



The Ecuadorian culture is what affected Ruth Sleshi the most during her semester-long study abroad program. A third year Ohio State student majoring in international development with a minor in Spanish, Sleshi traveled to South America during spring semester to improve her language skills and better understand the development and culture of Ecuador.

Sleshi is one of two students from Ohio State last year awarded the prestigious Benjamin A. Gilman International Scholarship, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State, to participate in a study abroad or international internship program. Gilman Scholars receive up to \$5,000 to apply towards their study abroad program or internship costs.

Through the University of Minnesota MSID Ecuador program, Sleshi took four classes over the course of eight weeks and participated in a six-week internship in the Municipality of Pedro Mancayo, a small town about an hour north of Quito. In addition to the classes, students visit plantations, community and cultural centers, municipal offices and travel to indigenous communities to learn more about the culture.



Sleshi, who stayed with a host family, began her day at 8:30 a.m. and took classes every morning. Afternoons were spent either in the classroom or were filled with cultural immersion activities such as practicing Spanish, playing traditional games and music or visiting historical locations nearby. Her evenings included having dinner with her host family and taking long walks with them.

Throughout her travels, Sleshi became more aware of the diverse ethnic groups prevalent in Ecuador from the indigenous Amerindians to the Mestizos to the Afro-Ecuadorians. She said that the indigenous living in the Andes and Amazon still wear traditional clothing on a daily basis and “lead a life intertwined with nature.” In Quito, where Ruth was living, the ethnicity was primarily Mestizos - individuals of mixed European and Amerindian descent. Each ethnic group has a culture all their own. The Afro-Ecuadorians “have their distinct culture of marimba music and cuisine,” Sleshi explained. And, the Mestizos’ culture involves “value of the family, affectionate greetings, cuisine and the Catholic religion,” she said. “It is interesting to see the heavy influence of Spanish colonialism that has left the indigenous population fighting to keep their identities and culture alive centuries later.

This culture of Ecuador is affecting me positively by teaching me to live with respect and in harmony with nature, the value of family and greetings and music as a form of expression,” Sleshi explained. Sleshi notes that the favorite part of her study abroad program was her host family, which adopted her as one of their own. And the best part about being in Ecuador was the language and culture she experienced. “I have been studying Spanish for several years but no class can compare to

the amount of progress I made in the few months that I spent in Ecuador.”