

Socially Responsible Travelling...and a Recipe for Hope (and Plantains)

By [andrew.zimmer](#) on Mon, 02/23/2009 - 16:26 | [andrew.zimmer's blog](#)



Am just back from an incredible week in Nicaragua, and had a legitimate life changing experience there. Despite the country's position as the second poorest in the hemisphere besides Haiti, the people are among the friendliest and most giving I have met since leaving tribal settlements in rural Uganda, Ethiopia and Tanzania.

I had a chance to spend a few hours touring the Barrio Esperanza in Grenada, a mile or two from the famous colonial town center. Josh Berman, our fixer and the author of the definitive travel guide to Nicaragua ([Moon Books Guide](#)), alerted us to the opportunity to make the visit before we left the States and Patrick Weiland (one of my producers) and Colleen Steward (Tremendous Entertainment honcho and my partner in Bizarre Foods) sent us down with duffel bags filled with goods for the children.

The poverty in the barrios is extreme. Children are under tremendous internal and external pressure to work at an early age, forgoing educational opportunity. 50 percent of the children drop out before reaching 5th grade. Families don't value education, they value children as wage earners, and while gov't sponsored schooling is free, the children of the barrios cant afford uniforms, supplies, shoes etc.

Enter Kathy Adams and Empowerment International. Check them out at www.empowermentinternational.org. I will post pics of my visit to their new tutoring and mentoring center when I get a chance. Like other successful social engineering programs developed over the last century, E.I.'s model works by engaging the entire family, establishes education to break the poverty cycle and then engages in mentoring and tutoring programs to maintain connection with the families and children.



Currently, many of the kids have been taking photographs (seen above) of their world, printing and selling the work in a gallery in Grenada that the kids run themselves to raise dollars for other kids programs. The more successful kids (I met several all under the age of 14) in turn mentor the next generation of youngsters. That's the incredible jump in outreach that Adams has created that so impressed me. As a recovering drug addict and alcoholic myself, I experienced the disconnect of the well meaning hand of hope extended to me by judges, police officers, teachers, family members etc, but until someone who had solved my specific problem in life reached out to me, I kept throwing life jackets back into rescue boats. Once I connected with other people who had recovered and learned how to stay sober, I was on my way. I got the same vibe from these kids. I bought a bunch of photographs and will be working with Adams and this incredible group moving forward. I encourage everyone who reads this to log on to Kathy's site, or call , or write, and offer money, send clothes or school supplies, buy photos or simply reach out. The work being done here is transforming the social fabric of the barrio, and changing the lives of the kids and their families. Please do whatever you can, every dollar makes a difference.

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On another note I had a blast in Nicaragua, great food, amazing people, gorgeous countryside and we made a superb show that airs in June. In the spirit of the people I include a recipe for the best street snack I had in Nicaragua....