My Trip to Ecuador

My decision to travel this year was a difficult one. I was originally scheduled to take a longer tour of Ecuador back in April, but in January my daughter Rachel, my only child, passed away suddenly in her home in Las Vegas. She had struggled with Bi Polar Disorder for more than 12 years, and while her life was often a rollercoaster of emotional upheavals, erratic behavior and drug addiction, her death, at the age of only 26, was unexpected and caused me much sorrow. As a recovering alcoholic (with many years of sobriety under my belt) I am not a stranger to sharing my feelings and personal history in AA rooms throughout South Florida where I live, but Rachel's death rendered me mute. Her passing was an incredibly painful emotional experience for me, difficult to put into words. At first I refrained from opening up and sharing my deep convictions about my daughter's life and her terrible struggles, so I spoke to family and friends in generalities, saying things like "perhaps it was for the best" and keeping my grieving process very private, assuring everyone I was fine. But I was not. Under the circumstances, I lost my desire to travel for the year, and cancelled my April tour of Ecuador.

As the months passed I found myself in a spiritual conundrum, questioning everything, not sure how to process my lingering guilt over things I may have done differently. I took two trips to Las Vegas during this period, visiting the mausoleum where Rachel's ashes are interned, thinking that perhaps I would find solace and understanding there. But the only thing that heals this kind of pain is time. Six months after my daughter's death, I was in constant contact with three traveling companions – DanaMarie Trunfio, and Ron and Anke Wilckens – all of whom I'd met on a tour of the Balkans in 2012. The four of us had taken a trip to Iceland together the previous summer and they were encouraging me to resume my travels, suggesting we plan something for August or September. At first I was reluctant. Slowly, though, I came around to the idea, and decided it was time to move on with my life. I think Rachel, who enjoyed reading my journals (and was a much better writer than I'll ever be), would have agreed.

Because it was late into the summer most of the tours we were interested in had already sold out, so we settled on a 12-day excursion to Croatia that

also included stops in Albania, Montenegro and Slovenia. Unfortunately, when I requested the vacation leave at work I was denied due to a scheduling conflict. My companions had already paid for their bookings and – with a very heavy heart – I informed them I could not accompany them to Europe. If I still wanted to travel this year I would need to make other arrangements. The only tour I found on such short notice – that also matched the remaining vacation slots at work – was an 8-day trip to Ecuador leaving in late August provided by Gate 1 Travel. The irony was not lost on me. I had originally cancelled a tour of Ecuador back in April, only to discover this was the only option now available. In the back of my mind, I couldn't shake the feeling that my baby girl was somehow telling me: *Dad, you wanted to go to Ecuador, so go*.

This would be the shortest tour I've taken since my weeklong trip through Mexico six years earlier. I would not have time to visit the Galapagos Islands (one of the destinations on my bucket list) but the tour *did* spend two nights in the Amazon rainforest, which I thought was adequate compensation. No special preparations for this trip were required. A tourist visa was not necessary, and I was up-to-date on all my vaccinations. Ecuador sits on the Equator, and the temperature is more or less constant throughout the year, with their seasons divided into either rainy or dry. I checked the online weather sites and while most predicted rain during this period, August turned out to be one of the driest months. With the exception of the Amazon itself, most of the towns and cities we visited were situated along the Andes, so the temperatures tended to run a bit chilly at night and in the early morning hours. I brought along my favorite padded hoodie (the warmest thing I own living in Miami) and pretty much layered up to stay warm when the situation called for it. Other than that, my trusty collection of nylon zip-off pants and plaid short-sleeved shirts sufficed. I didn't even need to convert my money since Ecuador uses the American dollar as its currency (I'll explain why later in the journal). Frankly, this was one of the easiest tours I've taken…*and it turned out to be one of the most memorable*.

The only concern I had occurred shortly after booking the trip. The Cotopaxi Volcano 30 miles south of Quito entered an eruption phase, spewing ash and steam, necessitating the evacuation of tens of thousands of people living within its valley. We would need to pass this volcano on our drive back to the capital towards the end of the tour. It was actually a déjà vu moment for me; the previous summer the Bardarbunga Volcano in central Iceland erupted just before we got there, and, like back then, I had to

monitor the news reports coming out of the country to see if my trip might be cancelled. Luckily, Cotopaxi held steady, but to be on the safe side I registered my visit with the State Department (under their Smart Traveler Enrollment Program) just in case an emergency evacuation of Americans was warranted. With this last detail taken care of, I was all set to go. At the end of August, while my friends traversed Eastern Europe, I headed to the exotic forests of Ecuador…

DAY ONE

I had scheduled an airport taxi pick-up for 6:45am. I live just minutes from Miami International Airport and within half an hour I was already checked in and having coffee at one of the food concession stands near my departure gate. The American Airlines jet left exactly on time (a rarity) at 9:40am for what turned out to be a very pleasant flight lasting around four hours. En route we were served breakfast and shown the thrilling movie, *The Avengers*. The plane was not fully booked, allowing me an entire row for myself. I stretched out comfortably and even took a nap during the flight. For me, this was a great omen, a wonderful way to begin a tour.

We touched down at the newly built Mariscal Sucre International Airport just before 12:30 pm (Ecuador is one hour behind Eastern Standard Time). The airport was completed in 2013, constructed along the Oyambaro plain near the town of Tababela roughly 11 miles east of Quito. It replaced the older, much smaller airport that was situated somewhat dangerously in one of the crowded northern residential areas of the city. I collected my luggage and breezed through immigration and customs. Waiting for me near the airport entrance was Javier Estrella, our young tour director, holding up a Gate 1 Travel sign. Standing beside him were Amy and Todd Williams from the Albany, New York area who were also on the same flight. There were only 18 members in our tour group (another good omen) and most arrived on a staggered schedule throughout the day. The Williams and I were the only

three to arrive on this particular flight. With luggage in tow, we followed Javier to an awaiting minivan for the 40-minute drive to our hotel in Quito. The sky was overcast, the temperature cool and quite comfortable.

As we drove into the city, Javier gave us a brief explanation on the unique geographical characteristics of Quito. Located in the northern highlands of the country, at an elevation of nearly 9,400 feet above sea level, Quito is officially the highest capital city in the world. It is nestled in a valley along the eastern slope of the active Pichincha Volcano, in the Guayllabamba river basin. The Pichincha Volcano has several summits and has erupted numerous times since the 1600's, including as recently as 1999, when it belched ash and smoke all over the city. Quito is the only capital city that is actually under constant threat of volcanic activity. In addition to the mighty Pichincha, Quito has several active volcanoes to the east that can also threaten its population, including the Cotopaxi Volcano (which, as of this writing, is still in an eruption phase).

On our way into Quito, we traveled around the edge of the valley, at times catching wonderful glimpses of the sprawling 25-mile long urban landscape below. We passed rows of colorfully painted homes and buildings rising up from the hillsides. Traffic was moderately heavy now as we reached our hotel – the Hilton Colon in the New Town section of the capital – shortly after 2:00pm. On most guided tours there is normally an orientation meeting on the first night, but since many of our fellow travelers wouldn't be arriving until late in the evening, my first full day in Quito was free to explore on my own. Javier helped the three of us check in and provided us with tourist maps of the city, suggesting a few places we might want to visit (taxis charge roughly $4 each way for most of the tourist locations in the capital) and he also recommended several places to have dinner not far from the hotel. I had earmarked in my guidebook the *Museo del Banco Central* (a highly touted national museum) located a short walk down the street from the Hilton Colon. I figured, what better way to get an introduction into the history and culture of Ecuador than an archaeological museum? Amy and Todd decided to explore the city streets near the hotel and we tentatively agreed to meet up later at Fried Bananas, one of the restaurants Javier recommended.

After putting my luggage away, I grabbed my trusty backpack, camera and tourist map and headed into the streets of Quito. Directly in front of the Hilton Colon is *Parque El Ejido*, a large central park that divides the

colonial Old Town from the modern New Town. I crossed the wide *Avenida Patria* and stopped to photograph the arched entrance into the park and the nearby statue entitled *La Lucha Eterna* ('the eternal fight') by French sculptor Emile Peynot. From here I walked east along the park's edge until I reached the *Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana* (House of the Ecuadorian Culture), a big circular building housing two museums, including the one I wanted to see. The building belongs to an organization started in 1944 to promote authentic Ecuadorian art and culture, maintaining several museums throughout the country. I was able to walk into the *Museo del Banco Central* free of charge, although the security guard cautioned me not to take photographs of the exhibits. What a shame, too, for the artifacts on display were simply amazing, I would have loved to have captured some of them on film. Surprisingly, the place was nearly empty and I was able to spend the next hour and a half leisurely walking the exhibition halls, getting a fascinating glimpse into the artistic development of the Ecuadorian people.

The *Museo del Banco Central* has five connected salons, each representing a specific category: archeology, gold, colonial art, republican art and modern art. The exhibits are aligned in chronological order so the visitor can sense the influence of one period on the other. I particularly enjoyed the pre-Columbian hall (the largest of the five) on the main floor. Priceless artifacts from all of Ecuador's pre-Columbian cultures – from the different regions of the country and some dating back thousands of years – are on display here. Pottery, tools, jewelry and sculptures, much of it exquisitely carved and detailed, are highlighted in modern, brightly lit showcases next to large-size dioramas depicting the everyday life of these tribal peoples. As you walk through the exhibits you start to understand just how gifted and technologically savvy these pre-Columbian cultures really were; their metallurgy was so advanced they were using platinum hundreds of years before the Europeans.

The main floor also houses the astonishing gold exhibits, with precious displays including an amazing gold and silver ceremonial mask that will take your breath away. On the upper levels I found the art exhibits, starting with colonial paintings and sculptures, much of which had to do with Christian indoctrination. There is also a very rare sculpture of a pregnant Virgin Mary here. The republican art salon contained beautiful paintings of Ecuador's forested landscapes, and depictions of the colonists' yearnings for independence and social change. Further upstairs was the modern art exhibits, featuring works by prominent Ecuadorian artists and containing a

section with contemporary pieces that are rotated on a monthly basis. I am a huge museum fan and I whole-heartedly recommend this stop to anyone visiting Quito; you will learn more about Ecuadorian culture here in one hour than you can gleam in one week from a history book. The only drawback was climbing the stairs to the upper halls. I had not yet acclimated to the high elevation of the capital, and I found myself routinely stopping to catch my breath.

From the *Casa de la Cultura Ecuatoriana* building I backtracked to *Parque El Ejido* and spent the next twenty minutes strolling along a row of tall shady trees lined with street vendors selling artisan wares from makeshift stalls. I browsed, but refrained from buying anything here because I knew I'd be able to purchase most of these items cheaper in the markets of Otavalo and other towns we would be visiting throughout the tour. The merchandise was nice to look at, though; colorful textiles and hand-made silver jewelry pieces. I speak fluent Spanish and enjoyed the pleasant exchanges with the vendors, who seemed to be mostly indigenous folks from the rural areas. One thing that impressed me from the moment I arrived in Quito was the overall friendliness of the average Ecuadorian. My own experiences with foreign capital cities has been varied, but most of the time the city residents tend to be more reserved than other parts of the country, at times even downright snooty (especially to tourists). But throughout our entire trip, everywhere we went – from the capital to the rain forests – the people here were always polite and friendly. Luckily, Ecuador has not been cursed by the violent drug culture that permeates Colombia, Venezuela and large parts of Central America. There are no cartels or drug gangs here. From what I gathered, much of the crime is centered on non-violent thefts. One can walk *most* of the major cities here without feeling afraid or threatened.

I continued through the park, taking photographs of the locals who congregated near the entrance, some were gathered in small groups around guitar players, while others enjoyed picnic meals on the grassy fields. There was a fairly large children's play area in one section filled with happy, younger families, and I came upon an enthusiastic crowd cheering on an impromptu volleyball game between several young men. Nearby, food vendors sold snacks of grilled meats, potatoes and corn. I crossed *Avenida Patria* again and continued north along *Avenida Rios Amazonas,* passing our hotel and heading into the heart of the New Town, also referred to as the Mariscal Sucre district or simply the Mariscal district. Mariscal ('Marshal')

Antonio Jose de Sucre was a Venezuelan Independence leader who led a patriotic force that defeated the Spanish royal army near present-day Quito in 1822, helping to secure the country's independence from Spain. You will find countless streets, monuments and public places in Ecuador named after him.

