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Globetrotter Grant Report

It starts with an itch on your left ankle. You're not completely awake yet, but you can already tell you are not at home. As your hand instinctively swats at the mosquito, the muscles in your arms hesitate to cooperate. Like twins, the ache in your lower back and the soreness of your left calf join together in harmony to mock how slowly it takes for you to pull open your swollen eyelids. The sunlight pierces your pupils as your throat gasps repeatedly, begging for water. While your vision does its best to adjust, your hearing is helped along more quickly with the cries of the rooster sitting outside the widow. With one deep breath, you call upon your body parts to assist one another in the goal of sitting up. Stubbornly, they cooperate. You slowly lift your head and dare to consider just what today will bring you. The frightening possibilities curl your lips up into a smile. What a day to be alive.

The majority of the 47 days between December 9th 2008 and January 23rd 2009 began similarly. Now before I begin, I must be honest. Generally speaking, I have a considerably exciting life. I was raised in the Bay Area of California along with a fantastic big sister and a younger brother I look up to. I've lived from Colorado to Pennsylvania to Southern Texas. A few of my hobbies include snowboarding, surfing, mountaineering, skydiving, and most relevant to this report, motorcycling. I've never had a problem entertaining myself, occasionally at the expense of my own safety and my mother's sleep. I had nearly arrived at that point in my life where it is socially expected for a graduate student to decrease risk taking behaviors and transition into the role model that enjoys the occasional cocktail party and an exciting daytrip to the "big city". Unfortunately, that's not me. For some reason, I couldn't just take my winter vacation and visit my family for a week full of fudge and eggnog like everyone else.

No, instead, I thought it much better to hop on my dirt bike with my girlfriend and ride to Panama. But wait. Lets make it a bit more interesting by finding each highest point in Central America and climbing to the top. That way, I'd be avoiding most major cities, paved roads, banks, hospitals, embassies, motorcycle shops and internet connection. Brilliant, right? Before you judge, allow me to mention a group of individuals who didn't. Eight unique alumni from Texas A&M University along with a most generous woman that goes by the name of Peggy Amante make up the Globetrotter Grant Board (globetrottergrant.com), a committee of individuals invested in promoting student learning through international travel. Without limiting applications to particular parameters often found in travel grants, the Globetrotter Grant Board is more interested in facilitating the creativity and original thought often repressed by the suffocating routine of academic life. The members of the board entertained my proposal and helped launch an experience I won't soon forget.

If you know your geography, the trip sounds simple. Ride south until you get to Panama and ride back. However, the logistics to this adventure when choosing a

motorcycle as the mode of transportation and six weeks as the allotted time frame require a bit of organization. Eight countries, fourteen border crossings and just under 7,000 total miles on the road demand your full attention to planning before your departure. With the help of my girlfriend Lauren, I spent roughly 10 months devising the most probable plan to make it to Panama and back alive. When the departure date arrived, I realized faith would be the most important piece of my luggage. And so it began. Through the holidays, averaging 300 miles a day, we rode through the tropical belly of Latin America (more details of the trip can be found at <http://ridewithdaniel.blogspot.com>).

There's no way around it. The stories are excellent. From Lauren splitting her knee open to the bone after a crash out in rural Honduras to watching the moon rise over Panama's Volcan Baru while sitting in thermal hot springs, the adventure never denied us continuous thrill. Though these tales will not be soon forgotten, this expedition served much more than your average "trip outside the country".

In addition to rows of volcanoes, endless rainforest and pristine beaches, Central America is also the culturally delicate and sensitive finger between the continents of North and South America. Underdeveloped and often ignored, the land between Mexico and Colombia offers a unique present-day historical window to our pre-colonial past nearly non-existent elsewhere. It offers a break from black vs. white, democrat vs. republican and terror vs. freedom, and instead invites you to consider that everything you know about this world barely scratches the surface of truth. Due to the many lessons I was taught about myself and others during my motorcycle ride south, I will let it suffice to discuss three of the most essential.

The comfortable bubble of fear: Many people's parents worked all their lives to keep them safe in a comfortable bubble of fear. This is not to suggest that most people are not interested in the world outside their comfort zone, though that world is scary. We are taught at an early age who we can trust, who we should associate with and how to problem solve. While this serves us well through our youth, it can stunt our global awareness and external perceptions. In fact, to truly test the assumptions of others that keep you feeling good (or bad) about yourself, you must remove yourself from the environment to which you have socially adapted. Entering the "unknown" is the first step, which is followed by embracing new experiences as means of self-growth. During this process, your existing social infrastructure is replaced with new interpretations of responsibility, community and humanity. Thus, the excitement of conquering your "fear of the unknown" is dwarfed by the recognition of increased consciousness and sensitivity for the experience of others.

The perception of potential: Glory is an endangered species of experience. Largely to the credit of the modern education system, we are taught to compare ourselves to the performance of our peers rather than the potential of ourselves. Personally, I am not satisfied living a "good life". I rather opt for a magnificent existence. Knowing full well that this includes a great deal of pleasure and pain, I believe personal potential is as great as the God we pray to at church. Though degrees of achievement are subjective, everyone possesses the possibility to experience great things. Determination of success is always debatable for those

who weren't there, but doubt no longer exists for the victorious individual. To those who are still striving, defeat is always temporary.

The destructive nature of "me": As a counseling psychologist in training, I spend a great deal of my professional life facilitating personal reflection. However, considering we are social beings, I have also found the western philosophies of work ethic and technological advances not conducive to the basic principles of a quality existence. Not only are we taught that we can "do anything if we try hard enough" as well as programmed to physically detach from one another through electronic devices, the theory of capitalism itself is diseased with "me first". Many often find that chasing their individual dreams by themselves ultimately leaves them all alone. Civilizations did just fine before we arrived and will continue to thrive far after we're gone. For the short time we are allotted, contributing to the enhancement of other's experience is most rewarding and effective at positively influencing future generations. Leave it to others to determine whether what you have to share is valuable. You may often be surprised about how amazing someone finds something you consider ordinary. Finally, regardless of how competent, skilled and esteemed you become, true friendship has no monetary value.

Please allow me to sincerely warn that the ordinary person should never attempt to ride a motorcycle to Panama as its extremely dangerous. However, there are endless alternative possibilities to discover your "unknown" in a way that challenges you to unlock your own truths. I am forever grateful to all those who supported me along my journey and continue to share with me what this wonderful world has to offer.

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