

# INSIGHT

## South America

A publication of Generation ACTS Club International



Are You  
Crazy?

IN THIS ISSUE

Are we crazy?  
Nearly crazy.  
Already crazy!



# Are we crazy?

That is a question we have found

ourselves asking so many times in these past years. I guess for a typical Singaporean, the thought of trading the comforts of a secure job, of a nice home, of an excellent standard of living etc.... for an adventure, that involves volunteering all your heart, brains and brawn in a country on the opposite side of the world, where everyone looks different and talks weird, is not normal and really rare. Now extend the duration of that adventure to three years... well, now, do you think that is crazy?

Well, crazy or not, my team of three people from Singapore did just that – left all the comforts and headed for a three-year volunteer stint in Quito, Ecuador. Our adventure actually started a couple of years ago in our club, Generation ACTS Club International (S), where through the many training opportunities within the club, we came together as a team to prepare for this adventure of a lifetime.

## Representing the Club

The club trained us in many ways and through many avenues in the lead up to our stint in Ecuador. When Team Ecuador first got together, we were already actively involved in the club's activities, both as participants and as organizers. Many of these activities taught us about having an "others-first" mentality and eventually, we grew in appreciation and personal assimilation of our club's vision and mission, which, on hindsight, helped tremendously, now, as we represent our club in Quito.

## Team Building

Another part of the preparatory training was simply the time spent working and playing together. Coming together as Team Ecuador was not easy. We had to learn to accept each other, overcome problems together, eat together and stay together. A team is never built in one night and our team learnt that the hard way. But today, our team, Team Ecuador, will give any "Survivor" or "Amazing Race" team a run for their money.

## Cross Cultural Training

Cross cultural training was something else we went through together. Quito and Singapore are literally poles apart, and both language and cultural barriers did not help to make our adventure an easy one. Furthermore, we had to also learn to understand some of the potential threats to our work of setting-up a representative office overseas.

## Country Research

We did a lot of that. A lot of time was spent on the internet, reading books, country reviews, and meeting up with people etc... basically, just getting our hands on all things Ecuadorian and learning endlessly about them. We are thankful for excellent support from the Ecuadorian Consul in Singapore, who gave us helpful advice and assistance. We also had a foretaste of the Latin culture during a social function at the consul's home. One simple conclusion of Ecuadorians – they are such warm and hospitable people.



## Finance Management

As the word 'volunteerism' implies, our work in Quito, Ecuador, is totally self-funded and voluntary, where each one of us was responsible for his or her own financial state. Hence, it was necessary to have sufficient savings and to budget our finances for at least two years. It was not easy but certainly, a lesson useful for even our future. In this area, we were much blessed by the commitment of the

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club, well-meaning friends and club members, who helped us through their much appreciated contributions.

## Looking Back...

As Team Ecuador looks back now, the unanimous agreement of the most invaluable lesson we learnt is simply the lesson of character. In our adventure so far, having been in Quito for almost five months, we have learnt to be better

people than before. Our characters have taken a molding towards the better in areas we thought never existed and would be appalled at upon discovery. We have grown in appreciation of ourselves, of others, of life in general. We have grown to treasure the small things in life that many would take for granted.

In the end, I have to still agree that this adventure is nutty and crazy. Yes. A crazy adventure it certainly was and is. However, as much as anyone would be crazy to participate in it, anyone would be crazy not to as well. ■

Chile

# NEARLY Crazy

## A group of crazy



Singaporean volunteers first arrived in Santiago in October 2002. It was actually a pre-trip of the Social Entrepreneurship project prior to the actual entry. Our objectives were to gather as much information as we could pertaining to various issues such as living costs and job opportunities, besides linking with various organizations for future volunteer projects etc. And we were to do all these without a proper or fluent working knowledge of Spanish!

But miracles have not ceased. We pulled through with lots of “si-si” and “no-no” without understanding what we were “si”-ing or “no”-ing to! At the end of the pre-trip, what we discovered and researched confirmed that our volunteer adventure for the next 3 years was a little crazy but possible.

