

## Becoming an International Citizen

On the 10th October 2014, I departed the UK and began my journey to the rural mountains of Nicaragua; where I would proceed to spend the following 10 weeks of my life, living and working with local people.

The real journey however, started back in January 2014 when I applied to the Department for International Development funded programme; International Citizen Service. After a successful application and assessment process, I was assigned to work for Raleigh International - a sustainable development charity - out in the wild depths of Central America.

The aim of the ICS programme is to encourage 18-25 year olds to volunteer overseas and improve their awareness of international issues. I personally chose to apply for the programme to gain more experience in the charity sector, and to step out of my comfort zone; completely immersing myself in a new culture.

Before my time on ICS, I was an Undergraduate at Durham University, studying Geography & Geology. A combination of my academic studies, and personal interests in travel, charity work, international development, sailing and skiing, has led to an increased awareness of the effects of climate change, and how important sustainable development issues are. I've slowly come to realise that the actions of one person are more far-reaching than you would expect, and that with positive-change programs like ICS, we can actually achieve a difference for the human population and for the environment. Therefore, when I gained a place with Raleigh, I was incredibly excited to get started on some on-the-ground projects, which could make a tangible difference to local people's lives and their environment.

Upon arrival in Nicaragua, myself and the other Raleigh volunteers (from the UK, Europe, Nicaragua and Costa Rica) travelled to the city of Esteli, to undergo an intense training programme; gaining basic skills in teamwork, conservation, cross-cultural communication, target setting, sustainability and how to effectively raise awareness of sensitive topics.

After 3 days of seminars, workshops and mentoring sessions, we were split into our project groups or "Charlies". I was assigned to Charlie 6, and placed in the central, mountainous region of Matagalpa; which in recent years has suffered hugely from the effects of climate change. Longer dry seasons have affected crop yields and encouraged young males to emigrate to Costa Rica in order to find work; therefore taking money and potential development out of the area.

The main aim of our Charlie was to work alongside a local project partner, ANIDES, on a Natural Resource Management project. ANIDES had previously assessed the area, and concluded that watershed management practices needed to be improved, so that access to water could be ensured and improved within the near future. The basic principle was that we needed to raise the level of the regional water table, so that more wells could be dug within the local communities.

Discussions with ANIDES concluded that our main activities would involve building infrastructure, such as: reforestation, dykes, agricultural terraces and vegetable plots; providing training sessions so that local people gain new skills and also; pursuing awareness raising activities within the community, to improve knowledge of environmental issues.



Photo 1 – “Cerro del Padre” aka “The Rock of the Father”; the mountain that our community was founded upon.

The community that we (Charlie 6) were placed in, was called Cerro del Padre II. There are 42 houses in the village, spread over an area of approximately 4 square km, across some very mountainous terrain. The community has no access to electricity, there is a single-room primary school providing very basic education to children between 4-12, the closest medical centre is a 2 hour bus journey away, the closest city is 2.5 hours

away and access to water is provided by a combination of private and public wells; with some families having to walk up to 3km every day, to fill up their buckets.

Despite this high level of relative poverty, most families are (for now) able to survive from a subsistence farming culture. The main crops grown are maize, rice and kidney beans, with some families growing passion fruit as a cash crop, or rearing a small amount of livestock. In recent years, crop yields have declined as a result of a changing climate; less rainfall in the wet season and longer dry periods. The community's access to water is becoming ever more important, meaning that our work was crucial to their livelihoods.

A big part of the ICS Nicaragua programme is the opportunity to live with a host family. My Nicaraguan counterpart (an in-country volunteer), Karla, became my new sister and we moved into a small family home in the centre of the village.

The first night in my new home was very daunting; setting up mosquito nets in the dark, eating a very basic meal of rice and beans, and attempting to communicate with my very rudimentary Spanish skills. A heavy rainstorm and the pitch blackness of the surroundings led to a long, lonely and sleepless first night: but after that initial, scary 24 hour period, I soon began to find my feet.

