



Usman
From Burlington Central
to
Ecuador

*The exchange journey comes to an end, but it's
impact on your life probably never will.*

As I begin to write my final beaver tale I can see this great journey coming to an end very soon. These last few months since my last beavertale have been some to remember and I could say have really impacted my life more than the preceding six months of my exchange. In March I had the opportunity to visit the famous Galapagos Islands with 45 other exchange students. For those unfamiliar with the Galapagos Islands, they are a chain of Islands lying in the middle of the Pacific Ocean (1000 km off the Ecuadorian coastline) where Charles Darwin conducted his research for the modern theory of evolution. Every year thousands of tourists flock in from every continent to get a glimpse of the islands. From my experience I really cannot sum up the beauty of these islands; a good comparison would be to take the video of the song *Paradise by*

Coldplay and replace the setting of South Africa with the Galapagos Islands. The islands are simply majestic in their beauty and diversity. The first day when we flew into the islands, we visited the Charles Darwin Research Centre on the island of Santa Cruz, which is a facility which carries some rare species of iguanas, plants and mainly tortoises. We saw some of the largest species' of tortoises in the world, including the famous "Lonesome George", the last of a dying breed. The second day, we visited a beautiful lagoon/river spot called "Las Grietas" which is located between two volcanic rock cliffs. We had the opportunity to swim through the crystal clear river, where you could see even the dimmest ray of light.

The following days we visited the bay of seals and saw many animals such as seals, sea lions, blue footed boobies and almost every type of fish from the movie "Finding Nemo"! We also had the chance to go snorkeling in the Pacific Ocean over fish colonies. Snorkeling in the ocean beside the Galapagos Islands was one of the greatest experiences in my life. Swimming in the crystal clear water, and every second passing schools of fish, sea lions and turtles was something I will never forget. I remember an exact moment when one of the guides was swimming with me and directing me to all the fish colonies. We swam underwater about a good metre or so down and he attempted to do an underwater flip, at this very second a whole fish colony swam right by my face, just enough so I could get it on camera. That feeling of the fish breezing by your hair is something I won't ever forget. This sensation made me feel like I was a part of the ocean, almost like a piece of seaweed floating in and out of the water just watching the other fish and creatures pass by. Later on, we also had the opportunity to visit a small cove on the island of Isabella where we were able to snorkel with sea turtles. This was also a surreal experience for me, because we were lucky enough to touch and feel the sea turtles and even "pose" around

them (they aren't quite the aggressive type)! The following day we spent visiting the famous Tortuga bay beach which is a beach of white sand and iguanas (lots of iguanas). On the final day, we went hiking into a cave called the "Tunnel of Love" which is famous because at the center point there is a heart shape located on the ceiling. We also visited some volcanic craters and the final night we had a giant good ol' dance party piscinazo (pool party) at a ranch on the island of Santa Cruz. For me, the Galapagos Islands trip was by far the best and most beautiful five days of my life. I loved the Amazon but the Galapagos was just a whole different experience. They are one of the most beautiful places a person can visit on this planet. The beauty of the islands, the greenish tint of the ocean and the diversity of the animals coming together in a place I would call Paradise.

After the Galapagos trip, I had some downtime to spare because of Carnaval. Carnaval is the festive season before Lent. Carnaval in Ecuador is quite the celebration. The traditions include large "food" fights that occur on the street where people run around throwing balloons full of water, flowers, eggs, flour and more. These types of Carnaval games usually end up in a huge mess for both sides and a lot of innocent bystanders covered in egg yolk! Also another Carnaval tradition, is the serving of the traditional Ecuadorian soup Fanesca. Fanesca is a soup served during Semana Santa (holy week), it consists of beans, eggs, herbs, plantains, cheese and some spices. Even with the wide mix of ingredients it possesses, I really enjoyed having Fanesca, it has quite the subtle but suave taste. During Semana Santa I also had the opportunity to go to the beach with one of my exchange friends from Switzerland. Her family owned a beautiful beach house directly on the beach of the sun drenched province of Manabi. They had quite possibly the largest private pool

I had ever seen in my life, it was even in the shape of a dolphin! Spending a week on the beach, getting in some sun (and nasty mosquito bites) was a great way to relax away from the chilly Sierras.

In the second week of April I began my Big Trip. A nine day cross-country trip around the major cities and sites of Ecuador with 140 exchange students. The trip began in my city, the capital Quito as we ventured firstly up north to the northern city of Ibarra. In Ibarra, we spent the night at a hostel, playing some good footy all night long. From there on, the next morning, we visited the indigenous markets of Otavalo, where you can buy anything from jewelry, carved goods to even llama fur sweaters. Finishing up the day we returned to Quito visiting the Mitad Del Mundo monument (Equator line monument) and the elegant historical centre of the city with its classical churches. The next day we visited the adventurous town of Baños where we went hiking to a nearby waterfall and some bungee jumping just for the fun of it. The day afterwards, we went volcano climbing as we visited the majestic Volcano Chimbarazo on a cold sunny morning. Chimbarazo is the highest volcano in Ecuador and it is also the closest point to space from Earth because of its location on the Equatorial line. The following days, we ventured to the coast, firstly to the largest city in Ecuador, Guayaquil. In Guayaquil we visited the Malecon, a lighthouse located on a hill right by the river of Guayas which gives a beautiful view of the crowded city. The next day we spent our time in the coastal city of Machala. Before visiting the city of Machala, I thought the experience in the city would be dull but the night we came to Machala, by chance there happened to be monsoon like rains. The streets were extremely flooded as high up to my waist and all the boys were able to sneak out of the hotel to go rampant in the streets for a little swim.

