

Installation One

Paloma Wodehouse is one of ten local interns chosen for Pinhead Institute's 2006 Internship Program, which sends high school juniors and seniors to work with mentors in science institutions throughout the world. Paloma is currently a senior at Telluride High School. Paloma and Ridgway High School senior Brooke Hunger, another Pinhead intern, spent their summer working in Costa Rica at INBio, an international biodiversity research center and two of Costa Rica's National Parks This is the first of three installments of her story of her internship, written in September 2006.

There was one saying I found myself repeating again and again throughout my entire trip in Costa Rica: "Now I have experienced everything." This saying covered the good, the bad, and the ugly. Seeing bright green glowing plankton in the ocean one night that illuminated the waves was a really good experience. Finding a hummingbird caught in a giant spider's web was a bad experience. The monstrous condition my legs were in after being attacked by the largest mosquitoes and having their bites turn into actual blisters was literally an ugly experience. To be honest though, the good experiences were so amazing and breathtaking that they made the bad and the ugly ones virtually unnoticeable.

Luckily, I was not alone on my trip; another intern came with me named Brooke Hunger who is my age and from Ridgway. While we were flying together over to Costa Rica we talked about our fears of being completely separated from our lives and on our own. I soon learned that being independent was easy, a blast, and not so stressful. When we arrived in Costa Rica we were picked up and driven to our hostel. While driving from the airport, I was shocked to find that the country was so Americanized with Billboards in English, McDonalds, Wal-Mart's, etc. At our hostel, we were staying with another girl named Maria who was getting her PHD in national parks. She was twenty six and one of the nicest people I have ever met. Our room consisted of two bunk beds and a bathroom, all shoved into a 25' by 25' area. Maria surprised us with instructions to always put toilet paper in the trash can, and that the shower water is always cold, very cold. While all three of us were talking in our room a cockroach dropped on Maria's shoulder and she swiped it off and stomped on it. Her reaction to the cockroach was careless because she told us that she sees them constantly and they are usually much bigger. This freaked out Brooke so much that she couldn't sleep the first night.

When we woke up the next morning and walked outside we were amazed by the lushness of the trees and the varieties of all the flowers. Next to our hostel was the national park of INBio, an international science research center for biodiversity studies of insects, plants, and animals. I was asked to help the entomologist, Carlos, by sifting through jars of soil and picking out any larva or eggs I found. These larvae were the first stage larva of rhinoceros beetles. These full grown beetles are so exotic I thought I would only see them on the Discovery Channel, never close up and personal. Carlos showed me two full grown rhinoceros beetles and a 3rd stage larva of the beetle. Full grown their bodies are about 4 inches long plus their two horns that are just as long as or longer than their bodies, which they sometimes use to fight each other. The larva was a pale tan color with huge fangs and coiled up was the size of a big man's fist. I maturely took pictures of myself pretending to eat it.

Four days later all three of us girls jumped on a bus going to Manuel Antonio, one of Costa Rica's National Parks. The bus ride was about five hours long and we drove through the Capitol, San Jose. The city had the most trash piles on the side of the road and the most poverty I have ever come close to seeing. Constructed of thin wood and metal slabs, the houses the lower class families lived in were the size of a bathroom. On our drive I also saw huge green fields with exotic trees that reminded me of Africa. The roads were barely wide enough to fit the bus and a small car, not to mention the one-way, long bridges made out of steel bars that would make snapping noises when the bus slowly crossed over them. Brooke was sure the bridge was going to break and we were going to fall straight into the huge river full of Caymans (small crocodiles). I found it entertaining. We finally arrived in the small touristy town of Manuel Antonio. The sidewalks were lined with Ticos, (Costa Ricans) selling jewelry on blankets and cerveca shirts and sarongs, bongos, pipes, cigars, practically everything. Only ten yards away from the sidewalk was the longest beach I have seen.

Installment Two

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We volunteers slept in the volunteer house, which was in the Manuel Antonio National Park, where we worked. Again we had bunk beds but this time we had to use mosquito nets and they saved my life from huge spiders, cockroaches and ants I found above my head when I woke up each morning. The volunteer "house" was a small, one-story "building" with three little rooms all connected and two disgusting "bathrooms" infested with spiders. To solve the problems we cleaned the bathrooms and killed all the spiders. The windows surrounding the entire "house" were not made out of glass but rather of wire covered in mesh. I got used to everything very quickly because really I loved being in such a beautiful place and it just sounds much worse than it really was.

Every day we had to wake up by 7:00 am for breakfast and after eating we were told what our job was for the day. Brooke and I worked together repairing signs in the park, taking surveys of the people entering the park, and cleaning the park -- basically maintenance work. One night there was a horrible storm with waves so big they took out entire trees lining the trails in the park. The next day Brooke and I were given the job to clean the trails of these huge-ass trees and branches. Working together, it didn't take us more than a few hours and after lunch we went to the beach. My most exciting work days were when 30 Tico volunteers, ages 19-23, came to stay with us and build a new trail in the park. My job was to carry two huge bags full of pebbles up a hill, dump them out on each dirt step, level the pebbles out, take the bags back, and then do it again. It took us three days to build the trail. This was serious labor but I loved the hard work and the Ticos were really fun to work with too. Every day we immediately went to the beach

after work. The ocean water was always very warm and blue and occasionally if I was lucky there were big waves I could body surf.

