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NCWA Ecuador

Before I explain the priceless experience I had in the summer of 2016, I would like to thank the Naples Council on World Affairs, sincerely, for the scholarship they afforded me and making this experience a reality.

July 2016 was full of amazing memories and experiences, most completely out of my comfort zone. Before this summer, I had not been away from my family for longer than a period of ten days, so traveling out of the country for a month without them was quite daunting, but also quite exciting. I spent weeks wondering what it would be like and if I would be able to take on the challenge. Eventually, the day of my departure arrived, and I was thrilled! I met my group



and our leaders in the Miami airport around two o'clock. After the initial awkwardness, I was shocked how quickly our group began to come together as a family. After our short four hour flight to the Ecuadorian capital city of Quito, we arrived at the place we would know as home for the next month, Mision Carmelita. For the next few days we began our immersion in the Ecuadorian culture through

Spanish classes, both in language and cultural norms, as well as our immersion into the group we would call our family during July. After only a few days, it was clear how close my group was and would become overtime; everyone was so accepting and genuine.

After our orientation in Quito, our group began our first excursion to the beautiful community of Baños, an oasis of waterfalls and simple, natural beauty. Our first adventure in Baños came on our second day where we took a bus to go on a cable car over a river between two mountains; it was absolutely beautiful!



After our cable car ride, we ventured further into the forest-like terrain to hike to beautiful waterfalls, one of which we actually got to get within yards of! It was amazing to see the innate beauty of nature that up close! The following day, we went horseback riding up a mountain in the local area. The view was absolutely breathtaking and unlike anything I had ever seen before!

The next part of the trip was the part that made me the most nervous, the homestay in Riobamba. I didn't know what to expect, and that uncertainty was frightening. However, all my fears went away upon arriving in Riobamba; I was greeted by a swarm of families excited to meet their new “hijos and hijas”. My host family was small, it was just a grandmother, Raquel Guadalupe, and her eighteen year old granddaughter, Alexandra. I remember the awkwardness of the first night, trying to adapt to their customs and language, while making a myriad of mistakes in the process. However, after a little while, I learned how I would bond with my family for the next week, and that was through the universal language of cooking, a passion my host mother and I both shared. About halfway through the homestay, my host mother and I traded recipes; I got hers for empanadas and I gave her mine for chocolate chip cookies! We spent the last few nights of my homestay perfecting our recipes and enjoying the delicious new treats we had made.

During the homestay, my group had amazing opportunities to explore the culture and give back to the beautiful community of Riobamba. During the week of our homestay, we got to refurbish a school for deaf children in the heart of the town; what a priceless experience. It was here that we began to notice all of the things we take for granted in the United States. After each day of community service, we also had an afternoon activity. Our first was two days of salsa dancing, which I would have to say was my favorite! Our group ranged in coordination and dance experience for sure, but the continued support of our peers, leaders, and teachers, made the experience so phenomenal. The next activity was a cooking class, where we made ayampaco, a traditional Ecuadorian dish of chicken and pico de gallo, and lamb and yucca, a root similar to that of a potato. Our last activity was vastly different from the others: climbing and then



mountain biking down Mt. Chimborazo, which is the closest point to the Sun on Earth, given its proximity to the Equator. We took a bus for about three hours to where we would begin our hike. The view was breathtaking, both metaphorically and literally, as the air was so extremely thin. After concluding the hike, we began our 38 kilometer (about 24 miles) bike ride down the mountain, on a dirt road, to where we would be eating lunch.

The view was absolutely amazing, as we got to watch the mountain transform from a rich white with dirt to a myriad of shades of greens right before our eyes. This concluded our activities as a group in Riobamba, as we spent the final days with our host families taking in all we could.

Our next excursion was the to world famous, Galapagos Islands, my absolute favorite part of the trip. We woke up around 5am to begin our travel, which would include two separate plane rides, which in total were about three hours. Upon, landing we proceeded to take a bus, followed by a ferry, to where we would be staying in Santa Cruz, a small but gorgeous hotel with proximity to the Pacific Ocean. The next day, we got to visit the amazing Charles Darwin Research Center and observe the giant tortoises as well as learn about the species' evolution. We then began the next part of our trip in the Galapagos, where we would call a boat, the Golondrina, our home for the next three nights. Our first morning was an early one, as we had to wake up at 5:50am for a 6am departure, however, it was well worth it as we got to see the indigenous penguins and black tip sharks of



