

Welcome to Ecuador!



Introducing our Country and Organization to Year Program Participants

This version was updated in May 2017. Our deepest gratitude to all who contributed their thoughts and ideas. Contributions for future issues of this orientation manual are most welcome! Please share your experiences and suggestions with us after completing your AFS program in Ecuador.



Welcome to Ecuador!

Dear AFS'er,

Welcome to Ecuador! On behalf of the AFS staff and volunteers around the country, let me wish you a most productive and enjoyable time in our country.

On the following pages, you will find information that we feel is important to share with you. Some of it you may have received before, either from us or from the AFS National Office in your country. In such case, we just want to emphasize the information or expand it, so that you have a better idea of what to expect.

We hope that this booklet will be useful to you during your stay among us, and will help you clarify what our organization is and what we're here for. It consists of four sections: **What to Expect From Us**, a guide to service delivery; **A Little History & Geography**, a brief introduction to the country; **Some Aspects of the Culture**, a primer on the Ecuadorian people and customs; and **Practical Matters**, some clues to find out how some everyday things work in Ecuador.

Let this be a period of much learning and understanding, and let us hope for a trusting and healthy relationship between you and our organization.

With best regards,

Juan E. Rodríguez-Heredia
National Director

1. WHAT TO EXPECT FROM US

A Guide To Service Delivery



Some of AFS Ecuador's volunteers and staff at a recent annual meeting and GA



I. WHAT IS AFS ECUADOR?

AFS Ecuador is a not-for-profit corporation devoted to promote intercultural learning through educational programs for adolescents and young adults, whose main components are sharing the home and life of a host family and working in a community project organization, or attending a high school. The Ministry of Social Welfare has approved the organization's by-laws, and we are also registered with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The governance body of AFS Ecuador is a Board of Directors formed by 7 members, with yearly elections of 3 for a 3-year mandate. The General Assembly elects the Directors at its November annual meeting. Also every year, the Board elects a President, a Vice-President, a Treasurer, and a Secretary. The Board of Directors meets at least quarterly, or more often, according to the organization's needs.

The executive body of the Corporation is the AFS National Office, with headquarters in Quito. The National Director manages a staff of 4, 3 of which are directly involved in different program areas, while the rest carry out administrative or support tasks. The programs staff responsibilities have been defined in terms of the different service areas. AFS has presence in over a dozen communities around the country, where local volunteers are in charge of promoting the programs and delivering services to our participants, their organizations, and their natural or host families.

**OUR AFS NATIONAL OFFICE
CORPORACION AFS PROGRAMAS INTERCULTURALES DEL
ECUADOR**

Av. Eloy Alfaro N32-543 y Shyris
Edificio Nuevolar, Tercer Piso

Telephones:
+593 (2) 225 5976/ 225 5977

E-mail address: info-ecuador@afs.org
Web page: <http://www.afsecuador.org>



THE AFS MISSION STATEMENT

AFS is an international, voluntary, non-governmental, non-profit organization that provides intercultural learning opportunities to help people develop the knowledge, skills and understanding to create a more just and peaceful world.

AFS enables people to act as responsible global citizens, working for peace and understanding in a diverse world. It acknowledges that peace is a dynamic concept threatened by injustice, inequity, and intolerance.

AFS seeks to affirm faith in the dignity and worth of every human being and of all nations and cultures. It encourages respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms without distinction as to race, sex, language, religion or social status.

AFS activities are based on our core values of dignity, respect for differences, harmony, sensitivity, and tolerance.

OUR HOSTING PROGRAM

On the Year Program, adolescents between 15 and 18 years of age attend a local high school and share the home of a host family. This program runs from August to June of the following year, and approximately 70-80 students participate every year.

OUR SENDING PROGRAM

Similarly, we send around 10-15 high school participants for a year abroad.

OUR INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS

AFS Ecuador maintains exchange relationships with Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Sweden, Switzerland, The Netherlands and the USA.

OUR LOCAL CHAPTERS

AFS has presence in 10 communities around Ecuador, where an equal number of volunteer chapters support our programs.



2. THE PEOPLE AT YOUR SERVICE

The AFS volunteers are the human resource more readily at hand for you, since they live in your host communities. They volunteer (this means they do not get paid by AFS) part of their free time because they believe in the ideals and goals of the organization and, above all, because they enjoy working with people. Many of them have full-time jobs outside of AFS, while others study at the university. Some do both, on top of devoting time and energy to AFS. One of the rewards for AFS volunteers is establishing a relationship with you, and receiving respect and appreciation for their efforts.

While we hope that the volunteers will deliver various services to you promptly and professionally, we do realize that this may not always be possible, due to the very nature of volunteer work and the volunteers' other commitments. In any case, the ultimate responsibility for satisfying your service needs lies in the paid staff of the organization.

VOLUNTEERS

Your primary contacts while in Ecuador should be the AFS local volunteers. There is an AFS Local Chapter in every community where a participant is hosted.

Depending on the number of volunteers with membership on the hosting units, the different program areas will be covered by one volunteer or more. For example, in some hosting units each participant will have his/her own personal AFS contact, while in others one single volunteer will provide direct support to more than one participant, or even to all those being hosted locally.

Please remember that AFS does not promise you a "personal counselor", but a support system, whose structure varies from country to country, and even from town to town within a same country.

STAFF

The AFS staff members are, of course, also ready to help you make the best out of your stay. Some of the tasks that they perform, together with the volunteers, have to do with screening host families and finalizing placements, setting up global contacts with the organizations and work projects, arranging travel, orientations, and other logistics.

3. THE SERVICES

AFS offers you a comprehensive basket of services, some of which have been rendered in your own country, while others will be offered to you throughout your stay in Ecuador. Please remember that you have been promised services, rather than goods, and services tend to be incommensurable for the most part. This means that you will not always be able to allocate a certain portion of what you have paid the organization to every item, nor will every single service be reflected as a direct expense on you. Also keep in mind that, no matter how much you have paid AFS in your home country for the program you are on, AFS Ecuador receives a smaller sum, to arrange for a number of services that will be described later.

FROM AFS IN YOUR OWN COUNTRY

Even though only the AFS organization in your own country will be able to tell you what services they have covered directly, we'll give you a list of some of those that a sending country typically takes care of:

- Publicizing and promoting the program opportunities.
- Identifying, interviewing and screening candidates.
- Providing candidates and their natural families with orientation to AFS and its programs.
- Buying air transportation between the home and the host countries, and making reservations and other related arrangements.
- Arranging for medical coverage for the participants during their stay abroad.
- Contracting a number of internationally administered program coordination services.
- Contact with natural families through the length of the program, when special circumstances arise.
- Program-related national and international communications, via courier, telephone, fax, and electronic mail.
- Supporting the volunteer and staff structures necessary to make it all possible.

In some cases, your National Organization may also have allocated a portion of your fee to a scholarship fund that makes an AFS experience possible and accessible to qualified candidates with limited financial resources.

FROM AFS IN ECUADOR

By accepting you on the program, and receiving the subsequent credit from your home country, AFS Ecuador has made the commitment to provide you with the following services, all of which will be described in more detail on the next pages.

- Providing the necessary documentation to enable you to obtain a cultural exchange visitor's visa, valid for one year.
- Placement in a high school, and some school-related expenses.
- Placement with a host family.
- Airport transfers at the beginning and the end of the program.
- Domestic transportation between Quito and your host community.
- Orientation meetings: One upon arrival, one within the first 5 weeks of your stay, one on the 5th month of your program, and one towards the end of the program.
- Orientation meetings with your host families, before and during the program.
- All-year-round, 24-hour emergency assistance.
- Follow-up and support to participants, host families and schools.
- Program-related national and international communications, via courier, telephone and electronic mail.
- Supporting the volunteer and staff structures necessary to make it all possible.

Additionally, AFS Ecuador must cover medical expenses caused by illness or accident occurred during the program, with the exception of preventive medicine, dental and ophthalmologic care, and the treatment of pre-existing conditions; these will be in turn reimbursed to us by the international organization.

A participant who terminates the program prior to the date set by AFS, forfeits all of the above services.

ON TOP OF THAT...

