Practical Advice

Visa

Students are required to obtain their visa at the Ecuadorian Consulate from their respective home state. I’d recommend obtaining your visa from the Ecuadorian Consulate at least 1-2 months before traveling. Make sure you have all the correct paper work and plan to visit the consulate on breaks or vacations, so you don’t have to travel when you are too busy with classes. It took 2 days to obtain my visa and it cost $130.

Packing

What I wish I brought:
- Prescription medication for the whole semester.
- Waterproof field journal.
- Small day/backpack.
- Light rain jacket.
- Books.
- Handkerchief.
- Water shoes.
- Hiking shoes.

Things I brought that I did not need:
- Dive wetsuit.
- Formal dress clothes.
- Too many long sleeve shirts, sweaters, and jeans.
- Smartphone (They are a common item to be stolen or damaged)

Arrival/Orientation

Immigration was fairly simple and easy. I didn’t have any trouble entering the country. The University of San Francisco of Quito (USFQ) did not assign students a host buddy but they provided an orientation program for all international students. The orientation program was very simple and broad, reviewing traveler’s safety and precautions.

Academics

The University

USFQ’S main university campus is located in Cumbaya, Ecuador about 30 minutes away from the capital city of Quito. USFQ’s secondary campus is located in the Galapagos Islands near Puerto Baquerizo on San Cristobal Island. Both campuses have computer labs, wifi, and libraries accessible for students. The GAIAS academic calendar runs from January 4th to May 4th. The international office is located on the main campus in Cumbaya.

Courses

Several weeks before arriving, students were provided course descriptions for each of three tracks of the GAIAS program (Marine ecology, People Politics and the Environment, and Evolution, Ecology, and Conservation) and were instructed to email the GAIAS coordinator with their course selections for the rest of semester. It’s important to note that the course selections cannot be changed once submitted because the GAIAS coordinator pays for and finalizes travel arrangements (i.e. hotels, flights, restaurants, etc.) before the classes begin. Therefore, it’s very important to make sure that you’re really committed to the courses you select.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class title</th>
<th>Bachelor or Master level?</th>
<th># of credits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Techniques of Marine Research I</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountain Geology</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marine Ecology</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ecosystem Based Management</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maritime Communities</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>3</td>
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Final grades were based on in-class participation, homework assignments, quizzes, exams, group projects, and group essays.

Life Abroad

Living costs

- Estimated monthly budget whilst on exchange
  - Food: $100/mo
  - Transportation: $75/mo
  - Books: $500/semester
  - Miscellaneous: $750/semester
Language
I had no problems with the language with faculty and other students as they all spoke English. I would highly recommend taking a Spanish course before departing. I believe knowing the language will make the abroad experience much more enjoyable because you’ll be able to better immerse yourself in the culture and won’t have to depend on your peers to translate for you. USFQ offered a “crash course” of Spanish, however I did not find it to be very useful in learning the language. The crash course was mainly a general review of Spanish and didn’t work on how to converse in Spanish.

Banking
I would recommend using a VISA card to access money while abroad. There is an ATM located inside the main campus in Cumbaya, Ecuador and there are a couple ATMs located near the Galapagos campus on San Cristobal island. Make sure that your bank clearly understands that you’ll be traveling internationally, so they don’t freeze your account as you make transactions abroad. I would recommend having an emergency credit card, in case your ATM card is lost or stolen.

Transportation
Ecuador has a variety of transportation, such as taxis, public busses, and planes that are relatively cheap. Taxis typically cost around $5-10. Local public transit busses cost $0.50. Coach busses typically cost $1.00/hr. Overall, it’s fairly easy and cheap to get around Ecuador. In the Galapagos, there are taxis that can take anywhere around the island for $3-4. There are also ferries that can take you between islands for $40-50, depending on which island you’re traveling to.

Housing
The housing was a homestay. I’d recommend it because host families are a great resource to learn about the Ecuadorian culture and are always happy to help you. USFQ matched students with host families in both Quito and on San Cristobal.

In Quito, I ate breakfast and dinner with my host family. For lunch, I ate on campus with the USFQ meal plan. In the Galapagos, the USFQ provided breakfast and dinner a few days each week. I ate the rest of my meals with my host family or at local restaurants with other students. The university and host families were not required to provide students with lunches during our time in the Galapagos, except during field trips.

Health and Safety
On the mainland, I felt fairly safe. However, I had to be cautious about pick-pocketers while riding public busses. Also, I always made sure to travel in a group while traveling in Quito or across Ecuador. In the Galapagos, I felt much safer and didn’t have to worry about petty theft or walking alone at night.

For your health, make sure to pack enough medications for the entire semester. Depending on the medication, it can be very difficult to refill prescription medication abroad. I had a very difficult time filling my prescription medication in Ecuador. I had a hard time finding a doctor, who could fill the prescription and then finding a pharmacy that had the prescription medication in stock.

I’d also recommend packing traveler’s antibiotics such as Cipro for bacteria or intestinal parasites. On the mainland, USFQ has an on-campus clinic for students who need medical attentions and there are several hospitals located nearby. In the Galapagos, the medical facilities and hospitals were poor and often inadequate. In the Galapagos, patients with severe injuries or illnesses usually have to be flown out to the mainland to receive medical attention.

Overall exchange experience
The best thing about my semester abroad was all the adventures I had with my friends. Within a few hours from campus, you could be zip lining through the canopy of the Amazon rainforest, white-water rafting in frigid water, puenting (bridge jumping), mountain biking, or even hiking up volcanoes. Everything was so cheap and close by, I rarely found myself with nothing to do.

The most challenging part of my semester abroad was learning Spanish. Spanish wasn’t a requirement for this program, however I felt it should be. I often found myself challenged to understand and converse with the locals or even my host family, who only spoke Spanish. By the end of the program, I knew enough Spanish to get by. However, I’d highly recommend for anyone interested in traveling to Ecuador to take at least one Spanish class before they go.

The semester abroad changed my perspective about environmental conservation in the Galapagos and Ecuador. I’ve always pictured the Amazon and the Galapagos as these picturesque and pristine places that are rich with biodiversity and are untouched by human development. I imagined that these places must have a superior and rigid environmental protection program that shielded these precious ecosystems. However, I now understand this is not the case for places such as the iconic Galapagos or the Amazon rainforest.

To my surprise, the Galapagos Islands and Amazon rainforest are dealing with the same environmental problems that the United States faces, such as urban development, invasive species, and even overfishing. For example, Ecuador now allows oil drilling in parts of the Amazon rainforest and countless tourists threaten the Galapagos Islands with the introduction of invasive species and pollution. In particular, there are a growing number of conflicts with the increasing residential population of the Galapagos Islands, such as raw sewage runoff, expanding landfills, and illegal fishing.