

Katie Melloh
Peru, ETW
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This summer I was accepted to the Experiencing the World Fellowship Program and received a grant from the Kellogg Institute to pursue a project in Peru, a country that has long fascinated me. I used this opportunity to go through the Center for Social Well Being in South America, an organization that runs an anthropological field school during the summer for college students who are learning how to design and conduct research projects. Because I had never been to Peru and had no connections there, I wanted to go through an existing organization to offer direction and more stability than I would otherwise have had if I tried to design an entire project on my own. The directors of the program were also able to act as mediums through which I could gain access to different people and activities that I could not have on my own. Evaluating this life-changing experience has revealed both the rewards and challenges of the project, as well as exposing more than I anticipated about the region and its people.

I experienced quite a few unexpected challenges during my time in Peru. As trite as it sounds, my main concern was being lonely and homesick, especially for the first week of the month I was there. I had not truly thought about going to a completely foreign country on my own, without knowing anyone beforehand. I was the first of the group of students from all over the US to arrive in Lima, so I had to go to the hostel and attempt to talk to taxi drivers on my own. And although I have never thought of myself as needing technology or using a computer or cell phone whenever I wanted, being cut off from everyone back home was much harder than I anticipated. I think that if I had something or someone familiar with me I would not have struggled with that as much. Another problem was internal disorganization. We students in the program were not always sure which direction to take or how to consolidate our experiences and

research. I was forced to take my research into my own hands and try to make sense of it on my own. That part was frustrating because I felt like I did not have adequate time. Once I finally realized I was going to have to take control, there was not much time remaining. I was able to sort through all my experiences and research and make enough sense to present a unique perspective at the end of the month, but I wish I had more time.

On a more positive note, the rewards definitely outweighed the challenges I mentioned. To be able to go to a completely foreign place and design a research project is a reward in and of itself. The people I met and the experiences I had in the Andean culture were priceless. There are some things a person can learn in a classroom, like how to write a paper or what Quechua-speakers eat on a daily basis, but there are many other things that class can never “teach.” Nothing can replace real-life experiences or relationships formed. The value of becoming immersed in another culture is immeasurable, and to see both differences and similarities between yourself and someone in that culture is surreal. I found it remarkably rewarding to see a project to fruition while learning and living with the people at the same time.

Overall I think the most I learned from this experience is the reality of the lives of those living in the Peruvian Andes. Obviously a month of research and experiencing the culture there does not make me an expert, but I feel like I have a better grasp on how what I’ve learned on paper in class translates to in the real world. I have heard (and tried to speak) Quechua, helped harvest potatoes and oka in the traditional way, planned and implemented school activities, participated in market day, and took part in traditional medicinal practices. All of these activities are important parts of the Center for Social Well Being because it focuses on participatory action research, using input from the people themselves about what they need and do not need instead of imposing preconceived ideas on them. To do this it is vital to immerse oneself in the culture.

I think it is difficult to really understand a place or a people without traveling there and living with them. To be able to see what their lives are really like, where the poverty truly is and is not, and how their communities work in a physical sense is invaluable. This experience put faces, noises, smells, and sights to a culture that previously seemed distant and foreign. I cannot say that I know everything about the northern Peruvian Andes (or hardly anything relatively speaking) but I can say that I have eaten the food, hiked the mountains, laughed with the locals, tried to speak the language, danced the dances, and allowed myself to be treated medically in the same way as the people who live there, and to me the value of that is immeasurable.

My research trip to Peru certainly had its ups and downs, but I am truly grateful to have had the opportunity. I have carried the experience with me and am currently exploring many aspects of it in various classes (i.e. International Development Studies, Studies in Andean Culture, and Cultural Difference and Social Change). I hope to expand on the topics I addressed during my research, particularly the preservation of traditions, in further work and possibly a senior thesis. If the opportunity to return to Peru arises, I would certainly take it in a heartbeat. Somehow my trip to Peru has made my itch to travel even stronger, and I know I will never be the same person as before. Using what I learned both about myself and about Andean culture, I hope to step into my future with an inexplicably incredible experience under my belt but always on my mind.