After returning from that trip, the team began planning to set foot into Chile permanently for the next three years. We were very excited yet anxious as there were many questions and uncertainties that came to our minds. Besides the never ceasing question of whether or not we were a little nuts kept bugging my mind, there was the immense challenge of achieving the objectives of our project of setting up a representative office, as well as entering into volunteer projects with the local organizations there.

But finally, the opportunity of doing something totally out of the normal proved to be too luring. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2003, two lonely and non-Spanish speaking guys touched down in Santiago Chile. We were a little confident but totally unprepared for the things that were to happen to us in the next few months.

## Spanish – Chilean style

Having secured a service apartment for a month, we decided that the first obstacle we needed to tackle was the language barrier. We started our Spanish course in the first week of April. The first lesson was an unforgettable one. Almost immediately, we were pushed into learning the language. Our instructor, Miguel, stepped into our class and started to ask us questions in a language that sounded really like Spanish (we discovered it was Spanish, Chilean style, eventually). All the nightmares of having to study and take exams again came flashing back. “Rats! What have we gotten ourselves into?!!”. But Miguel was kind and, thankfully, very bilingual as well! Under his guidance, we found ourselves enjoying our lessons more and more. We discovered that Chilean Spanish sounds very different from “normal” Spanish. Chileans often aspirate the “s” sound. A clear example is “muchas gracias” which is supposedly pronounced as “muchas gracias”. Also, the “d” sound is often aspirated in past participles and words that end in “do” or “da” - for example, “comía” instead of “comida”. Furthermore, Chileans love using *dichos* – slang that only

“In fact, there exists a certain level of respect for Singapore’s development and economic status in Asia.”

Chileans understand. If you’re a foreigner, you will soon discover, like we did, that to gain a Chilean friend, you need *dichos*. ¿Cachay?



### Furnishing an apartment

After our lease on the service apartment expired, we needed to look for another apartment. That was our next immediate obstacle – finding a permanent place of stay. After viewing more than eight apartments, we finally got a place at La Florida, about twenty minutes by metro (or MRT in Singapore) from the Santiago central.

Generally, apartments in Santiago are rented out unfurnished. That started our next adventure... of headaches. We had to purchase so many items, with our limited knowledge of both Spanish and places around Santiago that sold furniture!

In the end, we somehow managed to buy what we needed, after going from one place to another, under the recommendations from passer-bys to taxi-drivers. What was especially memorable about these shopping episodes was the communication and understanding (or the lack of it!) between us and the shopkeepers. Never in our lives did we have to bargain so long and hard to save money. The hardest thing was that we were expending more energy and time trying to explain that we wanted a discount of 10% than in actually getting that discount!

### Registering the club

We were grateful to have the Singapore Consul in Santiago to help us with the registration. We would have gone crazy just by trying to fill and file the registration papers by ourselves in Spanish!

However, we soon discovered that registering the club presented a different set of challenges. These challenges had a common solution – patience, the more unlimited, the better.

Like in all other South American countries, any form of registration would be greeted with the word “bureaucracy”. However, in Chile, it is almost an accepted way of life. Everywhere we turned, this famous word pops up, either as a reason for delays or for “non-compliant” documents or procedures etc. It is fascinating to note that it is even accepted as an explanation for the slowness in which things are being done.

However, we have emerged from these experiences more patient than ever before. Those long queues for National Day tickets or freebies in Singapore under the hot sun? No problem.

### Getting I@WORK going

Now with the basic infrastructure set up, we moved on to our next challenge – getting our club projects started. For Chile, after some research, we chose to use our internship program, I@WORK, as our very first local Chilean project.

Very uncertain and unsure about the best way to start, we decided to just visit the universities, knock on the doors of the dean or the international relations director and sell our program. Upon evaluation, this method sounds a bit crazy, especially since we were not yet registered or able to give a decent presentation in Spanish.

