Casas Viejas, Nicaragua

November 2016
Our blog...

Saturday 19th November – The start of the adventure

An early and chilly start to the weekend with the congregation of six of the group who were flying from Heathrow. We certainly stood out from the crowd of commuters, being lightly dressed despite the freezing cold weather in anticipation of a temperature increase from zero to 30 degrees! Much of the conservative clothing packing was in order to stuff our bags to the brim with gifts, learning material and sports equipment for the villagers.

It is always quite strange feeling like you have wasted a whole day on a plane but the flight passed remarkably quickly through either chattering, reading, sleeping or movie-binging and upon arrival in Houston, we met up with some of our international counterparts who were on the same connecting flight from other locations. Despite a late arrival in Managua (the capital of Nicaragua), there was still time for unofficial introductions to colleagues who had all arrived at various points of the day and the newly encountered hot and humid evening temperatures were mitigated through the consumption of some ice cold, Nicaraguan Tonas!

Sunday 20th November – The traveling continues...

A common grumble amongst seasoned business travellers are the difficulties in body clock adjustment and this acclimatisation was no different for the next stage of travel which was to be 8 hours of overland bus travel to the village of Casas Viejas in the mountainous north of Nicaragua near the border with Honduras. To the dismay of many on the team who were eager to get to the site of the prospective school, this journey was to be broken up with a stop in Esteli to allow for a thorough briefing of the week ahead and an opportunity to bond as a group and experience some local culture.

Esteli is the third largest city in Nicaragua and a fairly active commercial centre, famed for its cigars (impartially better than Cubans!). Arriving on a Sunday, the centre plaza was eerily quiet while we strolled around taking in the local environment. We also witnessed physical evidence of more turbulent times when we passed the bullet holed buildings with mural paintings of the Sandinista gunfight standoff that infamously took place in Esteli in the late 70s. Later in the afternoon, this period of reflection was not unwelcomingly disturbed, when we discovered a local café that was playing traditional Nicaraguan ballads. Some of these reminisced about the revolution but the musicians’ repertoire extended to The Eagles and even Ronan Keating! We rounded off the day with a hearty dinner at the hotel where we were handed out phrase books in order to polish up on our Spanish and left to speculate about what to expect in the week ahead.
Monday 21st November – The welcoming ceremony

After a long trip from Esteli through a wonderful and uncontaminated nature, we arrive to the village of Casas Viejas. Just before, we have a stop in another small village, in front of a big green field looking at the mountain. Few cows and horses are there, peacefully eating the green, in front of one of the goal. It takes less than 5 minutes and a football ball to attract a group of children and playing with them. Welcome in the land of the children!

The 4x4 don’t arrive - the driver is eating - so we proceed with the bus, the way is anything but a good way for a school bus...but we finally arrive to our village. People is waiting for us, all crowded on the way, all the community has been preparing for this day since months, a loud music plays for us and all are ready for this special moment: it is the first time that buildOn cover this area, it is the first trek group ever in the area. The welcome ceremony is in the main quarter - one of the few with energy powered by solar panel, all the seats of the village have been provided to set the stage of the event. We are sitting in a row, as special guests, to be welcomed from the village. The mayor of Jalapa, a smiling and smart lady taking notes in her iPad, open the ceremony highlighting the importance of this project for the community and their commitment in supporting the education of the children as a bridge with the future.

It is time for the people of the village to thanks us and buildOn for the great efforts in terms of funding the project but also for being part in person of this unforgettable piece of history for the community. The village does not have a school, even if 70% of the population are children (only 60 are adults). At the moment they are using a house in the top of hill that a generous member of the community has lent to them to allow children to access education. The same person has kindly given the field where we are going to build the new school.

The leader of a community is a man, proved by the hard life, with a gentle gaze and a shy smile, he uses few but powerful words: “what we are doing today will be forever”! And Carlos, the engineer, project leader for buildOn, describing how crucial is our involvement in the project to have the school finished in 10 weeks, gives form to what we are going to do in the next days: “the miracle is any hands that will contribute to build this school. The miracle is some of these children who could go one day to the university and change the world”!

