

Florian's QUETZALTREKKERS Story

I have been a volunteer at Quetzaltrekkers Nicaragua for a total of three months during my travels through Central America in spring 2008. I had planned to volunteer on different ecological farms in Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Guatemala but friends I met on the way invited me to León and left their phone numbers on the back of a QT flyer. I had previously read about QT in my guidebook but never considered applying there until then. At first I was not sure if I really should commit for two months - this seemed to be such a long time back then. In the end I wished I could have stayed longer! It sounds like coincidence, but now I think it has been fate that led me to the QT office.

I moved into the Quetzaltrekkers mansion and was immediately greeted by a bunch of friendly volunteers. The first few days I spent mostly with reading the trip descriptions and looking over the shoulders of the more experienced volunteers while they were working in the office or preparing hikes. Soon my first hike took me to Cerro Negro and I was amazed by the beauty of the landscape! The lead guides Maaïke and Kris took a lot of care to teach me the path and all important waypoints and also tried to pass on information about the history of the volcano. Soon I realised how unpredictable a hike can be when one of the clients got sick and was not able to continue on. Maaïke and Kris quickly decided to split the group and the sick girl was taken back on an easier route.

While I was sure I would love the following weeks I was still scared of climbing the impressive smoking volcanoes I had seen at the horizon on my first hike. Active volcanoes!! Crazy shit! I had been to Volcán Arenal in Costa Rica before, watching the lava roll down the slopes from a safe spot far away - but this was different! Scary different!

A few days later I went to Volcán Telica, my first REAL hike with big backpacks, several water bottles, tents and food for two days. I overestimated my strength and put too much additional weight into my backpack, which made me suffer all the way up to the crater. But the sight of Telica's huge crater and the beautiful camp site next to it compensated me for all the sweat I had lost on my way up. I immediately lost my fear of volcanoes and Telica actually became one of my favorite hikes. I got fitter with every hike and already the second time on Telica was no big problem anymore, even though I had had little experience in hiking before.

León became a second home soon. The city is beautiful, rich in culture and attracts a big amount of backpackers from around the world, which makes for a diverse and everchanging party crowd. It took me only a few days to get used to the weekly schedule of free live concerts and parties. The only thing I never got used to is the intense heat during the day – León is HOT! A lack of running water when you're coming back from a hike in the afternoon was another drawback that took a while to accept, but hey! This is Nicaragua, the second poorest country in the western hemisphere! At least I did not have to worry much about tourist crimes and petty theft on the streets, as León is one of the safest cities of Central America. I always felt safe walking around the city center at night, even though friends of mine preferred to take a cheap taxi to go home after leaving a club. Despite eating out many times a week my living costs were surprisingly low. I travelled on a tight budget allowing me to spend not more than 10 to 12 USD per day including rent, transportation and food, but it is easy to stay within that budget if you know where to shop (which you will after preparing your first hike) and still live better than at home.

Soon after learning the basics of volunteering at QT I took over responsibility for the website and the computers. I was free to improve and change whatever aspect I had in mind, which is true for every part of QT – from promotion to organisation to hike routes, if you had a good idea and the others agreed, you simply did it. This way we introduced three new hikes, greatly improved the route of another hike, added a new t-shirt layout, improved the accounting... all within the few weeks that I lived in León! I realised that QT profits a lot from the fresh ideas that every new volunteer brings in. I

consider the idea of running a profitable tour company as a non-profit fundraiser one of the most inspiring business concepts I've seen so far. It feels great to do a job you like and at the same time help kids to attend a program that keeps them from hanging around on the streets.

The part I miss most is the daily life in the Quetzaltrekkers mansion. It got to know a lot of interesting persons from around the world and got along well with everyone. We cooked together, went to parties together and stayed up late to prepare hikes together. Every good-bye of a volunteer was just another excuse for another great party, and soon someone new came in to fill the gap the former person left. I'm looking forward to meeting some of my friends again, wherever we may live and work by then!

My advice to you is: simply do it, you'll not regret it! Volunteering with Quetzaltrekkers has been one of the most fulfilling experiences I have had in my life, and if I had not run out of money after six months abroad I would still be sitting in the office selling hikes or climbing up volcano slopes! Now I am back in Germany, missing the heat and scanning the horizon for a smoking crater...

If you have any further questions, don't hesitate to contact me: aldehoff@gmail.com

Florian