A typical day in the community began with an early rise at 5.30am, to make the most of the daylight hours. After a breakfast of rice, beans and coffee, I'd join the rest of the ICS volunteers for a 7am morning meeting. We tended to utilise the cooler periods in the morning to complete our infrastructure work; meaning that 7.30-12pm most days were spent building dykes, digging vegetable plots or planting trees.

The midday heat was exhausting, so we often had a long 2-hour lunch period, to enable people to eat and shower or wash clothes if necessary.

The afternoons were used for planning, administration, running focus groups, conducting community questionnaires, putting on training sessions & educational workshops for members of the community or hiking out to the remote corners of the village, so as to establish regular contact with all community members.

We would finish our working day at about 6pm, and often return home absolutely exhausted. Although darkness fell soon after this, the evenings were my favourite time of the day. Lack of electricity meant eating dinner with the rest of my family by candlelight. Then afterwards, we'd often stay up for a few hours; playing cards, listening to the radio or just chatting and laughing – normally about very basic topics or a hilarious mistranslation!

After a few shaky weeks, I quickly improved my language skills and was able to communicate much more effectively. My 13 year old 'younger sister' Yariksa and I did a language exchange; as she wanted to learn more English, and I obviously needed to improve my Spanish. This resulted in me becoming very close to Yariksa, learning about her desire to become a teacher in the future and how one day she would love to visit Spain.



Photo 2 - My 2 Nicaraguan sisters; Yariksa (left) & Karla (right)

Over the 10 weeks, I learnt so much from all the members of my family and really came to love them and their lifestyle. My host mother Maria taught me how to make corn tortillas from hand, cook re-fried beans and how to properly hand wash clothes; I was in constant awe of how the women of Cerro del Padre II could make a white shirt quite so clean.

My brother Miguel worked unbelievably hard to provide for his new, young family; often spending more than 12 hours a day in the fields. His wife Norma also worked in the fields, at the same time as looking after their 2 year old son Louis. Their unquestionable dedication to work was inspirational and made me view the Western world's approach to work as slightly lazy!

Now, being back in the UK, I really value the time that I spent with my family, and often miss the evenings that we spent together.

Over the course of our project, we managed to build 15 dykes, 22 vegetable plots, 4 water filtration systems, 1 eco-oven and plant nearly 500 trees. In addition, we ran 6 training sessions in conjunction with ANIDES, to provide community members with new skills, and held 8 'action days' with various activities informing people of environmental issues.



Photo 3 – Members of Charlie 6 working with the community at a vegetable plot training session

Throughout the 10 weeks, we set up various focus groups and conducted several surveys, so that we could monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of our efforts. Seemingly, the project was a success, and by the end of our stay, the majority of people; across all age ranges within the community, were more aware of their own effect on the environment, and what they could do to react and mitigate against climate change.



Photo 4 - My colleague Richard & I, holding an action day on the importance of a healthy diet at the local school

Development occurred on a community-scale, but also on a personal scale. Throughout the project, I learnt how to work and communicate with people who weren't from my own culture. Between the Raleigh volunteers, we held a 'Cultural awareness evening', where we all shared stories of our own personal experiences, family history and native country's nuances. In the process, I learnt about Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Cuba, Eritrea, Japan, Saudi

Arabia and of course discussed my own background in the UK.

We also held discussions and workshops on a number of different topics related to International Development. I led one about the International Agricultural industry, and problems currently faced with food waste, food poverty and environmental degradation associated with pastoral farming. We also tried to; invent solutions to inequality, in a number of different scenarios; differentiate between people in relative and absolute poverty; and discuss how environmental and social agendas can be held as highly in society as economic ones.

Overall, the time I spent in Nicaragua on the ICS programme was hugely beneficial. I have picked up skills in environmental management, the Spanish language and cross-cultural communication. I learnt a lot; about myself and what limits I could push myself to - both physically and emotionally, and also about issues facing developing countries and people who live within them. I also feel that I was able made a positive impact in an area of the world, that I would otherwise have had no contact with in my lifetime.

I would like to thank GIFT for the incredibly generous bursary, which provided me with the opportunity to visit Nicaragua, live with a host family and become an International Citizen.



Photo 5 - A group photo of Charlie 5 & 6, after a joint reforestation day between both communities.