Not only words but emotions are tangible in the air. Lucas, our coordinator thanks the community to having us and also for being so collaborative in the previous week, before inviting us to speak. Jamie and Evie express our honour and pleasure to be there, to contribute to put the first stones of the school and thank all the community for hosting us in their homes and to share with us the next few extraordinary days.

It is time to introduce us to our families and to go with them for spending the rest of the day. All the members of the community offer their help to bring our staff, children and old people, their affection is touching! It is getting dark here in the village and we are just at the beginning of this trip that could let a dream becomes true!
Tuesday 22nd November – Day one on the worksite

It’s hard to know when Monday ended and Tuesday began thanks to a rather confused (or just impatient!) cockerel who gave us our first wakeup call at circa 10pm and then proceeded to doodle at regular intervals until our official wake up time of 5am.

After a delicious breakfast (the novelty of rice and beans hadn’t yet worn off), we ventured down to the worksite for the first time, brimming with enthusiasm and flexing our (almost) non-existent muscles. Our workforce soon doubled as several members of the community appeared to help us work and we marked the start of the first day with some motivational speeches from both sides.

There was a variety of jobs to do on the worksite catering for every type of muscle pain: sand sifting, re-barring (earthquake proofing columns Nicaraguan-style), digging aplenty…it is safe to say we felt our second serving of rice and beans for the day was well deserved.

As we digested and recharged, we took the opportunity to reflect on our reasons for being here, needless to say that Andrew and Toby came top of our thoughts alongside the unanimous belief of proving a whole community with a valuable education.

The carb loading then continued that afternoon as our cultural activity was ‘Bread Making’ at one of the houses, or rather small, sweet buns called ‘Polvorones’ which are made by the entire family in a kiln as a Christmas treat. Mixing and kneading the dough by hand proved surprisingly therapeutic – if only Bake Off hadn’t finished, we could have earned our place with an innovative new mixing technique! Over 100 buns later, we finally all sat down outside to enjoy them with the family fresh from the kiln.

We wandered home to our family and enjoyed a much needed and very refreshing (cold) bucket shower made infinitely more bearable by a stunning sunset over the valley below us.

Rice and beans take 3 was next as we say down with our family to eat dinner by torchlight, there being no electricity in the whole village. This was followed by several games of jenga which provided great entertainment and made up for our pigeon Spanish! By 7pm our eyes were dropping and our wild night ended with a final crow from our confused cockerel!


Georgina Cooper & Evie Paterson

Wednesday 23rd November – Day two on the worksite & lots of rice and beans!

Waking to the sounds the rustling of our abuela and hermanas in the other half of the room we were sleeping in, our padre sweeping and our madre working in the kitchen let us know that it was the start of a new day in Casas Viejas; it was 5:30am. Still pitch black outside, we fumbled around for our head torches to be able to start to get ready for the day. After our daily morning coffee with the family, we head down to meet the rest of the team for breakfast which today was pancakes, scrambled eggs, watermelon and pineapple – delicious!

After breakfast, half the group headed to the worksite to begin working on the school and the other half of the group, which I am in, assembled for a cultural educational workshop to get insights from the villagers on the new and different culture we have been immersed in. About ten people from the village, a range of ages from teenagers to elders, came to chat with us. With the help of our translators we had an engaging and open chat where we learnt about their level and
views on education (minimal and supportive as they know it is the one thing that can change their lives), their jobs (they farm corn, coffee and beans to generate income), to their access to medical care (available but they have to travel far for it). We asked the village elder about the country’s history and what life was like during the revolution. Clearly a very difficult time in his life as during the war he was captured and abused by the rebels for three months before making a lucky escape. We then got the villagers to ask us questions and these were centred mainly on what we do for a living and why we have children so late in life.

With a little bit of free time before lunch, Annette, Clemmie and I headed up to visit the temporary school on the top of the hill where 46 students (24 boys and 22 girls) taught by three teachers, teaching seven grades were squeezed into a dark and crumbling building with mud floors. Annette gave pictures from school children in Scotland and got the children to draw ones for her to take back to them. On the way back down, Clemmie and I stumbled upon some ladies that were heading to harvest coffee cherries and we were able to give them a helping hand.

