Travel Report
Zochonis Special Enterprise Award
The third of September came around so quickly! After being preoccupied with finishing university, saying goodbye to Manchester- my home for the past three years - and working as many hours as possible to continue to save for my three months abroad I barely had time to collect my thoughts before I was off. I remember the tears in my eyes when my mother dropped me off at the airport, but also the rush of nervousness and excitement as I boarded the plane.

My first four weeks were spent at an animal sanctuary called Criadouro Onça Pintada in Curitiba, Brazil. Home to many animals ranging from jaguars to crocodiles. In the morning, the other volunteer, an Ecuadorian named Gaby, and I would start work around 7am. We would be assigned to one of the workers who had their own designated area of the sanctuary, and begin preparing the food for the animals. Their diets mainly consisted of fruit, but some of the cats and the birds ate meat too. After we had finished this task we would then clean the enclosures and feed the animals. All of the animals were indigenous to Brazil, and had been rescued from being internationally trafficked or sold into the illegal pet trade. My favourites were the woolly monkeys, as they loved being stroked! We were very privileged as we had the opportunity to visit a future park nearby where the sanctuary will release the wild pigs they have reared.

Whilst at the sanctuary Gaby and I had the opportunity to travel at the weekends, and we visited Florianopolis and the Iguassu Falls. Even though it rained the whole time we were in Florianopolis, we still went to the beach and went swimming! The falls were amazing; you could barely hear each other when you...
were close to the crashing water, especially when we were on the walkway that is called The Devil's Throat!

I felt nervous as I left the Sanctuary and began my journey to Rio de Janeiro, I definitely experienced a learning curve in Curitiba, as, although I had some knowledge of Portuguese from the evening classes I had undertaken at university I learnt much more when conversing everyday. However, I still was nowhere near comfortable with my level of understanding and was worried how I would be able to communicate whilst there. Additionally I was anxious of how I would adapt to being in a fast-paced city environment, when I had spent four weeks living in a tranquil sanctuary, although I received a noisy wake up every morning from the sounds of the animals! Arriving in Rio at night I was struck by how quiet the streets were, and the majesty of the Cristo Redentor statue lighting up the sky. I discovered, in talking to the hostel staff, that it was quiet season in Rio at the time, hence why it seemed quieter than I expected. As I made friends with other guests I enjoyed the beautiful beaches and exciting nightlife in my spare time.
I loved volunteering in Rio. I participated in various activities including painting murals and teaching English in the Favelas. My favourite project was volunteering at a Day Care Centre. The children were really cute and I was there over the Dia de Crianças, (Children’s Day), celebrations, so we played games, gave presents and had cake with the children, and it was amazing to see this safe space that had been created in the middle of a community where violence can regularly disrupt daily life. The only occasion where I was personally affected by the inter-gang violence in the Favelas was when I was unable to teach an English class, as there had been a gunfight between two rival gangs in the area where the school was the night before I was due to teach.

After staying in Rio I travelled to Paraty and spent a few days there. It is a beautiful town and provided a welcome break from the fast-paced lifestyle that exists in Rio. I felt refreshed after experiencing the beautiful surroundings there!

I felt very sad when my time in Brazil came to an end. My Portuguese had improved by miles, and I felt apprehensive about travelling to Peru where they speak Spanish. I arrived in Cusco and the altitude and cool climate made it difficult to adjust at first. It was a very different experience to staying in Rio, especially as I was with a host family. After a few days I was glad to have friendly faces to welcome me after my volunteering had finished. I loved my project as I was working at an afterschool club in a village called Coya. I spent an hour on a ‘combi’ to travel there and back, and drove through the Sacred Valley everyday.
The children took a little time to warm to me, which was very different to Brazil as the children at my projects there were immediately excited to see me and have me there. However, after a couple of weeks at Abre Puertas in Coya I felt much more comfortable playing with the children and using my limited Spanish to help them with their homework. I also led two workshops of my own, incorporating games to help teach the children learn English. The highlight of working at Abre Puertas was Halloween. I dressed up as a witch and we played games with the children and they got to destroy the Piñatas we had been making in the week leading up to the 31st!

Volunteers had free time at the weekends so I hiked up Rainbow Mountain and also visited Machu Picchu. It was so interesting to learn about the Incas and the societies they established thousands of years ago as well as observing their amazing construction skills in the form of the many structures that exist there! I was very emotional when my time in Cusco came to an end, as I had to say goodbye to the children. They made me a card and the teachers brought me gifts and I was really proud of the work I had done there as they said I was the best volunteer they had ever had! Simultaneously, I felt it was time to leave. After spending four weeks in one city I was ready to see somewhere new and embark on the next stage of my adventure.

It was strange arriving in Guatemala knowing that my time volunteering was over and I was just travelling! I had signed onto an independent tour so my excursions were included. I visited the national park Semuc Champey, went to the Tikal Ruins and hiked up the Pacaya Volcano. It was fascinating learning about the Mayans and also ticking experiences off my Bucket List such as river tubing and traversing through a cave by candlelight! I ended my time in Guatemala by staying at an Eco Lodge on an Avocado Farm. It was a beautiful place to relax and reflect upon everything I had seen on my journey so far and all the things I had learnt!
Cuba was my final destination. I spent the plane journey thinking how lucky I was to experience everything that I had but also how exhausted I was of constantly being on the move! I quickly regained my energy upon arrival in Havana. I had booked onto a tour in Cuba also and got picked up from the airport in an old style American car! I fell in love with Cuba pretty quickly, and had the best tour guide anyone could ask for. There were only four of us on the tour so we had the privilege of spending a lot of time with our tour guide and being able to get answers to all of our questions. We learnt so much about the culture, politics and daily life of Cubans. Highlights of the tour were visiting the Che Guevara monument, the beaches of Trinidad and organising an excursion to the Bay of Pigs on our free day in Cien Fuegos! I gained a real insight into how socialism can function in a society, and also the constraints there can be when it is surrounded by Caribbean culture.

Arriving back in England after waving goodbye to South and Central America was so hard! I miss the sun, the culture and all the people I met on my journey. All of the varied and rich experiences that I had during my time away have undoubtedly changed my perspective on life. I now have a greater insight into the value of education, particularly for those people without the opportunities and financial stability that we often take for granted. Since leaving university I have been offered a position with Teach First, and will use the experiences I had volunteering abroad to help me in the classroom, and the inner-strength I have gained after travelling alone to aid me get through any challenges I face, at work or in all the other areas of my life.