

Charlotte Little (Medicine) – Ecuador, Summer 2011

This summer I spent six and a half weeks volunteering and travelling in Ecuador, South America. It proved to be one of the most exciting, interesting and inspiring experiences of my life. My trip consisted of two different voluntary placements – the first in an indigenous community in the Amazon and the second in a hospital in the capital, Quito – with some time in between for independent travelling around Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands.

My first two weeks were spent living in two different indigenous Shuar communities near Puyo, in the Amazon rainforest. This was without doubt the most awe-inspiring place I have ever visited and having the opportunity to live there for two weeks with the locals was incredible. I lived with two other volunteers in the Shuar houses and worked, dined and socialised with members of the community every weekday. I spent much of my time armed with a machete in the jungle, felling bamboo, planting bananas, clearing land, carrying wood, maintaining trails, doing construction work and other tasks. In our spare time, we went on jungle walks with the Shuar people, who taught us about the natural resources of the forest. In particular, they showed us many medicinal plants, such as trees with 'Dragon's Blood', a sap that can be used to treat abdominal problems and to relieve insect bites. I was soon using this daily due to the abundance of bites I was getting, despite bottles of repellent and a mosquito net! It was wonderful to share a completely new culture with the Shuar and I experienced things I never thought I'd do – such as crawling into a tiny bat cave and bathing at night in a tributary of the Amazon.

For my second placement, I stayed with a host family just outside Quito and worked in the emergency department of Sangolqui Hospital, a very small public hospital. This was a brilliant opportunity for me to meet a variety of patients and to closely watch and assist in their treatment, sometimes even treating patients entirely by myself. I spent most days in the ER, shadowing and assisting the doctors, for example pouring solutions over gauzes, collecting and clearing away equipment and dabbing blood away during minor surgical procedures. I learnt a great deal about many of the different treatments, such as for abscesses, and assisted in some very interesting cases. It wasn't always easy, for example holding down screaming and kicking children on multiple occasions as they had sutures put in or even a pea removed from their nose! I learnt how to set up a monitor for pregnant women and by the second week I could treat patients for suture extraction or wound cleaning independently. I also spent two mornings watching gynaecological surgery, which I loved. I saw two babies being born by C-section and on a later date visited the wards where the mothers were with their newborns. Completing a 34 hour overnight shift, with only a 2 hour break, was another amazing experience I had and allowed me to (briefly) enter an Ecuadorian ambulance. The two weeks really highlighted some of the major differences between the public and private hospitals in Ecuador. There are small things, such as a lack of pillows, patients sharing beds for short procedures and more sparing use of local anaesthetic! However, sometimes there are major differences in care, for example suturing being done in the ER that would, in a private hospital, be referred to a specialist plastic surgeon. Overall, the trip was an brilliant opportunity for me to learn about new cultures and gain hands-on experience as a medical student. It is something that I will never forget and I intend to return to Ecuador in the future.