

Fall 2017 Long Way Home

Recently arrived...

My initial impressions of the host site have been good. I like how everyone is passionate about what they are doing, and that they take both their work and the environment seriously. I am happy with all of the staff that I have met, and I am pleased that they don't just treat me as another worker, but rather a part of the Long Way Home family. Initially when I arrived I was very surprised about how much they have built. I was kind of overwhelmed by everything that was happening, and it took a few days for me to understand what was happening with the project. I'm still not sure that I understand everything, but if I don't then I ask and they are glad to explain things to me more.

Currently they are having me do construction work. While I will definitely do anything they ask me to do, the work isn't my favorite. However, they have explained to me that the first couple weeks they will have me doing construction work until I get an idea of how things work, and then after that they will get me going on some projects. They are excited about me getting involved with the different horticulture projects and working with Jesse, the local Peace Corps Volunteer.

The work pretty much matches my expectations of how I thought it would go. I didn't realize how hard some of the work would be, but I came in with an open mind, so it's okay. It hasn't yet matched my goals, because I want to become more involved in the horticulture side of things, but I'm sure that day will come soon.

I think what surprised me the most upon my arrival was how nice everyone is in Comalapa. Everyone says hello to one another, and it seems like everyone is willing to help if you need it. I kind of expected my host family to be more warm, but maybe that will come with time. They are more than willing to help with anything, but it is definitely more like I am renting a room than I am a part of the family. I guess that might come with time.

Before I left for Guatemala, I had a lot of different things that I was worried about. One of the biggest things was worrying about if I was going to get enough food. Because I don't feel comfortable using my host families kitchen, and I am very unfamiliar with everything, so that was mainly my worry. So far though there hasn't been a problem with food, other than me starting to get sick. I have stomach problems anyway, so I expected it, but it just sucks. The other things that I was worried about is how much I would miss my girlfriend. Cliché, maybe, but the first few nights were really rough for me and I miss her a lot. It is really hard to be away from the people you love. I'm not as much of a mess as I was earlier this week, but I still really miss her and also my friends and family. I am trying not to wish the trip away by missing them so much, but the thoughts are there anyway. :(

2 weeks in....

I feel like anything that I do here at Long Way Home contributes in some way to my profession goals. I feel that the attitude of "any experience is good experience" is the mantra that I have been trying to go by. My professional goals for the past handful of years have been associated with international development, so I really can't complain about anything because anything I learn here will most likely be useful at some point. Granted, I think some of the jobs are a little bit boring, but if I'm learning how to do something then it's worth my time. I think by the end of my internship I would like to know if going to another country for international development is still something that I am interested in. I think I will always be involved in some aspect of international development, but maybe working from a more centralized location might be a better option. I really appreciate friends, family, and loved ones, and I am starting to think about how a period of time longer than 11 weeks would be. We'll have to see on that one.

Things at work have been good but relatively slow-going, however, this week I have started to do research on the different projects that I am trying to start here. Some examples of projects that I am going to work on are trying to build a beehive, growing oyster mushrooms, and starting some composting piles/worm bins. Hopefully this next week I can begin on my projects. By the time that I leave I want to at least build the beehive and get the mushroom project going. I think both of those are important because they represent small business opportunities for people in this community, and I think that diversifying the market will be beneficial. The Peace Corps volunteers that I have talked to think that the oyster mushrooms are a really good idea and are looking forward to my projects. I think that I will ensure my success during this internship by trying to stay passionate about what I am doing and why I am here.

I think the only cross-cultural goals that I have are learning about the Mayan and Guatemalan cultures, and to also learning more Spanish. I think that these are going well so far. I have been learning a lot about the history of Guatemala (the good and the bad), and I think living with a host family has allowed me to see some of this culture first-hand. Also, living with a host family has enabled me to use my Spanish more. However, I realized that I speak English a lot during the day, so I am going to try and speak more Spanish from now on. One of the main reasons why I came was to learn Spanish, so I need to put some more effort into that. The food here has been one of the main cross-cultural experiences that I have enjoyed. Just being able to see how the people use and make food has been fascinating. It is interesting to see the different meals that are common and also how people interact over meals. Before I leave I would like to see how people celebrate a major holiday. The next big holiday is Dia de los Muertos, so I am interested to see what they do for that. Also, I would like to explore the country a little bit more. Since I am in Guatemala for 11 weeks, I am going to spend 10 weeks here at Long Way Home, and then probably spend that last week traveling around and also visiting my friend's farm in Guatemala City.

