa Rica’s classrooms where I am finishing my bachelor’s degree and discuss the Middle East conflict from a very different perspective, in Spanish. I play basketball for the University among all the Costa Rican girls and am part of the team. I coach a high-school girls basketball team in English and Spanish, putting all I have learned in both countries to use. I work for a non-profit organization, and again the ability to flow within different cultures has opened many doors.

It was hard. It still is. I sit in class and they talk about their country, their values, their president, and their culture. I am reminded every day that I am not a Costa Rican. I am a foreigner; they will always see me as a *gringa*. At the same time, I am grateful. I am more understanding and more developed as a person and more able to relate to a larger number of people. While home in the States for a short break, I look differently at every foreigner. When I see a person who hasn’t grown up in our culture and doesn’t flow through life exactly the way we do, I am first of all grateful and secondly empathetic. I understand at least a little bit of what they feel, and I strongly believe that it adds something to us as a country to have them here. My challenge to myself, and to anyone who happens to chance upon this article, would be to embrace rather than shun the differences. To open our arms to people whom we don’t understand; to take the time to learn and not be afraid of what we don’t know. We will come out stronger, together, and changed for the better. You never know when you might be the person that finds yourself saying...“I’m not stupid, I’m just gringa.”



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A screenshot of the Boy With A Ball website homepage. The header features the logo "boy with a ball" in blue and black, with the tagline "reaching youth - building leaders" below it. The main content area is divided into several sections: a search bar, a language selector (Español and English), a "Featured Stories" section with a large image of a child and the text "Reaching Youth Building Leaders", and a "News" section with a small image and text. The footer includes "ENGLISH | ESPAÑOL" and a link to "click on a picture above for the full story".