My name is Carly. I am an International Studies Major at SFU. I travelled to Ecuador in August 2015 to participate in a semester long exchange where I studied “People, Politics, and the Environment” through the Universidad de San Francisco de Quito. I selected the GAIAS program or Galapagos Extension program as my first choice from a long list of exchange offerings by SFU because it was much more structured compared to the other exchange programs. For this program, students were placed in two home stays. The first month we stayed in smaller cities just outside of Quito, Ecuador, which were closer to our host university which was located in Cumbaya, Ecuador. The remaining three months we were placed in home stays on San Cristobal, Galapagos Islands. Our program fee was quite expensive, especially considering the value of the Canadian dollar, as fees were paid in US dollars. However, this program fee included some meals, some transportation, accommodation, and all of our educational excursions as well as a week of touring the Galapagos Islands mid semester. I liked this structure and style of exchange because it took a lot of the preparation work out of the equation for the student. The number of participants for Fall 2015 was around 40-50. There were four academic programs to choose from, which were carried out in three week long intensive modules. The options provided were Evolution, Marine Biology, People Politics and the Environment, and a second Evolution track reserved for students from the University of Miami.

Preparation

The most frustrating part of preparing for this trip was the lack of organization and slow response times of staff at the host university. I recommend requesting the course syllabuses for all courses you are interested in well in advance of course selection. Also, try to find old syllabuses or request them, if the new ones have not been released to the host university staff by the professor. There was much confusion on the program costs, tuition costs, and which currency the tuition would be paid in. For my semester abroad there was a GAIAS program fee paid in US dollars as well as a regular 12 unit tuition fee paid to SFU in Canadian dollars. On top of this, you must pay a participation fee to SFU for the exchange, external airfare, visa fees, vaccination fees, and any other spending money for excursions and additional travel. The currency of Ecuador is US dollars. I exchanged approximately $1500 US dollars at my bank in Vancouver before leaving for Ecuador. I ended up taking out $200 at ATMs through the end of my trip. It cost me about $6 US dollars each time I withdrew money from the ATM. I did not feel comfortable bringing more money than that in case it was lost or stolen. The major expense which exceeded my budgeted spending money was scuba diving...however, it was definitely the best money I spent on my exchange and an unforgettable, once in a life time opportunity that was well worth it.

It was unknown to us that we would be spending money on a taxi each day to school during our time in Quito, it was still only about $2.50 each way however it added up for three weeks of commuting. The bus was $0.50 each way however, in the beginning I was very sick and could not ride the bus. The bus was
also sometimes unreliable and dangerous at night. However, to and from school it was totally manageable provided you scheduled enough time in case it was late.

The cost of living was cheaper compared to Vancouver in terms of transit and food. However, some items like shampoo, and other bath products or electronics were much more expensive. I would recommend bringing much of what you need instead of buying it. However, some students bought things as they needed them and it was no problem. I ended up being quite sick most of the time so I was happy to have all the medications I needed ahead of time. In the end, if it’s small to pack, take it even if it might not be used. Going to the store might not be so easy the first couple weeks depending on how helpful your host family is considering you might not be confident with the language and/or the transportation systems and you also might not be able to find what you normally buy back home!

In terms of packing clothing... this was extremely difficult considering the diversity of Ecuador. In the first month on the mainland in Quito and surrounding areas we participated in many excursions through our classes, this included the paramos which require winter wear (prepare for snow, rain, and wind), the Amazon which required moisture wicking clothing for intense sweating and bug protection, and Quito which required city wear (culturally showing too much leg and chest was not appropriate). Based on these requirements I would recommend investing in good quality hiking pants, light coloured (the bugs like black), and moisture wicking with pockets and if possible zip off legs for easy changing when the temperature changes. Most of the hiking trips we were required to wear rubber boots which were provided by the school in most cases. I would avoid bringing hiking boots for this reason as often you are wearing the schools and hiking boots are heavy and hard to pack. Instead I would purchase rubber boots in Quito and take them to the Galapagos were you can leave them behind when you fly home (donate them to the university). Bring gloves and a toque for the paramos. You will also need a warm, versatile jacket, wind and water resistant is preferable. This was definitely annoying to pack but I was happy I brought it. Quito was hot in the sun but breezy in the shade. The sun is really intense there so sun protection clothing is a must (hats, shades, etc.). On the Galapagos, which is where you will spend the majority of your time, you will want to bring comfortable, versatile clothing for hot weather and sweating. Most of the girls, including myself, agreed during the trip that they wish they brought more bathing suits (including a one-piece for activities) and more easy to wear sundresses that were lose and airy. Sundresses pack light/small (instead of two pieces) and were good for school and the beach. You’ll want your hiking pants, some shorts, runners, and a good pair of walking flip flops/sandals as that is what you will be walking around in everyday! There are some clubs and it is fun to dress up sometimes so bring a couple nicer outfits to go out in. I found a great packing list on Google by searching ‘Galapagos study abroad packing list’ – look through a few and compare them and that will help to make sure your bases are covered.

**During Exchange**
I would recommend arriving with a day to settle in at your host family's house. I arrived late because my flights were delayed and had to get up early the next morning to go to orientation and Spanish class – this week exhausted me with the adjustment to the altitude, the food, and having lost sleep. My baggage was also lost so the first week was tough. If you can schedule to arrive at least 24 hours before the necessary arrival time this can help account for any delays and give you time to get settled. Orientations and Spanish classes were long and boring in the first week, but they were necessary and helpful. Just go to them, this is when you start to meet people.

