Hiking through the Tropics: Spring Break in Costa Rica

—By Shreya Gupta SAS ’23

Located in Central America, Costa Rica is one of the most biodiverse countries in the world. Despite taking up only 0.03 percent of the Earth’s surface, it accounts for 6 percent of the planet’s biodiversity—with unimaginable wildlife, botany, and natural formations.

In the spring 2023 Interdisciplinary Honors Seminar, Costa Rica: Talk Science to Me, Dr. Lauren Adamo taught my classmates and me about the geology of Costa Rica. Through guest lectures by experts like Dr. Pablo Ruiz and Dr. Vadim Levin, we were able to learn about things ranging from the composition of volcanoes to seismic activity in the country—all covered within the framework of geoethics as well as diversity, equity, and inclusion.

It is no surprise that people across the globe come to Costa Rica to experience these things in the field, and my classmates and I were fortunate enough to get the opportunity to do the same during our Rutgers spring break.

Accompanied by Dr. Wright and two graduate geology students, we began our seven-day trip in the Heredia Province, visiting several remarkable geological structures in the region. Our first stop was the Barva Volcano, a dormant stratovolcano that last reported any activity approximately 7000 years ago. We hiked up to the Laguna de Barva, once a volcanic crater and now lake, and took in the cloud rainforest.

The next day, we went to the Poas Volcano, a stratovolcano marked by the acidic (to the point where it can reach a pH of 0!) and sulfuric aquamarine lake surrounded by steaming fumaroles. We finished Day 2 with a tour of the Starbucks Hacienda Alsacia Farm, learning about how the nutrient-rich volcanic soil helps the company grow coffee.

After hiking to the Catarata del Toro waterfall that empties into the crater of an extinct volcano in Bajos del Toro, we made our way to La Fortuna, famous for the Arenal Volcano. Our hike

Welcome New SAS Executive Dean Juli Wade!

We are excited to welcome Juli Wade as the new Executive Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences. Dr. Wade comes to Rutgers from the University of Connecticut, where she served as the Dean for the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences—the largest and most academically diverse college at UConn. She brings a clear understanding of the critical role that public, land-grant, research universities serve for their communities, states, and the nation.

We at the SASHP are looking forward to meeting and working with Dr. Wade!
In the Honors Program we talk a lot about “community,” but what does that actually mean? This year’s Honors Colloquia offered a variety of perspectives. In the fall, we examined how food and culture can foster different forms of connection: sometimes we want to bask in familiar experiences, while other times we want to explore and experience something new. I confess that my mouth watered when students described beloved foods from different cultures! And I was struck by how much the students, despite their varied backgrounds, bonded over favorite childhood snacks.

In the spring, we examined networks in many guises. We learned how scientists think about networks in computers and the brain, and how sociologists analyze social networks; we also got some great tips from honors alumni about building and maintaining professional networks. The common theme was that networks succeed not only because they contain valuable pieces but also because those pieces are connected well.

The Honors Program community extends far beyond campus—thanks to you! The annual Honors Alumni Gathering provides a wonderful space to strengthen connections and build new ones. Events throughout the year introduce students to different career and professional opportunities. The Honors Alumni Spotlights and Honors Alumni-Student Networking Directory help students meet and connect with their predecessors in a wide range of fields. If you’re already involved in these activities, we thank you! If not, please visit sashonors.rutgers.edu/alumni/alumni to learn more about what you can do!

Charles R. Keeton

Our class in front of the Starbucks Hacienda Alsacia Farm during our guided tour.

On a rainy day at Henry’s Diner, Sanjna Khanna RBS ’23 anxiously awaited her first encounter with her SASHP Peer Mentor Bhuvi Boda RBS ’22. This meetup blossomed into a friendship that would shape their college experience and beyond. “I remember going into the building wet from the rain...It was chaotic, but it became such a good bonding moment for me,” remembers Khanna.

Boda became an invaluable source of guidance and support for Khanna as they pursued RBS majors and took honors courses together. She offered advice on courses, study techniques, and even recommended the honors capstone that would eventually help Khanna satisfy her final honors requirement. Boda recalls, “All of those commonalities up the rocky terrain was tough, but rewarding—the view at the end was unforgettable! We got a glimpse into Costa Rican wildlife at the Mistico Park Hanging Bridges, where we saw poisonous frogs, snakes, and spider monkeys. Our last stop was in Liberia, where we hiked Rincon de la Vieja (which happened to erupt the week before we visited!). It is an andesitic complex volcano characterized by substantial reserves of geothermal energy, including hot pools and areas of bubbling mud. We wrapped up our trip with a fun visit to the mud baths and hot springs, giving our sore muscles a break from all the hiking we had done!

