

# A Life Changing Adventure - 4-H Exchange Trip to Puerto Rico

## Day 1

After many months of preparation, the day was finally here. We had worked very hard to make this trip a reality, but it was all worth it. Just to think that in a few hours we would be swimming in the crystal-clear water of the Caribbean Sea and tasting fresh tropical fruits made this trip worth all the extra effort that we put into it.

On Saturday May 30<sup>th</sup>, a group of nine 4-H members from Coffee and Emmanuel County along with 5 adults embarked on an adventure. We embarked on a journey to the tropical island of Puerto Rico. It was a long ride down to Orlando International Airport, but we made it safe and sound, traveling down I75 and then taking the Florida turnpike. Our flight left at 11:40 pm from terminal A and was supposed to arrive in Puerto Rico at 1:20 am the following day. Some children (and adults too) hadn't been on an airplane in their whole life, so they were a little too excited about the airplane ride over the Atlantic Ocean.



Picture 1. Jobos beach, Isabela PR.

A short while after take-off there were a few patches of rough weather, but the pilot quickly managed to fly out of the rough zone and we had a good flight from Orlando and Aguadilla, PR. We arrived early at Rafael Hernandez Airport in the municipality of Aguadilla at 1:00 am in the morning. At that time some of our hosts hadn't arrived to pick us up. My home-town 4-H club was hosting us in this first part of our new adventure that will last two summers: an exchange between Moca and Coffee County 4-H Clubs. At approximately 1:30, everybody departed with their assigned host families and were headed straight to bed (I presume). We made it safely across the Ocean and after a 20 minute ride me and the Burch family and I met with my parents and headed home.

## Day 2

The crowing of the roosters woke me up. It was a new day filled with lots to do. After breakfast Mr. Joe Burch, his son Emory and I met Mr. Frank Rivera (Papo), Mr. Kevin Tatum and his son Collin at an agro-touristic hotel called Hacienda El Jibarito in the municipality of San Sebastian. We toured the nice hotel and there we saw the antique decoration that made you travel in time to the era of the sugarcane mills and the coffee farms.

From the hotel we traveled through the Guajataca State Forest to the municipality of Isabela to see the Atlantic coast. Papo took us to the beach where in 1995 the actor Pierce Brosnan and Natalya Fyodorovna Simonova filmed the romantic scene of the James Bond movie Goldeneye (Picture 1). This was the first time the



Picture 2. 4-H welcoming party at the Rivera residence.

Burchs and the Tatums had seen the crystal-clear waters of the Atlantic Ocean. It was very impressive to them, since on the Georgia coast you cannot find a beach as clear as this one.

Back in Moca, we all met at Papo and Sonia's house for the welcoming party. The 4-H'ers and their host families got acquainted, played games, swam in the pool and exchanged gifts. We all enjoyed the good food and had lots of fun (Picture 2).

## Day 3



Picture 3. Group picture at the Palacete Los Moreau in Moca, PR.

On Monday, June 1<sup>st</sup>, we met at the Moca Extension office at 9:30 am. From there we walked to the city hall where the mayor's family greeted us and welcomed us to the municipality. The mayor's oldest daughter gave us an overview on the history of Moca. This municipality (my hometown) was founded in the year 1772 and actually has a population of over 39,000. It is located in the north-western region of Puerto Rico. Moca is also known as the bobbin lace capital of Puerto Rico (a lace textile made by braiding and twisting lengths of thread, which are wound on bobbins to manage them).

From the mayor's office we walked through the plaza headed to the bobbin lace museum and then to the Los Moreau Palace. The Los Moreau Palace was once one of the wealthiest sugarcane and coffee haciendas in northwestern Puerto Rico (Picture 3.). It was built in 1905 and was acquired by the municipality of Moca in 1993 after being abandoned and vandalized. This was the setting for a novel *La Llamarada* (The Fire) written in 1935 by Enrique Laguerre. Today it is a museum consisting of approximately ninety acres, a three story mansion decorated with paintings, antique furniture and machinery.

