

A Trip Home

by Renay Friendshuh '19

When I was a kid, visitors would often ask me, “Do you think you’ll live in community when you grow up?” and my first response used to be, “No, silly, who wants to live at home their entire life?” I grew up at Sandhill Farm in rural Missouri, home to so many people through the years and temporary abode for many more. So, when I thought of communal living, I figured everything was more or less like my home, with common meals and weekly check-in meetings and a constant flow of visitors.

Moving away from Sandhill to attend the local high school, where the entire town showed up in white and blue to cheer on our basketball games, I started to broaden my meaning of community. It was sometime during my college search that I realized the obvious answer to that frequent question of my childhood and it was a resounding yes. I would always seek out community and I was eager to explore how encompassing the definition, finding my next home in a small liberal arts school in Minnesota, called Carleton College.

In the summer of 2017, I had the chance to travel to Peru through a Carleton Spanish program and recognized an opportunity to see those other communities. With generous financial support from the Larson International Fellowship, I set about searching the directory of the Fellowship of Intentional Communities (FIC) for all the intentional communities in Peru and surrounding countries, planning my trip.

Aware that most individuals choose communal living as the alternative — in contrast to my experience of shifting into mainstream — I was curious what motivated people to move to community. As a psychology major with an interest in expressive arts therapy, I wanted to

explore the interactions between creativity and alternative living. How do garden work parties compare to block parties? How is the experience of creating a meal altered with a rotating cook shift compared to a daily chore? How does an impromptu dance festival in a common-space differ from those paid for at the door?

After several months of preparation and emails, I managed to confirm visits with three communities, one in Peru and two in Ecuador. I would be traveling off and on with my partner, Ben, who also won a Larson Fellowship for a photojournalism project along the same route. We would figure out buses and hostel stays in between visits.

We started the trip on June 20th, the longest day of sun in Missouri where I was born exactly 21 years before and, accordingly, the longest day of night where we were staying then in Lima, Peru. I still had no idea how my connection to one commune in the United States would translate to the broader communities movement, but the contacts I had made were warm and inviting.



The trip from Lima to Chancay took five and a half hours, riding in a crowded bus northwards along the Peruvian coast. From Chancay I hired a “mototaxi,” essentially a little buggy attached to a dirt bike, which kept stopping unpredictably—once for a funeral procession, then a tire check, then a pee break—each time giving me the impression I was to be dropped off in the middle of nowhere. Finally, though, I spotted the recognizable forms of “trulies,” which look like great upside-down honeycomb towers made of mud, the sure sign of Eco Truly Park, where I would stay for the next week.

Eco Truly is a yoga retreat, spiritual center, and ecological farm spread out across the sandy coast, just a few yards from the seaside. I was welcomed hospitably and led to a

surprisingly spacious “truly” with four bunk beds and a loft space, shared by two other female volunteers, Camilla, from France and Thaysa, from Brazil. Camilla and I, having just arrived, enjoyed a self-guided tour at dusk which revealed a spiral garden, a fat goat, a tall cow, and a pregnant horse among the sprinkling of earthen homes that decorated the space.

My new friend was the first to share with me her motivation for alternative living, as she described looking for a calm place to regroup, perhaps to find herself, and this center of self-care, nonviolence, and beauty seemed like just the place.

In the evening, all the volunteers were invited to a meditation ceremony. Removing our shoes at the door, we walked across a large room to an elaborate altar, the smells of spice and incense drifting through the space. Though I am not a spiritual person, I do enjoy ceremonies and customs, as they reveal so much history and insight to a culture and this was certainly a new one for me. There was nearly constant singing and music, often followed by a set of prayers, and the atmosphere was rich with conversation and light-hearted laughter.

No one preached of good or evil and, at the end, when one man shared something similar to a speech, it felt more like joining an enthusiastic family sing-along and story-telling than a spiritual event. I was very comfortable, sitting on mats and pillows with these strangers, appreciating the fun, loud music and meandering stories. When the music died down, each of us was given a necklace of fresh flowers as a welcoming gift and the night concluded with a communal dinner and movie showing of “El Principito” (The Little Prince). Washing dishes in the industrial-sized sink, using the composting toilets and walking by the gardens that night, I was filled with a deep appreciation of small, shared pleasures and memories of home.

During the following days at Eco Truly I learned more and more about the group. Volunteers are asked to work four hours each morning and are welcome to partake in daily yoga

classes as well as afternoon activities such as cooking workshops. The spirituality practiced was Hare Krishna and at all times of day there was a good chance to hear passionate music or the singing of mantras, sometimes even with speakers pumping by breakfast time, though there was space for peaceful, quiet relaxation as well, especially during the exquisite, early morning yoga. No alcohol, no drugs, and no meat were allowed on the property, as both physical and mental health were strongly valued.

