

. . . an e-journey
into the life of an
ADRA worker on
the road. . .

by *Tonya Hippler*



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From June to September last summer I worked with the Adventist Development and Relief Agency—ADRA. Although my official job was to edit a comprehensive book full of Capstone I projects (essentially two-page newsletters) from each ADRA office explaining what ADRA is doing in various countries, my actual experience included much more. My internship with ADRA took me to conferences in four countries—Kenya, Peru, Costa Rica, and Thailand. In these locations, ADRA, in cooperation with Andrews University hosted its semiannual APLI (ADRA Professional Leadership Institute) session.

APLI is a collaborative effort between ADRA and Andrews, in that Andrews provides professors and ADRA the pupils as they work toward master's degrees in international development. There are anywhere from 50 to 80 students per site currently working for ADRA, the Seventh-day Adventist church, or other non-governmental organizations.

Øystein LaBianca, professor of anthropology, was my Andrews "boss," and Gary Brendal was my on-site ADRA "boss." On a daily basis, both men (one through e-mail and the other in person) would discuss what exactly was expected of me and the book. By the end of the summer we had a focus for what the book would do. ADRA 2000: The Gospel in Work Boots was to comprehensively define ADRA, its mission and portfolios—education, agriculture, health,

disaster relief, and its current activities in more than 140 countries around the world.

Throughout my time at these conferences, I relied heavily on e-mail. During the summer a core of people received e-mail updates on my life. Here, you can read what they received—an e-mail journal of sorts—essentially a record of my stories and feelings while working with ADRA.

My summer with ADRA was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. It exceeded what I was expecting and changed my worldview and life-view. I now realize that the world is much smaller than people think and that there is a lot of good in it—contrary to what the nightly news may report. ADRA is a lifestyle, I learned that from speaking with more than 200 ADRA employees. The disorganization was sometimes confusing, but also enlightening, because it allowed me personal freedom. My summer experience changed my life, forever. It continues to do so today as I finish editing the 300+ page book titled ADRA 2000: The Gospel in Work Boots.

Weeks 1-3: *Whirlwind Introduction*—June 2-24, Mombasa, Kenya.

During my time in Kenya, I had a very able computer partner. Erik LaBianca helped me adjust to computer troubleshooting and helped me to

better understand Quark, Photoshop and Databases. For the first week I had no contact with home; then, sometime into the second week, I began playing around with my e-mail account and created a mass e-mailing list. Below is the first of many mass e-mailings . . .

June 18 The Beginning of the End:

Hi, everyone. Here I am, the ultimate enemy of mass e-mailings, sending one. How impersonal and cold of me. Here is an update to whatever rumor you may have heard or read before.

The day after we arrived in Nairobi, we were driven out to the Masai Mara for a four-day safari. On our drive to the airport, I was reminded why I dislike third-world countries. Large and expensive office buildings are built neighboring tin-roof huts where large families live. It is sad, and it makes me feel rich and spoiled. I am.

One day, our driver took us on a nine-hour game drive into Tanzania. It was exquisite, although exhausting. We ate a picnic lunch out in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by lion, ostrich, giraffe, monkey, cheetah, elephant, hippo, and other wildlife. The golden grass, which stretched for miles, waved in the breeze and symbolized nothing but peace to me.

While on safari, Erik and I went to a lecture about the people of the Masai Mara. I find their views towards women most disturbing. Apparently, the Masai feel that it is not important to educate women—their worth is totally wrapped up in how many male children they can produce, and many of their daughters have to undergo female circumcision.

The food: still not up to par . . . not eating a lot, but alas, have not noticed much weight loss, probably because everything is swimming in butter. The pineapple is good though! Erik told me, "You know, for being a part of a food security convention, you sure do waste a lot of food."

So true. After Erik made this comment, I began to take notice of how wasteful I was with my buffet food. I looked around and noticed that everyone else eats everything that they take—nothing less. I feel sheepish.

The weather: is misbehaving . . . I do not approve. Yesterday it was

sunny the whole day, and I didn't know what to do with myself . . . It usually rains, and I hate that. I am slowly losing my tan. It is warm (80's and humid). When the sun is out, Erik and I are out with it.

