



Freelance Travel Journalist Sarah Neale made the decision to take a career break. Sarah joined Raleigh's ten week spring expedition in Costa Rica as Communications Officer and loved it so much she is staying out to volunteer as project manager on the summer expedition.

Four months before I signed up for Raleigh my brother was killed in a climbing accident. I was finding it difficult to write so I decided to do something positive and constructive with my time, away from normal routines. Taking on a new challenge in a safe, structured environment, and one which nurtures personal development, with a charity organisation that had been recommended by close friends, seemed to tick a lot of boxes for me.

My role on expedition was Communications Officer. The induction phase prepared me really well; I enjoyed the training and as our expedition was so large, it was great to get to know the Fieldbase crew before the masses of venturers arrived. I thought that the training itself was excellent and I felt well equipped to start the expedition come deployment day.

My key responsibilities were as follows: Setting up and maintaining the blog, producing the merchandise (magazine, t-shirts) and documenting the expedition images. I really enjoyed the blog; I worked hard to develop the Google blogger website during the induction, and aimed to post updates on a daily basis. In the main part, we achieved this. I was really happy that I managed to get the venturers involved in writing blogs as it's a great opportunity for them to get writing published, and I expect parents at home enjoyed this too.

I also loved spending time out in the field, talking with the Venturers and Project Managers, getting a better insight into expedition life, and seeing a lot of the two countries.

I found my time out 'on phase' challenging as I have little 'leadership' experience having worked as an independent journalist most of my working career. However, in the ten days I spent on trek, I started to learn the basics and am really looking forward to the challenge returning to Costa Rica for five weeks as a Project Manager this summer.

My role on expedition has given me focus and purpose at a difficult time in my life, and introduced me to an amazing, supportive and inspiring network of people. I hope that during my second expedition by taking on a Project Manager role I can push myself, learn new leadership and negotiation skills, and learn to work better as part of a team.

I spent three months describing my days via the blog... Here are a couple of snippets:

Fieldbase day...

It's Sunday morning. By 6am, the swirling white mist that hovers over the dairy farm is starting to lift. The first mellow rays of sun have just crept over the horizon, warming my cheeks as I wander up the dirt track. It is 100 meters from my bed to the office.

I stick the kettle on and make some coffee. Outside the kitchen door, a couple of rickety chairs and a table are the makings of a breakfast room which gazes out over the farm. Chocolate brown cows peacefully munch the grass in a field dotted with vast trees bearing bright orange flowers. Brightly coloured birds flit playfully from tree to tree. The black-and-white cat that sleeps on the terrace lazily lifts his head and gives them a cursory glance before curling back up to sleep. It's far too early for chasing birds.

A couple of kilometres away, at the edge of the valley floor, the landscape starts to rise. The emerald green grass changes to deep green forest, lights from dwellings twinkle on the hillside and

the slumbering giant of Volcan Turrialba looms above, a pillowy plumb of smoke lingering on its summit like caustic cotton wool.

I love this time of the day – the late night owls are still sleeping, the early morning joggers are out pounding the backlanes and here in the office there's an hour of absolute peace and calm. The start of another fine day at Fieldbase.

Trek day...

When I boarded the plane bound for Costa Rica I pictured a lush, jungled land; uniformly green, brimming with wildlife and swelteringly hot. Instead, I found something of a melting pot of landscapes - cloudforests, dry forests, mangroves, ashen volcanoes, bustling cities and fields bursting with fresh produce. It wasn't until the end of Expedition Phase Three that I discovered the place that I had imagined back in January: deep in the tropical south, Corcovado National Park stretches across the Osa Peninsula, a pristine bastion of biodiversity that left me open-jawed and wide-eyed. For me, it was the absolute highlight of my time in Costa Rica; I saw more wildlife in three days than I've seen in any other place on earth, even miraculously stumbling across a female puma and her cub during an early morning stroll through the jungle.

To spend time in this haven is a privilege: Raleigh works closely with the national park authorities to maintain and improve facilities in these protected pockets and, in return, we are granted access permits to explore the incredible ecosystems within. During my six days with 'Zulu One', we skirted a coastline that was peppered with shark, crocodile and dolphin; we watched sunsets that ranged from deep golden to dusky pink to blood red; we swam in crystal-clear rivers and slept in wooden-stilted ranger stations serenaded by the sounds of the jungle at night. We saw tapir, four different kinds of monkey, anteater, sloth, agouti, spiders, snakes and dozens of insects and butterflies. The vegetation included root buttresses the size of buses, Ceiba trees that towered 100m above the jungle floor, strangler figs, giant palms and thousands more. It was a truly magical experience.

The highlights of my experience with Raleigh so far include the people I met – both in the UK, and Costa Rica, Volunteer Managers and Venturers; wild swimming in Corcovado National Park; wild camping on Playa Blanca (Santa Rosa National Park); Fieldbase roadtrips; Trek; Catie swimming pool at dawn; coffee – sticky, sweet and delicious; discovering how much fun you can have not drinking; jungle camps; spotting rainbows through the rain in Guanacaste National Park.

The biggest challenge for me has been managing the workload; blogging once a day and being cheerful when feeling completely exhausted!

The expedition has certainly built my confidence and energised me. I'm now able to spend a full day writing to a brief, and stay focused and positive. It's also made me realise what you can achieve in a day when you get up at 3.30am! It's made me aware of how little you need materially to succeed, and it has pushed me to be more resourceful and creative.

Raleigh has been a breath of fresh air. The rigid structure of training means you achieve so much during the expedition. It's relentless at times, challenging and inspiring; it gives you a chance to explore environments that are simply not accessible to guidebook-totting backpackers, within a nurturing environment that encourages personal development. You also make some incredible friends – these alone are reason enough to sign up!

