



Andrew
From Tillsonburg
to
Ecuador

150 exchange students + 1 Hotel = no sleep

A quarter of my exchange has already gone by, yet I still remember when I left Canada as though it were yesterday. In the few weeks leading up to my departure, I really hadn't had much time to let the thought of being away from home for a year sink in. Five days before I left, my host brother from Sweden had arrived, and so through the excitement I hadn't really concentrated much on my own exchange. We did a lot together in the short amount of time we had. We toured the school, picked out his courses, visited friends, played soccer, did some rotary events and more. I had been enjoying my summer and keeping so busy that when the day to leave came, it felt so sudden.

I woke up early in the morning on August 23rd to start what would be such an incredible journey. I put the bags I had finished packing the night before into the car and said goodbye to my four brothers (including my exchange brother) before heading to the Toronto airport. At this point I was still half asleep and so the excitement had yet to kick in.

We arrived at the airport and before long it was time to say farewell. I was both surprised and impressed by my mother, who shed many tears in the week leading up to my voyage, as she kept herself together the entire time. After saying farewell, making my way through customs and eventually onto the plane; the feeling finally hit me. As I sat in my seat and watched the ground get further away; that was when my exchange started to feel real.

In Miami Airport, I met six other exchange students from the United States who were also headed to Ecuador. One of which was going to Machala as well. We boarded the plane and after reaching a stable altitude, one of the exchange students and I found two adjacent, vacant seats to sit with each other. The three hour flight flew by talking and having a great time with my now good friend who's staying in Guayaquil where we landed. After landing we all braced ourselves for the unknown and went our separate ways.

My host Mother, Brother and Sister were there to greet me at the airport with smiles of excitement and a balloon that said "Bienvenido Andrew!" At that point I had now stepped fully into a new culture; and new way of living. We then drove two hours south to Machala; the city which I would learn to call home. The first difference that I noticed was the very aggressive driving and the amount of home security. Most homes in Machala are gated with barb wire or electric wire since crime is a threat in Ecuador. Another difference with their homes is that they never have basements as far as I've seen.

My family in Machala is great. I only had a few days to get to know my host sister who then left to go on her exchange to France. I was grateful to spend my first few days with someone my age. My older brother and sister are in their early twenties and speak very good English, however they both live in Cuenca. My father is a surgeon and likes to play tennis and compete in rally car competitions in his spare time. He took me to see him in a competition in a small town names Piñas where I felt like I was a spectator in the movie Tokyo Drift. It was one of the coolest things I've seen. My mother is a dermatologist and is the nicest women ever. The two of us talk a lot which started off as simple words and has grown into conversations now that my Spanish is better. My parents are both originally from Cuenca and so all of my relatives live there. We drive there just about every other weekend to visit my siblings and relatives. Cuenca is higher in altitude and the temperature is cooler. The city is very hilly and is surrounded by mountains which makes for some beautiful scenery.

The foods of Ecuador are by far better than those of Canada, although you can't help but miss Maple Syrup. The seafoods are so fresh and plentiful by the coast. We eat different seafoods including fish, shrimp, Ecuadorian shell/concha, and crab quite often. Ecuador is the world's third largest exporter of shrimp and so we eat shrimp pretty much every other day. Also, the fruits are so flavourful here and make the most delicious juices.

Granadillas and cherimoyas are some of the fruits I have had the privilege to try and fall in love with. Before coming to Ecuador, I didn't realize how many different types of bananas there are. Ecuador is the banana capital of the world and they eat them in dozens of different ways. The plantain/bananas are often sliced and fried into chifles or made into patacones. Rice is eaten every day, sometimes twice a day. Ceviche is a typical Ecuadorian dish which is seafood marinated in different citrus juices. It looks almost like soup. I recently had the opportunity to eat cuy (guinea pig) in Cuenca where I literally ate the entire thing. My grandfather showed me how to eat the legs, ribs, brain and even the eyes; and so I followed suit! Turtle sounds rather appetizing and so it's next on my list of things to try. I might get the chance to eat turtle and alligator on my trip to the Amazon.