The office: has changed a bit since we moved to a different resort, The Safari Beach Hotel. This new hotel is just down the road from our previous "home" and much nicer, except for the office. Our current one is not air-conditioned, has no windows, and is uncomfortable. Erik and I are thinking of switching our office to one of our rooms which would be an



Erik (far left) and Tonya (far right) on safari with friends.

improvement. Although it was announced in the beginning that I was in charge of the project, the men in this group would still prefer to talk through their projects with Erik. This frustrates me. I have more helpful information and feedback for them, yet they insist on talking to Erik only because he's a man.

The room: has a balcony the monkeys enjoy! Has air conditioning, and the sheets don't smell like mildew (always a plus)! I am still sleeping under the mosquito net . . . I feel weird about that . . . very strange.

The monkeys: are everywhere. The other day, one chased meEEEEK! There are big ones and little ones. . . they scare me.

The other animals: run around this hotel, mainly in the restaurants—very gross, very unsanitary—this explains why I'm not eating much. Anyway, these animals include peacocks, monkeys, and cats. I do not approve.

Daily activities: remain the same—sleep, and work. Erik and I have accomplished so much and I love it! We make a good team, and I am wondering what will happen in Peru without him. Any volunteers to assist me? Things are starting to look good! My computer skills—thanks to Erik—are improving considerably! However, my daily appointments with people who don't always speak solid English have not been helping my vocabulary. I must speak simply and slowly. . . . It is quite frustrating, yet I am learning a lot about the world's problems. It is very troubling to actually realize the trauma going on in most of these countries. Working here has definitely opened my eyes.

Weekend activities: typically reading. Current book, *Crime and Punishment*. This weekend we are planning on going scuba diving. I'm excited!! It's been a while, so hopefully I don't drown. Next weekend, if we don't leave early, we will be climbing Mt. Kilimanjaro. Cool, huh?

We don't have TVs in our rooms, so I don't know the news. . . what is the latest (both internationally and in your life?) Write soon. I would love to hear from all of you. Much love, Tonya

June 24 The Monkey Thief: I have a story to tell you. I was walking out of the "all you can eat" buffet joint we eat at and I took a banana with me outside to eat at my leisure in the morning or as a midnight snack. I looked above me and, I kid you not, about 12 monkeys are watching me . . . intently. I stopped to marvel at them, and suddenly they jumped down on the ground next to me, then jumped up on me to grab the banana (which I had forgotten about in my amazement). Very frightening. I will probably be in therapy for quite some time dealing with that experience. The monkeys are seriously out of control . . . I think they forget to take their Ritalin, because they are exceptionally active.

It is raining today, and why shouldn't it? It's rained nearly the whole time. I do have some bronzed skin to show in spite of it though!

Well, this is probably going to be my last group e-mail for a little bit since I'm leaving soon. I just wanted to congratulate all of those who wrote me . . . you are now on the very prestigious "TONYA'S FAVORITES" list. For those who failed to do so . . . certain death, a stern talking to, whatever it takes to convince you to write this lonely traveler. Seriously, I'm desperate! Can't wait to get back to civilization . . . watch TV . . . sleep without a mosquito net and eat food that I like. Isn't life delicious? Until we meet again. Keep the e-mails coming in. Love, Tonya

Weeks 4-6: Dealing with the Language of Heaven—July 12-29, Lima, Peru

In Peru I was on my own. The conference was hosted at the Adventist school outside Lima. It was cold and cloudy. Even though I know some Spanish, I didn't know enough to do a ton of work without a translator. Unfortunately, in the diverse land of Peru, I only had a few select and hard-working hours with a translator—the rest of the time was spent fumbling my way through the "language of heaven."

July 21 Graduation Discussion:

I scanned everyone's photos today, and after lunch I took everyone's picture for the database. They were all quite amusing and loved having their pictures taken. At dinner

tonight, I was offered a job with ADRA Peru. That was pretty exciting. As a group of English speakers sat around the table discussing the APLI program, they began discussing graduation 2000, and how the whole class wants to be at Andrews for graduation. But others want it to be in Peru and so on. Money became a huge issue in the conversation, and I offered my yard for people to stay in. How generous, huh? Whatever.

