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## A Trip to the Amazon Forest

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## A Trip to the Amazon Forest



Time here does not wait for anyone. It has been so hard for me to take a minute and catch a breath between classes, homework, commuting, host family events and travel. Recently I spent a weekend in Tiputini, the Amazon rain forest. The trip to Tiputini was about 12 hours in total jumping from bus to boat to chiva to boat, etc. This kind of gives you an idea how deep into the jungle we were. Although the commute was long, the trip was an amazing opportunity because this trip was not a typical vacation or tourist attraction. It was a trip organized by my school to allow students to visit the school's research station in the middle of the rain forest. This is definitely not a place where just anybody can visit. We were the only tourists for miles and miles since the station is mainly used by researchers.

On the way to Tiputini there was a stretch of the trip where we needed to enter a petroleum site because it was the only road available to get where we needed to be. This part of the trip really opened up my eyes to the controversies between the indigenous communities and the petroleum companies. This section of the trip I was not allowed to take any photographs or videos in case the photos I take are used to exploit the oil company. When we first arrived to the petroleum site, our group was forced to watch a video that presented people from the Yasuní community explaining that they agree fully with the oil companies saying things like “these people are our bosses” and “they have full rights to the land.” The video explained if anyone ever wanted to enter the land, they need to go through the petroleum company first. Previously in my culture class we learned a lot about the relationships between indigenous communities and petroleum companies in Ecuador. At this time I had many questions and speculations running through my mind, but overall I was just so grateful and intrigued to be able to be there and witness this relation in person since I studied it so much before. On the way through the petroleum site we had a 2-hour bus ride and about halfway through the site, we were stopped by not only the Yasuní, but the exact people that spoke in the video we watched. Our bus of students was not allowed to pass unless we got out and looked at their crafts. Although the video explained the agreement and accordance these two groups have, the actions being taken told me a different story.

This topic is very controversial and can have many different perspectives. I just wanted to know so much and ask questions especially because it was hard for me to fully understand the exact

dynamics and they keep us in the dark about many things. I also wanted to do the right thing in the situation when we were forced out of the bus, but I didn't even know what the right thing was. Do I buy a souvenir from the community or does that just add to the support of their behavior? I ultimately decided to buy a small braided bracelet because the way I saw it was I already supported the oil company by using their roads and transportation so I wanted to support the Yasuní as well since I side with them a bit more. I could go on and on about my opinions and views, but I know that it is a sensitive topic and want my blog to be more informative rather than political. If this is the first time you are hearing about this type of thing, however, I really encourage you to take a minute to look into the topic because educating ourselves about controversies like these is the best thing we can do.

When we finally arrived to the Tiputini research station, I was in so much awe. We were just living in the middle of a rain forest in tiny little huts. I can honestly say I have never done something quite like that before. After a long journey, a few of us decided to take a dip in the Tiputini river, and as we were swimming monkeys just casually flew overhead throughout the trees. The many species of monkeys I saw were one of my favorite parts, especially when we were able to see baby monkeys hanging from their mother's back. It was hard to wrap my mind around the fact that these animals are just living in their natural habitat, they weren't just placed for tourists. It's one thing to see animals like this outside their habitats but it was an extraordinary feeling to feel like the outsider and the intruders for once.

The following days there were crazy as well. We had an awesome tour guide who took us on excursions showing us different plants that could be used as medicine. He even put a vine that smelled like mango on the arm of my friend who was stung by a bee (the swelling and pain went down in a matter of minutes!). We also saw every type of insect possible: from a spider who wraps up its prey in 5 seconds to large hairy tarantulas, from ants that could kill in one bite to ants that tasted like lemons (yes, I ate live ants from a tree in the Amazon). Another plant our guide showed us was popular among the indigenous groups and was used to dye fabrics. Though it only looked like a green stem, I chewed it and my whole entire mouth was blue for the rest of the day. Everywhere I stepped, there was some type of new species of plant, insect or animal. Another bonus to the trip was the food prepared for us at the station. It was some of the best Ecuadorian food I have ever had. I even tried yucca for the first time, which reminded me of a chewy potato.

My last night in the Amazon was the most surreal. My group went out on a boat along the river at night with only one spotlight. As we strolled scanning the shore, the faint outline of the jungle trees lit by the moon and the brightest stars I have ever seen overhead, I felt like I was in a movie. Our group was so lucky that during the whole stay we had clear skies and no rain in the rain forest. When we returned that night, a couple of us decided to stargaze out on the dock with the sounds all around us. We said hello to the lightning bugs flying by, talked about life, counted the shooting stars we saw, enjoyed the fresh jungle smells and all the songs of all the Amazon critters. A memory I will never forget.

Magdalena