

Postcard From Ecuador

BY TED GRISWOLD

I could not help but think, as I circled through nocturnal clouds above the sparkling hills and valleys of Quito, that it is a good thing certain magical and futuristic modes of transportation have not yet been invented. If one were to use Harry Potter's Floo Powder or Captain Kirk's Transporter to warp instantaneously from Morningside Heights to Ciudad Vieja, one would be completely thrown off by the change in physical and cultural surroundings. I was glad to have the time during the flight to gather my thoughts and orient myself. I could see sprawling city lights beneath the silhouette of Pichincha Volcano as we came in for our nighttime landing. I immediately knew that Columbia and New York do not have everything there is to see, and that one of the best ways to experience the world is to travel.

I will be living in the city in the Andes Mountains until June 6, 2009 with my host mother, Sonia Garces, and her son Juan, who is a first year student at Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Ecuador. My program, Duke University in the Andes, consists of 16 students from the USA living with various families around the capitol city of Quito. We North Americans will take one class together in Spanish about Ecuadorian society, and we will each choose three elective courses at a local university.

When we met our families on our second day south of the equator, the meeting quickly turned into a party with dancing, indigenous music, new local foods, and fresh-squeezed tropical juices (in the USA we do not drink juice, but rather, water with juice). All of the host families know and love being around one another, and our program director, Juan Aulestia, seems to fancy himself more a father figure than a group leader. Juan designed the curriculum of our principle class to progress in synchrony with four weekend trips through the country to visit rural indigenous communities, an Afro-Ecuadorian community and the Galapagos Islands. Juan also requires each student to undertake a 'service learning' project. For my project, I will volunteer in a small elementary school that caters to indigenous students by teaching Andean practices and traditions, using indigenous concepts and methods of learning.

The day after I settled in with the Garces', Juan piled the group onto a bus leaving Quito for the countryside for a few days of 'orientation.' One night during the trip, after we had climbed a good portion of the glacier-capped Cotopaxi Volcano, I awoke vomiting and in a cold sweat. Still sick when it was time to leave the hostel, I gloomily followed the group onto a one-car train



that would take us further into the country, and I immediately fell back to sleep. When I awoke, the train was perched on the side of a steep green slope with patches of cloud rolling over the mountain above us, and others condensing and hovering through the valleys below us. The sun managed to permeate it all and illuminate the mountains beyond, which despite their grade were checkered with farmland. Sometimes the train would stop in a village or to let a farmer steer his or her livestock off the track. At one stop, the conductor yelled, "Arriba al techo... Un dollar!" We paid the fee and climbed onto the roof of the train where we witnessed the rest of our descent down a landform called El Nariz del Diablo, our feet hanging over vertical cliffs. Later that night, we relaxed under a canopy at our hostel and sang, danced, drank, and learned folk songs from a group of indigenous students who were also passing through.

Now is a fascinating time to be in Ecuador because only months ago several committees of legislators, cultural leaders and scholars finished the process of re-founding the constitution from scratch. The new constitution became law after a popular vote, and includes new policy based upon "interculturality", which not only recognizes the diverse ancestral backgrounds of over 20 indigenous nationalities and Afro-Ecuadorian bodies, but also uses terminology and philosophy from indigenous tradition to form the basis for the greater nation. I am lucky to be able to study the implementation of Ecuador's new progressive constitution, while also observing the Latin American response to real and symbolic changes in my own government with the recent election of President Barack Obama. I believe many of the lessons that Ecuador is learning, in creating a unified society of radically different cultures, are setting an important precedent for our country on an international scale now and for the future.

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Awkward Silence

What is the most ridiculous pick-up line you have ever used or had used on you?

1. "Are you on the menu?"—Customer at the coffeehouse, to me, impressionable young cashier
—Melanie Jones, Features Managing Editor

2. "How much does a polar bear weigh? ... Enough to break the ice. Hi, I'm (whatever)."
—Rebecca Pattiz, Music Editor

3. "I bet you can't name the five oceans."—Stranger to me at Rockefeller Center. (Much to my surprise, apparently there actually ARE five oceans—Atlantic, Pacific, Indian, Arctic, ... and Southern! It was just named two years ago.)
—Yin Yin Lu, Books Editor

4. "Who is going to take you out Saturday night and has two thumbs? This guy!"
—Raphael Pope-Sussman, Features Editor

5. "Did you know you can use those braids in your hair to pick your nose?"
—Carla Vass, Eyesites Editor

6. A barista once wrote his number on the top of my Peet's coffee cup. I thought that was pretty clever.
—Devin Briski, Food and Drink Editor

7. "Do you wash your pants in Windex? Because I can see myself in them!"
—Hillary Busis, Managing Editor

8. At Campo one night: "I work for public safety. I walk ladies like you back from bars late at night when they don't feel safe but want to get back to their dorm. Which building do you live in? I could walk you back."
—Helen Werbe, Style Editor

9. "Neither of us said anything."
—Peter Labuza, Film Editor

10. "You must be a magnet, because it looks like you are attracted to my buns of steel."
—Christine Jordan, TV Editor

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