4 weeks in...

My day begins bright and early at 6:15 when I wake up. My host mom makes me breakfast for 6:30, and then I usually arrive at work a few minutes after 7. The work day goes from 7am to 4pm. The day doesn't seem too long because there is like a 20 or 30 minute break at 10 for snack, and then an hour for lunch. The day gets long though when I do construction because it's pretty boring.

My day-to-day and hour-to-hour tasks vary greatly. As a general rule, I am suppose to be on a 50/50 schedule which means that 50 percent of the time I am suppose to work on my projects, and 50 percent of the time I am suppose to be doing construction. The first few weeks were 100% construction and I burned-out really fast because construction isn't something that I really enjoy. Especially since we do really monotonous tasks that could have been done more effectively if they had communicated what was happening. After a few weeks of doing construction I moved into more of a 50/50 schedule where I would do research for my projects for the morning and then work on construction in the afternoon. This week though I have spent close to 100% on my projects because I have a lot to do. Doing research on all of the projects takes a long time. Today I am hoping to finish the worm compost bin project. I will hopefully be picking up some worms from one of the Peace Corps volunteers today, so that should be the last step for the worm bin setup. I wrote a worm manual that is a few pages long for future reference of how to manage a worm bin, so hopefully after I leave they will be successful with it.

In going with the theme of Guatemala, the answer to this question is "it depends". If there is a volunteer group who is working for Long Way Home, then after work I will go and help prepare dinner for them. If there is not a group in town then I will either go into town to go pick something up, stay at work to continue research for a while, or go home and relax until dinner (relaxing may contain school work, scholarship applications, or Netflix).

Usually it isn't that hard because the exploring life part is usually done on the weekend. Sometimes I do go into town though after work and either visit a gallery, go to the store, or something like that.

I live with a host family. Their house is pretty nice. It's a four bedroom house with a toilet room and a shower room, and the kitchen of course. My host parents are Donal and Ana, and they have three kids: two boys aged 15 and 8, and a girl who is 22 months. If the OSU GO people ask, my house does not have an address.

I wouldn't have chosen anything different. My host family is nice and it forces me to have at least some interaction with Spanish and Guatemalan culture. I am a very introverted person when it comes to speaking other languages, so I usually have to must up enough courage to ask a handful of questions throughout the day to my host family. Sometimes it's awkward because I really don't have the words to say what I want to say, but such life goes I guess. It's also weird because my host family won't really talk to me unless I talk to them first. I mean I know that my Spanish is pretty dang bad, but I wish they would attempt to talk to me more. I'm not sure if it is just because they are reserved as well, or if they just don't think that I will understand them. At any rate, living with the host family is more expensive, but I feel that it is worth the cultural experience.

If I were to give advice to future interns, I guess all I really have to say is when doing an international experience just try your best. Things will challenge your patience. Either a project won't work out, people might poke fun at you because you don't understand the language, or

your life plans may just seem to crumble before you. There will be low days. But on the other hand there will be high days too. As a teacher once told me, life will come in waves. There will be high days and low days, but the most important thing that you can do is to not plan for the future during one of those low times because more often than not, you'll end up cutting yourself short.

Honestly, I really don't have a budget, but I am a very money conscious person, so money isn't usually a problem. I am spending more than I thought. This is mostly because I am eating with the family and each meal costs X amount, which adds up. My beef with it is that I feel like it is more expensive that it could be, but the family treats me well, so I guess I am okay with it. I always have the option to cook my own meals, but since I usually have a hard time in the States getting enough food when I'm on my own, it's also a tactic for me to eat well while I am here.