After the visit to Los Moreau Palace we headed to several local farms and joined Mr. José Vera, Moca's agriculture and natural resources extension agent. In the first farm our 4-H'ers had the opportunity to see plantain, orange, and starchy product (such as cassava) crops (Picture 4). Our last visit of the day was to Mr. Jorge H. Bosques' hydroponic farm. Hydroponic farms are not typical farms in Puerto Rico although they are becoming very popular. Mr. Bosques received us in his greenhouses where he produces hydroponic basil, cilantro, lettuce, carrots, tomatoes, and many other vegetables. His system is set-up in an eco-friendly manner, since he utilizes compost to fertilize his crop and also produces solar and wind energy to operate his system. The Coffee County 4-H'ers had an incredibly good experience so far, and at the end of the day, they had bonded extremely well with the Moca group.



Picture 4. 4-H'ers walking through a plantain and citrus farm in Moca, PR.

## Day 4

At 5:30 am everybody met at the municipal park in Moca. We were headed for El Yunque National Rainforest. This park is the only National Rainforest in the United States and it is so important that it is ranked 5<sup>th</sup> in the new seven natural wonders



Picture 5. Moca and Coffee County 4-H clubs in El Yunque's El Portal welcome center

of the world competition. This twenty-eight thousand acre park houses five ecologically different forests with completely unique flora and fauna with mountains as high as three thousand three hundred feet above sea level.

When we arrived at El Yunque it was raining (as we should expect in a rainforest). Almost no one was prepared to get soaked by the rain so we had to buy ponchos and umbrellas to keep us dry. The tour guide courteously waited on us, and when everyone was ready we headed for the trails. Due to the intensity of the rain we had to go on a shorter trail, but equally beautiful compared to the ones that I had seen before. We made several stops where the guide pointed out scenic views, endemic plants and spoke to the group about the importance of conserving our natural resources. Walking under the shadow of twenty-foot ferns and sierra palm trees the tour guide stopped for a moment and pointed out a crevice in a tree. This was the nest of a Puerto Rican parrot, the state bird of Puerto Rico. These birds have been deprived of their nesting habitats due to urbanization and today are on the brink of extinction.



Picture 6. Georgia 4-H, Moca and Coffee County 4-H Clubs gathered at El Yunque.

We were greeted by Mr. Jeff Buckley and Dr. Bo Ryles along with fifteen 4-H'ers from all over Georgia and their guides (Picture 6). We shared our experiences so far and posed for a group picture. During this encounter we discussed the importance of the exchange trips and how activities like these can change a young person's perspective of the world.

Enough about El Yunque, next stop was Old San Juan. We arrived around dusk to Fort San Felipe Del Morro. Constructed in 1589 the 140 feet walls defended the port of San Juan from pirates and enemies of Spain and are still standing after numerous earthquakes and hurricanes.



Picture 7. Eastern View from Cerro Punta Mountain, Jayuya, PR.



Picture 8. View of the Caribbean Sea from the Cordillera Central in Villalba, PR.

At that time its gates were closed, but we enjoyed the sunset from the hilltop in which El Morro stands. After being there for about half an hour we ventured into Old San Juan. We crossed the cobblestone streets admiring the Spanish architecture, the music and the people.

It was night and we had to drive two hours back to Moca after an exhausting yet exciting day, so we boarded the buses and headed home.

## Day 5



Picture 9. Salto Doña Juana in Barranquitas, PR.

This day was designated as a family day. During day five the children and adults were supposed to spend the day with their host families and do whatever they pleased. Some went to the beach while others went shopping. My family, the Burchs, Devin Durham, Mr. Kevin and his hosts Papo and Sonia Rivera, had planned to go to a town named Jayuya. This municipality is right in the center of the island. It lies in a valley surrounded by the Cordillera Central, the central mountain range of Puerto Rico. Here we met Mrs. Marisol Villalobos

and her family along with the Jayuya agriculture teacher, Mr. Juan Maury. They took us to the highest peak in Puerto Rico, Cerro Punta (Picture 7) rising to an altitude of 4,370 feet above sea level. From there we could see the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea (Picture 8). From there we drove through the mountains to the town of Barranquitas and saw a beautiful waterfall named Salto Doña Juana (Doña Juana's fall; Picture 9). Back in Jayuya, we visited several museums and then headed to La Piedra escrita (the written rock). La Piedra Escrita is a massive boulder resting on a



Picture 10. Mr. Kevin and Mr. Jona at the Piedra Escrita creek in Jayuya, PR.

creek with dozens of Taino Indian petroglyphs (Picture 10 and 11). Our hosts in Jayuya had prepared a barbecue just for us, so we spent the rest of the afternoon eating and socializing with them.



