

Harry's QUETZALTREKKERS story

I arrived in Leon with a vague intention of doing some volunteering, but I wasn't sure. First stop was Bigfoot, that hostel recommended up and down the well beaten path by many I met, so I checked in. I'd been in Quetzaltenango for a few months and did a few hikes with the QT crew up there so I knew a bit about the León project, but I didn't make it up to the office because of, well. Bars and beers.

Friday night in ViaVia came around and this Nicaraguan geezer with a QT t-shirt comes up and sells us all raffle tickets for the full moon hike. This was my first encounter with QT. When my ticket was pulled from the hat and I won the free full moon hike it felt like my decision had been made for me: I was going to be around for a while.

This first hike up Telica was one of the highlights of my meanderings around Central America. There were about 20 of us. We ranged from enthusiastic Northern Europeans with all mod cons and hiking paraphernalia to slightly unfit North Americans with flip flops. The summit was amazing. We saw lava and the sunrise was fantastic. Watching the sun come up and illuminate all the volcanoes in the Maribios range was truly exhilarating. If you can only do one hike with QT, the full moon gets my full recommendation.

So I was hooked from then on. I mean, when else can you live in a colonial city such as León and get to hike active volcanoes with astonishing regularity? Cerro Negro came up next, and how different it was!

I think my favorite volcano to hike was the mighty Momotombo. If the sunrise on Telica is spectacular, the sunset on Momotombo is something to write down for great-grandkids to be inspired by. From the campsite views include the pacific, the Maribios chain, Lago de Managua, Volcán Asososca and the eery Volcán El Hoyo. It's said that on a very clear day you can see Isla Ometepe in Lago de Nicaragua but in all my ventures I never saw this.

Another great hike was going to Cosigüina. I only did this hike twice. The second time was more of a group outing than a hike as there was only three paying guests - three siblings from Canada, but also three volunteers from Las Tias and two more volunteers from the QT gang. Cosigüina is very isolated and difficult to get to, and as a result the locals are fairly curious about us extranjeros coming to visit them. A spontaneous football match was organized which we unfortunately lost, but considering the odds (13 hardened locals to 6 weedy volunteers) I don't think our loss was that bad.

A beautiful hike later and another night on the beach and we slipped off to the natural hot springs round the corner. There is a bit of traveling involved in this hike but a warm soak is a lovely way to get relaxed for the bus journey home. The craziest thing about this hike was when we changed buses to get back to León. Daniel Ortega was due to have his signing in ceremony and there were 20 or so buses organized to transport people to León. A bit of swift talking and a hat exchange later and I hooked us up on one of these buses. Everyone was cheering and applauding all the way to León, a massive convoy of those old yellow American school buses.

Arriving in León there was time for a quick shower and a beer before we went to see Daniel Ortega and Hugo Chavez speak so eloquently about Nicaragua and the cuddly relations with the North Americans.

What more? There's too many stories to tell about the good times in QT. The time we climbed Asososca with local hiking and bee enthusiast (ok less enthusiast more aggressor) Alejandro and as we watched the sun go down whilst half way down the volcano he admitted he hadn't climbed it in 50

years. The time I agreed to take 10 Taiwanese up Momotombo only to find they rarely hiked and we never summited.

Standing on the cathedral and watching Telica belch out smoke... Finding a tarantula at the base of Cerro Negro and of course, the many after parties and the endless reggeaton de Nicaragua. Having to buy new boots every couple of months from the volcanic rock.

To see some of the photos I took whilst away, this is my flicker site:
<http://www.flickr.com/photos/52601360@N00/sets/72157607314749741/>

Quetzaltridders, you'll always have a piece of me somewhere, just like I have some of Cerro Negro still embedded in my knee. To any prospective volunteers feel free to email any questions feel free to email me: harry.staniland@gmail.com

Harry