

John Gall, '06

Colimes, Ecuador

A week after finishing our Junior year of college, Robert Hirten and I departed on the adventure of a lifetime. We nervously attempted to read an Ecuadorian newspaper as we passed the time on the plane ride to South America. We landed in Guayaquil, Ecuador; a world away from all we knew. After a hearty welcome from Sister Mary of the Franciscan Missionaries of St. Joseph, we drove two hours north. We crossed the River Daule on a ferry before arriving in Colimes. We stepped out of the jeep and back in time. There were more horses than cars in the streets.

The humidity hit us as hard as the realization that our Spanish language skills were not up par. Early on, we made some communication gaffes like promising to perform chest surgery on a child. However, our Spanish quickly began to improve. Our language skills had to get better because there were only three people in the whole town who spoke English: an Ecuadorian English teacher, a nun, and a drug dealer. Besides the change in language, we had to get used to other changes like cold showers, washing clothes by hand, and the squealing pig that lived right outside our bedroom window.



Our work in Colimes was teaching English. Every morning we taught three classes at either the Nueve Octubre or Santa Rosa Elementary Schools. Every night we taught four classes at the Santa Rosa High School. Occasionally, we helped teach in the afternoon at Agropecuario High School. Needless to say we stayed busy. In between classes, we graded papers, did laundry, or played pickup basketball. We taught kids from six to twenty-one years old. How much English they learned is debatable, but they enjoyed having us with them. We were a much needed diversion, a constant source of amusement as we struggled with the language and attempted to play soccer.



We lived in a boarding house that the nuns had built. Mirian, the woman who ran the house spoke no English so our dinner conversations were pretty sparse the first week or so. Her son was a university student who befriended us on weekends when he was home, while the rest of her family visited and cooked for us throughout the week. The Ecuadorian diet was an adjustment. Rob and I both lost ten pounds after eating white rice and soup two meals a day for six weeks.



When not teaching, we occasionally spent time in the local medical clinic. One Saturday, we were privileged to observe a team of doctors from Guayaquil perform eye surgeries. We also saw patients with measles and typhoid fever among other ailments. Unfortunately, we were also present at the clinic in the aftermath of a bloody suicide. Death was a part of life in Colimes. Not a week would go by without a funeral march through the streets.



Life went on however. The happy times standing out more than the sad. Some events stand out in particular, like the craziness of a religious parade that culminated in a fireworks display which shot sparks and roman candles into the crowd. On another occasion, we visited a Teak plantation outside of Colimes where we rode horses and shot submachine guns. On our last day of class, we ate cake while a student or two from each class made proclamations and sang songs for each of us.

Still, it is the little things from the trip that I find myself missing: the sound of horses' hooves moving slowly down the street, the easy rhythm of men hawking their wares, the laughter of kids in the school across the street. I miss having nothing to do and plenty of time with which to do nothing. Life in Ecuador spoke passionately to me in a way that our sometimes overly sanitized life back home could not. The world was raw and unpackaged, and I never felt more alive.