The whole group reassembled for lunch together which consisted of rice, beans, salads, vegetables and handmade crisps. We all then headed back up to the school to gift the children with new school supplies and sports equipment. When we got up to the school, all the children had left but it wasn’t long before they all came running back up the hill and we spent a happy hour playing football, rugby and volley ball with the children.

It was then time to switch with the other group and my group headed down to the worksite. A few of the young boys came to help and I spent four hours digging with Gerald who was 5 years old. It was incredible working with someone who will be directly benefitting from the school and to see the passion and excitement that he had for it. It was only the second day on the worksite but the amount of work that had already been achieved on the foundations was amazing. As with every day, we wrapped up the day by all forming a circle and thanking everyone for their hard work and commitment to the project.

Flora and I walked home to a beautiful purple twilight hue in the sky and were greeted as soon as we got home by our abuela who quickly rushed us into the kitchen to teach us how to make tortillas. We then had a very quick spin in the outside shower (it was very cold!) and then we were given the classic staples of rice, beans, plantain and the tortillas we made for dinner - a welcome relief as the previous night we were given chicken foot soup!

We then got out our little Spanish books to try and make conversation with our family, we struggled but our attempts filled the evening with endless laughter. Despite the language barrier, the connection we had with our family was profound. The family, three generations living harmoniously together, were wonderful, caring and gentle people. As with every evening, the translators popped by to help us properly verbally communicate with our family. This was our last night staying with the family. Although we have given something to every person in the community – the brand new school – we wanted to gift our family with a few small tokens of appreciation for looking after us, so after speeches we gave the grandmother and parents a solar powered torch and a couple of small clothing items and Jenga and glow sticks to the children.

It was then time to have our last gaze at the stars before we headed to bed for the evening. Tonight was a late one for all - it was 8pm!
Thursday 24th November – Day three on the worksite & closing ceremony

Time to leave Casas Viejas, had to leave a day earlier than planned due to a Tsunami Red Alert! not what everyone wanted but it had to be.

It was an early start for us all as we had to bid our families good bye, I believe it was a mix of emotions due to relationships and bonding establish within a very short time.

Breakfast was for 6am as usual and we then headed to the site for 7am, had the usual morning briefing with the other co-workers on site both from the community and BuildOn.

We completed digging the trenches for the foundation, worked on the rebar, sifted sand, finished digging the pit for the Latrine amongst other activities.

By about noon we laid the first bricks, these were autographed by each of us including one each in memory of Toby and Andrew.

We had a brief closing ceremony, played the Piñata with the community, had lunch and then left Casas Viejas for the nearest City Jalapa

We were so tired by the time we got to Jalapa and I believe all that was on everyone’s mind was a good shower dinner and some rest.

The fun started after everyone had some rest, we were hosted by the Mayor of Jalapa to a reception at the City Hall entertained by the Cultural troupe.

We then had our dinner and the fun continued till the early hours of Friday.

Friday 25th November – One completed school, an 8 hour bus journey and the last supper

It felt strange waking up on Friday, no cockerels, no need to stumble around in the dark getting changed and no need to navigate to the latrine with a torch...

After Thursday’s disappointment of the impending Tsunami Red Alert! we were anticipating a day in the yellow school bus to take us the 8 hours through lush Nicaraguan countryside. Luckily buildOn were able to arrange for us to visit a finished school in a community similar to Casas Viejas, everyone was excited to get a glimpse of what our efforts had begun to achieve.

The bus turned into the school yard and the white and blue buildOn school lay before us, the children came out to shake our hands, Hola! Que Tal? We were invited to sit in the classroom and the teacher told us how for this community they teach 54 children between the ages of 4 to 11, in 2 classrooms! How they manage this is incredible. After our turn to learn Maths and Spanish classes and it was Georgina and Jamie’s turn to teach! Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes ensued... luckily the translator was able to help here, otherwise they might have thought that this is actually a visionary interpretation of ourselves.
The journey back to Managua took the rest of the day, and between dosing we caught glimpses of villages in the country, green hills lush with coffee plants and night fall fell as we reached Managua.

