

Ecuador and the Galapagos

By Olivia Chambliss, Fall 2013

Introduction

I studied abroad through the IES Galapagos Islands Direct Enrollment program (GAIAS). During fall quarter in 2013, I spent one month in Quito, the capital city of Ecuador, before going to live on the island of San Cristóbal in the Galapagos for three months. Quito is situated in the Andes where the dormant volcano, Cotopaxi, looms in the distance. When I arrived in Quito, I was not prepared for the breathtaking scenery of the city. My flight into Quito arrived late in the evening. The city was brilliantly lit up with streetlamps, house lights, and cars. From my point of view in the plane, the city looked like a bowl of lights and I was immediately enchanted.

Housing

The GAIAS program requires students to live in a homestay as a way to help students immerse themselves in their host country's culture. I stayed with two wonderful families in Quito and San Cristóbal, respectively. I had no problems with my host families but in the case that a homestay does not work out, IES is willing to move students to a more appropriate family. Homestay was a great way for me to fully engage with my host country. It helped tremendously with my Spanish language skills and provided me with useful first hand experience of Ecuadorian culture. My host family - both in Quito and the Galapagos - were open to including me in family activities. They were eager to show off their home country and I was excited to learn as much as possible.



My home in the Galapagos

Finances

Ecuador and the Galapagos use USD so there is no need to worry about exchange rates. The cost of goods such as food, clothing, and supplies in Ecuador and the Galapagos are comparable to prices in the US (if not a little more expensive). I would suggest bringing items such as clothing, shoes, and toiletries from the US. At the University of San Francisco in Quito (USFQ), students are provided with a swipe card that is loaded with money that can be used to purchase food. I would plan on spending thirty dollars a week on food in the Galapagos since lunch is not provided by your host family. Almuerzo costs about three to five dollars in the Galapagos. If you wish to travel to other islands in the archipelago during your free time, you might want to bring extra cash. I was able to access money from my own bank account through ATMs located on the school campus at USFQ and the bank at San Cristobal. There was a five

dollar charge for each withdrawal. It is of the utmost importance that students carefully budget for food, entertainment, and transportation. A realistic, honest budget is the best way to prevent future monetary emergencies.



Me hanging out with a tortoise!

Academics

The academic demands at USFQ and GAIAS were similar to those at Santa Clara. The GAIAS program had three academic tracks that focused on ecology, marine biology, and sociology respectively. Each student had to take five classes within their chosen track and the classes were all taught in English. Most of the classes incorporated field trips in their curriculum. These included trips to various locations throughout Ecuador and the Galapagos which often involved hiking, snorkeling, and long bus trips. The classes lasted four to five weeks each depending on the subject. Most homework assignments were readings assigned by the professor and students were expected to come to class prepared to discuss the readings. The grade for the class was usually decided by a final project or a final exam. The teachers I had were most interested in having engaged students ready to verbally participate in class. The classes were not very formal and most of my professors insisted the class refer to them by their first name. This created a relaxed but intellectually stimulating environment.



The ice cream cart that visited the beach across from the GAIAS campus

Student Life/Social Life

Campus life at USFQ was vibrant. There are several clubs and activities to join at the university including intramural sports, martial arts, and dancing. In fact, when I was in Quito, I joined the social dancing club and made some new friends! At first it seemed a little daunting, but joining on-campus clubs was a great way to meet local students.

Student social life was very different at the GAIAS campus in San Cristobal. The university did hold a few events for the community and students with fairs and sports competitions. Because all of my classes were with other international students studying through IES, I did not have the chance to get to know local students through my classes. I had to go out of my way to get to know local students.

Engagement

Studying abroad is a great time to consider engaging with your host community. The GAIAS program did not offer much in the way of internships, language study, or research opportunities, so I had to be far more proactive in the Galapagos to find a way to engage with the local community. I discovered my niche in tutoring ESL students after my morning classes. This was a fun as well as useful way to engage with the local community. I was able to use my skills to help local students practice their English while simultaneously practicing my Spanish. It turned out to be a great way to meet locals. I would say that the best way to make friends and engage with the community is to participate in school activities or look for volunteering opportunities. The people I met were friendly and eager to show me around their hometown. It's okay to be shy, but taking chances and reaching out to local students is all a part of the study abroad experience.

Religion



A Catholic Church in Old Town Quito.

The predominant religion in Ecuador and the Galapagos is Catholicism. It has religious as well as cultural importance. Most Ecuadorians would call themselves Catholic even if they don't attend mass regularly. Though Ecuador is a relatively conservative country, host families know that students from other countries may have different religious beliefs from them (or none at all.) Both of my host families were open and accepting of my religious beliefs. If any student would like to locate services for their religious needs the IES office in Quito would be the best place to go for help.

