

Travel Fund Winner 2010:

Nikhita Chulani

“We’re not in times of Jacuzzi”

Despite having enviable oil deposits and vast natural endowments of coal, iron ore, bauxite and gold, Venezuela still faces exorbitant rates of inflation destabilizing their economy and limiting the ability to further decrease poverty rates. For these reasons and many more I wish to take up a six-week placement in East Venezuela to make (what I hope will be) a marked difference to the lives of the local indigenous communities, serving to eradicate poverty and support sustainable development. The country has always faced energy and electricity crises, with this month being not exception. Furthermore last year President Hugo Chavez controversially urged citizens to reduce the length of their showers to three minutes, giving an impression of a fall in development and instability to foreign investors. I believe by helping to improve Venezuela’s infrastructure, the Foreign Direct Investment the country greatly lacks will be encouraged and hopefully the nation will be rewarded the ‘luxury’ of being allowed to sing in the shower or lie back in their ‘jacuzzi’.

My six-week journey will be divided into four projects, with intentions to serve the community and promote conservation and eco-tourism. Initially I plan to spend my time in Playa Colorada at the Mochima National Park and the Guacharo National Park staying in a basic beachside lodge. For two weeks I aim to restore and revitalise shelters, the local surroundings and the legendary ‘White Beach’. Alongside decontaminating and reviving the area I hope to educate the public on environmental issues and ways to advance conservationism.

Still in Playa Colorada I plan on spending the following two weeks serving the community through teaching English, sport, health, and hygiene to children and developing two-week timetables of activities for the children with the ‘Jakara Club’ to further teamwork and communication skills. Furthermore, I would be teaching classes on marine conservation awareness and evening English classes for adults. It is a widespread thought that by improving adult literacy rates the appearance and actual development of a country is heightened.

For the final two weeks of my placement I would move upland onto the mountainous Caripe, where I would stay with twenty-four fellow volunteers in a simple estate. While I am there, I plan to assist on another conservation project, which also involves elements of teaching. The first week would be spent reconditioning mountain trails and bat caves, as well as speaking to the community about dangers of apathy towards their natural surroundings, a subject matter I’m sure I would benefit from being more aware of as well. In addition to this I look forward to encouraging reforestation by urging schools to safeguard the environment and planting endangered native tree species alongside them. For my final week I plan to work within the National Park Guacharo supporting a new clean-up operation that is vital for endorsement of ecotourism in the area, which allows the country to benefit from sustainable development.

Although I plan to spend upwards of eight hours a day working in the week, during the weekends I will have the chance to participate in experiences that rival bungee jumping and skydiving I have complete with the school, such as scuba diving, kite surfing, snorkelling or swimming with dolphins.

The gap year expedition cost will be £1,890, this includes twenty-four hour emergency back-up, pick up and transfer to and from the placements, food and accommodation. The projects I wish to carry out are arranged by a non-profit organization ‘The Leap’; they spend over 60% of the £1,890 on or within the community itself. Additional costs will include weekend excursions, travel insurance and international flights. The average cost of a flight to Caracas from 5th July and to 16th August (my departure and arrival dates) is £700, together with roughly £60 for travel insurance. Therefore my trip will cost upwards of £2,650.

Winning the Quondam Travel Scholarship would make my trip entirely possible, firstly because of financial limitations and secondly to prove my commitment and passion for the project to my hesitant family. I have already started fundraising for my expedition through auctioning of promises to friends and family, tutoring, and organising a twenty-four hour dance marathon outside of school.

As I spend much of my free time tutoring Mathematics and English I think I would be of use to the staff in Venezuela, but I hope also be able to further my own communication skills and develop and learn new techniques for teaching. Since my Spanish proficiency is relatively rudimentary, my past experience

teaching non-English speakers will be useful. Moreover, I believe the project will benefit from my work because of the concentration and enthusiasm I plan to devote to every project I spend my time on, from clearing litter on walkways to building rubbish bins.

While I wish this trip could be entirely selfless, I also stand to gain so much myself, as I have already mentioned. Due to the language barrier between myself and a majority of the community, there will be translators within the schools and groups I plan to travel with, however I fully intend on taking absolute advantage of the language immersion and have even arranged to take a minimum of ten hours of Spanish a week while I am there, as well as preparatory work. In addition, I hope to take the lessons I learn about ecotourism, teaching and conservationism and put them to use when I return home. Finally, I also believe the trip will provide me with first hand experience of the effects and ways to combat poverty that will be very advantageous, as I intend on study Philosophy and Economics at University.

In my opinion people grow the most in situations foreign and sometimes uncomfortable, although I have previously spent my time volunteering in poverty-stricken areas; I have always gone home at the end of the day. I believe by going away for six weeks and reducing my dependency on material objects and amenities, I can fully apply myself to the projects of helping in Playa Colorada and Caripe, giving back a fraction of what I been so privileged to have received.