

The Life of a WindAid Volunteer – Jamie McHarg

'Light up a Life.' That is the WindAid slogan and if you have signed up to participate in one of the volunteer programs, get ready to do just that. There are many communities throughout Peru that have no access to electricity. This means no TV, no computer, none of the luxuries that many of us take for granted. But by volunteering your time to build a wind turbine with WindAid, you are doing your bit to help improve the living conditions of those less fortunate than you. As a previous participant of a volunteer project (Oct - Nov 2010), I hope to give you a brief insight into what you'll get involved in during your project by recalling my time spent there.

Fresh off a journey covering 6,500 miles involving three flights and a 9-hour overnight bus trip, it was nice to start the week in Trujillo with a few days gentle induction. We learned who we would be installing our turbine for, and where, we received an in-depth presentation covering the historical and political past of Peru and how those events have shaped the country today, and we took a trip to the WindAid test site to see one of the turbines up close. This setup allowed us to see every stage in the electricity generation process and gave us an indication of what we would be doing over the next five weeks. Further activities throughout the week included receiving an introductory Spanish lesson from a Welshman (seems an odd mix but he was very good!) as well as a colonial tour of the city and an eye-opening trip to El Porvenir on the outskirts of Trujillo. Here we made kites with the local children and despite my years of studying an engineering degree, I successfully managed to attach the string in such a way that my kid's kite went down instead of up! Poor kid. Bad volunteer.

Come Thursday it was time to kick things off in the workshop. As someone who loves dabbling in hands-on practical work, this was my Valhalla. Construction of the wind turbine took up most of the next three weeks, with a couple of days a week spent in the nearby school - Fleming College, our turbine recipients - giving climate change and renewable energy presentations to the students. There was plenty to do in the workshop each day. Here's a quick run-down; fitting magnets to the rotors, winding copper coils (good muscle endurance required!), cutting, grinding and welding steel to make the frame, soldering the coils within the stator, mixing and pouring resin for the rotors and stator, making the blades (a combination of foam, fibre glass, carbon fibre, and resin), painting the tower, frame and tail, assembling the generator and preparing everything for the installation week. The final week is usually spent entirely at the installation site but in our case, we were holding a week-long display presentation at Fleming College so we also needed to make some display boards, miniature wind turbine models and a large electronics board, so everybody could see how the wind can be harnessed to get electricity.

To balance out the work, there is plenty of free time to relax and enjoy your new surroundings. We spent our first weekend surfing in Huanchaco, and subsequent weekends saw trips to Mancora and Huaraz. There was also time to indulge in paintball, football and trips to the local clubs and bars. By the middle of the second week, the abundance of chicken and rice may start to get tedious but don't fret, you get used to it! Alternatively you could also inflict some of your local traditions and delicacies on your fellow volunteers. Hailing from Scotland, my friend and I conjured up some rather tasty shortbread as well as trying our hand at making deep-fried Mars Bars. The latter definitely wasn't as popular but that was probably due to the fact it was a heart attack on a plate!

All in all, prepare to have an absolute blast. It is one of the most enjoyable experiences I have had, much of it thanks to the warm and friendly nature of the WindAid staff and fellow volunteers and I hope that by giving you a glimpse of what you could expect, you're looking forward to getting out there and getting started.

Paz y amor

Jamie

