

This time last year, I was on a countdown. I was counting down the days before heading off on October 10th 2014, by myself, to Central and South America- and I was nervous!

My name is Daisy Bidault. I've always loved learning Spanish however the exams were something I struggled with for some reason. After my A-Levels, I knew that I wanted to go somewhere I could practise and develop my linguistic skills without the pressures that come with said exams before heading up to Durham University to continue my studies.

I'd known that I wanted to go travelling for a while and NHEHS was a great help in encouraging and motivating me to make this happen; especially since the GDST Travel Scholarship that I won helped me buy my plane ticket out, which was the first and arguably the most important step of my journey.



Since this was my first big trip so far from home, I decided to take part in a 10 week Raleigh International expedition in Costa Rica & Nicaragua in order to make the whole ordeal less intimidating as this meant I wouldn't find myself alone in an alien environment straight away. Raleigh International is a sustainable development charity. The expedition broken down into three phases of volunteering: environmental, humanitarian and a three week long trek, during which you develop teamwork skills. It was an absolutely incredible experience as I was constantly surrounded by like-minded people of my own age. Not only

did I make fantastic memories as well as lifelong friends, I also got accustomed to being away from home and I even made some travel-buddies for after the expedition.

Although my time with Raleigh was a small part of my trip, it was definitely the most impactful. My first three weeks were spent walking 285km across the Guanacaste region of Costa Rica, with 11 other members. During this time, we walked with all of our food, clothing and tents in our 20kg backpacks. For water, we would ask strangers who would gladly offer it to us from their taps, with a kind '¡pura vida!' in exchange. (Costa Ricans are supposedly the happiest people in the world). We slept in schools, churches, community centres or wild camping- going to sleep under the starriest skies and waking up (at 3.30am!) to the most wonderful views. We finished the trek arriving at the Pacific Ocean which was paradisiacal (however even paradise didn't prevent the dozen blisters that I had by the end from burning in the sea water!).

My second phase was spent in a small and almost unheard-of national park in Costa Rica (La Cangreja, about an hour from the capital). Here we stayed in bamboo beds that we constructed ourselves. We spent the mornings renovating the derelict trails of the national park and in the afternoons we tried to encourage the community to make the park a more important part of their lives. We did this by going into the local school and showing to children the advantages of village life compared with the urbanisation that is currently happening.



My third phase was spent in a Nicaraguan village called 'La Laguna', made up of about 15 houses. We lived in a small, poorly constructed building, yet it only took a few days for me to be able to call it 'home'. I was staying in the house with a Dutch girl called Christina and our host-mother Sayda. She was a single mother of four. Our first day felt like a magical one because water arrived in the village

through their newly-installed taps for the first time in history, after Raleigh had been working there for a couple of years. As we begun a similar water project for a neighbouring village called 'Las Brasiles', I was able to watch my temporary 'mum' start up her own business of selling cookies & cakes, making dinner for the village; essentially opening up a restaurant within her own household. She was able to do this as she now didn't have to dedicate her days walking hours to the water source. A true inspiration.

The rest of my time away was spent travelling through many different countries, meeting hundreds of people and learning about the various cultures. Of course, an important aspect of my trip was to improve my Spanish so I made sure to go to various Spanish language schools. I did a total of three. My favourite by far was by Lake Atitlan in Guatemala. I had an instant connection with my teacher Judith, and the school planning was well worth the money (around \$440 for two weeks



including a host family): four hour one-on-one lessons everyday for two weeks with included after-school activities. My host family was so kind-hearted and caring, only speaking Spanish to me and bringing me to local town fêtes. It was a great feeling to be truly immersed in the culture.

Attending Spanish schools is a great way of getting to know people in a new city or area and to have certain activities organised for you. Another city in which I went to a school was in Cartagena, Colombia. Here for example, I met a lot of fellow backpackers with whom we went to Playa Blanca, a Caribbean-esque beach during the weekend. It was great to be

able to go to lessons and then be able to speak more and more to the locals, be it for the simple day-to-day things such as in restaurants, or haggling in markets or crossing borders which can be somewhat daunting! Not only do I now have a better understanding of the culture in these countries, but I also have a much improved grasp of the language.

Taking salsa lesson is something else I would also recommend; especially in Colombia's Cali- 'the salsa capital of the world'. The dancing in South America is infectious: everybody seems so happy and ready to party that you really do want to get involved and they appreciate gringos trying it out (even if it is a funny sight at times!).

Of course, one of the big aspects that I had to learn to deal with was budgeting my money! With such a long trip, I didn't pay enough attention to this aspect at the beginning which was a problem about five months down the road when I was so low on money that I couldn't afford to go to Chile. So I decided to get a job in a hostel in Cusco, which is the 'stop-off' city on the way to Machu Picchu. I was a bartender in a party hostel renowned throughout the backpacker scene called 'Loki'. I ended up working there for six weeks as it was so much fun and I managed to save a lot of money! When you work for hostels, you volunteer, in that you work bar shifts in return for bed and food. This was one of the few places where I 'settled' down and got to know the city inside out and Cusco is such a beautiful place to 'get stuck in'. I did end up feeling a little homesick here as the hours of the job could sometimes get long however the arrival of some girlfriends from NHEHS with whom I did the amazing trek up to Machu Picchu, softened the blow and motivated me to continue my journey and finally leave Cusco.



So, why would I encourage you to apply for a GDST Travel Scholarship and take a gap year? Having seen my brother travel here, there, everywhere, I've always had inspiration to 'get out and explore the world'. But what if you don't have a brother with itchy feet? Hopefully this short piece will motivate some of you out there! Yes, I could have easily gone to University straight after my

A Levels but the fact that I had to leave home, leave my comfort zone and adjust to this new, amazing, terrifying and constantly exciting way of living has changed me in ways that I probably don't even realise yet. I now feel that I'm going up to University with a renewed appetite for learning which, feeling worn out from the stress that came with A-Levels, I wouldn't have had last year. It wasn't always easy but something that a friend from home reading Spanish at Manchester said to me had a big impact 'I'm learning about all these places in my uni books but you're actually out there and experiencing them!' This really convinced me to carry on. I'd heard of the cliché 'catching the travel bug' and I can't say for sure where or when it happened but what I can say is that it *is* an actual thing! Having been home three months now, I've already started planning my next trip... Hopefully I'll meet some fellow GDST girls out there!