In addition to the services listed before, which are more or less typical of programs in different parts of the world, AFS Ecuador, of its own accord, will provide you with the following:

- ☑ Clear instructions on how to proceed with the registration of your visa with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This type of procedure is a direct responsibility of the participant since the physical presence of the student is required. Participants also remain responsible for obtaining the alien registration card ("*Empadronamiento*") after this.
- ☑ An ID card, indicating your status as an AFS foreign exchange visitor. You should receive it during the Arrival Orientation.
- ☑ A Global Education program designed to heighten the participant's awareness of global issues. It involves the study of the new United Nations goals to end poverty protect the planet and ensure prosperity to all as part of a new sustainable development agenda. In this optional task, participants are encouraged to do personal research with the help of a workbook.
- ☑ Arranging and coordinating two optional trips. The first trip is to the Galapagos Islands, at especially reduced fares paid by the participants. We'll try to keep it within the US\$ 1,100 - US\$ 1,350 range, but it will very much depend on the going rates. You will be given information on the exact cost at the mid-stay orientation, and you should be ready to pay - in cash - two weeks afterwards. We will also be offering a 4-day/3-night trip to one of the most spectacular natural reserves in the Ecuadorian Amazon jungle, at an approximate cost of US\$ 320 - US\$ 360. This trip is offered in April or May.



4. DESCRIBING THE MAIN SERVICES

HIGH SCHOOL

An agreement with the Ministry of Education authorizes schools to admit AFS participants as "guest students". AFS'ers must attend school regularly, and take part in all academic activities that regular students are required to. Officially, schools cannot provide a guest student with a transcript of grades, but many schools will submit certificates to deserving AFS students.

We place students either in public schools, which are free, or private schools where AFS has secured a tuition waiver, or a scholarship. In some cases, host families will register their AFS student in a school of their choice, at their own expense.

Locus of service delivery: Local.

HOST FAMILY

Far from "matching" participants and families, we place together representatives of different cultures based on their strengths and needs, so that they can learn from each other and be mutually challenged within a supportive environment. AFS host families are not paid --they invite you into their home hoping that you will become another member of the family.

Locus of service delivery: Local.

AIRPORT TRANSFERS

Participants are met by AFS staff upon their arrival in Quito, to be transported to the Arrival Orientation facilities, and later taken back to the airport, bus terminal or National Office, depending on the case, to be put on their way to their host communities and families.

Locus of service delivery: National.



DOMESTIC TRAVEL

Those participants staying outside Quito will either fly or take a bus to their host communities, and back at the end of the program. All participants placed in communities served by commercial flights will take a plane.

Locus of service delivery: National.

SCHOOL EXPENSES

Provided that the student attends the school assigned by AFS, we will pay for the registration fee (when applicable), required textbooks and public transportation to and from school. A student or his/her host parent(s) may be asked to pay upfront for the covered school expenses, to be reimbursed by AFS later, upon presentation of receipts.

On the other hand, please keep in mind that you are responsible for buying uniforms and all school supplies (PE equipment, art materials, pencils and notebooks, etc.) out of your own pocket, as well as for other expenses such as school snacks, class trips, graduation expenses.

Locus of service delivery: Local.

PARTICIPANT ORIENTATIONS

Our orientations are meant to ease the adjustment difficulties normally associated to intercultural learning, by helping our participants understand cultural differences and promoting an empathetic approach towards different ideas, attitudes and values.

The Arrival orientation focuses on expectations and clarifying them. The Adjustment orientation deals with cultural differences, after participants have had a chance to experience them first-hand through the contact with their host families and other nationals. The Mid-Stay orientation is a good moment for self-evaluation and also a forum to discuss global issues. The Final orientation helps participants wrap up their experience and prepare them for the return home.

Locus of service delivery: National and local.



HOST FAMILY ORIENTATION

Even though the host families remain in their same familiar environment, they are also confronted with cultural differences and the need to adjust. While the pre-arrival Orientation (a meeting prior to the participant's arrival into their home) is in-person, the other three take place online.

Locus of service delivery: National and local.

EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE

Outside our office hours (which are Monday through Friday, from 09:30 to 13:30 and 14:30 to 18:30), a duty officer will carry a mobile phone. All emergencies should be reported to our mobile phone number (099) 973 3200. Our duty officer will answer your call immediately.

Locus of service delivery: National.

FOLLOW-UP AND SUPPORT

While orientations are group events to deal with general areas of adjustment, support is meant to be individual, and to deal with specific issues related to the participant and his/her relationship with the surrounding environment. We encourage you to make full use of AFS's human resources at your service, and feel free to contact an appropriate person.

Please bear in mind that our responsibility for providing timely and objective support does not only lie towards you, but also towards your host family and school. The process should involve all parties affected by a particular situation, and help them arrive at resolutions that are sensitive to all concerned. This means that the AFS contact should not be seen as an unconditional ally, but rather as an outside facilitator; nor he/she should be seen as someone who comes up with magical answers or solutions, but rather with alternative proposals that make sense and are realistic, viable, and empathetic.

Locus of service delivery: Local and/or national.



COMMUNICATIONS

Communications related to our program participants will not only take place during their stay in the country, but also start long before their arrival. These communications take place between our National Office and hosting units, the International Office, and other national offices around the world, to transmit and exchange data on participants and host families, to inform on individual situations, and so forth.

Locus of service delivery: Local and national.

INFRASTRUCTURE

To make it all possible, this is, to be able to provide you, your host families and schools with the services you are entitled to, we must maintain and support a physical and human structure that includes not only buildings and equipment but, most importantly, the ongoing recruitment and preparation of people, both staff and volunteers, who are keen on our principles and ideals and, at the same time, can be professional and pragmatic when it comes to managing a complex organization and a wide diversity of realities.

The fact that you help finance such an infrastructure, without which not only that our programs could not be run, but perhaps the organization itself could not survive, makes you, along with the volunteers and staff of AFS Ecuador, a very important stakeholder in the responsibility of keeping it fit and alive.

5. WHAT IS EXPECTED OF YOU

TO COMPLY WITH THE RULES

You've heard them many times, but we feel this is an important reminder.

- ◆ **NO DRUGS:** As a foreigner, you are particularly vulnerable when breaking the laws of the country, and we will be unable to keep you from the penalties against the illegal use of drugs, or any kind of involvement with them.
- ◆ **NO DRIVING:** Again, driving any motor vehicle can be a dangerous endeavor in a foreign country. Besides, once you see the traffic here, you'll be happy you're not allowed to drive!
- ◆ **NO HITCHHIKING:** Another rule for your own protection. Not all people are driven by good intentions. What may be a common and safe practice at home can be a very bad idea here.

You know the rules, and you are responsible for sticking to them. There's no valid excuse for not to. Once you break them, you go home.

TO BE SENSITIVE AND ACT RESPONSIBLY

Remember that different societies hold different standards of behavior regarding such things as sexual conduct, alcohol consumption, political activism, and many other issues that people are confronted with as part of their life choices. Please be sensitive to the norms of the society that has adopted you for a while, and accepting of the guidance from the host family you'll be living with.

Ecuadorians take great pride in dressing well in public and at social affairs. It is important to realize that personal appearance delivers a message intended or unintended. Inappropriate dress, like inappropriate behavior, is something that can set an AFS'er unnecessarily apart from his or her family, job, or community. By dressing conservatively, you will not attract any more attention than you already do, just by looking the way you do (i.e. foreign).

Not the least of all, you have a very important responsibility towards yourself. Act in a way that will make you a respected human being by those around you. And don't forget that your body deserves all the care and protection to remain healthy, and thus provide you with many years of life enjoyment and peace of mind.

TO RESPECT OUR POLICIES

Although these are not part of the three international rules, it only takes common sense to realize that, because of the nature of our program, you have made a tacit commitment to abide by these as well. Your disregard of these policies will also jeopardize your permanence on the program.

