

Meeting Yolanda, our Host, for the first time all seems like such a blur now. We had arrived at our 'Aldea' (Orphanage) in Peru in the middle of the night, so hadn't had much sleep. There was so much to take in at first. I remember she came into our casa (house), introduced herself then took us down for breakfast. It was all a bit difficult at first with the language barrier.

Arriving in the little town of Caraveli was pretty daunting. My partner and I had only known each other for a week or so and this was the first time we were really spending time just the two of us. Caraveli is basically a little farming village situated in the South of Peru in a valley, about an hour and a half from the coast. The drive into Caraveli is an experience in itself. I've never seen so much nothingness, just desert and mountains. Then you eventually start to see the green vegetation of Caraveli.

My Partner and I had both signed up with the organisation, Project Trust, to volunteer in a Peruvian Orphanage for a year. I think it only really hit me that we would be spending a year in such a strange environment once I had actually got there. I think the first few days I suffered slightly from culture shock, just from the realisation of how different and isolated it is. But just as I kept telling myself, it passed after a week or so. I think our Host, Yolanda also helped a lot with that. She's the director at the Aldea. She lives there with her family in their own 'casa', opposite ours. Within one of our first few days she had organised for the Aldea to go on a little day trip up the valley to the river, which we really enjoyed. The kids all swam in the little lagoons and I think it really helped us to settle in, playing cards with Yolanda and some of the kids.

Yolanda really did make an effort with us, even with the language barrier, though we were learning quickly. I'll always remember this one time, I was about to go into our house and she started telling me to 'Ven! Ven! Ven!'. I had no idea what that meant so thought she was telling me to go. Turned out it means 'come'; she ended up actually having to come over and grab me by the arm to get me to come. I lost count of the number of times she told that story after. Within the first few weeks of us being there we had already made quite a bond with Yolanda and she was telling us that we were like daughters to her and that she would miss us when we left. The rest of her family were also all so welcoming, her husband who would always try and use the few English words he knew. Her eldest son who is a similar age to us, who we ended up becoming quite good friends with, her younger son of about 10 years who eventually became like a little brother to us. Then there was also her adopted son, who took a keen interest in learning English while we were there, I've never seen such a hard worker.

To begin with everything was so full on, with all the children, the language and this new family we appeared to be part of. We would quite often go into Yolanda's casa in the evenings after we ate dinner with the kids. Sometimes just watching TV, sometimes chatting etc. She has such a great sense of humour; there was never really a dull moment. After we all participated in a cake baking course with some other women from the village we would also quite often bake pies and cakes with her. She was quite shocked at our lack of cooking skills whenever we attempted helping her to cook. I think they all learn how to cook quite young there.

As much as we loved having Yolanda as a host, she could sometimes be quite full on and we did struggle at times due to the difference in culture. She was very overprotective of us from the moment we arrived. They couldn't seem to understand why we had left our homes for a year at only age 18 as this would be a very rare thing for them to experience, I think they thought our families didn't love us or something; they would always say how they would never let their daughters do that etc. She would quite often just pop into our little house for a chat or something as well. It was impossible to get away from it all, as we were living in the Orphanage. It was literally a constant thing, and even though we could escape into our house from time to time for some time to ourselves, it would never be too long before someone came knocking or we had to go and do something.

Although, Yolanda was working and living in Caraveli, she is actually from a different town called Bella Union, about 5 hours away. She always spoke about Bella Union so much; I think she was truly proud of her town. So one time that she was going to visit, she asked if we wanted

to come with her. So we went along on a little holiday for about 10 days. We were staying in her family's home with her mum and dad, who were so cute and welcoming. Her mum was just like her, always talking and joking, then her dad didn't really say much but just looked like he was constantly smiling. After just a couple of days staying there, they too were saying how they didn't want us to go etc. Their house was like a proper little Peruvian home as well, with an outside toilet and shower and concrete floors. It was so much fun to experience how Peruvians really live. We ended up meeting most of Yolanda's family, who were all so friendly and welcoming. None of them even seemed to find it strange that we were there or anything. We even went shrimp fishing with them one day and got to ride on their motorbike. Yolanda was also great at looking after us, sometimes a bit too well. She would always be worrying about us being hungry and would quite often feed us a second lunch or dinner right after we came back from our first one. She didn't seem to understand the concept of being full. Then if one of us was to fall ill, she would always take it upon herself to take care of us. Getting us whatever medicines we needed and feeding us soup. She would always have some form of remedy for whatever was wrong. They had some strange theories about what makes you ill as well, for example, apparently eating pork and drinking beer was bound to make you ill, but if you have a shot of pisco (the local spirit) after eating pork, you won't get a sore stomach.

I think some of the main things I learnt from the experience is that language isn't all that important in communicating. When we first arrived in Peru, I only knew the very basics of Spanish, but within just a few weeks I felt like I really knew Yolanda, even though we had never really had a proper conversation, or at least not without dictionaries. It also became apparent quite early on that no matter where you are or what you're doing, the thing that will probably affect you most is the people around you. If it hadn't been for Yolanda and everyone else being so friendly and welcoming from the moment we arrived, regardless of how beautiful the scenery is, it would have been a lot more challenging settling in and really enjoying ourselves there. I think it all made me realise just how important the people you surround yourself with are. Likewise, it was definitely my family and people I missed the most from home. Furthermore, although our culture obviously has various differences to the Peruvian culture, it actually surprised me just how similar everything was. Even though their surroundings and standards of living are fairly different, when we were sitting around a table eating a meal with them for example, it would be pretty much identical to how we would expect, minus the difference in food.

I have honestly enjoyed the whole year so much; it's definitely the best decision I have ever made (so far). It's strange how normal it all seemed towards the end. I think we both forgot about all the difficulties we faced throughout the year and how it hadn't always been that easy. Then when we remembered, we couldn't help but feel proud of ourselves, with a true sense of achievement. Such as remembering how we had to adapt to such a strange environment and ways of life like showering out a cold bucket of water and not having running water 24/7. Along with the language barrier, thinking back to after 4/5 months when we suddenly realised that we weren't carrying our dictionaries around with us constantly and that we were actually managing to have conversations with people. Obviously our Spanish is still far from perfect, but we get by. I think it was only about 2 weeks before leaving that it started to sink in that we were actually leaving, and just how much we would miss it. The thought of leaving was such a mix of emotions. I feel we experienced so much there and it truly did feel like home, so it definitely wasn't easy walking away from all of that. But at the same time, I am very excited about what's to come and feel that I was ready to leave Caraveli. I think after spending a year in Peru, it has in some ways opened my eyes and I will definitely be sure to do more interesting things in life. I cannot put into words how happy I am that I took part in Project Trust, the thought that I might not have almost scares me!

