

Michelle Maresca

My summer in Ecuador was certainly an eye-opening experience. I went to Ecuador hoping to make a difference in the community; what I achieved however, was much more about learning how to live more simply in a new and different culture, and how to be openly welcomed into a community even though I was clearly a foreigner.

I volunteered with a program called Jatun Sacha, a program focusing on protecting and maintaining Ecuador's biodiversity as well as working with the surrounding communities to improve both the community itself as well as the community's use of natural resources. From reading the description of the program, I really had no idea what I would be doing this summer. Had I known, I might not have gone! The first thing we did upon arriving at the Congal station was work. We worked until well after dark (almost 10:30 pm!) harvesting shrimp and carrying heavy buckets of shrimp, in the meantime getting bitten alive by ticks and mosquitoes, and nearly falling numerous times because we couldn't see where we were going. All of this was after spending 8 hours on a bus, 20 minutes on a boat, and walking 10 minutes with all of our luggage. "What am I getting myself into?" I thought to myself.

Luckily, things improved a great deal after that first day. I started teaching English in the Bunche community elementary school, which I absolutely loved. The children were wonderful. I often reflected on how welcoming and trusting they were; every day they would run up and hug me, hold my hand, play with my hair. Just walking into town brought a chorus of "hola," "buenas," and "gringa!" Wherever I went, everyone had questions. "Where are you from?" "Are you married?" "Do you like to dance?" Everyone in the small community knew me as the English teacher - and they even recognized me when I was spending a weekend at the "tourist beach." My time in Bunche was my favorite aspect of volunteering. As I was teaching the children English, I was practicing and refining my Spanish. As I played with the children and walked through the town, I wondered what my life would have been like had I been born in Bunche. I was almost jealous of the Bunche children; even though they had so little in terms of possessions, they had a freedom which was greater than any I had ever experienced.

Another project that I had undertaken was visiting the county hospital and clinic. I was able to see the facilities as well as speak to the director, work with a nurse in triage, and shadow a medical

resident. While the medical center definitely lacked much of the technology as we are accustomed to in the US , it was still efficient at meeting the needs of the population. For instance, one of the most common ailments in the coastal Ecuadorian population is parasites. This is easily recognized and treated by the doctors there. They have labor and delivery and even an operating room to handle minor surgeries. They have vaccinations for all children, and supplemental nutrition for pregnant/breastfeeding mothers. There is even a pharmacy on the premises. The most amazing aspect is that everything, except medication, is free. Unfortunately, the inability to afford medication is a major barrier to health care for many people.

Other than teaching and visiting the hospital, I was able to participate in some "environmental" activities. I became quite skilled at using a machete, climbing steep mud hills in the forest to remove barbed wire fence, and I made many imprints on the forest floor after falling while carrying heavy branches. I planted trees, picked fruit, and played with shrimp. I washed my clothes by hand, pulled ticks off my pants, wore my "Wellies" to school and even the "bar," nearly adopted Valentina, Joselo, Tatiana, Jefferson, Rosacela and Jomari (and their adorable little puppies), napped in the hammocks, danced salsa, merengue and cumbia, suffered the wrath of the sandflies and mosquitoes, nearly got stranded on an island after getting into an argument with the boat driver, was woken up daily by roosters (or dogs or horses), witnessed a few bar fights, ate fresh coconut on the beach, and most importantly, made friendships and memories that I will carry with me forever. My month in Ecuador was certainly not what I expected, but rather it was an adventure that exceeded my wildest dreams.



The youngest Bunche class and their teacher. How could you not love these kids?