The amount of money I spend on things like food, recreation, and travel really just depends. I've kept track of some of my expenses, but not all. I keep track of food expenses on my phone because I need to know how much to pay my host family for food. So the LWH fee every week is \$85 for me to stay with a host family. That is just for the room and board. For food it has cost anywhere from Q190 (\$27) to Q310 (\$43) for a week. The Q190 is an example of when a group is in town and I only need to eat breakfast with my host family. The Q310 is an example of when a group is not in town and I need to eat breakfast and dinner with my host family. I am okay with paying the extra costs though because I know that I am getting a cultural experience that the other volunteers aren't getting. And it will be kind of cool to say that I lived with a host family for 10 weeks. Knowing what I know now, I don't think that I would do anything differently. I mean I wish that it didn't cost so much, but other than that it's fine.

I walk everywhere. I walk to work, to town, to the store, etc. I really enjoy walking because it gives me a unique perspective that you don't see when you're driving. There isn't really a way for me to drive places here unless someone gives me a ride or I take a tuktuk, but I don't mind. For work and getting around town, walking is the best option.

On the weekends usually I'll either explore town or go somewhere new. I usually take the chicken buses for that because they are cheap and it's a fun adventure. I usually just go places for the adventure and not so much for the destination. Lake Atitlan is pretty, so that's a fun area to spend a night in. There are tons of different towns around the lake that you can go to, some more touristy than others, so just do your research if you can. It takes about 3ish hours to get there from Comalapa. I actually would not recommend a long stay in Antigua. It's touristy and overrated in my opinion. If you are a partier then there is plenty of that for you there since there are a lot of young tourists, but I'm not into that, so really I didn't find anything special there other than a handful of really old Spanish buildings that were closed off. The main reason why I went to Antigua was to mail a letter, though Guatemala being Guatemala, I wasn't able to mail it because the mail service is currently on strike. I hear that the ruins are pretty cool, so I plan to go check out some of the less touristy ones after my time here in Comalapa. I really just recommend doing your research on different places and also looking into things that interest you. For example, I am interested in chocolate production, so I have been in contact with one of the chocolate producers here. Sounds like when they get their new shop up and running they want me to come out and chat with them. I wanted to look at their processing

facility, but they said due to sanitation problems I unfortunately could not do that. Maybe I can convince them though after I meet with them. :)

6 weeks in....

I'm not entirely sure how to describe the workplace culture here, other than when I say that the culture of the worksite seems relaxed. My understanding is that there is normally a pretty large construction crew who works on the project, but they are currently building a famous boxer a house up in the mountains for him to retire in. We currently only have about three Comalapans who are doing construction. Other than that, volunteers come and go. This past week there were about 6 of us volunteers, and most of them were helping with construction. Having said what I just did, I think the work culture seems relaxed both because we don't have our normal crew here, and also because the Guatemalan culture is more relaxed about time. I don't believe there are any hard deadlines for when things need to be done. I often hear the construction manager tell the crew that the admin building needs to be ready for a floor in January, but that's the hardest deadline that I hear about. They like me to have hard deadlines, but that's because I only have a few weeks left.

The parts of work that I enjoy most are the parts where I think I am making the biggest difference. For the project, and for me, I feel the most happy when I am working on my own projects. At the beginning of my time at LWH, they had me do solely construction for around the first three weeks or so. For some reason the construction just burned me out, so I have been struggling since then with having motivation for work. I think that the most challenging thing at this time is just having enough motivation to get through the week. Don't get me wrong, I am having a good time and I love working on my own projects, but I feel burnt out.

It's difficult to pinpoint a workplace accomplishment that I'm proud of at this point, since only one of my projects is finished at this point. I'm trying to work on all of them at the same time. The project that I finished this past week was the worm composting bin at the house where the other volunteers and interns live. The worm bin has been a process. You wouldn't think so, but it has been. There is a Peace Corps Volunteer here whose name is Jesse. Jesse is an agricultural extension volunteer. While talking to him at the beginning of my time here, he told me that there was a family here in Comalapa who had a worm bin that he helped put together, and that I could get worms from their bin. As a side note, you need a special type of worm for a worm bin. You can't just go out, dig up some earthworms, and use them. It wouldn't work if you did that. You need a certain type of worm called a red wiggler which eats the bacteria off of decaying organic matter. Jesse had told me that I could get the worms from her, but the problem was that it took about three weeks to get in contact with them and get the key to their farm property where I could collect the worms. Long story short, this past Friday I finally got the worms and put the worm bin together. Now it will take some time to get the worm bin going to full capacity, but at least it will offer a place for the volunteers to recycle their food waste. Other projects that are currently in the works but about half way done are: the mushroom cultivation project, the hoop house, and the beehive.

