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Cuenca, Ecuador

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Study Abroad Journal #2

Entry 1 (May 24th)

Global Citizenship- Self-awareness: Level 2: Shows emerging awareness of the varied contexts and boundaries of one’s own culture and its cultural rules and biases.

Today, was a typical day in my life in Ecuador. The only difference is that after class instead of going straight home, I had the opportunity to go to the Sombrero Hat Museum or the Panama Hat Museum. To be completely honest, I was not expecting much from the museum because I thought it was just going to be a shop of hats. I got way more than what I was expecting. We learned the history of hat making which includes the material, the process, and the exportation. The material is found in the countryside of Ecuador in leaf form and it is then cut, and dried. The women in the indigenous villages then start weaving the top of the hat in either a fine, medium, or normal style. The top of the hat is then shipped to larger cities such as Cuenca to complete the rim. We learned about the process of the hat making as well. This includes a hammer type machine to make the hat smooth. Then includes a pressure type machine to mold the top of the hat to the rim. This is then taken to have the rim cut down to size, and have a band added. This type of hat is trademark of Ecuador. They designed it and came up with the idea. The hat can be made in a variety of colors, sizes and styles. This experience taught me the lesson that hard work truly goes a long way and is often unnoticed. The tour guide was explaining that depending on the thickness of a hat, a woman could be weaving it for 4 weeks up to a whole year. The product seems so simple and it is easy to overlook the hard work put into the product. This experience helped me grow in the area of self-awareness because I became aware of a cultural tradition that has been going on for hundreds of years. I understood that there were biases present about whether Panama or Ecuador was the true sombrero capital of the world. I was able to see both sides of the process of the hat making from the hand weaving to the mass exportation. This showed me that over the years the indigenous people have not lost their roots, but they have smoothly merged with modern times for their benefit. Overall, this experience taught me a significant amount about the culture behind the sombrero hat and how the hat has evolved and will continue to evolve in the future.

Entry 2 (May 26th)

Global Citizenship- Communication: Level 3- Through increased practice with a second language, recognizes and participates in cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication and draws connection between multiple experiences and issues related to language and culture.

Today marked the start of my final weekend in Ecuador. I was on a mission to make this weekend worthwhile. I woke up early on Friday morning and headed for the bus station. When I arrived at the bus station, this is when my communication abilities were put to the test. I had a difficult time adjusting to the rapid pace of the bus station, along with a partial language barrier. I have never taken a bus from a bus station before and it made it difficult to navigate something that I have never experienced. My communication skills became very necessary in this moment because I needed to ask a representative at the bus station for guidance on where I could buy a ticket. I was able to successfully communicate my need to the representative, and I purchased a one-way ticket for the city of Loja in Ecuador. A lesson that I learned from this simple interaction is that it is always okay to ask for help. We as humans are not perfect and we cannot possibly know exactly what to do 24 hours a day. On the bus ride, I practice my communication skills further by engaging in conversation with my seat mate. He was from Loja, Ecuador and had just been visiting his family in Cuenca, Ecuador. When we were stopped on the middle of the highway by the police, I was confused and asked him what was going on. He explained to me that often times the cheap city buses are perfect ways to transport drugs across the country. I was grateful for his explanation and his willingness to discuss an issue in the culture of Ecuador. I arrived in Loja, Ecuador and continued to practice my communication skills by hailing a taxi. This taxi ride was the most memorable of my lifetime. The driver was very nice and outgoing. He asked me if I could help him practice his English. This may not have been working my Spanish language communication skills, but I was able to use my first language to help improve the communication skills of another person. I felt very helpful and he was very grateful. While in Loja, I toured the city and its numerous historical tourist spots. I exercised my knowledge and understanding competency by visiting a park know as Jipiro Recreational Park. I was amazed by this park when I arrived because it wasn’t a park solely about the history of Loja, Ecuador. It was a cultural park that had around 15 structures of historical architectural masterpieces from around the world. I learned about the St. Peter’s Basilica in Russia, the Chinese Pagoda, a European castle, and a Samoan hut. This experience helped me learn a little bit about the culture history across the world. It also showed me how important culture is to the people of Ecuador. They created a park so others in their community could also learn about cultures different from their own. This shows me that they are focused on exposing the community to a variety of cultures, so we all can be more culturally sensitive and understood. I continued to use my communication skills throughout the day by asking for directions, hailing taxis, and going to a restaurant. I was able to successfully navigate all these things alone in a foreign country and a foreign city. I feel that this shows that I am becoming more self-aware of the culture around me and my independence is growing with my increased awareness.

