I chose to spend a semester in Quito, Ecuador for more than a few reasons. Firstly, I wanted to improve my Spanish and work towards my goal of becoming a certified Spanish-English interpreter. I chose Ecuador for this because the Spanish spoken in the Ecuadorian Andes is among the easiest to understand in Latin America (I can attest to this; when some of my host mom’s relatives from the coast came to visit, I had a hard time understanding them!). I also chose Ecuador because of its fame among biologists: Ecuador is one of the most biodiverse countries on Earth, and not just because it lays claim to a piece of the Amazon. There is the coast with amazing dive spots, the Andes, and of course the Galapagos, where Charles Darwin famously landed in 1835.

I’m a fourth year Linguistics major, and while it was difficult to find Linguistics courses at USFQ per se, I had the opportunity to study languages that I would not have had otherwise – namely, Quichua, or the language of the Incan empire. Quichua is still widely spoken among the indigenous people of the Andes, and if you happen to visit the artisanal market in Quito or Otavalo (which are really worth a look!) you can practice your Quichua skills with the vendors. Most of them are surprised and happy to hear a foreigner speaking their own tongue.

Ecuador is a unique challenge as far as packing goes. Since there are three distinct climates in Ecuador, an exchange student must pack three very different wardrobes. For the Andes, for example, I recommend packing jeans, T-shirts, and a sweater for when it gets nippy. Another very important item is sunscreen; since the atmosphere is a lot thinner in the Andes, wear at least 50 SPF to keep from getting toasted. The air may be cool, but the sun is still very intense (if you can’t find 50 SPF in Vancouver, most Ecuadorian pharmacies carry good brands). Rain gear is also a good idea; when it rains in the Andes, it really rains. While I did not make it out to the Galapagos or the coast while I was there, quite a few of the other exchange students went, and they found they were able to wear more casual “summer” clothes there such as shorts and sandals. For the Amazon, a pair of quick-drying, loose cotton pants will be a life-saver, both because of the humidity and biting insects. Make sure to bring plastic bags to keep your electronics in, as the humidity will do (not so) funny things with them, and also a flashlight with extra batteries. Darkness in the rainforest is absolute, and very frustrating when you’re trying to walk (stumble) from your cabin to the dining hall and back without light. A final note on packing: make sure to carry a first aid kit at all times, and also a face mask and water. Cotopaxi, a nearby volcano, has recently been spewing ash into the air, and the mask will prevent the inhalation of ash particles.
(Horseback riding in the Andes: thank you Pepe for the lovely ride!)

(A tree with buttress roots in Yasuní National Park)
Travel/Transportation:

My journey to Quito involved two flights: one from Vancouver to Houston, Texas, and another from Texas to Quito. The round trip flight cost me around 1,200 dollars CAD. If you want to go to the Galapagos or the Amazon during your exchange, these trips require booking additional flights. There is a government fee to pay to access the Galapagos, but for students, the fee is greatly reduced (the last time I heard, it was somewhere around 50 USD, but it is subject to change).

The transit systems in and around Quito are worth mentioning. In Quito, as you are commuting from your home-stay to class, you will take one of two buses: the “bus verde”, or green bus, and the ecovía, or red bus. A ride costs 25 cents US, and you can get change from the bus attendants after you board (one of the best things about Ecuadorian transit!). The green buses are by far the nicest, as they are rarely crowded and go to the most places around the city. The ecovía buses travel in a straight line from Rio Coca station to La Marin station; Rio Coca is a very large bus terminal, and a good wayfinding point when you’re going anywhere in Quito. These red buses are the ones you want to take if you are going to La Mariscal, or the tourist district close to the airport. I would be amiss, however, if I didn’t include a word of caution: especially on the ecovías, watch your personal belongings, and always carry your bag in front of you. I was fortunate enough not to be pickpocketed, but I know many other students who were. And even more than on Vancouver transit, hold on tightly. I am not exaggerating when I say that some bus drivers ignore the speed limit.

The third kind of bus is the trolebus. It’s a blue bus that travels lengthwise through Quito and ends at La Ofelia station in the north. This station is where buses to Otavalo and Cayambe depart.

Financial Details:

Ecuador is still a very cash-based society; any markets or smaller venues will only accept denominations under 20. The official currency is the US dollar, but there are still Ecuadorian sucre floating around from before the “dollarization” of the ‘90s. One of the few credit cards accepted nearly everywhere is Diner’s Club, but you can still use Mastercard and Visa at most major banks. Banco Pichincha and Banco Bolivariano are the two closest banks to the USFQ campus. Since I bank with a small credit union, I wasn’t able to use my debit card in Ecuador. It would be worth it to talk to the banking representative where you bank to see if they offer a debit card with an international PIN, such as Visa debit. Additionally, I was told it would be wise to bring around 500 USD with you before arriving in Ecuador to make sure that you can buy food and lodging if you need it. I did end up being glad that I brought so much, because it allowed me to launch right into campus life without having to figure out how to withdraw money first from an Ecuadorian bank.
Food, and life in general, is cheaper in Ecuador than in Canada. Little *almuerzo* places usually charge between 2 and 4 dollars US for a bowl of soup, a full plate of food, a glass of juice, and fruit for dessert! There are several of these restaurants within a few seconds’ walking of the university, and there are always tasty Ecuadorian specialties on the menu. I recommend *churrasco*, which is a platter with rice, a fried egg, avocado slices, and beef steak. There are also several vegetarian options close to campus, and most restaurants serve a mean quinoa soup!