For my volunteer hours, I enjoyed time in the fields, clearing garden beds and landscaping around banana trees. Mainly, it was time to get to know the other volunteers and I was amazed how a chance encounter in a new place with new people could foster such fast friendships. The sweetest evening I had at Eco Truly was on my fourth day when the members invited us all to a women's circle. The ceremony was intimate, with three members and three volunteers. We sang and played music and ate snacks and, more than anything, shared a little bit about ourselves, reminiscing on the past month together and looking forward to next moon.

Throughout my visit, I was surrounded by art, from the music to the beautifully constructed trulies to the murals that decorated the walls. In my short week there I crafted God's eyes and molded paper mache owls for a community fundraiser, I helped build a shelter for their coming-soon baby colt and I prepared food in the kitchen. I was also inspired to create some of my own art just for fun. As Debbi, who had been a member for several years, told me during our crafting session, people came to Eco Truly to seek calm. Each week, Debbi told me, she led a mothers' art circle and the women who came shared their appreciation of the peace found there, which they could then bring back to the bustling chaos of the outside world.

Many aspects of Eco Truly were still mysterious to me when I left and I am sure my short stay had a lot to do with this, but it did give me a new perspective on creativity in community.

There, the expression of creativity seemed to represent the spiritual roots of the community as well as the practical beauty of food cultivation and, especially in the case of music, friendship building.



Saying goodbye to Eco Truly, I reunited with Ben to travel north once again, through Trujillo and on to Huanchaco, a small beach town, teeming with jewelry and tank-top vendors. There we experienced a different kind of community for two nights, staying in a hip hostel called Moshka with an assorted gaggle of Australians, Italians, Argentinians, fellow gringos, and a German family of three generations who impressed us all with stove-top sourdough bread. Several makeshift meals, two picturesque sunsets, and one minor surfing accident later (turns out surf boards are pretty heavy when they hit you in the neck), we were on our way again!

The complimentary entertainment from Trujillo to Piura was a dramatic, Spanish-dubbed Russian war movie which blared through the speakers of our large bus. The next morning we bought tickets from Piura, Peru to Loja, Ecuador and enjoyed a very long but beautiful drive through windy mountains, the speed averaging 20 mph for much of the trip. We crossed into Ecuador on a long, high bridge which we walked across on foot before meeting our bus on the other side. After two nights in Loja, Ben and I parted ways again and I set out for my next community.

Traveling east to Gualaquiza, I took a cab from the center of town out to a little fruit farm which the driver had recognized instantly when I asked for “los gringos.” I had arrived at the smaller of two properties belonging to the community, Terra Frutis. Inside I met Jason, who helped found the community just a few years back with the intention of growing fruit and living off the land. I also met Matthew, who gave me a thorough tour of the land that very afternoon.

I learned to identify the ice cream bean tree, which is a valuable nitrogen fixer, how to plant a banana tree, and how to distinguish sugar cane from tall weed grasses. I had not brought my own food, which I would need at the more remote, larger property known as “Mount Frutis,” and the next day Matthew took me into town to stock up. Going for a walk afterwards, my new friend and guide shared how he came to be at Terra Frutis. Previous communal living experiences had encouraged him that it was possible to, “find your place... your people,” and for the time being, this was that place for him.

That evening, I sipped a giant smoothie made with fresh papaya and banana from the land. Jason told me how the mission of their community is healthy sustainability, living off the land and providing an example of a raw, vegan community to the world. Similar to Eco Truly and their spirituality, this group too had a strong thematic backstory and I was eager to try out the new style of living.

The next day another new visitor, Kimberly, showed up, full of excitement, curiosity, and feminine energy. We bonded quickly over a mulching endeavor, donning heavy muck boots and arming ourselves with machetes to combat thick weeds. Kimberly’s path to Ecuador was an elaborate one and centered around her health, which had transformed since switching to a raw food diet, enabling her to explore the world as never before. That night all of us stayed up late talking of food and people and art, reminding me why I love community.

Several days into my stay, the other members of Terra Frutis came down from the larger property for a meeting and to restock their food rations, giving me and Kimberly the opportunity to travel back to “Mount Frutis” with them the next day. The big farm sat on top of a small mountain and its ascent required first a taxi, then a riverboat and a steep uphill climb through

deep, squelching mud, but the beauty of the property and surrounding countryside was astounding.

