

## Raleigh International- Costa Rica & Nicaragua Feb 2016

I arrived into San Jose, Costa Rica on the 6<sup>th</sup> February not really knowing what I was going to be doing over the 10 weeks that I was with Raleigh International and also not knowing anybody else on the expedition. I think our first night was a bit of a shock to everybody. We were taken straight to a school sports hall where we were split into 3 groups and told to sleep in a section of this hall. Our roll mats and sleeping bags were out straight away. As I lay there trying to sleep in a room full of 80 people that I didn't know all I was thinking is why the hell am I doing this.

At 5am the next morning we were herded onto 3 buses and taken through some of the Costa Rican Rainforest to get to our fieldbase in Turrialba, a town at the bottom of an active volcano. When we arrived all of the volunteer managers (VM's) were standing outside the main building playing tambourines, drums, chanting and singing songs. We also had to all do the limbo as we got off the bus. It was a really overwhelming atmosphere but was definitely a taste of what was to come and you soon learnt that that is just how the Costa Rican and Nicaraguan people are. We were all handed our mess tins and got out our sporks, which until now had either been only for D of E or had never been opened. We didn't go a meal without using it. For breakfast we had the traditional gallo pinto-rice and beans, with plantain, scrambled egg, bread and melon. The first 5 days of Raleigh is used as an induction phase so we had swimming assessments and medical checks, went over important communications kits and got to know each other a bit better. We were then told our groups (alphas) that we would be in for our first 19-day phase. I also found out I would be going to La Amistad International Park. We went on a trial trek learning some vital skills e.g. digging a long drop, cooking on tranguias and some basic navigation and emergency routines for if someone is injured. We were taken through medical training and taught how to cross rivers. In the evening we had a giant just dance competition it was hilarious although very embarrassing dancing in front of people you had just met. We also had a salsa lesson that evening...there is never a dull moment and you quickly learn just to throw yourself into everything.

### Phase 1-NRM-La Amistad International Park

La Amistad is a beautiful park that covers 2000km<sup>2</sup> between Panama and Costa Rica containing many species of plants and animals. We learnt that Costa Rica accounts for 0.03% of the earth's surface but it contains 6% of the world's biodiversity. Could you think of a better place to help keep that way? For our NRM (Natural Resource Management) project we were camping in the main Rangers station on the Costa Rican side of the forest, just above a community called Altamira. The view from the viewing platform is unforgettable and the sounds as you go to bed at night are crazy. One night I had a firefly stuck inside my tent and at the same time could hear hummingbirds flying around and toucans calling out.

Our job in the park was to clear a section of a 2.5km trail called the Gigantes del Bosque trail so that it is more accessible to the public and also to start with

building a compost area so that the rangers can live in an even more sustainable way. We actually managed to clear the whole trail in our 17 days in the park, as well as finish half of the compost heap, which they started using straight away. We worked from 6am-12am to avoid the heat of the day, using tools that were new to the majority of us and discovering muscles that we didn't know existed. It was hot, tiring work and you get bitten all over as you are working in the rainforest, but it is also great working as a team to achieve a goal. It is even better when you exceed that goal. We had to put steps into the path, remove fallen trees and clear roots and any other tripping hazards, as well as creating trenches for the rain to run down so our path wouldn't be ruined.

On Sundays we would have the day off and go down to the local community to visit the cooperative, run by Jessica. We spoke to her about the importance of the cooperative within the community because it means that the village work together in order to all get a better price for their coffee. They share the work and share the profits, although the profits are still not much. We were shocked to hear that the coffee farmers only get \$1 for each kilogram of coffee that they sell and that this is only 0.5% of the total retail price for a cup of coffee somewhere like the UK or the US. It is really important that cooperatives like this keep running and it is amazing to see the whole community working together to make it a fairer society. The work we are doing helps the rangers in the park but also benefits this community too, by bringing more tourists to the area where they will be spending money and spreading their wealth.

When we first arrived I think as a group we felt that the work we were doing would not really benefit the park that much and that the rangers didn't really need us there doing this work. However, after talking to the Head ranger Frank we learnt that this was not the case at all. He said that in a year he only has about 6 groups of volunteers and that we are far larger than a normal group. They have only 12 rangers for the whole of the Costa Rican side of the park, which covers 196,000 hectares. That is not enough rangers for the massive area that they have to cover as well as doing maintenance work such as clearing paths. So we are definitely saving them a lot of work. Having a whole new trail clear means that they will have more tourists come to stay at the rangers station and visit the park.

On this phase I really enjoyed working as part of the planning team for 6 days. It was hard at times because in the afternoons it is hot and it is tricky to motivate people to do activities. We did Raleigh activities that had to be completed as well as fun sessions like yoga, who am I? and Spanish lessons run by Lupe and Fabian who are from Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

After each phase you return to fieldbase for a changeover period before heading off on your next adventure with a new group of people. You have to perform a skit to let everyone know what you have been doing. We decided to do some songs from lion king and change the lyrics, which was so much fun and we won. You also get a chance to go into Turrialba, do some shopping and get the very needed Wi-Fi.

