

As my bus pulled into the Ayacucho station, I could feel the butterflies in my stomach. I looked out the window at the dozens of tiny stores that lined the dirty streets. The deafening sound of car and 'moto' horns filled the thick fume filled air. I took a deep breath and made my way off of the bus to what would be my home for the next eleven weeks.

That was already over three months ago and I have returned to my home and 'comfort zone' in Portland, Oregon. Thinking back to my internship in Ayacucho, Peru is remembering some of the most rewarding and challenging times in my life. I learned to laugh at situations that made me feel like crying. I developed a stronger understanding of myself, the world, and my place in it. I made life-long friendships and met people I will never forget. And I came to adapt to a culture that is inexpressibly different from my own.

My first day at FINCA-Peru region Ayacucho Urbano, seemed so fast paced and over my head. I remember sitting down with the Executive Director and as she described how the organization worked and the areas of it that were in need of assistance, I felt unprepared and intimidated. I doubted everything I had previously felt so sure about - my Spanish-speaking abilities, my abilities to adapt, and my ability to contribute and make a difference.

After receiving an in-depth overview of FINCA and what projects I would be working on, I was given stacks of reading material so that I could better understand all the information I was given. For the remainder of that day I sat in an office with the reading material I was given and a Spanish-English dictionary. By the time six-thirty came around I felt exhausted, overwhelmed and the cold I had woken up with that day had gotten worse. I was ready to go 'home'. At around seven I was told we were having a meeting. I walked into the room and noticed that on the chalkboard someone had written "¡Bienvenida Raquel!" and there were cookies and drinks. The President, the Executive Director, and the rest of the "FINCA Family" from the region were all there. To my dismay I was asked to speak about myself and why I had come to Peru in front of the forty people or so who were present. This was my first Spanish public speaking experience in a professional environment, it was after a long tiring day and I was sick on top of it all! I felt like be I was going to faint. After swallowing my nervousness I

managed to get a few sentences of Spanish out. At around eight o'clock I made it back to my room and lay down on my bed exhausted. I was hungry, but it was dark outside, I had no idea where a restaurant was or if it was even safe for me to walk alone at night. I closed my eyes; I had made it through my first day.

Before arriving in Peru I was fairly confident in my Spanish speaking ability. I had finished my fourth year of college level Spanish and I spoke Spanish at the bank I worked at on a daily basis. However, I quickly learned that speaking Spanish in Peru wasn't as easy as I had anticipated. Although the difference is small, Peruvians speak another dialect of Spanish. Their accents are a little different, they use a lot of 'slang' that is different from the slang I had learned in the United States, and they use words that I would normally never have used in the United States (a meaning I was familiar with, but spoken with an alternative word). At first I was very intimidated and I understood only about half of what was being spoken. The biggest advancement in my Spanish language ability was a result of asking questions. When I didn't know a word or I was unsure of a meaning - I asked. By asking questions I quickly realized that I knew many of the words that were being spoken, but they were simply being pronounced differently than I was used to; the word I didn't understand was Peruvian slang; or I knew the meaning but had been using a different word to express that same meaning. As my comfort grew, my confidence grew as well. Now, after leaving Peru, my Spanish is not yet perfect, but I am much more comfortable holding a conversation, speaking on the phone and talking in a professional setting with native Spanish speakers. The key to my improvement was learning to ask questions, being comfortable and learning to listen for words that I do know.

The benefits of my internship were not apparent to me until I neared the end of my time in Peru. One of my biggest challenges and frustrations was with the difference in the description of the internship given and the internship itself; I realized from the very first day that it would be very different from what I had been expecting. From descriptions of past interns I had thought I would be interacting a lot with the women involved in FINCA and would be able to see how my contribution was making a difference. I had also hoped that it would relate

somewhat to my major (Finance) being that it was a Micro-Finance organization. However, throughout the majority of my internship I worked independently and was unable to directly see how I was bettering the program and/or the women's experiences.

While my initial expectations were not met, I evolved and learned a lot about myself in a professional environment as well as my understanding of the world. I learned that being in another country can feel like another world, and that accepting and understanding the differences between these two 'worlds' or cultures could help me grow both professionally and as a person. I realized that each intern's experience will be inherently different from another and that I could either make the most of *my* experience and contribute in my own way or miss out on a great opportunity. I also learned that changes can only come through voicing one's desires and/or opinions. By voicing my desire to work more closely with the women early on I was able to work on a project different from what FINCA had originally planned for me, but was of equal importance in the advancement of the organization.

