



Maddy

From Tillsonburg to Ecuador

"We swam in crystal clear waters in the company of fish, stingrays, and iguanas"

Pichincha y Napoleon Mera. Buenavista y Olmedo. Marcel Laniado y Santa Rosa. Nearing the end of my exchange year, I've already lived in 3 different houses at 3 different intersections with 3 different families. And don't the names of those intersections sound so lovely and exotic and quintessentially Latin American? When I do have to come home to Canada, I think that one of the things I'll miss most will be sidling into a yellow taxi and allowing the Spanish street names to gently roll off my tongue as I tell the driver my address. Here in Ecuador we get around everywhere in the plentiful and cheap taxis and they have truly been a constant in a year full of changes. From the beginning of the year when I could barely string together a sentence, to the present, at which point I can convince inquiring taxi drivers that I'm half-Ecuadorian and was born in this country. That being said, the simple fact that it is already time for me to sit down and write my third and final Beavertale is staggering to me. This year has gone by so fast – there are so many things that have happened, and so few words with which to describe them.

Ecuadorians love to celebrate, and one of the biggest celebrations of the entire year arrived swiftly after the writing of my second Beavertale - Carnaval. It's a 4-day long excuse to party - imagine walking down the streets of a city and constantly being assaulted by water guns and spray foam and you have the general gist of the atmosphere. By the end of one particular night I was covered head to toe in water and foam. Definitely a mess, but I loved it all the same. I spent my Carnaval in the beach resort city of Salinas, where my former host family owns a beach house, and it was definitely one big fiesta to remember. By day we lived on the beach, looking out at the clear blue waters of the Pacific Ocean, and by night we danced and danced and danced, in discotecas, at parties, or even just with the family in our beach house. One particular night I had the opportunity to visit a private beach in a gated residential community called Punta Barandua, and it was one of the most beautiful and atmospheric places to

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which I've ever been. Watching the wave's crash upon the rocks and the thousands of stars twinkle in the perfectly blue night sky, while listening to music out of the back of a Jeep and talking with friends, I truly had an amazing night. Carnaval was an amazing and unique cultural experience, and por supuesto yo pase bonito (I of course had a lovely time).

More than anything else, Ecuador is famous for one particular attraction - the Galapagos Islands. They are often referred to as Las Islas Encantadas (The Enchanted Islands), and after visiting in March, I can honestly say that they very much deserve such a grandiose title. We flew from mainland Ecuador to the island of Baltra, then travelled by ferry to our home base of Isla Santa Cruz. On our first day we went to the Charles Darwin research centre and visited the famous giant Galapagos tortoises, including the legendary and ancient "Lonesome George." Then we trekked to a small beach where we swam in crystal clear waters in the company of fish, stingrays, and iguanas - quite the way to begin a trip. Our second day was my favourite: in the morning we visited a small inlet surrounded by huge cliffs and jumped into the bluest waters I have seen in my entire life, in what must truly be one of the most naturally beautiful locations on planet earth. That afternoon we went snorkelling off Isla Santa Fe and saw amazing underwater life including sharks, sealions, and a veritable myriad varieties of fish. The third day we hiked a lot and spent most of our day on the beach at the gorgeous Tortuga Bay. And on our fourth and final full day, we took a 2 hour boat ride out to the verdant and tranquil island of Floreana, where we hiked through a mountain forest, saw giant tortoises in their natural environment, and heard folklore of past pirate presence in the Galapagos. To be honest, some of my favourite moments in the Galapagos were the times we spent on the boat, together with my closest friends, listening to Bob Marley and an interesting playlist of 80s music on the boat's sound system. The captain of our yacht even let me drive for awhile at one point (with Rotary permission of course)! In the nights, we had free time to roam the streets of our small host city of Puerto Ayora, where we bought souvenirs, ate ice cream, and just generally had a beautiful time. On the final night, we travelled to a scenic hotel for a formal Rotary dinner followed by a dance. Then, we returned to Puerto Ayora and Rotary actually let us visit a discoteca to go dancing! To top off the night, all of the students jumped off the main pier together and into the ocean for one last time. Although that final night stands out, the entire trip to the Galapagos was certainly a time to remember. Those 5 days were truly some of the happiest of my life and the islands were definitely the most awe-inspiring place I've visited on this earth.

Just after the Galapagos trip I switched to my third and final host family. After 3 months of being almost always alone in the house, moving to a house with 4 host siblings, all between the ages of 5 and 11, was certainly a big change. At first it was difficult and frustrating, but soon I came to a realization - that this host family truly is more of a family to me than any other. There are more rules, more family time, more helping out around the house - all things that can be frustrating but which are ultimately important

and make you feel at home. Already we've had many family outings and one of my favourite things about living with this family is their hacienda - a small farm they own up in the mountains, where I love to ride horses or just admire the scenery. After a month together, I've really come to love this family, and I know that I'll miss them greatly when the time comes to leave.

After almost 3 months of beautiful summer vacation, you can probably imagine that I was less than excited to start school again. Although it still can be headache-inducing (you can truly not imagine the decibel-level of an average Ecuadorian classroom until you've experienced it firsthand), the social aspect of school has become much easier now that I speak good Spanish, and since I've started doing more of the work in class the time definitely passes by faster. Recently our school had our annual sports day, which was a day to be noted for sure. We ordered special class uniforms just for this one day - my class's were black and white and my last name was charmingly misspelled on the back of my jersey. We had a huge opening ceremony which involved walking around the school grounds a seemingly endless number of times, and we had a little pep rally type thing with class cheers and, of course, the election of the Reina (beauty queen) of sports day (yes, Ecuador is just a little bit surreal sometimes, but you get used to things like this). Most exchange students in Ecuador agree that school is not exactly their favourite aspect of exchange, but I'm liking it more and more as the year progresses. If nothing else, school in Ecuador is inarguably a unique experience.