Visa application is slightly complicated, and there is a lot of paperwork. There is one Ecuadorian Consulate who lives in Burnaby, and he is very helpful in answering questions about the application process. As far as I know, the application for residents of BC may be online now, but the best thing to do is to talk with the USFQ International Services for Students via email. They will guide you through the process, and will notify you of, or send you, all of the required documents. There is an 80.00 CAD Visa application fee.

Arrival and Orientation:

USFQ is very on the ball with its students. My host mom met me at the airport and drove me to her home. Ecuador is three hours ahead of Vancouver (or four, depending on time change), but the more noticeable difference is the amount of oxygen you’re breathing in. Quito is the world’s second highest capital at 3,000 meters (9,000 feet) above sea level. It may be hard to walk long distances and climb stairs for about the first week, but your body will begin to acclimatize. Altitude sickness does exist; if you are concerned, I would suggest making an appointment with a travel doctor, who will let you know which medicines are best to combat the sudden change in air pressure (and while you’re there, it’s a good idea to ask about vaccines! It will depend on which region you go to which vaccines you need). Thankfully, I was only very tired!

I found that the orientation at USFQ was well-planned. You will meet other exchange students, be paired with an “Ecuabuddy”, (a local Ecuadorian student who helps you through the semester), and receive safety talks from various staff members at USFQ. Orientation also offers a tour of Quito for 60 USD, which I recommend! Quito has a very unique blend of old colonial-style architecture and modern glass high-rises, and is famous for the cathedrals in its Historic Center.
Academics:

Much like at SFU, you enroll in classes at USFQ online using a system called Banner. Don’t hesitate to contact USFQ international student services if you have computer trouble; they are very friendly and knowledgeable. Classes at USFQ are 4 credits each, transferring to 3 at SFU. Course structure is also similar, with papers, midterms, and finals. Grading used is the North American system (A, B, C, D, and F). There are tons of fun clubs to get involved in, too, ranging from salsa classes to scuba diving, photography, yoga, and everything in between.

Accommodation and Living:

All students either stay with a host family close to campus, or they rent an apartment in the city; there are no on-campus housing options. That being said, I loved the experience of living with a host family, in that I had someone to say hi to when I came back from class for the day, and also the opportunity to practice my Spanish 24/7! Rent is paid to the university all at once, and works out to about 600 USD a month. Host families are required to provide two meals a day (usually breakfast and lunch), and so I bought lunch at the university (the 2 dollar almuerzos made it very affordable!). Many families will have an empleada, or maid, which is another thing that will take getting used to. You can ask your host family about which things you can help with around the house, and the etiquette for interacting with the maid, which is different in every family. In my host family, the empleada was treated like part of the family, and I was even allowed to help her with the dishes on occasion. My favourite part of helping in the kitchen was being allowed to make the fruit juice; Ecuadorian fruit juice is always made smoothie-style in the blender with fresh fruit and sugar. Store-bought juice is just not the same.
Orientation at USFQ is very well-planned. You will meet fellow exchange students, get paired with an Ecuabuddy (a local Ecuadorian student that will be there to help you out over the semester), and will attend safety talks delivered by the International Student Services department at USFQ. There is also an included city tour of Quito’s Historic Centre for 60 USD. If you get the chance to go, please do! You will get to see some beautiful cathedrals, parks, and museums, and also get lunch at a very up-class hotel overlooking the Panecillo, one of the landmarks of Quito.

To say that my international experience went beyond words would be cliché, but it’s true. I made many friendships, saw amazing places, and got very addicted to fried plantain chips (trust me, you’re going to want to leave room in your suitcase for a bag of those). I did face some challenges while there, mostly a run-in with parasites due to not being careful enough with where I ate (ie. the south of Quito). If you’re not feeling well, let your host family know. Especially, if you end up in the hospital, let USFQ know, and they will make sure you recover and return to class. Private hospitals in Ecuador are preferable to public ones, as you’re more likely to get good, timely care. As far as things I wish I had known before leaving for Ecuador…I wish I had known that homesickness commonly sets in around the third month, and that this is perfectly normal. Meet people, join activities, and always take time to care for yourself. To everyone thinking of going to Latin America, que les vaya bien (may it go well with you!). It will be worth every second.
(A family platter at a fritas restaurant. Clockwise from the top left: salad (the least important food in Ecuadorian cuisine), mote, potatoes, chulpi, avocado, habas, fresh cheese, corn on the cob, fried plantains, empanadas de viento (cheese filled empanadas), and something potato-ish that I still haven’t identified. In the middle: slow-cooked pork)