

THE OFFICIAL

NEWSLETTER

For Projects Abroad Costa Rica



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EDITORIAL

Holidays in Costa Rica

A country's holidays and how they are celebrated is one of the most revealing aspects of a culture and its people. In honor of the holiday season, members of the Projects Abroad staff share some of their favorite traditions and memories.

When I was little, my family and I used to spend Christmas in San Jose, and at midnight on 25 December, my mom woke up my little sister and me to open up the presents that Santa had brought for us. The presents were at the foot of the bed that we were sleeping in. It was even better because I still believed in Santa.

-- Freddy Arrieta, Coordinator--Sports, Teaching



In my house we raise a pig for 8 or 9 months, and then we use this meat for a holiday barbecue, and we make chicharrones. Later we make tamales with the meat that is left. It is always shared with friends and family, including family visiting from the city. We have music and dancing, and we hike around Barra Honda mountain and go for a swim in the river. On New Year's Eve, we eat "pollo achotado" (creole chicken, painted red with "achiote," a type of spice, cooked over a fire). It's the season for Coyol wine, which is an alcoholic drink that comes from the palm tree.

-- Oscar Rosales, Coordinator--Conservation

I had many moments, but the most fun ones for me are the ones when we used to make Tamales at home. Coming from a rural area, I was sent to collect "hojas de platano" (banana leaves) in order to prepare them for Tamales. So I would go alone or with my friend and collect them during the whole day. Later in a fire in the back yard, I would "cook" them and then my mum would prepare all of the ingredients in order to make several hundreds! So we would all sit and help out and watch. It was tiring but rewarding. The work that goes into making tamales is a family celebration in itself.

-- Luis Arguedas, Country Director



The year that I lived in Spain during high school was the first time that I had been away from my family for the holidays, so I was feeling pretty homesick at the time. After a night of feasting and games with my Spanish family on Christmas Eve, it was beginning to snow when we finally went to bed around 4 am. When I woke up, there was a meter of snow on the ground! Coming from Tennessee, I had never seen so much snow, and I had never seen snow on Christmas Day. It was one of those moments that reminded me to quit complaining and to be grateful for the opportunities that I'm given.

-- Lee Steenbergen, Communications Officer

I always spent Christmas in France. A memory that I like is that each person always left a shoe at the foot of the chimney on Christmas Eve, and that's where each person's gifts are left. I've only had one "Tica" Christmas, and my best memory is the food. We ate pig's leg which is different than what we would have eaten in England. I also like how here a lot of people go to the beach for Christmas.

-- Emma Sharpe, Assistant Manager



Volunteer Story

Nils Wolfer: Teaching Sports at Escuela Nuevo Horizonte

At eighteen years old, it is rare for a person to know what he or she wants to do with their life, yet this is precisely the time when decisions begin to be made that have the potential to affect a person for years to come. For this reason, it's a common theme for students to take a gap year before beginning their university studies. For German volunteer, Nils Wölfer, passing part of his gap year on a Sports Project in Costa Rica was a perfect opportunity to gain practical experience in a particular area to see if it is worth pursuing as a field of study.

"I didn't really know what to study," says Nils who volunteered nine weeks in Costa Rica at a sports placement, followed by ten weeks on a microfinance internship. "That's why I'm doing a gap year. I wanted to do something that will help me to figure it out," he adds.

During his sports placement, Nils volunteered as an assistant to the physical education teacher at Escuela Nuevo Horizonte where he helped to teach sports classes to elementary students. "There are a lot of students in each class and it was a disadvantaged school, so the teacher was sometimes stressed," says Nils. "It was a huge help for her to be able to split the group up. While I played football with one group, she could do exercises with a smaller group. And it sounds very simple, but just being a partner for her helped. We became good friends during my work there and I think it made her happy to be able to share with someone."

Volunteers aren't only a help to their co-workers: they also have an influence on the children that they work with on a daily basis. "In general people, especially kids here are very open," says Nils. "They're outgoing. When I first arrived, they came and embraced me and jumped on me. You get to see that they have fun with you, and playing with them was a great



experience. Many of them come from poor homes, and don't get a lot of attention. Many of them don't have a father who is around, so they don't get that kind of attention either."