August 1 The Language of Heaven:

Hello everyone. I realize that I have been neglecting my e-mail groupies . . . I have my reasons. Mainly, that in the land of Peru, they have an

independence day (July 27, 28) much like that of the United States. You know, the usual — businesses close down, the entire population engages in a party, satellite systems shut down, you know, the usual! Yes, you heard me right —their satellite stuff and modems, etc., totally shut down for independence day here . . . That, among other reasons, is why I have been neglecting you.

Anyway, keeping with tradition, below is my life in a nutshell:

Cusco: Last week I went to Cusco. Fell in love . . . not with the tourism and continually being bombarded by street entrepreneurs selling anything from film to sweaters . . . but with the Inca way. It was incredible to see all the ruins and history. Avocados are as prevalent as water, and I eat them at every meal!! A four-hour train ride outside of Cusco took me to the hidden city of Machu Picchu. I went there for a day and would have been content in setting up permanent residence. My adventure in Machu

Picchu was remarkable—I was alone, of course, but every day I made new friends with random tourists and only ended up eating three meals alone. :) It was kind of a whirlwind adventure. I

had a tour every day of random places, but I always had the evenings to myself. Unfortunately, I didn't warm up while there; the altitude was high, which — although it put me closer to the sun — neglected to warm my shivering body. This week has been crazy!! My translator left for Chile on Sunday, so I have been without full understanding of what my comrades really want, but my Spanish is 100% improved for it. The language of heaven is beautiful and I enjoy learning it in a practical/survival sort of sense.

Work: has been getting done —slowly.

The students: are my favorite. They are all full of life and quite young!! Some are even unmarried. I love it. They are easily excited and have taken me on tours of Lima on the weekends. They encourage my Spanish endeavors—for example—yesterday, I made an announcement in Spanish to the entire class and they loved it. I received clapping and tons of adoration for it. They make me smile.

Food: remains tasty and oily.

My accommodations: are interesting — I stay in a dorm room on the Peruvian Union University campus, which is one hour outside of Lima. It rests at the base of part of the Andean range. I love it. I have a view of a steep mountainside. I am in the room alone, even though there are four beds, with no heat (the outside temp is usually about 50 degrees with NO SUN).

My office: the cold concrete chamber has been literally perfect.

Well, all, I'm off to Costa Rica — no, seriously, my plane leaves in 7 hours!! You will hear from me there. Love and kisses—Tonya

P.S. Every day that I spend doing this, the more I love it!

Weeks 7-10: A greater sense of purpose—August 1-25, Puenta Leona, Costa Rica.

Puenta Leona is right on the coast of Costa Rica. While at this site, I enjoyed the company of my Andrews' bosses—Sten LaBianca and Merlene Ogden, and that of ADRA administration—Mario Ochoa, Ralph Watts, etc. In Costa Rica I used my now-perfected Spanish skills on occasion. I had regular access to a thorough translator—Henry—and we accomplished more than expected. Because of temperamental weather and an earthquake at 2 am, e-mail was not terribly reliable. It was hot the whole time.

August 15 Problems in Paradise?

Hi, everyone! So sorry. Life has gotten crazy! But, my e-mail is working! Life is good, and I am working steadily . . . thus, losing my tan. Dr. LaBianca arrived yesterday to supervise, and now, instead of having everyone think that I walk on water no matter what, he makes me work for that distinction. I know, poor girl! No, really, I love it —



Tonya (in sunglasses) with students from Peru

stress, pressure, encouragement and direct feedback. His help has been priceless and his enthusiasm contagious.

In brief, here are my feelings about my surroundings —

Food: awesome dessert, lots of meat — not particularly my favorite — plenty of rice, not many veggies. It's okay, but my palate has seen better days.

Room: love it! Very nice. Air-conditioned to accommodate the humidity. Has a TV. . . don't worry, I only watch it at night.

Office: located in my room. Consists of my printer, scanner, thousands of files and my computer all on a 6-foot-long table. Primitive!

Animals: way too many spooky bugs, large spiders and stuff. I do not like it. There are also large lizards here that are cool — I have yet to see a toucan or a monkey . . . supposedly they are lurking around.

Again I find myself surrounded by men. There are only six women at this site out of about 55. I find it amusing.