Isabela Island. Right after our island exploration we jumped into the water with all of our snorkel gear and began our first snorkeling excursion, where we got to swim with sea lions, sea turtles, and sharks (oh my!). Later that day we drove across the island to observe an ancient cave as well as see flamangos! All of the diverse ecology was surreal to see, as the majority is only found on the Galapagos Islands. Each night on the boat was filled with great conversations and lots of fun with my group. Our favorite late night activity was star gazing; after the boat began moving, there were no lights, which revealed an array of stars as well as the galaxies, which are not visible in traditional cities around the world, as they are typically washed out by lights. The following day, we went snorkeling again; this one was by far the most the most exciting. After our morning hike to observe mockingbirds and cacti, we proceeded to put on our snorkeling

gear. Our group snorkeled for about a half hour and then about half took a small boat, which we called a “panga”, to return to the main boat, the Golondrina. I decided, however, to stay behind with the other half of the group that was still in the water. My friends and I continued until we saw a massive seven-foot black tip shark approaching, my friend Bridget and I froze. It was headed directly for us and as we moved it moved; it continued its direct path to us, and swam right under our feet, nearly touching us! It was an absolutely, amazing experience. Later that day we traveled to Dragon Island, where we hiked to see the world famous marine and land iguanas, which do indeed resemble dragons, and also enjoy feeding on cacti. After our hike, we went snorkeling for the second time that day and saw a myriad of fish as well as a sea turtle bigger than most people in our group! We concluded the night with a farewell dinner on the boat and were off the following day to our next adventure.

We traveled back to Quito the next day and enjoyed a great dinner together as a group, as



well as some Dominos pizza, which, if you were wondering, does deliver in Ecuador. The following day, went sightseeing in the “Old City” of Quito, at Panicillo Hill, to see the Virgin of Quito Statue, which is of the Virgin Mary. It was a gift to Ecuador by the same people

of France that constructed the Statue of Liberty and is also the only statue of Mary, in the world, to have Mary depicted with wings. After our visit to the statue, we proceeded to go to a gorgeous Cathedral called the Basilica of San Francisco, in the heart of the town.

The following day, we traveled to the Amazon, which our group was both very nervous and excited about. After traveling about three hours by bus, we proceeded to take a motorized

canoe, to the picturesque Yarina Lodge. Each time we walked to the canoe or back to the lodge, we climbed about twenty flights of stairs! After arrival, we went back to the canoe, and journeyed to see Amazonian animals in the wild; we caught glimpses of monkeys and baboons, all hanging or

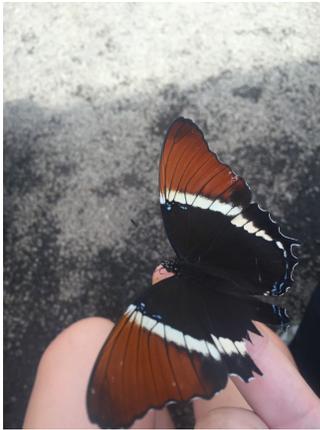


swinging from trees! The next day, we embarked on our first hike in the Amazon, which I must say was very difficult, but filled with amazing ecology and views; I even ate an ant, which tasted a lot like lemon! We saw vibrantly colored poisonous frogs, extremely large spiders, and

termites, which some members of my group were brave enough to eat, when our guide offered.

After the hike, we got to make homemade chocolate using real cacao! It was delicious! The morning of the third day in the Amazon, we went to an animal sanctuary where we got to see toucans, spider monkeys, anacondas, and jaguars! Later that day, we went to a beach on the Amazon River and ate our lunch of chicken fried rice, served on leaves, and then proceeded to play a riveting match of soccer and tube down the river for an hour! Right before dinner, we traveled to the homes of two indigenous families, where we got to make pottery and paint with brushes made of hair as well as play a game with a blow gun! That night, around nine o'clock, we participated in a shaman ceremony, which is performed by the shaman of the town to cleanse, both spiritually and physically. Our trip to the Amazon packed quite a bit into a very short period of three days. However, even though our group was completely out of its comfort zone, it was an amazing experience, where we grew closer both as a group and with nature.

Our last adventure was to the Mindo Cloud Forest, and it was very different from what we had originally thought. We arrived to find a handmade, hand-pulled, single person cable car ready; we took this everyday to cross the river to go to our lodge. Our lodge consisted of a treehouse-like structure, where the kitchen was downstairs and the beds upstairs; the treehouse was completely open and lacked doors of any kind, so it was definitely a new experience for all of us. Each night, we went to sleep with the sound of the river in our ears and mosquito nets over our beds. Our second day began with a cable car, about 530 meters above the forest, and an



extremely challenging hike to two gorgeous waterfalls, each of which we got to swim in! That night we traveled to the center of the town of Mindo for a chocolate tour, which had some of best brownies I have ever tasted! We also participated in a Zumba class for about an hour, which was located in the town square! The third and final day we were in Mindo was filled with a lot of activity! We got up in the

morning to walk to a butterfly farm and had the luxury of having butterflies landing on our fingers all morning. After spending a few hours at the farm, we walked across the street to go white-water tubing, which is very similar to white water rafting except for the fact that you are in seven tubes tied together, so it is even more adventurous! That afternoon



we left for Quito and concluded our last major adventure as a group.

The last few days of our trip were filled with tears and goodbyes. It was remarkable to see how close we had become as a group after only knowing each other for a month and to recall

all of the amazing places we had visited and all of the memories we had made. This trip was an amazing experience that I am so grateful to have had. I would once again like to thank the Naples Council on World Affairs for their generosity in affording me a scholarship, as without them, this experience would not have been possible. The Summer of 2016 was full of life changing experiences that I will never forget and for which I will be eternally grateful.