



Maddy

From Tillsonburg to Ecuador

"Your typical North American New Year's party on steroids"

One of my closest exchange friends recently observed that going on exchange is like living a lifetime within a lifetime. We are transplanted into entirely new worlds, naive and without roots. Surprisingly quickly, at a pace accelerated by the brevity of our stay, we find ourselves attached to new places, people, languages, and memories. We become comfortable in our new lives. And then, as the year comes to an end, we must give up these new lives we've cultivated for ourselves, and say goodbye to those people and places that have come to define us. Exchange is such a sad thing. If I apply the analogy of "a life within a life" to my own individual experience, I can safely say that I have hit middle age. I'm over halfway done my year in Ecuador, and writing it down does not make it any easier to believe. I have already made so many amazing and life-long memories in this country, and the happy part about being halfway done is that there are still half of the year's memories left to make!

I've been up to a lot since my last Beaver Tale. The holiday season quickly arrived which was in a way a difficult time, but also an exciting and interesting time to experience the culture. Christmas in Ecuador is something else entirely. It was sweltering hot, Santa coexisted with palm trees, and the religious aspect was much stronger (not altogether unexpected in a country so homogenously Catholic). On Christmas Eve I gathered with my host family, starting around 11 at night, and we began the celebrations. It was in a lot of ways more simple than Christmas back home, but also more intimate. We held hands and read Biblical passages and sang songs and exchanged gifts (I was quite proud that I found gifts for all of the 6 members of my family that I think were actually quite apt for each of their personalities). At midnight we exchanged "Feliz Navidades" and ate a huge dinner, followed by dancing into the small hours of the morning in true Ecuadorian style. I think Christmas is hard for every exchange students, but at the same time it was amazing to experience such an essential cultural moment with the family I had grown to love. Never will I forget the unique South American Navidad.

After Christmas of course comes New Years, and I have to say that this was definitely one holiday that I was looking forward to. Imagine your typical North American New Year's party on steroids, and that will give you a rough idea of how they celebrate Fin de Año in Ecuador. First and foremost, it is a family holiday here, and the manner in which it was celebrated in my family was quite similar to that of Christmas - dinner and family time. Then at midnight the people of the city gather in the streets for the most quintessentially Ecuadorian of traditions - the Año Viejo. Translating into English as "old year," these are giant papier-mache dolls in the form of everything from cartoon characters to the president of Ecuador. And what do they do with them? Light them on fire in the streets, of course. My family had a giant Año Viejo and fireworks to boot, and while it's perhaps not the safest tradition, it's truly an amazing sight to behold. After the fire was extinguished, the less traditional side of New Years began - the parties. One of the discotheques in my city rented out a giant piece of land upon which to throw the party of the year. People from all walks of life, amounting to probably half the city's population, showed up. We met up with all of our friends and danced until 8 in the morning. Then we went to a friend's house to swim and watch movies and eat a little bit, and I am proud to say that I didn't get home from the festivities until 2 in the afternoon. It was truly one of the most memorable evenings of my entire time here. I would trade Canadian New Years for Ecuadorian Fin de Año any year!

The next big event which came to pass in my life was the changing of the host families - an event I had been dreading, or at least not exactly looking forward to, for quite some time. It was a huge change. I switched from a huge family of 6 people to a big empty house with only an older couple for parents. I really loved the life I lived with my first host family, and my host mom even called my Rotary club to ask if I could stay for longer than the scheduled period, but the change obviously had to happen sooner or later. At first it was very difficult - I no longer had a house full of rowdy brothers and I suddenly found myself with significantly less freedom, and I often thought wistfully that the best five months of my exchange were already in my past. While I still miss my first family, and visit them from time to time, I've come to appreciate my new family a lot, and have had some fun memories with them. I've been able to do a fair amount of travelling within Ecuador since coming to visit them, and for that I am very grateful.

