

## Bella Plumptre (Natural Sciences) – Ecuador, Summer 2012

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After three flights, several days and countless rom-coms, I arrived in Quito and was greeted by an inexplicably smiley man (given that he'd been waiting for me for the past two hours). He escorted me back to the Secret Garden hostel, which was my base for the next month. This beautiful but narrow hostel has a stunning roof-top terrace that served as my kitchen and classroom. I soon got settled; after a morning getting my bearings of the city, I found a library and crunched some serious Spanish verbs in preparation for my first lesson. My teacher, Jacky, continued the trend of super-happy Ecuadorians, and taught me five tenses in four hours. I remained calm, and had a lot of baked items filled with a mysterious cheese/egg substance in order to recover.

Later that week, with my mind bubbling with grammar exercises and GCSE vocabulary, fellow Pembrokeians Sarah and Roger, along with two other friends, joined me on the garden terrace. We then set off on our adventures. This new Spanish made me a valued member of the travelling team, as without a GCSE between them, they had been asking for things with some rather dubious phrases (Roger told someone that Sarah was 'heavily involved with a member of the opposite sex', rather than 'in the toilet' as he originally intended).

The reason we chose to visit Ecuador was because of the country's huge variation in landscape and ecosystems. It takes the same time to traverse from top to bottom as to journey from Land's End to John O'Groats, but boasts the soaring skies of the Andes, the humid wonders of the Amazon jungle, cloud forests, cultural wonders in colonial cities, and postcard perfect beaches. All of these are accompanied by a spectacular array of flora and fauna to match. We spent the first part of the trip in the mountainous area surrounding Quito. Highlights included visiting the animal market at Otavalo (and pretending to barter for puppies and chicks sold in brown paper bags), being served what could only be described as a deep fried dog's head (poorly disguised as chicken) and accidentally gatecrashing a six year old girl's birthday party.

Cotopaxi Mountain was our next stop, although we gave scaling the actual mountain a miss (our hostel said 'only' two people had died trying in the last couple of weeks). Here, our plans changed after a morning exploring the area on horseback; my placid beast played buckaroo with me at full speed, and I was thrown off dramatically onto my back. Luckily, we had a French nurse in our group who looked after me, and I was very fortunate not to be seriously hurt. However, it did mean that we had to rearrange parts of our trip: we couldn't make it down to the south for a homestay with a Spanish family, as it was difficult for me to travel immediately after the accident. But my companions were fantastic in keeping me comfortable. Roger nobly carried two huge rucksacks for the rest of the trip!

So, we then headed to the coast instead. We went on a boat trip to Isla de la Plata, a tiny island an hour off the coast populated by blue footed boobies. This was incredible for Sarah and I as biologists, as we studied much of this wildlife in our Evolution and Behaviour in first year. On the way back, we scuba dived with the angel fish, and went whale watching (we did actually see one jump and crash!).

Going round in a circle, we headed to Cuenca the colonial beauty (where they sold giant maggots as snacks outside the main cathedral) and right up through the Andes via Banos, where we stopped at some thermal baths. Finally, we made a detour into the Jungle, which was by far my favourite part of the trip. Our lodge was a two hour canoe ride in from the main road, but we were kept well entertained by our guide, pointing out parrots and monkeys on the way. In the jungle, led by our somewhat crazy guide, we went looking for alligators, swam in the lagoon (I was not happy with this, knowing from studying Pathology all the water's potential parasites!), went on a night hike and found spiders the size of dinner plates, and went piranha fishing. Finally, we visited a local community village and helped make traditional bread. We also saw a local shaman, who whipped one of our friends with a spikey plant as part of a spiritual cleansing. Altogether, this was a spectacular part of the trip, and a fantastic way to finish our adventure.