Reflections by Alyssa, ACES Sophomore

When I first moved onto campus, I was focused on familiarizing myself with Champaign-Urbana just like most of my peers. Going to another country to study and adjusting to another unfamiliar setting was just about the last thing on my mind. But then again, I don’t think many freshmen enter college thinking that they will study abroad their freshman year.

I thought this until I heard about a fantastic and very unique opportunity to explore and study agriculture, food and environmental systems in the Dominican Republic for two weeks over winter break. This class is called ACES 298: Discovering Food, Human, and Environmental Systems in the Caribbean, and it is available only to freshmen. It involves an eight week course where we also studied Caribbean customs and heritage, followed by a case study. In early January, we hopped on a plane to the crystal clear waters of the Dominican Republic and began our study tour.

I loved this trip because we were able to spend time as tourists while also enriching ourselves in the Dominican Republic’s food, human and environmental systems. Most of our time was spent in two major cities, Santiago and Santo Domingo, where we visited beaches, heritage sites, greenhouses, plantations, and more. It was a great way for me to enhance my agriculture background while also escaping the Illinois winter.

Going on this trip during my freshman year was the ideal time. I was able to create strong friendships, increase my passion for agriculture, and learn a lot about myself. It gave me confidence while traveling and motivated me to pursue more study abroad experiences. I found it fascinating to compare the Caribbean systems with the ones in the United States, and what I learned has been a great foundation for my continuing studies at the University of Illinois.