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Postcards from Abroad

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Galápagos!

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USFQ, Quito, Ecuador

October 19, 2017

Galápagos!



Made friends with Ecuadorian Sea Lions

Well, I've just returned from easily one of the most incredible weeks of my life and now I'm currently sitting in a café, a little sad, mulling over the fact that it's over and that it also means our semester is halfway over. After missing home a little bit the past couple weeks, our trip to the Galápagos and the beautiful ocean was exactly what I needed to recharge for the last half of being in this incredible country. Our travel squad consisted of four Linfield students, which turned out to be the perfect group size, and perfect company for long-term traveling.

We had a long first day that consisted of a taxi, a car ride, a bus, two planes, another bus, a water taxi, yet another bus, a long taxi boat ride, and a short walk; we finally arrived at our hostel on Isabela Island. I was in awe before our boat even reached the dock – the water was so clear and a shade of blue I thought only existed courtesy of professional photo editors. There were sea lions everywhere – lying on boats, lying on beaches, lying on benches, and tons of marine iguanas all over the ground. Initially they were a little scary, but they're essentially harmless.

We were also initially impressed with how remote and calm the island was – no supermarkets, hardly any people, sand streets, and typical remote beach vibes – until we realized that this remoteness meant that there were no ATM's on the entire island. This was surprising and incredibly problematic as the entire Ecuadorian economy runs on cash, but after all the fees to get on the island, I didn't even have enough cash to get back to the island that had the ATMs. However, in typical supermom fashion, one of our moms suggested we try to wire money to the one lone Western Union on the island. After a morning of a wee bit

of anxiety trying to figure out how that worked, we were able to get some money wired (thanks mom) and get going on the fun adventurous stuff.

We spent the first day exploring the little island, snorkeling, enjoying the much needed sunshine, and I'm not sure I can adequately put into words how I felt when I saw a manta ray, four sea turtles, and a star fish my first time snorkeling. I knew how incredible the wildlife was there but didn't imagine it would be so easy to see all the majestic creatures so close or so easily.

On day two, we went on an organized snorkel tour and the incredible sights only improved. We went to Los Tuneles first (little bridges more or less over the water created from lava flow) where I saw my first Blue-footed Boobies. It's Boobie mating season so we got to watch the male try to attract the attention of a nearby female by adamantly honking and flapping his wings. He was unsuccessful (atta girl). There were also the cutest sea lions everywhere, and they're all such show offs. They'll do tricks in the water and then climb up on the rocks and start posing, knowing this is probably their shot to become insta-famous.

We moved along the coast, and the actual snorkeling part was way more incredible than I could have conjured up in my little brain – almost immediately we saw a sea horse which was followed by manta rays, golden rays, tons of the brightest colored fish, white-tipped sharks, more sea turtles, and my personal favorite – an octopus that I got to hold. And by hold, I mean he latched himself to my arm and would not let go. But he was so cute and so soft that I almost felt bad about the octopus empanada I ate the next day. There were underwater caves full of dozens of sharks – they're so majestic and fierce that it took a lot of effort to remind myself that they're harmless to humans. This was probably my favorite day out of the whole trip. We spent our last day on Isabela at the giant tortoise breeding center (it was crazy to see things that were alive before my great-grandma was even a thought, and that will still be alive when my great-grandkids have great-grandkids) and then walked to a nearby flamingo lagoon. Flamingos are indeed as cool as they look in books – just weird, pink, leggy creatures that are oddly majestic but make weird noises when they eat.

The next stop on our trip was Santa Cruz Island, which was much more modernized but still didn't even have a supermarket, for example. We were able to see a lot of really unique things on this island as well. Incredible birds, underground lava tunnels, huge lava craters, the Charles Darwin research center, tons more giant tortoises, sharks, sea turtles, iguanas, and we hung out on some of the most beautiful beaches. It's what I imagine living in *Finding Nemo* would be like.

I was also able to go running along the port, which was so refreshing... I had almost forgotten what it felt like to actually have oxygen in my lungs while exercising (what a privilege living at sea level is). Just being by the ocean would've been enough to cure some of my homesickness, but the fact that the water was an unprecedented shade of turquoise and clear enough to see the most beautiful creatures that live underneath the surface really did the job for me. After an incredible week, my last day in the Galápagos was spent with some of my favorite people, back-flipping off some rocks into the bright blue ocean, and that's a day I'll definitely never forget.

One of our goals while planning the trip was to make sure we had a kitchen where we could do our own cooking. Not only did it save us a ton of money, but it was so much fun cooking together and going to all the different little markets, getting creative finding stuff to put a meal together. It was also nice to be able to cook some of our favorite foods from home, and have a little control over our diet again. Santa Cruz has a cool fish market (I say 'cool' because it's constantly being flocked by pelicans and sea lions trying to get fish scraps. The former are insane – fighting each other and flapping their huge wings trying to assert dominance, while the latter are like trained little dogs. They sit next to the vendors and just nudge their elbows every once in a while trying to encourage some scrap donations) where we bought some fish for super cheap – still could not tell you what type it was, and had fun finding fixings for fish tacos. (We even splurged on some cheddar cheese... quite the delicacy in these parts.) We also bought some octopus at a market, which was fun to learn how to cook and getting creative making it into a meal (Pinterest saves

lives). I would definitely say we embraced the island lifestyle, and the opportunity to have weird, delicious foods while there.

And now, being back in Quito is bittersweet. There's always something a little comforting about being on a consistent schedule, and after missing a day and a half of classes, it's time to return to the homework-filled student schedule. On the bright side, only four more days of class until our next adventure to the Amazon! I love that there's always something to look forward to here.

Besos de Quito,

Maddy