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## Dando las Gracias (Giving Thanks)

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## Dando las Gracias (Giving Thanks)



*Pailon del Diablo in Baños!*

Hola a todos,

November has been a crazy month! I can hardly believe tomorrow is the first day of December, and the month my crazy journey in Ecuador comes to an end. I'm feeling so bittersweet about this---some days I feel ready to come home, and some days it feels like *Ecuador* is home and I can't imagine leaving. I'm already feeling nostalgic about all the small things I encounter every day here---from how slowly Ecuadorians walk (like molasses), to vendors on the bus selling everything from ice cream to 5 for \$1 pens, even the lady in the small convenience store by my house who always greets me with an "Hola niña!" every time I walk by.

This past week was Thanksgiving. I was a little worried this would be a hard day for me, seeing pictures on social media of all my friends going home and getting a week off of school (it was a little weird for me having three classes on Thanksgiving). But luckily, our awesome program director Franco organized an *amazing* Thanksgiving dinner for us in the house of one of his close friends who is also a chef! She cooked an absolutely incredible turkey dinner for us while Franco and his small band played beautiful Latin American music from the '50s in the background. It was an awesome way to celebrate a classic American holiday with an Ecuadorian twist, and really reminded me of all I have to be thankful for.

The next day, my friends and I decided at the last minute to take a weekend trip to a town three hours away called Baños de Agua Santa (everyone just calls it Baños). Baños is a beautiful, warm little city right

on the line where the mountainous region of Ecuador ends and the jungle region begins. Here there are gorgeous rivers, waterfalls, and thermal pools, and you can enjoy basically any kind of extreme sport you can think of. We arrived on Friday night and ate an amazing dinner in a cute little Thai restaurant. We spent the night walking around and seeing the town, then woke up early the next morning and met up with some more friends to start the day's adventure! That day we decided to go white water rafting. A 45-minute bus ride took us into the jungle along a river, where we suited up in wetsuits and helmets and after a brief introduction and safety briefing, we got in six to a raft with our guide and proceeded to spend the next hour and a half being whipped around and dumped into the warm water (usually on purpose by our guide).

That afternoon after lunch, the bus dropped us off at the top of a hike down and then back up to an absolutely incredible waterfall called Pailon del Diablo (Devil's Cauldron). The best part about it was being able to crawl through a kind of tunnelled, rocky area up behind the waterfall and, when standing behind it, get soaking wet as if it were pouring rain. We hiked back up to the little town, dripping wet, then paid a dollar each to sit in the covered back of a pickup truck for the bumpy ride back to Baños. Unfortunately, it was too late by then to do any more tours and we had to head back the next morning, but we all absolutely fell in love with Baños and plan on going back for four or five days as soon as we finish finals (which are looming upon us)!

For now, I'm hunkered down in my bedroom trying to do all the schoolwork I've been neglecting and wishing I were back in those rapids or ziplining as if I were flying through the cloud forest. But, I've been spending a lot of time lately doing my best to be thankful and find the joy and goodness in everything I encounter---even schoolwork. If this semester has taught me anything, it's how incredible this life is and how fortunate I am to have been given this opportunity to live and study in such an incredible country full of new experiences I never imagined I would encounter.

! Hasta luego! Until next time,

-Hopesita