Entry 3 (May 29th)

Global Citizenship-Knowledge and Understanding- Level 2: Asks questions about other cultures that result in increased understanding of the complexity of element important to members of an/other culture/s.

Today marked the start of my final week in the culturally rich country of Ecuador. There are still so many different experiences that I want to take part in while here in Cuenca. One of those experiences is to visit more cafes. This may seem like I am only focused on eating tasty food, however this is not the case. I have learned that there is a heavy presence of cafes and different small restaurants here in Cuenca. On the surface, a person may just think that people really like food here in Cuenca, but I looked deeper and questioned this. I have learned throughout my time the significance of these cafes and why they are so important. To start, the process of drinking coffee or tea in Ecuador occurs very often during the day. They have a cup of something with every meal, in addition to other cups they have throughout the day. An example that holds this statement true is that at my school Estudio Sampere, we have a 15-minute break in between our classes so we can drink a cup of tea or coffee. It is part of their culture that they see these two drinks as refreshers needed for a quick relaxation from a busy day. The cups of coffee and tea that are served in the home or in a café serve as conversationalists. They promote conversation between people who live in a home together by bringing them all together at night. In my house here in Cuenca, around 8 pm every nigh we have a small snack for dinner followed by a cup of tea. This is when we catch up on each other’s day and tell each other our plans for tomorrow. During these tea times, I have also discussed topics such as politics, catholic schooling in Ecuador and abortion. The drinks of tea and coffee really promote a sense of unity and understanding. This is one of the reasons cafés are so important here in Cuenca. Each café has a different theme or aspect that makes it stick out from others. There are different groups of people who attend the cafés and this is a perfect way to promote communication practice with people from all over the globe. While in Cuenca, I have met people from Switzerland, England, Australia, Ireland, and Norway. I met all of these people in various cafes across the city. The cafes here are very inviting because they promote a variety of different aspects of the Cuencano culture. For example, I have visited a café called Maria Empanada café. This café focuses on the cultural importance of the empanada in the history and present day in Cuenca. Finally, I have learned that cafes are important because often times they are family owned. The owners do everything in their power to make sure that everyone in the café enjoys their experience. The sense of community and family in every café that I have visited is very evident. Everyone in Cuenca wants to get to know each other because they see it as a cultural opportunity. Cuenca is a cultural hotspot for tourist who also bring a variety of different cultural backgrounds. The cafes provide an outlet for these cultural backgrounds because the families who own the cafes make it a fun and safe space. Overall, my goal is to continue to learn more about the norms of the cafes here in Cuenca and I wish to attempt to identify a theme in the cultural approach of each café.

Entry 4 (May 30th)

Global Citizenship-Knowledge and Understanding- Level 2: Asks questions about other cultures that result in increased understanding of the complexity of element important to members of an/other culture/s.

