

9-8-2017

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Recommended Citation

Hellebrandt, Mariah, "Colorful Awakening" (2017). *2017-18 Postcards*. Article. Submission 8.
http://digitalcommons.linfield.edu/intl_postcards_1718/8

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Mariah Hellebrandt

GAIAS, Galapagos, Ecuador

September 8, 2017

Colorful Awakening



Ecuador: a place of life, color, and culture. I am so thankful for the opportunity to be studying Spanish and biology in this incredible country. I am really enjoying my experience so far.

Hello there!

Wow, where to even begin? First off, my time here has been fantastic. It is hard to know where to start, yet I will try my best to explain my experience so far, a time I would call nothing less than incredible.

My day starts with the morning ritual of a cock-a-doodle-doo (actually many cock-a-doodle-does) beginning at 5:00 a.m. The next one strikes around 5:10 a.m., 5:20 a.m., 5:30 a.m. and continuing until the entire population of Quito rises up out of bed, I swear. Although, I actually love the little guy a few houses down. He sounds the alarm each and every day. I think the whole thing is great; his dedication and lovely vocal cord capability is like none other. I'll tell you one thing, he does not go unnoticed. In fact, I would say that waking up to his crowing is definitely one of the things I look forward to each day because truly he does a great job; it is a colorful awakening.

Saturday marks my first two weeks studying abroad in the exquisite country of Ecuador. It would be a lie if I said that I am not loving every minute of it. A country full of nature's beauty, las sopas (soups), el arroz (rice), dogs (strays unfortunately), kiss on the cheek greetings, and a place where time has no value (people and events are rarely on time).. what is there not to love? I am staying with a sweet Ecuadorian woman named Raquel and her little schnauzer, Poncho. I am very happy with my home because Raquel is so sincere. Whenever I speak Spanish she is intently focused on the words I am saying and the point I am trying to get across. She always encourages me to never stop trying; she has so much patience. When I am struggling she eases my crinkled brow as she reminds me of the word or phrase I am looking for. I really appreciate her. Even more, Raquel makes me a new delicious juice every day from fruits I have never even heard of before: Guanábana, Babaco, Granadilla (Passionfruit), Taxo, or Guayaba (Guava). Although, in my opinion, nothing tops fresh pineapple juice. The house is just outside of Quito in a valley called

Cumbaya. I feel fortunate to be staying in a more rural area where I can see cows, horses, and chickens from my bedroom window. The sight of the animals provides me comfort because I am reminded of the house where I grew up. One thing is clear to me, I mustn't have forgotten to pack my Montana roots.

Raquel's home is a close twenty-minute walk (or should I say climb) to the university, La Universidad de San Francisco Quito (USFQ). Calling it a climb may very well be more fitting because Quito itself (and sections of Cumbaya) are very hilly, a lot more hilly than I had expected. I have learned to appreciate the inclining and declining streets as I walk to school because I see it as a good way to get my cardio for the day. By breaking a sweat, I save a dollar that would have been used for a taxi ride. In Ecuador a dollar goes far; in my experience, a dollar can pay for local helado (ice cream that is made without cream, only a churned mix of fruit and water), two bottles of water, or even a dollar will pay for half the price of a full Ecuadorian "almuerzo" or lunch (usually costing about \$2.50 and including juice, soup, the main course, which always involves rice and some sort of meat, and possibly a little dessert).

USFQ still takes my breath away as I pass through its security gates (it is the only private Ecuadorian university in all of Quito). The campus has a path that is lined with tall, gorgeous palm trees. There is a large green grass area where one can always find dozens of Ecuadorian students; when I pass by I pick up a few Spanish phrases here and there. I regularly glance past all of the students toward the left side of campus towards the turtle pond in hopes to catch the sight of a turtle working his way onto a rock to bask in the radiating Ecuadorian sunshine. USFQ really is a unique campus to be a part of.

School is going very well. I am highly thrilled with my Spanish class that I completed last week. I enjoyed being taught by an Ecuadorian lady who is a native Spanish speaker. I was surprised by how well structured the class was and how much I had learned in a short week's worth of time. I started a Tropical Ecology course this week and I am very happy with it. We learned about the tropical rainforest and the "gap phase." The gap phase occurs when a tree falls and it creates an increase in the amount of light and nutrients available to the other trees. The tree that falls undergoes decomposition and gives more nutrients to the environment. I am very excited for this three-week course because we have multiple trips planned to conduct research in the field. We will be visiting a cloud forest in Banos, a Paramo region in Papallacta, and a research station called Tupitini that is located deep within the Amazonian jungle. Finally, I am immersed in a course that I am very interested in. It is great to be surrounded by excited eyes; my classmates too are as into the class as I am.

All in all, I am so happy that I made the choice to come to Ecuador. It is a place that is so vibrant, cultured, and full of life. The biggest thing that I can say that I have learned is that when you truly push yourself outside of your comfort zone, good things can come your way. When I started college I couldn't imagine myself stepping foot outside of the United States, much less having the desire to study abroad. Actually, my roommate freshman year had the dream to study abroad, yet I never thought of it as something for me. Sophomore year had come and the idea made its way into my mind as my passion for learning another language grew. During junior year the opportunity to study biology and improve my Spanish in a different country was all that I could think about, yet the thought of making it a reality seemed foreign. From visiting incredibly beautiful ancient Catholic cathedrals in the historic district of Quito to trying an array of freshly made fruit juices, I can say that I truly am "having a taste of Ecuador." I owe it to the little guy down the street who ensures that I rise out of bed every day to take another breath of Ecuador's sunshine, people, fruits, and culture...it truly is a colorful awakening.

Until next time,
Mariah Hellebrandt