**Heidi Elkington writes from Lima, Peru:**

Guess I´d better start from the beginning, as so much has changed, so stick with me :)

The first week in November was definitely the worst ever! Feelings of loneliness, lots of ´why??´ questions and the dreaded homesickness. My mood definitely wasn´t helped by the long, early-morning, standing bus rides to school. I started comparing lifestyles to the UK and generally hated being an outsider. I struggled every day just to understand and to be understood as the novelty of language learning had worn off. Tired and frustrated, I still got on okay with my family, but struggled with food, dodgy stomachs and the will to smile and pretend that everything was fine and jolly. I missed the simplest things like jokes, a good shower and a proper hug. Luckily I peaked after about 5 days of this; a good chat (cry) about it in English, a few episodes of Friends and God´s peace sorted me out :) So feeling sorry for myself over and done with, we move on...

The weekend was much more promising and fun! We took about 45 yoooths from all over Peru (aged between 14 and 24) who were leaders of some sort in their churches, on camp. The camp was in Pachacamac which is south Lima and feels so much more rural, desert-like and very ´Peruvian´. The camp was beautiful and clean, and a great break for them. Lots of bonding, encouragement in their work with children and young people, crazy dancing, games, and reflection. I made a really good friend, Mirian, as we organised and made all the decorations together in a mixture of Spanish and English :) The weekend was really great for mine and Charlotte´s Spanish. We were both put in rooms with 5 other Peruvian girls who liked to chat and dance until half 1 in the morning, then get up at 6 to shower and take pictures of the ´gringos´ sleeping! Ha.Ha.Ha.

But it was lots of fun, and completely worth it! The best feeling of the whole weekend was teaching Jasmin, a 14 year old girl how to swim for the first time. She was so proud of herself and we both got out with big grins on our faces :)

Language school was good, great teacher and interesting class. There were about 15 of us from all around the world: Russia, China, Australia, Jordan, Brazil, US, Germany, South Africa... We finished our month of classes about 2 weeks ago now, and I managed to pass too which was an added bonus :)

Visited a physiotherapy project called Shalom where a team from the US were treating patients, giving out wheelchairs and seeing kids like a 5 year old boy who has half his intestines missing from a random shoot-out argument over a mobile phone! (I got asked to translate for a day they were short of translators HA!)

Then it was time to start working at the Compassion project. It´s about 15minutes on the bus from my house and I love it! I remember the first day walking up the dusty hill in Pamplona Alta past unfinished houses with hens and washing on the roofs, past weird purple Peruvian dogs and past staring people. This is definitely Not somewhere tourists come, although I find myself wanting to invite everyone there to experience ´real´ Lima. Compassion runs Wednesday, Thursday and Friday afternoons for about 200 children in a very narrow 4 floored building attached to the church ¨Cristo Redentor¨. They come after school for a big, healthy lunch and have their own toothbrush here. Then until 5 they have lessons on practical stuff (hygiene, health, manners etc..), help with their homework, and play on the court outside. All the children have difficult backgrounds or situations, and are chosen to come to Compassion by the lovely youth worker, Erika, who visits all the houses and makes files which then have to go through the Compassion board to decide who are the priorities. The place is bustling with smiling, cheeky faces, chatter and music :) From the first day, kids would come up to say hola and give me a kiss..they are really really sweet people..Cheesy as it sounds, this place feels like Love and God :)

So on those afternoons I help with the 13 year olds and another class of 14-17 year olds. We decided that´s where the most help and encouragement is needed (everyone finishes school at 16 here and has to have a decent job at the same time as Uni to be able to afford it. The rest go into the service industry like taxi driving, street cleaning or selling in the markets.) In the mornings I help in the nursery school downstairs; absolutely adorable 3,4 and 5 year olds sitting on their tiny chairs round tiny tables with bowls of rice, beans, fish and salad in front of them. This Friday, one of the teachers was really ill, so I took a class of nine 5 year olds all morning by myself! (never mind teacher work experience, how about getting chucked into the deep end in a different language!) But I loved it, we did spellings and played and they helped me lots :)

Monday and Tuesday, I go to another school in Pamplona called Santisima Trinidad where the pastor’s wife is head teacher. It´s attached to another church and they struggle to pay the teachers even the low salary they get here. It´s very veeery different to schools in England, hardly any discipline so it´s really hard work for the teachers..but the kids seem to have lots more fun! The teacher of the 25 or so rowdy 9 year olds has had an operation, so her husband came in to teach them instead! He´s lovely, and together we managed it. I taught Maths and English and although exhausting, it´s really rewarding and I never run short of hugs or questions to answer!

Saturdays I still go to my favourite place, Ventanilla..we had around 100 children yesterday! The 6 hour bus journey with Sarah gives me time to catch up on my English ;) and be thoughtful about things.  I´ve definitely learnt to be more patient and appreciative! We drive past thousands of Shanty houses, busy markets and drydrydry-ness! Hygiene and nutrition could be really improved; it hit me yesterday how bad most people´s teeth are..not just wonky, but rotting or completely missing! Must be painful :( And the saddest bit is to see the smiley 5 year old girl sat on my lap, with brown spots of rot on her teeth. Unfair.

But then I can see how great Compassion is in improving things like this and it makes me happy :)

Next week in Ventanilla we´re having a big party with hot chocolate and peruvian christmas cake, and giving out 110 Christmas shoe boxes! Can´t Wait!

Lima is warming up, the skies are more blue and the feeling´s more summery. I´m starting to cope better with the food (after finding a chicken heart float to the top of your soup, it can only get better) and I´ve made friends with the old beggar man down the road. I give him bread roll, biscuits or whatever I get given on top of the 2 cooked meals a day..and we´re both happy :) My family are Great! We can have a good laugh together, and I feel really comfortable here now :) They´re actually surprisingly similar to my family back home, (though no-ones Ever going to beat them!) :P and I understand enough Spanish now, not to feel bad about what I don´t understand, which makes all the difference! (Did that make sense?)

My head is so full of experiences, that it´s really hard to even start explaining!!..but I´ve given it a go..hope it was bearable :L

One last thing, I´d really love prayer for one family in particular from Ventanilla. The mum is in bed most of the day with osteoporosis and has epilepsy so the doctors bill are high, the Dad drinks money and the smallest girl of 4 is badly malnourished. Yesterday I fed her the bowl of plain pasta she hadn´t eaten, and when we had to go, she cried and wouldn´t let go of my hand. I love her to bits and am trying to come up with a plan involving buying multivitamins that might work. Please pray for this family :)

On a less important, more annoying note, something in Peru happens to like my blood! On an average day in dust I manage to obtain 12 or so bites, meaning I have a fresh set of over 60 than the 60 itches I had 20 days ago! I don´t like the anti-histamine companies enough to go on paying them all year (and I hope God doesn´t either), so I´d quite like to go un-bitten for a while :)

So now I really will stop,

Again, Thank you so much for all your support, thoughts, and prayers,

Hope chilly England´s still doing well :)

Lots of Love

Heidi xxx