Our days on the mountain were filled with planting flemingia, naranjilla, and peanut butter trees, mulching young plants, and transplanting sugar cane stalks. Once, all seven of us walked to the neighbors' house to buy fresh sugarcane juice and were greeted by the whole family. In their front yard sat a small cane press, powered by a pull-start motor. Dad loaded the cane on one end, his son pulling out the dried stalks on the other, Mom and her two daughters at the side, collected the juice as it ran down a freshly cut banana stalk, through two strainers, and finally into the waiting bucket. Full of sweet sugarcane, we walked back gaily to our side of the mountain and I felt the most connection to the community in that brief stroll as I had throughout my stay.

The nights there were often filled with silly, meandering conversations, sometimes light, sometimes deep. By the end of my two-week stay, I was comfortable asking people about their connection to art in this alternative lifestyle and what creativity meant for them. I learned that many people have a loose definition of art, which can express itself in the planning of an orchard or the brainstorming of a new building. For several members and visitors, creativity formed in community was different from the common expressions of art seen in mainstream culture and it seemed to have a healing purpose for some individuals, as well as a social one.

On my last night on Mount Frutis, we enjoyed a campfire together, and the ease we found in singing, making up lyrics and sounds, warmed me as much as the dancing flames. Eventually, our conversations of art turned into more rambling talk of food and revolution and health until everyone was at last too tired to think coherently and retired to bed. Traveling back from the mountain was an invigorating hike, aided by a kind neighbor who let me catch a ride in the back

of his truck. After a final night in the smaller property, I then set out again, leaving a note of gratitude in their visitors' book, hoping one day to return and see what has emerged from all those incredible, creative ideas.



My next day of travel brought me to Cuenca, where I shared an Airbnb with Ben and his own new group of local friends. After some exploration of the city and a slightly odd readjustment period for me—from raw fruits, starry nights, and insect sounds to alfredo shrimp pasta, crowded streets, and traffic sounds—we set out to the Ecuadorian coast through Guayaquil. The ride was incredible, descending from the mountains into a sea of clouds, making our way to Manglaralto all the way at the Eastern coast where Ben had made evening arrangements with a lovely couple, Upi and Loida. The two had built their own home and made a living selling exquisite jewelry to travelers. The four of us played cards all night and in the morning Ben and I hitchhiked to the beach before setting off once more.

We had decided to stay at the last community together and after a confusing scramble of local buses, we arrived two days later at Dos Tortugas. Peter and Lisel, metaphorically the two turtles, greeted us excitedly and showed us around. The property sat on top of a steep hill, looking out over a small fishing town where little speed boats could be seen skidding up onto the sandy shore each evening to haul in their catch. On the hill, Lisel, an artist, teacher, and gardener and Peter, a master builder, had created a beautiful nest of homes. Ben and I were invited to stay in La Casita, a sweet, second-floor apartment with kitchen and bedroom that looked out across the water near Puerto Cabuyal.

Much of our first day was spent putting together a rocket stove for Peter and later, after a trip to the market, we started up the stove and fried the fish overtop. Lisel completed the rest of

the meal with a stir-fry, rice, and white wine and we all got to know each other over the delicious feast.

They shared how, after years of clearing the land, artfully crafting buildings, and making a home for themselves, the community had at last been able to fully open its doors to new visitors and members. Then, just a year and a half prior, the whole area had suffered a severe, 7.8 earthquake, destroying many homes, costing lives and traumatizing the community. After this catastrophe, those plans were put on hold until very recently and we were some of the first visitors after their period of healing and rebuilding.

During our visit, Ben and I applied ourselves to whatever tasks were available — creating a website for the community, learning some simple electrical wiring for an outdoor light, planting vegetables, tinkering in Peter's shop to fix a broken chair. Once, Peter showed us how to use a long-handled saw to take down coconuts high above our heads and we spent the next hour cracking them to suck out the sweet milk.

When I asked Peter and Lisel how they each defined art and what role it had in their lives, their answers reflected the space. Peter gestured around the house they had built, showing us how he artfully placed a certain wood grain against a contrasting color or how he purposefully chose a twisted, curving post to add personality to the frame. This was his art, he told us, and it held the very meaningful role of bringing joy and purpose into the home. For Lisel, creativity came in many forms, especially as a teacher, and she was always finding a new use for discarded tidbits which she would then magically craft into a child's favorite toy or a decorative adornment. At Dos Tortugas, creativity was not so much distinct within community, but rather, something necessary and joyful for everyone.

The relaxing stay gave me time to reflect on much of what I had seen and felt in each intentional community. I was able to experience a range of diversity within the definition of community, from spiritual to political to ecological. Yet sharing meals, playing music around a campfire, seeing hands beside mine plant seedlings into the soil, these will always make me think of home. What I learned was that the creativity of each place, the very making of shared experiences and stories, is what communities have in common. So maybe my younger self, equating “community” with “home” was, in a certain way, completely right.