

News Feature/Travel

A travelling student

N.K. Cameron talks to UNB graduate Nicole Bourque about her travels in England and Ecuador

Twenty-four-year-old Nicole Bourque of Fredericton

is in her second year of a PhD program at Cambridge University in England. For fifteen months she lived in a village high in the mountains of Ecuador, doing field work towards her degree in Anthropology. What road leads one from Fredericton to Cambridge to Ecuador? I spoke with Nicole recently in Cambridge. The walls of her room are covered with hundreds of postcards which show South American animals, people, and ceremonies. She pointed out one showing the

towering volcano visible from the door of her village house.

Speaking in an acquired British accent, Nicole recalled her days at University of New Brunswick, where she decided on a career in Anthropology during her second year. She spent the third year of her B.A. immersed in French Anthropology at Laval University in Quebec City. Prior to graduating from UNB, she applied to the Commonwealth Scholarship and Fellowship Plan.

She was one of several New Brunswickers who won this award in 1988. Renewable for three years, it covers all expenses related to travel, books, thesis, living maintenance, tuition, and examination fees.

In a pub, over thick prawn sandwiches and amber beer, Nicole told me that the awards committee had warned the recipients in advance that they would have to obtain their own research funding.

Before she left for England, she wrote and obtained application forms from various funding sources in Canada. The month later start of the fall term in England makes it difficult to be advanced enough in your research plans to meet the deadline for funding applications in Canada. Cambridge University provides its students with a list of possible funding sources in Great Britain, but it was from Canadian

sources that Nicole received two sizable awards for her field work. Arriving in Cambridge for the beginning of the fall term in October 1988, she spent the first year in courses which prepare students for field work. One course deals with visas, vaccination,

and other administrative details. Another discusses health care in the field. A third course bridges the gap between theory and methodology.

Nicole and the other nine students in the first year of their PhD attended many seminars structured like open workshops, wherein each person presents their ideas and is offered constructive criticism by the others. Persons just returning from field work share their experiences and offer tips on what to do and what not to do. Gradually each student works out a field or research proposal. A mini field work project which is developed and carried out over the Christmas break, complete with interviewing people and typing transcripts, is presented in class after the New Year.

As soon as her first year ended at Cambridge in June of 1989,

Nicole headed for Ecuador. Although she had been applying for research monies beginning in November, some funds didn't come through until she'd already left for her field work. She landed in Quito, the capital, and stepped off the plane very nervous at the thought of being robbed. She says she felt no culture shock, and attributes

this to the fact that her introduction to South America was through a famous hotel in Quito which is a mecca for Western travellers.

The inadequacy of her Spanish and the absence of a necessary field research permit which was to have been issued for her by the Ecuadorean embassy in London, extended her stay in Quito. She had not chosen a site for her field work while in Cambridge, due to the lack of information available on Ecuador. After some researching, she settled on a village high in the mountains. Equipped with a cassette recorder (to play familiar music as well as to tape interviews) and a self-focusing camera that would snap photos before people had a chance to

parrots and pottery figures line her mantle, Nicole reminded me that the Indian population of South America has been exploited for 500 years, and explained how that affected her research. The tallying of children and livestock, the grouping of people with their relatives, and the establishing of the duration and places of residence -

these are questions of a highly suspect nature. All are central to the taking of a census for an ethnography. In a village where few people get beyond primary schooling because further studies would mean sending a child far away from home, not

only the stranger is foreign, but also the concepts of research, of publishing, and of a university degree. It was unthinkable to the villagers that Nicole would leave not only her home and parents and three younger sisters but all the amenities of Western life.

Her period of field work over, Nicole was back in Cambridge by the end of September 1990. She's proud to see the artifacts she shipped from South America on display at the museum of the "Arch-Anth" department. (They'd given her a £250 purchasing grant.)

Ahead of her lifetime of interpreting and transcribing interviews, analyzing data, and weaving an original PhD thesis out of theory and her findings.

It's not all work in Cambridge, however; the morning I left, Nicole was heading for Eton and the boys' school where "Chariots of Fire" was filmed. She and some friends were going to spend the day golfing. The road from Fredericton to Cambridge may be a two lane highway of hard work and generous funding but there's always time to pull over and take a walk on the wild side.

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'pose', she moved into her village house, which consisted of a bedroom.

Seasons of mud alternate with seasons of dust when everyone in the village learns to live with dirty skin, dirty hair, and dirty clothes. Toilet paper and clean sheets were non-existent. She learned how to cook guinea pig and fowls, and she shared these meals with the puppy given to her by a village neighbor.

Back in her room in Cambridge, where green and orange wooden

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