## Phase 2-WASH-El Terrero, Nicaragua

WASH stands for Water Sanitation and Hygiene and is one of the phases that I was most looking forward to when I applied for Raleigh International. You stay with a host family in a rural community in northern Nicaragua in a region called the dry corridor. When Raleigh arrived to El Terrero none of the houses had any running safe drinking water, they either get it from an unsafe source or have to go and collect it from a river. They then purify it in ways that are not necessarily guaranteed to work. Our job while we were staying in the community was to pipe a section of the line running from the source to the houses and also to educate the community in basic sanitation and purification methods.

Every day except for Sunday we would trench from 7am till 12pm and it was extremely strenuous and sweaty work. By 12pm some days it would have reached 40 degrees and sometimes the ground we were digging would be rock solid or even paved courtyards. We were working alongside the local men and their sons, as in order to have clean water you have to have one member of your family turn up for work 2 times a week. They are absolute machines and trying to keep up with them is impossible, but it made us work even harder. You feel guilty when you take a break even though you know you are there to help so anything you do is good work. At lunch time I would walk back to my house and have lunch, which is always rice, beans, tortilla with an accompaniment-normally egg often with tomato or pepper and occasionally meat. We had this for all of our meals and coffee too, made by my "Mum" herself. She woke up every morning at 4am to make tortillas-she makes between 30-40 a day when we are here.

In the afternoon we would all meet as an 'alpha' in the community centre, we would organize action days, do active citizenship activities, organize focus groups and have some fun. An action day is when you bring the community together to educate them around a certain topic that Raleigh or CAPS think is necessary to discuss. We did one on water sanitation showing the importance of knowing where your water is from and how and why to treat the water they drink. The other one was on the water shed and water cycle, we talked to them about the different processes and also how they can look after the cycle and prevent contamination occurring. We also arranged a meeting for all of the women in the community with coffee and biscuits. It was a women only meeting so that they would feel comfortable sharing their views and discussing them openly with the group. The outcome was very interesting and because it was international women's day we talked about what they thought their rights should be and how they are restricted in their community. They said that they felt they were not appreciated for all of their work around the house and that their husbands do not see it as proper work. They also said you have to be brave and set your own limits in order to not be controlled by men. The men often walk into the house and lie in bed kick their shoes off and drop their coats on the floor, expecting their wives to pick everything up for them. They don't say please or thank you and expect food to be ready when they ask for it. You could really see the want for change within the younger girls at the meeting who said that they would never let a man boss them around and if he wants to leave his coat on the

floor he can pick it up himself. Some of the women are also starting to see that for something to change they have to actively change their behaviour, so that they don't just do their husbands washing and cooking. One grandmother in the village is teaching her young grandsons to wash and cook and clean around the house themselves. Other women though definitely do not have the confidence to stand up to their husbands so there is a big difference from household to household. We also did a similar thing with the men that morning asking them the same questions. They answered them in completely opposite ways, saying they realised how busy their wives are in the house and that they appreciate all that they do. There is clearly a bit of miscommunication here.

I found the biggest challenge of this phase was the home stay. I was living with another girl from Holland, called Emma. She did not speak Spanish so I was the Spanish speaker in our house even though I have only studied Spanish to GCSE level. Our first few days in the house were very tricky, minimal communication and a lot of awkward silences... however my language and confidence did start improving and I found I could have conversations with my "Dad" about his childhood even if I didn't understand everything. It felt like a big achievement when I did have a conversation, which made me want to try harder. They live in very basic conditions, but I learnt that this is all you need as they are very happy and lead a peaceful life. They cook on fires-mostly eating their own produce and animals, shower outside with a bucket, use a latrine in the garden, they have one central living room with a small TV on which they watch telenovelas every evening. It is also what they are used to and they know nothing else. I slept in a small room with Emma and our brother and his girlfriend. They had built another bed so that we didn't have to sleep on the floor. They also have many animals including chickens, pigs, cows, dogs, puppies, chicks, cats etc. and I was also lucky enough to be in a house that grew a lot of their own fruit so we had delicious juices and also could take fresh fruit to work. Even though you only live with your host family for just over 2 weeks you get very attached to them and leaving was horrible as I was just starting to get to know them and their lives.

### Phase 3-Youth Leadership-Turrisantos Trek-280km

I was very excited if not a bit nervous for trek. I had done D of E and things like that at school but they were only 4 days not 19...I had a great group though and we bonded really quickly. Some people appeared more confident than others but we soon realised that everyone has their strong point, whether it is the trekking, cooking, organization, map reading or keeping the moral high. We trekked from one side of Costa Rica to the other and climbed to 2,820m as our highest point. Costa Rica is anything but flat so there were a lot of hills, humid climates and heavy backpacks to deal with that made it even more of a challenge. We would carry food for 5 days max always with an extra day's worth in case anything went wrong. I loved the trek as I saw beautiful views that I will never forget, worked as part of a team, and we got on really well as a group. The generosity of the Costa Rican people surprised everyone. They would frequently offer us their houses for showers, toilets, food and coffee for no charge at all. It was lovely to see how happy everyone was for us to be trekking through their country and weirdly how many people wanted to take photos with us.

