

Shyama Mathews, '06
Colimes, Ecuador



Playtime with some of the local kids: Alesandra, Viviana, Estali, and Drisela (Clockwise)

This summer, Greg and I had the unique opportunity to spend 6 amazing weeks of teaching and traveling in Ecuador . Though I was there only a short time, the language, culture, and people of this beautiful country have found a special place in my heart. This trip was, by far, the most rewarding and refreshing experience I've ever had.





Views of Colimes: Across the River (top) and the Center Square of Town (bottom)

We spent the majority of our time in Colimes, a quiet, little town by the River Duale. Sister Katherine and Sister Maura, two kind and spirited Irish Sisters of St. Francis, were our hosts. We stayed at Casa San Bernardo, a community hostel owned by the sisters and run by a wonderful woman named Mirian. Mirian is a great cook and our rooms were very comfortable; both the food and accommodations definitely exceeded my expectations.



Rosita, me, Sister Katherine, and Sister Maura (top left); Casa San Bernardo (top right); Mirian and me (bottom)

Within my first few days in Ecuador , I realized two things. The first was the remarkable resemblance between Ecuador and South India . The bustling city, the green countryside, the small towns, the poverty, the climate, the food and even certain aspects of the culture reminded me so much of my part of India and made me feel very much at home with my surroundings. The second realization was that while in Ecuador , the Sisters were the only two people, besides Greg, with whom I'd be speaking English. Though I was there to teach English, I have a feeling that my Spanish improved more than my students' English



More views of Colimes: The view from our terrace (left) and Sundays on the riverbank (right)



Houses in the "campo" built on stilts (left); One of the streets leading into town (right)

Every morning from 8 to 12:30 , I taught at Nueve de Octubre, one of the public elementary schools. I had a total of 300 sweet, yet unruly, students from grades K-7. As much as they loved testing my limits, they looked forward to my English class, had plenty of hugs and kisses for me, and fought over who would hold my hand as I walked home from school. Every single one of them welcomed me as their teacher and they were very forgiving of my Spanish, which I

appreciated a great deal. I focused on vocabulary and phrases but some days we learned songs and drew pictures. My Kindergarten class had the best memory while my Fifth grade was the most out of control. Nevertheless, I love all of them very much and truly enjoyed teaching them.

The teachers at Nueve de Octubre were just as welcoming as their students, particularly Rosa Romes. Rosita took me under her wing and some days, she and I would talk for hours about our families, cultures, plans for the future, etc. She is an amazing person who instantly made me feel comfortable and I am so grateful to her for that



Nueve de Octubre: My kindergarteners (left) and the girls from my 4th and 6th grades (right)



Teaching my 3rd graders (left) and Taming my 5th graders (right)

In the evenings, Greg and I taught at Santa Rosa , the private high school. I can confidently say that a majority of our students did not learn a thing in our English classes- besides the meaning of “I love you,” that I was not married, and everything about Greg’s girlfriend. I really did enjoy the conversations with my students particularly because of their endless supply of questions. I spent several free periods with Maida, the regular English professor, helping her practice her English and learning about our respective cultures. She asked us to stress the importance of learning English for the students. It troubled her that so many students didn’t think that their future could extend outside of Colimes. Many of the boys had resolved to continue on with the family business while the girls planned on marrying and having children very early. As a result, English really held very little practical value for their day to day lives. There were a hand full, however, that aimed to go to college and recognized that learning English would provide them with numerous opportunities.



Santa Rosa: the 8th and 9th grade boys (top left); the 'cool' girls (top right); the 9th graders at work (bottom)

Greg and I spent a few hours at the local clinic on Sundays, which was when most of the people from the outskirts of Colimes came into town to see the doctor, sell their products, and buy what they needed from the market. We mainly helped with medical records and taking blood pressures and pulses. We also spent some time in the lab looking at blood samples. The doctor, who came in from the city 3 times a week, was very accommodating and allowed us to shadow him while he examined his patients. The clinic was a very rudimentary set up but all the patients were well cared for; it was a good example of how a little could go a long.



The Clinic

Colimes is a very relaxed place; “bien tranquila” is how the locals describe it. Naturally, there was a lot of down time that would have been incredibly boring had it not been for the rather large and lively group of kids our age that we met. Most of them studied in the city during the week and only returned on the weekends but I quickly became very close with all of them. Not only did I get a chance to practice my Spanish with them (and some even practiced their English with me), we all learned a lot from each other about our two very different cultures. They wanted to know everything about my family, friends, college, plans for the future and life in the States. I would spend hours talking about these things with them during the afternoons and late evenings after school. They took me dancing Saturday nights and we spent lazy Sunday afternoons on the beach and swimming in the river. I really had a wonderful time in their company.





Los Muchachos- My Friends

Since our students had exams and vacation, Greg and I had time to travel to the capital and several other cities. Ecuador is a beautiful country and the people are welcoming all over. It is remarkable how quickly they embraced us. They may not have much but they share everything they have and they openly expressed their happiness and appreciation for us. On my last day of school, my elementary kids held an assembly and sang me one song in Spanish and another in English that I had taught them. Our high school students wrote us notes, made us posters, and our seniors threw us a going away party. I couldn't help but cry when I saw how upset they were that I was leaving. All the foreigners that have come to Colimes to volunteer or work have all said that they would come back to visit in the future, but no one ever did. For this reason, specifically, I want to make my way back to Ecuador very soon.



View of "El Panecillo" from the Cathedral in Quito , Ecuador.



The Indigenous People of Ecuador (left) and A view from the roof of the train that we rode from Riobamba to Alausi- through the mountains and countryside (right)

My life has been filled with so many incredible experiences, which I have often taken for granted. Each and every one of my experiences is so memorable and amazing because of the people I've encountered. They all hold a place in my heart and it is their presence that makes a place more than a city to study in, a tourist site, or a pueblo to volunteer in. With the help of my loving students, caring guardians, and spirited friends, I was drawn into and made a part of the tiny town of Colimes and it will forever remain in my heart



My little friend from Colimes.