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Quito, Ecuador
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Fruits, Flowers, and Foam Wars

It's the middle of February, which means we have now been in Ecuador for over a month. It's crazy to think about; time has passed so quickly. School in general seems to have fallen into a pattern, as it does normally. The almuerzos, which are restaurants that specifically serve lunch, are an awesome way to eat a lot for not that much money. \$2-3 will get you a three course meal of soup, rice with meat and veggies plus some small dessert and juice.

Two weeks ago was Carnaval, which means a long weekend and time to travel. Since each city celebrates it differently, my friend and I went to Ambato for the weekend, which is known for its parades of fruits and flowers.

The first parade was early in the morning. We woke up at 5 and then left by 6 AM just to get seats. The parade was on the main street of the city and there were hundreds of people already settled in when we got there. The seats themselves were more or less owned by the shop owners, who we had to pay once we decided on a location, and were very tightly packed. It was a bit of a "once you sit you stay" situation. But it worked out fine. We had all skimped on breakfast in order to get an early start, so we took advantage of all of the street vendors selling various types of food and snacks.

Since we were on Ecuadorian time, the parade started about an hour late, but it was definitely worth it. It started with the police, who did stunts and tricks with their dogs. Then came the floats. Each float was made of flowers, fruits, and sometimes other food materials. It reminded me a bit of the rose parade (in Portland) as well, as the first float had the city's "queen" and the following floats each had a princess. After each individual float, there would be a whole troupe of dancers with costumes that corresponded to the float's theme. At the end, they had groups of performers who were representing various countries, such as China, Germany, as well as the different indigenous groups within Ecuador.

After the parade, our group conveniently just went to the pizza restaurant behind where we had been sitting for lunch. Having been pacing ourselves on potato chips, fruit, and water, we were all starving. The restaurant also served as a good shelter for the mayhem happening outside.

During Carnaval, Ecuador goes a bit crazy. Traditionally there's a bit of a water war, where one member of the family will start by flicking someone with water, another member will retaliate, and it escalates. In some cities however, on the streets, you can run the risk of looking like a pancake by the end of the day, as people like to throw eggs and flour. My friend and I chose Ambato, not only because of its famous parades, but also because people there typically didn't use anything other than carioca/espuma. This is a foam material that smells like soap and is sprayed at people from cans like silly string. Any other day and it's just something kids will sometimes use. During Carnaval, it's essentially used to wage war.

We met up with some other exchange students from our school at the pizza restaurant and one guy eventually convinced us to join in on the espuma war. The people of Ecuador showed us no mercy, but of course we had to retaliate. By the end of the street, all of us looked like we had taken a bubble bath in our clothes, but at least we smelled nice. Our friend's fire hydrant sized can of espuma also seemed to deter most people from taking more shots at us as we wandered around downtown. That night though, I think I could have put together an entire can of foam just from washing out my hair, which I had to do twice.

The second parade was at night the following day. It was, more or less, the same groups that had performed during the first parade, but with elaborate costume changes and light shows. I can't imagine how exhausted the performers were though. The main street alone was at least 15 or 20 blocks and their route, according to our host, extended for a few blocks more after that.

Currently, my friends and I are planning a trip to the Galapagos for our spring break, which will hopefully go through. Tickets unfortunately run about \$400 for a round trip, but we may have found a deal that will include tours, accommodations, and food.

- Stacey Strovink