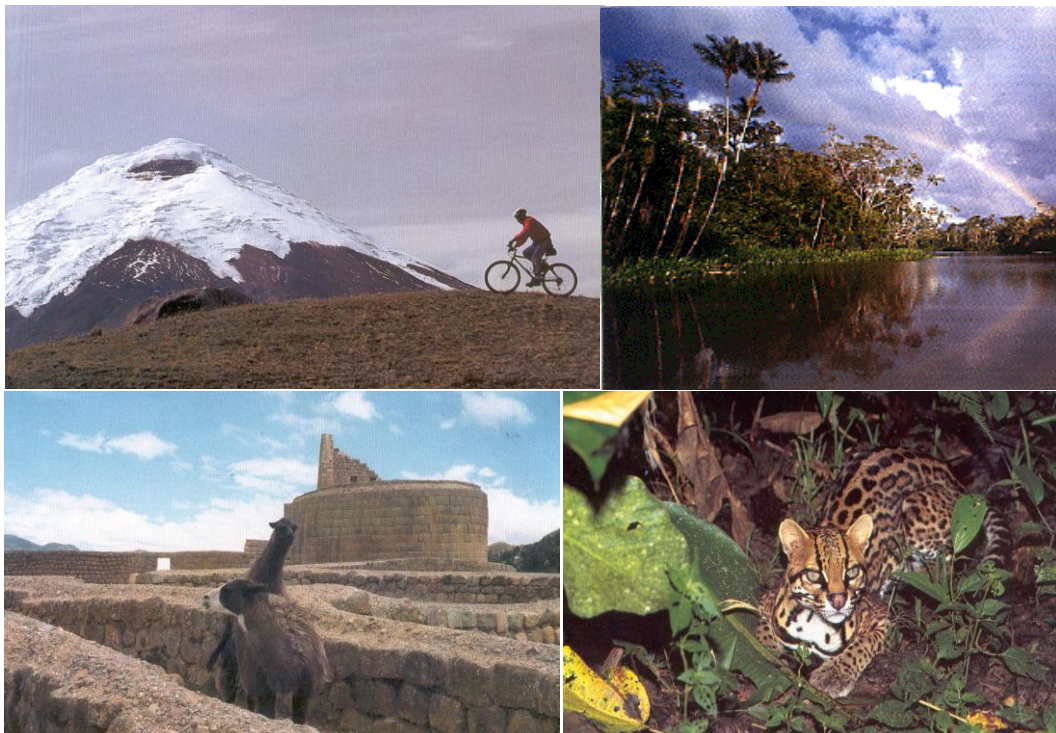
- ◆ **TRAVELLING WITHOUT AN ADULT MEMBER OF YOUR HOST FAMILY IS NOT ALLOWED:** You and your natural parent(s) have signed an agreement that we all must honor. Only under very special circumstances, which will always be considered on an individual basis, we could make exceptions. Always consult an appropriate member of the National Office. Let's remain friends, and never ask for the impossible. Should you leave your host community without a member of your host family, and without the written authorization of AFS Ecuador's National Office, you will be sent home immediately.
- ◆ **SCHOOL ATTENDANCE IS MANDATORY:** We know it may hold little academic value for you, but school in Ecuador is a great way to know people your age and improve your language skills. And, after all, it is a basic component of the program! AFS Ecuador will send you home early if you register an unjustified absence from school for more than one day in a row at any time during the school year, or after repeated absences of even just one day.
- ◆ **VISITS FROM HOME ARE RESTRICTED:** Your family, relatives, and friends should know that a visit could interfere with your adjustment process. Please consult with the AFS National Office in Ecuador before making any plans along these lines, even if your host family seems to be enthusiastic about the prospect. We will comply if the right conditions are in place, but we also may advise you on the contrary.

TO ENJOY YOURSELF AND BRING JOY TO OTHERS

It is quite possible, you know, despite all the limitations. Once more, let us wish you the very best throughout this very special time of your life. You have an unlimited potential for adapting and learning, and knowing how to bring out the best in you is something that, we are sure of, has already brought you this far. Keep on going!

2. A LITTLE HISTORY & GEOGRAPHY

A Brief Introduction To The Country



Snow-peaked volcanoes, tropical landscapes and much, much more...

HISTORY

The Early Tribes and The Inca Empire

Most histories of Ecuador begin with the expansion of the Incas from Peru in the 1400s. The history of pre-Inca Ecuador is lost in a tangle of time and legend. Generally speaking, the main populations lived either on the coast or in the highlands. The earliest details we have date to the 11th century AD when there were two dominant tribes: the expansionist Caras in the coastal areas and the peaceful Quitus in the highlands. The Caras, led by Shyri, conquered the Quitus, but it seems to have been a peaceful expansion rather than a bloody warfare. The Cara / Quito peoples became collectively known as the Shyri nation and they were the dominant force in the Ecuadorian highlands until about 1300 AD, by which time the Puruhá of the southern highlands had also risen to power under the Duchicela lineage. Conflict was avoided by the marriage of a Shyri princess, the only child of a king Cara of the Shyri to Duchicela, the eldest son of the King of the Puruhás. This Duchicela / Shyri alliance proved successful and the Duchicela line ruled more or less peacefully for about 150 years.



At the time of the Inca expansion the Duchicela descendants still dominated the north, and the south was in the hands of the Cañari people. The Cañaris defended themselves bitterly against the Inca invaders and it was some years before the Inca Tupac-Yupanqui was able to subdue them and turn his attention to the north. During this time he fathered a son, Huayna Capac, by a Cañari princess. The subjugation of the north took many years and Huayna Capac grew up in

Ecuador. He succeeded his father to the Inca throne and spent years traveling all over his empire, from Bolivia to Ecuador, constantly putting down uprisings from all sides. Wherever possible, he strengthened his position by marriage and his union with Paccha, the daughter of the defeated Cacha Duchicela, produced a son, Atahualpa.

The year 1526 is a major one in Ecuadorian history. The Inca Huayna Capac died and left his empire, not to one son as was traditional, but to two, thus dividing the Inca Empire for the first time. In the same year, on 21 September, the first Spaniards landed near Esmeraldas in northern Ecuador. They were led by the pilot Bartolomé Ruiz de Andrade, who was sent south on an exploratory mission by Francisco Pizarro, who himself remained further north. Pizarro was not to arrive as conqueror for several years. Meanwhile, the rivalry of Huayna Capac's two sons grew. The Inca of Cuzco, Huáscar, went to war against the Ecuadorian Inca, Atahualpa. After several years of fighting, Atahualpa defeated Huáscar near Ambato in central Ecuador and was thus the ruler of a weakened and still divided Inca empire when Pizarro arrived in 1532 with plans to conquer the empire.

The Spanish Conquest

Pizarro's advance was rapid and dramatic. His horse-riding, armor-wearing and cannon-firing conquistadors, though few in number, were believed to be godlike and spread terror among the Indians. In late 1532, a summit meeting was arranged between Pizarro and Atahualpa. Although Atahualpa was prepared to negotiate with the Spaniards, Pizarro had other ideas. Finally, Pizarro's lieutenant, Sebastián de Benalcázar, battled his way to Quito in late 1534, only to find the city razed to the ground by Rumiñahui, who preferred destroying the Inca City to leaving it in the hands of the conquistadors. Quito was refounded on 6 December 1534, and Rumiñahui was captured, tortured, and executed in January of 1535. The only important Inca site in Ecuador, which remains more or less intact today, is at Ingapirca, near Cuenca.

The Colonial Era

Lima, Peru, was the seat of the political administration of Ecuador during the first centuries of colonial rule. Ecuador was first known as a gobernación (or province) but in 1563 became the Audiencia de Quito, a more important political division. In 1739 the Audiencia was transferred from the viceroyalty of Colombia (then known as Nueva Granada). Ecuador remained a peaceful colony during these centuries, and agriculture and the arts flourished.

Life was comfortable for the ruling colonialists, but the Indians, and later "mestizos", under their rule were treated abysmally. A system of forced labor was not only tolerated, but also encouraged, and it was no surprise that by the 18th century there were several uprisings of the Indians against the Spanish ruling classes.

The Independence

The first serious attempt to liberate Ecuador was by a partisan group led by Juan Pío Montúfar on 10 August 1809. The group managed to take Quito and install a government, but this lasted only 24 days before royalist troops were able to regain control. Simón Bolívar finally achieved Independence. The Venezuelan liberator who marched southward from Caracas, freed Colombia in 1819, and supported the people of Guayaquil when they claimed independence on 9 October 1820. It took almost two years before Ecuador was entirely liberated from Spanish rule. The decisive battle was fought on 24 May 1822, when Field Marshall Sucre, one of Bolivar's best generals, defeated the royalists at the battle of Pichincha and took Quito.

Ecuador Today

The ethnic distribution of Ecuador's population reveals the dynamics of a racial melting pot since the days when the first whites immigrated to this indigenous continent. According to recent data the situation in Ecuador is as follows: Indians 40%, 40% "Mestizos", Whites 10%, Mulattos and Negroes 10%. It is quite clear that the integration of Indians and "Mestizos" into civilized life is a matter of historical importance and the key to the true future development of the Ecuadorian nation.

At present there is an optimistic outlook for Ecuador thanks to the discovery of petroleum in the Oriente region and of deposits of copper, lead, molybdenum, zinc and silver in the Azuay and Cañar provinces.

Social differences in Ecuador are very pronounced, with a big gap between the upper and the lower classes. Among the latter a high degree of illiteracy prevails. The rapid population increase is accompanied by a shortage of schools and teachers, which is a permanent worry of State and Municipal authorities. The middle class is still weak in Ecuador, but anxious to take advantage of the benefits of public and private education with a view of gradually strengthening its still incipient role in national affairs.

Ecuador is among the nations with the highest population density, which averages about 54 inhabitants per square kilometer. And Ecuador is a "young nation", for approximately 53.1% of the total population is under twenty years old. Life expectancy is 78 years for females and 73 years for males.