Quito is technically divided into three distinct areas within the valley, separated by hills. The central part of the city is called the Old Town, the historic Colonial area, where the original city was founded. To the south are residential and working class neighborhoods and the industrial center. The northern part is called the New Town (or the Mariscal district); this is the modern business and tourist area of Quito. The streets here are lined with hotels, offices, restaurants, outdoor cafes, nightclubs, discos, art galleries, artisan boutiques and quaint little shops. A wonderful place for strolling and losing yourself in the city. I ventured into an artisan market on a side street that Javier had marked on my tourist map, browsing the stalls of beautiful handicrafts, succumbing to one pretty vendor's sales pitch and buying four colorful scarves at a reduced price (or so I was led to believe). Afterwards, I visited the Santa Teresita Church nearby, built during the first half of the 1900's. The church's two towers and neo-gothic concrete façade caught my attention because it seemed so out-of-place amidst its more modern surroundings.

It was now after 5:00pm and I was beginning to feel hungry. I took out the map and checked to see where the Fried Bananas restaurant was located. Before I go on, let me confess something here: despite being a mailman for the past twenty years – and dealing with addresses on a daily basis – I have a *terrible* sense of direction. My mail route back in Florida is near many of the car rental agencies adjacent to Miami International Airport. Inevitably, lost and wandering tourists find me on the streets, somewhat elated, certain that I'll be able to help them on their way. I'm ashamed to admit this, but over the years I've probably led more of these poor innocent travelers astray than the House of the Rising Sun. It's not my fault, really…when it comes to directions most males are too stubborn to admit they don't know. And putting a map in my hands is useless; it's like entrusting your candy bar to the fattest kid in the neighborhood for safekeeping.

In other words, *I got lost*.

Javier told us to go approximately eight blocks north along *Avenida Rios Amazonas* and then make a left on a street named *Mariscal Foch* to find the restaurant. Eight blocks down and one to the left. I remember thinking: *Why, even a ten-year-old child could figure this out*! Sadly, my map didn't come with a ten-year-old child. My initial mistake occurred when I stopped to visit the Santa Teresita Church. Instead of returning to *Avenida Rios Amazonas* I walked northwest towards the next avenue called *9 de Octubre* (which means the '9th of October', commemorating the day back in 1820 when Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest city, was liberated). I assumed, quite wrongly, that the Mariscal District was created under the same reliable grid-like pattern of all Spanish colonial towns, meaning the streets would be parallel to one another. But this was the modern section of Quito. My second mistake was not realizing my *first* mistake. I had clearly walked more than eight city blocks but hadn't reached a *Mariscal Foch* street. In my defense, it was a cool, comfortable late afternoon and the stroll was quite pleasant. When I crossed *Avenida Francisco de Orellana* it dawned on me that I was nowhere near where I was suppose to be. I swallowed my pride and asked a local how I could get back to *Avenida Rios Amazonas*. My third mistake was that by now I was so disorientated I made a left on *Avenida Rios Amazonas* and continued north instead of heading back south. I was now more than an hour into a walk that should have taken no more than ten minutes.

By the time I got my bearings and turned around, dusk was rapidly approaching. I figured if I continued down *Avenida Rios Amazonas* I would, at the very least, get back to the Hilton Colon before dark. With a renewed sense of purpose, I stepped lively and hurried my pace. On one street corner – in an area referred to as "Gringolandia" due to all the hostels catering to young foreign backpackers – two Ecuadorian women of African descent propositioned me. *I was shocked*. But not because of the prostitutes: when I glanced up at the street sign directly above their heads I realized I was standing on *Mariscal Foch* Street! Holy Columbus, I had found the place I was looking for by accident. With a big smile that must have confused the heck out of the 'ladies', I politely refused their offer and strutted up the street until I came upon Fried Bananas. The entrance was locked. A sign instructed would-be customers to knock. *How unusual*, I thought. But then again, judging from the hookers on the corner, perhaps this wasn't the safest street in Quito. A member of the family that owns the restaurant let me in. The place was empty except for one table where Amy and Todd were sitting. I joined them as they were just finishing their dinner and about to order

dessert (which they later shared with me). The Williams told me the food was good; I ordered a very reasonably priced grilled chicken plate.

We spent the next hour getting to know one another and exchanging stories about what we'd done that afternoon. Apparently, I wasn't the only one who got lost looking for the restaurant. I really enjoyed Amy and Todd's company throughout the trip. In their early forties, the Williams were a very attractive, physically active couple. Both looked years younger than their actual ages. Amy had a compassionate disposition about her that I think stemmed, in part, from her work with severely disabled children; Todd, employed in the health insurance field, had a great sense of humor and reminded me of my brother Joe. I enjoyed ribbing with him as the tour unfolded. An avid jogger, Todd woke early every morning and ran for at least twenty minutes no matter where we were staying, be it the high-altitude Andes or the hot, humid Amazon. I was impressed, even more so when he confided that 14 years earlier, prior to taking up running, he had been 80 pounds overweight!

My meal came to $12 with the tip. We headed back to the Hilton Colon around 7:30pm. The night air was much cooler, but it felt very comfortable. In front of our hotel a young man stood in the middle of *Avenida Patria* and, during traffic light stops, juggle three sharpened machetes, hoping to elicit donations from the waiting motorists. I took photos of the man, thinking, *what a way to make a living*! Exhausted after a day of travel and sightseeing, I excused myself and retired to my room. I set aside my clothes for the following day and watched a little of the International CNN news channel before drifting off to sleep.

Day Two

Because Ecuador is only an hour behind Eastern Standard Time I did not suffer from jet lag on this trip, and slept like a baby most nights. I am an early riser and was awake by 4:30am, feeling fully refreshed after eight solid

hours of sleep. I immediately made several cups of coffee in my room and spent over an hour writing in my journal notebook before showering and getting dressed. By 6:10am I headed downstairs for a nice buffet breakfast in the hotel restaurant (they actually began serving breakfast at 2:30am). An hour later I placed my luggage outside my room for the bellhop to collect, and by 8:00am we assembled on our spacious tour bus to begin a morning tour of Quito's Old Town. This was the first time I met the entire tour group. In addition to Amy, Todd and myself, the other members included:

Sandy and Ann Feld from Toronto, Canada (he is an accountant and I believe his wife helps run his office); Paul and Christin Kim from Irvine, California (business owners); Jim and Jane Nelson from Waterloo, South Carolina (he's an engineer and she is a school teacher, both retired); Joan Betz from Ivyland, Pennsylvania, who was traveling with Diane Walker of Richboro, Pennsylvania (the two friends had just retired from teaching); David and Anne Eaton from Bloomington, Illinois (he is a retired professor, but I am not sure what Anne did for a living…*sorry, Anne*!); Rob and Whitney White from Logan, Utah (he is an undergrad college student and she is a registered nurse); Peter and Lila Homan from Nashville, Tennessee (I know that Lila is a registered nurse, but I can't recall what profession Peter is in…*sorry, Peter*); and Rita O'Connor from Vienna, Virginia (who told me she was a personal assistant and also did consulting work in DC). I apologize if I got anyone's information wrong. This particular group turned out to be one of the friendliest bunch of travelers I've ever encountered in my years of guided touring. Our group size was perfect, and we bonded almost immediately.

Before we headed out that morning our tour director Javier introduced us to our awesome bus driver, Geraldo, a middle-aged Ecuadorian who spoke little during the tour (I don't think he knew English) but was a phenomenal driver, maneuvering the mountain roads and city streets with a professional agility that made us feel safe (even in the fog shrouded Andes!). On our short drive to the Old Town section of the city, Javier gave us a brief lecture on the history of the capital. I will, from time to time, include current and historical details gleamed from the tour and my own personal research to keep this journal informative.

Despite the active volcanoes surrounding the city, and the subsequent earthquakes they bring, Quito has been remarkably spared any major damage to its historical infrastructure for hundreds of years, making this city

the best-preserved historical center in all of the Americas. In honor of this distinction, Quito – together with Krakow, Poland – became UNESCO's first designated Cultural Heritage Site in 1978. Quito's history dates much further back than its colonial period, though. For nearly a thousand years, a group of indigenous people known as the Cara culture had been flourishing along Ecuador's coastal area (in what is now the Manabi Province). By the 10th Century they had traveled eastward along the Esmeraldas River and reached the high Andean valley where Quito lies. The Caras defeated the local Quitu tribe in the valley and established a new Quitu-Cara culture (the Caranqui civilization) with its kingdom dominating the highlands of central Ecuador for the next several hundred years. Towards the end of the 1400's, successful military campaigns by the Inca of neighboring Peru brought the Caranqui civilization under their control, making them part of the Inca Empire. This proved to be a short-lived domination. By 1535, the Spaniards, who had effectively ended the Incas reign in Peru, moved into the Ecuadorian highlands and subjugated the Caranqui civilization, as well, essentially wiping out the culture through violence and the spread of European diseases like small pox. Over time, continued inter-marriages between the foreigners and the local population slowly began to change the physical characteristics of the indigenous peoples, producing the *mestizo* (mixed race) population that exists there today.

Under the Inca Empire, Quito was an important royal city, containing spectacular palaces and temples. Once the Inca emperor had been captured and executed in Peru by the Spanish conquistador, Francisco Pizzaro, the battle to dismantle the Inca Empire shifted to Ecuador's highlands. When it became evident that the invading Spaniards were going to prevail, an Ecuadorian-born Inca general named Ruminawi set fire to Quito's royal structures to avoid having them fall into the hands of the larcenous conquistadors. The fire quickly mushroomed out of control and the entire city was razed to the ground as the Spaniards looked on from the hillsides. This is why there are no Inca remnants in Quito today; most were lost in the blaze. Eventually, a group of about 200 settlers, under the command of Conquistador Sebastian de Benalcazar, 're-founded' Quito in 1534. It was officially declared a city in 1541.

As Quito grew, it became more influential, and by 1563 it was designated a *Real Audencia* (the official seat of a royal district of Spain), exerting political, military and religious jurisdiction over Ecuador and parts of

Colombia, Peru and Brazil. Although it fell under the control of the Viceroyalty of Peru – headquartered in Lima – Quito was so geographically distant it acted on an almost autonomous level. This sometimes led to conflicts with the Viceroy in Peru or the royal crown itself. Following the region's independence from Spain in 1822, the country – not yet referred to as Ecuador – became part of the short-lived Republic of Gran Colombia (or Great Colombia) that included modern-day Colombia, Venezuela and Panama. Bogotá was the capital, but Quito continued to exert its influence, particularly in matters concerning Ecuador's commerce and the on-going border wars with Peru, remaining a hotbed for political defiance and discontent.

In the early 1830's, as the Republic of Gran Colombia began dissolving under the weight of its own internal struggles, the military commander of Quito, General Juan Jose Flores, a Venezuelan who had married into the city's aristocracy and had ambitious designs on power, announced the formation of *La Republica del Ecuador* ('the Republic of the Equator') with Quito as its capital. The newly independent nation had roughly 700,000 inhabitants with tentative borders based on those of Quito's former *Real Audencia* (but in the years since, those borders have been drastically reduced). Thus began the country's tumultuous path to the present. I'll be discussing more of Ecuador's history throughout this journal. If this should bore you, forgive me; as a simple mailman I have this psychological need to justify my dad's investment in my education at Rutgers University.

As we drove into the Old Town, we passed a section of business and office buildings built mostly during the 1950's, an area Javier referred to as an architectural 'transitional period' when the city was beginning to transform itself and expand into the New Town. We knew we had reached the colonial Old Town because the streets became very narrow (they were designed for horses and buggies, not cars) and most of the traffic flowed in one direction. Our first stop was actually to the north of the Historic Center, to visit an interesting church called *La Basilica del Voto Nacional* (the Basilica of the National Vow), the largest Gothic basilica in Latin America. Our bus parked along Venezuela Street, next to a small hilly park containing the statue of a former Ecuadorian president, Gabriel Garcia Moreno, a piously Catholic (and often controversial) leader from the late 1800's who helped usher in a period of rebuilding in the capital. Across from this park, built at the bottom of San Juan Hill, was the basilica.

