

Honduras Report

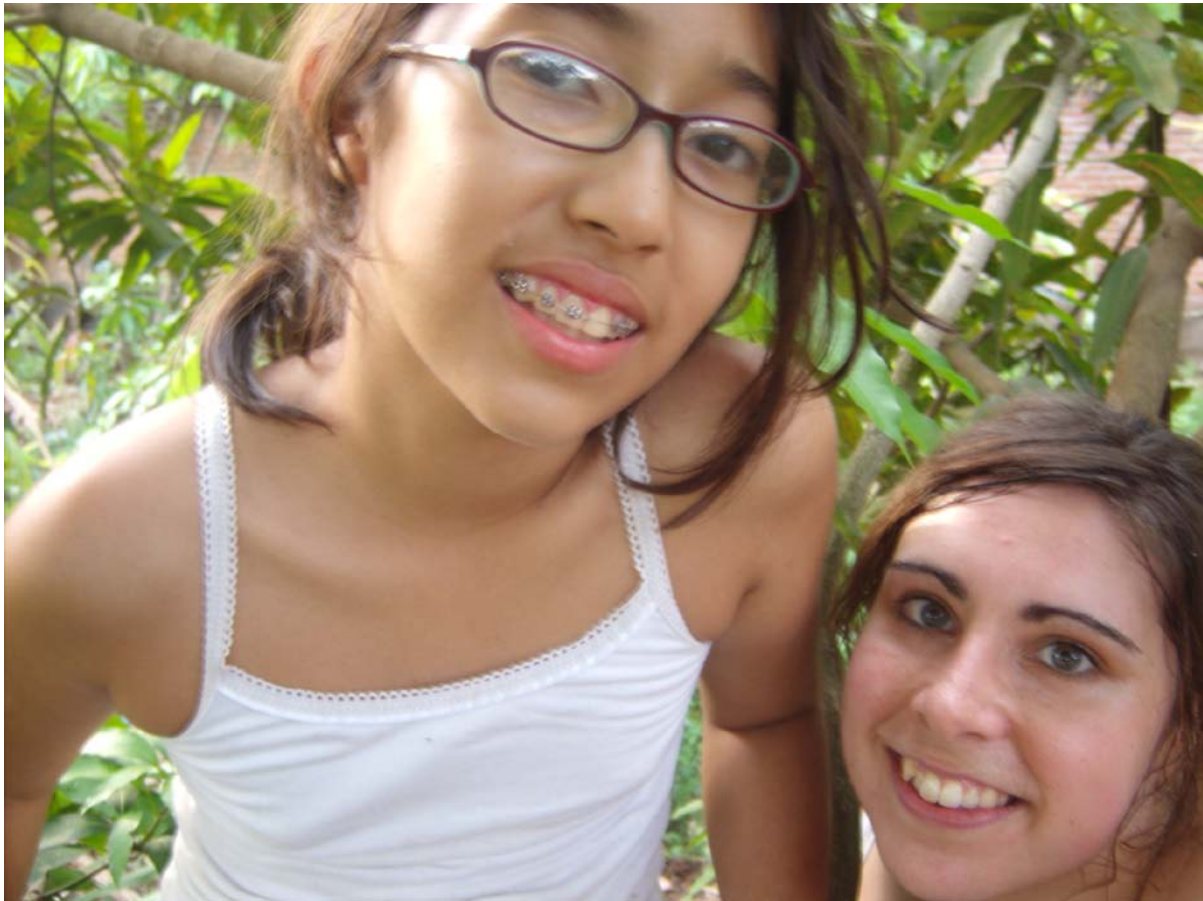
I spent 6 weeks living with a Honduran family in 2012 during my medical elective, where I worked alongside Honduran healthcare workers in a charity clinic to provide healthcare to the region's most needy and poor patients.

I had a very exciting landing in Tegucigalpa – the world's 2nd most dangerous airport I was informed after! The runway is very short and there are lots of mountains in the way meaning the plane has to fly very low and do a very tight turn before landing.

The road to Catacamas started out ok, but the further we got away from the capital the rougher it got, and the more we had to snake around all of the potholes including driving on the wrong side of the road until oncoming traffic forced a quick swerve. It was very hot and the enormous bottle of water that I had bought quickly ran out. All of the windows were open and there was a good breeze blowing through which made it bearable, but when the sun got a bit lower and shone in on me through the windows it got very hot again.

The family I live with consists of Roldán and Conchita, couple in their late 60s/70s, their daughter Lety and 2 of their grandchildren – Linda (12) and Daniel (16). They have 5 other children who live in the capital but visit regularly. And they have a practically adopted daughter from the States, a missionary doctor who has moved here to work and is now married with a baby. The house is a survivor of the 1998 hurricane Mitch which devastated this country. The house, like most in the city and a lot in the country too, is made from concrete. It has a kitchen, sitting room, dining room and lots of bedrooms which have all been added at different times. My room has an ensuite shower and toilet and double bed which were unexpected luxuries! The garden is full of coconut and mango trees and has a shady terrace with a table, chairs and a couple of hammocks for when it is too hot to be inside.

The staple food here is kidney beans. They are either eaten boiled or liquidised with butter and spices. They are coupled with corn tortillas, fried plantain, scrambled egg, fried chorizo or hotdog sausage and grated cheese for breakfast and dinner. Lunch is more of a typical meat, carbs and vegetable or salad. They have the most wonderful fruit here, and I was lucky enough to be here for mango and watermelon season.