The Ecuadorian people of the cities are elegant, intelligent, and amicable. Rural folks are hospitable even when they live very modestly. People of the coastal region are more free and easy going, while in the Sierra they are somewhat ceremonious but hearty at the same time. As is only natural, Ecuadorians love their country, but they do so without showing off as patriots. They are also mainly Catholics, but with a healthy amount of liberalism and tolerance.

GEOGRAPHY

Ecuador is called a country of contrasts. Above all, this refers to the marked physical features produced by capricious work of nature itself. The country presents three very different geographical regions: the coastal lowlands, the Andes with their high plains and valleys, and the densely forested oriental region extending towards the Amazon basin. That is, in Ecuadorian terms, the *Costa*, the *Sierra* and the *Oriente*. The Galápagos Islands in the Pacific Ocean constitute a fourth geographic region.





The Coast

This is tropical lowland between the Andean Mountains and the sea, over four hundred miles wide. It is mainly a fertile alluvial plain with small hills here and there, which covers a good quarter of the country's surface. Numerous rivers descend from the Andes and cross the land. The Coast is a busy region which provides nearly all the export products: bananas, shrimp, coffee, cacao, sugar, rice, oil seeds, rubber, balsa wood, tagua nuts, and cotton.

The two principal river systems are that of the Esmeraldas to the north, with the seaport of Esmeraldas, and to the south that of the equatorial "old man river", the Guayas. On the right bank, some forty miles from the open sea, lies Guayaquil, Ecuador's main port and biggest town, of more than two million inhabitants

The Sierra

The sturdy backbone of the country is formed by the system of Andean Mountains. There are two parallel Andean chains, the Eastern, and the Western Cordilleras; separated by the "altiplano" (high plateau), which is formed 25 to 40 miles wide and some 400 miles long, with an average altitude of 8,000 feet. Several transverse ranges divide the Inter-Andean plateau into separate watersheds, or intermountain basins, where agriculture and stock raising are carried on throughout the year. This extensive Central Valley lined with the cones of volcanoes has many towns and small villages, each with its special flavor and ancient folkways.

The "altiplano" is the ancestral home of the numerous indigenous human groups. In different territories they conserve their typical, colorful apparel. Everywhere these stout people can be seen toiling the land, which in the Andean valleys brings forth all the agricultural products of the tempered zones, from potatoes and maize, the staple food of the Sierra Indians, to wheat, apples, pears, peaches, cherries, figs, strawberries, and even grapes

The Oriente

This heavily wooded and sparsely inhabited region extends from the gently descending eastern slopes of the Andes to the flat jungle lands, and is cut by numerous tributaries of the Marañón and the Amazon rivers. Some of the streams carry auriferous sands. The Oriente represents nearly half of the territory of Ecuador.

In recent years large tea plantations have been founded near Puyo. Considerable investment is being made in the introduction of African palm, and in cattle raising. But above all, it is the exploitation of the new oil fields in the northern Oriente, near Colombia, which contributes to the prosperity of the country.

The Galapagos Islands

Five hundred sea miles off the Ecuadorian coast, in the Pacific, lies the officially named Province of Galapagos, also known as Archipelago of Colon. It comprises six



larger and nine smaller islands, and over sixty islets and rocks. The largest island is the Isabela, whose 1500 square miles represent about half the terrestrial area of the whole archipelago. The Galapagos were formed by volcanic accumulation from the bottom of the ocean.

The Galapagos, named after those ancient creatures called galápagos, which are giant turtles, attained world fame after they were visited in 1836 by Charles Darwin, whose observations of the rare animal life were to support his theory about the evolution of species.

These "enchanted isles", as one early navigator called them, enjoy an ideal climate, which explains the presence of so many "Crusoes" of different nationalities who have settled there. While the possibilities for agriculture and stock raising are naturally limited, the surrounding sea is considered one of the richest fishing zones anywhere, especially for tuna, codfish and lobster.

As you can see, Ecuador is a very fascinating and diverse country. Although you will not come here as a tourist or under a travel program, we recognize your need to see as much as of our country as possible. Since Ecuadorian families in general do not travel within Ecuador, AFS Ecuador will offer you four trips (see page 9).

Finally, there are many more sources that you can explore if you want to learn more about Ecuador before arriving:

<http://ecuador.travel/en>

<http://wikitravel.org/en/Ecuador>

<http://www.lonelyplanet.com/ecuador>

The information for this section has been taken from two different sources: ECUADOR: A LAND, A PEOPLE, A CULTURE, by Arturo Eichler, and ECUADOR: A TRAVEL SURVIVAL KIT, By Rob Rachowieki. The spelling, punctuation, measurement units, etc. used in the originals have been respected.

3. SOME ASPECTS OF THE CULTURE

A Primer On The Ecuadorian People And Customs



The indigenous and the European, the traditional and the modern, the rural and the urban... all blended in a single, rich culture called "mestizo"



ECUADOR BY ECUADORIANS

The cultural fabric of Ecuador, as of all countries, is very rich and diverse. We cannot attempt to give here a full view of our culture, especially since there are so many different nuances of a same aspect, as practiced from region to region, from town to town, from family to family... What we want to do here is deal with a few issues many Ecuadorians feel very strongly about, and tend to cause friction or embarrassment to foreigners if they are not attentive to them. Please understand that AFS staff and volunteers do not necessarily share all the ideas or beliefs put forth in this document, nor are we making a stand on whether we believe them to be "right or wrong". We think that they may be just different from your own, and our aim is to help you readjust your expectations in terms of what you may find here.

FORMALITY / INFORMALITY

Ecuadorian culture is rather more formal than informal. "You" takes two forms in Spanish -you use the "tú" form with people your age, brothers and sisters. "Usted", conjugated in the third person singular, is used with parents and older people, and denotes respect. If, by chance, the kids in your family use the "tú" form with their parents, do so as well. This form also exists in French and German and probably in other languages. Although a bit confusing in the beginning, you should learn these and use them appropriately.

Greetings - when people meet they shake hands or give a kiss on the cheek. Only women and members of the opposite sex kiss each other, men don't among them. When you don't know someone, you usually just shake hands, although it's not uncommon in a group of teenagers to kiss on the first encounter. If relatives or friends of family come over, you should greet them as described. When invited over to someone else's home, the same applies. If you're up in your room, you come down and greet them. It's considered very bad manners if you don't go through with the greeting ritual. It's usual upon greeting to also say "¿Cómo estás?" or "¿Qué tal?" to people your age, or "¿Cómo está?" or "¿Cómo le va?" to older people. A short answer such as "Bien" or "Más o menos" is usually sufficient with strangers. With people you know or want to get to know, ask questions to start a conversation. Although it's common for people who know each other to chat afterwards, it often happens you don't have a chance to answer the question, especially if a lot of people are present and greeting each other. In these cases, people aren't being impolite; the important thing is to comply with the formality, which is asking how you are.

Youths show a lot of respect/deference to older people, using the "Usted" form and letting the other do most of the talking. Youths here probably show greater formal respect (as opposed to informal respect) to their parents, uncles and aunts, teachers, etc. It is not well seen for a youth to contradict the opinions of elders, as the latter are more experienced and deserve this respect.

Many invitations to parties are informal as they come from other teenagers or young adults. But invitations to weddings and other special events are usually written and one has to dress formally.



People here, especially adults, usually dress formally to work. Teenagers and young adults dress informally but very seldom wear shorts, tattered jeans, etc. They don't use the sloppy look and their jeans are always clean, even pressed. To a certain extent, teenagers or young adults tend to dress semi-formally rather than informally. Many participants don't bring many clothes as a good pair of jeans can go a long way back home. But in Ecuador, host mothers feel queasy about their AFS participant wearing the same pants or shirt 2-3 days in a row. We suggest you rotate your clothes so that you wear something different every day. Try to be as neat as everyone around you, as people do put an emphasis on cleanliness.

At most parties, there is a lot more dancing going on than talking. People like to dance and you will be expected to learn quickly to do so. People can drink a lot, whether they are teenagers or adults. There doesn't exist a legal drinking age. There can be peer pressure to get drunk,

especially in the case of males. Although it is more accepted for males to drink than females, host families do not like to see their children or guests staggering home from a party. Women can have a couple of drinks, can drink socially, but it is frowned upon if they get tipsy or drunk. Even today, many families don't accept that their daughters smoke cigarettes.

INDEPENDENCE / CONFORMITY

Conformity is more valued in this culture. You will notice few cases of extremes in dress/appearance. Being different, or at least too different, is definitely not valued. There is no tolerance for unconformity, whether in dress or in the opinions one expresses. We think it's obvious that dressing in a way that's not in line with how people dress here will be an obstacle to your being accepted/will hinder your integration into the culture.