Race/Ethnicity

Race and ethnicity in Ecuador is a complicated issue. Whiteness is often held up as exceptional and special in a country where colorism is deeply ingrained in society. It may be uncomfortable for some students to deal with their privilege in a place where it is difficult to ignore. Most of the other students I studied abroad with were white or white passing and they drew a lot of attention. The female students got a lot of attention from local men in the form of catcalls, blatant staring, and horn honking from passing cars. Machismo culture is very much alive in Ecuador and, at times, it can be a sobering reality. My experience as a young black woman in a Latin American country differed from that of my white classmates. I did not experience much in the way of harassment and I did not draw too much attention. Many locals were surprised to learn that I was from the United States because they assumed I was from an African country. It was an interesting experience, to say the least.

Gender & Sexuality

Sexuality in Ecuador is also a difficult topic. Students that have a gender or sexual orientation that falls outside of mainstream expectations may feel uncomfortable expressing themselves fully. This is another unfortunate reality of living in Ecuador and the Galapagos. Fortunately, the IES staff are available to discuss these difficult issues with any students who are struggling with the cultural transition.

Socio-Economic

Though many of the areas in Quito are developed and contain relatively well-off families, there are also many people in the country who live in poverty. It is not uncommon to see people begging or selling cheap goods on the street, especially in crowded tourist areas. In San Cristobal, most people were lower-middle to high income. Most of Ecuador's population do not live in abject poverty, but many people in Ecuador live without many of the amenities we often take for granted here in Santa Clara. It is important to keep this in mind when studying abroad and to take this as an opportunity to learn and gain understanding.

Ability and Learning Considerations

Many of the classes I took for my program were heavily focused on the scientific and technical aspects of environmental studies. We read peer reviewed journal articles that discussed scientific concepts, produced lab write ups, and conducted some of our own research. If I had not had the biology and chemistry background knowledge before taking these courses I probably would not have performed as well in my classes. Additionally, many of my classes had field trip components that required long hikes through field sites, snorkeling and diving for laboratory research. I found some of these tasks to be difficult as I had never hiked before and I was not a very strong swimmer. Looking back, it may have been useful for me to have had a conversation with the professor or the program coordinator about my abilities so that I could participate in a more appropriate activity.

Leisure

Ecuador is a country that is ecologically as well as culturally diverse. There are a number of ways to experience the diversity and culture that the country has to offer. El Mercado Artesanal is an open air market set in the center of Quito. Vendors sold handmade bags, blankets, jewelry, and other goods. It is a great place to buy inexpensive souvenirs for yourself, family, and friends. La Ronda, located in the “old town” part of Quito, is a great place to go enjoy the nightlife of the city. There are karaoke clubs, places to dance, and street performers. For students that are interested in exploring the natural beauty that Ecuador has to offer, hiking Cotopaxi is an excellent opportunity. One of my favorite experiences in Quito was at the Teleferico gondola lift ride that takes you over Quito. The ride begins at the foothills of the volcano Pichincha and ends at the base of the mountain. This gave me a great opportunity to see the city and all the sights it had to offer.



A baby sea lion just waking up from a nap!

Life on the island is considerably slower than life in Quito. However, I thoroughly enjoyed a break from the hustle and bustle of American life. There were still several ways to be engaged with the community and have a great time. Every other Saturday evening the main street on the boardwalk was blocked off and there would be street food, live performances, and dance parties. People would usually go out with their families and enjoy the festivities. There are also beaches to visit and a few trails to hike. Because there is less to do on the islands I made ample use of the university library. I also spent time with my host family and hung out with local students. One local student held a weekly bonfire at his house where he invited locals and students to come and enjoy the music he and his family performed. I spent some of my best nights there singing along with my friends.

Shopping

Shopping in mainland Ecuador differed greatly from shopping in San Cristóbal. For example, the popular chain supermarket in Ecuador, Supermaxi, was where most students did their shopping. There was a Supermaxi located about one block away from the USFQ campus and served as the best place for students to buy groceries, snacks, and school supplies. While produce was pretty inexpensive to purchase, other goods were a little more expensive than prices in the US. No such supermarkets existed in San Cristóbal. Instead there were small stores called *tiendas* that sold a mixture of goods. These were places that students could reload minutes to their cell phones, buy a snack, or get groceries for the week. The *tiendas* did not have the wide selection of goods that could be found in a Supermaxi in Quito and most items cost a little bit more on the island than on the mainland.

Overall Impact

For me, studying abroad was an amazing opportunity that provided me with a newfound sense of confidence and independence. I was in a situation where I did not speak the local language very well, I did not know anyone in the country or my program, and I did not know much about Ecuadorian culture. However, these challenges that I faced were necessary to my academic and personal growth. Study abroad served as a unique opportunity for me to refine my values and discover my strengths.