

## Guatemala and Belize Expedition 2018

This summer, we were fortunate enough to visit Guatemala and Belize on our expedition. Prior to our departure, we spent a year and a half planning and preparing for our trip. The first stage of training took place in the school where we slept overnight in one of the maths classrooms and planned our itinerary from start to finish. This left us excited for the next stage – camping in the South Downs. We learnt how to cook over an open fire and put up tents. Above all, we finally got to know each other through games which involved pitting one half of the group against the other. It is safe to say things got competitive!



After our GCSEs, the day we were waiting for finally arrived – we set off to Belize! Our first phase was in fact across the border in Guatemala where we stayed for 5 days at an animal rehabilitation centre called ARCAS. ARCAS is a non-profit Guatemalan NGO formed in 1989 by a group of Guatemalan citizens. They work on rehabilitating animals and releasing as many as possible back into the wild.

We were lucky enough to work with exotic animals such as spider monkeys, jaguars and toucans.



It was mesmerising that we were staying and working in the middle of a jungle, where wild monkeys would often show up during meal times. Essentially our tasks involved us being locked in cages with these wild animals, feeding them and keeping their temporary home clean and clear. One of the most difficult aspects of our job was to remember not to talk to the animals as they are unable to thrive in the wild once released if they are too familiar with humans. Unfortunately this was made even more difficult for us as one of the parrots took a liking to one of the members of our team and constantly shouted out 'Hola' in the most flirtatious tone.



After our shifts we visited the beautiful island of Flores where we relaxed for the rest of the evening and went to explore the local shops and tried Guatemalan food. We also spent some time relaxing and swimming in the beautiful lake just as the sun was about to set.

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After finishing our time at ARCAS and sadly saying goodbye to all the animals, we started phase 2, trekking! We set out on our journey through the jungle where we saw many exotic birds. The weather was like nothing we have ever experienced before! We were soaked by the torrential jungle rain but this didn't dampen our spirits. On our way through the jungle we also visited Mayan ruins which were challenging to climb up but the breath-taking views at the top were well worth it! After the two hardest phases of volunteering and trekking, we finally started our favourite phase – R&R! The highlights of this phases included visiting a chocolate factory where we tried our hand at making our own Belizean chocolate. We also visited a chili factory where we challenged the leaderto a competition to see who could consume the hottest chilli product. It is safe to say that many of us were left redfaced and gasping for milk but the good news is that we won! Probably the most amazing experience was when we went swimming in the Rio Frio waterfall in the area of Mountain Pine Ridge. We spent our evenings cooking our own dinners and relaxing in the hammocks where pranks were pulled. Our remaining days were spent simply visiting the local markets and playing with the local children in the village centre. We loved trying all the restaurants and one of the restaurant managers even taught us some of his dance moves on the street outside his restaurant. Our last day involved travelling up to Belize City where we spent the night in a nice hotel and dined at the Radisson.



We will never forget the valuable skills we gained, such as resilience when faced with problems (like when our expedition leader fell ill and was taken to hospital and we had to carry on without him) and independence as we had to organise the entire trip, such as buying food, booking accommodation and arranging transport. This was a once in a lifetime experience. Not many teenagers can say that they helped rehabilitate animals to be released back into the wild, trekked through the jungle to climb up breath-taking ancient Mayan ruins, made their own chocolate, swam in a waterfall or danced in the streets of Belize with the locals.



We would like to take the time to thank the school and Ms Patel and Ms Athman for providing such an amazing opportunity for us.

**2018 Expedition Team**