

BELIZE 2022 -Nadia van Maurik Report

I am very pleased to let you know that I completed the 14-day World Challenge expedition to Belize in the summer of this year, 2022. I volunteered in a Jungle Research Station that helps to protect Belize's natural and cultural heritage through education and conservation. I got involved in agricultural activities that included, looking after banana trees, creating space using machetes for planting ginger crops and mulching pineapples. I also learned about the habitat and wildlife in the jungle, collecting data from electronically tracked turtles and bats and created a record of the number of bats and jungle frogs to understand their population better. I also completed a four-day trek in the Sibun Forest Reserve - here I strengthened my resilience & team-work skills. As I was trekking through the dense jungle, we came across many caves and sinkholes. I was fascinated to learn about the history of the Maya people and their religious beliefs, how they sacrificed people or animals to the water Gods for rain and fertile fields. The caves served as a source of water for the Mayans and were also thought to be an entrance to the 'underworld'.

The jungle trek also provided me an unplanned experience which I will never forget...It all started when we prayed to the water Gods, and that same night it started pouring with rain. Despite the rain, we all got ready for bed (hammocks that is...) and woke up first thing in the morning realizing it had not stopped raining and all our stuff was soaking wet. This is when it started to get a little bit more interesting...All the local guides, who have been looking after us during the jungle trip, panicked, they barged into our sleeping area literally as we just woke up, and took down our hammocks, and told us to get ready to go - but did not tell us why.

As far as we were aware, this was our last day, only around 3 hours walk through the jungle to get back to basecamp. However, the usual paths in the jungle were now unsafe due to the enormous amount of rainwater that had fallen throughout the night and therefore we had to walk on the quad bike paths. Little did we know that the quad bike paths had now also turned into rivers, and the only option left was to wade through to get us safe at basecamp, as this area is slightly elevated. However, upon arrival at basecamp it became very clear that this was far from safe; water started rising even quicker – we had to act immediately. At this point, World Challenge Team leader sent emergency signals to central team to get us all rescued. In the meantime, we started to make a safety raft by attaching everyone's self-inflatable sleeping pads and inflated our dry-bags as a buoyant aide.

Six hours later, a helicopter was circling, however there was no clearing in the jungle from which the helicopter could rescue us – we were all very disappointed. Another two hours passed, now it was getting dark again. We had no food or clean water, and no dry bedding to see us through the night. The helicopter returned and lowered a massive net that contained pre-packaged military rations, water, hammocks and sleeping bags. As we were getting ready for the night, out of nowhere a British military rescue mission appeared from the dark, several dinghies were now floating on the river to get us safely across. Once we were rescued by the British military, we got on to Land Rovers, to manage driving on muddy tracks and trucks then drove us to Jaguar Creek, our final destination with lovely clean water, showers and beds.

The last two days of our amazing trip were in Caye Caulker, a small Caribbean island off the coast of Belize with the second largest coral reef in the world. I was fortunate enough to experience a fantastic snorkelling trip where I got to swim with sea cows, turtles and even sharks.

Thank you for your support allowing me to experience this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Nadia van Maurik







