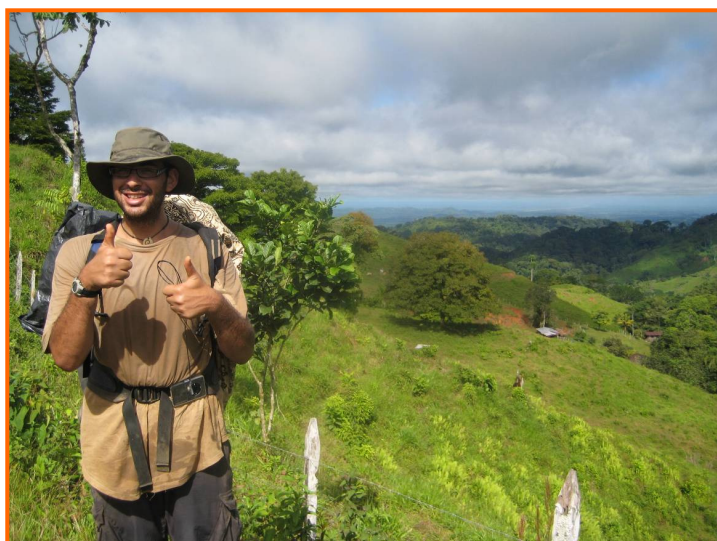


Sam joined a 10 week expedition to Costa Rica & Nicaragua in 2008



On July 2nd after travelling for about 16 hours we failed to land at San Jose airport, Costa Rica! After getting diverted to Nicaragua (due to bad weather and without enough fuel to keep circling) we had to sit on the plane for 4 hours before taking off again back to our destination. There were maybe 100 people on the plane, 30 of which were going to Raleigh!

We slept on a school's floor that night, and the next day took a two hour coach ride to Field Base, at Catie in Turrialba. This was to be our home between projects. There were around 140 participants or Venturers in total. Throw in 40+ staff and you get quite an atmosphere!

Environmental phase – Santa Rosa National Park

My first phase was in Santa Rosa National Park, around seven hours drive from Field Base. We were to do some work on the research and accommodation facilities that are there for scientists to try and attract more to the area. Costa Rica has around 10% of the world's bio-diversity in a country that covers less than 1% of the world's land. Raleigh works in conjunction with the country's park rangers, who request what they would like to be done. Projects in other parks included rebuilding a visitors' centre, repairing a camping area, and repairing trails.

We camped in the camping area where there was some running water, toilets and showers. Now, when I say 'shower' I actually mean a Tap in the ceiling. You had to clear the cubicle of any wildlife first, which normally meant getting rid of some spiders and frogs!

The phase was wet in general. In the afternoons it almost always rained, starting some time in the early afternoon and often going on until the evening. Washing clothes was quite a challenge: I would hand wash some things and then hang them up, hoping they would dry before the rain came. Unfortunately there was nowhere to hang anything sheltered, so normally clothes stayed damp and started to smell, resulting in having to wash them again, try to dry them etc... A few days before we left the park (after 19 days there) we found out there was actually a washing machine in the park administration place!

We spent three weeks in Santa Rosa, and after getting picked up we headed back to field-base. Some kind of party was laid on the next evening, after we had been watered and fed some kind of real food! Our diet up there consisted of pasta about 5 times a week, and reconstituted mashed potatoes the other two evenings. Lunch was normally noodles or half a tin of tuna with crackers. All of this was generally washed

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down with lashings of *Tang*, a sugary powder which you added to water to make a kind of squash. It was to become infamous between us Raleighers.

Community phase – Montefrio Dos

We gathered together once again and waited to hear where we would be going next and what we would be doing. I knew it would either be trek or community phase for me, and I was holding out for a particular community phase in Nicaragua. I lucked out and got the one I wanted I was off to a tiny community called Montefrio Dos. This was in a land far far away, miles from where transport could get us to. We got two coaches, which took a day and a half, and then stayed in a community centre that Raleigh had previously built. The next day we got up at the crack of dawn to walk the four strenuous hours just to get there.

