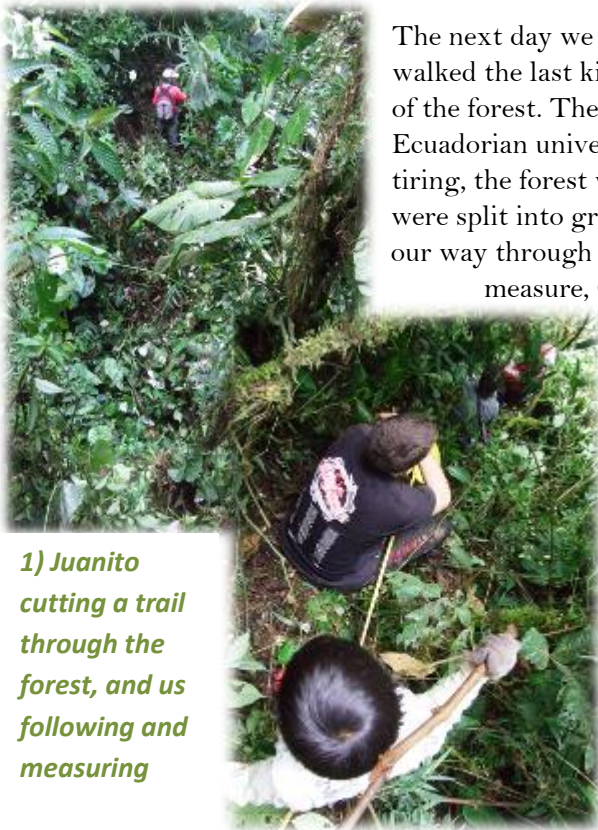




Volunteering in Ecuador, July 2010

The project I chose had two very different sides to it; the first fortnight was spent in the cloud forest 50km from Quito, the last two weeks in a “coastal” town teaching English to primary school children. I am a zoologist and have taught and worked with children before, so I was looking forward to both types of work, though no experience was necessary!

I travelled around South America for six weeks before the project began, learning a bit of Spanish and seeing some of the world. Arriving in the Chiriboga Foundation house in Quito was almost like reaching home. The two sisters in charge of the project are very welcoming, with lots of experience with international volunteers and well organised! The first night was spent learning of the history of the Chiriboga cloud forest and the foundation, and what work we would do there. I also met the other volunteers; four Spaniards, three Germans and one Irish.



1) Juanito cutting a trail through the forest, and us following and measuring

The next day we travelled together to Chiriboga, a small town 50km from Quito, and walked the last kilometre to our accommodation, a house tucked under the outskirts of the forest. The next morning we began our work, alongside local workers and Ecuadorian university students out in the forest. The work was physically tough and tiring, the forest was wet and slippery and difficult to move around through. We were split into groups- each one led by a machete wielding Ecuadorian- and worked our way through the forest marking square after 50m square. The routine was hack, measure, GPS, mark the point, hack, measure....The first day was exciting, then it became the norm☺. We sang and joked around to keep our spirits up, played with the dogs that followed us everywhere or watched out for toucans and hummingbirds and other wildlife. The house, bedrooms and bathrooms were clean and modern (by Irish standards!) and the food fantastic- rice and meats, fruit and veg, fresh milk and fruit juices. The physicality of the forest work caused the Spanish volunteers to leave Chiriboga for Jipijapa after only three days and the Germans were only scheduled to stay for one week. That left two of us, and a lot of work! I learnt about the forest and the species within it, how to make bracelets from vines and maybe most importantly, about Ecuadorian culture and food and traditions and how to interact with them. The rough terrain made progress slow but by the end of the two weeks, I felt we had achieved something worthwhile.

Between the two parts of the project we spent a weekend in Quito (in the foundation’s house) for rest and relaxation, and visited the incredible Otavalo markets.

The teaching part of the project was in Jipijapa, a small town in coastal Ecuador. The other volunteers and I were in different schools that were run in very different ways so each of us had a unique experience. I taught three mixed-age school groups English every day. It was tough at times, when my Spanish wasn't able for the slang and quick speech of some of the kids or when it was so hot I felt I couldn't think, let alone teach! The kids were innocent and good, always willing to listen or sing or play games and even do the tests the school principal asked me to set. They learnt a lot - their English pronunciation improved 100fold! I lived with a local family, three generations in the one house. Everyone in the town knew who we were and why we were there; we were interviewed for radio and even appeared on the regional television station. We met so many people and were included in every town event for the two weeks. It was incredibly welcoming! I gained a huge insight to urban life in the poorer regions of Ecuador, away from the touristic centres. Our weekend off was spent on the beaches of the Machalilla National Park and Humpback whale watching by the "Poor man's Galapagos" of Isla de la Plata.



*Older boys playing soccer in the schoolyard,
The infants class "concentrating"*

It was a fantastic experience and I felt like I had achieved something in both places. At the beginning I was a bit nervous but willing to try anything and give everything a fair chance. So I did and it was fantastic; for my confidence, my awareness and my Spanish. No, by the end of July the forest wasn't completely marked out with every specie catalogued and my school kids don't have excellent English, but we marked a good few hectares and identified nearly 1000 trees and the kids met someone from a country they had never even heard of and can sing and mime "Old MacDonald's Farm" with the best of them!



- 1) Us with Jipijapa's "Abelitos",*
- 2) Celebrating an old ladies birthday*
- 3) Us six volunteers with Carmen from the Chiriboga foundation, the school principals and the town officials on our introduction*