Swimming in the streets with just shorts and causing mayhem for the upcoming cars trying to pass by will be an experience I won't ever forget.

The last three days of the trip were spent in the Mountainous city of Cuenca. We visited the beautiful historical centre of the city as well as ancient Inca Ruins located high up in the mountains. Cuenca was the ultimate destination in the trip because it was the site of the annual district 4400 conference (District 4400 is the entire country of Ecuador). In Cuenca we had to enter a "desfile" while wearing our blazers and representing our countries (countries from all over the world). The conference for many of us was a very emotional moment because it was on the last day of the trip and it would be the last time all 140 exchange students would be united. In Ecuador, being such a small country, the exchange students are very close because in almost every city there are some exchangers so we have the opportunity to see each other a lot. The conference ended up in some tears of joy and grief because it was the moment where many of us realized the end was near. The big trip for me was a great adventure. It did have its ups and downs however as at times I felt it was mentally exhausting being 9 days on the road, spending a lot of time on buses and not staying in the same place too long. Through the difficulties there were also some huge positive points including getting to see all my friends from every city we went to. We went to some cities I'd never visited in Ecuador before and I got to eat llama and ostrich and most importantly I went through the feeling of being an official rotary youth exchange once again at the district conference

After the big trip, I made some short trips to the beach and the coastal cities of Machala and Guayaquil to visit some friends. In Machala, I met some good old friends from the big trip and we went to some great sites including two waterfalls. In Guayaquil, I went to

visit a friend to get to know the city better. My friend, who lives in Guayaquil, happened to live in the house of the President's sister. Staying a week in that house was quite the experience as I met the mother of the president, the other members of the family and of course the private security team. After the short trips, I had two of my friends come to stay at my house for two weeks in which we climbed some mountains, went to see a world cup qualifier game with Ecuador vs Colombia, where the Ecuadorians came out triumphant, shared some lifelong memories and met up for the final time with many of the exchange students about to leave for their countries.

In the last few months, I had been living with my second family Ayala until about May; afterwards I switched into my counselor's family for the month of May. I really enjoyed my time with my counselor's family, they are extremely friendly people and I always felt at home there. Now in the final month of my exchange, I return to my first family because for me, I have spent the longest time with them and I feel like they are my actual family here on exchange. School also had finished for me after the month of May. This year school was a struggle at times, adjusting to the rules/regulations, managing studying with other activities, trying to understand the teachers and integrating to the culture. Even through the difficulties, I enjoyed my school experience in Ecuador, it made me a harder worker and more appreciative of the excellent school system we have at home.

At this point in my exchange I would say my español has come a long way. Coming off the airplane, when I only knew basics such as "Hola, gracias?" I would say I have surprised myself. After about 10 months I can say, I have learned and taken in everything of the

language I could and I have a great grip on the language. Accents don't trouble me anymore, and I can speak with the fluidity that I dreamed of. The task for me now is to every day, until the final flight, learn more and more and when I get home, to try to conserve the Spanish I learned because it is definitely something I don't want to forget.

As far as some final thoughts on the last few months and on my exchange all I can say is that it's been a journey. In the past three weeks I have been going through a circus of going away brunches, gatherings, parties and about 8 or 9 visits to the airport in the last three weeks to say goodbye to all my friends around the world. Day by day I realize, that the end is coming near, and everyday someone else has gone. Many say that the toughest part of exchange is the beginning or around the holidays but I think the hardest part is the end. The end is when you realize, that this life in a year is coming to a swift close and having to say goodbye to your very close friends that you may or may not ever see again is much more difficult. As an exchange student I have learned the meaning of friendship and family, being united with my Ecuadorian friends and especially my exchange friends through thick and thin. I will miss all the conversations, the trips, the jokes, the experiences we have made together because in the end that is what matters most. I think on exchange I have really changed as a person by maturing a bit more, seeing the world from a far different perspective, appreciating the little things.

I feel capable of taking up more responsibility and that I have improved as a leader. I owe this experience all thanks to Rotary of district 7080, The Rotary Club of Burlington Central and Rotary Ecuador. I am so grateful for everything you all have done for me!

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This year for me was a life changing one and the most important I have ever experienced. I will never forget the people and the memories I made in this tiny South American country and I hope to be back one day!

Saludos,

Usman