

Amanda's QUETZALTREKKERS story

I just rocked up at QT one day and met the volunteer that was working in the office, later I came back for the weekly meeting and started on a hike by the end of that week. That first hike was the hardest thing ever and I was thinking as if I can do this for the next three months. When we got to that point on Telica where you can see the smoking crater and look back along the line of volcanoes I was completely blown away. How could I not do this for the next three months?!

León is only a small town and not the most exciting place on earth, but I had so much fun. The people, the lifestyle, the weather, everything gets your senses going crazy in mostly good, but sometimes bad ways. My favourite hike was Cosigüina or was it Telica? I can't decide. I loved Cosiguina because we got to travel so far away and camp in the garden of a family, swim at a beach where Honduras and El Salvador are just across the water and eat at a Comedor where there were about five dogs with under bites. Also there is that awesome fresh water swimming hole where all the locals initially stare, but after a while just want to be friends. The kids show off by doing flips, the cattle herders cruise up and sometimes give you a ride on their horses and the women stay down stream and do their laundry.

I loved Telica because after all that dusty trail and steep climb the butterflies emerge from the forest. After being on the edge of a steep hill in mostly sunlight, thinking you could vomit at any moment, before you know it you're surrounded by lush green forest, flat ground and shade. Along the way there are droplets of water falling from above. We always knew it couldn't be rain, the sky was way too blue. After everyone's random theories we found out it was bugs that pee. Along the trail there is a mango tree. Yum. It's the best rest spot in the whole of Nicaragua. So much shade and so much food, as long as you beat all the cows that want to eat the mangoes, too. One thing that wasn't so cool about Telica was the toilet situation. The ground's mostly too hard to dig and a lot of people camp up there. It was becoming a struggle to find an untouched piece of ground, hopefully by now something's changed.

The other hike I learnt was Cerro Negro. I remember walking to the bus stop in the dark, waiting on the curb and continually hoping that we hadn't missed the bus. Of course there's not a chance of that, as if anything's ever on time in Central America. The drive up to Cerro Negro usually takes place while the sun's rising and it's the only bus ride experience that isn't beyond stuffy and hot and isn't packed to the brim. Sun rise is always such a calm and peaceful time and I think it's about the only time in my life that I've been up so often to see it. Then the school kids get on. All calm is blown away as they cramp in three or four to a seat. They're all so cute and once again a lot of staring occurs, but this time in both directions.

The Main Square and church in León are pretty cool. There's an awesome view from the top of the church and awesome hamburgesas coming from the surrounding caravans converted into kitchens. If you're vegetarian you can still enjoy these tasty treats, just make sure when you ask for no meat you also ask for no ham otherwise when you go to return it with ham in it the lady will say, but there's not meat in it. You will say what about this? She will say that's ham and stare at you blankly. So rather than getting into the biology of things with her it's simply easier to ask for no meat and no ham. It's better to remember to do this initially because she won't make a whole new hamburger, she'll simply just take the ham out.

León also has its share of town crazies, but like most town crazies they are harmless and loveable once you give them a chance. The two I remember most are the chubby blind guy that sang and the war vet painter. Chubby blind guy used to stop at the door everyday with his hand out stretched, we'd always fill it with whatever food was around and he would go on his merry way. One day it was raining and I noticed him down the street wearing only a singlet. I ran out with some spare clothes

that we had in the house and gave him a jumper. He squeezed into it straight away and everyone was staring at me from their shop windows like I was a freak. When I got back to QT I asked one of the Nicaraguans why what I had done was so weird and he said 'well, he's crazy'. I know people can have that mentality everywhere you go, but it made me really sad. The war vet painter's story is really full on too. He used to be a really amazing famous painter until he was made to go and fight in the war. Now he still paints, but his disability affects his body and he can't paint anywhere near as good as he used to. His speech is also affected by his disability, so he walks around León for months with the same painting, approaching tourists trying to talk to them and sell his paintings. The poverty in Central America became really hard for me to deal with. I did what I could while I was there like buying people food and giving them clothes, but every day, almost everywhere you look there is someone suffering.

León is also a lot of fun! Doing the market shopping for the hikes is really cool once the market people start to recognise you and realise you will be coming back, but not to their stall if they keep ripping you off. Also there are piñatas everywhere. All occasions should be celebrated with a piñata, whether it be a bad interpretation of sponge bob or an unrecognisable animal, they're always fun. Fireworks in Nicaragua are an unbelievably dangerous and therefore exciting event. They shoot up into the sky attached to a metal pole, the firework flies off and does it's magic, leaving the metal pole to plummet back down to earth. I couldn't believe my eyes the first time I saw it. Mother's shelter their babies with whatever they can find and people duck under trees for cover. A sight not to be missed in León is the hill at the top of the dump. There's an old fortress and prison up there and the view is amazing. I went up there in the afternoon, which was a really bad idea because it's a dangerous place to be after sunset, and saw something like I'd never seen before. The dump is almost more interesting than the view in a less beautiful and freakier kind of way.

The last thing I have to mention is the rum. Be it brown or white rum, there is no escaping it in León. It's plentiful, cheap and of course entertaining. The best thing to do is befriend a shop keeper who runs the store from the living room of his house. When he realises you're good business he will allow you to purchase rum at any time of the day or night. There is also a possibility of delivery if you get a big enough order.

Living in León is an amazing experience. It's the best thing I've ever done in my life. I met a lot of really awesome people, saw some incredible stuff and did heaps of things I never thought I could. Leading hikes out into the middle of nowhere and realising you're responsible for everyone is a really confidence boosting thing, especially when you manage to pull it off.

Amanda