

CHIRIKAYEN REPORTS FROM PAST VOLUNTEERS



Report from Marie Stark, anthropology student, USA

My stay at Chirikayen cannot be explained in just a few words. This living experience was both a cultural experience as well as a personal experience. When you're told that you make your own adventure wherever you go, nothing could be more true of Chirikayen. My adventure was filled with learning, teaching, and emotion. By delving myself into the community, I learned the ways of Pemón life and was able to take part in everyday activities; at night I taught English to those taking night classes. The Pemón are a very sweet people who make the best of everything. During my stay there, I made some great friends, one in particular with whom I became very close and miss very much.

A typical day involved either hiking, going to the mines, building, going to the conoco to gather yucca and make cassava, bathing, and lounging around. People are very friendly and will talk to you randomly throughout the day (Don't be surprised if someone gives you a bunch of bananas!). Once I got to know people I found myself hanging out with them, playing games, talking and watching the guys play futbol. I became so close to one family

that they considered me like family. Church is also an important factor in their lives, but nobody will ever make you go if you don't want to, it is very lenient.

I guess I could go on and on about different aspects of my experience, but all in all it is what you make of it. I personally fell in love with a culture, a place, a person. The hardest part for me was leaving and now I sit at home in the states wishing I were still there. For me, the experience was life changing.

As for suggestions for those who are unsure what to expect... just go with it, the everyday life. There are always things that need to be done whether helping in construction, going to the conoco, or playing with the kids. Albeit, there is plenty of time for relaxing so I recommend books or whatever will keep you occupied for when it rains or you're just feeling sluggish. Going with somebody instead of alone is a good idea, especially if you don't know Spanish. Another note, no matter how much mosquito repellent you have, the puti puti are going to eat you alive. Oh yeah, and don't be fooled into thinking that the Pemón don't become puti food either...they just hide it better. Lastly, go with an open mind for you never know what can happen in the middle of the forest. For me, I found paradise and I'm not quite sure I want to give it up.

p.s. There is an outhouse on the left hand side as you are walking down to the missionary village. It took Nicole and I a week to find that thing and nobody told us!! Oh yeah, respect it and love it!

Report from Fritz Reuter, Austria

Chirikayen is a unique, magical place, thanks to both its good-humored people and breathtaking natural setting, it's an unforgettable experience. On the journey there, packed like a sardine on an open top truck full of chattering and joking Pemon, I really wasn't sure what to expect. When the truck burst out of the jungle into the savannah, with the village dwarfed by 3 imposing tepuyes, the location certainly was breathtaking. The welcome was warm, from both the friendly village Capitan and from the purri puris, happy to have some fresh gringo blood to suck. My first experience of village life was watching a rough and tumble football match between the Chirikayen women, kicking the crap out of each other but laughing about it afterwards. As you quickly realize, the Pemon of Chirikayen do everything with a smile on their faces, they also have an enviable philosophy of "compartir". Every man and woman is an integral cog in the wheel and everything is done together as a community – working, eating, worshiping and socializing.

This strong bond has also helped to avoid many of the problems other indigenous communities seem blighted by and alcoholism and greed are not present in Chirikayen. The community functions very cohesively. My main task was helping at the school, teaching sports and a little English. It was richly rewarding to have all the village children running around shouting "Hello! How are you!" Everyone was also quick to welcome me into the community and before I knew it I was getting kicked in the daily football matches,

lugging wood from the forest and climbing trees with the kids. The kids, in fact left the most indelible imprint on my memory. They are tough and forced to mature quickly but also generous and unmistakably happy. They are constantly singing, joking and playing and never complain or bicker. They took me on all kinds of adventures to local places showing me hundreds of horrible and fascinating creepy crawlies on the way (even forcing me to eat a live termite with bigger teeth than me...). They are such a stark contrast to spoiled Western children it makes you retrospectively assess your own childhood guiltily.

Going up to the gold mine where many of the villagers work, you get unbelievable views of the mountains and savannah and you also see the grittier side of life here. Wading around knee deep in mud all day dispels any glamorized myths you may have previously harbored about gold mining. Each person here has to work incredibly hard to scratch out a living and again you find yourself regretting the days when you used to complain at the end of your 9-5 job.

Life in the village has changed a little with the influence of Western civilization and now there is a peculiar and curious mix of cultures. Children dip their home made casabe bread into glasses of Diet Coke, women wash their fake Lacoste polo shirts in the river and men get back from cutting wood in the jungle and watch Movies on the villages only DVD player. When the electricity snaps off at 10 PM you are suddenly left in pitch darkness under a million stars with only your thoughts for company. Chirikayen also allows you plenty of time for reflection and there is so much to reflect on after visiting here. It is an experience I would recommend to anyone.