Ecuador: Clouds, Mountains, and Memories

I feel that it is a mark of my character that I found and applied to this internship while abroad on a different adventure. I was in Thailand and planning on partaking in the internship experience in Mexico right up until the day one of my classmates mentioned the amazing time she had in a cloud forest. At the time, I had been abroad three weeks already and had fallen into an almost reckless craze for new, exciting, foreign adventures. I found Cloud Forest Adventures online and never looked back.

May was an odd month. I finished finals, was home for two weeks, and then left for Ecuador before the month was over. The caveat to all of this is that I did not actually start my time at Cloud Forest Adventures until several days later. Just getting out to the forest involved a night in Quito, two bus rides, another night in the small town of Cuellaje, and taking the milk truck up the mountain at 6 am the next day. Even then, after meeting with the coordinator, it was another day before I made it to the home of the family where I would stay. He made sure I knew my options for where I could volunteer and had a night to “sleep on it.”

I was very glad to be travelling with another girl starting the same experience. My Spanish was rusty and hers less developed, but we had different strengths in the language that got us everywhere safely. I thought I had wanted a solo adventure, but she was this was proving me wrong. Furthermore, I suddenly was struck by how little I knew about what I had signed up for.

Though the first day at the homestay was somewhat awkward, things became normal when I visited the school the next day. Part of the experience was teaching English in the local school, so I spent my first day becoming acquainted before starting the next week. On the very first day, the children were amazingly warm. I played with them during recess, and two of the youngest girls, Christina and Julia, were so friendly that any doubts I still had about the experience vanished. There were only two classrooms and no technology to be seen – no clocks on the walls even – but it was a school that the children I became familiar with will think of fondly.
After teaching school, I returned to the farm for some lunch and some work. The farm was full of plants I had no experience with: granadillas, naranjillas, tree tomatoes, and unfamiliar beans. The family seemed hesitant to allow me near the animals, so I mostly pruned, weeded, harvested, and prepared (for consumption). I am proud to proclaim I developed callouses on my thumbs from removing kernels from the cobs of corn and can now keep pace with lifelong farmers when extracting beans.

Though many people seem to think that teaching for half a day and then starting on farmwork would be extremely time consuming, I found that without distractions like a cell phone or internet, I had more time than I knew what to do with. I suddenly had endless time to think, read, and write. I read through a good many books and kept a journal. The simplicity of it all was more enjoyable than I could have imagined. With so much time to reflect and think, I had revelations about what I want from life that I do not think I would have reached otherwise.

The Sunday routine was very different from the Monday-Friday school and farm schedule. On Sundays, everyone goes to church, and the only church is in the small town of 2,000 in the valley, Cuellaje. While in town, everyone shops. Small vendors pop up on the sides of the town square selling everything from shoes and movies to fresh produce. Meanwhile, stores deal with long lines of people stocking up on essentials. Through all of this, two volleyball courts are constantly the center of attention. The following is a translated verse from my journal (which was written in Spanish):

When I left from the internet café, I saw Don Limber near the street vendor that sells fresh fruits and vegetables. I wanted to buy broccoli, but instead Don Limber gave me a pear. I had not eaten a pear since leaving the United States, and I thanked him greatly.

I watched the volleyball games for a few minutes. I was very near a car where a man was trying to sell coca. The things that he was saying! He said that coca was able to help men with sexual problems relating to the prostate and women with pain from menstruation, among other things.

Here, I saw a man with very blue eyes. He did not seem to be a foreigner. I wonder if he is the father of the boy in my class in Magdalena that has blue eyes. While I was writing this, a girl sat down beside me. She asked me about Elizabeth. I had not seen her today. I told her that she needed to ask Eduardo.
I feel that I have presented my time in the cloud forest as following a very set routine week to week, but that was certainly not the case. Beyond Cuellaje was a much larger city only three hours away that was good for a weekend getaway. The daughter of the family I was staying with went regularly with an older mentor in Magdalena. I went with her once, other times by myself. I did not know how I was supposed to act on a trip to the city, and thus felt more relaxed on my own. The city is known for hosting the largest arts and crafts market in all of Ecuador every Saturday, and it took hours and hours for me to wonder through all of it, only looking and without buying anything. I also managed to catch a better glimpse into the culture of the area when I was in the city for a festival. I examined the costumes and watched the dancing on the stage and in the streets with awe. I was struck by how happy everyone was, how invigorated even the people watching were. I can’t think of any holiday in the United States that brings such excitement and joy. The closest thing might be the Super Bowl.

On some weekends, rather than travelling to Otavalo, I would take the milk truck up to visit with the coordinator and his wife. His wife was an excellent cook, and since they only ate what they grew and did not have extra money to buy foods in town very often, the meals differed quite a bit from that of my homestay. I much preferred what the coordinator nervously called their “poor man’s diet.” Here, I was able to greet other workers as they came in. I was impressed by the variety of people he managed to draw in to the tiny area. Everyone had a unique background and reason for showing up in the mountains of Ecuador.

Here again, I must announce a caveat. I have been glazing over the inevitable “bad” things that happen while abroad. I got terrible food poisoning, experienced motion sickness for the first time, broke a toe, came down with such terrible bronchitis that I did not have a voice for a week, and was almost charged by a cow. I can only think of these happenings as the bumps in the road that make the ride all the more fun, exciting, and enjoyable. However, people looking for a similar experience need to accept that such things happen, even if they do not choose to adapt the same mindset.

After two months abroad, I left for home at the end of July. At first, I was excited to be returning to see my friends and family. However, when I arrived at the gate in the airport for my flight to Washington, D.C., I was appalled. Why was everyone so loud, so rude? I had become more accustomed to the mannerisms of the area than I thought. I seriously considered just
walking away and staying in South America. The next major step was speaking English again. It felt weird in my mouth, like my tongue was being stubborn and didn’t want to cooperate.

Though I now speak English better than I did through those first few days of readjusting, some aspects of my time in Ecuador never left. After checking my email and Facebook, I have no clue what I am supposed to use the internet for. For breakfast, I absolutely need a warm drink to sip. I hope some of these things will never fade, as a constant reminder of an amazing summer spent in the cloud forests of Ecuador.