

Paz y Esperanza – discovering South America

Knocking on 800 doors and yelling at people to answer, educating mistreated Bolivian housewives about their basic rights, organising a march and running youth groups for street children was not what I had envisioned when considering my gap year. Nevertheless these all played a significant part in my year, taking place 3000 miles from home, and all in Spanish.

It all began with an interest in international development and the knowledge that to help on a programme overseas, local language skills would be essential. Hence, with no prior knowledge of Spanish, I devoted the first part of my year to tackling the language before gaining some experience with international development. Having never before travelled solo, my gap year was also an opportunity to gain some world experience and learn about other cultures. My time was split into two: first learning Spanish abroad and second using it with a development scheme. I spent the first 11 weeks attending Spanish school in Costa Rica and Ecuador, where I lived with a host family and experienced Latin American culture. That meant essentially becoming a local, dressing like the so-called “ticos”, and consuming beans and rice not just for breakfast but also lunch and dinner! My weeks consisted of attending language school, where dance and cooking lessons were also provided, before spending the weekends exploring the country. My Spanish improved quickly, and although my grammar was slightly lacking, after my first 11 weeks I was able to have a fairly fluid conversation with the locals. This knowledge of Spanish was essential for the latter part of my year: volunteering with ICS Tearfund in Bolivia. ICS is a government funded programme that works through different charities, bringing together people from different backgrounds to tackle poverty overseas.

Its main attraction is that it works on sustainable development, pairing up UK volunteers with locals. After a two week training course, my team moved to the largest and hottest city in Bolivia, Santa Cruz. The charity with which we were working was called Paz Y Esperanza (Peace and Hope) which held the long-term goal of reducing violence in Santa Cruz. This seemed a very broad and unattainable aim, however the statistics were startling: 90% of women in the area had been mugged in the past two years. The charity’s main work revolves around human rights and addressing domestic violence issues for women. They offer a service of free lawyers and counsellors for sufferers and abusers alike. Within Bolivia, sadly, the majority of women aren’t even aware of their rights. As the majority of houses don’t have a TV, and women generally remain at home as an “Ama de Casa” (housewife), it is all too easy for women to be excluded from the outside world and remain uninformed of their human rights. This is where our team became involved: the easiest way to ensure these women gain the information they need is to literally walk from house to house explaining the law. However, due to the lack of doorbells, we were forced to abandon our British etiquette and yell “SENORA” at their front door. Originally these tactics were met with severe scepticism; it seems that if you ring the doorbell in the UK twice in under thirty seconds you are received by an irritated Brit, huffing and puffing. However, having visited almost 800 houses in ten weeks, we were proved wrong and were nearly always met by a friendly face, keen to listen, taking our leaflet and often sharing heart-breaking stories.

There were some sobering testimonies: one woman, along with her daughter, had been continuously physically abused by her husband for over ten years. Another admitted that her mother had died due to domestic violence at the hand of her father. Both these women have since come to our office and are currently using the help of Paz Y Esperanza to change their lives. Alongside this we organised a series of weekly workshops for street children with the aim of changing their mind-set surrounding domestic violence. My year out was a new experience and has made me continue with Spanish to potentially fulfil a career with international development in the

future. If you're unsure whether to take a year out and try something like this, my advice would be to go for it - you won't regret it!