The one Thing you need to know about Brazil is that if ever you go, you will get sucked in. You may not realize it at first, but along the way somewhere, and maybe after a couple of caipirinhas, you will quickly realize that Brazil has intoxicated you with something more than just its national cocktail. That is exactly what happened to me when, in 2008, I spent a week in Brazil as part of a spring break delegation organized and sponsored by the UT Law School’s Rapoport Center for Human Rights and Justice.

This delegation consisted of ten UT students of interdisciplinary backgrounds, all going to Brazil in order to explore the many questions and opportunities around the struggle for land title, property, and development rights of Afro-descendant Brazilians living on traditionally occupied community lands. The center’s director, Karen Engle, and the director of the Human Rights Clinic, Ariel Dulitzky, led the delegation, each with a separate group of five students, one traveling north and the other heading south, in order to cover the most area possible of the expansive country in our limited amount of time.

For me, the only undergraduate in the group, the trip consisted of much more than a weeklong delegation. This was my first foray into the world of human rights work, and meeting with many committed and experienced people in the field excited and inspired me. While sitting with the employees and advocates of such organizations as Justiça Global, Koinonia, Mariana Criola, Comissão Pro-Indio de São Paulo, and many more, I came to realize some of the successes as well as some of the recurring difficulties of human rights work. Many of the organizations we met with already operated with overcommitted calendars and portfolios filled to the brim with the causes and cases of other important human rights and environmental issues they were working to address. This, I’ve learned, is the nature of many human rights organizations: there is often so much work to undertake that it can overwhelm even the most energetic. In Brazil, however, I found hope in the fact that, despite this, these organizations still made time to meet with a group of inquisitive students from the United States—to answer our questions, share in the ritual of coffee, and help us understand why securing formal land title for these communities has evaded them for years. From this experience, I walked away believing that in spite of the time crunches, difficulties, and delays in furthering human rights policies, collaboration is a reason to hope. The mere presence of an equally dedicated group of people in one room made the ever-daunting task of change appear a little less so, reminding me that
if we all can manage to do at least that much, together we can accomplish a lot more.

Perhaps most of all I will remember my experience interacting with the men and women living on the very contested traditional lands that were the reason for our delegation to Brazil. During the trip, we traveled by boat and bumpy road as well as through rush-hour traffic to reach communities struggling to gain their land title. Some rural communities, like the state-recognized quilombo of Ivaporunduva, chose to practice agriculture to make a living, each community member with his or her own crop to sell at market. Others, however, have maintained a more community-oriented structure that focuses on collective living as a fundamental part of how they operate. Still more, urban communities like the community of Sacopa, which sits on prime real estate in the heart of Rio de Janeiro, envision a future of commercial development if they should ever receive title after having lived there for more than a hundred years. As guests, we were grateful for their hospitality and knowledge as they showed us their community, shared their thoughts and experiences on the struggle for land title, and allowed us to observe a snapshot of their daily lives. The individuals living in these communities were as diverse as the communities themselves, each with a different opinion on the state of affairs related to their community’s gaining land and development autonomy. Some even refused to be considered a part of the movement to gain title, while others fervently believed that gaining formal land title was the only way they would escape the cyclical poverty that has affected their people for generations.

Experiencing Brazil like this for the first time was truly a unique experience, far beyond any typical tourist’s package. Thanks in large part to the Rapoport Center, I stole a glimpse of the complexities, struggles, pleasures, and successes of Brazil that I will never forget. In my time there, I had the opportunity to meet an astonishing diversity of people, observe the functions of their government, study some of their national problems, as well as celebrate some of their national successes. In my downtime, the little of it I found in the cracks between the rigors of the delegation, I partook of the nightlife and danced the samba in Rio, walked in rainy São Paulo alongside businessmen and towering buildings, and enjoyed the beautiful rural aspects for which the country is so well known. All of these adventures, however, I know were but a scratch on the surface of the variety of experiences shared by Brazilians every day. For me, though, this taste was more than enough to whet my appetite for more. My experiences in Brazil with the Rapoport Center opened a window to Latin America that challenged my academic knowledge with tangible firsthand experience, leaving me to weigh my own observations, research, and experiences to develop my own knowledge of the country. My time in Brazil has left me with more than a great memory and a lingering thirst to return, but a whole new idea of what it means to call oneself a Latin Americanist.

Tony Keffler is in the undergraduate program in Latin American studies.