Our first glimpse of this enormous structure was from the side, which was impressive by itself, but then Javier led us down the street and into the front courtyard of the church. *Whoa*. Although it is often compared to the great Notre-Dame Cathedral in Paris (or St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City), the French architect who designed it, Emilio Tarlier, actually used the Bourges Cathedral in France as his inspiration. The idea for the basilica is credited to a missionary monk by the name of Father Julio Matovelle, who, in 1883, proposed the idea of erecting a monument as a reminder of Ecuador's consecration to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Previously, the country's conservative leaders had passed a national law re-affirming Ecuador as a Catholic nation. This church was to be a permanent legacy to that commitment (hence the name, the Basilica of the National Vow). Work on its construction officially began in 1892; the townsfolk donated much of the stones and money used to build the structure. And while it appears to be completed today, the site is 'technically' unfinished. Although, for the life of me, I couldn't tell what exactly still needed to be done. Supposedly, there is a local legend stating that if the basilica is ever completed the world will come to an end. Maybe they've left a door or something unhinged?

The structure is impressive for a number of reasons. First, its size. The basilica is 460 feet long, and has two front towers that are nearly 380 feet tall. The sanctuary itself is a huge cavernous chamber almost 100 feet high, adorned with bronze images depicting apostles and evangelists, all of it glowing in the soft hues of sunlight shining down from the stained-glass windows. Very serene and majestic all rolled into one.

The second impressive thing about the church is its unique neo-Gothic design. I must admit, I find neo-Gothic structures a bit creepy. Whenever I see one I'm always anticipating an angry crowd of Bavarian peasants charging from the nearby forest, carrying pitchforks and torches, shouting *"Death to Frankenstein's monster!"* What unsettles me the most are those hideous gargoyles perched on the ledges. The use of gargoyles in Gothic architecture had a two-fold purpose: one, the mouths were actually used as spouts to drain rainwater from the rooftops (before the invention of gutters); and two, they were used as symbols to both protect the building from evil spirits and also to scare uneducated peasants into the church. The Basilica of the National Vow went one step further; its gargoyles are not fashioned after hideous creatures, but rather images of the national wildlife found in Ecuador's forests. In all my travels I had never seen anything like this. The top portion of the basilica is decorated with stone animal gargoyles of

iguanas, monkeys, dolphins, Galapagos tortoises, and so forth. And let me tell you, if you think a gargoyle peering down at you from a church tower is frightening, wait until you see an angry armadillo pouncing from a stone wall!

We spent about 45 minutes here, walking around the courtyard (where there is also a pantheon containing the crypt of several former heads of state), taking photos of the basilica from different angles and entering the church for a look inside. Absolutely beautiful. It is possible to climb to the top of one tower for a panoramic view of the city, but time did not permit. Afterwards, we re-boarded our bus and headed eight blocks south towards the heart of the Historic Center: the *Plaza de la Independencia* (Independent Plaza), Quito's main square.

Down through the millenniums there has been an architectural blueprint governing the creation of most towns that has rarely changed since humans abandoned nomadic hunting/gathering and decided it was better to just settle down in one spot. Namely, the formation of a town square, or center, from where the population expands outwardly, forming a larger community. Around this center you will always find *three* distinct things: a building from where the ruler governs, a main religious structure where the people gather to pray, and a marketplace. Government, religion and commerce. Three of the essential hallmarks of any great society. Quito's main historic square, *Plaza de la Independencia* – the locals just call it Plaza Grande, for short – was surrounded by such trappings: the *Edificio de la Administracion* (the City Hall building), the *Catedral Metropolitana* (the Metropolitan Cathedral), the *Palacio Arzobispal* (the Archbishop's Palace), and – because Quito was also the country's capital – the *Palacio de Gobierno* (the Government Palace), the official residency of the president of the Republic.

Geraldo was not allowed to park the bus around the main square, so he let us off in front of the *Palacio de Gobierno* and later met us several blocks away. We crossed the street and entered the gardened plaza; it was not very large, but beautifully maintained. Javier led us around a large statue monument in the center of the Plaza Grande entitled the Monument to the Heroes of the Independence, erected in honor of Ecuador's declaration of independence from Spain. The statue at the top of the tall pedestal resembles our own Statue of Liberty (which was intentional, according to Javier). After taking photographs of the surrounding historical buildings from the square, we crossed Chile Street and entered the Archbishop's Palace. For some

reason we had to provide our names and addresses to the security detail before being allowed inside. The palace takes up almost the entire side of the street facing the square, but the archbishop's actual residence has been reduced to a small section of the palace, the rest of the building has been rented out to small shops and businesses. We came to a beautiful open courtyard used as a restaurant and climbed the staircase to the balconies above to admire the 18th century architecture (the upstairs was filled with gift shops).

From here we crossed Garcia Moreno Street and visited the *Palacio de Gobierno* (also known as the *Palacio de Carondelet*), the official residence of Ecuador's president. For nearly 400 years this site has been the seat of Ecuador's government, built over the original governor's mansion from the time of the *Real Audencia*. In 1801, under the administration of Francisco Luis Hector de Carondelet (who served as president of the *Real Audencia*), the palace was renovated and expanded to its current form. It has been periodically restored, renovated and updated over the past 200 years. It has also been repeatedly plundered. Historians have noted that on many occasions throughout its history, palace furniture and art have vanished from one presidency to the next. Which presidents, you ask? Take your pick. In the first half of the 1900's alone, Ecuador had 39 governments, four constitutions, a few dictators, various uprisings… *and a partridge in a pear tree*! In fact, during one particularly trying moment in the republic's history, the country produced four different presidents *in just 26 days*.

Built incorporating both French renaissance and Spanish baroque architectural designs, the white, three-level *Palacio de Gobierno* takes up the entire block west of the Plaza Grande. Thanks to the current president, Rafael Correa, who came to power in 2006, visitors can now tour certain sections of the palace. The entrance is flanked by two official guards dressed in red, blue and gold 19th century style uniforms, who stand immobile as wave after wave of tourists pose next to them for pictures. Visitors can view the interior patios, with their iron balconies, columns and ornate fountains, and some exquisite paintings and artwork, including an amazing mosaic mural by Oswaldo Guayasamin depicting explorer Francisco de Orellana's journey into the Amazon. One can also visit some of the larger, beautifully decorated government halls if they are not currently in use. The top level of the palace contains the residential area reserved for the president and his family; although President Correa chooses to live at his home instead of in the palace, preferring only to conduct his official duties here. When we

arrived, it was still too early in the morning, and the main courtyard was closed off. Nonetheless, we were able to take some nice photographs from behind the iron gates inside the visitor's entrance area, including one of the country's official emblem.

From the palace we walked across Eugenio Espejo Street, heading south, and entered the *Centro Cultural Metropolitano* (the Metropolitan Cultural Center) for a quick tour. This historic, beautifully restored building serves as a municipal library and museum, and hosts temporary art exhibitions. Its past is even more colorful than the *Palacio de Gobierno*, built on a site that supposedly contained one of Inca Atahualpa's palaces (burned to the ground by Ruminawi). The first house built on this site was part of the original headquarters of the *Real Audencia*, and from 1597 until 1767 it served as an important Jesuit school before Spanish royal troops threw them out and established a military barracks inside the building. In 1809, the dungeon beneath the patio held 36 prisoners, members of the independence uprising, who were later executed. Wax figures inside the museum gruesomely depict their deaths. There is also a collection of religious artworks from the 16th and 17th centuries on display. Javier led us to the central courtyard where two incredibly large araucaria trees (the oldest in Quito) rise all the way up past the rooftop, their horizontal branches forming an unusual canopy above the building.

Javier pointed out the colonial architecture evident in the old Jesuit school before taking us to the roof so we could get a good view of the Virgin Mary statue known as the Virgin of Quito. The statue sits atop a large hill called *El Panecillo* (Bread Loaf Hill) located between the southern and central sections of the city, and can be seen for miles around. This volcanic hill once contained a temple used by the native tribal people to worship the sun. In the late 1970's the religious order of the Oblates commissioned an enormous monument to the Virgin Mary based on the 1734 sculpture by Bernardo de Legarda entitled the *Immaculate Conception of the Apocalypse*. The statue was constructed out of 7,000 pieces of aluminum (supposedly the largest of its kind), and depicts the Virgin Mary with wings, standing on a globe and stepping on a snake.

Our next stop was the 16th century *La Compania de Jesus* (the Church of the Society of Jesus) adjacent to the *Centro Cultural Metropolitano.* Construction of the Jesuit church began in 1605 and took 160 years to complete. You only have to step inside to understand why it took so long.

The floor plan was based on a simple Latin cross, with northern, central and southern arms, a conventional nave and transept, and other typical features of the Catholic churches of the time. But most similarities end there. The builders of *La Compania de Jesus* incorporated four architectural elements: Baroque, Moorish, Neoclassical and a distinct form of ornamental design known as Churrigueresque. These combined elements are often referred to as Latin American (or Spanish) Baroque. *La Compania de Jesus* is probably the best example of it in all of the Americas. And as striking and impressive as the outer building is – with its carved statues, columns and intricate patterns – what makes this church probably the most beautiful in all of South America is the interior design, one of the most spectacular I have ever seen.

As you enter the church, the ceiling contains images of the sun, a nod to the indigenous Inca people who worshipped a sun god. Walking through the center of the nave your senses are immediately drawn to the artistic splendor of this church. The walls, pillars and altars are lavishly decorated in gold leaf (as if you've entered a golden dome), with gilded plaster and detailed carvings. Murals from the School of Quito (Ecuador's finest painters) adorn the walls and Moorish-style columns. As you approach the main altar, you glance up at the 85-foot high barrel-vaulted ceiling made of pumice and brick and are amazed to see more than a hundred different paintings and sculptures, earning this church the nickname "Quito's Sistine Chapel."

The enormous main altar in itself is an intricately carved masterpiece, with painted images and statues, including a very rare one of God in Heaven, surrounded by saints, looking down on His Son, Jesus. At the foot of this altar lie the remains of Saint Mariana de Jesus, who died in 1645. She was the orphaned daughter of a wealthy aristocratic family who gave all her inheritance to the poor and was said to be able to heal the sick. When a deadly outbreak of both measles and diphtheria, coupled by a terrible earthquake, devastated Quito, killing 14,000, she supposedly offered her life to God as a sacrifice so that the rest of the city could be spared. She died almost immediately thereafter and the plagues ceased. I believe that because this church also serves as her sanctuary, photography was not permitted inside. If you want to get an idea of the lavishly decorated interior of *La Compania de Jesus* I would recommend to my readers to Google it online, for it is truly amazing. We must have spent thirty minutes in the church, but one could easily while away an entire afternoon admiring the artwork and detail that went into this structure.

From here we walked one block west along Antonio Jose de Sucre Street to visit the almost equally stunning *Monasterio de San Francisco* (the Monastery of St. Francis). Construction of the church and monastery began only 50 days after the founding of Quito in 1534, making this the oldest church in the entire American continent. This religious complex is also the largest structure in colonial Quito. Directly in front of the church is an expansive, cobbled stone square (the *Plaza San Francisco*) from which you can take great pictures of the Virgin Mary Statue in the distance. We must have spent another 30 minutes at this site, mostly viewing the inside of the spectacular church which recently underwent excavation and restoration work and has now reopened to the public.

The ceiling of the church, as in *La Compania de Jesus*, has images of the sun, the Inca divinity, appealing to the local indigenous population. The interior is another sumptuous display of Spanish Baroque design; the nave's aisles are lined with paintings and works from Quito's most renowned artists (the School of Quito masters), including the 18th century *Virgen Inmaculada de Quito,* the rare winged image of the Virgin Mary by Bernardo de Largarda that inspired the statue atop the hill. The semi-domed main altar is intricately carved and outlined with paintings, statues and gold leaf. Seeing the inside of these churches today is awe-inspiring; one can only imagine what the native population back in the 16th century must have wondered as they entered these houses of worship. The God of the Spaniards must have seemed all-powerful to them to require such elaborate temples. Adjacent to the church is a museum (inside the complex's old school of art) that houses its finest paintings, sculptures and period furniture dating back to the 16th and 17th centuries. There are several other museums and churches situated around the *Plaza San Francisco* (or within walking distance) which showcase the fascinating history of this city.