Our trip to Costa Rica introduced us to much more than just geology, however. From trying tropical fruits like guanabana to spotting coatis and lizards in the most unexpected places and from meeting local artisans to interacting with college students, we got a glimpse into what life in Costa Rica was like and for this, I am eternally grateful.

A Lifelong Friendship Begins in Honors Housing —By Celina Deflorimonte
Participating in the SAS Honors Program was a transformative experience that provided me with a supportive community of like-minded individuals. This community inspired and motivated me to reach both my academic and personal goals, and helped me become a well-rounded student. Thanks to the SASHP, I had access to invaluable mentoring and leadership opportunities that have enriched my educational experience.

My favorite part of the SASHP was my Honors Embedded Study Abroad trip to Spain over Summer 2022! I thought I could never fit in study abroad with my major and professional requirements, but the embedded trip allowed me to take a class at Rutgers and travel for 2 weeks abroad over the summer. It was a great opportunity which showed me the importance of out-of-class learning and direct experience.

The SASHP has made Rutgers feel like a home to me; it’s a smaller community, and I met a lot of nice people. One of my favorite Rutgers moments was going to SAS Honors Peer Mentor events that I helped to plan and to be able to see students enjoying themselves at the events.

There were many opportunities to meet new people, build connections, and make like-minded friends; I’ll miss being able to hang out with friends at on-campus events and running into professors who taught me before on campus.

Living in honors housing, I made some of my best friends that stayed with me throughout college. The memories living in Brett will last a lifetime, and I’m so grateful to the SASHP for pushing me academically and socially.

Amanda Chen

2023 SASHP Senior Speaker

The SASHP Senior Leader Award acknowledges Honors students in their final year of undergraduate study who have made significant contributions to campus life at Rutgers, with particular emphasis on service to Honors Program organizations and initiatives. Five of the 11 recipients share their reflections below (not pictured: Marguerite Brancato, Ashley Chang, Amanda Chen, Zohal Najem, Hiral Patel, Mahek Virani).

Kuhu Halder

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Zayna Jawed

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Madison Whitman

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Amanda Chen

Honors Senior Gathering Speaker

Amanda Chen SAS ’23 delivered the senior speech to the class of 2023 honors scholars at the Honors Senior Gathering in May. The following is an excerpt from Chen’s speech; the full speech is available on the SASHP Student Blog: go.rutgers.edu/sashp-seniorspeaker23.

“In the Honors Program, we don’t compete with one another, and we don’t see other people’s success as a threat. Rather, we exist in this cohort of ambitious scholars to help one another, to ensure we all try a little harder, and to lift one another up towards success.”
Rebecca Goldfinger Chanin arrived at Rutgers in 2016 with definite ideas about what she would study. Passionate about global affairs, especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the School of Arts and Sciences Honors Program (SASHP) student chose a double major in political science and Middle Eastern studies. But that wasn’t all she had planned for her undergraduate years. Chanin also loved science and felt called to practice medicine. Yet that raised a difficult question. Was there room for a demanding double major plus pre-med staples like organic chemistry, biology, and biochemistry? How would it all fit?

Chanin decided she’d make it work. And with mentoring and advising support from SASHP deans, she did just that.

“I decided that when you go to college, you get one opportunity to learn and study anything,” Chanin said. “It seemed that there was no better place to do that than at Rutgers.”

Now, as a fourth-year medical student, Chanin is bringing those insights back to SASHP, helping current student Vividha Venkatrajan navigate similarly difficult decisions as a psychology major mulling over medical school. The two met at the SASHP’s annual Honors Alumni Gathering event in 2022 and then got together for a follow-up meeting to discuss school and career issues.

A junior, Venkatrajan entered Rutgers thinking she might become a psychotherapist. But a neuroscience course she took to fulfill honors requirements opened a new direction toward science and medicine.

“It is still my favorite course that I have taken at Rutgers,” she said of the class, “Brain, Mind, and Behavior.” “And one result was that I became increasingly interested in the medicine aspect of psychiatry.”

Nevertheless, she remains committed to her psychology major and the study of human behavior. Her passion for mental health advocacy fuels a busy schedule of community service, including serving as a peer educator with the university’s Health Outreach, Promotion & Education (HOPE) program and as a counselor for a national crisis hotline. She is also managing editor for The Examiner, the student-run health journal of Rutgers University-New Brunswick.

Learning about Chanin’s varied undergraduate experience felt empowering for Venkatrajan as she began considering medical school.

“Rebecca was the first person I ever met who had a non-biology major and had gone to medical school,” she said. “It was really comforting to know that I could pursue my academic interests and still go to medical school.”

The connection forged between the two women reflects the strong culture of mentoring at SASHP. The honors program holds events throughout the year that give current students a chance to meet and network with alumni.

