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Ecua-home

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The landscape around Quilotoa, a crater lake I got to visit and even kayak in a couple weekends ago, was some of the best I've ever, ever been privileged enough to visit...and that coming from a girl who's been jeeping through most of Colorado. Love this crew (in the picture you can see Lauren, me, Becky, Cassidy, and Alex, plus photographer Dalton), and loved this place!

One of my favorite things about this program is the people I've met so far. I realize that I might be biased because extroverted me likes people in general, but that has been an invaluable part of me finally feeling at home here. It's the end of March, and the nearer I get to the end of my visit, the less I find myself thinking of it as a visit. My host family has been an inspiring example of generosity. I wish I could introduce you—I wish I could show you how kind they have been every single day, from Majo's greeting in the morning over breakfast, to Papa Ramiro's endless patience in answering questions and giving directions, and Mama Sandra's repeated insistence that I feel free to do what I like. They give me good-day wishes while racing out the door to classrooms and offices in the morning, free rein in the kitchen, last-minute rides, a very comfortable place to sleep, and an insight to Ecuadorian life that I would never have gotten living in an apartment alone. I don't even know how to thank them. It's been new to be the youngest—I live in the zone somewhere between relative and guest—but it's undeniably beautiful to have a place where I feel I can rest at the end of the day. The university campus is also feeling more and more like home; the hallways seem less like a maze and more like a quirky puzzle. Tile floors made me walk carefully at first, but I love having fresh air flowing in and around in this little oasis from city living. I can't bring myself to use *tu*, the informal second person form of address, with any of my professors (except for El Cube—pronounced COO-bay—my Cuban beach volleyball coach), but the vast majority of my classmates do. This place is pretty *chévere* (“cool,” here in Ecuador). The student body of USFQ is comprised of some of the wealthiest young people in Quito, and I was warned that they might be stuck-up and exclusive. After three months, though, I haven't found that to be the case: I have connected with people I was brave

enough to break out my Spanish on at the beginning of the year, Ecuadorian volleyball players from my class and our Carnaval tournament on the beach, and fellow dancers who are working as hard as I am to remember all the salsa moves we've learned since January. Why would I expect every person I pass to bounce up with a handshake and want to be my friend? (Just thinking of the people I know here doing that gives me the giggles.) Getting to know any person takes time, which is part of the reason I dislike any attention girls tend to get on the streets, because it's based on appearance alone. I have, though, made friends with the security guards I pass between my house and the bus terminal every afternoon. One never fails to salute me with a, "*¿Como le va, mi reina?*" (literally, how's it going for you, my queen--my favorite of the pet names I've heard Ecuadorians assign to the people around them) as I come around the corner, and the other has talked me and fellow Linfield student Vicky into giving him English lessons one afternoon a week. Last Monday, he paid us in cake from the bakery next door. And all of that came about because he greeted Marnie and I with a heavily accented, "Hello," trying to practice English--respectfully--when we, the gringas, walked by on our way home from classes. Most of my classes are composed of other exchange students from all over the States (and the world—it's so cool to me that my Japanese friend, Sae, and I can only communicate if we both use our second language). I realized on one of my latest adventures that this really is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity...when would I ever have this kind of chance to explore another country, and with such a community of adventurers just a text or Facebook message away from going to see it with me?

Recently, I've also started attending Vida USFQ, the U's branch of Campus Crusade for Christ, and a *grupo pequeño* of young adults at a friend's church. It pains me to think about saying goodbye to the new friends-who-love-like-family I've met there, but I'm savoring the Fridays I have left with them and trying not to think about how small that number is. People make a place home for me, so I feel like I have pieces of my heart everywhere I and they have ever been.

Studying abroad is amazing. It IS NOT easy. But, despite pangs of homesickness and the embarrassment that comes with tripping repeatedly over a language and culture barrier—which means the almost-constant feeling that even if no one corrects you, you're still not doing it right, whatever 'it' may be—jumping into life here and investing the time I have is absolutely worth it. In Spanish, the phrase is, "*vale la pena*," and it does (even though I wasn't sure it would at first). I just realized somewhere in the middle of our Cotopaxi/Quilotoa adventure that I really am going to miss this, and miss the people who have become a valuable part of my life here. (If you're reading this from Ecuador, I won't be forgetting you anytime soon!)

I'm thankful for the remaining weeks we have. I'm living them and loving them, and taking down memories as well as I can. I'm sorry for being slow about putting the pictures I have up for the rest of you to see, but they and their stories will come...*no te preocupes*. :) Until next time,

Lexy