Our tour of the colonial Old Town ended with the monastery. But before we left the city to visit 'the middle of the earth' monument at the Equator, Javier took us to the Omero Ortega Panama Hat Shop across from the *Plaza San Francisco*. This was one of those obligatory 'official' store visits that all guided tours have on their itineraries. These stops are good for a number of reasons. First, they always showcase beautiful, locally made handicrafts and include some kind of interesting presentation on how the items are made. Secondly, these stores offer a respite for the tired tourist with clean bathroom facilities. Usually snacks or drinks are provided. *But hold on to your wallets, Amigos, cause nuthin' is ever cheap here*! The prices tend to be

a lot more expensive. My suggestion – based on years of guided touring – is to hold off until you reach a public market (unless you absolutely fall in love with an item). You will inevitably find the same things cheaper elsewhere. *Trust me*.

The female proprietor, with Javier interpreting, gave us a brief history on the Panama hat and how it is made, and then we were let loose to browse and shop. I think it would surprise most people to know that the Panama hat was invented in Ecuador, not Panama. It received this name because the hats, during the 19th century, were initially sent to the Isthmus of Panama before being shipped all over the world. The hat became very popular in the U.S. when President Theodore Roosevelt visited the Panama Canal construction site in 1904 and was photographed wearing one. These brimmed hats are made of the plaited leaves of the *toquilla palm*, a plant that grows in different areas of Ecuador, although most notably in the Manabi Province (where the best quality hats usually come from). I'm not sure how the leaves are dried and weaved, but the process is so intricate, requiring thousands of stitches per square inch, that the art of weaving a toquilla hat has actually been included on a UNESCO cultural heritage list. Another thing most people will be surprised to know, you can roll up a Panama hat like a cigar when storing. It will regain its shape the moment you take it back out. I wouldn't have believed this until I saw Todd purchase one in the public market of Otavalo the following day and the vendor rolled the thing up like a scroll before placing it in a decorative little box.

Our tour of the Old Town concluded, we boarded our bus near the Plaza San Francisco and began our 45-minute drive north to visit *La Mitad del Mundo* (the "Middle of the Earth"), also known as the Equatorial Line Monument. Since Ecuador literally means "equator" in Spanish, Ecuadorians use the phrase "the middle of the earth" to describe the *actual* Equator, as opposed to saying "the Equator of the Equator", which would sound ridiculous and confusing. As we headed out of the city we passed some really nice suburban areas along the forested Pichincha Valley. Javier told us that Quito's upwardly mobile younger families were building homes in this section, or buying up condos (which is a relatively new concept in Ecuador, the notion of living in apartment buildings). We saw a lot of construction going on and later passed smaller 'working villages' like Pomasqui and San Antonio de Pichincha, with shoe and textile factories and other smaller industrial plants. Along the side of the highway we came upon rows of agave, part of a growing tequila industry in the country.

We made a brief stop while passing Pomasqui to visit a store that specialized in homemade *helados de paila* (ice cream or sorbet made in large copper bowls). The store employee demonstrated for us how the product is made (usually just from fruit juice and salt and then mixed rapidly inside the copper bowl which is lined with ice). It took him only a few minutes to produce a mound of delicious fruit sorbet. Javier surprised us by buying a round of ice cream for the group. When we continued our journey we came upon a valley pockmarked with abandoned andesite mines and several large quarries. And we also noticed hearty crops growing along the hillsides; Javier explained that volcanic soil is often rich in minerals and nutrients, and very good for farming.

Before 1:00pm we reached the town of San Antonio, in the province of Pichincha, roughly 26 kilometers north of Quito. This place is home to the Middle of the World Village, a small tourist town containing the Equatorial Line Monument that marks the equatorial boundary separating earth's northern and southern hemispheres. On the way to the site we passed the newly built headquarters of UNASUR (the Union of South American Nations, an intergovernmental regional organization with 12 member countries – and counting – that is trying to create for Latin America something akin to the European Union). We would spend the next two hours visiting *La Mitad del Mundo* before continuing on to the Imbabura valley later that afternoon.

In the parking lot of the Middle of the World Village was a local tourist bus, which looked more like a carnival ride throwback to the 1940's than an actual bus. Our group excitedly headed over to the main attraction – the Equatorial Line Monument – and began taking pictures almost immediately. Built to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the French Geodesic Mission that came to Ecuador in the 18th century to measure the Equator, this enormous trapezoidal monument is nearly 100 feet tall and covered with cut and polished andesite (volcanic) stone. At the top rests a five-foot wide globe. Each side of the monument is marked North, South, East or West depending on its compass point. There is a yellow line that extends out from the monument denoting the equator. Tourists, millions of them annually, visit this site and take photographs of themselves standing over this yellow line with one foot in the northern hemisphere and the other in the southern hemisphere. But the joke's on them. The *actual* Equator, it turns out, is approximately 240 meters to the north of the monument line. Apparently,

when the monument was erected, measuring technology was not as accurate as it is today. Highly sophisticated GPS co-ordinates place the invisible equator line roughly hundreds of feet to the north of the current monument.

But this doesn't dissuade the multitudes of tourists who've turned this spot into a sort of Mecca. I guess being this close to the Equator is good enough. *It sure was for us*. Our group took pictures in every conceivable pose. Besides standing on the yellow line (the standard Middle of the Earth pose) our group became very inventive: Lila jumped up and down while Peter photographed her in midair above the Equatorial line; Amy did a cartwheel over the Equatorial line while Todd snapped away; couples smooched over the Equatorial line; some photographed their feet on the line, or sat on the line, or held hands over the line, or tried to get a shadow on one side of the line or the other (interesting to note, during the Equinoxes, the sun is directly above and casts no shadows). If anybody knew this wasn't the *actual* Equator, they didn't seem to care. We had a lot of fun posing and taking each other's pictures.

Afterwards, I joined Todd, Amy, Peter and Lila in a walk through the small Middle of the Earth Village, a prefabricated tourism town erected by the provincial government to cash in on the Equatorial Line Monument. We stopped to check out a sundial next to the equatorial museum. The center of the village also contained a small bullring. We browsed several of the local gift shops, purchasing Middle of the Earth kitchen magnets as mementos. Near the tourism office was a large, very popular weighing scale that costs a quarter to use. Due to the greater centrifugal force at the Equator, the effective acceleration of gravity is slightly lesser here than at the poles, which means you weigh a little less. Todd was the one who pointed this out to me. But if you're thinking of moving to the Equator to avoid diet and exercise, think again; you only lose about 5.5 ounces for every 100 pounds.

The entire group met up at a local restaurant for lunch recommended by Javier. Todd and Amy wanted to sample the roasted guinea pig but the cost was $26 and they selected something else. It was actually *cheaper* to order two steak meals than one toasted rodent. For the life of me, I didn't understand the appeal. I once tried guinea pig while in Peru and nearly upchucked everything in my stomach. I ordered the grilled shrimp. Delicious. This was the first time our entire group sat together for a meal and we had a great time getting to know each other better.

After lunch we re-boarded our bus for the long drive to Imbabura Province. We had to backtrack 30 minutes to Quito before getting on Route 35 (the Pan-American Highway), taking that north through the valleys of the Eastern Cordillera of the Ecuadorian Andes. From this point onward, the scenic views were simply astonishing. We passed Calderon, a rural town famous for its All Soul's Day cemetery celebrations and decorative *mazapan* figurines (made from hardened bread dough). A short while later we came across Guayllambamba, a small agricultural town that contains the country's largest zoo. At the bottom of the spectacular mountain drops near this village was the meandering Guayllambamba River.

In the fairly large town of Tabacundo, on the eastern foothills of the Mojanda Volcano, we stopped to make a pit stop at a gasoline station. I was able to purchase a two and a half liter size plastic jug of purified water to feed my serious coffee addiction. I consume several cups each morning soon after waking, so having an adequate supply of drinking water is crucial, especially in the more rural areas. In my suitcase I packed a small metal emersion heater to boil water in my room and brought along enough instant coffee, creamer and Equal to keep my java jones at bay.

We continued our northeasterly path on Route 35. Just before 5:00pm we made another pit stop in a café/gift shop near the tiny electoral parish of Gonzalez Suarez that offered a panoramic view of the majestic Imbabura volcano in the distance, with the beautiful Lake San Pedro (where our lodge was located) nearby. Most of Ecuador's provinces are named after their dominant volcanoes. This particular region is called the Imbabura Province. There is a colorful local legend about how the now inactive Imbabura and Mojanda volcanoes (on opposite sides of the valley) once had a duel over the love of Cotacachi (another nearby volcano), erupting and throwing rocks at one another. Imbabura is considered the protector of the area. Large volcanic stones from these long-ago eruptions are scattered throughout the valley and are considered sacred (some have tribal carvings on them).

The Imbabura Volcano has twin lava domes. The summit, known as *Taita* (or Papa) Imbabura, is over 15,000 feet, with a lower lateral lava dome, the *Huarmi* (or Son), on its southwestern flank. At such a high altitude, the volcano is sometimes capped with snow but does not have any permanent glaciers. It's last eruption, some 14,000 years ago, covered the mountains with ash, producing a very fertile soil. The Imbabura valley is extensively farmed, and the lands around the volcano are used for cattle

grazing (even the meadows high above the tree-lines). We took many wonderful pictures here of both the Imbabura volcano and Lake San Pedro. In the fields just below the café/gift shop we also discovered two llamas in the process of mating. Yes, we took pictures…

A short drive later we reached the village of San Pedro, adjacent to the lake. It was primarily a farming community and judging from the conditions of the homes along the bumpy dirt road leading into it, the place didn't seem very prosperous. My initial reaction, based solely on this first impression, was that our lodge, Cabanas del Lago, was going to be a dive. I'm sure I wasn't the only one who came to this conclusion, *either*. But when we arrived, the beauty of the lodge blew us away. Situated right next to the San Pedro Lake, it was a wonderful collection of rustic wooden cabins, colorfully landscaped gardens (with its own little brook and waterfall) and a glass-walled restaurant and reception center that overlooked the calm waters of the lake and the imposing volcano beyond it. As night fell the staff lit up the gardens and pier area and the whole place felt like a holistic retreat, serene and relaxing. They even had a pen filled with adorable rabbits that you could feed.

Javier handed out our cabin room keys and instructed us to meet in 45 minutes at the bar lounge area for an orientation meeting. Inside my wooden cabin I was surprised to see a fireplace (while we were at dinner later that evening, staff members came in and set a fire). I put my luggage away and decided to make a cup of coffee before the meeting. As I was rummaging through my suitcase looking for my water heater there was a soft knock at the door. When I opened it, one of the young female lodge workers was standing there holding a rubber container wrapped in a brightly knitted textile covering. She smiled sweetly and said, "Your hot water, sir" *Wow*, I thought, *how the heck did they know I was going to make coffee*? In my defense, I don't believe I've ever used a hot water bottle so this thing did not look familiar to me; its intended purpose was to keep my bed warm (it gets very cold at night in the Andes). Instead, I nearly drank it with instant coffee crystals and a packet of Equal! The only reason I *didn't* was because I couldn't figure out how to open the darn thing. Thankfully, when I got to the orientation meeting everybody was talking about the usefulness of the hot water bottles; I put 'two and two together' and was spared making a fool of myself by not asking, "*Hey, does anyone know how to get water out of the rubber thermos*?"

The meeting started at 6:45pm in a conference room above the bar lounge. We sat in a semi-circle while Javier 'officially' introduced himself to the group. He told us he was from Quito, had a degree in Tourism and had been working as a tour guide for 12 years now. Javier briefly went over the itinerary with us, describing the spa treatment excursion for the following night in Papallacta (for those who were interested in indulging). We then took turns going around the room introducing ourselves individually, saying where we were from and anything else that came to mind. I was surprised most of the group members were newcomers to Gate 1. In fact, some were actually traveling out of the U.S. for the first time.

