

DESTINATION: DOMINICA

HOW 16-YEAR-OLD
MICHELE GERSMAN
LEARNED TO LOVE
CEMENTING SEPTIC
TANKS IN A TROPICAL
PARADISE.

I was ready for a change. For the past two summers, I'd been working at a local day camp, and I really wanted to try something new, like community service. Also, I'd only been out of the United States once, and I was dying to experience something a little different from my hometown of Great Neck, N.Y. So after doing a lot of research on the Internet and discussing different programs with my parents, I chose the Vision Service Adventures program in Dominica, a lush 29-mile-long island in the Caribbean. I'd be living and working in Salybia, Carib Indian territory.

I was nervous, but the second I stepped off the plane, I had no regrets. Hot air rushed over my face, and it hit me: I was really here! It seemed like the whole country had turned out to greet the kids in the program—there were even a few guys screaming "Supergirl!" because I was wearing a Superman T-shirt. Before arriving at the Salybia School, our home for the next 28 days, we toured the island. All I remember thinking was how amazing it was that every morning I'd be waking up to this beauty.

Of course, I didn't know how hard falling asleep would be.

The first night was pretty difficult. Everyone on the trip had bonded really easily, but I was homesick. And the stifling heat, my deflated air mattress and the claustrophobic mosquito netting didn't help. My roommates were so reassuring, though, which was a great way to start off the trip.

We spent the first few days exploring the island's mind-boggling geography, but then the real work began. We would wake up at 7:15 A.M., and decide which task to undertake: I spent most of my time at the preschool, where the incredibly independent children found a new way to shock me each day. It was pretty hard to keep an eye on all of them, but I never got sick of it. There was so much to do at the school. My friend Samantha and I painted a mural (funny, since we're both artistically challenged), and built



So ready for the water hole.



Michele and friend.



One nutty souvenir.



Don't get too attached to those sandals, Michele.



Cementing the septic tank. Fun!



Home sweet home: the Salybia School.

tables, benches, toy boxes and bookshelves. But my favorite activity? Cementing the septic tank. It was great learning how to do something I never thought I'd do—while talking and laughing with the funniest people in the world!

At the end of our workdays, we'd be sweaty, smelly and generally pretty nasty. By the third week, we had no water and couldn't take showers. No problem! Every day we'd head to a water hole to wash off. Our favorite was Bassa Ma Jo, where the water was clear, cold and crisp.

Did I mention that we didn't have working toilets or sinks? Going to the bathroom required walking across a field to the outhouse. I usually went with a few other girls, so they could hold the door—and I could hold my nose. But at night we didn't feel like dragging ourselves over there—the bats flying around our heads didn't help—so we decided to make one big peeing circle. Ah, the power of girl bonding.

Throughout this trip, the kind of luck I'd had with my deflated air mattress often found me. My camera broke. My Discman was stolen. My sandals and favorite necklace were washed out to sea. But by the time my scuba equipment spontaneously combusted in the back of our Jeep, I really didn't care. Dominica had changed me. It had made me realize that many of the things I used to call necessities are truly unnecessary. All anyone really needs is amazing friends, good health—and the chance to do something you love. ☐

TRIP TIPS

FOR MORE INFO ABOUT VISIONS SERVICE ADVENTURES go to visions-adventure.org. **THE PRICE** \$4,500, including airfare. "You only need about \$40 a week for spending money," says Michele. "I brought \$200 and it was too much!" **MOST ESSENTIAL ITEM MICHELE PACKED** "A lot of bug spray." **THE THINGS SHE REALLY WISHED SHE'D PACKED** "A Therm-a-Rest instead of an air mattress! And a small fan (mine broke), a flashlight that worked (mine also broke) and face pads to wash my face."