The home stays were probably the highlight of my trip. The host university did a great job on matching people to families. However, remember that you get what you give. Some other students did not have as great of an experience with their families and later in the exchange actually regretted their decision not to force themselves to engage with their families, even though in many cases it is sometimes awkward and difficult with the language barrier. Good ways to engage with your family are helping to cook or asking to learn new words in Spanish or asking about food, places to visit and activities. Just show that you care and want to get to know them and you will have a great experience.

The intensive module semester format was definitely different than a traditional semester at SFU. However I ended up really liking it because you just needed to focus on one course at a time which helped with time management and stress. It was really demanding with three hours of class each day, however, it was in the morning and gave you the rest of the day to explore or hang out with your family. There were daily readings which were hard to keep up with but the grading was easier relative to SFU so you should be able to do well. Balancing between school and experience was one of the biggest challenges of this program. The GAIAS program was more based on hands on learning, excursions, group work, and some individual assignments. It was up to you how engaged you wanted to be... but in some cases putting more attention into studying was really interesting and worthwhile – due to the exclusive nature of the Galapagos Islands and the topics one could explore. However, at the end of the day, spending time with your family, meeting friends from inside and outside your program, and participating in new and challenging activities like diving or travel to other islands are things that you will remember.

Spanish and meeting locals

In terms of culture, I found some things to be different however, nothing particularly alarming. Most things I could adjust to and it helped talking to the other students or professors of the program if I had concerns. If you utilize the resources available to you and reach out, you will find the support you need. In general, just have an open mind and remember that it takes a couple weeks to adjust to a new atmosphere.

I would definitely recommend visiting Banos for a weekend in the first month when you are in Quito. I also would recommend hiking Pichincha, it was an intense hike and the altitude kills you but the summit is amazing. This was definitely a highlight for me (some people turned back mid hike so it is not for everyone). There is also a market called Otavalo which is a two hour bus ride from Quito, this is a great
place to buy presents and can be done in a day trip, bring lots of cash! Take advantage of your weekends and don’t worry too much about school, you can do work on your trips and everyone is in the same boat. Another town people loved was Mindo, I never went but it’s something to look into. My one regret was not exploring the Galapagos Islands more. It was very difficult to do anything on the Galapagos without future planning (one weeks’ notice for permits etc.). Take advantage of weekends off and travel to the other islands, because although you get to see a lot on the island hopping trip, there is so much to see. This however is expensive, which is why most of us did not. I did do a trip back to Santa Cruz after the island hopping trip with a couple friends; this was another highlight of my trip. Maybe wait until after island hopping to see what interests you and then make some plans. There are some great places to see on San Cristobal, including Puerto Chino, the highlands (Milton Aguas home), Baquerizo, and some beaches for camping.

At the end of the semester, everyone flies together back to Quito and we spend one night in a hotel that is paid for by the university. My flight was scheduled to leave a couple days after returning to Quito and at this time I fit in my trip to Banos with my traveling buddy (other SFU exchange student). I am so happy I fit this trip in because Banos is amazing; however, at this point in the trip everyone was very exhausted and sad. We had to leave the Galapagos Islands because our permits were expired after 90 days, and many students flew back home within 24 hours of returning to Quito. You won’t know who you will be closest to at the end until the end comes and so it is very difficult to plan travel after the trip. I left Ecuador not ready to come home, because I really loved it there. However, I think it would have been difficult to extend my trip considering my schooling and work back at home. Most students from my exchange agreed that two semesters with the GAIAS program would be too long (considering the size of the islands).

**Reflection After Exchange**

In all the exchange was one of the best times of my life. The GAIAS program is so unique because of what you will be able to see, do and learn on the Galapagos Islands...but also because the small program size and island life forces you to become friends with people you would never have otherwise got to know so well. It forces you to slow down, simplify your life, and enjoy the outdoors. I am still realizing all the impacts this program and experience had on me. My advice to anyone considering this program would be that is is challenging and expensive...but SO WORTH IT! If you keep a positive attitude and are open to new experience and new people you will have the best time. Most of the challenges of this program for me were dealing with sickness/illness from the food, travel, or exhaustion, communicating in Spanish day in and day out, learning to engage and make friend with people who were very different than me, and adjusting to uncomfortable situations such as heat, early mornings, unappetizing food, tensions with my host family or classmates, and challenging excursions mentally and physically. However, in the end I gained resilience, confidence, better appreciation, a better attitude, stronger group work and social skills, intermediate Spanish speaking skills, and unforgettable experiences.
Walking day tour of Quito – Main Square (school excursion)
Our beautiful university campus in Cumbaya, Ecuador
Canyoning in Banos, Ecuador
Summit of Pichincha, Ecuador
Sunrise in a 43 meter high tree fort in the Amazon Rainforest (school excursion)
Las Grietas – Swimming hole on the Island of Santa Cruz
Sierra Negra – Volcano Caldera on the Island of Isabela (school excursion)
Freezing in the Paramos (school excursion)

Swimming at Tijeretas on San Cristobal, Galapagos – it’s a great snorkel destination that is a 15 minute walk from the university campus on the Galapagos.