They play a lot of volleyball here, and of course, I'm cleaning house on the court!

I saw a volcano the other day. It was one of the "dormant" ones; I will see an active one this next weekend. Very exciting!

For the most part I'm ready to go home. I'm not homesick . . . just ready to leave. Anyway, I must go for now. Love, Tonya

P.S. Remember, my e-mail is working and those who faithfully e-mail Tonya will have an extra star in their crowns! :)

Weeks 11-12: *Wrapping up—* September 12-26 Thailand.

Thailand proved to be my favorite site, only however, because of the night market and food. I was only there for a short amount of time with Erik (two weeks), and it was good to have some company. Thailand's "Asian persuasion" — silky textiles, beautiful people, and spicy food — won me over.

September 17 The sun may set where I'm from, but it rises here: After a much-needed break, I'm back at it . . . in Thailand. This place is the best!

My first impression of this place is this: Getting checked onto my Chaing Mai flight, I look behind me and there it is — a "just for monks" seating section in the airport surrounded by trees and flowers. The "normal" seating section is just chairs. A monk was sitting there and it made an incredible photo op. Too bad it's illegal to take pictures of such things in the airport. Oh well, the visual rewards were good enough.

And now I will briefly evaluate my conditions:

Food: does it get any better than this? No. I love Thai food and think that I could easily live here! Desserts are lacking—of course, what's new?

Exchange rate: is amazing—I am a zillionaire here. :) Independently wealthy . . . almost!

Work: Although this group of students isn't as productive (as in they haven't handed in many reports to us yet), we are still getting things accomplished.

Erik is my partner in crime again. Although I am competent, for the most part, his assistance and company have been the best!

Sleep: I am suffering severely from jet-lag. This is my daily routine — wake up at 5 in the morning . . . watch MTV, drink water, read newspaper, eat breakfast with Erik at about 8, go to work, eat a bit of lunch, feel sleepy at about 4, actually



Tonya and Erik ride a Thai elephant.

go to bed at about 6 . . . wake up at 1, watch more MTV, go back to bed . . . see 5 in the morning. True, I've gotten a bit better about sleeping, but really, it is driving me crazy.

Elephants: no sightings yet . . . I

really want to see one though.

Night market: my answer to jet-lag. Last night I shopped around in the night market — it's incredible — and keeps me awake til about 9. However, I still woke up promptly at 5. They have everything under the sun, and I am in love. I think that I'll have to do some Christmas shopping.

The hotel: I am staying in a 4-star hotel, and enjoying it. The Thai are truly service-oriented and no, I'm not taking advantage of them! The thing that I love most about my room is that from my nightstand I can control everything in the room—lights, TV, alarm clock and air conditioning. Very fun! Hmmm, maybe I should spend an entire day in bed and play with the lights and TV! :)

The one thing that I've learned: geography. For example: East Timor — I now know exactly where that is, among other places. I feel so competent — now I can wear my title "daughter of a travel agent" with pride, and actually be able to back it up.

Tomorrow I'm hitting the "tourist" scene — maybe see a few buddhas, walk around a few temples, hang out with Erik. Who knows? Maybe I'll have to read my guidebook and see what's "hip" to do. I hope to hear from all of you soon. Love, Tonya

September 25 Asian persuasion: Tomorrow morning Erik and I leave the lovely city of Chaing Mai for a day's outing in Bangkok, and then we'll be up bright and early for a series of flights that will actually put me in Argentina on Tuesday — talk about being frequent flyer of the year! Before I leave this place, however, I want to update you on the latest — besides the fact that I'm going to set up residence here permanently!

Last weekend, after a rather disjointed work week, Erik and I decided to be "tourists." After reading our guidebooks thoroughly Friday night, we set out on Sabbath to see the sights! After walking for quite some time, we came upon a temple—one of many. Did you realize that Chaing Mai has the most temples in the world!? Incredible. We only saw a few, but after awhile they all start blending together. The tradition that I

fell in love with was a special "pre-temple" entry fee. It is optional, of course, but I had to try it.

There are ladies selling little cages with birds in them at the temple entrance. You buy a little cage, say a prayer and then let the birds go. This ritual is symbolic of releasing our cares and sending them to heaven.