Me misunderstanding something is an everyday occurrence, but as far as misunderstanding something due to a cultural difference, I can't really think of anything. Usually it is just me not understanding what someone said in Spanish. If I don't understand what people are saying when they speak to me, which is pretty much all the time and with

everything they say, I usually will have them repeat it at least once. If I still don't understand them after a couple times of repeating, then I usually just smile and nod or leave. Not the best tactics, but I don't know what else to do.

Being here has just strengthened my awareness of some things that I need to work on. Let me explain. So the past year has been a period where I have learned a lot about myself and some traits that I need to work on improving. In the past year I have learned that I am perfectionistic in some of the things that I do. For example when I have an idea in my head I can picture it, and I will work hard to ensure that it comes out the same as what I imagined it would be. Being here has challenged that because I want something to be a certain way, but it can't be. Like in building the hoop house I need to use mostly recycled materials. Let me tell you that building a hoop house out of the recycled or leftover materials that we have is more difficult. Hoop houses generally have plastic over them to heat up the climate within them. For mine I have a certain amount of clear plastic, but it won't be enough, so they want me to use black plastic for what the clear plastic won't cover. It's definitely not a good idea to use the black plastic because it will get too hot, but we use what we have.

Another thing that I need to work on is being better about not feeling bad when people make jabs at me or laugh at me. My Spanish is really bad and it is a common occurrence for me to say something to someone, then say something back, me not understand, and then they turn to their friend and start laughing about how I'm not understanding. It makes you feel really dumb and that your attempted efforts in learning a language have been futile. There are more things, but again, I don't think I learned anything more about myself other than learning more about the things I already knew were problems and trying to work on them.

The other challenge has been that I kind of burned out quickly here in Comalapa. That might be partially due to me doing construction for a good amount of time and not being able to work on my interests for a few weeks, and also due to that wall that everyone hits on their experience abroad around week three to four.

The greatest reward I think has been interacting with all of the Peace Corps Volunteers and watching my projects come to fruition. Being a PCV is something that I had always wanted to do, and through this experience I am not sure that I want to make such a big commitment anymore, or at least not at this point in my life. However, I have gotten to live vicariously through them and interact with them, and I can't say with words just how much of a great experience it has been to do so. Watching my projects come together has been pretty cool too. I had no prior experience with any of my current projects before I came, so it's been a great opportunity for me to learn about worm composting, building a hoop house, growing oyster mushrooms, and building a non-traditional beehive. Like I said, only the worm bin is operational at this point, but with time everything else will come together.

8 weeks in....

It's hard to say if I've learned about any new possibilities for career paths. I think that my experience abroad has influenced my career path or the possibilities thereof. This experience has given me a greater perspective on what it is like to do a longer term international experience. Since my goal has been to work in some aspect of international development, this experience has really showed me what it is like. The experience has showed me what things I would enjoy doing internationally and what things I would rather not do. Unsurprisingly, the things that I enjoyed

most were the projects of mine that involved horticulture. So, I learned that I would still be open to a long-term international community development project, but only if it fell in-line with what I am interested in. I also learned that I really like cultivating mushrooms. I am considering mushroom cultivation as the topic of my thesis when I get back.

I have had quite a few informal interviews with Peace Corps Volunteers and people in the community. The other day I spent over an hour talking with the local family who keeps bees and sells honey. I talked to them about their farm and also talked for a good 45 minutes about different crops that they could use to increase their honey production.

Not that I didn't think that the locals wouldn't be nice before I came, but I have been pleasantly surprised about how kind people are here. Everyone says good morning, good afternoon, or good evening to each other, and people want to help you.... I just didn't expect there to be this much hospitality before I came.

