

Here's my Study Abroad Story

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Major: International Relations

Program: I studied abroad with SIT (School for International Training), and as such, the program was an experiential learning based program. The program focused on culture and development and how development impacts local and indigenous cultures. It was divided into three parts: the first month was spent in a suburb of Ecuador's capital, Quito, with family home-stays. This first portion focused on cultural immersion and language acquisition skills. For the second month we transitioned to home-stays within the city bustle of Quito. This second month focused on our understanding of the social, political, and economic factors involved in the national development. The final portion of the program was an intensive field based independent study project. This aspect allowed students to explore an individual interest they had developed over the previous two months and to then physically go to a location of their choice and research their topic.

Interspersed between the home stays, we went on excursions to different regions of the country which allowed us to grasp more thoroughly the diversity of the country.



Typical Day: To a certain extent there was no typical day because we moved around so much. Each aspect to the program had a different "typical day". But to generalize, we would have class usually from 9am until 1pm. Because lunch is the main meal of the day in Ecuador, we would return home for lunch to spend time with our home stay families. In the afternoon we would either explore the surrounding community or city or spend more time immersing ourselves in Ecuadorian culture by socializing with our families. The academic standards were not as rigorous as those at CMC, allowing us more freedom to take time to really explore and experience being a part of Ecuador.

Highlights: The highlight was being able to immerse myself in a foreign country. By the end of the program, I felt that I was a part of the country and that I was fully comfortable being and living there. That feeling of successful immersion was the highlight. I was able to adapt to new and different customs and standards and although I may not have agreed with all of them, it was nonetheless an amazing experience to be conscious of those differences in our societies. Conquering the initial fear and discomfort of being in a foreign place and then turning that around into feelings of normalcy and comfort was an incredibly fulfilling process.

Challenges: The most pressing challenges personally and for our group as a whole were the severe differences in societal norms. Being a woman (or man for that matter) in Ecuador entails a totally different set of cultural expectations than it does in the United States. As a male, I was expected (often times) to have a more aggressive view and mindset towards women. Coping with Latin "machismo" was a challenge. Men are expected to behave in certain ways and often times those behavioral norms challenged my personal values and my personal comfort zone.

Advice? Have fun and try to brush off the little stuff. It is really easy to get caught up in the severity of the issues or the societal differences. And not to minimize these struggles, because there are some glaring and offensive cultural patterns, but at the end of the day we are visitors to a foreign culture and ought to be respectful (while perhaps critical) of the norms for that society. Try not to let these issues weigh you down. Try to escape the burdensome feeling that you are there to save the world and enjoy yourself. Many of the participants in my program were so weighed down throughout the whole time by these issues that they forgot to have fun. Consequently their memories of their time abroad are of constant cultural struggle and pure depression and the inequities of society. Being able to go live in a foreign country for a three month period is one of the most amazing opportunities we are offered while in college. There truly is no other time in one's life where you can just take off and be in a foreign place for that period of time, all the while staying productive and appeasing the parents. So, take advantage of that. Be happy in the face of hardship and stay above it all because if you let it, it certainly will get you down. Easier said than done, but worth remembering nonetheless. Also, don't hang out with your American friends. You can do that here at CMC. Spend time with locals at all costs. That's the best way to really experience a place.