



Maddy

From Tillsonburg to Ecuador

“I can think of only one word to describe it “

Ecuador, Ecuador, Ecuador. Como puedo describirte? How can I describe you? I have now been here for just a little short of three months. Already I've had so many adventures, have been profoundly surprised, challenged, and changed, to some extent, every single day. I have gone horseback riding in the Andes. I've danced until 4 in the morning. I've *seen* the global wealth divide, with my own two eyes. I've lived through my first attempted revolution; experienced a Latin American coup d'état firsthand. And now as I lie in bed trying to write a coherent summary of my experiences I feel like I'm trying to catch smoke with my bare hands. Despite my best efforts, the English language is simply insufficient to convey the essence of the events, feelings, people, and memories that have comprised the beginning of my exchange year. So I will try to put this all into words as best as I possibly can.

My departure in Toronto was teary-eyed and bleary-eyed but the logistics went off without a hitch. And I got upgraded to business class on my second flight from Miami to Guayaquil because there was a mix-up with the seats. I arrived late at night, exhausted, scared out of my mind, but incredibly excited to explore a whole new world. That being said, airports are the same everywhere. They are bastions of propriety and order even in the most wild of places. And Ecuador, once you step out of the clean, modern, air-conditioned airport, is a wild place. This was first illustrated to me in transit from the airport in Guayaquil to my home in the city of Machala. Before we had even pulled out of the parking lot we had almost caused a vehicle collision. The generalization that Ecuadorians are bad/dangerous drivers is shockingly true. They're just... yeah. They have no regard for traffic rules the way North Americans do. It's chaos, but after three months here it just feels normal. As we left Guayaquil we started seeing some true Ecuadorian scenery - I gazed upon mountains and the ocean and banana plantations and mangrove forests on that first night and I had only yet seen the tiniest

sliver of this country. And it was beautiful even in the nighttime darkness.

Two days later, I started school. I can think of only one word to describe it and the English equivalent just doesn't do it justice: loco. Here in Ecuador, I have to leave for school at 6:30 (!) in the morning. Even though the uniform saves me time getting ready, that means I have to get up at 5:45 (!!!) every day. At first the mere thought made me want to cry (I am *not* a morning person), and while I still don't exactly enjoy the arrangement, it mostly feels normal at this point. I had been warned in advance that school in South America is chaotic but I was really surprised by it. My *colegio* is the nicest, most expensive private school in town, but nevertheless it is madness. Really, if there is one English adjective I can attach to school, it's *loud*. Everybody yells and runs and sings and dances around the classroom, and there have been more than a few headaches as a result. That being said, all of my classmates are extremely friendly. People here are fascinated by exchange students and love to ask questions and talk to you, which is one of the aspects of Ecuador that I love. Back home in Canada the people are wonderful of course, but I have come to notice that we Canadians are definitely more reserved. There have been times that I've hated school here (ie. when I've gotten in trouble from the school "inspectors" for having my nails painted or the wrong colour of socks), but generally I don't mind it, and it really makes me appreciate how lucky I am to be from a country like Canada where we have fantastic education that is publicly funded. School in Ecuador is definitely a different kind of experience.

On the topic of publicly funded education, while none of the Rotary exchange students in my city are attending public schools, we did have the opportunity to visit a public school last month to help with a Rotary project that gives out anti-parasitic medicine to impoverished children. Because I live with a wealthy family in a wealthy part of town and go to a wealthy school, this was one of my first true up-close-and-personal experiences with Ecuador's poverty. I cannot describe with words alone what this school looked like, but it was an utter wreck and it definitely tugged at even the stiffest heart-strings. To walk down rows of desks and place pills on the tongues and cups of water in the hands of little children, to look into their eyes and know that we were, if even in some minor way, helping them; that to me was one of the most important and most rewarding days of my entire exchange.