As my days here in Cuenca near an end, I began to question more about the typical aspects of the culture of Ecuador in general, but more specifically the culture here in Cuenca. These questions came up when I was navigating my way through the streets in search of the perfect souvenirs for my family. I wanted to buy them something that was aesthetically pleasing, but I also wanted it to have cultural significance. I found that there are three main souvenirs/things that represent the culture of Cuenca, Ecuador. The first souvenir that I found was the mesitas (table cloths) and the caminos (table runners). I learned that they construct these in a variety of shapes, sizes, colors, and patterns. I wanted to learn more about the significance of these things so I asked a local artisan utilizing my very best communication skills. She told me that they are commonly gifted to a couple who is newly married. It is a sign of good passing on into the married life. It will bring happiness, brightness, and culture to the dining room of their home. She said that the mission of the table cloth or table runner is to remind the family of their culture. I found this very interesting and now I have a deeper understanding of not only the table cloths, but also a few aspects of the marriage culture here in Ecuador. The second souvenir that I found was anything made in red ceramic clay. I questioned my host mother why there seemed to be a large quantity of artisans selling ceramic bowls, vases, mugs, plates, and planter pots. She informed me that Cuenca and Ecuador as a whole is one of the world largest exporters of terra cotta ceramic materials. This includes the things I listed above, roofing supplies, ceramic tile, and pavers. This made sense to me after I put two and two together. I had the opportunity to see a wonderful view of the city and now recognize that the majority of the roofs are red because of the material that is widely popular here. This cultural artifact is important because they are constructed by the indigenous people in rural Cuenca. They make a living by taking what the earth has provided to them and making something useful and beautiful. The last souvenir that I soon learned is the most important across Cuenca. This would be the “casita” or the little house. When I first arrived in Ecuador, I was invited to visit the house of the extended family of my host family. I remember seeing a wide variety of these little houses on the walls within their house, and I then saw similar houses on the walls of the house of my host family. I was very curious behind the significance of these houses so when I was walking through the streets I stopped at a local artisan who specifically sold the casitas. She explained to me that they are mostly for decoration in the home. There are a wide variety of different structures, settings, colors, and models. Although, they all do have one thing in common and that is that they are handcrafted with wood. She explained to me that a family often buys a new casita or little house for their home when something significant happened in their life associated to that specific structure. Overall, she explained to me that they are most frequently used for decorations in the home. I ended up purchasing a “Panaderia” or a bread making one because it reminds me of my experience studying abroad in Ecuador. Bread is one of the main courses here daily and I love bread which is why I was in search of the perfect casita. The newly attained knowledge helped me grow further in this competency because I understand the customs of local culture and tourist culture further now than I did before. I realize that there is more significance to small items than I would originally think. The process of trying to locate souvenirs for my family taught me that there is always a different perspective or a bigger picture. I could have looked at one of the little houses and just thought that it was interesting and moved on. Instead, I asked about it and learned the background and understand now that it is a large part of the culture for the Cuencano people.

Entry 5 (June 2nd)

Global Citizenship- Self-awareness: Level 2: Shows emerging awareness of the varied contexts and boundaries of one’s own culture and its cultural rules and biases.

Global Citizenship-Knowledge and Understanding- Level 2: Asks questions about other cultures that result in increased understanding of the complexity of element important to members of an/other culture/s.

Global Citizenship- Communication: Level 3- Through increased practice with a second language, recognizes and participates in cultural differences in verbal and nonverbal communication and draws connection between multiple experiences and issues related to language and culture.

I write this journal entry with a little bit of a heavy heart because today I had to leave a country that I have fallen in love with over the last 4 weeks. A month went by in a flash and I wish I could do it all over again. This was an amazing experience that I will remember for the rest of my life. The members of my conversation class and myself went to a café on Thursday June 1st to send me off and it couldn’t have been a more perfect breakfast send-off. They asked me if I plan on revisiting Ecuador in the future and I did not even have to think before I answered because the answer is yes. This country now holds a special place in my heart and I know that I will always have family in Cuenca. There are many things that I will miss about living in Cuenca. One thing that I will miss the most is the cheap dining. Living in Cuenca, you can get a filling meal for less than $4-5 on any given day. I will also miss the fairly reasonably priced transportation as a typical taxi ride only costs less than 2 dollars and the city buses only cost 25 cents to ride. The last thing that I will miss dearly is the city itself. The city is made up of beautiful architecture, diverse streets, and catholic culture. All of these things blend together to make a very aesthetically pleasing city. I truly enjoyed how everything I could possibly need was within 20-25 minutes walking distance from my house. This experience provided me with a new found sense of knowledge, understanding, awareness, and independence. I had the opportunity to grow as person during this experience immensely. I learned how to do things successfully on my own in a Latin American country. I utilized my communication skills to grow as a person as well because I needed to speak with the citizens in order to act successfully in my activities. I learned about the rich culture of the Cuencano people through questions, different perspectives, and history. I embraced the life of an Ecuatorian by eating their traditional food and by following their typical schedule during the day. This includes eating lunch with my entire host family every day during the week because lunch is the biggest meal of the day and the whole family gathers. I now understand the deeper roots of the culture and history of the city of Cuenca thanks to museums, tour guides, and simple exploration. I improved my competency of communication by consistently practicing the Spanish language all day ever day. I rarely utilized the English language, and only used it if I was in absolute need of complete understanding by the other person. I feel that by practicing the Spanish language 24-7 I was able to fully immerse myself in verbal and nonverbal communication that is typical of people who permanently reside in a Latin American country. I am truly grateful for the level of excellence that Estudio Sampere pursues for their students. I feel that I received a very well rounded intensive Spanish course through grammar, conversation, museum visits, salsa dance classes, and traditional cooking classes. Overall, this experience was truly life changing and I cannot wait to return to Ecuador in my future endeavors.