On arrival we realised that this really was *something else!* There really was nothing around for miles and miles. It transpired that there were about 80 families in the community, with no running water or electricity. The houses were all made of mud, something I had never experienced first hand. We were to stay with some of the families, generally two of the 10 of us in each house.

The project here was amazing: it was to provide running waters to these families. Before Raleigh got involved there, the women had to spend much of their time collecting water, first from the river and later from one of two wells installed in the village. This was a vital priority of their day. My family went through approximately 20 huge buckets of water a day. I don't quite know how they managed this but you can imagine this cost the women most of their time! In order to provide running water, trenches were to be dug running from two water sources way up in the mountains, running to a tank that we had to build which would fill up overnight. This would then come down to the village and then to the houses and the school. Phase 1 had been here and had dug a fair bit of trench, but there was still a lot more to do.

After a few days of getting acquainted with pickaxes, spike-mattocks and spades we had to start taking rocks up to where the water tank was going to go. These were going to be cemented together to make a tank 2metres cubed. This was up a steep hill, and hundreds of rocks were needed. It took us about three days to get what we needed!

In the coming days, more trenches were dug, and after a slight delay the pipes that we needed to make the magic happen turned up.

Unfortunately the materials that were required for building the tank in the beautiful hole that we had dug were still missing, so we realised that we were not going to be able to finish the project entirely, but phase 3 of the expedition would come and tidy up the loose ends. Nonetheless we pressed on, and got a load of the pipes down, with the water flowing from the source to where the tank was going to be. This was a special day, with dozens of the locals turning up to get involved or watch. Every day we worked, there would be between 5 and 12 coming to work with us. They are extremely hard workers, and it was motivating for us that they were chipping in as well.

I could see how much it meant to the residents of Montefrio Dos. I really felt like us being in this little village was really something special and beneficial to these people.

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One more thing to mention is that we took a trip to the Cooperative which many of the local communities are involved with. The main aim of the Cooperative is getting good prices for the goods that the villages produce. There are large amounts of beans and sesame produced, and this is what we looked at. It was hard to get exact details, but I could garner that the sesame seeds were sent to Cooperative, where they were pressed using machinery (which had got bigger and more efficient over the years) into oil. This was then sold to various parts of the world - the most interesting to us turned out to be to the Body Shop in England! This was truly amazing: to be in the remote town of Achuapa, and knowing that there are 'fair trade' type things out there, but to actually see one in practice, where the magic happens as it were, was special

We said goodbye to our families and the animals and headed back to field base. Three days were spent relaxing and getting ready for our final phase.

Adventure Phase: Coast to coast trek.

For me, trek *Coast to Coast*: a walk across the continent from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific coast in 17 days, was the last part of my adventure. In order to prepare, we had to sort out 19 days worth of food into different bundles. We were to get a food drop (where food would be dropped off for us somewhere) after 6 days then 5 days then 4 days, and then for the last two at the beach we were going to end up at.

We had a relatively late start for this phase. Our departure time was a good three hours later than the 4am starts I had become accustomed to for phases one and two. 13 of us got a minibus to the beach a couple of hours away and had a little touch of the warm Caribbean coast, before setting off on our 240km stroll. I was laden with a rucksack weighing in at a mere 32 kilograms!

We walked every day between 6km and 25km. The huge difference in pace was due to highly varied terrain: The first couple of days we walked flat along the beach and then a railway line and roads; some days were spent falling over in the jungle, and on some days we spent almost the whole day going uphill. We started at sea level and climbed to a top peak of (I think) 2934 metres! This was probably the hardest thing I have ever done in my life! Days were spent like this: 3.30/4.00am wake up, start packing up our stuff, have breakfast, leave around 6am and walk for normally 10 hours including some breaks. We had a target of where we wanted to get to each day, with a suggested place to try and stay which was normally a community centre of some description with some access to water, with the occasional night spent camping.