School here at Santa Maria has been great. There are six other exchange students at my school: two from Denmark, two from the United States, one from Mexico and one from Germany. The seven of us have become the best of friends. Around six-hundred students attend Santa Maria from what would be our grades 1 to 12. School starts a lot earlier than I'm used to at 7:10 and ends at 1:55. I find it funny how the classes here are extremely laid back yet the uniform dress code is really strict. For example, although you can't see our socks because we wear pants, the socks must be blue! I didn't bring any blue socks but since I'm foreign I get the special privilege of wearing black. In school here, we stay in the same class with the same group of students, and the teachers move around. It's nice because you get to know your class really well. When I arrived, I only had around three weeks of school before having an entire month off! The school wrote exams for two weeks followed by a two-week break in-between semesters. In those four weeks I hung out with some other exchange students who also didn't have school. I went to a resort in Playas with some family friends and went to Salinas with the Rotary Club.

Salinas was the most incredible experience ever! I drove from Machala with the other exchange students in a bus to Guayaquil where we stopped to eat before continuing on to our destination. Like any other time your with other exchange students, the drive

flew by and in no time we were there. When we arrived we met all of the exchange students from the coastal side of Ecuador which was around eighty students. Living at that resort with them was wonderful! There were two pools outside the hotel followed by the beach where there was a volleyball court, soccer pitch and snack bar. Behind that was the ocean. We had all you can eat food, all day and so I ate two breakfasts, two lunches and two dinners every day! I think that in five days I stayed there, I probably put on almost a pound a day! We had Spanish classes each morning and had the afternoons to swim, play volleyball, play soccer, eat and converse with the best bunch of guys and girls from around the world. To make things even better, I coincidentally happened to stay in a room with my best friend in Machala, from Denmark, and the American exchange student who I flew on the plane with to Guayaquil! After spending five days there, I had made so many friends from so many places and my Spanish had significantly improved. The hardest part of the trip was saying goodbye to the other exchange students who I wouldn't see until our next trip to Bahía, Manabí.

A couple weeks later I was on my trip to Playas which was also absolutely amazing. I tagged along on my mother's friend's vacation with her husband and son. The father spoke English and so we had great conversations for hours about the cultures and lifestyles of our countries. We first headed to Guayaquil where we ate, toured around, went along the Guayas River on a boat, and then slept at their grandmother's house in the city. I learned a lot about the history of the Guayaquil from the father and I got a good idea of the size of the city from the view on the water. After spending the night at the grandmother's house, we drove to Playas where we spent a couple days at the most beautiful resort on the beach.

From where we we're staying we had an amazing view of the ocean. We spent almost all of our time there swimming in pools and in the beach. The seafood I ate there was probably the best I've ever had. I had two different kinds of crab and some delicious empanadas.

After returning to school for a few weeks we left again on another rotary trip to Bahía. This time, every exchange student in Ecuador all stayed in the same hotel. One thing you have to understand is that when you have one-hundred and fifty exchange students from around the world staying in one hotel, sleeping basically doesn't happen. This time I once again stayed in a room with my Danish friend along with my Brazilian friend from Machala and a guy from Germany who before long had become a great friend as well. There I met the fourth Canadian who lived on the other side of Ecuador and thus wasn't on the Salinas trip. The two of us found that we have a lot in common. In Bahía, we did a lot of beach activities where we were put into four teams and competed in kayaking, volleyball and soccer.

We were also taught to dance salsa on the beach. One of the days while we we're there we took busses to Portoviejo where we visited a very interesting museum.

Day to day life in Machala has also been great. My best friend from Denmark lives a one minute walk from me and so we hang out all the time. Taxis are really inexpensive and two or three dollars will take you anywhere in the city. We often cab to the shopping centre to eat or watch a movie at the cinema. There are about fifteen exchange students in Machala and we get together to do stuff about once a week whether it's watching a movie, going to someone's pool or bringing our country's typical food to someone's house for a pot luck. My Danish friend, American friend and I recently started going to the gym six days a week and I play soccer three days a week. It's been great doing so many different things because I've had the chance to meet and practice my Spanish with many different groups of people including my classmates, the exchange students, the other kids from soccer and from the gym.

My experience here has been wonderful and I already know that I won't want to leave at the end of the year! I want to thank the rotary club for such an incredible opportunity and for picking Ecuador for me. I feel so at home here and I'm looking forward to all the adventures that have yet to come!

Andrew