However, we were really surprised and glad that whatever we did succeeded!! Surprisingly, the knocking on doors and presentations in broken Spanish worked. We discovered two things that helped us. Firstly, the warmth and friendliness of Chileans took us by surprise. Unlike Asians, Chileans are more willing to talk, listen and discuss patiently. We think they were simply too nice to reject us! But secondly, the fact that our club is a Singaporean club opened many doors. Chileans, especially those who have received education, know and have heard about Singapore. More than anywhere else in South America, it seems like Chileans now about Singapore. In fact, there exists a certain level of respect for Singapore’s development and economic status in Asia. That worked very much in our favor.

After being in Santiago-Chile for close to eight months, all our doubts about actually leaving Singapore were replaced by fulfillment and joy for having done so. Yes, we nearly went crazy in the first few months in the foreign city of Santiago, trying to accomplish the seemingly impossible with almost nothing to start with. But now, after all these experiences, we are crazily joyful and thankful that the impossible has become possible.



## About Chile

*“In the beginning of time, God created the wonders of the world. When he was finished, however, he saw that he had many leftover pieces. He had parts of rivers and valleys, of oceans and lakes, of glaciers and deserts, of mountains and forests, and of meadows and hills. Rather than to let such beauty go to waste, God put them all together and cast them to the most remote corner of the earth. This is how Chile was born.” - A Chilean Legend*

Looking more closely, it is easy to see how this legend emerged. Chile is a very long, thin country that is located in the extreme southwest of South America. The closest neighbors include Argentina to the east, and Bolivia and Peru to the north. The entire country at its widest point is only about 300 miles wide, yet it is 2,500 mile in length. Chile is as geographically isolated as it is diverse. To the south, Chile reaches into the cold and inhospitable Antarctic zone. To the west, the shores are pounded by hundreds of miles of the great Pacific Ocean. In the north, Chile is home to the Atacama Desert, one of the most arid lands in the world. Finally, to the east, the huge Andes mountain range runs nearly the entire length of the country. Because of such isolation and challenging land forms, Chile has become a country of people who are strong, proud, and extremely innovative. The population of Chile is approximately 15.5 million people. Of this, 80% live in Chile’s urban areas, with nearly half living in the Santiago or Metropolitan Region.

# . . . Already Crazy

“True happiness is not attained through self-gratification, but through fidelity to a worthy purpose.” - Helen Keller

“One thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.” - Albert Schweitzer

These statements remind us of a paradoxical principle which states that the path towards self-fulfillment is found in the pursuit of altruistic objectives.

There are five of us who are currently stationed here in Peru as permanent staff and volunteers of the Peruvian branch of our Singapore club. The current team comprises of a variety of professionals, including a training director, a lawyer, a marketing manager who used to deal with technology products, a social worker and an administrative executive with an international shipping firm in Singapore. We are all here as social entrepreneurs.

You may be wondering what social entrepreneurship is all about. Well, in a nutshell, it is about investing our lives in a foreign culture to build communities that demonstrate positive values and an altruistic and enterprising spirit. Although we do receive a small sum of seed money from our Singapore headquarters to set up the initial infrastructures, the primary capital that is invested into this venture is our lives. And the target audiences of our venture are the lives of the youths from various communities in South America. As social entrepreneurs, we seek to demonstrate by example, maintaining positive values in our interactions with the people we come across, and by using our spirit of enterprise to raise enough finance for our living expenses and the expenses of our projects.

## **Immersed within the contagious fever of social entrepreneurship**

The spectrum of adventures that we have encountered since we stepped into Peru ranges from the exotic to the bizarre. Registering ourselves as a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) was supposed to be an administrative formality, but it slowly uncoiled into a nerve wrecking ordeal that lasted eight months. Facing stoic bureaucracy and a Latin culture that was simply inexplicable to us at the beginning, we had to weather several setbacks before we finally registered ourselves. At the end of the day, we learnt many invaluable lessons about negotiating and communicating within the Peruvian culture.

