

**Recognition of Distinction in Global Health**

University of Alabama at Birmingham Heersink School of Medicine

**Clinical Elective: INTEC Dominican Republic**

**Date of Training: 06/09/2025-07/05/2025**

**Student: Ashley Weber**

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Going into the Dominican Republic trip, I felt both excited and uncertain. I was traveling to a new country for a whole month with classmates I had not yet bonded with. I worried about language barriers and my ability to contribute meaningfully in a new environment since my medical journey was only beginning and claiming that my Spanish skills were subpar would be generous. Despite these doubts, I was eager to immerse myself in a different healthcare system, learn from the culture, and broaden my medical knowledge. From the moment we



stepped off the plane, the INTEC staff made us feel welcomed and supported, greeting us warmly and ensuring we had everything we needed to feel at home.



For the first two weeks, we lived in Baní and worked at Servicio Nacional de Salud CPNA Santa Rosa Clinic. Each morning the clinic was filled with patients, reflecting just how essential it was to the community. While the language barrier was initially challenging, I quickly learned to adapt and find ways to communicate effectively. My role included taking manual blood pressures, recording vitals, and helping gather patient histories. Patients primarily sought care for hypertension, diabetes, infections, and prenatal needs, but I also assisted with procedures such as vaccine administration and even the documentation of a death note. One meaningful aspect of this experience was collaborating with the INTEC students on their research project, which focused on sun protection practices among the rural population. We helped administer surveys and recruit participants, which gave us insight into the value of preventive medicine in underserved areas.

What struck me most about the Santa Rosa Clinic was how heavily the community relied on it. The clinic was free of charge, and patients deeply valued the care they received, often expressing gratitude in small but memorable ways like bringing us mangoes from their trees. Despite limited resources, the clinic provided essential access to primary care while offering medical students invaluable hands-on experience. It reinforced for me how even small, community-based clinics with low resources can impact health outcomes by serving as a first contact for health concerns.



Outside of the clinic, our time in Baní was rich with cultural connection and community. We attended the annual Mango Festival, an event that celebrates the fruit for which the town is famous, where we sampled dozens of varieties and experienced firsthand how food and agriculture are woven into the community's identity. The INTEC students also introduced us to Dominican music and dance, teaching us salsa, bachata, and merengue. Attempts at learning the steps together often resulted in laughter, and these moments became some of my most cherished memories, as they broke down barriers and allowed us to connect beyond language. Evenings were often spent gathered around meals, where we tried traditional dishes, exchanged stories, and shared parts of our own cultures. Some of my favorite moments were not structured events at all, but the simple car rides we took with our host students. During those drives, we had conversations

about daily life in the Dominican Republic, favorite foods and music, the differences in our schooling, and even future aspirations. These casual interactions gave me insight into the values and perspectives of my Dominican peers, helping me understand more deeply what shaped their lives both inside and outside of medicine. Cooking, eating, dancing, and laughing together allowed us to build genuine friendships and offered me a richer and more personal appreciation for Dominican culture.





The second half of our trip was spent in Santo Domingo, where we rotated at La Plaza de Salud and Marcelino Vélez. I rotated through surgery, where I observed and assisted in a laparoscopic cholecystectomy, shadowed additional cases, and attended the diabetic foot clinic. This clinic was especially eye-opening. It was lined with patients stretching all the way onto the street, many with advanced disease. It quickly became clear that diabetic complications are a major public health concern in the Dominican Republic, and despite the overwhelming demand, physicians remained dedicated to providing care. I also rotated through internal medicine, where I assisted with patient onboarding, vital signs, and EKG interpretation,



as well as observed echocardiograms. Interestingly, although I expected the city hospitals to be better resourced than rural clinics, I was surprised to see that they also faced shortages, compounded by the sheer volume of patients who travel long distances to seek specialized care.



Outside of the hospital, our group took as many opportunities as possible to explore the beauty, history, and culture of Santo Domingo and its surrounding areas. Within the city, we spent time in the Colonial Zone, where centuries-old architecture, cobblestone streets, and vibrant plazas offered a glimpse into the Dominican Republic's rich history. We enjoyed traditional meals at local restaurants, wandered through coffee shops and markets, and visited the botanical gardens, where we nearly performed an entire photoshoot and took the trolley

to the Japanese garden. These excursions gave us a sense of the daily rhythm of city life while also deepening our appreciation for the country's cultural and historical legacy.





Beyond the city, we ventured into nature, where some of the most memorable experiences of the trip took place. At Sendero El Tabernáculo, we hiked through tropical forest and climbed alongside waterfalls, taking in the scenery while bonding as a group. A trip to the sand dunes brought an entirely experience, one that was undoubtedly hot, but we tried sandboarding for the first time, laughing at our inevitable falls. Visits to the salt mines and iguana reserves offered yet another perspective on the diversity of the country's environment and wildlife. One of the most unforgettable experiences was snorkeling at a nearby coral

reef. As someone often hesitant in the ocean, I initially felt nervous, but once I settled in and began to appreciate the coral and colorful fish, the experience quickly became into one of my favorite memories of the entire month.



By the end of the trip, I realized just how much this experience had given me. I returned with new clinical skills that strengthened my confidence in patient care, as well as a deeper understanding of how healthcare systems function under constraints and challenges. The friendships I formed with my peers and the INTEC students became one

of the most meaningful parts of the trip, reminding me that medicine is not only about treating patients but also about building relationships, trust, and understanding across cultures. When I think back on my time in the Dominican Republic, I know I will always carry with me the lessons, the laughter, and the sense of community that made every day meaningful. As it turns out, a month abroad feels like no time at all but the memories, skills, and relationships it allowed me will stay with me for a lifetime.