During the meeting I learned interesting tidbits about my companions. For example, I found out that Lila and Peter were newlyweds, that Joan and Diane were good friends who met 40 years ago when they both started teaching, that Sandy and Ann were originally from Israel (now residing in Toronto), that Amy and Todd had received this tour as a Christmas gift, and that Anne and David were celebrating nearly fifty years of marriage. This was a great bunch of travelers, and what made this group so special, I think – besides our sense of humor and adventure – was the variance in our ages. In my experience the majority of people who prefer guided tours tend to be middle-aged or retired folks. This makes sense, considering these are the people who usually have the time and money to travel, and are probably at a stage in their life when backpacking isn't such a thrill anymore. But on this tour we had a nice mix of young and old: Rob and Whitney were in their mid-twenties; Lila and Peter in their (I think) early thirties; Amy and Todd in their early forties. As for the rest of us? Well, let's just say we were, um, 'seasoned' (like a nice piece of brisket).

When the orientation meeting concluded, we went downstairs to the lounge area where two of the female staff members – with Javier interpreting – put on a little cultural fashion show for us. They asked for volunteers to model and I somehow got snookered in together with Amy and Todd. Before we knew it we were dressed up in traditional Ecuadorian local garb. Amy – who could easily pass for a real model – looked adorable in her blue embroidered blouse, with two skirts and matching ribbon waistband. Todd and I, on the other hand, resembled frat pledges in some wild college Halloween party. I was dressed in a poncho topped with a black hat that seemed way too small for my cranium, while Todd, outfitted with a bizarre knitted ceremonial facemask and leather chaps, looked like a reject from the Village People. Embarrassing, but fun. The group then participated in some

kind of Ecuadorian circle dance before – *gratefully* – we sat down in the restaurant for an included dinner. I had the grilled steak with veggies and potatoes. It was good, but a little undercooked. I had ordered the steak medium rare, but with a little luck I think I could have revived it.

After such a long day of sightseeing, sitting down to a leisurely meal and lively conversation with my traveling companions was just the right way to end the evening. I returned to my cabin around 9:30pm, delighted to see the fireplace aglow. I got undressed, brushed my teeth, set my alarm clock for 6:00am and snuggled up under the sheets with my hot water bottle.

Day Three

During the middle of the night I had to get up to pee and nearly froze my ass off. The cozy fire had gone out and it never occurred to me to throw more wooden logs – neatly stacked below the fireplace – into the flames before going to bed. I blame my ignorance on living in Miami; the only thing I know about 'surviving the elements' is what strength of tanning oil my skin requires. By comparison, Joan and Diane – who live in Pennsylvania and are used to cold wintry weather – turned into seasoned survivalists, out scavenging for firewood in the wee hours of the morning. If I'm not mistaken, I think they tried to pilfer the logs in front of Jim and Jane's cabin. *Tsk, tsk, ladies*. I bundled up beneath the blankets and tried to get more sleep but at around 5:00am a wayward rooster kept cock-a-doodling in the distance. I decided to wake up, take a shower (luckily the water was warm) and make coffee in my room. I wrote in my journal until it was time for breakfast. That morning I sat with Dave, Anne, Joan, Diane, Sandy, Paul and Christin. The glass wall of the lodge's restaurant afforded us a spectacular view of Lake San Pedro and the Imbabura volcano as we helped ourselves to the breakfast buffet. Absolutely beautiful!

By 8:00am the gang was back on the bus for what would be a very long day of sightseeing, shopping and traveling. Javier instituted a rotation

system on the bus by using stickers with our names on it. A rotation system on a guided tour is essential if the group is very large. I've been on some trips with nearly forty travelers and without a rotation system the morning bus-boarding ritual turns into a frontier land grab. To avoid arguments and insure that everyone gets a chance to sit in the front of the bus, the tour director has to be vigilant in implementing a fair seating assignment daily. In our case it was merely a formality since there were only 18 of us and we had plenty of room on the bus to move around freely throughout the tour.

We would spend the entire morning and a good portion of the afternoon in the Imbabura Province. Our first stop was a visit to the Peguche Waterfall. Geraldo slowly drove the bus over the hilly dirt road leading out of San Pedro village. We stopped twice along this road to take panoramic photographs of the valley below. From this vantage point we could see the towns of Peguche and Cotacachi nestled within the fertile plains between the Imbabura and Cotacachi volcanoes. Ecuador is divided into provinces, which are further broken down into administrative districts called cantons (these are smaller cities or towns – with their own outlying areas – within the provinces). The Imbabura Province has six cantons. The capital, which we did not visit, is Ibarra. The second largest canton is Otavalo, known for its textile market (and includes the village of San Pedro). Surrounding Otavalo are several other smaller villages like Peguche, home to excellent weavers and local musicians. This particular province has an indigenous population of more than 50 percent, made up of ethnic Quichua natives, and is one of the more popular tourist stops in the country. Besides the natural beauty of its volcanoes, lakes and forests, and the cultural diversity of its population, this Northern Sierra region is also a handicrafts paradise; you'll find towns specializing in different crafts, from the leatherworkers of Cotacachi, to the woodcarvers of San Antonio, to the famous textile weavers of Otavalo. There is something for everyone here. *And the bargains are phenomenal*!

We descended into the small town of Peguche, passing lavender fields of lupine and patches of eucalyptus trees along the way, and stopped in front of a nature trail leading to the famous Peguche Waterfall located within a protected forest. To the locals, this waterfall is sacred, used for purification bathing prior to the *Inti Raymi* celebration. This annual ritual, held in June, gives praise to La Pacha Mama (Mother Earth) and Inti (Sun god) for the upcoming harvests. We trekked for about ten minutes along a cobbled stone portion of the trail before reaching the waterfall. The water originates in

Lake San Pedro and travels down the Peguche River before cascading over the falls' 18-meter drop. It was not one of the more impressive waterfalls I've seen in my travels, but its sacred ranking made it special, and the surrounding forest was beautiful.

Most of us crossed a wooden pedestrian bridge erected above the Peguche River in front of the waterfall to take pictures, and then continued up a series of stone and dirt steps to the top of the cascade. The climb up was daunting due to the region's high elevation. I thought my body had already acclimated to the higher altitude, but I was wrong. Many of us were huffing and puffing all the way up, stopping frequently to catch our breath before reaching the top. To get to the waterfalls' dropping point we also needed to traverse a small length of rocky tunnel (never a pleasant experience for someone who suffers from claustrophobia). Once at the top, we took turns photographing each other posing in front of the rushing water. When we headed back down we were joined by a pack of friendly local dogs that accompanied us all the way back to the bus. Many in our group had a sentimental soft spot for these animals and I promised Joan and Diane (those lovable log bandits) that I would include a public announcement message in this journal, so here goes: *To my readers planning on visiting Peguche in the future, please bring something for the dogs to eat.*

Many of us needed to use the public restrooms near the parking area but discovered they were closed. Javier told us there'd be bathroom facilities at our next stop in Otavalo, a twenty-minute drive to the south. One of our members (who shall remain nameless) decided he could not wait and created his own 'waterfall' behind one of the nearby buildings. We then drove through the very scenic valley, surrounded by volcanoes on all sides, arriving at Otavalo before 10:00am. Serving as capital of the Otavalo Canton, this city of over 100,000 largely indigenous people was once essentially a farming community famous for its artisan weavers who made the colorful woolen clothing worn by local women. As tourism began to flourish, though, and visitors began to admire and demand the intricate patterns and embroidered textiles, an entire industry sprang up surrounding this trade that has grown by leaps and bounds over the years. Handicraft workers from the outlying areas produce many of the wares for the traders of Otavalo who then ply them to the busloads of tourists who now arrive on a daily basis, creating an important economic hub in the region. Although most of the handicrafts sold today in the Otavalo public market are tailored

for tourists, one can still find styles fashioned on traditional motifs. The quality is *very* good, and the prices are excellent.

Before visiting the famous outdoor textile market we stopped at the southern end of a wide street known as *Calle Jaramillo* to walk the town's food market. We arrived on a day when many of the food vendors were painting or cleaning their blue-colored stalls, and water hoses snaked through the alleyways as workers washed down the area. There are both indoor and outdoor stalls here, selling a wide variety ranging from fruits and vegetables to grains and meats. We followed Javier from vendor to vendor as he pointed out and explained the more exotic of the local produce, at times he negotiated the price of certain fruits (members of our group donated roughly a dollar apiece for the items), and by the time we finished our tour of the food market we had purchased a fairly large sampling, which we later consumed at lunchtime.

Javier cautioned us not to take photos of the local vendors unless we asked permission first. To avoid any unpleasant confrontations he suggested we photograph a wide area and not point our cameras at anyone in particular. I learned this the hard way during my travels. If I want to photograph a person, or group of people, I usually aim my camera in a way that seems as if I'm photographing the surroundings and not them. Trust me, you do not want to be confronted by angry natives on a foreign street for taking a picture. While in Morocco, one of my traveling companions was nearly assaulted for doing this.

We spent thirty minutes at the food market, winding our way through the alleys and the indoor marketplace. At one point Javier suggested we buy roses and give them to the female workers, a lovely gesture they would appreciate. Several of the group members did so. Rob, who resembles a young Charlie Sheen, began handing out roses like he was running for mayor, much to the delight of the female vendors.

From the food market we made the short drive to the *Plaza de los Ponchos*, a large square built in 1970 containing nearly a hundred concrete benches topped with umbrellas. When guidebooks refer to the Otavalo textile market, this is the place they're describing. By 9:00am the local vendors have set up their displays and this public market square, along with its side streets, transforms itself into a feast of colors, an assortment of

garments and textiles guaranteed to delight the eye (and, in many instances, the wallet).

Before letting us loose for the next hour and a half inside the plaza, Javier gave us a brief lesson on how to bargain with the vendors. The average indigenous trader can size up a tourist in seconds, knowing exactly what mark-up price to begin with before lowering the price to a 'negotiated' amount. But do not kid yourself, only the vendor knows what the *real* selling price is beforehand; your job in the proceedings is not to get gouged. Javier recommended we offer half of whatever price they initially quote and negotiate from there. Never *ever* accept their first offer. If you do, vendors will follow you around the plaza like a child closing in on a large lollipop. But take heart, folks, because no matter what price you end up paying, it will inevitably be much, much cheaper than if you purchased it back home. So enjoy the experience. Javier also mentioned something called *yapa*, an indigenous term referring to a small gift given to a customer as a way of thanking you for your purchase (think of a baker's dozen). He told us to ask for it if we buy anything. Sometimes the *yapa* could be in the form of an additional discount or some free item added to the sale. Armed with our new bargaining instructions, we dispersed into the market.

Everyone headed off on their own in search of bargains and souvenirs. Once the vendors set up shop, the square becomes a maze of narrow alleys lined with brightly colored textiles and clothing. You'll find embroidered blouses, dresses and shirts; bulky sweaters made of alpaca wool; blankets and tapestries; piles of multi-colored cloth; the long traditional *fajas* (or belts) that indigenous women wrap around their waist or the *cintas* (cloth tapes) used to bind their hair; Panama hats; T-shirts and casual *pantalones* (that resemble pajama bottoms); and an assortment of handcrafted souvenirs from paintings to wooden figurines to handmade silver jewelry to decorative plates. It's quite an eyeful.

I would have thought the market chaotic, with vendors hawking their wares and customers in spirited negotiations, but actually the atmosphere was very relaxed and unhurried. The vendors were seldom pushy, and the rows of stacked textiles lining the square muffled the noise level. I was able to casually make my way around the marketplace without feeling pressured or intimidated, and was able to make pleasant small talk with the vendors in Spanish. Occasionally, I would run into my fellow group members and watch them haggle over the items they wanted to buy. Jim and Jane

purchased two beautiful alpaca sweaters for $20 apiece; Joan and Diane scoured the square for scarves, helping me pick out a few nice ones as souvenirs for family and friends; Todd was able to buy a Panama hat (and got an extra hat band thrown in as *yapa*!). I purchased a small painting of a rural Ecuadorian village to hang on my 'souvenir' wall back home. All in all, I think everyone enjoyed the experience and managed to find just what they wanted. Back on the bus we excitedly displayed our purchases, sharing stories about our 'negotiating prowess' with one another.