One negative thing is that I didn't expect the culture to be so misogynistic. The US is very misogynistic as well, which I very much dislike, but the misogyny here is different. I can't explain it, but I dislike it. I guess it is kind of how the US used to be; there are specific gender roles.

The misogyny part is pretty frustrating. How they treat animals (mostly dogs) is probably one of the most frustrating parts. It is really sad to see malnourished dogs run in the streets or dead puppies on the side of the road. Stuff like that happens often here. I suppose the same things happen in the United States, but in the US things are behind closed doors. Here in Guatemala it's out in the open.

The most rewarding aspect of the culture is that everyone is happy to say hello to you, ask where you are from, if you are working here, how you like Comalapa, etc. People just seem generous. They may be kind of shy, especially if you are male and talking to a female, but most people are very kind.

Reflecting on my experience with culture shock, I'm actually not sure what my curve would look like. I guess my curve would look like a lower-case "r". I was excited when I got here and everything was new, but I really didn't enjoy the construction aspect of Long Way Home. At Long Way Home they have interns do a few weeks of construction to start you off, and I burned out really fast of that. So, me burning out on construction combined with the newness of Comalapa wearing off, I wasn't really enjoying myself. I just missed the States, studying what I loved, the food, family, my significant other, etc. My crash was probably around the end of week two (end of September). I really didn't come back up until week six or so. That was when I started to actually work on my projects and stopped working on construction. I am actually becoming sad that I won't get to see the results of my projects. Part of me wants to stay for a longer period of time so that I can see the successes of my hard work, but part of me is ready to go home.

My culture shock came in the form of me missing the things I enjoyed at home. I don't think anything really shocked me about the culture here other than when I witnessed my host dad whipping his oldest son with a belt.

10 weeks in....

As my trip comes to an end I find myself having mixed feelings about leaving. On one hand I am very excited to go back to the United States. I miss family, friends, my significant other, the food, and the simplicities of life, like hot water as soon as you turn the shower on. It

is hard to be away from the people you love and from the comforts of home for several months. On the other hand I am disappointed that I have to leave Comalapa so soon. As my time in Comalapa, and with Long Way Home has progressed, I've been inspired to work on a greater diversity of projects. I have built a hoop house, started a worm composting system, began cultivating oyster mushrooms, and will soon begin building a beehive. I have got into the grit of the things that I love, and it is hard to come to the realization that I will not see the future of my projects. Although I will not witness the final product of my projects, I'm okay with leaving them in the hands of the school and of the community. Leaving before my projects flourish reminds me of the old proverb which says, "A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in." I think that this is symbolic to the significance of my time here in Comalapa. While I may never see the results of my hard work, I can only hope that it will inspire future interns and members of the community to take the foundation of what I've built and run with it.

What I have liked about interning abroad is that I undoubtedly feel like I am a part of the greater community. I think the magic of interning abroad is that you are very much more involved in the community on a day-to-day basis. There is no filter on what you see; it's real. Granted, both positive and negative experiences can come from this, but what you experience will likely change your perspectives. Having the opportunity to attend traditional ceremonies and celebrating during local holidays are the best ways to feel a deep connection with the community. I was lucky enough to be here in Guatemala during Dia de Todos los Santos (All Saints Day) and Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead). Traveling over an hour via chicken bus at four in the morning to Santiago Sacatepequez to see 20 meter high kites (called barriletes gigantes) was one of the coolest experiences I've ever had. Of course there have certainly been many challenging times during my time abroad, but the great experiences such as seeing the barriletes makes it all worth it.

Returning to the United States will definitely take some adjustments, but I know that I will be bringing back much more with me than when I left. Not with regard to clothes or material items, but rather from what I have learned. One of the most important skills that I have taken from this internship is how to take an idea to fruition. Long Way Home is a school that is literally made of trash: tires, plastic bottles stuffed with plastic chip bags, glass bottles, and plastic spoons. It was, and still is, a crazy idea that is worth exploring. From the trash they have cultivated education, and my projects are the same. Who would ever consider that cultivating oyster mushrooms from salvaged agricultural products might contribute to small business development in the community? That it might provide students with enough curiosity to go out and start their own cultivation project where they provide the local restaurants with fresh materials? Overall, I hope that the projects that I've started will continue to grow and provide the community with enough momentum to instigate a more sustainable future.