At the end of January arrived an event for which every exchange student in Ecuador was excited - the trip to the Amazon rainforest. After travel by bus, airplane, and boat, we all arrived at a jungle lodge for a fun-filled 4 days in this legendary territory. During our time we went on hours-long hikes through the jungle, lazily floated down the Napo River on inner tubes, visited an animal rescue shelter for jungle creatures ranging from parrots to monkeys, and even visited an indigenous family and got to practice shooting poison darts at a target (which I think was the most interesting aspect of the trip). On top of getting to do all these things, we got to do them in good company - all of the nearly 150 exchange students in Ecuador participated in the trip. It was great to see old

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friends and make new ones, and I was quite excited to spend time with the four other Canadians on exchange in Ecuador. In a country-to-country faceoff on the last night, I was voted "Reina" (queen) of Canada and had to represent my country in a funny dance routine. I didn't win first place, but I think my paisanos (countrymen) would be proud if they saw me in action! On the last night I fell asleep on the back porch of my lodge room, spending a tranquil night outside in the Amazon rainforest - the perfect way to end an amazing trip.

I've also been lucky enough to participate in some other travel since the New Year began. In January I went with my local Rotary and the other exchange students in my city to Las Cascadas de Manuel, a group of 6 waterfalls that you can hike up a mountainside forest to visit. Being from Canada, I thought that Niagara Falls was kind of the last word in waterfalls, but these were a different thing entirely. Deep in the forest, after an intense hike, standing under the spray of a hundred-foot tall set of falls, I had one of the most memorable and magical moments of my exchange. The next trip I took was with my new host family, to the gorgeous colonial city of Cuenca, nestled high in the Andes. While my host mom attended a Rotary conference during the day, I got to go on a bus tour of the city. And at night I went out with some friends who live in the city, including two other Canadians. It was great to spend time in such a beautiful place with great company, and I got to see a side of Ecuador that I rarely get to see in my home on the coast away from the mountains. The final trip I went on was also with my host family, along with one of my best friends, to the coastal resort city of Salinas. We spent our days lying on the beach, riding jetskis, and browsing through artesan markets, and our nights going out dancing and meeting new friends from around the world (Salinas is a big tourist city). I'm glad I've had so much opportunity to travel around this country, because it truly is so different depending on where in the country you are.

One of the biggest perks of living in Ecuador as an exchange student is the different school year. Because classes here run from April through mid-January, I'm currently enjoying "summer" vacation. Although I haven't been in school, I've definitely been learning - to speak Spanish with increasing confidence and ease. Some days I really do feel like I'm practically fluent and other days I feel like I'll never speak perfectly, but the undeniable truth is that in 6 short months I've learned to speak a language better than one could ever learn from sitting in a classroom. Apart from language learning, I've also been trying to see as many friends and spend as many nights dancing as possible during all this free time. I've become inseparably close with many of the other exchange students in my city, but I've also made some great Ecuadorian friends. When I first arrived in this country, the prospect of making good friends with the locals seemed all but impossible, and my social life mostly consisted of time with other exchange students. But by this point I've made some amazing Ecuadorian friends who I'll never forget, and with who I hope to maintain a friendship for many years. Life is definitely pretty good right now - no school, lots of travelling, and focusing my time and effort on friendship and the learning of a beautiful language.

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When you're an exchange student, a lot happens in a very short span of time. Living life at such an accelerated pace can sometimes leave you with a headache, and make no mistake about it, exchange is definitely still a difficult and even vexing experience at times. There are days when I still can't believe what I've signed myself up for. But more than anything, the sentiment I find myself feeling is gratefulness, because this year has exposed me to so many new experiences, people, and memories. It has already changed me profoundly as a person. Ecuador itself is certainly a challenging country to live in at times, but I still love it in a way I can't describe. I've developed a strong attachment to my adopted "hometown" of Machala, to the point where leaving to travel to other cities invokes a measure of homesickness. At the beginning, everything was so indescribably different. Now it's normal. Now it's home. And that is the most amazing feeling ever. Many thanks to Rotary - back home in district 7080 and here in Ecuador - for giving me and every other exchange student such life-changing experiences.

Un Fuerte Abrazo

Maddy

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