With respect to personal opinions, you should not come on too strong. There will arise, on more than one occasion, situations in which you will strongly disagree with the opinion expressed. Don't jump in before considering the cultural factors involved. Remember that, in general, people do not positively accept ideas that are quite liberal.

COMMUNICATION: DIRECT / INDIRECT

In general, people will resort to diplomacy as the best tactic. If something bothers them, they prefer to let it pass, not wanting to make a fuss or to hurt the person's feelings. If the bothersome situation persists, they might indirectly try to let you know about it, by ignoring you, being cold or limiting themselves to brief sentences in their contact with you. Through these means, a person of the Ecuadorian culture usually picks up quickly that he has done something wrong and will immediately rectify the situation. There exists little open confrontation, the preference being for expressing one's views in a diplomatic way. It's a question of how to use the language, which might take you some time to pick up. When you are in a situation where the point of view or behavior goes against your beliefs, alternative means for getting your point across must be explored, in the interest of not creating an atmosphere of confrontation, which would make the other uncomfortable. One of the best ways of



getting your views across is to ask questions, in a diplomatic manner of course. Although we ask host families to go over the house rules and norms with the participant within a few days after arrival, this is not always done. Many families think this is not necessary as few rules exist or that the participant will easily learn. If this is the case, the participant will have to rely on observation and on taking the initiative to speak with host family members when clarification is needed.

Due to the cultural idiosyncrasy with respect to communication, some people will have a tendency to speak with a third party when a problem comes up. This usually occurs when a problem arises which the person can't find a solution to. If you become aware of this (most of the time the participant is aware something is going wrong), speak as soon as possible with the person involved to clear things up or call someone from AFS. Although you might feel offended if you find yourself in this situation, many of you will be doing the same thing during the program, sharing your experience with other AFS'ers, and not saying the nicest things about the person or persons you're having problems with. To a certain extent, it's normal to share with friends the problems you're having. The important thing is not to remain at the level of just talking, but to work in a constructive manner on solving the problem and not let too much time pass as things can just get worse.

Due to the mentality of the people and the fact that the majority belongs to the Catholic faith, certain subjects are considered taboo. Issues such as politics or religion can be controversial, as in most other cultures, and the participant will have to use his/her judgment in determining to what extent the other person is open to discussion. Some of the taboo subjects are abortion, pre-marital sex, homosexuality and drugs. Now these topics can be discussed but with great care, as those who approve of/defend these "behaviors" can be seen as having questionable moral standards. However, if you have had an abortion, taken drugs, are gay, or have had pre-marital sex, it's better not to tell anyone about it. People feel very strongly about

these being "wrong" and they constitute totally unacceptable behavior. The participant would risk losing / greatly affecting relationships if this became known. It's tantamount to placing an obstacle between you and the people you are in contact with.

GENDER ROLES

Although times are changing, Ecuadorian society is still dominated by males. The same as in most of your cultures, even if women are on the road to obtaining equality, the power structure (politically) is still overwhelmingly in the hands of men. For this reason you will soon notice that machismo is prevalent, which implies that the roles of men and women are strictly defined. Although probably more than 50% of women work (this being a necessity due to the economic situation), the ideal is for the man to be the bread-winner and the woman to be the housewife and take care of the kids.

With sexual roles being sharply defined, there exist different expectations for men and women. As mentioned before, the man is expected to be the breadwinner and the woman the housewife. Although an increasing number of women have access to higher education (university), the priority is matrimony. Within the home, the women of the family are expected to cook and clean, the men having in general nothing to do



with these tasks. In your families, this will become obvious and female participants should take a part, this being the expectation and conducive to integrating into the family structure.

Women are treated differently from men, gallantry being the maximum expression; men pay for women (restaurant, movies), open doors, help put their coats on, etc. Actually, this can be pleasant if you put it into perspective. Unfortunately, from your point of view, there are disadvantages due to the double standards that exist. Men enjoy greater freedom than women do when it comes to outings. They can come back later and are not so over-protected as women are. There are occasions where a daughter 18 years of age enjoys equal/if not less freedom than her younger brother. It's not uncommon for a girl to have to be accompanied by her brother if she goes to a party, even if he is younger than she is. This is due to the perception that there is less probability for the man to get into trouble, pregnancy being the worst fear.

Another example of the double standard is the fact that it is acceptable for men to have pre-marital sex (they can talk/boast about it), but it's quite the opposite in the case of women. Now, all this is very difficult to accept, considering your backgrounds, but is part of the reality you will be living. This is quite natural but is an incorrect interpretation of what is going on. What is actually happening is that they are treating you like any other son or daughter (which is the basic idea of the experience; this is what we ask host families to do). Also, they are genuinely concerned about your welfare and have set down norms to insure nothing "bad" happens to you. This is how they reason and it will be very important to keep this in the back of your minds during your stay. Machismo is not easy to live with but there's nothing you can do to change the mentality. It existed before you came, will be present while you're here and will continue after you leave. The only thing you can realistically do is attempt to live with it.

As for "dating" - for the most part, young people tend to go out in groups, rather than alone in couples, unless they're having a more formal relationship. Women rarely ask men out, being the prerogative of men to do so. At parties, it is the man who asks the woman to dance. You always dance with a partner of the opposite sex, you rarely see two women dance together, or someone just get up and dance alone. A woman, who asks a man for a date (or even for a dance in the most conservative circles) is seen as being very forward, will give the wrong idea, especially if she is a "gringa".

Many participants have said in the past that it is difficult to make friends of the opposite sex. This is true when you ask someone to go out alone, as it creates an expectation around an exclusive relationship.

FAMILY LIFE

Domestic help is common here with most host families having either live-in maids or ones who come during working hours. Maids are normally referred to as "Usted" and how they are treated will vary from one household to another. Some are considered family members, due to the length of service, while others are looked down upon because of social class or they don't respond to the family's expectations. Whatever the case, you should be respectful of the maid. This means you should not become a burden for her, but not become familiar with her or treat her as a friend. She already will have to wash your clothes and have some extra work, which is acceptable. But



don't give her all your clothes to wash at the same time or be inordinately untidy in your room, as this will surely bother her.

There are two things to watch out for. Avoid having a better relationship, or spending more time, with the maid than with your family. After all, the family members are the ones hosting you. No matter how good a relationship you have with the maid, never tell her your problems (whether serious or insignificant) in the family or negatively comment on a family member. If you do so, we can guarantee you that the family will know about it, resulting in even greater problems. Despite our warning participants about this, every year some participants get into trouble because of this.

The family is considered the very foundation of society and a high value is placed on being close-knit and spending time together. Families expect to share at least one meal together with everyone present, be it lunch or dinner. The only acceptable reasons for not being present are work or attending a course. But participants can accept the occasional invitation to eat at a friend's. Free time is usually shared in the evening on weekdays and on weekends, Sunday being the traditional family day.

You will find that families do watch a lot of TV, many of them getting together in the parents' bedroom, with the kids sprawled out on the bed. Although TV is watched, a lot of conversing goes on and it can become quite social. We know that many of you don't watch that much TV back home but it will be important for you to be flexible in this area. Besides providing you with the opportunity to spend time with the family, to converse with them, it can be helpful with your language skills, especially at the beginning. Also, watching the news can be very informative in learning about the country you will be living in. You shouldn't permit your dislike or disinterest on TV gets in the way of sharing an important family activity in the evenings. Do take advantage of any opportunity, especially in the beginning, to spend time with the family, going grocery shopping, accompanying mother on errands etc. Whatever goes on, try to be in on it.

Parents in Ecuador have the final say in all decisions taken. Although some families might consult with their children, parents have the last word. Under no circumstances should you argue with a decision taken by the father or mother as it's considered a lack of respect. Parents don't consider it necessary to explain their decisions, the premise being that they know what is best for their kids. If you happen to disagree with a decision let some time pass and find a diplomatic way of inquiring into the reasons behind it. The age of a son or daughter is quite irrelevant, as long as a child lives under the parents' roof -which is not uncommon in Ecuador for people in their mid- and late twenties.

Ecuadorian teenagers and young adults are much more dependent here than in other parts of the world and the amount of freedom they enjoy is restricted. Independence is definitely not valued as it goes against the concept of family unity, togetherness, etc. This is due to various factors with finances explaining in part the situation. Most teenagers don't have jobs (due to the economic situation, even part-time jobs are held by heads of families) and their priority is to finish high school with good grades. This economic dependence continues into university and a son/daughter will very rarely leave home until they get married. It's quite common for a newly married couple to live with one of the spouse's parents, in order to establish themselves financially. Parents thus have a word in all that goes on within the home,



whether you're 17 or 27. From what we've just said, it's obvious that turning 18 in Ecuador doesn't mean any change in your status, as it does in other cultures.

