

Voluntarios de Occidente

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Having found Voluntarios de Occidente on the internet, I had no firsthand knowledge of the organisation and arrived in Ambato feeling slightly anxious and wondering what exactly I had let myself in for... the moment I entered the door of the VdO office, however, the host of friendly faces that greeted me assured me that everything was going to be all right. Having met Gonzalo, Maria Teresa and three other volunteers from the UK and Canada, Maria Teresa took me straight out to lunch in a typical Ecuadorean restaurant, after which one of the other volunteers helped me take my luggage to our host family.



Like most people I had very little idea of what to expect of my host family's living arrangements: would they have things like electricity, a shower or a fridge? I was pleasantly surprised to discover that they had all of these, and though the house was by no means luxurious, it was large and had plenty of character, especially from the outside.

Set amongst potato fields in a fertile valley high up in the Andes, with a skyline dominated by the shape of smoking Tungurahua, an active volcano, it gave the impression of being in the heart of the countryside, although we were less than a mile from the Panamerican highway, the main road which runs right through Ecuador.

We soon adapted to life in El Porvenir de Mocha: the sounds of the cockerel in the morning, the braying of Maria the donkey, frequent power cuts whilst under the shower, and the extreme cold at night. After 7 o'clock in the evening we took refuge in the kitchen, the warmest room in the house, and played card games until it was time for dinner. Our host mother's cooking, typically for Ecuador, was simple but filling, involving lots of soups and plenty of rice and potatoes.



After a few days of observing the other volunteers' lessons, I started work as an English teacher in three different schools in the neighbouring villages of Quinchicoto, El Porvenir and Acapulco. The half hour hike up to Quinchicoto meant quite a rude awakening to the day but was excellent training for the Inca Trail! The biggest surprise of all concerning the teaching was the sheer enthusiasm of all the children and their affection for the volunteers, even before they had met us – during our first visit to El Porvenir we were greeted by hordes of tiny children all wanting to hug each of us individually!

Their infectious excitement did however mean that it could be hard to keep them quiet, and maintaining a basic level of discipline was one of the main challenges of the teaching... sometimes it was necessary to resort to giving prizes for good behaviour, for which purpose the eternal appeal of smiley face stickers often came in handy! As the children are between five and eleven years old, English lessons are primarily about having fun and giving a headstart to those planning to go on to secondary school.



One of the highlights of the trip was the opportunity I had to explore different parts of Ecuador with the other volunteers at weekends. Because of its size, Ecuador is very easy to travel around, and a day's bus ride from Ambato will take you either to the coast or deep into the Amazon jungle. During my stay we were lucky enough to have two long weekends due to bank holidays and spent several days in Tena exploring the rainforest and white-water rafting, as well as a trip to the beautiful colonial city of Cuenca in the south.



The cost of living is unsurprisingly very cheap, which means that you can find a room for the night for next to nothing, and even in the most expensive tourist restaurants you can eat for a fraction of the cost in England. One of Ecuador's main attractions is the astonishing variety of its scenery, all within a very compressed area. Whether you like hiking up snow-capped volcanoes, exploring colonial churches in Quito or playing with monkeys in the jungle, it really is true that there is something to please everyone. Voluntarios de Occidente offers the chance to experience all this not just as a backpacking tourist – living and working in a rural community allows you to get to know the

Ecuadorean way of life in far more depth, as well as the satisfaction of making a real contribution to the lives of children from very deprived backgrounds. With VDO not only are the programme costs minimal but every penny is going to local people. I would strongly recommend you to sign up now!

Please contact me at louiseruffle@hotmail.com for further information.