

My Nuñoa Experience by Rachel Hildebrand

Wednesday, 3 December 2008

I was invited by my professor of animal sciences to Nunoa, Peru as a part of a small team of representatives for the nonprofit organization, the Nunoa Project. Throughout my time spent in my professor's camelid management classes, which have a main focus on alpacas, I had learned a little bit about this nonprofit organization. I knew that each year a select group of students were invited to Peru to help the organization in the efforts of bringing aid to a small village situated somewhere high in the Andes Mountains. It had always intrigued me, and I was delighted when I, myself, was invited to join the "team" for their January 2009 trip.

Thursday, 8 January 2009

We arrived in Cuzco early this morning to begin our acclimatization process. We will be here for two days to allow our bodies to get used to the high altitude. Cuzco is situated at around 11,000 ft above sea level whereas, Nuñoa is 13,000 ft. These high altitudes can provide a bit of a challenge for people like me who are used to life at sea level. I noticed a difference almost immediately after arriving in Cuzco. The once easy task of climbing a flight of stairs proved to be much more difficult; I was left winded at the top, as if I had run a mile. Another seemingly simple task of exploring the city was much harder than expected; walking short distances and small hills exhausted me. If it is this much of a challenge to do such simple tasks at 11,000 ft, I can't imagine what it must be like to live another whole mile above sea level. I'm glad I get this time in Cuzco, not only to see more of Peru, but to prepare myself for the next week spent in Nuñoa.

Saturday, 10 January 2009

Today we drove from Cuzco to Nunoa, a beautiful five hour drive that winds through the Andes. Some of the peaks must have been over 15,000 ft high and many were farmed near to the top. Most communities in this part of Peru are farming communities; they spend their days and nights high in the mountains tending to the fields and the animals. Occasionally we would pass farmers tilling a field with their oxen or a mother, with a baby tied to her back, moving alpacas. The last quarter of the drive was all dirt roads, some hovering near the edge of the mountain. We saw many people walking along the road toward some place in the far distance. It turns out that they were walking to their homes in Nuñoa; motor vehicles are a luxury for most people here, so most people walk to work which may take over two hours. We picked three or four people up and drove them into town.

The current orphanage, where we will be staying for the rest of our time in Nunoa, is larger than I expected. It is made up of two buildings surrounding a central courtyard. We are staying on the second floor, which means that I will often be out of breath from the dreaded steps. As I figured, one flight of steps at 13,000 ft feels like I ran a marathon. Even when I am sitting still in Nunoa, I am breathing heavily and my heart beats very fast. The boys who are at the orphanage talked me into playing jump-rope with them and I could have sworn my heart was going to beat right out of my chest.

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There are five boys here now, all brothers. We came during a school holiday, so some of the other children who are normally here are currently at home working on the farm. The children that stay in the orphanage do have families, but they are extremely poor and can not afford to take care of their children.

Of the five boys who are here now, Sandro is the oldest at 17 years old. He loved sharing his school work; he showed us a couple of poems he wrote and the prep book for college applications, which is a very select process. I learned that very few kids from the country make it to college because their school system is typically sub-par. Sandro asked us if we could help him with his algebra homework sometime while we were there and of course we said yes. Pablo is 14 years old but looks much older than Sandro. He is very mature and does well with helping his younger brothers. He is soft spoken, but I can see his interest in our life as American college students when we talk to Sandro. Julio is 10 years old and is always with his younger brother, Jorge who is 6 years old. Both of them are all smiles and are happy with whatever they are given. One of their only toys is a plastic rope which they play with for hours. Sometimes they use it as a jump rope, other times they tie a toy truck to the end and drag the truck around. Josef is 3 years old. He lets his brothers do the talking for him, but he has the cutest little squeaky voice when he does choose to talk.