With respect to outings, you must always ask permission before going out, saying where you're going, which you're going with and the time you will be back. If you don't do this, you're in trouble. Parents are parents, and they will worry if they don't know all the details. A little hint: parents don't feel comfortable about giving permission to a request to simply go out. It will be a lot easier to get permission if you say you're going to a friend's house, going to the movies, playing football, something that does not imply just hanging around or "let's see what comes up". Also, some parents will not give you permission to go out with someone they don't know, with a friend you have just recently made. The policy to follow in this case is to communicate this to one of the parents and ask if it would be OK for the friend to come over and meet the family. Needless to say, this also applies to boy/girlfriends.

Although your room back home might be your castle, strictly your territory, it will not be well seen here if you're messy, and you will be told to do something about it. Exceptions do exist but most families expect you to be orderly. Remember also that the maid will not appreciate walking into a war zone every day and will certainly not put up with it for a year. If it's important for your family that you should be tidy, simply do it, thereby avoiding conflicts.

SOCIAL CLASSES

In Ecuador, the middle class makes up a small percentage of the population, and their number is reported to be decreasing due to the deteriorating economic situation. There exists a great disparity between social classes, where the majority of Ecuadorians, especially in rural areas, live below the poverty level.

There exists a pronounced sense of class due to economic, social and racial factors. Racism and discrimination are quite common, especially against Indians and Blacks, who have traditionally occupied a minimal role in the economic and political structure of the society. It is difficult to explain racism or discrimination but its roots can be found in history, specifically during the period when the Spanish colonized Latin America. We know that discrimination is difficult to accept, for someone from a more egalitarian society, but one must remember that it is not in-born, but learnt, and that it has been handed down, generation through generation. Don't be surprised if your families, or some members of your family, or your friends, discriminate. They were brought up that way and they belong to a social class that reinforces this. All you can really do is be tolerant and try to understand why, which is difficult, but a lot more challenging than just emitting a rash judgment about their character.

Here parents have a word in the friends their kids choose. This is due to the kind of family structure that exists, where the children are more dependent than independent. It is also attributable to the class situation. Parents don't want their kids to frequent people who are seen as having bad "customs", such as swearing, bad manners, etc. These habits are seen as being common to people from the lower classes. We ask that you be tolerant and understanding of these reactions.



PRIVACY / SOCIABILITY

Although privacy is respected, it is not necessarily valued nor appreciated. People in general are quite social and sociable; most don't like/can't stand to be alone. Being a private person may be tolerated but it's not well seen. You should not spend too much time in your room, or spend time there when your family is together. You have to choose your moments to do so - when nobody is at home, when all are occupied in studying, in the evening after having spent some time with the family. If you spend too much time in your room, your family will think you are unhappy or homesick. This is what they would think of an Ecuadorian who did so. Also, if friends, relatives or visitors come over, it is considered uneducated not to greet them and join in the conversation. It is considered unsociable if you keep things to yourself. You are expected to share the letter you received from home, to speak and comment about what happened that day at work, at the party you went to, or whatever you are doing. Making conversation is important. It might seem like small talk at first but it helps in relating to people here.

Don't leave your Facebook personal page open, or even your diary or letters you are writing hanging around on the bed, on the table or otherwise out in the open. Someone is bound to read them, and that someone just might understand English, German, etc. It's quite normal for a participant to write about the things they like and don't like, but it's very difficult for a family to understand that you are telling someone else about your problems and making them look bad. This happens every year, despite our warning participants about this possibility.

Privacy is not seen in the same way as in other cultures. Don't be surprised if your brother/sister just walks in unannounced into your room to have a chat. And ask who and what are you writing about, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

You should be careful in confiding very personal things to friends and family, especially in the beginning when you don't really know that well the people you are in contact with. Give yourself time to get to know people so that a relationship of trust can be established and you have an idea of what the person is like, in terms of openness, discretion, or whatever character trait you value as important in a friend.

Examples of things you shouldn't do: tell your schoolmates you're taking the pill to control your menstrual cycles, or telling your sister you hate your host mother (because you're going through a difficult period with her). You can be sure this will get around or get back to the person who was talked about. We are not saying you should be distrustful of people. Just be careful in what you say and whom you say it to. Remember that, coming from a different culture, some of the things you will say, the opinions you have (which you take for granted, which may be common back home), will be novel, surprising or unusual here. It's normal that people will want to discuss what you've said.



SENSE OF TIME

Although many families are very punctual, Ecuadorian society, in general, has a very relaxed notion of time. When you ask people when they will be ready, they often say "Ya mismo", which means right now. In reality, "Ya mismo" means anytime from now till 3 hours later, if not tomorrow. It often happens that a party starts 1-2 hours later than the set time, a friend comes and gets you 2 hours later than planned, you wait an hour in the restaurant before your friends show up. In Ecuador, time is not money; there's plenty of it. It's not that people are being impolite or inconsiderate, it's just that the pace, the life-style is more relaxed. This is difficult to get used to at first but you'll quickly get the hang of it. Punctuality is expected for work, mealtimes, and curfews, taking planes/buses, having a doctor's appointment and some AFS activities. When plans to do something are being made, don't be surprised if they don't work out. A friend says he'll phone/come and gets you at eight o'clock, but never calls/shows up. Your family says they are going to the beach/country next weekend but nothing happens. Or, they tell you half an hour before leaving to pack your things as the family will be spending the weekend at a relative's. Basically, people feel that there's always another day and don't feel stressed when something doesn't work out. You have to go with the flow and most of you will probably end up liking it.

THE CONTEXT

In the part of this document entitled "Geographical and Historical Facts About Ecuador", you were given a brief review of the historical background of the country. This will be helpful in understanding what is going on, not only in Ecuador, but also in other parts of South America. We strongly encourage you to read up on different aspects of the country, be it through books or the newspaper, so as to broaden your knowledge of Ecuador and thereby have a better grasp of the culture you will be dealing with. All Latin American countries were colonized and although most became independent by the middle of the 19th century, the state of under-development that accompanied this period has not changed. Being part of the Third World means economic conditions aren't optimal, and they aren't getting better in most countries. Ecuador reports a two-digit annual inflation. Unemployment is estimated at 5%, with approximately 57% of the population being under-employed.

For some or many participants, coming to Ecuador can be a shock, initially, as the standard of living is lower than in your countries, and you will be in touch daily with realities that are not easy to accept or get used to. There are an increasing number of street vendors, selling anything from meals, fruits, clothes, pens, cigarettes and candies etc. Many young children also work in the streets, shining shoes or selling newspapers. People litter and a lot of garbage can be seen in the streets. Public transport is far from modern and the buses are often crowded. Sanitary conditions can be quite poor when it comes to the sale of fresh produce in the markets or typical foods on the street. What will make your experience unique is the fact that most countries in the world are in this situation and this will be your opportunity to understand what is going on, from the point of view of the Third World, rather than from the perspective of a developed country. Although the aspects described previously are not pleasant, they will be more than offset, or compensated, by a culture that possesses endearing characteristics. People are very hospitable; when they invite you over they do their utmost to make you feel at home. In general, people are very friendly and quite willing to help you out. Families can be very close-knit, affectionate



and they are very concerned about the welfare of their kids. Despite the economic difficulties and uncertain future, people are quite cheerful, exuberant and have a zest for life. They know how to party, with music and dancing playing a very important part of their lives. People know how to relax and enjoy themselves. Now all these things will take a while to get used to before you can appreciate them, but with a little time and keeping an open mind, you're going to love Ecuador.

SOME “DO’S” ...

- ✓ You should always greet people, particularly those older than you.
- ✓ Always communicate your plans to your host parents. Be sensitive to family rules.
- ✓ Spend as much time with the family as possible, especially in the beginning.
- ✓ Be curious - what are the rules in the home, expectations of family members, what to do with the laundry, ask about the country, interesting things about the city, customs, etc... It will please people that you are interested in Ecuador.
- ✓ Accept certain aspects of the experience that go "against the grain" - machismo, racism. Wait till you are more knowledgeable about the culture before expressing your opinions.
- ✓ Be observant - "when in Rome, do as the Romans". This is very helpful in avoiding mistakes.

... AND “DONT’S”

- 7 Never use a foreign language when Ecuadorians are present. It's very rude and impolite.
- 7 Arguing / confronting rarely works. Try to be patient and understanding.
- 7 Don't wear shorts or tattered clothes in public, unless you're absolutely positive that it won't result offensive.
- 7 Don't be an outspoken feminist or advocate of alternative life styles.
- 7 Don't be indiscreet - What's the use of telling your problems to the maid, friends/relatives of the family, or on the phone to another AFS? People care about their reputations and if you talk about them negatively, this will reflect on their hospitality and ability to make you feel at home.