Picture 11. Katrina Burch and Katie Burch beside the Piedra Escrita in Jayuya, PR.

## Day 6

Everybody met at the usual place, Moca's Municipal Park at 7:30 am headed for Ponce, the second largest municipality of Puerto Rico with a population of 194,636. This city is filled with culture housing several museums and historical landmarks. While in Ponce visited the Tibes Ceremonial Park, Hacienda Buena Vista and the Plaza del Caribe Mall. Tibes Ceremonial Park (Picture 12) is an archeological museum containing an artifact museum an Indian village setting and ceremonial plaza. The Taino Indians used this place as a social and religious gathering point more than two thousand years before the arrival of Christopher Columbus.

From Tibes we headed north to the Hacienda Buena Vista (Picture 13), a 1800's coffee plantation in the foothills of the Cordillera Central. This place is frozen in time. We walked through the old buildings and into the bush



Picture 12. Visiting the Taino indian village at the Tibes Ceremonial Park.

through a paved trail carved in the hills. The homesteaders had dug a channel in the side of the mountain to propel the plantation's machinery. On this trail the tour guide pointed out a young ceiba tree that was about 14 years old measuring about 70 feet tall. This giant tree's trunk was covered with spikes that permitted its survival in the tropical forest. We also encountered a tree called malagueta from which the Puerto Ricans extract alcohol and use its leaves for medicinal purposes. The 4-H'ers could smell the alcohol fragrance from its leaves as the tour guide passed around a sample. The end of the trail a beautiful waterfall reminded us of the name of this plantation: Buena Vista which is Spanish for beautiful view. Next we toured the buildings and looked at the antiques. They showed us how the canal powered a big water wheel that made the grist mill work.



Picture 13. 4-H'ers in the Hacienda Buena Vista, Ponce PR.

On the way we stopped at Guánica in the exact place where the U.S. Navy arrived on 1898 (Picture 14).



Picture 14. 4-H'ers at Guánica bay, Guánica, able to see the glowing water of the bioluminescent bay. We boarded the two boats and headed through the mangrove islands of La Parguera to the bay. The glowing water of this place is a result of millions of microorganisms that inhabit this bay. As a defensive mechanism these organisms have developed a chemical reaction that makes them glow. So when the water is disturbed a neon green color is seen on dark nights.

We were finally there. The boats turned off their lights and aligned one beside the other to cast a shadow. A boy dove into the water and swam to the space between the two boats. As he swam we all could see the water around him glowing in a neon green color. The boat captains then told us to shake the water with our own hands. When we did this our hands glowed too. The water that soaked our hands was filled with thousands of microscopic organisms that light-up like fireflies.

## Day 7

This day was our second family day. Half of our group decided to go to the municipality Cabo Rojo where my family and I own a beach house. We swam in the beach, snorkeled and kayaked all day. This was a day for relaxation and enjoyment.



Picture 15. Villa La Mela beach in Cabo Rojo, PR.

No schedules, just fun and hanging-out. While the older folks stayed dry, Mr. Kevin, the children and I enjoyed the Caribbean Sea exploring the reefs, playing with sea urchins, starfish and other sea critters at the Villa La Mela beach (picture 15). We didn't get to see a perfect sunset that day, but the horizon still looked amazing as the sun sank into the blue water. We managed to save some energy for the next day when the whole group was going to come back for a snorkeling tour.

## Day 8

We met at the usual gathering point at 9:00 am and headed south on highway 2 to the same municipality as the day before. We were going to see the Cabo Rojo Lighthouse in the Bahía Sucia Wildlife Refuge. This place is at the southwestern tip of the island. Its unique topography makes this place special. At high tide the marsh fills with water and starts to evaporate, leaving salt crystals in the sand. As the water evaporates the ponds turn pink. Taking advantage of the topography, there is a company that owns properties adjacent to the wildlife refuge where they have made dozens of pools and canals to extract and sell sea salt. On our way to the lighthouse we could see a white mountain of salt piled beside the road. After the salt pools we got off the pavement and continued through a dirt road until the end.



