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Looking back on my short but wonderful time in Ecuador, it's hard to believe I partook in such an amazing experience. The rolling mountains of the Andes, the mists of the cloud and rainforests, and the sunrises in the Galapagos Islands will forever remain a personal source of inspiration for me. Studying abroad opened my eyes to new environments and culture, but it also helped me realize a little about how many beautiful things exist on this earth.

Our trip to Ecuador began as the majority of our small class of 9 plus Dr. Fogle gathered in the O'Hare terminal. We all chatted about the things we would see; the excitement was contagious. We flew to Miami to pick up our last member and headed onward to Quito, the capital of Ecuador nestled in the Andes Mountains. Although Quito is one the largest cities in Ecuador, it didn't have the big bright lights of North American cities. Instead, it appeared to be more like a bed of dying embers as we flew in that first night.

Our first couple days of exploration included Quito's famous Otavalo market where indigenous vendors gathered to sell beautifully colored paintings, clothes, scarves, jewelry, instruments, and the incredibly soft baby alpaca shawls. Alpaca are much like llamas, except they are used more for their long soft hair sheared seasonally. We also traveled through the Andes to a cloud forest where we encountered many interesting and brightly colored hummingbirds. These little birds had no fear of humans and would dart about without concern. One flew so close to my ear, I could feel its wingtips beat against my ear lobe and hear the loud buzzing generated from its rapid wing movement. It was so amazing to watch the vegetation change drastically as we changed elevation in the Andes. It seemed to go from simple eucalyptus and orchids to vines, bromeliads, and other tropical plants. The tropical plants in the higher elevation looked like something out of Jurassic Park with long twining vines, large leaves, orchids, epiphytes of all proportions and the sounds of exotic animals calling and chirping from all around. Hiking through these vistas was a breathtaking experience. To be immersed and isolated in a place not controlled by human hands for once was indescribable. These plants weren't sown by a farmer or tended to by a botanist; they reigned over this land.

Visiting the equator was another new and exciting experience. I was able to see first hand the effects of the invisible forces the earth has on gravity. I watched as water in a basin 3 feet north of the equator spiraled counterclockwise down a drain, clockwise 3 feet south of the equator and straight down when directly placed on the equator. The indigenous have been aware of these forces for nearly a thousand years with artifacts of certain shells and graves to prove this.

The next part of our journey included the Galapagos Islands. Here, we all stared in awe as we saw the famous blue-footed boobie, Darwin's giant land tortoise and his very famous finches. 97% of the Galapagos is a preserved national park teeming with extraordinary wildlife in the sky, on land and below the water. The islands are very unique for many reasons; they are home to many endemic species, they are still growing, and they are the source of the greatest scientific discovery thus far: evolution. During the day, we'd hike across the islands and catch a blue-footed boobie guarding its fuzzy white young and snorkel around shark caves while sea lions swam playfully around us. At night, our 600 mile distance from any type of city worked in our advantage as we gazed at the wondrously bright stars and constellations from our boat. Just above the Milky Way, which stretched across the sky, I was able to see the Southern Cross for the first time. Since we were on the equator, we could see the stars of both the northern and southern hemispheres. Below us, we watched the bioluminescent dinoflagellates twinkling in the water like aquatic fireflies. When an animal like a shark would swim around our boat into a cluster of the bioluminescence, they seemed to pulse once like a bolt of lightning and then outline the figure of the shark leaving a trail of tiny flickering lights behind it. One night when I was sleeping on the boat's deck, Freddie, the captain, woke me up and brought me to the bow. We were traveling approximately 10 miles an hour, but I could still see and hear a set of 4 dolphins chattering and swimming along side the boat with the bioluminescence being swept along them. They played along the boat's waves and would suddenly sprint forward and leap into the air. In the morning, the sun would come up around 4:30 and the view was spectacular. Every shade of the spectrum painted the background of the islands and other nearby boats. My favorite parts of the Galapagos were the nights and the sunrises.

Our last portion of the trip included the Ecuadorian rainforest. We spent several days at

a lodge along the Napo River (an extension of the Amazon River). Here we learned about many large insects, amazing animals, and medicinal plants. Lenny our guide was a shaman in training. He had a lot of knowledge about the many plants and their uses. This way, people in his village could consult him if they had an ailment. Once when we were hiking, I was stung deeply by a wasp and upon notifying Lenny, he gave me a root to rub into the sore. Within half an hour, I felt no pain and the sting did not bother me ever again. One of the most memorable parts of the rainforest was when we visited a village with a school. The children were so excited to see us. They all came running as soon as they spotted us and shook our hands. They spoke the Quichua language (indigenous language) as well as some Spanish. We played soccer with them and they showed us a common Quichua dance and song, so we showed them "I'm a little teapot." At lunch we had a meal that looked questionable but was very delicious. It included soup (banana and palm heart), eggs mixed with greens, manioc (like potatoes), and raw sugar cane for dessert. It was all placed on a banana leaf and eaten with our hands. While the experience was a good one, it gave me first hand knowledge of some injustices some people have to deal with. French oil companies are becoming more widespread in these areas and fail to assist and compensate for oil spills or damaged land. While this village was relatively unaffected, other villages accept invitations from oil companies because of the large initial amount of money received. However, there have been lakes and large pieces of land permanently damaged by machinery and oil spills. For example, entire lakes have had oil dumped in them, killing all the fish. Monkey hunting has decreased due to the machinery scaring them away. In general, many of the children at the village were without shoes and had to walk miles to their school from their homes sometimes toting a baby brother or sister. How can a child learn properly when they have to carry an infant?

After the rainforest, we headed back to Quito to enjoy one last meal in the hotel and to attend a Quichua ballet illustrating the many customs and events the Quichua celebrate throughout the year. It was interesting to see the different instruments used and to see the brightly colored outfits worn by the performers.

Going to Ecuador was the best decision I've ever made. It was beautiful, magnificent and

allowed me to see into a completely different and wonderful culture. Hopefully, someday I will be able to visit again.

CWIL Reflection

Environments of Ecuador

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