ECUADOR BY FORMER AFS'ers

The following are some views of Ecuador, its culture and its people, as seen by AFS participants who have been here in the past. These could help other participants coming to Ecuador get a better grasp of the country before actually arriving here and, hopefully, make them aware of the richness and diversity of a nation that usually doesn't get that much press abroad - neither good nor bad press, and that, perhaps as a consequence of this, tends to be avoided by the adventurous tourist and the serious intercultural learner alike.

We hope the following vignettes will give you a feel of what life in Ecuador is like and will answer some of the questions you may have about this country. One thing that you should always keep in mind, however, is that experience is unique and that you will be the one making things happen for you, so don't take for granted that what you will live will be what those others have lived. Some things will be similar, but others will be totally different.

NO SENSE OF TIME, CRAZY DRIVERS, RICE EVERYDAY

"Well, I remember this time last year, thinking Oh my God! I'm off to Ecuador! What the hell is Ecuador like? I remember reading through books trying to figure out how was this country I would be living in for nearly a year. I'll tell you just a few things about Ecuador. People have no sense of time, if something starts at 7, no one will get there till 8. Parties and the nightlife don't start until about 11 at night and finish at 3 or whenever, also everyone dances at parties and everybody will teach you salsa and merengue and you will have heaps of fun. Ecuadorians love to go out and party.

Don't be shocked at first when you see a bus. I remember my first time, I saw one of those overcrowded, ugly buses, where you had people hanging out the door thinking I would never ever go on them, but sooner or later you will be catching those buses everyday. The drivers are really crazy, they are forever beeping their horns at everyone and everything. The food is really different, don't eat a lot of food of the streets at first, because it'll probably be dirty and you'll probably get diarrhea and that's something, which may happen throughout your year. You'll be eating rice practically everyday and the biggest meal is at lunchtime. They put oil in everything. I can't wait to have boiled vegetables! My year in Ecuador has been one of the greatest experiences in my life. Remember to put everything into your year, try to do all you can, it'll be the best year out."

HELGA, GERMANY

ANYTHING YOU EXPECTED WILL PROBABLY CHANGE DRASTICALLY...

"Well, it's the middle of my year in Ecuador and looking back, my last night back home seems like another lifetime. I don't know if I've really changed that much, but I know I've lived through quite a few adventures. The best advice I can give you is the best person to rely on is yourself. You'll be your own best friend. Always remember too, that if times get a little boring or you are at a loss of what to do, Quito, Cuenca,



Machala, etc. won't cater to you, but you will have to go out and look, ask, find activities to do.

Anything you expected will probably change drastically once in Ecuador. It's hard for to explain my time and impressions here in just this small letter, but on a very general evaluation: the people are extremely friendly; the family is very important and you'll discover you have more cousins than you can count. The cities are easy to move around, walking or by buses. School takes up your morning, usually 7 AM to 1 PM. Clothes: they are pretty conservative, no shorts downtown, and for many upper- class families, only American and European clothes worn. Always make sure your family realizes how important they are to you, and that going out or finding friends doesn't mean you're running away from them."

ULLA, FINLAND

YOU CAN DISCOVER NEW POSSIBILITIES HERE...

"I have been playing the piano for five years in Japan and I have had the opportunity to keep studying it here too. I have classes twice a week with my Russian teacher. She is quite strict, so I have to practice at least one hour every day. Recently I discovered something. In Japan, my teacher never told me I had talent and that I could become a pianist, I played only because I enjoyed it, but here my teacher is telling me that if I practice a lot I could be a pianist. I'm not saying that's what I'll do, but I'd like to tell you that you can discover new possibilities here, things you had never thought of doing before. It's a good thing. Furthermore, I had the chance to play in a concert here. Can you imagine a Japanese playing the piano in a concert in Ecuador? It was great!

There are a lot of other things you can do. Sometimes I feel bored, but if I look around a bit, I always find something to do. You have to be active, and ENJOY YOUR YEAR IN ECUADOR!"

KEI, JAPAN

I WAS AFRAID THEY WOULD NOT TREAT ME LIKE THEIR OWN CHILD..

"Six brothers and sisters here, but I only live with one brother. My brother is seventeen, the same age as me. At home, I only have one sister who is two years younger than me. I had never lived with a brother before and I was really scared what it would be like. I was wondering if we would even get along. With my parents, I was afraid they would treat me like I was just living in the house, and not treat me like their own child.

After Christmas, the awkwardness ended completely. I could tell that my family loved me and treated me the same way as my brother. I really, really felt a part of the family, like a normal member of it. My parents worry about me, help me, correct me, and teach me about everything I need to know. I feel like they are always there for me and always will be."

ISABELLE, BELGIUM



THE SEXUAL ROLES IN THIS SOCIETY ARE VERY CLEARLY DEFINED...

“As you can probably tell from the entry, I am a female and I can tell you from a female's point of view, but many of my male friends (other exchange students) also find it quite hard to deal with at times. For example, in my host family, I have two sisters and one brother. My parents let my brother go out 10 times more than my sisters and I merely for the fact that he is a guy. One of my sisters and I are both older than he is and we can almost never go out, so it's not because he is older either. When I asked my host father the reason for this, he told me that it was because the woman is to the house, and if my brother were to stay in the house as much as we do, he would turn homosexual. In my country, brothers and sisters have equal permission, if the brother can go out, so can the sister. It usually just depends on age or if one of them has done something wrong.

Another example, it was the week when report cards came out, and my brother got awful grades, and my sisters and I had very respectable grades. My father was very mad with the brother and absolutely praised us. That weekend, my brother went to parties two nights in a row and we couldn't leave the house. Somehow, I fail to see the logic here.

Men are also considered very masculine here if they have sex with a lot of women and women acquire a bad reputation if they do the same. Men can drink as much as they want and women can't.

Now, I've chosen a negative topic to write on, but I believe it is something one should prepare him/herself for. But, there are as many positive customs here that I wouldn't change for the world.”

JENNIFER, USA

4. SOME PRACTICAL MATTERS

How Some Everyday Things Work in Ecuador



Food, food for thought and other things that matter



THE LANGUAGE

Some of you have some knowledge of Spanish and some don't. Whatever is the case, it will be good for you to start taking Spanish classes right now, if available. That will make your adjustment to the country easier. The language is very important and you should devote a great deal of attention and time to it, if you want to learn it fast.

Spanish is our official language, although it is likely that someone in the family speaks at least some English, which is a comfort to know if your Spanish isn't fluent yet.

You will learn Spanish fast enough; especially if you insist on speaking it, rather than having others speak your home language with you.

Never be afraid to speak Spanish! It doesn't matter if it's incorrectly spoken and if you don't get the accent 100% right. As long as you can make yourself understood, you have succeeded in speaking Spanish! A whole lot will come to you just by listening closely and asking what things mean, and of course, studying and learning from books.

REMEMBER: The most important thing is not to hesitate to use what you know and to expose yourself to as much Spanish as possible. Please bring a dictionary to help you at the beginning.

VISA REQUIREMENTS

All participants coming to Ecuador on the Year Program **MUST** arrive in the country with an intercultural exchange visa issued by an Ecuadorian Consulate abroad and valid for a year. In order to obtain this type of visa, you will have to fill out a visa application and buy official stamps (supplied by the consulate). This application must be submitted with some other documentation, such as: a copy of the decree by the Ecuadorian government authorizing AFS activities in Ecuador; a visa request in Spanish from AFS Ecuador to the consulate where you should apply for a visa (both sent to you through your AFS National Office); etc.

Up to some time ago, our local immigration authorities were rather flexible, but the rise of undocumented foreigners, abuse of privileges by other organizations, and tougher visa procedures for Ecuadorians in other countries, have prompted stricter laws. Year Program participants arriving in the country with a tourist visa, can no longer change their visa status once in Ecuador. Any financial or legal liabilities caused by visa problems will be the sole responsibility of the participant and/or his/her natural family.

Please make sure to bring with you, in addition to your passport (stamped with the proper visa), THE ORIGINAL AND TWO COPIES of your visa certification ("Certificado de Visación"). This is a sheet of paper with your photo and vital information, very similar to the visa application. This one you will need for further visa formalities that you must comply with once in Ecuador.



IMMUNIZATIONS

Before coming to Ecuador, you should get shots for typhoid and hepatitis A. It might be hard to do it once in the country, since vaccines are scarce, and generally limited to the infant population. Also, please follow the recommendation of your AFS National Office on any additional shots they may advise you to get, since we will keep them updated on any unusual conditions that may require additional medical precautions.