Unfortunately the country has never recovered from the 1998 hurricane which left the city of Catacamas completely cut off from the rest of the country when the bridges were washed away and roads destroyed. There was no water or electricity, even the water in the well in the garden was contaminated. The people tell me that it has suffered under poor leadership ever since. The global economic crisis has hit this already struggling country hard, and more and more people have turned to crime as a result. It is on the route of drugs trafficked from South America up to the states and gang crime is common – murders are an everyday occurrence here in the cities.

In my first fortnight in the country the couple's 22 year old daughter was visiting which was great for me. We chatted about the differences between being a student in the UK and here. She is keen to go to Spain to work in the future as she is interested in international and criminal law, but lawyers who work in criminal law here tend to get shot. She took me to some caves with stalactites and stalagmites and quartz formations and to swim in the river one Sunday when it was very hot and there was a power cut making it unbearably hot in the city. We actually have power most of the time. But when it goes, there's no water either because the water is pumped out of the tank by electricity. They keep a big sink full of water outside in case of emergencies which is useful for washing when there's a power cut, but not great from a vector control point of view.

After a week and a half of sunshine (which did nothing to augment my tan as it was too hot to be anywhere other than in deepest shade!) the rainy season begun. This suddenly led to an enormous increase in the number of mosquitoes, flies and other bugs, and the geckos which had been all over the inside walls of the house suddenly disappeared. This showed that the beginning of the mango

season was near and Linda and I climbed mango trees and threw things at the fruit to see if any were ripe yet.

The roads are very dangerous here because the combination of potholes, unpredictable flooding, animals on the road, poor vehicle maintenance, intermittent street lighting and a plethora of drunk or drugged drivers does not make for a very healthy combination. The increase in opportunistic crime both serious and petty has had a marked effect on the family I lived with. They used to walk the half mile into town every day without thinking about it, but now are too afraid. They used to have a church service in the morning and another in the evening, but the evening service has had to be cancelled because it is too dangerous to be out much after dark.

The language was quite difficult for me to understand at first because the vocabulary and grammar were quite different from the Spanish that I had learnt first at school and later in South America. Their accents were also quite thick, and they spoke quickly apart from the family who I lived with who made every effort to be speak slowly so I could understand. After a few weeks my ear tuned in more and I was able to do medical consultations with little supervision. It was great to be completely immersed in the language and culture of Honduras and go for days without speaking English. Linda also discovered that I was a useful resource when it came to both Science and English homework!

Opportunities to leave the house were limited, especially in the evenings, and I ended up spending a fair bit of time with the local kids. We would play ball games on the street or in the garden when it wasn't raining. The neighbours are used to the family having random white people to stay so I didn't get treated like too much of a local celebrity. Football is a national obsession here and the locals were disappointed that I wasn't from Manchester, Chelsea or Arsenal! They were also surprised that I had neither met the queen or been invited to the royal wedding!

The diseases I saw in the clinic were more similar to those in the UK than I had initially expected. But there were some tropical diseases that we don't see like malaria, dengue and parasitic infestations. There were also lots of cases of things which presented much later and at a more advanced stage than they would usually in the UK because people put off going to the doctor for as long as possible because they have to pay, or because they can't afford the treatment. A lot of people live many hours' journey away from a doctor as well. The doctors were generally quite knowledgeable and I realised after a few weeks that often when they made decisions that I didn't understand or agree with it was because of cultural factors that I didn't understand, especially the patient's beliefs about the cause of disease.

Death is very much a part of everyday life here – partly because everyone knows everyone so hears about it when someone dies and partly because of the higher levels of violence and poor health and safety. This was something which I found very hard to get used to. I would get angry when I heard about people dying in violent circumstances or due to medical negligence or lack of resources because it seemed unfair to me as those deaths are very uncommon in the UK. However, the people here are used to that being part of life and see it as unfortunate, but are too used to it to become angry.

The family and my colleagues at the clinic soon realised what a fan I was of the local coffee and took delight in explaining the growing and roasting process to me. They were very impressed that I could

take my coffee without milk or sugar though. The eldest son of the family owned a coffee plantation which produced the second best coffee in Honduras which unfortunately there wasn't time to visit.

I realised that I got quite defensive when people told me what an easy life I had only knowing that I was British. They are right, I am incredibly blessed and the minor trials and tribulations of my life are nothing, but I also realised that there are people in the UK who are just as poor as the poorest people in Honduras. We have a wonderful social welfare system, and I am even more grateful for the NHS than I was before having seen the struggle for people with no insurance and no savings when they or a loved one becomes ill. But you don't have to look too far to find people living in terrible situations in most cities in the UK too. I have realised that I need to be more aware of this when I go home.

They spend a lot of time in their houses because it is too hot to do much in the day and too dangerous to go out much after dark. I made friends with a local doctor who was 24 as well. He took me to try some of the typical local food and drink. Fried chicken is a staple here, as are tacos, burritos, enchiladas, baleadas and other combinations of meat and or vegetables wrapped in flour tortillas. We were able to talk a lot about the differences in healthcare in the two countries, and how we manage patients in very different ways depending on the resources available and limitations of the different systems.

There are many things that I will take away from the experiences I had in Honduras. The way that we do things over here is not always the best – it is just what I'm used to, and I would do well to question why we do things the way we do rather than just accept it, and to be more open minded when I come across people from other cultures who do things differently rather than automatically assuming that they are wrong. The other biggest thing that I will take away is a profound gratefulness for the NHS and other social and economic structures in place in our country which I take for granted on a daily basis, but without which our lives would be very different indeed.

I would like to sincerely thank the Reg Gilbert International Youth Friendship Trust for their very generous donation towards this trip which made this life changing, challenging and stimulating learning experience possible. I have made close friends who I stay in regular contact with, and despite having stated in my application that I did not envisage a reciprocal visit I have offered 3 friends accommodation should they ever wish to come to the UK.