

# HANNAH MATTHEWS CHIRIKAYEN EXPERIENCE

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Spending a month in the beautiful indigenous village of Chirikayen was a fantastic experience which I would love to repeat if ever I get the opportunity and can't recommend highly enough to everyone staying in Santa Elena with Aldeas de Paz. I was welcomed into the village with open arms and a huge effort was made to make me feel comfortable, included and totally accepted as a member of the community. I lived with a fantastic family who I will make every effort to keep in touch with and hopefully visit again one day. Living with an indigenous community may be out of the comfort zone of many but I loved the freedom and simplicity of life and tried to embrace it to its full extent. This meant washing in the river, using an out-house about two hundred meters from the house as a toilet (and I was lucky, most people just use the bushes!) and eating anything I was given no matter what it was! This task was not too difficult as the food is delicious. It mainly consists of "Tuma" which is a spicy soup with "Cassava bread", eggs, a spinach like vegetable, something made from flour, water and butter and a sort of porridge like drink. I am not fussy and will eat everything but even for those of you who are I do recommend you try everything as it is all part of the experience.

We would wake up relatively early (about 6 or 7am) but this isn't too tough as there is only electricity until about 10pm (from when it gets dark at 6pm) so we tended to go to bed pretty early. I would usually help to cook breakfast which we would eat between 8 and 9am depending on what we were doing that day. Some days we would go to the family's farm where we cleared the area of weeds, ploughed the earth and planted cassava sticks. Each family is given a piece of land to grow cassava and anything else they like but the ground is not very fertile so they can't grow a lot. Every few weeks each family will need to make cassava bread either just for their own family or to sell in Santa Elena on a Friday. The process starts by pulling the roots of the cassava sticks (yucca) up and clearing the farm for more planting. Then the yucca has to be peeled, washed and grated. It is then squeezed to remove as much of the water as possible, sieved and eventually baked. It takes about 3 days depending on how much they need. I helped a neighbors' family make 50 cakes to sell one week which was a lot of work but very satisfying as they managed to sell everything and it was great to spend time getting to know more people and learning the ancient technique of making cassava bread which all the indigenous people use and have done for years. I also helped my own family make cassava for themselves one week.

Other days I helped with various things that had to be done like taking clothes and dishes to the river to wash, fishing with the boys or helping clean the house or other parts of the village. Every evening at about 5pm when most people have come back from working at the farms the community gets together to play football and volleyball. It was so great to be a part of the community and I loved seeing everyone enjoying each other's company and welcoming me into their lives and routines. I would usually wash at about 5ish in the river

and a load of children would always come with me, staring at my skin and hair, asking me lots of questions and showing me their handstands and various other water tricks! Washing is pretty sociable as there are always people down at the river at the same time as you to chat to which I really loved. I will definitely miss washing in the beautiful fresh water river with the fish and the mountains in the background.

After my first week I noticed how musical the village was. They have a fantastic choir which is run by my host mum and they all sing together very enthusiastically (!) in church accompanied by the guitar. I do a lot of music at home so I decided to help out and teach some piano and general music lessons. Everyone was so excited and interested so I ended up teach about 10 people to play the tiny keyboard they have in the church and another 15 or so to read music. They were so appreciative and eager to learn, I was only sad I couldn't be with them longer to teach them more. I helped a lot with the choir which was great as they are preparing for a festival in a few weeks and were beginning to sound really good! I played the piano in church a few times but I didn't want to impose so I preferred to watch and listen to how the services normally ran. The community are 7<sup>th</sup> day Adventists which mean they worship on Saturday (the 7<sup>th</sup> day of the week). There is a 3 hour service in Taurepan (their indigenous language) which is really interesting but I recommend taking a book! They would always welcome me in Spanish though and say how grateful they were that was there to experience how they lived. Someone sitting next to me would always try and explain what was going on though and show me the relevant bits of the Bible they were discussing.

I taught a couple of people English but because of the extreme lack of structure in the days it was hard to do anything regular. I think it would be great if any volunteers do want to set up some English classes though because they would love to learn. Overall they appreciate anything and everything that you can contribute to their lives. They love sharing stories with you and hearing about how you live. Everyone was so friendly and so interested in where I come from and what my country is like.

Something I found hard to accept was their complete lack of knowledge about the outside world. I had long talks with people explaining the wars that are still going on, terrorism, Barack Obama as well as issues in their own country. They were amazed by a lot of what I told them about but it struck me that they didn't really have a lot of interest as these things just don't affect the way they live. In a way it was refreshing to live for a month with no worries or concerns about the world beyond this little village in the Gran Sabana but it took time to adjust.

The biggest piece of advice I can give to anyone spending time in Chirikayen is to embrace their life totally and utterly. Do everything they do and ask them about their lives because they are just so happy that you are interested in how they live that they love to share their lives with you. Whenever I walked down the street people would stop me and either invite me into their home or just talk to me. The community is amazing and so different to what I'm used to. Everyone knows each other and helps each other with everything. The family is the most important thing in everyone's lives and each member of the family plays a role.

They all help each other without ever complaining and live in complete harmony with one another working, playing, cooking, eating and cleaning together. The children are free to run around in the fields, swim in the rivers and climb the mountains. The men have time to come home for meals and spend time with their families. The women make delicious food out of nothing and most have 5 children or more by the age of 30ish! They are incredible people that we can learn a lot from. It was liberating and refreshing to be surrounded by such incredible nature. We swam in the beautiful rivers and climbed the majestic mountains. The stars over Chirikayen are unlike anything I've ever seen and the moonlight lights up the whole village. Overall I had a fantastic time and I am so jealous of any of you who get the chance to go as I would be there again in a heartbeat if I had the chance. I will never forget the fantastic people I met and the brilliant time I had. You will just love it there. Living such a simple and easy life really makes you think about your own and what you can improve. It is an experience that I think everyone should have as teaches you a lot not only about the way in which people on the other side of the world both physically and ideologically live but also about yourself.

Leaving Chirikayen was really difficult and emotional! One man made such a nice speech in church on my last night saying how although we may speak different languages and have different colored skin we are all family and we are all equal and they were so happy that I had spent time with them and shared their lives. They were all so thankful to me for staying with them which I found really difficult as it was me who was thankful to them for letting me visit and for their incredible hospitality. I will miss the village a lot especially my wonderful family who will always be in my thoughts and who I will never forget.