We left Otavalo and drove north for approximately 15 kilometers to visit the small city of Cotacachi. Nestled between the Cotacachi and Imbabura volcanoes, this Andean municipality serves as the capital of the Cotacachi Canton. It has an interesting population mix consisting of not only indigenous peoples, but also Afro-Ecuadorians (descendents of the African slaves brought to the region by the Spaniards), mestizos from Quito and a growing number of foreign retirees. The city is famous for the more than 50 artisanal leather shops within its borders, making this the 'leather capital' of Ecuador. Using predominately tough cowhide, the leather artisans here fashion top quality products ranging from boots and clothing to bags and riding equipment. And like everywhere else in the valley, the prices are bargain rate. We entered the town through *Calle 10 de Agosto* (the 10th of August Street, commemorating Independence Day) but more commonly referred to as Leather Street due to its numerous shops. Our bus parked in front of a very popular restaurant called *El Lenador*. We went inside and placed our lunch orders with the cashier; afterwards, we had roughly an hour and fifteen minutes to shop for leather goods, or explore the city, before lunchtime.

The group split up. I joined Paul and his wife Christin (who, like me, were not interested in shopping) and we headed towards the main square about five blocks away. I could see why there was a growing community of foreigners living here. The streets and sidewalks were well-paved and maintained, with decorative lampposts and benches; many of the two-story Spanish colonial style homes and businesses in the area seemed relatively new or renovated. The streets were lined with quaint boutiques and shops, looking in parts more like a typical New England community than the average Ecuadorian town we'd seen thus far. It took us about fifteen minutes to reach the main square. The nearby Cotacachi Volcano provided a dramatic backdrop to the plaza. Lila and Peter joined us and we commenced to taking pictures and photographing one another in front of the cathedral

and inside the relatively large square. We returned to the restaurant by 1:00pm for lunch.

The purpose of pre-ordering our lunch was so that it would be ready when we returned from our sightseeing or shopping, but *El Lenador* was either incredibly understaffed or incredibly slow, take your pick. Many of us ordered the *carne colorada* (which literally means 'red meat'), a traditional Cotacachi dish made with sun-dried fried pork colored with *achoite* (a red seed seasoning), served with a cheese, onion and egg sauce, potatoes, sliced avocado, and corn. The meal was distributed throughout an hour-long period; some of us were finished eating while others were still waiting to be served. It took nearly 45 minutes before I got my grub.

On the tables in front of us were the sliced samples of the various fruits we'd purchased earlier in the Otavalo food market. Almost all of it was new to me, and it was quite an experience tasting each item. You'd think the word 'fruit' would denote something sweet, but some of the samplings were very tart and sour or (at the very least) *unusual* in their textures and flavors. My barometer was Christin, who sat across from me; if she ate a piece of fruit that was not to her liking, her lips would pucker in a certain way and I knew enough to avoid *that* one. The selections were quite exotic in appearance, too: round, egg-shaped tree tomatoes (not the kind you're thinking, either); elongated banana passionfruit (*taxo*); the green spiky *guanabana*; the small, orange-looking (but very sour) *naranjilla*; the bumpy yellow dragon fruit or *pitahaya* (its inside filled with edible tiny black seeds within a white pulpy mush); the pale-orange sweet *granadilla*; the small, grape-like yellow ground cherry gooseberry (*uvilla*). The fruit kept me going until my meal arrived. The *carne colorada* was tasty, but I'm not sure it was worth the wait. We finished our lunch just before 2:30pm and piled back onto the bus for the long ride to our lodge in Papallacta.

Our drive to Papallacta, high up in the Andes east of Quito, required that we return to the country's capital. We began by backtracking southeasterly along Route 35, but just beyond the tiny electoral parish of Gonzalez Suarez we detoured along a smaller rural highway, passing through the center of several agricultural towns and villages within the Pichincha Province in a valley adjacent to the Cayambe volcano. We continued south, beyond El Quinche, a rural parish near the headwaters of the Guayllabamba River, and a short while later reached the town of Pifo where we turned east onto Route E28, a major central highway, and followed that into the Papallacta Pass.

Papallacta is a small Andean village situated at an elevation of about 11,000 feet. It is located in the Napo Province, a large, mostly forested (and underdeveloped) area that extends from the Andes down to the upper Amazon basin. In order to reach our lodge we had to first cross the Papallacta Pass, one of the highest points in Ecuador at almost 13,500 feet, along a narrow mountain road. From Pifo, we slowly ascended E28, winding our way through valleys of snowcapped mountains. It was an ear-popping experience the further up we climbed, with a thick blanket of fog suspended just below the mountaintops. As we rose higher up the Andes we drove directly into the fog for what turned out to be (for me, anyway) a very anxious moment. It was very late in the day, and rain had now combined with the fog to make visibility worse. Our bus hugged the twisting road, maneuvering close to the valley's edge, a seemingly endless serious of precipitous mountain drops that made you gasp with every turn. Thirty minutes after crossing the Papallacta Pass we (gratefully) reached the Termas de Papallacta Lodge where we spent the night. From here – the following day – we would slowly descend the Andes until we reached the Amazon.

The Termas de Papallacta was another great lodging facility. Surrounded by forested mountains, the lodge featured a cluster of individual wooden cabins centered around several hot spring pools generated by the Cayambe and Artisana volcanoes, which lie on opposite sides of the Papallacta Pass. I only needed to walk out of my cabin and there was a steaming hot spring just a few feet away. *Awesome*. There were no fireplaces in the rooms, but each had a portable electric heater, which definitely came in handy at night. With about forty-five minutes or so of daylight left, a small group of us (Sandy, Ann, Lila, Peter, Todd, Amy and myself) decided to walk the nature trail along the Papallacta River in front of the lodge. In one area we had to pass a farm with cows grazing in the fields. A short while later we came upon a small wooden plank bridge built over a narrow portion of the river, the water rushing over the rocks below it. Night was rapidly approaching now and we decided to head back at this point while we still had some light. We made it to the lodge as darkness enveloped the valley, stopping to visit the spa area of the lodge with its larger hot spring pools and thermal baths.

From the spa area the seven of us elected to head straight to the dining room and have dinner. This was an included meal; I ordered the grilled chicken with veggies, it was served with a delicious quinoa soup. We had a

lively conversation, which at times touched upon personal topics. Prior to the tour I had decided not to mention my daughter's death to anyone in the group lest it might invoke sympathy for me, or, at the very least, make others feel uncomfortable. Talking about the death of one's child is never easy, and having to respond to such acknowledgement is equally difficult. But I felt very at ease with this group, and so I told them about Rachel and the circumstances surrounding her passing. Although we had bonded as a group, we were essentially strangers, and I found it easier to open up with them than with my family and friends back home. Believe me, this was mostly for my benefit, for I had been wanting to unburden myself of these painful thoughts for some time now, I just didn't know how to go about it. I am grateful to this group for being so understanding and supportive. For this reason alone, this tour will always count as one of my more memorable ones.

We finished dinner around 8:15pm. I returned to my room while the others agreed to rendezvous at the larger hot spring pool in the spa area. I wasn't up to walking around in the cold night air in my bathing trunks and elected to soak in the smaller pool right outside my cabin. Papallacta's thermal waters are very therapeutic, containing sulfites, sodium, calcium, chloride and traces of magnesium, reputed to cure or ease a ton of physical ailments or symptoms. The pools (near the cabins) vary from a comfortable range of 97F to 104F degrees, while the thermal baths found at the spa area are much, much hotter. One can also pay for a separate spa package that includes a steam room and a massage. I soaked under the night sky for about 35 minutes before returning to my room to shower and change. I was loose as a goose. Prior to going to bed I draped my bathing trunks over a chair near the electric heater, hoping they'd be dry by morning. I was so relaxed from the hot spring pool I drifted off to sleep in minutes.

Day Four

I awoke shortly after 4:00am. Surprisingly, the room did not feel cold, even though it was very chilly outside. The electric heater, which I pushed as

close to the bed as possible, kept me comfortable throughout the night, and did a wonderful job drying my bathing trunks. I made several cups of instant coffee and spent nearly two hours writing in my journal, trying to sort out the previous day's activities. I rely heavily on my early morning notes when I start writing my 'official journal' back home, a process that can take more than two months to complete. By 7:00am I was showered and dressed. Before heading off to breakfast I left my luggage outside my cabin door for pickup. That morning I sat with Diane and Joan, who pitched the Feed the Dogs of Peguche campaign to me for the first time (to sweeten the deal, they even showed me adorable smartphone pictures of their own dogs). Diane shared a very funny story concerning her son and his creative use of computer files to hide personal documents. I will not divulge any more details other than to say this kid has my vote for the Ingenuity of the Year Award. By 8:00am we were back on the bus for our long drive into the Amazon.

We began our road trip that morning at an elevation of 11,000 feet, but several hours later, as we wound our way down the valley of the Papallacta River to the upper Amazon basin (what Ecuadorians call *el Oriente*), we would drop more than 9,000 feet. Ecuador is one of the smallest countries in South America, with a landmass equivalent in size to that of Colorado, but it is the eighth most biodiverse country in the world, and as we descended the eastern slope of the Andes we witnessed this incredible diversity firsthand. The previous afternoon, near the Papallacta Pass, we traveled near the edges of what is referred to as the paramo section of the Northern Sierra, a high-altitude ecosystem of mostly grasslands and shrubs that grow in the cold environment above the mountain forest line but below the permanent snow caps of the Andean high peaks. We even caught glimpses of the gnarled polylepis tree, the only tree species that grows at that altitude. And on this day, as we reached the 8,000 feet mark, we descended into the cloud forest region, a moist band of evergreen forest characterized by a persistent fog cover. Condensation from this fog provides a constant source of water for the vegetation that grows here. There are numerous types of birds to be found in the cloud forests, including the iridescent quetzals, the equally colorful tanagers and – according to Javier – over a 100 different species of hummingbirds.

Small clouds are perpetually suspended within these valleys and permeate the forests; at times we had to actually drive through them, the near-blinding fog a continued source of anxiety for me. In fact, at one point

we came across an accident on one of the mountain turns, when a car swerving to avoid a large fallen rock in the fog sideswiped a bus. Luckily – from what we could tell as we drove by – nobody was injured. But it highlighted the persistent dangers of travel in this area; besides the haze, increased rainfall (blamed on the El Nino effect) had produced numerous mudslides and falling rock incidences along this mountain road in recent months. We passed several sections where government workers were busy repairing the roadway from these massive and often dangerous slides.

On our drive down to the Amazon, Javier gave us a brief lecture on the economy of the country. Ecuador currently has a relatively stable economy, but this wasn't always the case not too long ago. The country's economic woes began to spiral out of control during the 1990's when years of political mismanagement and corruption finally came to a head. In 1996, Abdala Bucaram, the controversial former mayor of Quayaquil, was elected president. To combat a worsening recession, he instituted a series of rigid economic measures – coming on the heels of a large privatization movement from the previous administration – which led to steep increases in everyday prices. Inflation rose dramatically and the poor were even worse off than before, leading to a general two-day strike in 1997. Due to allegations of blatant corruption and questions about his mental state (President Bucaram was often referred to as *el Loco*, the Madman), he was removed from office by Congress and replaced by an interim president who proved to be as self-serving as his predecessor. Meanwhile, the economy continued to tank, and millions of Ecuadorians emigrated abroad.

In 1998, a Harvard-educated centrist named Jamil Mahuad came to power. This poor guy was elected during a period when *new* financial troubles began to exacerbate the economic shit storm already embracing the country. Devastating rains flooded the main agricultural sectors of the country, wiping out the key export businesses. The price of oil collapsed internationally, causing the Ecuadorian oil industry to suffer tremendously. In addition, Mahuad had to agree to austere economic reforms (which further hobbled the economy) in order to secure IMF loans to bail out the country's faltering banking system. Desperate to stem the tide, Mahuad froze existing bank accounts for a year and replaced the nation's currency (the *sucre*) with the U.S. dollar, hoping to curb the 60% annual inflation rate. And while Ecuador's economic sectors grudgingly accepted the new dollar conversion, the indigenous population rallied and marched on Quito, literally

forcing Mahuad to flee for his life. More political chaos ensued, including a failed coup attempt.