One of the things that I was surprised about that I didn't mention in the last question set is how surprised I was over traditional clothing. I find traditional clothing super interesting, and I enjoy learning about traditional trajes, but I didn't expect as many women to wear them as I previously thought. I thought maybe some women would wear them, but in reality most women wear the traditional traje. I also didn't expect Comalapans to be so reserved. They are

extremely nice people, but when it comes to interacting with outsiders it seems that they get uncomfortable.

One thing that I really didn't even think about before I got here was the impact of alcoholism on the community. I was just surprised how common it is here. I learned that because of the civil war and the horrible things that the people saw during this time, people turned to alcohol as a way to cope. It is really sad to see people laying in the street or on the sidewalk and to think that there is little to no social support for them. This drunkenness also contributes to domestic abuse within families. I am planning to do some more research on the civil war in the next couple of weeks and when I get back to Oregon. It has been kind of difficult to find information here on the subject.

My advice to future interns....

I think that one really important thing to have when coming to Long Way Home is an idea of the projects you would like to work on. Or at the very least know the kinds of things that you are interested in and go from there. I was lucky enough that the site had ideas of projects that they wanted to experiment with, and those just so happened to line up with things I was interested in, but the work they are currently doing may not reflect what you are interested in. That is why it is a good idea to come with ideas (also the staff really appreciates people who have an idea of what projects they would like to work on). One aspect of the project that I found kind of frustrating was that LWH generally has you work on construction for the first couple/few weeks that you are on site. Construction to me isn't very interesting, and the work was very tedious, so it made for a long few weeks. It is very possible that you will be doing something tedious for a week at a time and just burn out. Just remember that this is all a part of the bigger picture. It is important for you to work on the construction because it is important to understand the entirety of the importance of the work. From the individual school buildings to using local and sustainable materials, it all contributes to the broader goal of LWH which is servicing the community and giving back. While yes, your projects are and will be very important, and you should be excited about them, try and take the time to realize the importance of everything that you are doing. If you find yourself getting worked up, just step back and think about how that small thing will contribute greatly to the community of Comalapa.

As for the culture, people are generally kind and patient. Make sure that you greet everyone as you go by with either buenos dias, buenas tardes, or buenas noches. Not only are saying these things a good way to be kind, but it also helps show the community that visitors are kindhearted people with whom they can be comfortable sharing their community and traditions with. I recommend consuming street food and looking out for new things to try. Don't be afraid to sit at a booth during a market day and order an orange juice, licuado con cereal (smoothie with cereal), atol, or whatever else you find. Doing this is a good way to enjoy some of the local cuisine and meet some interesting people. It is a necessity to get atol de coco

(coconut atol) while you are here too. It is a coconut flavored drink. You can find it at the corner panini shop on the main street. If you like coconut, it will be one of the best things you have ever had. Also, side note: if you choose to begin consuming the French fries from the street, you will become addicted. They are some of the best fries you'll ever have (in my opinion). They usually top the fries with a drizzle of sweet ketchup, mayo, and picante, which is a green hot sauce. Don't be afraid of the mayo. All of the flavors together are amazing. But seriously, get street food because it is really good. On kind of the same note, be prepared to get some form of food poisoning at some point during your trip. Personally, I got sick twice. I never got sick from the street food however, so don't be afraid of that. Food poisoning/being sick sucks, but it is part of the travel experience and will usually go away within a day or two. If it does happen, just make sure that you get enough fluids and eat.

Another thing that I recommend is making friends with the local Peace Corps Volunteers who are here in Comalapa. During my time here I had the fantastic opportunity to hang out with three Peace Corps Volunteers who were here, and even got to help them with projects and activities. Whether or not you are interested in the Peace Corps later in life is unimportant, but it is really a cool opportunity to work with people who are working directly with the community. Chances are that there will be a Volunteer here who is working in the subject area of your interest, so connect with them and see where you might be able to help. I guarantee that you will gain something from the experience.