**Picture 16.** 4-H'ers enjoying the view on top of the cliffs at the Bahía Sucia Wildlife Refuge in Cabo Rojo, Puerto Rico.



**Picture 17.** Trail leading to Bahía Sucia beach in Cabo Rojo.

hill to get to the lighthouse. In back of the lighthouse the land ended in an impressive two-hundred foot drop making this place one of the most beautiful places in the island (picture 16). The 4-H'ers and adults walked alongside of the ridge enjoying the beauty of this place. From the hill top you can see a beautiful bay called Bahía Sucia. It is currently one of the top ten most beautiful beaches in the U.S. The blue water and the white sand with the mountains in the background make this place spectacular (picture 17). We went through the trail and got to beach level. Here we explored the rocks. Some of the children had never seen a sea urchin up close. Here they had the chance to hold them (picture 18). One of them even found a two inch octopus (picture 19). We took it out of the water and played with it for a while. When it was put back in the water we could see the



**Picture 18.** 4-H'ers playing with sea urchins.

creature changing color to mimic its environment.

After playing in the water for a little while we headed to our cars and went to Villa La Mela beach where we had been the day before with a handful from our group. This place is not an ordinary Puerto Rican beach. This place is special. There are three coral reefs surrounding the bathing areas in this beach. The northern corner the beach ends with some mangrove trees and the bay of Puerto Real. There is an abundance of marine life in this location. The reefs are still healthy and house thousands of fish, mollusks, sea urchins, various species of sponges, starfish, lobsters and even sea turtles. Occasionally people spot a school of dolphins playing in the deep blue water headed to and from the Puerto Real bay.



**Picture 19.** 4-H'ers playing with a small octopus at Bahía Sucia beach.

The ones that were planning on going snorkeling with me got geared up and soon we were in the water. We had to travel several yards from the swimming area to the coral reef through a prairie of atalasia seagrass (primary food source of manatees in the Caribbean). When we got there we snorkeled through the deep portion of the coral reef with a depth of about 10 feet. Here we could see brain corals, sea fans and dozens of schools of fish. There were lots of colorful fish varying in shape and size: squirrelfish, atlantic blue tan, sargentmajors, french angelfish and many more. We regrouped frequently stopping on several locations where it was safe to stand on the rocks. All around us where fire corals which sting when you come in contact with them. I hadn't been in this coral for several years and that day it looked the best that it has been in a while. The children enjoyed the snorkeling tour which ended in the hot bath which is a man made clearing in the sea grass prairie with shallow warm water that resembles a Jacuzzi.

## Day 9

This was our last day on the Island of Puerto Rico. After going to the beach, each 4-H'er and their families departed to prepare for the trip back home. We met at the Aguadilla airport at 1:00 am for check-in. In a couple of hours we were going to leave our new friends and families. There was a mixture of happiness and sadness in the air. We had created a strong bond during the past week and all was coming to an end for the moment.

We left that morning knowing that we would come back to the tropical paradise of Puerto Rico. Not only is the landscape spectacular, but the people treat outsiders like family. The way they opened their homes and their hearts to us was the best experience of all, and for this we are eternally grateful. Back on the mainland, we were glad to be returning to our families. Mr. Kevin and I drove the entire way back from Orlando to Douglas. Everybody was so tired they fell asleep on the bus. By 2:00 pm we arrived at the Coffee County Extension Office where our families were waiting. All the 4-H'ers

were excited about their recent experience and couldn't wait to tell their loved ones every detail about the Puerto Rico Exchange Trip. Mr. Kevin and I were tired but satisfied knowing that by doing this trip we had changed the lives of our 4-H participants.

Next summer we will be hosting the Moca 4-H Club for the second part of this exchange program. We are planning ahead to take them several places, but to make this work we need funds and the support of our community. On behalf of the Coffee County Extension Office I would like to thank everyone who collaborated on our fund raisers. The smile on our childrens' faces is the ultimate outcome from your generosity.