Eventually, the vice president, Gustavo Noboa, nervously stepped in and finished Mahuad's term, presiding over what would be a dramatic turn around in Ecuador's economy. Inflation declined sharply after the dollarization of the national currency, and this was followed by millions in new foreign investments in oil exploration to help boost production as prices increased worldwide, triggering an oil boom. In 2006, after two more lackluster presidencies, the country elected a populist economic lecturer named Rafael Correa (who still holds office as of this writing). Correa instituted constitutional and economic reforms geared at helping the lower classes, including a massive government-spending program for infrastructure and social development. By 2008, the country's economy was growing at a healthy 6.5% annually, mostly due to oil revenues, and hasn't looked back, despite the recent glut of oil supplies worldwide and the shorter prices they command. It remains to be seen how the country's economy will fare in the future. Correa – who is serving his third term in office and seems to be seeking a fourth – remains popular but is increasingly criticized for being power hungry (and a socialist with strong ties to the unpopular regime in Venezuela). Nonetheless, he has ushered in what is by far one of the more stable political periods in Ecuador's history.

According to Javier, Ecuador's economy today is fueled by several key factors. Namely, oil revenues, exports like bananas and seafood, remittances from citizens working abroad, and tourism. The government derives revenues via corporate and personal income taxes (ranging between 5-35 %), a 12% sales tax, a 5% imposed fee on credit cards, and extra surcharges for specific consumer products like imported items, cable televsion, etc. The *average* Ecuadorian earns between $750-1500 a month, and is able to take many personal deductions that can leave them exempt from having to pay income taxes. Overall, Javier thought the country was in good shape economically, but admitted the situation could always change drastically, for better or for worse.

Thirty minutes into our drive Javier stopped the bus along the side of the mountain road so we could take pictures of three waterfalls cascading off the adjacent valley rock face known as the *Three Marys' Waterfalls*. Actually, low-lying cloud cover obscured one of the falls so we could only see two of them. I don't remember why they were called the Three Marys, but I'm

guessing it has something to do with local religious superstition. We took turns photographing one another posing along the edges of the road, with the waterfalls and the beautiful forested valley in back of us. Before re-boarding the bus Javier pointed out a *lechero* plant, whose milky residue is used by children as glue.

Less than an hour later we made our first pit stop in a gasoline station in the 16th century town of Baeza, situated near the Quijos River. Although Baeza is considered Ecuador's largest jungle town in the *Oriente* (the Amazon), its current reputation as a nondescript community of ramshackle, tin-roofed homes belies its historical significance. Perched at 4600 feet above sea level, on the edge of the Amazon basin, and only 50 miles east of Quito, this town served as the last outpost in Ecuador's northern Amazon region for more than 400 years. The Spaniards built a missionary and trading post here in 1548 and used this area as the launching point for all of their expeditions into the Amazon basin. And even prior to the Spaniards arrival, the lowland forest ancestors of the local indigenous Quijos-Quichua people were already using this spot as a bartering station on their way up to the highlands. Today, like in the past, Baeza continues to act as a gateway into the Amazon basin. We turned south here onto E45, known as the Amazon Highway, following it into the heart of the Napo Province. Along the way we passed numerous rivers – the Quijos, the Bermejo, the Cosanga, the Chontas, and so many more – that I eventually lost track. Javier told us they all flowed into the Napo River, which in turn serves as the ninth largest tributary of the Amazon River.

A short while after leaving Baeza we descended to 3400 feet above sea level, to what is referred to as the subtropical forest region, an ecosystem characterized by greener vegetation and taller foliage and trees. The heavily wooded slopes between the cloud and subtropical forests contain a variety of wildlife, including the endangered spectacled bear, the puma, the coati (a hog-nosed member of the raccoon family) and the weasel-like tayra. Unfortunately, we didn't see any wildlife (other than birds) on our way down. Once we reached the eastern foothills of the Andes we began traveling through a new ecosystem: the Amazon basin rainforest. This exciting place would be our home for the next two nights.

We continued driving south on E45 and passed the sleepy little town of Archidona – originally established as a Catholic missionary back in 1560 by the Spaniards – famous for its palm-shaded plaza where the local indigenous

population gathers on Sundays for market day. Less than eight miles further south we made a second pit stop in Tena, the capital of the Napo Province, situated along the confluence of the Tena and Pano Rivers. This charming jungle city has grown to become a major economic hub in the region, primarily catering to the ecotourism industry (hiking, kayaking, rafting, camping, etc) and serving as a base for the numerous volunteer organizations associated with the reforestation of the rainforest and other conservation programs. During our brief stop I picked up some snacks (not knowing what the food situation would be like at our Amazon lodge).

Just a short distance from Tena we turned left onto a dirt road that went passed the tiny village of Atahualpa and led us to a small port community called Punto Ahuano along the northern banks of the Napo River. There is a ferry that crosses the river here, and the port serves as a transportation hub for the motorized canoes that service the nearby lodges and local tourism industry, transporting both tourists and goods throughout this portion of the upper Amazon basin. The Napo River is the largest river on this side of Ecuador, flowing east into Peru where it drains into the mighty Amazon River. It extends for more than 650 miles into the rainforest, and can be navigated by river raft for more than 200 miles before the journey becomes too laborious and dangerous.

When we arrived at Punto Ahuano it began to rain. The tour bus would have to remain on this side of the river; our luggage would be ferried across to our lodge. And just where the heck *was* our lodge? Good question, from here all we could see was jungle and river. Near the sandy banks of the waterway we donned life jackets before boarding two motorized canoes. We sat on rows of moveable wooden benches, ten persons per canoe, and launched off down the murky Napo River in the rain. I sat with Diane in the back of our canoe; we huddled close underneath the overhead tarp trying not to get too wet, but the wind made that impossible. The river's current was very strong.

We cruised along the Napo River for about twenty minutes, surrounded by the thick vegetation of the rainforest, until we reached our lodge, the Casa del Suizo. We'd all been pleasantly surprised by the lodging facilities thus far on the tour, and our stay in the Amazon would be no exception. Founded by a Swiss named Arnold Ammeter – who arrived in the area with his family in 1985 – the Casa del Suizo ('House of the Swiss') sits above the riverbank near the Quichua village of Ahuano. It is a remarkable place, a collection of

very spacious wooden cabins amidst a beautifully landscaped terrain displaying the colorful flora of the jungle. The center of the establishment contains a large pool surrounded by an outdoor restaurant, bar and lounge area, all of it within eyesight of the Napo River and the jungle beyond. My cabin was almost as large as my apartment in Miami. The middle of the room had a tiled shower, and the bathroom and bedroom were situated around it in an open space with no connecting ceiling, an unusual design that creates the illusion of greater space and allowed for air to flow freely throughout the cabin. There were no AC systems in the rooms, just ceiling fans, but you did not feel the heat of the jungle because of the layout and shade. The windows contained no glass, just screens to keep the bugs out. Each cabin had a deck with a hammock. Mine overlooked the nearby Napo River. What an awesome place! It was my favorite of all the fantastic lodging facilities on the trip.

Our canoes docked along a stone pier at the bottom of the Casa del Suizo. Staff members were on hand to help us disembark and lead us up the steps to the lodge. We hung our life jackets on the railings as we went up. Javier and a hotel guide be the name of Marco (an affable young man who seemed to be in charge of the other guides) sorted out our room assignments and handed out registration cards for us to fill out as we sat in the open lounge area next to the bar, admiring the view. Marco gave us a brief orientation on the lodge, where to get towels for the swimming pool, when our meals would be served and where to meet for the afternoon excursion to visit a nearby Quichua home. Afterwards, we were given our room keys and we dispersed in search of our cabins.

Our luggage had not yet arrived. I washed up and took some photographs of the tropical flowers around my cabin. At 1:30pm I walked to the outdoor restaurant next to the pool area for our lunch buffet. It was quite a spread, with uniformed kitchen staff on hand to serve us. They had several chicken and meat dishes, both cooked and cold veggies, rice, a potato side dish, two choices of soup, and for dessert there was a separate table with assorted yummies. I almost forgot I was in the rainforest. I sat with Sandy, Ann, Paul and Christin. I stuffed my face like I was the King of the Jungle!

During lunch, Rob told me they had mistakenly left my luggage in front of his cabin door. When we'd finished eating, I followed him back to his cabin to retrieve my suitcase and returned to my room and hung up the clothes I'd be wearing for the next two days. It was still drizzling outside so

I opted to change hats (my cotton boonie was completely wet from the canoe ride over, so I wore my red cap). I put some insect repellent on my face, neck and the back of my hands (the only exposed parts of my body) and covered my wallet, camera and camera rechargeable batteries in a plastic bag before putting them inside my backpack together with a plastic rain poncho. The weather here is very unpredictable, with one exception: it will most assuredly rain. They don't call it the *rain*forest for nothing. It's anybody's guess how hard it will fall or *when* it will fall – morning, noon or night (or, for that matter, all day) – but it *will* rain, count on it. And because there is so much moisture in the air it is damn near impossible to dry anything over night. The following day we all got drenched (I'll explain later) and when we finally left the Amazon I simply threw my wet clothes in the trash rather than store them back in my luggage.

At 2:45pm I met the group at the reception center for our afternoon outing. Rob and Whitney could not join us because poor Whitney had taken ill and elected to stay in her cabin. Luckily, the sky cleared, or rather, the rain stopped (there was always perpetual cloud cover during our time in the Amazon basin). Javier was there together with Marco and another local guide named Ambrosio. They led us to a room that must have contained about two hundred pairs of rubber boots in all different sizes, stacked loosely in wooden bins; we were instructed to find a pair that fit comfortably and put them on, leaving our shoes behind in boxes marked with our cabin numbers. I must have tried on about half a dozen pairs before I found one that was big enough to fit my sensitive feet. Each time we left the lodge on an outing we had to put on boots. The trails were often very muddy, and the water stepping out of the canoe was usually calf-deep (or higher). I also think the boots helped protect our feet and ankles from anything that might be slithering around in the thick vegetation. We then headed over to the railings where the life jackets were hanging. When the group was fully 'jacketed' and 'booted', we climbed into two separate motorized canoes and took off down the Napo River again for a short ride to an islet named, I kid you not, *Anaconda Island*.

We reached the island and disembarked along a muddy clearing and trekked for about ten minutes on a well-beaten nature trail, the whole while I kept thinking, "Why do they call this place *Anaconda* Island?" I mean, correct me if I'm wrong, but if a place is called Lover's Lane you'd expect to find lovers there, *right?* And – I'm embarrassed to admit this – my sole knowledge of anacondas comes from that horror movie starring Jennifer

Lopez, the one where the monster-sized snake devours all the actors one-by-one. *Gulp*.

We came upon a section of the trail that was submerged in about two feet of rising river water. Ambrosio and Marco went first, trying to ascertain what path was the shallowest for us to cross. But it didn't make a difference. Most of us were not very agile when it comes to river crossings and ended up getting water in our boots no matter how gingerly we stepped through the river. On the other side of the natural embankment, awaiting our arrival, were a group of young Quichua girls from the nearby village. They welcomed us in Spanish, handing out flowers and bracelets made from plants. It was very touching. The previous day, Javier instructed us to refrain from giving the children cash donations (no matter how adorable or needy they looked) but suggested, instead, we bring school supplies. Many in my group had done just that, and prior to setting out for the village Javier gave us pens and notebooks to distribute to the children, which, for some reason, were all girls. We only saw boys when we were about to leave later that day.