However, teaching is hard work, and volunteers quickly realize the energy required by the job. And this is precisely where one begins to notice the more profound benefits that come from volunteer work. First-hand experience has the unique effect of making a topic more personal, resonating in a way that books and lectures simply cannot. Sometimes figuring out what one wants to do can only be realized through discovering what one doesn't want to do. "Before I came here I was thinking a lot about what I would like to study," says Nils. "I thought that I would like to study medicine, but I also thought about becoming a teacher or working in business. Now, I figured out that I don't want to become a teacher. Being a teacher is a great thing, but that isn't the work I want to do for the rest of my life. I still think I would like to study medicine."

Of course, the teachers and students aren't the only ones to benefit from the volunteer's time in the country. More than giving a person hands-on experience in a particular area, a gap year abroad provides lessons and introspection that can only be attained through spending time in another country away from one's daily routine and comforts. "The sports project helps you out a lot with your Spanish," says Nils. "You're with people who just speak Spanish all the time."

"My time here has made me more independent," he adds. "I'm in another country for a long period of time for the first time. At first you know nothing, you know nobody, it makes you independent. You become more open because you learn how to speak to people. It's a great experience that you will always remember."



Project Update

Environmental Education: Success in Bandera Azul Initiatives

One of the primary concerns of the Conservation Project in Barra Honda is the integration of the local community with the conservation efforts going on inside of the park. The primary form through which this initiative is realized is through the Bandera Azul or “blue flag” program that Projects Abroad volunteers have worked to implement in local schools. The first phase of this initiative came to a head recently as the Bandera Azul program in the three community schools where Conservation volunteers work came under evaluation and resulted in the awarding of two stars to each of the schools involved in the program. Institutions in the Bandera Azul program are awarded stars through an on-going process of evaluations that are ultimately tied in to the Costa Rican government's goal of becoming carbon neutral as a country by 2021.



“The maximum is five stars, which means that the school is completely carbon neutral,” says the Projects Abroad head of environmental education, José Mario González. “Now we have been awarded two in just the first year, and normally they only give one star in the first year. We were awarded two because we have biogardens and a mini-center for recycling, and these are things that other schools don’t have. In the coming year as we continue with these projects we will have composting and clean water in addition to the recycling centers and biogardens. If we fix the bathrooms, we could be awarded the fourth star. Four stars in only two years is enormous. And this is a realistic goal because with the knowledge of the staff in the park and with the help of Projects Abroad, we are able to carry out large-scale projects in the schools.”

The success of this project is bittersweet for the Projects Abroad Costa Rica family. As we recognize a promising beginning to one project, we simultaneously find ourselves saying goodbye to our head of environmental education, José Mario González, or better known as Macho. A permanent fixture in the Projects Abroad staff for the last two years, he will move on to continue his work in environmental education and development with a local company whose focus is sustainable development throughout the province of Guanacaste. As José Mario moves on, he leaves us with the thought that permeated his work in environmental education and was summed up in the Bandera Azul initiative.



“What is important with the Bandera Azul program, more than with the stars or the flag itself, is the impact that the program has on the communities, and what better than with children? They are the ones who will grow up to form the communities surrounding the national park. So the things that are problems in the park - forest fires, contamination, hunting, improper use of water and energy - we can take these subjects and bring awareness to them. With the Bandera Azul program in the schools, we can teach the children about environmental education, about the risks to the environment, and recycling and waste management. We’re making an impact on the children while they are young and impressionable. They look to the park rangers and staff as role models, and they see people coming from all over the world to work in the schools and this leaves an enormous impact on them. It’s something greater than stars or a flag. The flag is a symbol—a symbol of the work that is being done.”

Photo Essay

New Bio Digester in Barra Honda

Christmas came early for the Barra Honda Conservation Project this year when on 23 December staff and volunteers installed a new bio digester in the park. The Bio Digester collects the carbon monoxide given off from sewage coming from the park's bathrooms and re-uses it as cooking fuel in the comedor. This machine plays an integral role in the sustainability of the volunteers, staff, and employees living within the boundaries of the park as well as contributing to Costa Rica's goal of being Carbon Neutral by 2021.

