

ECUADOR: THE GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS & THE ANDES

There I was, June 27th, looking around Miami International Airport for people I had only seen pictures of online. I was so nervous I was practically shaking. My fears were soon washed away as I found my group and was quickly approached by our two leaders who greeted me with a comforting hug. My nervousness was sent aside and my fellow group members and I spent the next 4 hours getting to know each other and preparing ourselves for what was to be a month long adventure in the amazing country of Ecuador.

We first arrived in Quito and bused to our hostel, which was to be our base camp through the next four weeks. The next few days were spent getting introduced to Ecuadorian culture and the different customs we should be prepared to expect. Our second day in Quito proved to be one of my most memorable experiences when we visited the local botanical gardens. It was there that I found a flower that I had been searching long and hard for: the Dracula orchid. I had seen a picture of it once yet never knew the name and spent years trying to find it. It was such unexpected find that it still brings a smile to my face.



While in Quito, we were also thrown into Spanish immersion lessons which included a multiple choice test that had us all having horrible flashbacks to school. It was all worth it



though, as we learned our first trip would be to Riobamba, where we would spend a week with our homestay family. We were all extremely nervous to meet our families, primarily because most of us could not speak Spanish well. It had been two years since my last Spanish class and I feared that it would be extremely uncomfortable the entire stay. I'm

very thankful to say I was wrong and I couldn't have asked for a better family. Once we arrived in Riobamba, I was greeted with open arms by my 5 family members: my papa, Nelson; my mama, Silvia; my brother, David; and my two sisters, Emilia and Paula. They made me feel as

welcome as possible and that night they took me to a local concert because they knew about my love for music. I was touched that they put so much thought into my first night with them.

The next few days proceeded with a slight awkwardness as we all tried to get to know each other through the language barriers, as my host brother was the only one who could speak a little English. Even though I was extremely out of my comfort zone, I was grateful for the chance to be able to practice my Spanish and to be immersed in their culture. One thing that brought us closer together was cooking, the true way to a person's heart. I love to cook and I really wanted to make them one of my personal favorite dinners, chicken parmesan. That day my parents took me to the local markets and helped me to buy the ingredients I would need. Being able to do something as simple as cook a meal for my family became one of my happiest memories with them.



One of the best parts about the homestay was our volunteer work with a local park to restore its watershed. We got down and dirty to clean out weeds that had completely overrun many areas and returned it to its previous lively beauty. However, I was only able to help my group for two days before I became ill. I had gotten a UTI that, combined with the high altitude, exacerbated my dehydration and caused me to be out of commission for the week on some serious bed rest. My host parents took such good care of me that it felt like I was back at home. When the end of the week came it was incredibly hard to say goodbye. I had grown close to everyone in my family and I didn't want to let them go. It was a teary goodbye filled with hugs and promises to keep in touch. I will forever love my host family and the lessons they taught me.



Our next stop was the amazingly beautiful city of Baños de Agua Santa, filled with waterfalls and lush green landscape. We first travelled to Pailon del Diablo, the Devil's Cauldron, which is a well-known waterfall in

Baños. After we hiked to the waterfall, we stood mere feet away from it and drenched ourselves in its frigid splashes, giggling like little kids. That night, my group leaders and I went to the nearby hot springs while the rest of the group went shopping around town. It was a fun and different experience that I will not soon forget. The next, and final, day we went horseback riding up a nearby mountain and were able to see the true loveliness Baños had to offer. We returned to Quito that night to rest and prepare for what the next day held: the Galápagos Islands.



There are no words to describe how I felt when we flew over the islands I had only ever dreamed of visiting. And that's how everything seemed, like I was in a dream. The airport, on the island of Baltra, was surrounded by a desert landscape, something shockingly different to what I was

used to seeing. We were soon transported to a boat that took us to Santa Cruz, where we would be staying for the night. There are very few things that can compare to seeing the beautiful Galápagos waters for the first time. Once we reached land we walked along the beach to Tortuga Bay. Along the way we saw what we thought to be black rocks but were actually marine iguanas! The following day we went to the Charles Darwin Research Station where we saw many tortoises and learned about the breeding programs in place to boost their numbers. There were also many of Darwin's famous finches flying about calling to each other. That night we stayed at a hotel in Santa Cruz, but the rest of our stay would take place on a boat, the Golondrina. The next morning we were able to explore the local area while we waited to board the boat. Once we were on, we traveled to another tortoise breeding site and learned more about the conservation efforts that went towards protecting them. That night we traveled to a different island





