

Will you host two visitors from Costa Rica, please?

...well, would I? Really?... This was my moment of challenge ... and me living alone, long retired, looking for someone or something new!

Several months earlier a friend had invited me to Sunday lunch in a country pub with a bowling alley - have a drink and a quick game first, meet a few of her friends, then try some good roast beef, with enormous portions of home-cooked puds to follow. This was Friendship Force Cornwall. Who they were and what they stood for I did not know, nor what I was getting myself into.

It went well. They were a lovely lot of people. Jasper, my dog, enjoyed the cliff-top walk afterwards and together he and I decided to "go with the flow". Other occasions followed - a Christmas meal, with the whole group all smartly dressed, then another time a quiz night, except that the pub manager forgot to reserve a room and the quiz-master dropped out at the last minute, but who cares when there is decent food and good company?

By then I understood a little of how it worked. This occasional socialising was the glue to keep the members together over the year - they clearly knew and liked each other surprisingly well - but their main aim, along with members of other local groups such as this, was to create lasting personal friendships and understanding at "grass-roots level" among dozens of countries ... *across the whole world*. WOW!

So I joined. It seemed worthwhile if unrealistically ambitious. They were my kind of friendly folks, trying to achieve something and enjoying themselves at the same time. I still did not feel particularly close to them, but it was early days.

Then came my challenge. It was not put that way at all, but as a discreet enquiry. They were short of hosts for a group coming in a few months' time. Would I consider it? Now if you belong to something you have to support it, properly, not half-heartedly. Anyway, I always like giving hospitality and helping visitors to feel at home and besides, what is the use of a guest room without guests? So I said yes, instinctively, not needing to consider it.

Unknown to me a smooth organisation was falling into place. An outline programme for the week's visit appeared, followed by the email address of my guest couple with encouragement to contact them ... and say what? They might speak little English and my Spanish was less than basic. Quick, get some language CDs off eBay! A staged, historical pageant was being planned, as the finale to their week ... I was to represent IK Brunel, the engineer ... the costume try-on became hilarious, whilst someone was scripting a bilingual commentary. Only later did I realise how the whole thing was built on the group's experience and teamwork. Particular members had been "volunteered" for special activities, a coach and various venues had been booked and a mass of detail was being arranged.

Nearer the time, the reality of what I had taken on began to dawn. My guests emailed that they had no dietary problems, but what sort of breakfasts to offer them - light or full English? Evening meals for the first couple of days - proper roasts, or quick grills, or something made in advance? Several lots of picnic lunches needed - make them sandwiches, or buy pies and snacks, or what would they like? Also, where to take them and what to do with them on their first day spent with the individual hosts? Add to all of this planning and uncertainty the thought of cleaning and preparations, then a mammoth supermarket shop. With just me on my own, "apprehensive" does not do it justice.

The turning point came at the rehearsal for the Pageant, which brought everyone together. They were all so helpful, such as Gavin and Maggie: *Your first time? Why not bring your guests to join with ours on the first day and we'll all go out together? Then you can follow us to Margie's for the Welcome tea party*. Then Jo, kindly and gentle: *You're coming to me for a meal on Sunday*, and Robin: *I can lend you a top hat for your Brunel outfit*, followed by Christine: *Could you and Maggie squeeze my guests into your two cars on Saturday and take them to Yvonne's for the Pasty Making demo?* And so, with Sally's: *You can do it, Lovely*, it all began to fit into place.

At last the visitors arrived, tired after an all-day coach journey from London via Stonehenge. Carlos spoke quite good English and his young wife, Yamileth, was delightful. They settled in straight away - complimentary about my home, happy even with Jasper's noisy welcome, no problem about meals and particularly pleased with all the fruit I had been recommended to have in.

By a stroke of good luck the nearest members of our group to me were Gavin and Maggie. Their guests, Marco and Lucia, turned out to be long-time friends of my couple so our combined outing, around the beautiful Roseland Peninsular, was ideal for them. This sharing also worked well for us throughout the week. I was able to take all four guests for the group visit to Lanhydrock House, when Gavin and Maggie both had to work. Equally, on the Sunday morning, they did the run to the Catholic mass whilst I was busy ringing church bells in Stithians. Sunday was another free day so we naturally went together, showing them Cornwall's north coast including the famous Bedruthan steps.

There was much more in the week's programme - a boat trip down the river Fal, a coach tour around St Ives, Mousehole and Marazion, a nice meal out as the treat of our guests, a sight-seeing and shopping day in Truro and, of course, the Farewell Supper and Pageant. I was not needed for the first two of these excursions, which gave me free time, but it was good to hear how well they had enjoyed their visits. In fact they regularly crashed out for a quick sleep before starting again with each evening's entertainment.

It was the immediate friendship of the Costa Ricans, their warmth and acceptance on first meeting, which added much to the pleasure of sharing with them. They fitted in so easily - preparing breakfasts and packed lunches, doing DIY fixing some pictures for me, Yamileth even demanding a broom and dustpan. A spontaneous beer-tasting, with seven of us around my kitchen table and six different real ales to try, was a magic hour of happiness.

Their gifts illustrating their native animals, the insights gained into another world, their sincere invitations to make return visits and their descriptions of personal friendships maintained from previous exchanges, these things and the whole delightful week have convinced me of Friendship Force International. I wanted something new: This and my new friends will be part of it. Thank you!