Back in the hotel we stayed at six nights before we were all full of laughs, reflections of Casa Viejas, and soon... margaritas. Faces were tanned and the restaurant dimmed the lights for a warm albeit slightly out of tune rendition of Happy Birthday to Annette! Fitting to end the week there was a round of awards; sponsored by Arnold Schwarzenegger for the biggest biceps within the group was the Gun Queen - Georgina Cooper and for stamina and commitment is The Raging Bull award honouring Bruce Stout! The celebrations continued into the night as we all enjoyed the warm November in Nicaragua before saying our goodbyes in the morning.

Sarah Cansfield:

There are so many unforgettable memories from this trek ranging from: digging for four hours straight with Gerald, a five year old, who will be directly benefitting first-hand from the school; everyone on the worksite singing along to ‘Total Eclipse of the Heart’ by Bonnie Tyler that was playing on the small radio; the landscape; walking home in the beautiful purple twilight hues of the evening; to eating dinner with our host family under the stars. It was also incredible how being immersed into a completely different culture and all working towards one goal can bring 16 colleagues from 9 offices from all over the world so closely together. The villagers were all so kind to us and welcomed us with open arms into their homes. The beauty of experiencing rural life was profoundly moving as although the villagers deal with adversity is clearly evident that everyone is happy and the true important things in life are family and a strong sense of community. The access to education facilities will have a direct and lasting impact on this village and the excitement of bringing literacy and hope to all was both an incredible and humbling feeling. Thank you Aberdeen for this opportunity, it was a truly unique and uplifting experience and one that I will never forget.
Jamie Govan:
- Teaching the kids how to play rugby and learning how to actually construct a building
- Incredibly rewarding, only regret is not being involved for longer!
- Would highly recommend anyone even marginally interested in undertaking such a project – nothing is impossible!

Annette Leith:
This was an experience of a lifetime. What a wonderful community who were very welcoming and most appreciative of the help we were providing. The Aberdeen volunteers really worked well together and many lifelong friendships were made both within the team and the community. Lucas was an inspiration to us all and kept us constantly motivated. It truly was a humbling adventure and made us realise how privileged we are to live the lives we lead. My thoughts will remain with this community and I hope to follow their progress.

Bruce Stout:
To sum it all up in as few words as possible, some people feel the rain – others just get wet.
I felt the spirit of our visit as inspiring as it was humbling.
Georgina Cooper:

To be able to work, live and become a member of a community who have so little, then leave them with memories and a school they will treasure forever is one of the most rewarding experiences ever. Who knew that digging holes, sifting sand and mixing cement was such an effective way to bring people together from all over the world – I couldn’t recommend it more!

Andy Clarkson:

A truly uplifting and life-affirming experience. An honour to work and spend a short but unforgettable time with so many amazing people – community members, BuildOn staff and colleagues alike. The teamwork, enthusiasm and inspiration we all shared went miles further and will last far longer than any monetary donation ever will.

Quote of the week ‘We were all bad guys’ – senior community member and civil war veteran Horacio’s response when asked if he fought for the good guys or the bad guys.

Moment of the week – The bewildered smile on Bruce’ face when he heard ‘Love Hurts’ by Nazareth for the first time in 30 years – on the radio of an old Bluebird bus in the hills of Nicaragua / Honduras border country! Chances?

Roberto Bosch:

Going on the trek with buildOn had a profound impact on me. Not only did it helped me realize how lucky I was to have had the opportunity to pursue my education but it also gave me a moment to pause reflect on all that I’ve been able to accomplish because of it. I was fortunate to have been part of a great group of colleagues that shared a common vision and fully committed to the project. It was one of the best team-building experiences I think I will ever have.

Spending a time in the homes of the community members and playing with the kids was one of the highlights of the trip. Despite coming from a relatively humble background they were so proud to be hosting us in their homes and teaching us about their way of life. The kids were all smiles and I believe it’s an experience that they won’t soon forget – I know I won’t!

