

San Andres

San Andres Island: an Unforgettable Place

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Thanks to Ministerio de Educación Nacional de Colombia and Secretaria de Educación Departamento de Cauca I was given this excellent opportunity to learn at a personal and professional level as an English teacher. My family was very important in supporting me to travel to San Andres Island. I am highly grateful to all of them. This paper tells the experience that allowed me to share a period of my life with some of the most wonderful kind of people I've ever met before. San Andres Island is a paradisiac place where I took one step of my life to learn from an exciting and amazing culture and to improve as an English teacher.

I love my job as an English teacher. My motivation to teach the subject is what pushes me to do my best at San Antonio de Padua High School, in Timbio, in the Department of Cauca in Colombia. Thus, when the Ministry of Education offered me the wonderful opportunity to participate in an English Immersion Program in which I would be able to improve my command of English by living in the one and only English-speaking environment of Colombia for a month, I took advantage of it.

My arrival to San Andres Island is the first thing to remember because the plane was having all sorts of trouble landing due to the torrential rain of that day. I was more than a little bit nervous when the captain announced our landing three times, especially as I had signed up for an "immersion" program. It was with some relief then that we finally descended. In fact this was my second time on the island and it was just great

to be back, this time along with other colleagues from Cauca: Betty Castrillón and Luz Dary Lasso. However, we were kind of disappointed to be separated as soon as we got to the airport on the island.

I was the first to be taken away. The driver of my car was Mr. Ambrosio Hudgson, a very tall black man who began to talk to me in English. At the beginning I didn't understand him at all, however during the trip to my host house I was soon able to answer his questions in English. From then on he was always most kind and gentle. At this point I had many expectations about my home and the people I would have to live with.

First impressions are important, and mine was as pleasant as could be: my hostess Lois Bent was very nice right from the very beginning of my arrival in her home. She made me feel very

well and comfortable. I came to consider her to be one of the best women I have ever known, a very kind, good and tender lady. I hope God blesses her always. I am very grateful to her and her retired teacher husband, Mariano Gomez, who also made me feel at home. Mrs. Lois was concerned all the time for my well-being and my housemates as well. In addition, I improved my English language with them because they spoke a very clear Standard English and I had fun talking to them about my daily experiences on the island.

My housemates await introduction. Fabiola Bayona Caro from Barranquilla is a very nice and funny woman who made me laugh all the time. Nathalie Ruge from Armenia is a very young teacher who was very nice and helpful with me and who reminded me very much of my older daughter. From Chocó there was Jesús Amaury Yurgaki, a kind man who always helped me in everything, a very good friend in whom to trust. Gustavo Daza is from Valledupar, a young English teacher, very judicious and skillful in speaking English. Ana María Aragón Castro is from Girardot in Cundinamarca, a kind girl; and Cristhian Camilo Cárdenas Ochoa, a nice and happy teacher also from Girardot. I had a very good time sharing my stay on the island with such great housemates. All of them were a very important and very supportive with me in my time in this paradise. We all got along very well. In our free time we went walking on the island, meeting new and wonderful people everywhere.

The whole stay at Mrs. Bent's home was excellent. The food she cooked was really delicious. I love eating fish or any other meal related to it and here I was in a place where I could eat these tasty foods every day. Lois Bent, besides being an excellent hostess, cooked very well. Of special note was "round down", a typical plate on the island that includes all sorts of fish in different ways of preparation... crab, shrimp, and lobster. I was very happy eating those delicious dishes.

Our first public activity on the island was the presentation of the different regions participating on the SAI English Immersion Program. Luz Dary, Betty and I worked very hard on a good presentation of our region. We took into account important issues about culture, local customs, historical sites, tourist attractions and typical food and dance. At the start of this presentation I was a little nervous but then I was not nervous at all because my Cauca friends and I were very proud to represent one of the most beautiful departments of Colombia. Betty and Luz Dary played an important role as we finished among the winners with our presentation, gaining second prize, we were very delighted with the result. Our Secretaria de Educación sent us an e-mail congratulating us for this achievement and the program treated us to a trip by boat around the island, a trip that I had to miss due to a badly-timed bout of flu.

My training course had a very good English level. I learned a great deal of everything related to the methodology and strategies to apply in my English teaching at my school, besides I improved my communicative skills a lot. My teacher, Mr. Arturo Stephens, is a great English teacher who taught me to teach with happiness and good sense of humor. I think this is the best way to call the attention of the students everywhere. His class was excellent. I learned a lot every day.

My classmates were from different areas of Colombia, mainly Manizales, Casanare, Cartago, Monteria, Barranquilla, Bogota, and foreign teachers from El Salvador, Honduras. My friend from Cauca, Betty Castrillon was my classmate as well. She was very supportive with me there because we shared many things and helped each other all the time. I learned from everyone about the regions they came from. Our group was very nice to get along. I did my best in my English class; I participated all the time working hard to learn many things.

Another really outstanding aspect of my trip to the island was the cultural activities we developed there such as typical dances on the island, interesting music, food, and customs. These important presentations helped me to have a very good opportunity to increase my communicative skills at practicing it in a real English speaking environment. San Andres Island offers very beautiful landscapes, the sea of seven colors, wonderful beaches, tourist places like Jonny Cay, the Aquarium, Botanical Garden, Island House in which I had a good time with the other English teachers. Participation in the program of foreign teachers from Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and Panama was an interesting point because in this way I had the chance to interact not only with Colombian teachers but also with foreign ones who could share their experiences in English teaching in their countries.

We had to work on a final project and my class chose to make a presentation about Dance and Music on the island. We did the presentation to the whole group of teachers in the program in form of a TV show. In the presentation my classmates danced the typical dances on the island such as jumping polka, schottische, and calypso. They talked about cultural features related to the dances and on the most outstanding musical groups of San Andres Island also. My classmate Gustavo Daza and I were the presenters of the TV show. This activity was so successful because we were among the two winners for best presentation in the closure day. As you can imagine, I was very happy and excited to be awarded because I helped coordinating all of the activities

carried out in my group. On the final test taken in the program I showed improvement in the knowledge of the English language. Graduation of the training course on the island was very pleasant for me because I was awarded as the most hard-working student.

This trip to San Andres Island has changed my way of teaching a lot because my communicative skills were improved on the island. I have also implemented many issues learned there and share with my students all of the features of this wonderful culture where people are very kind everywhere. In my school I continue working hard in a project called "Effective English Teaching as a Foreign Language" in which I have helped my students to be able to communicate in English with me, with their classmates and with native speakers of English who often visit my school. I have been developing this work for five years. My stay on the island during a month was an excellent training course for me which also helped me to participate in a new opportunity. I was able to study in London UK during two weeks sponsored by the Ministry of Education. I was successfully awarded with this scholarship to travel to London representing the Department of Cauca in a very demanding and intensive course from April 10th to 23rd 2011. All these things happened during and after the English immersion program on San Andres Island. I am pleased to share my experiences with the reader about an unforgettable place. I hope many other English teachers in Colombia also have this opportunity to grow as teachers and as human beings.