CHIKUNGUNYA

This is a viral disease transmitted to humans by infected mosquitoes, and as you might know, the Chikungunya outbreak has already reached South America. To date there have been several confirmed imported cases of the virus in Ecuador. In most of the cases, it causes fever and severe joint pain. Other symptoms include muscle pain, headache, nausea, fatigue and rash.

There is no specific antiviral drug treatment for Chikungunya. Treatment is directed primarily at relieving the symptoms, including the joint pain using anti-pyretics, optimal analgesics and fluids.

Since there is no commercial Chikungunya vaccine, the best thing to do is to prevent:

Students placed in the coast region should take basic precautions. These precautions include use of repellents, wearing long sleeves and pants and ensuring rooms are fitted with screens to prevent mosquitoes from entering.

During outbreaks, insecticides may be sprayed to kill flying mosquitoes, applied to surfaces in and around containers where the mosquitoes land, and used to treat water in containers to kill the immature larvae.

For protection during outbreaks of Chikungunya, clothing which minimizes skin exposure to the day-biting vectors is advised. Repellents can be applied to exposed skin or to clothing in strict accordance with product label instructions.

The information for this section has been partially taken from the World Health Organization web site.

ZIKA VIRUS

Zika virus is a mosquito-borne virus transmitted by Aedes mosquitoes. The same mosquito also transmits 3 other vector-borne diseases -- dengue, chikungunya and yellow fever – across tropical and subtropical regions around the world.

The most common symptoms of Zika virus are headache, muscle and joint pain, mild fever, rash, and inflammation of the underside of the eyelid.

To lower the risk of being infected with Zika virus: use insect repellent; cover as much of the body as possible with long, light-coloured clothing; empty, clean or cover



containers that can hold water to remove places mosquitoes can breed; and sleep under mosquito nets.

The information for this section has been partially taken from the World Health Organization web site.

MEDICAL ISSUES

AFS International provides medical insurance for all participants. AFS doesn't pay for dental care, eyeglasses, inoculations, routine check-ups or medical care for any pre-existing conditions.

Detailed information on obtaining medical services will be given to you upon arrival.

THE AFS NATIONAL OFFICE WON'T REIMBURSE YOU FOR MEDICAL EXPENSES IF YOU DON'T PRESENT ORIGINAL RECEIPTS.

THE FOOD

A typical Ecuadorian diet calls for some kind of meat (beef, pork, poultry, fish or other seafood, cold cuts) twice a day, at lunch and dinner. Meat portions are not necessarily large, and are always accompanied by rice and some cooked vegetable or salad. Many times, meat is cooked as a stew, which will also be accompanied of rice. Besides rice, other main staples are potatoes, noodles, and on the coast, beans, yucca and plantains. Carbohydrates constitute a major intake, and it's not unusual to have two or three (rice, potatoes, and noodles) on a same meal. In any case, vegetables are never at the center of a meal.

Most Ecuadorian housewives (even those who have hired help to do the cooking, as it would be the case of most AFS host mothers) are very territorial when it comes to their kitchens, and will seldom allow someone who is not meant to do the cooking prepare his/her own meals. Besides, doing this would be considered rude of someone living in a family situation. Snacking between meals is not customary.

For vegetarians (especially strict ones, or even ovo-lacto vegetarians) all this means that, while they definitely have to assume responsibility over their dietary needs, they will have limitations, and most of the time, they will have to eat everything else in the meal but the meat. Particularly for those who do not eat any kind of meat at all, a balanced diet may be impossible, unless they provide for themselves food products that may compensate a lack of proteins from a diet of mostly starch.

Host families tend to think that if their AFS visitor eats a lot, she/he will be happy. Be careful, but don't be overly concerned about food: what your family feeds you is surely clean and safe to eat, and it probably tastes very well too. There are many food imports available, but they are very expensive. These products, that might be easy to get at home, may be seen as a "luxury" for us (cereal, imported cheese, jellies, etc.) Don't expect your host family to buy these things for you.



Please keep in mind that taking food from the refrigerator out of meal times might be considered not polite by your hosts. This food might not be available for your use and it may cause certain distress or even change drastically their budget if you do so. It is better to avoid this type of inconvenient by asking before you take something and being conscious on the price of these “extra” snacks to prevent an economical problem.

SMOKING AND DRINKING

Be sensitive at all times of family rules regarding this, and please follow them strictly, since they might affect your family relationship. If your hosts strongly don't approve of drinking alcoholic beverages, it is advisable not to insist on it. If they like to drink some alcohol, accept that, even if you don't approve. These goes too for smoking, if your hosts disapprove of your smoking in the house, smoke outside. If they smoke too much for your liking, sit by the window.

THE CURRENCY

It is probably easier if you bring your money in US Dollars, since this is the legal tender of Ecuador. You should open a bank account after your arrival. In case you need money to be sent from home and don't have a bank account, bank drafts or money orders in US Dollars can be sent, but you may lose some money due to service charges. Traveler's checks in US Dollars are no loner accepted in Ecuador. Personal checks can be very difficult to cash, if not impossible.

Another possibility is to pay with credit cards: Visa, MasterCard, American Express, and Diners Club are honored all over the major cities, so you will be able to pay or even get cash advances. Cash, however, is indispensable in the small towns and the countryside.

WHAT TO BRING

Ecuador is a country with no seasons. Instead of the four seasons, there are wet and dry periods. The weather patterns also vary greatly depending on which region you are in: Costa or Sierra. Nevertheless, practically any spring or summer clothes that you wear at home will be fine here. Young people wear jeans a lot, but they should look neat. Shorts are OK for sports, but not totally accepted on all occasions. Don't forget your bathing suit.

Females should bring a couple of dresses for a party or other formal occasions, and males should bring a pair of good pants with a jacket to match, and a nice dress shirt and tie. Be prepared for the fact that you'll probably gain weight, so bring clothes that fit you comfortably. The highlands are often cold, so bring a wind-proof jacket, sweater, and a warm layer to wear beneath.

Remember that many high schools require uniforms, and that you will be responsible for buying such articles of clothing.



OTHER USEFUL FACTS

Mail:

Even though the postal system has greatly improved, strict import taxes have become imposed in most of the things that come into our country, including packages.

There are some regulations that all the participants and their natural parents should be aware of:

- A package weighing 8.9 pounds (4 kilos) or less can be mailed, but it will have to pay a 42 dollar import fee to entry the country.
- The package must also contain items valued less than US\$ 400 total. The total value of the items must be clearly marked in the value declaration section of the package's customs level.
- Packages must not contain any currency or used shoes or clothes.
- If the package exceeds the weight limit or the value declared over the allowance and the addressee refuses to pay the taxes, the parcel will be returned to the remitter. Please be aware that unfortunately, we know of some cases where the returned packages never reach the remitter.

We have known cases in which the postal employee uses his/her own criteria to charge a fee, and in some cases, they have even charged up to 100% of the value of the value of the package.

Our general recommendation is that nothing be sent by mail to Ecuador, except for letters or documents.

Electricity:

The voltage is 110/120 throughout the country.

Telephone:

Long distance phone calls are easy to make. There are several options to call home. There are communication centers ("cyber cafés", or "Internet cafés" and phone companies' booths) where you can make telephone calls and send e-mails or faxes. In this case, you pay at the end of the call. You can also buy a calling card and then use it from any public telephone. This method has the advantage that you have already paid in advance, so there won't be any surprises afterwards (\$\$\$\$). Both communication centers and calling cards are cheaper than calling from a home telephone.

In 90% of the cases, AFS participants will have a phone in their host homes. An overseas operator will be in charge of placing calls abroad if direct dialing is not activated. Collect calls can be made to most countries --you should check with the overseas operator on availability of this service before placing the call.



E-mail:

Though widely available in major cities through cyber cafés, it is not a commodity to be expected in smaller towns or the countryside. Some host families will have Internet access through their PC's, but there may be restrictions regarding its use.

Transportation:

A good number (though usually crowded) of public buses provide very regular transportation within the bigger cities and towns, and between most points of the continental territory.

Insects:

One of the reasons why families on the Coast give so much importance to cleaning the house is because this region is located in the tropics, where insects abound and reproduce quickly. Your family will surely be making all efforts to keep insects out of the house, but don't panic if you see a cockroach.

A last word...

Let us tell you once more that we are very happy that you will be sharing such an important period of your life with Ecuador and Ecuadorians, and give you a big welcome to our country -we really hope you will learn to enjoy it. Finally, you should not feel surprised if you do not find your individual placement situation totally exotic. Some of the things you are used to seeing at home might also be a part of everyday life in Ecuador. And then maybe not so...