While I worked mostly on my own, I was still able to interact for a short period of time on a daily basis with the women of FINCA. Talking one on one with these women was one of the most rewarding and life changing opportunities I have ever had. From those women I learned that it is not what you have in life, but who you have next to you. I learned that to live a meaningful life you must be forgiving, honest, humble and laugh even when all you feel like doing is crying. Many of these women had next to nothing, but yet they wore a smile on their faces and would give you the shirt off of their back if you needed it.

Another challenge I faced was not having a mentor or supervisor working on-site with me. My mentor was working in Lima and we were only able to communicate through email and sometimes by phone. Her busy schedule and the difficulty of communicating clearly through email, paired with a slight language barrier, made getting guidance and feedback on work very difficult and frustrating around eighty percent of the time. There would be times I had to wait for documents or instructions before beginning a project and would have to wait days to get a response, or other times where I would spend weeks on a report and never get any feedback.

Although not having a supervisor at the same location proved to be both frustrating and challenging, working on my own taught me to make decisions based on my best judgment and with confidence. I also learned to be patient and adapt quickly to the situations I found myself in, which will aid me both in my professional and personal life.

In the end, I realized that my contribution wasn't one that would be seen in the short-term, like I had previously hoped. But rather over-time as changes were made according to the preferences and opinions of the women of FINCA-Peru, which I helped to voice through my time and contributions in Ayacucho.

### **Tips for Future Interns**

#### *My Daily Routine*

My daily routine was generally the same throughout the course of the internship. We began at 8am with a prayer (which was *very* new to me coming from a country that does not allow for public displays of religion) and announcements. After prayer and announcements I would survey the women who were planning to leave FINCA as to their likes, dislikes, opinions and ways they thought FINCA could improve. After meeting with each woman who had decided to leave her bank I would return to my office and begin processing the results – putting them into tables, charts and then percentages. After three to four weeks of surveying and compiling the data I would also begin writing a report outlining the results and recommendations I drew from the results. Every Monday we would have a meeting discussing the agenda for the week. At 12:30pm we had lunch and would return at 2:30pm. At 6:30pm I would leave FINCA and meet up with friends for dinner.

#### *Transportation, Money, Entertainment, Housing, and Food*

Compared to what an average student spends in the United States living in Ayacucho is extremely inexpensive! For the conscious spender 200 soles (around \$65) should last a month, not including rent. Housing for me was 200 soles a month – a good deal for a student used to paying downtown Portland prices! However, don't expect a kitchen, television, hot water, washer or dryer.

For food I would recommend going to a local restaurant that offers a *Menú*. A *Menú* is offered by many restaurants generally for breakfast, lunch and dinner for around 3 to 5 soles and comes with a drink, soup, a main course (from which you can choose from a list of the daily specials) and a small desert – extremely affordable!! Other but more expensive options include restaurants that offer *Pollo a la Brasa (Grilled Chicken with French fries)*, *Chaufa (Chinese Fried Rice)*, *Chifa (Chow Mein)*, and other more 'American' type food cooked Peruvian style. These restaurants generally range from 7 and can go up to around 16 soles a meal. Aside from price I keep an eye on the cleanliness of the restaurant and do not eat food (especially meat) that is cold. Food in Peru has a different form of bacteria that we, as Americans, are not used to and can make us sick. Stick with restaurants that appear clean for the most part and try taking stomach medicine (you can find some at any of the local pharmacies) before you eat.

Getting around Ayacucho is pretty easy. There are four main forms of transportation; walking, taxi, moto, or bus. Walking is the way to go if you have the time and the weather is nice. A taxi can be expensive for a short ride and drivers may try to overcharge, so be sure to bargain! A moto, while small and quite unsafe is affordable and quick. A moto may charge only one sol to arrive at the same destination that a taxi will charge 5 soles to arrive at and in half the time. For long distances, like to the more rural areas, the bus is the best option, charging only fifty centimos (around twelve cents).

Entertainment in Ayacucho lacks a bit compared to what we are used to in the United States. The most common form of entertainment for college students are the many bars and dance clubs. While there is a movie theatre it doesn't play any up to date movies and many of the movies are inappropriate. The best place to look for entertainment is in the San Cristobal Cultural Center. They show a movie every Sunday at 6:00pm and often showcase performances including dances and traditional Peruvian music. For something a little bit different, but a bit pricy the Bull Run or the Chicken Fights are fun when available.