

My Unforgettable Experience in the Peruvian Amazon

By Zoë Gershuny

I attended the League for the Hard of Hearing from the time I was two years old for about ten years. There, I learned how to listen and speak which allowed me, among many other things, of course, to travel to some amazing places. My most recent trip to the Peruvian Amazon was one of those amazing and special trips to say the least.

This trip was special because the group included 17-22 year old students, some who have a hearing loss and some who have normal hearing. One of them has bilateral cochlear implants, one uses hearing aids on both ears, and I have one cochlear implant. The trip was sponsored by a nonprofit organization called [Global Explorers](#), which combined with [Hear the World](#), a global initiative of Phonak, to form the first ever *Hear the World Expedition*. The purpose of the trip was to explore science, culture, leadership, and service simultaneously raising awareness around hearing-related issues.



I flew from JFK and arrived in Lima where the entire group met and flew together to Iquitos, a small city in the Amazon rainforest. It can only be reached by plane or boat. We then took an hour boat ride on the Amazon River to the Explorama Lodge in the heart of the rainforest which began my, as well as the others in different ways, incredible journey of encountering sounds that we never experienced before.

One day, we had an activity where normal hearing people were given earplugs so that they would not be able to hear the surroundings, and hearing impaired students had to turn off their Cochlear Implants or hearing aids. The normal hearing people were terrified not being able to hear, especially in new surroundings as they usually associate sounds with images. One found it depressing. Another student would create a sound in her mind of what she thought it should sound like to replace the missing sound. Another student looked at it from a different angle. She was able to hear things that she would not normally think about, such as her own breath. However, they all eventually did find solace and became adjusted to their inability to hear sound after awhile. Meanwhile, I laughed about it, agreeing with my hearing impaired friends that we sometimes use our hearing loss to our advantage, and it is very normal and natural for us not to be able to hear.

We spent about half of a day doing community service at a nearby village called Sapo Playa (roughly translated as Frog Beach). What was interesting about our relationship with the villagers, indigenous people, was that they had no concept of cochlear implants or hearing aids. They did not even care about our deafness and they treated everyone equally. This is an example of how removing the stigma around hearing loss can change the way hearing impaired people are perceived. It is possibly true that hearing impaired people who do not know Spanish will have a harder time to communicate, but it is definitely true that there are different ways to bond other than talking. It just takes time and experience.

When we returned from Sapu Playa, we had a discussion about our experiences. One of the staff members, who does not know any Spanish, obviously found it difficult to communicate with the villagers. Interestingly, she said that she was deaf in the sense that she could not understand what was going on around her because she did not know what the people were saying and thus she felt excluded. That led her to a better understanding of what it is like being deaf – not being able to communicate with people and feeling excluded.

During our last full day in the Amazon Rainforest, I was able to hear underwater sounds for the first time in my life on a boat somewhere in the Amazon River. An acoustic technician who works for the National Park Service's Natural Sounds Program had a hydrophone microphone (underwater microphone) connected to an MP3 recorder. I had my special wire that directly connects my Freedom BTE to the MP3 recorder. I changed my processor setting so that it blocked the noises around me and focused on the hydrophone my wire was plugged into. After a minute, I was able to hear my first underwater sounds. I heard something like "whoosh, whoosh." It turned out to be other group members on the boat splashing water with sticks. Regardless, it was my first encounter with an underwater sound, and it definitely was an awesome experience for me. At this point, I was brought to the reality of sounds, unlike the dream world in movies where many sounds are exaggerated, especially underwater. Other hearing impaired people agreed that it brought a new dimension of sounds that they had never heard before. Of course we heard many other sounds in the rainforest, but it was often difficult for me to distinguish between the sounds, although I knew that some were sounds I had never heard before.

Later on that day, we took a bath in the mud, and some others and I hesitated to go in such an unfamiliar area, not being able to hear. I sometimes do not like to go swimming because I cannot hear while in the water, but I did not want to miss out on this most likely once in a lifetime opportunity bathing in the mud of the Amazon! My group mates finally convinced me to join them, so I removed my BTE, jumped in the mud, soft and so thick that you could easily lie back and float. I did not need to hear to have fun with them. All I needed was for them to understand that I could not hear and all I saw were smiles on our faces, playing with the mud, and laughter.



On the last day of the trip before we went to the airport for our flight back home, we spent some time at the Efata School for the Deaf, the only school for the deaf in Iquitos. The deaf students there use sign language, but they do not have access to audiologists, or any type of hearing technology. There was one classroom for twenty students of all ages, and because of lack of financing and any support from the government, the school has only two teachers who are capable of only teaching at the primary level. They are extremely lucky to have an American PhD student who has been there since last March and will leave this December. The other students in our group with hearing loss and I realized how lucky we are and appreciative of what has been made available to us in the USA, but also we felt sorry for the deaf children in Iquitos as they probably will never have the opportunities that we have and their future is not very bright. Both the government and the society ignore them.

As a result of the normal hearing students spending time with the hearing impaired students on our trip, their awareness of the importance of sound and hearing issues was heightened. At least they now all agree that they will turn down the volume of their MP3 players or iPods. Personally, I hope to be able to raise the awareness and understanding of people in my life as to the impact that hearing or lack of it has on all of our lives, and how important it is to try to maximize our ability to hear. Fortunately the media is raising the issue of the increasing prevalence of hearing impairment in our society more and more. The technology available for listening to music such as MP3 players is having a negative impact on the hearing of all people, but especially on preteens and teens who spend so much time with earbuds in their ears blasting their music. I hope to be able to influence at least my peers by raising their awareness of the importance of sound and hearing.