I remember how our first lawyer almost got us registered as a social club rather than an NGO, because our name contained the word “club”. Unknown to us, in South America, the word “club” carries with it the idea of a social club. An organization that is dedicated towards altruistic projects is referred to as an NGO here, a concept that virtually does not exist in Singapore! The etymological mazes that we had to negotiate did not end here. In Singapore, a person who has a bachelor degree from the university is a full-fledged graduate who is accepted as a professional in society. In Peru, a bachelor degree is only an intermediate stage in your university education. To be a full-fledged graduate, you need to obtain a certificate known as the “professional title” after having obtained your bachelor degree. It took us quite a while before we managed to unravel the differences between the educational systems in both countries, and even then, it proved to be an impossible task to explain the differences due to the perplexing use of the common word “bachelor” in both systems, which has a different interpretation in the two educational systems.



### Setting off a contagious and feverish revolution in Peru

We finally got our NGO registered after nine long months. It was a relief as we could finally get our projects underway. We were full of enthusiasm as we started sending out letters of invitations to various potential project partners. We were soon to realize that letters don't make partners, relationships do. In Singapore, we were used to a very systematic methodology towards setting up projects – first, you identify your mission statement and then you identify the potential partners who could complement your mission, and then you follow that up with a formal letter of intent, and then a business meeting is set up, where negotiations are carried out, culminating in a formal contract.

Getting up a clearly defined mission statement was the easy part. We were primarily here in Peru to bring about holistic development to the youths through the medium of education. With that in mind, we divided our projects into three large categories – the “La Vida Maxima” programs, the CulturalX programs and the ACTSPeru programs, and then we started sending out the letters. We were rather disappointed when there was no response after more than a week.

We decided to call up the organizations directly rather than send them letters. Surprisingly, this worked much more effectively! Within a month, our projects were up and running! A description of the projects that we have here in Peru is outlined in the Appendix.

It was hard work in the beginning. In our first assignment with the youth club of the Municipal of Surco, we had four participants. They all had zero level of English prior to attending our lessons. Furthermore, they all came from financially disadvantaged backgrounds, and some of them did not even have the privilege of attending any formal education, which resulted in a significantly lower cognitive proficiency. For example, we were once teaching on the subject of telling the time, when we realized that some of them did not know how to read a 12-hour clock! As a result, we had to teach them how to read the 12-hour clock in Spanish, before we could even start on the topic itself. Another problem that we faced was the lack of commitment from the participants. Sometimes there were no legitimate reasons for their consistent absenteeism, although some had valid excuses. One of the participants had to quit the course halfway, because her husband decided that she should stay at home to look after him instead of going out to learn English! Given the odds that we were confronted with, it was especially gratifying to see the progress of the students that we had with us.



Another project that presented a steep learning curve for us was our English classes with about 120 orphans in an orphanage in Chorillos. Many of them were extremely naughty and simply could not sit still in class! Getting some sense of order into the class took almost half of the time, with only about

half an hour left for the actual teaching. Getting children to pay attention also proved to be an art in creativity. We had to constantly devise creative methods of motivation to keep the students alert and attentive in the class. Some of the methods which we used include the meting out of rewards such as stickers for good behaviour.

Looking back, our projects had a little bit of a slow start, but there is great satisfaction and joy as we see their gradual progress. The hindsight of seeing lives transformed one at a time and the vision of being able to play a part in engineering social revival in Peru provides us with a wonderful motivation to continue our work here in Peru. Although in a sense, we are first-timers in the work we are doing, first-timers are also the people who make history. Every time we finish teaching one of the English classes, we feel a sense of deep satisfaction and excitement, knowing that another page of history has just been written.

**“ The good influence of godly citizens causes a city to prosper, but the moral decay of the wicked drives it downhill. ”**

**- A wise saying of King Solomon as recorded in the Book of Proverbs in the Bible (The Living Bible Translation), Chapter 11, Verse 11.**

We strongly believe that economic success in a country is the result of a social revival, in which good moral values spring out of the heart of every member of the society, as observed more than 3000 years ago by the wise king Solomon. When people start to cultivate good moral values and beliefs in their personal worldviews, values such as altruism, patience, tolerance, diligence, faithfulness and fidelity, their attitudes towards work, towards others, and towards authority figures such as the government will also be transformed, leading to transformed lifestyles that will influence every segment of society and bring about prosperity at every strata of society.