The other students and I stayed up and talked with Sandro and Pablo about our life in America, their favorite things to do, school, music, their family, and much more. We struggled a bit to understand each other because none of us speak Spanish fluently and Sandro and Pablo speak no English. We were lost in translation on some of the more complicated topics about marriage and having children, for example, but we came out with a greater understanding of one another.

Monday, 12 January 2009

We have been very busy in the past couple of days. Yesterday we went to the Mayor's office to meet with him and discuss any needs the town has which he thinks we may be able to help with. He shared with us the need for medical supplies in the new hospital and even took us on a tour of it. The hospital is currently a shell with nothing inside; they only had enough funding to build the building, but not fill it with supplies. We went over different possibilities of ways we could help finish the project, most of which they were very open to. One big thing they need is a truck with four wheel drive, which comes in handy especially for times of childbirth. The current hospital does not perform cesarean sections, so any woman with birthing complications needs to be taken to a town that is over an hour away, accessible only by dirt roads that are not in the best conditions. Hopefully something can be worked out.

We also gave packages to each of the children at the orphanage containing books, pencils, erasers, coloring books, crayons, shoes, toothbrushes and toothpaste, and some clothes. Sandro remarked "today I am rich" after having received his package. The children's reactions to such simple presents were very rewarding. Another extremely rewarding experience was bathing Julio and Jorge. Another UMass student

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and I bathed them today, something that they have been wanting for a while. It hasn't happened earlier because the electricity goes out at random times and that means no hot water. The hot water is limited, as it is, and takes time to heat up, which is just a deterrent for any of the boys to take a shower. It seemed as though this was the first time they had ever been bathed. We had to instruct them on how to keep their eyes closed when the shampoo was being rinsed out, how to hold the soap and wash their whole bodies. Afterward, they brushed their teeth with their new toothbrushes, and dressed themselves all in their new clothes. Julio and Jorge were ecstatic after their shower.

The events over the past couple of days, alone, have given new meaning to my life. I realize how fortunate I am to have hot water in the blink of an eye, heat, clean clothes, close-toed shoes, a family that can provide for me, and an education.

Wednesday, 14 January 2009

The focus of our trip for the past couple of days have been animal related. We visited a couple of alpaca farms and discussed the care of the animals. We answered questions about birthing, vaccines, care, and fleece quality to help them improve their herd health. The workings of the farms are very different from the alpaca farms in the states. Hundreds of animals are turned out in a very large field, and by field I mean one large side of a mountain. The males were grouped together, non-pregnant females were together, and pregnant females and crias were together in separate fields, separated only by a flimsy wire fence. It is my understanding, however, that there are always workers in the fields, keeping watch over the animals. They prevent alpacas from wandering onto neighboring land, make sure the different herds remain separated, and are responsible for the alpacas' well being. There is no grain supplementation in these alpacas diets, and certainly no vitamin/mineral supplements either. These alpacas graze the low brush along the mountainside all day and drink from flowing streams. I realized from these visits that alpacas are truly hardy animals.

We also looked at the property on which the new children's home will be built. It was a wonderful piece of land in Nunoa that borders the river. Currently it is just an empty lot, but that will change soon, hopefully. Having accomplished all that we had set out to do in Nunoa, we ended our trip early today. As it turns out, the current orphanage is closing today and is being converted into housing for nuns. I don't know what is happening with the kids who live here; they are probably going home to their parents, but they all live hours away so will they be able to get to school? Will Sandro continue to work towards going to college? I hope the new children's home will be built soon, so that the kids are given back their opportunity of an education, a routine, and the guarantee of food and clean clothes.

We said our goodbyes to the Sandro, Pablo, Julio, Jorge, and Josef, and promised them another visit from us in a year. Should I get the chance to return, I hope to see them again enjoying life in the home which will also hopefully be built. I would also love to return to the alpaca farms and hope to see fewer deaths of crias and an improvement

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in overall health care of the animals. As for now, I must return home; however, I will always remember my time spent in Nunoa.