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## **Three months in Quito, Ecuador CENIT – my impressions and experiences**

### Volunteering at CENIT

After just a few days in Quito I was very excited about my first day of volunteering and went to the volunteer office to wait for the volunteer coordinator. Whilst I was waiting there I got to know some of the other volunteers and started to get a feel for things – some of them were off to collect a snack for the children, others were busy with some last minute craft preparations, others were chatting... The volunteer coordinator, Emily gave me a very warm welcome and showed me around CENIT and explained a few things. In the afternoon I went down to Rescate Camal (the street outreach programme in the local market). At first I was allowed to take a look at a number of different programmes and after a short while Emily and I put together a timetable for me.

I volunteered in CEA (a tutoring programme) both mornings and afternoons, Street Outreach at the market San Roque and in Project C. As I am a psychologist, I was also supposed to work together with Esteban, one of the psychologists at CENIT three times a week. In fact this only worked out sometimes. But this would not stop me from recommending it! My role was to support some of the children in CEA, who had serious problems reading and writing. It sounds simpler than it was as the children generally didn't want to do things the way I had planned. Or they came on the days when I was working in a different project. But with time I got to know and understand the children better and it worked out pretty well. When I wasn't helping these children with basic literacy, I helped others with their homework or played with the children. Sometimes I had the feeling that it is more meaningful playing together with the children rather than help them with homework as it seemed to me some of the tasks they had to do were either far too demanding or in my opinion slightly pointless. However I noticed time and again how the children benefitted from playing together in a group, following rules, accepting consequences etc.

In both CEA in the morning and in the afternoon it was often shocking just how much the children were struggling with their homework and how difficult this was for them. For example, they were expected to add and subtract numbers in the thousands when they couldn't even do basic sums like  $7+1$ . In Ecuador children very rarely fail or stay back a year so they never catch up and each year they fall further and further behind. Of course there were also children who were able to complete their homework correctly by themselves, but it seemed to me they were a minority. The work environment was also interesting – you would be wrong to imagine a quiet room with tables and chairs, where the children sit obediently at their desks and do their homework. First you have to persuade the children to do their homework. In addition, the children's attention span is short and ability to concentrate is very limited. There would constantly be children standing up and running round the room, shouting and distracting the others, while some children would sit determinedly at their desks and get on with their work.

I worked in the market San Roque at least twice a week. This is a pre-school programme for 3-5 year olds. I really enjoyed this work. To begin with I was a bit distant and reserved with the children as they seemed to want so much closeness and some of them were really dirty. However this stopped mattering to me in no time as I got to know the children better and learned about their living circumstances and very quickly I became so fond of them. Most of the children would come running to us with great big smiles and they were so happy playing with the few toys that there were. More than anything they were delighted with the attention which the volunteers gave them.

I really enjoyed the daily routine in this programme. We sang lots of songs, we danced, laughed and generally had a lot of fun. The weekly trip to the playground was the favourite day for the children and volunteers alike. As well as the daily pre-school activities, we celebrated the Quito festival – we dressed the children up in costumes and went on a procession around the market. On International Day for the elimination of violence against women, we launched a campaign and walked through the market, where we talked with many women. We also organised a Christmas party for the children and their families, which was a highlight for me. It was so nice breaking down some of the barriers between the parents and the volunteers and watching how they warmed to us with time. We organised games for the parents, some for the children and some for everyone together. Some of the parents thanked us volunteers at the end and even with hugs and it was plain to see how much fun they had had. That was amazing.

It was always something special when we took the children to the playground. There they were able to run around and see something else. It was fun going on the swings and the slides with the children and playing ball etc. The children's behaviour and their upbringing is very different to that of the average German child. The small things give them much greater pleasure but they are also lacking basic skills. This is of course down to the parents and families. I believe that even on the most chaotic day in a German Kindergarten it would still not be as chaotic as it is in the Street Outreach programme sometimes. With time you get used to it and it becomes easier to deal with.

I also volunteered in Project C for a few weeks, which I really enjoyed, in part because it was a psychological programme. It is group work with a small group of children and 4 leaders. Every couple of weeks there was a specific theme. During my time there, we worked on attention and concentration. The session began with introductions, questions about the current topic, reminder about the group rules and then the main section, which was a topic-specific activity. Afterwards, there was a brief discussion about the activity, the children were given a reward and the session was up (unfortunately after just 40 minutes). In this programme I was able to get to know the children in a different way which was really fun. During my time we went on a trip to the Parque Metropolitano for a Barbeque. We prepared all the food – salads etc together and in the end we ate altogether too. Despite the chaotic nature of the outing it was really lovely.

### Quito

I lived in the old town, which I was really pleased about as it is so beautiful there. There are many beautiful old buildings and churches and the attractive town square, Plaza Grande. At first I thought I would never learn my way around as everything looked alike, but after a few weeks I began to know my way around. The bus system is pretty simple. At least, the trolley buses Trole, Ecovia and Metrobus. The little blue buses I only caught from CENIT to San Roque and back with my colleagues. There is a lot more going on in the street – it is busier and dirtier but I loved it although I can't really explain why. It had a very pleasant atmosphere. Even the fact that you should always travel by taxi after dark was entertaining – simply put out an arm, negotiate with the driver, all pile in and away you go! The city has a very different vibe to cities back home. The town has really lovely parts – not just the old town but also the Mariscal and the many beautiful parks. Quito has a lot of green spaces and you can always look up and see the surrounding mountains, which make the city more attractive. The view of the town from the Panecillo is stunning. The difference between the poor south and the rich north is plain to see. Although I didn't get to know the north of the city, I could tell just from the shopping centre Quicentro that there were also wealthy people in Quito.

### Ecuador – the countryside

Even before I left, I knew that Ecuador had many different landscapes to offer and various regions worth visiting, but when you see and experience all this yourself it is something else and even more impressive. From Quito, everything is easily accessible and quick to get to. For example, you can sit

on a bus one evening in Quito, where it is relatively cold and the next morning get out at the beach in Mompiche, where it is hot and humid. I loved travelling and after a while I even started enjoying the bus rides as you start to feel the sense of adventure. The Ecuadorians are keen to help travellers and offer lifts when there are no buses or taxis. It felt good to leave the city on weekends and holidays and experience the countryside but I was always happy to return to Quito afterwards. I enjoyed going shopping in the little *tiendas*, where there was an abundance of fresh fruit, and walking in the beautiful sunshine with a blue sky overhead. All in all it was a wonderful time and a really valuable experience!