

# REFLECTIONS FROM THE MIDDLE OF THE WORLD: Studying, Serving, and Sharing in Quito, Ecuador

by JENNIFER SVETLIK

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WHETHER IT TRICKLES MILDLY DOWN THE WINDOW pane in tiny rivers or comes *cayendo chuzos de punto* out of nowhere when the Forty Acres bus has already stopped running, I am reminded. Each time it's rained since I've returned from studying abroad in Quito in fall 2006, I've been thankful for the rain, and no rainstorm passes without thoughts of the rural community of Turuku, Ecuador.

Turuku is a small, mostly indigenous community two hours north of Quito, where I had the privilege of doing service learning and field research for an anthropology class. While there, I was *profesora* for two days a week for six weeks, teaching English, art, music, and physical education classes in a public, bilingual Spanish/Quichua elementary school and studying the effects of migration on the community. Weekends were spent participating in community life: in the shared work of the *mingas*, in baking *guaguas de pan* for the Day of the Dead, or in discussing the kichwa cosmovision while sipping *chicha* (corn beer) from cracked mugs around the fireplace of our generous host and guide in the community, Raúl.

Raúl was a fountain of wisdom during my weekends in Turuku, and it is he who taught me to think differently about the rain. One early Saturday morning, as the clouds were still rising over Mama Cotacachi,

the volcano that is believed to care for the indigenous people who live under her watchful gaze, Raúl took my research partner and me for a walk. As during all of our walks together, interesting conversation topics abounded: women and microenterprise, the controversial presidential candidates in the upcoming election, and the discrimination faced by indigenous schoolchildren. As we walked, the sky began to darken and thunder rumbled ever so quietly. Without thinking, I groaned, not wanting to be caught miles from Raúl's house without umbrella or poncho. Noticing my groan but not saying a word, Raúl redirected our path to show us the spring from which the people of the neighboring community got their water. It was a small spring, with a pool half a foot deep, but was the water source for more than 100 people, some who had to walk a couple of miles each morning to fill buckets before livestock came to drink from the pool in the afternoon. I believe this side trip in our walk was Raúl's subtle way of telling me, "Be thankful for the rain, it comes as a gift!" and I left the spring with tears in my eyes, humbled by my narrow and selfish thoughts about the rain.

My experience that Saturday is just one small example of many that taught me the most important lesson I learned while abroad, that I am no *dueña de la verdad*, that I cannot make presumptions about the way people will act, what they will say or expect, or even the way they

see the world. “Traveling makes one modest,” said Flaubert. “You see what a tiny place you occupy in the world.” So many experiences I had humbled me and made me feel small in the world, but also made me so excited to travel further and see what this world has to offer to those who choose to explore.

My travels around Ecuador led me to some amazing places, filled with beauty and excitement, realities and complexities. I danced salsa in the sand and sipped piña coladas in a hammock on the Ecuadorian coast, but

forest and spent the most amazing four days of my life there: watching gorgeous sunrises over the canopy, swimming with river dolphins, eating lemon-flavored ants, and even being defecated on by a howler monkey! But only an hour away, oil drilling was destroying rare species and upsetting the traditional lifestyle of the indigenous people who had lived there for hundreds of years. And even in Quito, where I studied and spent the majority of my time, I would take the crowded bus to the historic district at least once a week,

Cotacachi, where I felt most at home. I left my heart in the energetic rhythms of the Afro-Ecuadorians on the beach, with the indigenous guides in the Amazon whose families were organizing to speak against the oil companies’ actions. Part of me will remain in all the fascinating places I visited, but I have taken so much wisdom with me back to the U.S. as well. I learned to live simply in the present, as I did when my host mom would make her grandson and me sit quietly and name all the sounds that we could hear. I learned to become

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also was able to meet politically active Afro-Ecuadorians working to improve the school system in an area ignored by the government. In the Galapagos Islands, I saw a fascinating abundance of wildlife, sat with a multitude of sea lions on the beach, saw so many gigantic tortoises that they became almost commonplace, and snorkeled with sharks, but I also spoke with fishermen on the islands, several who had lost relatives in a recent storm. I traveled six hours deep into the Amazon rain-

to appreciate the richness of the history and the magnificence of the architecture there. It made me feel more alive to walk through those streets, even while I knew that orphan shoeshine boys slept in them at night.

Over four months, I fell in love with this land of complexities, a land of political turmoil and peaceful mountaintops, beauty in pain. I left my heart there, with my adorable and affectionate students in Turuku and with Raul’s generous family, at the base of Mama

more aware of injustices and to educate myself in how I can best work toward change both at home and abroad. I learned to experience every situation with new eyes and to see all things as a gift, especially the rain.

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Left to right: 1) Two of my favorite students and me, receiving a Quichua lesson from another student during lunch, Turuku, Ecuador, 2) With a llama at Ingapirca, the site of the largest Inca ruins in Ecuador, 3) Sunrise over the Rio Tiputini Biodiversity Research Station, Amazon Rain Forest