“This is what the honors program is all about,” SASHP Dean Charles Keeton said. “And we’re committed to creating the conditions for these types of interactions to occur.”

Chanin, a 2020 graduate, was eager to give back. She said the honors program staff, including assistant deans Jennifer Kim-Lee and Kathleen Sadowsky, helped her stay focused, informed, and inspired through a challenging undergraduate program. The deans, for example, made sure Chanin knew which pre-med classes to take, and when, and supported her ambitious plan for a capstone project, a documentary about Albanian Muslims who protected Jews during the Holocaust.

Chanin graduates in 2024 from the Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and will begin a residency in internal medicine.

“The advisors and the deans of the honors program are the biggest assets of the honors program,” Chanin said. “They 100 percent completely shaped my experience.”

The same holds true for Venkatrajan. “The honors program has given me a community,” she said. “It’s the reason why my experience at Rutgers has been so amazing.”

A Culture of Mentoring and Support

When a student began mulling medical school, an alum shared wisdom that proved empowering...
Fall 2023 Honors Colloquium

This fall, the SAS Honors Program builds our mission course around our summer reading, *American Fever* by Dur e Aziz Amna. Even if we don’t move halfway around the world for a year, we all cross borders—sometimes physical, sometimes metaphorical—between different communities. In this semester of Colloquium, we will explore how such border crossings shape our understanding of family, culture, and home. Through guest speakers and small discussions, we will consider why people choose to explore geography, language, food, and culture, and how those experiences shape our sense of who we are and where we feel at home. If you have stories of “crossing borders, finding home” that you would like to share with current students, please contact hpalumni@sas.rutgers.edu!

SASHP 2023 Retirement Announcements

The SAS Honors Program appreciates the contributions of our four staff members who, in total, dedicated 100 years of service to the Rutgers and SASHP communities. They share their favorite memory about serving in their roles and time at Rutgers with the SASHP.

**Assistant Dean Dr. Mahasti Hashemi** Livingston Campus (30 years)
“To have served more than 5000 honors students during the last fifteen years with the SASHP, witnessing their extraordinary achievements continues to astound me and bring me a deep sense of purpose and gratitude. Learning from them and about their goals, leading the Faculty Mentor Program, the Honors Ambassador Program, and important aspects of the SASHP recruitment efforts, have been highlights of my time with the program which will always have a special place in my heart.”

**Administrative Assistant Lori Reba** Douglass Campus (29 years)
“One of my favorite Rutgers memories would be my interview for the SASHP department. Right then and there I knew that if I got the position I would be working in a great place with exceptional co-workers.”

**Administrative Assistant Dorene Pardun** College Ave. Campus (25 years)
“Working with the SASHP student population was very rewarding. My favorite memories were with the Peer Mentor & Mentee Summer event when the whole SASHP staff would come together to support the event and welcome the new class; very fun & happy days.”

**Administrative Assistant Karen Nagy** Livingston Campus (16 years)
“Every day was different, and I got to interact with such a varied group of students and colleagues; I was always learning. I love that everyone cared and that we had flexibility when needed. SASHP rocks!”

SAS Honors Program by the Numbers

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class of 2023 Honors Scholar graduates</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Computer Science</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Psychology</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Cell Biology and Neuroscience</td>
<td>29</td>
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<tr>
<td>Graduated with 4.0 cumulative GPA</td>
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Top 3 Majors
1. Computer Science
2. Psychology
3. Cell Biology and Neuroscience

Top 3 Minors
1. Psychology
2. Mathematics
3. Spanish

SASHP Class of 2023 Paul Robeson Scholars
Meet Our New Administrative Assistants

Itzel Denis is an Administrative Assistant and supports Dean Ackerman on the College Ave Campus. She graduated from Berkeley College with an Associates of Applied Science degree in business management and minor in computer science. She is a DECA alumni and does volunteer work for the Domestic Violence Response Team in New Brunswick. Being the first college graduate in her family, Itzel is excited to help students make the most of their time at Rutgers. When she isn’t working, Itzel loves spending time with her two sons, husband and family; going to the beach, playing video games, and trying out new restaurants. Itzel also enjoys drawing, painting and decorating.

Kristen McCauley is an Administrative Assistant and supports Dean Sadowsky on the Douglass Campus. She received her BA in art history and visual arts from Fordham University. Additionally, she studied archeological conservation as an undergraduate while abroad in Italy, and cultural heritage and preservation studies as a graduate student at Rutgers. Prior to joining SASHP, Kristen spent twelve years working in museum education and public history. Kristen is an avid reader and a cinephile who enjoys traveling, live music, genealogy, and spending time with her family.