Sometimes, with all that goes on in my life here, and at this point in the year, I forget that I'm actively learning a language in addition to everything else. I could speak essentially zero Spanish when I arrived and now it comes to me almost as easily as English. Even on trips, with an abundance of English speakers in the room, I find myself accidentally switching from English into Spanish all the time. When I talk to my parents back home, I often confuse them with the interesting mix of Spanglish that rolls off my tongue, and I know that this will continue even after I'm back in Canada. I have very high standards for fluency, but nevertheless I consider myself to be at the level of almost-fluent. No longer am I considered as a tourist, but as somebody who has lived in Latin America. I love Spanish. It is a beautiful language and it is my second language y espero que pueda seguir hablándolo por toda mi vida (and I hope that I can keep speaking it for the rest of my life).

Finally, after more than 8 months as an exchange student here, the time arrived for the final trip. Although this trip tends to get overshadowed by the exoticism of the Amazon and the Galapagos, it's an amazing voyage, travelling from the top of Ecuador to the bottom over 9 days with all of the other exchange students in the country. We started our trip on the evening of April 27th, embarking from our city of Machala to Quito, a 12-hour drive, 13 of us crammed into a tiny minibus. Let's just say that we got very cozy with our fellow exchange students that night and got almost no sleep whatsoever. We left at 10 pm that night and arrived at 10 am the next morning. Once we finally arrived

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in Quito the real trip began. I could write an entire novel on all that happened during that trip, but for the sake of brevity I'll simply list the highlights: a nighttime tour of Quito's breathtaking historical centre; a visit to Pizza Hut; riding a funicular up a mountain in Quito and singing "Hallelujah" at the top of our lungs at the mountain's summit; visiting the "Mitad del Mundo," the exact location of the equator; being charged at by a rather angry llama; finding treasures in the artesan market of Otavalo; attending a nationwide Rotary conference; marvelling at Cotopaxi, Ecuador's most famous volcano; seeing the first Church to be consecrated in Ecuador; wandering through Incan ruins at Ingapirca; a very cold trip to the nevertheless gorgeous Cajas National Park; a city tour of beautiful Cuenca, my favourite city in Ecuador; a talent show in which me and the exchange kids from my city performed a rendition of "Colours of the Wind" in 4 different languages; a visit to a banana plantation; a wild final night with a party on a pirate ship; and of course, many many tears. It really does seem like just last week I was meeting all the other exchange students on the first trip to Manabi province, and saying goodbye to them was certainly one of the hardest things I've ever had to do in my life. We hugged and we cried and we cried some more and although it was heartbreaking, it made me come to a realization – that I have loved and been loved more in this year than ever before. In a way I feel like now that the final trip is over, my exchange year is over, even though I know I still have almost 2 months left. It's a sad sentiment to be sure, but the countless pictures and videos and memories will serve to remind me of those 9 amazing days for the rest of my life. In one single word, the final trip of my exchange year in Ecuador was amazing.

The friends you make on exchange are some of the closest friends you will ever make. It makes my stomach turn just thinking of saying goodbye to people who live in all corners of the globe. We make so many plans to visit each other, but there is always that little voice reminding you that it's not so easy, and that many goodbyes will end up being final goodbyes. My best friend in this year is from Brazil. That's not exactly a hop skip and a jump from Ontario. Being from the southern hemisphere, he still has over half a year of his exchange left (how is it that we can become so ridiculously close to a person in only 4 months?), and although I fully intend to make a trip to visit him when he goes home next February, it will simply never be the same as the good old days when it cost \$1 to take a taxi to hang out with each other, any day of the week. The most overwhelming feeling is of unfairness. It just doesn't seem fair to rapidly make such life-changing friendships and then just as quickly have to say such a definite goodbye to them. But I believe that it's better to have such strong relationships, such unbelievable love for each other, even if we have to say goodbye to it in the end, than to never experience it at all. The sense of urgency definitely makes you feel more strongly about people than you ever would at home, but isn't that a beautiful thing to experience? I love the people I've met this year. I love Kelsey from Chicago, Talke from Germany, Luis from Brazil, Torin from Washington, Kevin from British Columbia, Helene from Belgium, Stephanie from California, and countless others. Those names are all real people who have had a real impact on my life, and I will miss them more than

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somebody who has never gone on exchange can ever possibly imagine.

So this is the end. As I'm writing this, I have about 50 days left in Ecuador. To an exchange student, 50 days really is nothing at all. Sooner than I can believe I'll be home, getting ready to start university and a whole new chapter of my life. I'm already connecting with next year's exchange students to Ecuador, charmingly naive and about to embark on the adventure of their lives, and I'm incredibly jealous of them. I'm jealous and I'm sad and some days I actually feel relieved, but I think that the most important emotion I'm feeling is gratefulness. Because going on exchange was the best decision I made in my entire life. Because I've had experiences and met people that I could never possibly imagine had I stayed back in Canada. But more than anything, because it has changed me more than even I can believe, and I've finally become the person I've always wanted to be as a result. Thank you to all the people and places and memories from this year – to my friends, my families, and of course, to Rotary. Thank you for giving me the best year of my life.

Besos,

Maddy

Ecuador