

## Women's Health in Ecuador By Reshma Patel

As I reflect on my Women's Reproductive & Sexual Health as a Human Right rotation in Ecuador, I am beginning to fully appreciate my multifaceted experience which included language, food, travel, medicine, and people. In terms of language, staying with a host family allowed me to practice my Spanish and live the daily life of an Ecuadorian in Quito. I became close with Maria, my host mother, and I continue to keep in touch with her through WhatsApp till this day. She introduced me to local cuisine (even with my dietary restrictions- vegetarianism). I loved the various fruit juices she blended fresh for me every morning; and the dinners including soups, plantains, tacos, beans, and rice always had both a sweet and savory component. She taught me how to use the local transportation to commute to La Maternidad Isidro Ayora, the hospital where I worked for two weeks. I never thought I would reach a level of confidence in my Spanish speaking skills to handle a new city alone. Actually, one of the most memorable bus rides involved getting lost, but I fortunately found my way back with my growing Spanish vocabulary. I was returning home from a solo excursion to Mitad del Mundo and missed my bus stop for home; I wound up on the opposite side of Quito at the Panecillo and it took me an extra hour to find my way back. In all honesty, I was terrified, but I began to believe in my ability to adapt. Language was a significant factor in my clinical learning experience in Ecuador as well.



Mitad Del Mundo: At the top of the museum located at the equator.

I felt honored to be at La Maternidad, because it is the oldest maternity hospital in Quito, where countless of its citizens and their many generations were born. The Child Family Health International organization hosted weekly lectures and I was educated regarding the healthcare system in Ecuador and the cultural differences to anticipate. The medical students, residents, and doctors were all warm and welcoming, and as always I continue to keep in touch via Facebook. I witnessed medical cases that I will carry with me for a lifetime. Without going into graphic detail, the incomplete abortion I observed was devastating as I watched the tears roll down the young mother's face. I put myself in her shoes and could not imagine the pain of losing a child. I remember the resident telling her not to look downward towards the body. I began to reflect on differences in medical practices and culture from the United States. For example, the patient population tended to be on the younger end of the spectrum and episiotomies were quite routine. There was a section of the hospital, which housed the youngest of the teenage pregnancies. The social determinants were apparent, ranging from education to healthcare access. I spent most of my time at La Maternidad, but did spend one week at a family medicine clinic. This was definitely the environment I hope to practice in, serving those who don't have access. By travelling around Ecuador, I was able to further understand their lives and learn their history

which was imperative to connecting with the patients. On a side note, between deliveries and C-sections, the medical residents and students would gather around the TV to cheer for their favorite teams for the World Cup. The national excitement was contagious. Even in the lobby, waiting patients would gather in the hallway and bystanders to catch a glimpse of the game. There were many aspects to each of my experiences in Ecuador.



Mindo: While waiting in line for equipment to go zip lining, I met this cute puppy and the adorable Matthias sitting in the back.

I shadowed Shaman at an indigenous clinic in Otovalo, which was a two hour bus ride from Quito. The evolution of medicine was apparent as I watched patients of indigenous origin seek help for back pain and colds. The diagnosis of a medical condition was done in three different methods. With the first patient, she took a stone and rubbed it all over the patient's body and then studied the intricacies of the rock to determine where the patient might have dysfunction in the body. With the second patient, she used an egg in place of the stone and after rubbing it all over the patient's body, she cracked it into a plate. She looked for inconsistencies in the yolk and egg white to determine where in the body disease may be present. With the third patient, she used a guinea pig, or cuy. The patient brought in the guinea pig themselves and the Shaman proceeded to rub it all over her body. During this process, the guinea pig started to urinate all over the place and died. The shaman then used a knife to exsanguinate and remove the internal organs to locate any pathology. Likely due to lack of translation, I was not sure what treatments were recommended for these patients. This was definitely a once in a lifetime experience. After this day, I spent the remainder of my time in Otovalo with family.



Mindo: Feeding bananas to butterflies in their sanctuary.

My uncle, who married into the family, is originally from Otovalo and his parents happened to be in town. I went to their home, which was mostly farmland and they made fresh sopa with a fruit salad. We visited volcanic springs and swam in the pools mountaintop, the ambiance was

nothing like I had ever experienced. I had similar experiences in Mindo where I did ziplining and walked in a butterfly sanctuary. Sitting at the equator at Mitad del Mundo, I felt so small in comparison to the things happening around me. When I hiked La Ruca Pichincha, I went by myself through the Teleferico and ended up meeting a Brazilian couple who I befriended. Back in downtown Quito, I went to the local panederias, tried some vegan Chinese food and came to realize how multicultural Quito was becoming. From the academic to the social, I grew as a person and plan to go back and visit.



La Basilicia



La Basilica: View from the top.