To build on your personal leadership qualities everyone gets a chance to be a day leader and for 24 hours you are in charge of the team. You assign roles to your team members and make decisions on when to break, how to keep the group walking together and also keeping the moral high even when you are only half way there and everyone is already flagging. It is a tough job but I loved every minute of my two day leader days. The first one I was leading the team on a day that we had been warned was hard. The route card appears misleading with the hills seeming to go on forever. I was also not feeling great with a dodgy tummy, that came with nausea and stomach cramps. The rest of the team were also not walking together, so I set a pacemaker (the slowest walker) at the front, surprisingly it made them walk faster and the rest of the team stayed behind them. This made us much faster. We completed the day and came to a pulperia (village shop) where everyone bought bread, biscuits and much more. We camped that night on a football pitch, it was the first night we had to camp and it poured with rain, it was not easy to keep everyone happy or in good spirits but somehow I managed and everyone went to bed in good spirits ready for the next day.

The 16B Raleigh group that I was a part of all completed the 19 day trek, provided safe drinking water to 3 different communities, completing the piping and placing taps in all the houses, cleared 5km of trail in La Amistad International Park and Built a new trail that acts as a forest fire break in Las Piedras Blancas National Park. It is amazing what a group of young people can achieve in 10 weeks.

I learnt a lot during my experience on Raleigh. I have become much better at coping in unknown or difficult situations, have found that I am a good leader and that I can complete things that sometimes I would have doubted I could. I have gained valuable social skills from being immersed into a group of people that I didn't know and made a lot of great friends. Through the active citizen workshops that we completed I also learnt a lot about issues that are arising in the world today and have heard the views and opinions from people from very different cultures and backgrounds to myself. I wish I could go back and do Raleigh all over again as it honestly is one of the best things I have ever done in my life.

### Travels

Puerto Viejo, Costa Rica ->Bocas del Torro, Panama->Panama City->Medellin, Columbia->Cartagena->Playa Blanca->Santa Marta->Tayrona National Park  
->Minca->Bogota->Home

I could write forever about all of the things I saw on my travels after Raleigh but instead I will just highlight a few special places. Medellin is an amazing place. In 2004 it was the worlds most dangerous city and by 2006 it was finally an ok place for people to go and visit. Now 10 years later walking around the streets you feel perfectly safe and yes you do get men on the street calling out to you and saying welcome to our city but our tour guide on a free walking tour told us it is only because they actually do want to welcome you. The fact tourists are there

only means good things to them, they are happy that we can enjoy their amazing city too.

Cartagena was everything I was expecting, beautiful old colonial streets and lots of street food, music and Local people, who are always happy. We went to Playa Blanca for a night and stayed in Hammocks on the beach and relaxed before going back to humid Cartagena for a few nights.

Tayrona and Minca are both beautiful. Tayrona is a National park to the East of Santa Marta. You get dropped at the park gate and have to walk into the park to find where you want to stay. The beaches are untouched and beautiful, with coconut trees lining them and rocky outcrops sheltering the bays. In Tayrona it was very hot so it was nice to go for only a night. Minca is in the mountains and it is a bit cooler. There are waterfalls to walk to, coffee plantations to see and chocolate tours to go on. If you go from Mid May till the end of Summer it gets wetter but you can also try out cannyoning, tubing and other activities that involve the many rivers. There are also motortaxis that take you everywhere, which is also quite fun as going on the back of a local's motorbike is hilarious.

If you want to find out more about Raleigh International or more about what I and the rest of 16B did when we were out there have a look at the blog:

<https://raleighinternational.org/blog/costa-rica-nicaragua/>

or the website:

<https://raleighinternational.org>

The generous sponsorship that I received from The Kempson Rosedale Trust has enabled me to have this truly life enriching experience and also meant that I could then extend my time and travel afterwards. So I am hugely grateful for the support I was given and I hope that you will continue to provide young people with the chance to do something different and help them feel like they can achieve what maybe they couldn't before.



Beautiful View from campsite in La Amistad National Park





Me and Stijn working on the trail in La Amistad



Meeting Jessica at La Asiprola Cooperative in La Amistad





Meeting my 'Dad' in Nicaragua



Action Day in Nicaragua





My Room in Nicaragua



Womens meeting in Nicaragua



Trekking through the Costa Rican Hills



One of the many places we were given to stay in on trek.





Dancing with children in a school while waiting for a guide



Reaching the beach at the end of 280km



Waterfalls in Minca





Bags in Cartagena





Tayrona National Park