We often hear criticisms about the prevailing government. There appears to be a presupposition among the people that the solution to their problems is found externally, through structural and policy reforms carried out by the government. This presupposition is challenged by an Australian professor of economics in a frank assessment of the situation in his country. He wrote:

*“An issue which received little attention from politicians and media in the election campaign is the spiritual and moral decay of our nation.*

*Morality is essential for the future of a civilization.*

*Morality includes such values as honesty, the pursuit of truth, responsibility, duty, fairness in interpersonal relations, concern for one's immediate neighbours, respect for property, loyalty and duty to one's spouse and children, the work ethic and keeping one's word. The emphasis is upon the duty and responsibility of the individual. No society can function efficiently or humanely and no civilisation can endure without these values.*

*The failure to assume responsibility for one's actions and the tendency to look to government for everything are among the consequences of the break down of traditional morality.”* ■

# Appendix: Our Projects

## 1 Programa LA VIDA MAXIMA

### Objectives and Description

The goal of these programs is to promote altruistic and enterprising values in youths through holistic education that is offered free of charge. We believe in imparting knowledge, skills and values to a youth so that he can reach his fullest potential and make a significant contribution towards society. We have 3 levels of courses in our La Vida Maxima program – firstly, we teach them English till they reach a decent conversational level, then, we engage them in conversational classes to enable them to practise their English around topics that revolve around the transmission of positive values and beliefs, and finally, we equip them with life skills for enjoyment, employment and entrepreneurship. Our hope is that through holistic equipping and the impartation of values, all of our participants will ultimately invest their lives towards altruistic volunteerism, contributing their time and resources towards making society a better place to live in. Our ACTS Peru programs below offer them an opportunity towards volunteering their time and resources in community projects.



### Municipal of Santiago de Surco

We are currently working with the youth club of the Municipal of Surco to provide English classes every Tuesday and Thursday to the youths who come from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. Some of the participants in our programs here include young single mums (below the age of 25). We are also working towards introducing English classes for kids here.

### Municipal of Miraflores

We are currently working with the social work department of the Municipal of Miraflores to introduce English courses to youths coming from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. This would be run in the same way as our courses with Municipal of Surco. Courses are due to commence in November 2003.

### Among University Students

We are currently having English classes every Saturday afternoon for university students. The students mostly come from San Marcos University, which is one of the most prestigious public universities in Lima, but whose students generally come from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. Some of the participants in these classes also come from various educational institutes in Lima.

### San Ignacio de Monterrico (SIDEM)

SIDEM is a large technical education institute in Surco which provides courses for professionals such as teachers, nurses and translators, who come from financial backgrounds that disallow them to pursue their professional education in the universities. We are working towards training their teachers in the methodologies of training, as well as providing their students with English practice classes. We are also providing relevant seminars and workshops here from time to time. Courses and seminars are due to commence in November 2003.

## Programa CULTURALX

### Objectives and Description

The goal of these programs is to promote a global mindset and a spirit of enterprise among youths through cross-cultural immersion. We believe that a youth's vision is expanded when he gets to meet youths from another culture and when he exposes himself to firsthand experiences of the different culture. It helps him to see a different reality, to build friendship and understanding across cultural frontiers, to acquire cross-cultural entrepreneurial skills and to broaden his perspectives towards developing a global mindset, which is very important for today's global society. There are 2 key programs we are developing here:

- ACTSpeditions
- I @ Work

### ACTSpeditions

These are programs which bring volunteers from Singapore to Peru for various periods of volunteering stints ranging from 3 weeks to 3 months, to engage them in the value of volunteerism and to expose them to the realities of a different culture, in this case, the South American culture. Through their interaction with the local Peruvians, they are also able to introduce snippets of the Singaporean culture to the local Peruvians. We already have a team of 14 people from Singapore who came during last December for a 3 weeks program, and another team will be coming this December. We also have one volunteer who is currently here on a 3 months program.