This photo is my favorite because it reminds me of who would be impacted by the school and the wonderful people that welcomed us into their home like we were their own family.
Iain Gillespie:
It is really difficult to put in to words the impact of the buildOn trek to Nicaragua. I was not prepared for how it would change my perspective. The work of this charity changes lives and empowers communities. It was an absolute privilege to be a part of.

Kimberley Woolverton:
It is really difficult to put into a few sentences how meaningful this experience was for me, since it was impactful in so many different ways. It is extremely fulfilling to know that we have bettered the lives of the incredible children in the village of Casas Viejas, as well as the generations to come, through the gift of education. Honouring Andrew and Toby in the process made it all the more special. My favourite moments were working alongside my colleagues, the community members, and our buildOn partners on the school site. Cultural and language barriers were eliminated when we were all working hard towards a common goal...and we had fun, too! I will cherish these memories. A big thank you to Aberdeen for making this trek possible!

Alan Goodson:
A humbling, challenging and, at times, emotional experience. Was a true honour to spend time with such a gracious and welcoming community. Best of all was doing it with an amazing group of colleagues and now friends. The best experiences are always those shared and this week proved it to a tee.
Flora Sexton:
The opportunity to stay with host families as we assisted with the beginning of the school building project was the best part of the whole experience. We were humbled by the generosity and grace of our hosts. The point of travelling to the sites is not just to work, but to show the community that they are valued and respected and their contribution to the world is welcomed. That being said renaming the latrine “the Jamie hole” after his Herculean labours was a pleasant development.

Sam Bevan:
I want to tell the story of Melvin Caceres Peralta, the Nicaraguan padre of Iain and myself. A father of two and coffee bean farmer his entire life, he had been democratically elected as community leader. A gentle and shy man who was fiercely loyal and totally devoted to his family, he was immensely proud to welcome us into his modest home and immediately made us feel like family. His brilliant blue eyes were kind but sad and he opened up about the three-month sentence he spent in a Texan prison for entering the U.S. illegally in 2011. With a heavy heart, he left his wife and young son but the lack of options locally and instinct to provide for them drove him. He travelled over 2,500 miles by land through Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico. The journey was dangerous, as evidenced by his close friend and only travel companion losing his life. He laughed wearily when asked whether he considered entering legally but explained that improved education could provide opportunities to the next generation to strive for better. Melvin let Iain and myself into his home and into his heart, making our goodbyes incredibly difficult but enriching our experience and giving us hope that the new school can help provide the opportunities this incredibly hospitable community deserve.

Evie Paterson:
It is impossible not to resort to clichés when trying to convey what a humbling and unforgettable experience the buildOn trek Nicaragua was. It was simply a privilege to part of such a great group and meet so many inspiring people in the village.
Clementina McCallum:

On the flight home I began to think about my expectations and whether they had been met. The thing that stuck me most, and that I hadn’t expected were the similarities between us all, and not the differences as I had expected. The family I lived it all made us feel the most welcome with the grandma who couldn’t possibly feed me enough, the granddad how was frustrated by our lack of Spanglish… and therefore proceeded to shout louder Spanish with the hope we would understand. Colleagues who had rarely, if ever, met working together, laughing together; when you’re sharing a latrine with 15 colleagues you soon get to know each other... I will fondly remember the community who welcomed us, the opportunity to work in a company who value a chance to give back in such an extraordinary way and sugary Nicaraguan coffee.

Laura Nateri:

In a community where 70% are children, be part of the miracle to build the first school of the village has been extraordinary. "The miracle..." explains Carlo (the buildOn foreman) "...is any hands that will contribute to build this school. The miracle is some of the children attending this school who could go one day to the university and change the world".

Yilsen Dasar:

The adventure was wonderful and rewarding, I enjoyed every minute of it. Thanks to Aberdeen and buildOn for providing such a great opportunity to give back in a more practical and exciting way. The team spirit from all the volunteers coupled with the warm reception from the community made the whole experience more exciting and memorable.