In Ecuador, family is one of the most important institutions, so it's definitely critical that I take a minute to describe mine. I love my first host family. Seriously, I do. If I could spend my entire year at this house I certainly wouldn't hesitate to do so. My parents are both very hard-working (my mother is an obstetrician and my father is a civil engineer), so we don't spend a ton of time together, but with 4 siblings there is always somebody in the house and it is definitely never lonely. I have an 18-year old sister and 3 brothers between the ages of 16 and 27. While my sister and my middle brother live in another city for university, my youngest and oldest brother live at home with us and we have the best relationship. Some of my best memories, whether of cruising around town, having food fights, or just chilling and talking, have been with my brothers. I can honestly say that my youngest brother, specifically, is my best Ecuadorian friend, and I'm going to miss him to death come January when I have to move to my next host

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family. As a family we have travelled a lot, everywhere from chilly Ambato high up in the Andes (I saw a volcano!), to sweltering Manta on the coast. But perhaps my favourite thing about my family is that they treat me like the almost-adult that I am and give me a significant amount of freedom. I feel like I have become so much more independent since I came here, and that is largely thanks to my having such an awesome host family.

When I first arrived in Ecuador I spoke essentially zero Spanish, just some basic phrases and the most minimal of present-tense verb conjugations. At this point, I would estimate that I understand between 75-90% of spoken conversation (depending on the accent and speed of the person talking) and can say more or less whatever I need to. Spanish is a relatively easy language to learn, but at first I was frustrated out of my mind by it, especially because so many of the other exchange students had at least a few years of high school Spanish classes under their belt. That being said, my background in French, another Romance language, definitely gave me an advantage in understanding the basic grammar structures of Spanish, although at first I would accidentally insert French words (ie. "oui" instead of "si", "mais" instead of "pero") into my conversations. Some days I feel like I speak way too much English, due to the high concentration of exchange students in my city and siblings who speak English, but most of the time I'm really proud of the progress I've made, and I've come to love the feeling of accomplishment that comes after you've had a real, engaging conversation en espanol.

Rotary Exchange in Ecuador is a fantastic program, and it is *legendary* for the incredible trips they organize. So far I've experienced the first two - language camp in the Andes mountains near the breathtaking colonial city of Cuenca, and a sun-drenched voyage to the northern coastal province of Manabi. At our language camp we met up with the exchange students from the cities of Cuenca, Loja, and Guayaquil at a tranquil mountaintop resort for an awesome 5 days filled with learning and getting to know each other. We had Spanish classes during the days, and everything from salsa classes to horseback riding to ziplining in the evenings. On our final night, we had a special mini-festival of Cuencana culture, including a "vaca loca" performance (in which a daredevil wears a papier-mache cow headdress covered in fireworks and runs around in circles - this really challenged our North American and European concepts of "safety regulations") and beautiful paper lanterns which we sent into the sky accompanied by wishes for a fantastic year. On our final day, we went into the city of Cuenca to do some sight-seeing. We saw colonial cathedrals and women robed in traditional Andean dress and a culture that is so different - yet in many ways the same - as that which we experience in our home city on the coast, and the beauty of the city was simply unbelievable. I will definitely not forget our first Rotary trip anytime soon.

In October, we travelled to the gorgeous province of Manabi for a beach trip. These 4 days were truly some of the happiest of the nearly 100 that I've accumulated so far in Ecuador. During the days we would travel around the province by bus, visiting cultural attractions, local artisan markets, and our fair share of beaches, and in the night we would dance - sometimes on the beach, sometimes at the hotel, sometimes at the Rotary club in downtown Portoviejo. If anything represents Ecuadorian culture to me, it is the

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dancing. Before I came here I would laugh at the thought of dancing as a social institution, but now it is an integral part of my life, and I know that I will miss this new passion endlessly when I return to Canada. Perhaps my favourite aspect of the Manabi trip was the company - almost 150 exchange students (each and every RYE student in Ecuador), from nations far and wide such as Germany, U.S.A, Belgium, Denmark, Brazil, and Taiwan. I've made a plethora of new friends, and although many live far away in cities nowhere near mine, I look forward to reuniting with them all at the end-of-year trip around Ecuador. The Manabi trip was just fantastic.

Ecuador has taught me a lot, and in a short quantity of time. It has taught me patience, understanding, independence, and most importantly, what the world is like outside our bubble of North American privilege. I love this country, I love these people, I love these memories, I love this life. Although being away from home has made me love Canada even more, right now I feel like I never want to go home; I just want to stay here and enjoy this forever. I truly believe that when we leave home we discover ourselves. Thank you Rotary and thank you to the people of this beautiful, incredible country, for helping me do just that.

Con Amor,

Maddy

Ecuador