

Chana Weiner
International Medicine Grant Application

This summer I participated in the Interhealth South America program in Ecuador. The purpose of the program was to study medical Spanish, learn about the health care system of a developing country, gain an appreciation for Ecuadorian culture, and perform medical volunteer work in underserved communities.

During the first week of the program, we lived with host families in Quito, the capitol of Ecuador. Some of the highlights of the week were visiting the women's prison, where a number of American women are incarcerated for various drug-related crimes, and conducting our first health brigade in the marketplace of South Quito. At the health brigade, our group of 35 students "set up shop" in the town square and, in pairs, examined hundreds of children from the surrounding communities. Many of the children suffered from parasitic infections, poor dental health, eye infections, and other medical problems. With the help of a small medical staff, we prescribed medications for the children and provided whatever limited medical care we could offer.

The next two weeks we spent in the Andes mountain city of Otavalo. One week we stayed in a hostel and the 2nd week with a host family. Our activities consisted of touring the local clinics and hospital and visiting the surrounding communities to conduct health brigades and learn about their lifestyle and livelihood (hand-made craft production). We visited one particularly unique clinic, Jambi Huasi, which integrates western medicine with indigenous traditional medicine. This clinic attracts indigenous people who feel more comfortable receiving health care from a medical team that includes their own traditional healers. At Jambi Huasi, we learned about Yachacs and frigadoras, different types of traditional spiritual and physical healers and their significance in Ecuadorian indigenous culture. Priya Narayanaan and I plan to do a presentation and some fundraising for this clinic through AMSA as the clinic recently experienced some storm damage. The staff at Jambi Huasi also volunteered their time to help our group with the several health brigades that we conducted in the surrounding communities. Additionally, we conducted a 2-day health survey of Peguche, a poor town outside of Otavalo, for the local Peguche clinic. We gathered information about how many family members live in each house (often dirt huts), what types of medical ailments are suffered by the families, what types of health care they seek, infant mortality, etc.

For the final week of the program, we traveled to the Napo River area of the Amazon. With the help of our guide, we hiked through the rainforest, observing the wildlife and learning about the various medicinal herbs and plants used by the Amazonian people for centuries. We also visited a local traditional healer, made donations of medications and medical supplies to the local clinic, learned basket weaving, and visited the high school where the children are studying eco-tourism, conservation, and farming. Finally, we hiked 12-miles round trip in order to conduct a health brigade for a remote village in the Amazon basin.

In addition to the daily Spanish classes and volunteer work throughout the month, we also took some time to tour the beautiful countryside, horseback riding through the Andes mountains, relaxing in hot springs and hiking up a mountain at Papallacta, and mountain biking down Cotapaxi in Quito.

Overall, I had an incredibly educational, exciting, and eye-opening experience in Ecuador. I would certainly recommend the program to 1st year students and I hope to return to South America in the near future for at least one 4th year rotation.