Breakfast, lunch, and dinner every day was beans and rice but I got used to it. Every now and then the house cook would make cow stomach but I could barely look at it. The fruit was always freshly picked minutes before, whether it was a banana, a mango, a coconut, watermelon, or some weird fruit I can't pronounce. The juice was always freshly made from these fruits except for the occasional orange Tang. Every day I had at least 3 cups of coffee, which almost killed me, but it was the most amazing coffee. It makes American coffee taste like dirt.

During the beginning of the trip, I watched the World Cup every day until Italy won. At nights, if we weren't in town, watching soap operas, or playing poker, we were playing pool, which sadly were some of the funniest times. The humidity was so intense that every night I went to bed, my pillow and sheets felt wet and every day sweat would drip of my nose and chin. This sounds gross but I loved it. I felt so relaxed all the time and had no worries. Ticos are very laid back and have a saying, "Pura Vida," that means no worries. When greeting someone, you say this and they say it back. Speaking of no worries, Bob Marley was a huge hit there which I found surprising. Reggae and hip hop in Spanish and English were very popular. Then there was salsa and meringue but that's more for the older folks.

Installment Three

Paloma Wodehouse is one of ten local interns chosen for Pinhead Institute's 2006 Internship Program, which sends high school juniors and seniors to work with mentors in science institutions throughout the world. Paloma is currently a senior at Telluride High School. Paloma and Ridgway High School senior Brooke Hunger, another Pinhead intern, spent their summer working in Costa Rica at INBio, an international biodiversity research center and two of Costa Rica's National Parks. This is the third installment of a three part series of her internship, written in September 2006.

Every day Brooke and I got to hang out with awesome animals like white faced monkeys, sloths, raccoons, iguanas, *cuatias*, boars, crabs, and sometimes snakes. Snakes really really liked me because every time we saw one, it was within five feet of me. Three out of the seven times when a snake was by me they were *flare de lance* snakes, which are the most poisonous snakes in Costa Rica. If a person gets bit by a *flare de lance* they have 20 minutes to get to a hospital or they will die. Manual Antonio is about 2 or 3 hours away from the nearest hospital. The best encounter I had with a snake was with a poisonous coral snake. One night all the electricity was out because of a horrible rainstorm and I was using a digital camera for light to walk around our "house." I was leading Brooke into our room with the camera when I felt something on my foot. I looked down at my foot to see a 13 inch long coral snake on my foot. Immediately after I saw the snake the battery for the flash light on the camera went out. I literally jumped onto a top bunk bed until the electricity went back on. One of the park rangers heard us scream and came to see what the fuss was about. He grabbed a newspaper and wrapped it around the coral snakes head and threw it outside. Brooke and I burst into laughter as soon as we were back to safety.

About five weeks into our trip Brooke and I decided we wanted to see more of Costa Rica. We hopped on a six-hour bus to San Jose and said goodbye to beautiful Manuel Antonio. We stayed in San Jose for only one night in a hostel before we jumped on another six-hour bus ride into the mountains to the National Park of Las Heliconias. We didn't work as volunteers here and instead we took beautiful hikes, where I had more snake encounters, and enjoyed the scenery as we pleased. On our hikes in the lush forest mountains we would suddenly turn onto an Indiana Jones like bridge hanging over a deep valley of forest. I scared Brooke by swinging and jumping on the bridges.

From the middle of one of the bridges we saw a pack of howler monkeys swinging on a tree. Brooke and I speak howler because we yelled at them from the bridge and the alpha male spoke back. The trees below the bridges were hundreds of feet tall with a base circumference of 20 feet or more. Most of the moths we saw were bigger than our hands and the spiders too, but they both were actually very pretty. In the mornings I would wake up and lay on a hammock while looking at toucans. In the evenings the sunsets were so brilliant in colors of pinks and oranges that they looked fake. From the main building you could see in the distance a large lake which was part of Nicaragua.

The most beautiful part of the mountains, though, was the waterfall, Rio Celeste. Brooke and I had to take a "taxi" an hour to another national park where we then had to start our hike to the waterfall. It was at least 60 feet tall but the most amazing thing about it was the bright turquoise color of the water. I was shocked how unreal and magnificent the color was. When we were done we took the "taxi" back which was actually just a pickup truck we sat in the back of. It made it easier for sight seeing, even though it was a little bumpy and rough.

After a week in the mountains Brooke and I went back to San Jose and stayed with one of the scientists from INBio. We went to the mall, the movies, museums, and said our goodbyes and flew home after another week there.

To conclude, my seven weeks in Costa Rica was a once in a lifetime experience and I hope to go back one day. The people are the nicest and most helpful people I have ever met and they taught me great things. The country not only improved my Spanish but the way I now look at life. Although I personally didn't enjoy all the food, I loved living there because of how calm, stress free and nice the people were. Any task a Tico was given, they did it with heart and made it fun, which is one of the most important things I learned and will carry on. All the landscapes were magnificently beautiful and even though I loved being in that kind of diversity, I am happy to be back home in gorgeous Telluride. Thanks to Nana Naisbitt and Pinhead Institute, this was all possible and she made it happen for Brooke and me by pushing us to open up our minds and move outside our comfort zones. You are the best Nana, thanks you rock!