

WESTERN

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BEATING THE ODDS



MATT AND ERICA HOGAN OWN AND OPERATE A SUSTAINABLE TREEHOUSE COMMUNITY IN COSTA RICA

“Sometimes you don’t choose the path, the path chooses you.”

Erica (Andrews) Hogan, a 2000 graduate, and her husband Matt, 2002, have followed their path to Costa Rica, where they now live. And while they have travelled far from their previous home in Crested Butte, their connection to Western remains strong.

The couple own and manage a sustainable treehouse community on the Southern Pacific Coast of Costa Rica. The name of the place is called Finca Bellavista, which means beautiful property. This semester an outdoor leadership course from Western, led by Professor Mark Gibson, is studying there for five weeks.

So how did all of this come to be?

In 2006 Matt visited the Southern Zone of Costa Rica on a surf trip and fell in love with the beauty and serenity of the area. Quickly he called Erica to plan a trip down there together so that they could explore the possibility of maybe buying a fixer-upper surf shack, or a bungalow in the region.

It was on Erica’s 28th birthday, after a day of looking at property, that they came across what is now Finca Bellavista, 350 acres at the base of a rainforest mountain, with two whitewater

rivers, countless big trees and critters like frogs, monkeys, and hundreds of species of birds.

Over a cocktail, pondering how they could possibly afford to purchase the property Erica brainstormed an idea, “I thought, what if we could build an Ewok village, (like from the Star Wars movie).”

To which Matt replied, “Why can’t we do that?”

And they did, or at least they are in the process of doing so. The Hogans have constructed the first model treehouse, and the property contains 19 ziplines across the rainforest. “When the Western students were here I got a kick out of hearing their Tarzan calls echoing in the river canyon as they zipped across the canopy,” Erica said.

Future plans include more treehouses to be built, (parcels of land are available to be purchased and several Western alums have already purchased lots). The world’s first treetop yoga retreat and wellness center is also planned to open in 2010.

Though the rainforest of Costa Rica is a far cry from the cool mountainous environment that is home to Western, the Hogans found their connections from college essential to their current position. A former Western Recreation and Environmental

Matt&EricaHogan



Studies Professor Darla DeRuiter, has provided valuable feedback on the Finca Bellavista project. Coincidentally, Matt and Erica met in an Ecosystems Management class, taught by DeRuiter.

Now less than a decade later, the Hogans are hosts to a Western class, providing the unique opportunity for experiential learning, utilizing a host of connections they've made over the years. The 15 Western students, who studied at Finca Bellavista through late February of this year, took Spanish lessons with a local teacher, studied native flora with a leading Costa Rican botanist, and helped gather information on the country's wild cat population.

The kicker is that they took a fauna and conservation seminar under **Dr. Jan Schipper**, a 1995 graduate of Western, who is one of the world's leading rainforest conservation biologists. Schipper is also the person who first introduced Matt to Western and Costa Rica.

With the Western family deeply involved in the creation of Finca Bellavista, possibilities for the future are endless. The Hogans shared that there could be opportunities for other departments from Western to study there including: biology, geology, environmental studies, Spanish, and archaeology.

The Hogans were sad to see the Western class leave, off to a few more weeks of studies and travels in Costa Rica before their return to Gunnison in mid-March.

In a letter to the class Erica wrote to her future fellow alumni, "Being in college and making decisions that will affect your future paths in life can be an exciting, frustrating and sometimes overwhelming process...While one small decision can seem insignificant, the butterfly effect of each thing you choose for yourself has a string of long-term effects."

Those sentiments have certainly held true for the Hogans.



Hogan photos : Tim Hussin