After walking for what seemed an eternity, Erik convinced me that renting mopeds was the best way for us to see everything. So we found a vendor that rented two motor bikes for \$5 for 24 hours — talk about cheap.

The lady gave us a brief instruction period and let us loose. I promptly ran into a parked truck. To make matters worse, it was about 10 feet from the store and it was the motor bike owner's brand new truck.

Embarrassed and frightened, I returned the bike quickly. Erik just smirked. Fortunately, the damage to the truck was minimal and they let us go but kept the \$5. I am convinced that had I not immediately returned the bike, I would have been killed here. They drive on the wrong side of the road, and it's been all summer since I've driven anyway.

Next, we arranged for a taxi/truck to take us out to see a temple and generally loaf around the city. The temple we went to see was majestic. In order to reach this temple, we had to climb 209 steps — it was well worth it though. The temple had a huge courtyard overlooking Chaing Mai. Besides the incredible scenery, I got a picture with two monks! They were actually "monklettes."

In the evening I shopped more in the night market and got my first Thai massage. That was painful. Thai massages were created for contortionists. Although I am flexible, I am not a pretzel. Tonight I got another one, just to make sure that I didn't like it, and I loved it . . . so crazy.

On Sunday, continuing our "tourist" quest, Erik and I set out again with the same taxi driver—we paid him \$10 and he drove us around for 6 hours. Our first stop was the elephant training camp. Erik and I rode on an elephant for an hour — seriously, they basically plop a loveseat-size chair on the elephant's

back and let it go. I loved it! It felt a bit unstable at first, but eventually I began to trust the lovable two-ton creature. I think that if I brought one to Berrien, it would be a big hit! I could ride it to school and it could splash around in Lake Chapin! Very hip! Hey, who knows, with the new millennium upon us, it could be the new rage?

After the elephants, we visited an orchid farm — lovely! So many flowers. Then, we went to a local handicraft village and went from store to store for hours.

Since Sunday, Erik and I have been working like mad fiends to get everything done. We have succeeded, despite the challenges we've faced in communicating with people.

The rest, in Tonya fashion, are my feelings about Thailand.

Accommodations: Still wonderful!



Tonya draped over a temple guard in Thailand.

ADRA has spoiled me. I took the time to actually look outside my 16th-story window — it overlooks a Catholic church, a cemetery, a few apartment buildings and a radio tower. I am still amazed by my "all powerful" bed stand — and every morning before my feet hit the floor, I punch on every light in the room, just because I can.

Gary, my ADRA boss of sorts, took me up onto the roof of the Empress Hotel just to give me an idea of the size of the city— and needless to say, I was impressed! Although Chaing Mai is physically smaller than South Bend, Indiana, it has about a zillion more people — all riding mopeds.

Work: The makeshift office Erik and I share is a teakwood hall adjacent to the meeting room. Thus, we hear all the teachers, yet don't get class credit — it's almost like we're auditing the classes. By the end of this time, I should be well on my way to a master's in international development.

Although I am done with the traveling part of my ADRA assignment, I will still be editing this book into the school year!

Jet lag: Well, now that I'm completely over it, I will have to adjust to Argentina time — will the madness ever end?

Food: Still loving it, however, it is a little oily.

Durian: This fruit is gross. Typically either people love it or hate it. This week I got the chance to do a "durian run" in the middle of a monsoon downpour. A group of us stood in the rain eating this nasty fruit. To taste it is terrible. The consistency is that of a ripe mango — juicy, stringy, messy — and the aftertaste, like garlic. But, now I can say I have tasted durian. The one thing that did impress me is that the fruit, before it is opened, can be used as a deadly weapon — forget brass knuckles, butterfly knives and karate — I'll just carry around a durian with me. If the pointy, prickly, football-sized fruit doesn't hurt them, the taste and smell will!

Well, everyone, this is Tonya Hippler, signing off from Thailand! I do expect to hear from you since I will continue to have the same email address in Argentina! Love you all!
Evita Hippler

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Tonya "Evita" Hippler graduated in June with a BS in public relations. She is currently student activities coordinator for the Berrien County Intermediate School District in Berrien Springs.