for our next adventure. At our next stop we were able to see pink salts flats, white tipped sharks, and many seals. Afterwards we went snorkeling and were able to swim with the amazing wildlife! We traveled to several other islands snorkeling and visiting the protected parks at each. The boat was also a great bonding experience for my

group. We would sit on the deck each night sharing stories and singling along to our favorite songs. Those were my favorite nights of the entire trip, where we could just enjoy the breeze and the beauty that surrounded us. It was truly amazing to be able to see the incredibly diverse and amazing life unique to the Galápagos. I will always remember the magic that I experienced there.

After we said our goodbyes to the Galápagos, we headed back to our hostel in Quito where we had a free day to explore the city. We visited the Guayasamín museum, which housed the artwork of Oswaldo Guayasamín, a very famous Ecuadorian painter and sculptor who was born in Quito. His artwork was awe-inspiring and captured the struggles faced by many peoples from around the world. The next day we traveled to Quito's historical old town district, one of the parts of the trip I was most excited for. We first went to Panecillo Hill, where we saw its famous 45 meter statue of the Virgin of Quito; it was truly a magnificent sight. Afterwards we traveled to what I had been heavily anticipating our entire trip, the Basílica del Voto Nacional. I love church architecture, especially ones built in Gothic style. It was wonderful to be able to explore the grand structure and see the detailing everywhere. Our last stop was at Plaza Grande where we were sent on a "scavenger hunt" and had to use our Spanish skills to ask locals for help. The historic district became one of my absolute favorite places we visited on the trip.



We left Quito the next day and stopped for a short time at two different sites at the Equator. We first went to the “actual equator” where we tried to balance eggs, performed physical feats to show weakened muscles on either side of the line, and watched as the water drained differently on different sides. Afterwards we moved to Ciudad Mitad del Mundo, the touristy site that was marked out by the French. By mid-day we were off to the Mindo Cloud Forest, the most different experience so far. We stayed in a remote cabin in the forest, where we had to hike back and forth to get to the cabin and town. There were no walls, so we slept under bug nets to keep the mosquitos away, which had me constantly reminded of Florida. While there we hiked to at



least 4 different waterfalls, visited a butterfly garden, went tubing down a rocky river, and got to learn about the chocolate making process. It was a jam packed few days but it allowed me to become more in tune with nature than before.



Our final stop was the Amazon Rainforest where we stayed at Gaia Amazon Eco-lodge. This place was truly and utterly amazing. The Amazon has such a unique and beautiful scenery that it's difficult to forget where you are. We mostly traveled by place to place by means of a motorized canoe, which was exciting to say the least. However, to get back to our lodge from the water we had to climb up several flights of stairs through part of the forest; it was arduous but worth it as I got to see and hear nature at work every time I



climbed them. The Amazon went on to push me out of my comfort zone far more than I had ever been the entire trip. Our second day there we trekked through the forest around the lodge. The trail was thick with dense foliage and the ground was covered in slick mud. I have an extreme fear of falling so the three hour long journey tested me to my limits. Every step I took induced a frenzied panic within me that was hard to overcome. I pushed through my fears and made it out on the other side proud of myself that I had continued on despite the fact I wanted to quit. We also visited the Amazonico, an animal rescue center that helps to rehabilitate animals that are part of the illegal animal trade and care for animals that cannot be released back into the wild. It was harrowing to hear the sorrowful tales of many of the inhabitants but I was glad that at least these animals had a home to live out the rest of their days. We ended our stay with a Shaman

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arrived back in Quito was our farewell dinner. We laughed and joked about everything that had happened over the past month. It was hard to grasp that we would all be separated by that time the next day. Our airports goodbyes were filled with many smiles, tears, and hugs. I had an incredible group that was led by two incredible people. This trip and these people will remain forever engraved in my heart. None of this would have been possible without the scholarship from the Naples Council on World Affairs none of this would be possible and I am forever thankful for the opportunity they gave me.