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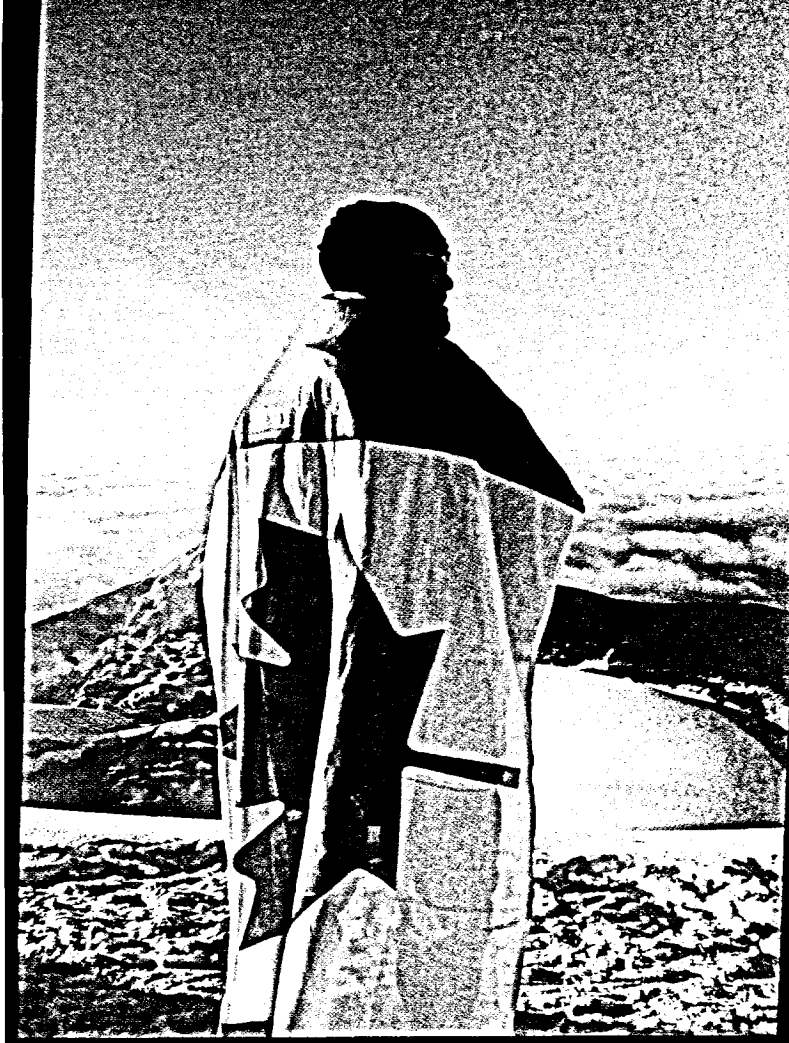
Experience is simply the name
we give our mistakes
—Oscar Wilde

Within days of moving to Quito, Ecuador, in July 2006, I learned the hard way the differences between the verbs “to introduce” and “*introducir*” in Spanish. As I had just spent seven months learning Spanish at the Canadian Foreign Service Institute, I decided to put my “advanced” Spanish skills to the test and hold my conversations in Spanish. This proved to be greatly appreciated by my new acquaintances, who often complimented me on my mastery of the language.

I decided to take Spanish courses after work on Fridays. My teacher was impressed by the level of Spanish I had attained while studying in Canada but was quick to point out that I was misusing the verb “*introducir*” as it did not in fact mean “to introduce” but rather “to insert” or “to penetrate.” My face quickly turned the color of a ripe tomato as my mind flashed back to the many occasions when I mentioned to key business people and government officials that I looked forward to “penetrating” them in the near future. At least this explained the many stifled chuckles that often followed my introductions.

Many adventures and misadventures accompanied my first foray into Latino life. Among the interesting and unique experiences I’ve had in Ecuador are climbing the Cotopaxi—an active volcano 5,897 metres high; discussing Canada-Ecuador relations with the President of the Republic; encountering 24-7 stores that were closed on Sundays; holding one-on-one meetings with ministers and deputy ministers to address important Canadian commercial matters; visiting Canadians in an Ecuadorian jail; regularly wearing alpaca ponchos inside my 2,830-metres-above-sea-level apartment, which can get chilly since it is literally engulfed by clouds on a nightly basis; leading trade missions both to and from Ecuador; and, of course, snorkelling among sea lions in the Galápagos.

Obviously not every day is an epic adventure, but I can truthfully say there is never a dull moment at the Canadian Embassy in Ecuador. It is really the antithesis of a typical nine-to-five environment. For one thing, the



embassy is open from 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. and closes at 1 p.m. on Fridays. For another, there is often work to do in the evening and on weekends, such as meetings with the chamber of commerce, key contacts, government officials and other embassies. The embassy is run by three Canadian rotational employees with the invaluable assistance of a dozen locally engaged staff and a Canadian university intern. Despite its small team, the mission provides a range of consular, commercial, political and immigration services. As the head of the trade section and vice-consul (you are normally asked to wear more than one hat at small missions), I could touch on all of the above-mentioned services on any given day. Effective organization and prioritization skills are key to performing your job in a competent way. You may be assisting a Canadian citizen who was assaulted one moment and lobbying the local government to consider a billion-dollar Canadian investment the next.

There are many responsibilities related to working at a small mission such as Quito that are truly welcome by those of us who aren't fans of a nine-to-five routine. Although my work prior to joining the Canadian diplomatic corps at Accenture and Microsoft was enriching, my two-year assignment to Ecuador has by far been the most interesting and challenging experience I've had to date.