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Life on the Equator

On my first day of interning I had to wake up at 5:30 in the morning. This was in order to find my way to a local commercial center where I had to meet the doctor I was going to shadow so that he could drive us the rest of the way to his clinic. Standing in the middle of a cold street at 6:15 in a foreign country, I had to ask myself what I had gotten myself into. However, I quickly found out the doctor I would be observing was very knowledgeable and patient. He worked at an IESS clinic, which is the social security branch of medicine in Ecuador. While at the clinic I learned to read EKGs and how to look for abnormalities; I also practiced taking blood pressure on lots of patients.

After rotations I would take a cab back to North Quito where our Spanish classes were held. Students were divided based on their skill level. We would then meet with an instructor who would teach conjugations, grammar or whatever else we felt we needed help in. The instructors didn't speak much English so we were forced to speak strictly in Spanish, which helped me to pick up the language at a much faster pace. After class we would head back to our homestay to hang out and eat dinner, which our house mom would make. I was staying with four other students, which was nice because they were able to help me with Spanish and we were able to explore Quito together.

This became my typical daily routine for most of my internship. I would wake up early (often very early), eat breakfast at my homestay and head to rotations. Rotations would generally end around noon and I would grab an almuerzo before Spanish class. Almuerzos are typical lunches made up of soup, an entrée with a lot of rice, a juice and sometimes a small dessert. We'd then be in class till around 4, after which we were free to do whatever we liked. Often times we'd go into old town or hang out in the Mariscal, also known as "gringolandia" for the large number of tourists. Other times students would organize soccer games or other group exercises, which often ended badly due to the high altitude. We would then eat dinner with our host family at seven o'clock. After dinner we would spend time at our homestay or walk to a commercial center nearby which had free Wi-Fi and a McDonalds. However, my routine did change when I spent two weeks in the small, rural town of Chone. Chone was located close to the coast and was very hot and humid. Because of the weather the three girls I was with and I often spent our free time hiding in the single air-conditioned room in our homestay. We would also escape to a beach that was only an hour away.

Rotations were only from Monday to Thursday/Friday so we were able to travel on the weekends. Traveling was easily my favorite thing to do in Ecuador; it was very simple and very cheap to get around. My first weekend I went with a group of students to Baños, a town full of outdoor activities, where we went ATVing, repelling down waterfalls and zip-lining. Other weekends we went to the beach or the mountains or visited towns near Quito. I was so happy to be able to get explore amazing regions of Ecuador, and I can now say that I've mountain biked down an active volcano.

When I first arrived in Ecuador I was not proficient in Spanish. I had taken classes throughout high school, but I hadn't practiced much since. My lack of practice made the first week or two difficult, but taking classes every day helped a great deal. Within the first month weeks my conversational Spanish improved hugely. The instructors at the Spanish school taught us helpful medical vocabulary so I was able to converse with doctors and patients. By the end of my internship I felt confident both in

conversational Spanish and medical Spanish.

There were many benefits to participating in my IE₃ internship. It gave me a unique opportunity to observe another country's medical system, and by studying Ecuadorian medical care I can compare it to the system we use in the United States and evaluate our own strengths and weaknesses. I think it's important for students pursuing a career in medicine to study different systems of care because it creates a wider perspective. There were some aspects of the Ecuadorian system that I saw as weaknesses, such as a dismissive demeanor many doctors had towards patients. At least four of the doctors I shadowed answered their personal phones while a patient was speaking to them. Just as I observed weaknesses, I also saw strengths. Ecuador provides free medical services to its population, which is an impressive feat. Being able to observe so many different medical professionals taught me what I value in a physician, and showed me the type of doctor I want to become.

Through this internship I also grew a great deal personally. I was pushed out of my comfort zone and into a world where I was an outsider. I struggled to communicate, which was a huge challenge for someone as talkative as me. I had to become more patient with others and myself because it took much longer for me to express myself and understand the people around me. My internship also gave me more confidence in myself. I had been on my own in college, but in Ecuador I had to rely completely on myself. Traveling on my own was one of the most rewarding experiences, proving that I could survive and even thrive on my own was incredibly fulfilling.

One of the biggest challenges I faced was adapting to the pace of Ecuador. Back home I am a very organized and structured individual. I'm one of those people who finds joy in having a busy day mapped out. However, I quickly found out that most Ecuadorians don't like to move at the same speed as me. Other students and I quickly coined the term "Ecuadorian Time". This phrase is used to describe the fact that it is perfectly acceptable for our Spanish instructors to show up 30 minutes late without letting anyone know, or how it takes 15 minutes to get through the check-out lines at a grocery store because the clerks move at glacial pace. At first I was a little frustrated at such a slow pace of life, but I quickly realized that speed is something Americans value but that few other cultures appreciate. Instead, Ecuadorians enjoy sitting and talking. There were so many strangers who wanted to know why I had come to Ecuador and who were legitimately interested in my story. One of the lessons I value most from my trip is the benefit of slowing down, how taking the time to wait for my Spanish instructors gave me more time to learn about the other students who I was waiting with.

In my program I was shadowing full-time doctors, which meant that educating me was not their first priority. I couldn't just stand around and wait for someone to explain the significance of every test. Instead I had to take initiative and ask the questions I was interested in. I could tell that the medical professionals were glad to see that I showed genuine interest in my work and they were more than happy to explain what they were doing. I had the chance to observe a hysterectomy and was confused about why they had inserted a complex band through the woman's lower abdomen. When I asked, the surgeon excitedly explained that it was a procedure to support the bladder to correct urinary incontinence. Being willing to speak up and ask questions was incredibly valuable to me and was appreciated by the professionals I was observing.

Every week the students in the program would meet with our medical coordinator. In our meetings we would discuss what we had seen during that week's rotations and ask any questions that we were wondering about. Students would also present on interesting cases or problems they had come across. The medical coordinator would let us know which rotations were available each week and we would then choose what rotation we would like to do. She was also very helpful whenever a student became

sick or had a medical problem. On the Stateside, I kept in contact with my major advisor and helpful staff from IE₃.

I have a couple tips for future interns who find themselves in Ecuador. While Ecuador uses the American dollar, most places will only have change for \$1, \$5, and \$10. I recommend bringing a hundred or two hundred dollars in \$1s and \$5s or to find a bank that will exchange \$20s or \$100s for smaller change. In Quito there are lots of free concerts, events and museums so ask your host family or Spanish instructors about upcoming events. In regards to safety, I felt very safe in Ecuador. My only advice is to watch your bags and pockets on the public transportation, there are lots of pickpockets. Travel as much as possible, it's cheap and easy! Some of my favorite spots were Baños, Canoa, Cotapaxi and Quilatoa. It's also really valuable to meet locals; they're the best guides and can show you great restaurants and local spots. To sum it all up: be respectful and open to new experiences, go out of the way to meet new people, travel as much as possible, and have fun!