



Usman

From Burlington Central To Ecuador

I am one of the lucky few who has visited the Amazon

Hola!

Time flies fast, it really does. I still remember my first day in Ecuador when I arrived at the airport and the very first hours of the morning after, staring in awe outside my window at the beautiful and mountainous landscape of the Ecuadorian Sierras. Now it's six months later and I can start to see the end of this incredible but short journey. I have learned so much here and made some great and lifelong friendships; it truly cannot feel like the end is near. These last three months have been a learning process of the language, the culture, and for myself personally.

Picking up from where I left off, December was a busy month for me because of the holidays and the fiestas de Quito. The fiestas de Quito is an event where the capital city of Quito celebrates its heritage in a week long festival on the streets. The fiestas were quite the experience seeing the streets of historical Quito full of colour, dancing and traditional music. It was time of culture and unity for the historic city and its people. During the fiestas, I also happened to watch my first bullfight! Bullfighting is a very prestigious and exciting sport in the Spanish world. It is a sport for the cunning and the brave, the objective is to literally avoid the bull from running over you while trying to stab it with two sharp spears. Civilized animal cruelty. Either way, I really enjoyed watching the bull fights and seeing the streets during the time of the fiestas. After the fiestas, I went with my first host family to the city of Baños and got a taste of the amazon. Baños is a tourist city

full of exciting and adventurous activities such as kayaking, ziplining, bungee jumping and any other thrill seeking activity you can find. In Baños, I had the opportunity to zipline across a canyon and to go bungee jumping off a bridge which was one of the coolest and craziest things I have ever done in my life.

Soon after this the holiday season came around. At first it was a bit strange looking at the calendar and noticing it was December with a mild forecast of 25 degrees every day. Christmas in Ecuador is a completely different thing here than at home. Besides the fact, that there is no snow anywhere to be found except the Volcanoes, the way Ecuadorians perceive the holiday is very different. It is a lot less commercialized here than at home and overall it's a downsized event. My Christmas could pretty much be summed up as a little family dinner in a small city up in the mountains while playing cards all night. The culture is just different. New Years was by far one of the most interesting and craziest holidays. On New Year's Eve we had a family dinner 3 or 4 hours prior to midnight. Afterwards, my whole family and the families from my neighborhood gathered around the park to celebrate what is called El Año Viejo. It is basically a ceremony of crazy traditions to commemorate the passing of the old year and coming of the New Year. Some of the traditions involve eating 12 grapes in a minute at the stroke of midnight, running around the house with a suitcase, wearing yellow underwear to bring for good fortune, putting money in your shoes for good wealth and most importantly creating a paper mache mannequin doll of a famous figure. The famous figure we had for our neighborhood was the Hulk and at the stroke of midnight we lit the doll on fire and started jumping over the fire to represent the passing. It is one of the craziest and dangerous things I've ever seen but just so much fun and simply very Ecuadorian.

In the first two weeks in January I had my trip to the Amazon. The Amazon trip was by far one of the most spectacular five days of my life as we traveled through the upper northeastern province of Sucombios, bordering the front with the Peruvian Amazon Basin and Colombia. The landscape, the animals and the plants were just more than what I expected. I had only ever seen footage of the Amazon on Discovery channel or National Geographic but being there in reality was a completely different experience. After taking a quick flight, 2 hour bus ride and a 4 hour canoe trip we finally had made it to our lodge in the heart of the Amazon Basin. On the first night, we had a night hike where we had the opportunity to see some of the world's coolest and deadliest spiders from the scorpion spider all the way to the world's largest tarantula. The following days we had a trek through the jungle where once again, I saw some of the most interesting creatures such as spiders, toads, snakes and many different herbs of the Amazon! On the last day we had the opportunity to visit an Indigenous community of the Amazon and visit a Shaman. By definition, a shaman is a tribal representative and a healer between mankind and the spirit

world. Meeting the shaman was a great experience as we learned all about his life, his experiences and the mystical herbs lying in his garden. The hikes in the Amazon were amazing but my favourite parts of the trip were fishing for piranhas and every evening we had the opportunity to swim in the giant lake surrounding the lodge during the beautiful sunset. This lake was special because it was a breeding ground for piranhas, anacondas, dolphins, alligators and many more creatures, so swimming in it was a bit risky but completely worth it. Besides the mosquito bites, the Amazon trip was a trip I will certainly remember and I can easily say I am one of the lucky people in the world who has visited the Amazon.

Besides the Amazon trip, another big event for me was moving day and the family change. On Jan 7th I officially changed families to my new family Ayala. Obviously it was extremely difficult leaving my first family after 5 months when we had become so close and had a great time together plus the addition of having to re-adjust with my new family to different customs also added a new challenge. My new family is just great though as we get along really well. My host mom works as an architect and my host dad was former mayor of our county multiple times. I also have a host brother who is 21, the first time in my life I have had an older brother, and he is currently studying in university. With my family, we have travelled around the country a bit. I went to a grand waterfall near my valley with my host dad and also went up north with my family to a market town called Otavalo. We went to "El Panecillo", which is a grand statue of the Virgin Mary that overlooks the city of Quito. Also we had the opportunity to visit some of the famous churches and cathedrals of Quito such as "La Compania", which is one of the most famous churches of Quito made entirely of gold. I love my family now as I did my last one and when April 7th comes for the final family change, it will be a pity to leave them.

My Spanish or Español, however you want to refer to it, I think in these last 3 months, has definitely improved. The language is literally a day to day process of learning new words, verbs and grammar rules. I think I have come to the point after 6 months that I am confident enough to have a conversation with anyone about anything. The words just seem to flow out naturally without me having to actively think about them anymore. By far the hardest part of the language is mastering the verb conjugations (for about 7 different tenses!). I think on exchange you learn the language at a much faster pace than in high school classrooms because you are surrounded by the people, the street signs, the culture and the environment. Spanish is definitely a language that I think people should consider learning because it is one of the most spoken languages in the world; it is based on Latin roots (similar to French, Portuguese, and Italian) and it's a language that sounds like music to the ears.

As far as thoughts about the last few months, the main thing has been about taking it day by day. I can hardly believe that six months have passed. The old expression "Time flies when you're having fun" is unsurprisingly true. There are a lot of things in Ecuador that make it a great place and there a lot of things that degrade it. I think for me, just learning to accept them and to live with them is the way to integrate into the culture. The worst thing to happen on exchange is to let opportunities pass by and not take advantage of every day to the fullest. After 6 months, there are a few things I wish I had done earlier liketravel more, study the language more etc but that doesn't mean I can't do them now. I'm over half way done my exchange and I have learned so much but the important thing for me is to keep building on that because in reality time is short and you have to make it count.

Finishing off, I have the legendary Galapagos Islands trip March 9th followed by the final Cross-Ecuador trip in April. I am extremely thankful to Rotary 7080 and my rotary club at home for giving me this great opportunity to explore such a wonderful country!

Cuidate y Chao

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