### I@Work

These are internship programs which provide deserving university students in Peru the opportunity to participate in work attachments with prestigious companies in Singapore for periods lasting 3 to 6 months. The potential interns will be put through a training experience under our "Vida Maxima" programs before they are sent to Singapore. We are currently working with a network of the top universities in Lima to identify potential candidates, who will have to work out a plan to raise enough money for their airfare to Singapore.



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# 3 Programa ACTSPERU

## Objectives and descriptions

The goal of these programs is to make a positive impact on society through various community projects that focus on the holistic development of various communities. Some of these projects are ad-hoc in nature while others may involve a time span of 3 months to 12 months. These projects are organized free of charge. Some of the communities that we are currently helping include the following:

### The community of underprivileged children and youth

The resident staff and volunteers of our NGO in Peru dedicate every Saturday morning towards a visit to an orphanage in Chorillos, "Hogar Jesus Niños de Pragua", to provide community services there. English classes are organized for about 100 children ranging from the age of 4 to the age of 16. The people from Singapore who sign up for our ACTSpeditions program also help to organize cultural awareness and sports programs for the children during their stint here.



### The community of shanty town families

We go to shanty towns in San Juan de Lurigancho on an ad-hoc basis to visit the families there and to distribute some basic necessities such as clothings, toys etc. The houses in the shanty towns are built on the hills, and most of them are very poorly constructed, lacking basic items such as electricity, water and such amenities. Such projects can only be organized when resources are available to our NGO.

### The community of domestic helpers

Currently, a volunteer from Singapore who has signed up for our 3 months immersion program here in Peru is involved in providing English classes every Sunday to domestic helpers in Peru. In this regard, we are working together with a local NGO called Los Redes de Trabajadores (Network of Workers) in their project "La Casa de Panchita". They form a leading organization in Peru that deals with the problems and issues that confront domestic helpers /maids in Peru.

### Summer educational programs

We will be running various English and chess workshops during the summer break for children and kids between the ages of 4 and 12. These children come from various schools and colleges in Lima. These programs allow our NGO to meet youths from different social levels and backgrounds, giving us the opportunity to inspire them to join us in our ad-hoc programs in the shantytowns as well as provide the local youths the opportunity to interact with their peers in a comfortable environment that crosses social barriers. This will inculcate mutual respect among them.

### Educational program with David Wilkerson School in Lima

We have attached one of our resident volunteers to this school on a 3-month stint to help them develop their English courses and to introduce our teaching methodologies to the youths who attend this school. Most of the youths who attend this college come from financially disadvantaged backgrounds.

## Support Us!

### Financial Resource Support

The youths and children who participate in our programs come from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. They are usually unable to afford the materials and resources used in quality education. You may want to consider making a financial contribution, either as a one time donation or on a regular basis, to sponsor resources used in the various projects. The material and stationary costs per student is estimated to be 50 USD, based on quotes received from suppliers of such resources. A typical ad-hoc project requires funds ranging from 100-2500 USD or contributions in kind depending on the nature of the project.

### Logistical Support

We are constantly working towards improving the quality of our educational and training methods and materials. One of the ways in which you may contribute in this aspect is to provide logistical resources such as computers, teaching and training tools, materials for training and the like.

### Networking Resource Support

You can help us market our programs to your friends and contacts. We are constantly looking for partners who may be able to offer their professional experiences and know how towards developing some of the projects that we have. While our projects are largely educational in nature, some of our projects require professional contributions from various fields.

### Human Resource Support

Finally, but certainly not least, you can sign up on our ACTSpeditions programs and join us here as a volunteer!

Visit us at: [www.gen-acts.org](http://www.gen-acts.org)

Or email the country managers:

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