Marco and Ambrosio led us to a makeshift wooden stand alongside the trail just beyond the river crossing and provided us with a brief understanding of life on Anaconda Island. Ambrosio, who did not speak English (Marco did the interpreting), is actually from the area, a native Quichua living in the small town of Ahuano in back of the lodge. He welcomed us to Anaconda Island and told us the name is derived from its long shape and not an abundance of the actual snakes. (*Whew*!). The islet is situated between two waterways, the Napo and Arajuno rivers, and when the water level rises due to heavy rains the entire peninsula becomes flooded. This is why the thatched homes of the local Quichuas are built on wooden stilts. He asked a rhetorical question: if the island is regularly flooded, why would people live there? Answer: the minerals deposited during the floods makes the island's soil very rich and suitable for farming. They grow several different crops year round, but all I could remember was cassava (a root vegetable). Approximately 50 Quichua families live on Anaconda Island, and we were about to meet one of them.

We walked a bit further along the trail and came upon two thatched structures in a small clearing just beyond a vegetable garden. We gathered in the yard directly in front of the huts while Ambrosio pointed out the different types of crops that were growing in the garden. Cassava, which is a staple of the Quichua diet, has three varieties: white, brown and purple. Most

of the vegetables in the garden consisted of white cassava. Surrounding the area were plantain and papaya trees. Chickens and roosters roamed freely. He told us this was the property of a local Quichua woman named Martha, who was waiting inside the larger of the two structures to meet us.

Before we went inside, Marco taught us the word "*allichishi*" (pronounced ali-chee-shee), which means "good afternoon" in the local Quichua language. We entered the home to meet Martha and some of her family members. The 'house' was built on stilts made from iron palm trees that grow in the nearby rainforest; the sturdy lumber is remarkably water resistant (which comes in handy during flooding season). Basically, there was just one long room, with wooden benches along the sides. According to Marco this room had been extended to accommodate foreign visitors, so I'm not really sure how 'authentic' this place really was. Although nobody asked, it was quite possible this was merely a display home used for tourism purposes. Nobody doubted that Martha owned the property, but there was little indication (other than a cooking area) that a family actually lived here. The floor was a combination of wooden planks and what looked like bamboo; the walls, made of similar materials, were more like railings that did not extend to the ceiling (there were no traditional windows, just open space all around). The tall roof was fashioned from thatched plant material that was constantly smoked to fortify it; soot from cooking fires bonded the thatch and somehow made it stronger and less impervious to rain. In one section was a cooking pit, resembling an ash-filled sandbox resting on small wooden legs, and adjacent to it were crude shelves holding cooking utensils and bowls, with a pile of green plantains underneath it.

When we entered the hut Martha was standing in the middle of the room, smiling and greeting us in her native language. We all smiled back, nodding and saying 'hello'. Except Paul, who very diplomatically went up to her and mustered his best "allichishi" …only, *it didn't quite come out that way*. Apparently, Paul's pronunciation of 'good afternoon' was a bit distorted. Marco playfully told the group that Paul had just informed Martha she had nice breasts. We had a great laugh over this. Later, when we were leaving, someone quipped that perhaps Paul shouldn't say 'goodbye' lest he informs our host that she has a nice ass, too!

We took our seats on the wooden benches. Marco and Ambrosio stood next to Martha and introduced her to the group. She wore a light blue embroidered blouse, a blue skirt and was barefoot. Her hair was jet black

and braided down her back. It was difficult for me to guess her age (jungle living seems to age a person), but if I had to guess, I'd say she was in her mid-to-late thirties. She spoke no English and addressed us mostly in Spanish with Marco interpreting. Martha first welcomed us into her home and told us about her family (she had several children, some of whom were standing nearby; her husband, I believe, was working). She then went about explaining a typical day to us. It started with her serving *guayusa* to the males of the household, a drink made by brewing the dried leaves of the holly tree that are native to Ecuador's Amazon rainforest. For more than 2,000 years *guayusa* tea has been used as a kind of energy drink, containing strong amounts of caffeine, vitamins, antioxidants and amino acids, providing a similar – some say more intense – stimulant effect as that found in coffee. The men are given this tea first thing in the morning to get them revved up and ready for whatever laborious task awaits them. Gargling with the *guayusa* helps to kill 'morning breath', and the liquid can also be used to wash the face. Normally, the brew is prepared the night before, allowing the leaves to seep for hours, making it more potent. The bowls used for drinking are made out of dried pumpkin shells.

Martha then spoke about her home, and how it was constructed. The roof was thatched from the *toquilla* plant; the floorboards made from the iron palm tree. When a member of our group asked who built the home, we were told it was a community effort. How does the community know when it is time to help out? Ambrosia produced a seashell and blew into it, producing a unique sound used to alert family and neighbors nearby that help was being requested. Some of us tried our hand at blowing into the shell but the results were comical, at best. In one section we noticed a small fire going, and later learned it was a termites' nest. Apparently, the insects secrete a scent that acts as a natural bug repellent. The following day when we did our trek through the rainforest, our guide told us that locals often rub termites on their skin to ward off mosquitoes. We were also given a demonstration of a shaman healing ritual. Lila volunteered and sat in the middle of the room while Ambrosio gently swatted her with some kind of leaves, blowing smoke at her intermittingly. I'm certain at some point a chant is uttered. According to Marco, this kind of ritual can last for days. Superstitious by nature, the Quichua people prefer going to a shaman first before visiting a real doctor or clinic. There were only three shamans available in the area, and they now ask for money instead of barter for their services. Afterwards, Martha demonstrated for us how she brings food back from the marketplace,

balancing a woven basket on her back with a strap wrapped around her forehead. These Amazonian women were pretty strong.

And then came the *chicha!* This beverage, which can be served in both a fermented or non-fermented state, is another staple within the Quichua communities of Ecuador. It is prepared differently depending on the zone. In the highlands of the Andes, *chicha* is usually made with maize, but here in the Amazon it is made from cassava. Basically, any type of fermented drink (regardless of the ingredients) is commonly referred to as *chicha*. Using a large wooden bowl, Martha mashed together boiled white cassava together with *camote* (red sweet potato). The camote is the catalyst used to induce fermentation. Although – hold onto your stomachs – in the more rural areas women sometimes spit into the mixture to make it ferment. Once everything is mushed together, the chicha is stored in some kind of sealed container where it slowly begins the fermentation process. If consumed within the first few days it is mild and used as a sort of watery gruel to fill the empty bellies of the locals and their children, but after a certain period has lapsed the *chicha* becomes alcoholic and keeps getting stronger with each passing day. It is the drink of choice at parties here, and can pack quite a wallop. Marco asked us if we wanted to try the *chicha*, and when the group tacitly agreed, Ambrosio handed Jim, who was sitting at the end of the wooden benches, a small bowl with a non-alcoholic sample and we all took turns nervously sipping the milky-looking substance and passing it around. As I swallowed, I prayed this stuff wouldn't wreck havoc with my intestinal system. Ambrosio told us the taste was similar to liquid yogurt. Yeah, a very watered down version. At any rate, we all survived the taste test.

Ambrosio and Marco fielded questions from the group concerning the Quichua culture. I do not remember all of the topics discussed, but they touched upon health and education, and the political system within the tribal communities (they elect a president to represent them in both regional and national matters). We hardly saw any men during our visit, and were told most were working in the fields, or in construction, or in the tourism-related industry as guides, hotel staffers, etc. When our visit to Martha's home was concluded, we spent fifteen minutes in the smaller hut next door, browsing the locally handcrafted items (like beaded bracelets and necklaces, and an assortment of blowguns) that were on sale. We reassembled in the courtyard where Marco and Ambrosio continued to talk about the local vegetation and species of trees in the immediate area. Ambrosio handed out samples of the local cacao; we picked pieces of the seeded fruit and sucked on the white

pulp before spitting out the seed (which is used to make Ecuadorian chocolate, one of the finest in the world).

At this point, Ambrosio gave us an introduction into blowgun hunting. He explained the process by which the blowgun is made, using up to two pieces of hollowed out hardwood material. The one he held in his hand was probably five feet long with a wider section on one end for blowing into and the other side (where the dart comes out) tapering off for better accuracy. He had a small wooden quiver filled with darts and loaded one into the mouthpiece end. The darts were not fletched in any way (like with feathers) to make them more aerodynamically stable, so the force of the dart was based solely on the user's respiratory muscles. The blowgun is still used today by natives of the Amazon to hunt small prey. A mixture made from poisonous or toxic plants (like curare) can be added to the tip of the darts for a more lethal impact; usually these are paralyzing agents that immobilize a target within minutes, making them easier to catch. The darts are often sharpened using piranha teeth.

On a tree limb in the middle of the yard hung a wooden target and Ambrosio demonstrated how to shoot the blowgun. He missed both times. He then asked for volunteers to give it a go. Jim was the first at bat. He, too, missed the target. Todd went up next, tried twice with no success (one of his darts nearly skewered a local chicken). Peter, to a huge round of applause, was the first in the group to hit the target. Not to be outdone, his bride Lila went next and hit the target, as well. (A match made in Heaven, I think). In fact, from this point forward most of the volunteers hit the mark. I decided not to try my hand. As an ex-smoker – who went through a pack a day for nearly 25 years – I was certain my lungs couldn't muster up the sufficient force to propel the dart five feet let alone five yards. But it was just as much fun rooting everyone else on.

We said our 'goodbyes' to Martha and the local girls and trekked back to our canoes. The portion of the trail submerged by water was now almost knee deep; we waded across as slowly as possible but water gushed over the top of our boots, filling them instantly. Many of us had to remove our footwear to drain them before continuing on. Heading back to our lodge along the Napo River the current was very strong, yet that didn't stop a group of local boys from wading (chest deep) through the murky river, one holding a terrified-looking small dog.

At the hotel, we hung up our life jackets and retrieved our shoes and gathered in the reception area next to the pool for a sampling of Quichua cuisine. Our guides had prepared five items for us to taste, all of them indigenous staples or delicacies, and laid them out on a buffet table. Using banana leaves as our serving plates (the way the natives do) we lined up and helped ourselves. There were sliced pieces of boiled cassava and plantains, and what looked like a cooked salad made of palm hearts. One tray had chunks of broiled river fish (I'm not sure what kind). And the most unique food item was – hold onto your stomachs, again – *beetle larvae*. No, you did not read that wrong, they served us the larvae of beetles. This is a delicacy in the Amazon. Quichua natives actually listen to hollowed out sections of rainforest trees to hear for the movement of these insects, and then scoop out the cocoons. They are roasted and resemble tiny blackened beehives; inside are the cooked, mushy remains of beetle larvae. We were told that the taste was similar to bacon. I took one look at them and balked.

I have consumed many strange and exotic things in my life. As a Peace Corps volunteer in the Philippines back in the 1980's, I ate dog, monkey, field rats, turtles and snakes. But, don't get me wrong; I am not a daring eater. I ate what I did back then because it was available and supplemented the constant diet of dried fish and rice. When all is said and done, any type of animal meat, if marinated, cooked and prepared properly, can be made edible (heck, even downright palatable). But this was *bug* meat. And it *looked* like bug meat. A roasted cocoon with gooey insects inside. I balked. There was no way I was going to eat this. I have to credit Todd for convincing me otherwise. Throughout the trip I had been telling everyone about my TravelingMailman website, and about the journals I write of my experiences abroad. Todd wondered aloud how the 'traveling mailman' was going to be able to write about the beetle larvae experience if he didn't partake? He was right. I had to man up and take one for the journal (*damn journal*!). Besides, everyone told me it *did* taste like bacon. So, with incredible trepidation, I put a small cocoon on my banana leaf and then wolfed it down as quickly as possible. And, I have to confess, it wasn't half bad. Not that I would prefer it to bacon, but it did have a pork fat texture to it. *Live and learn*, my friends, *live and learn*.

After the food sampling, I returned to my cabin and took a warm shower, washing my nylon safari pants in the sink and hanging them up to dry. Unlike cotton, nylon is suppose to repel water and dry quickly, but it took nearly twelve hours before I could repack them in my suitcase. My wet

socks went right into the trashcan. I put on a clean T-shirt and jeans and at 7:30pm returned to the reception area for a brief orientation on tomorrow's rainforest hike. Before he began, Javier proposed a toast to the group. Hotel staff served us a drink containing orange juice and aguardiente (a strong grain alcohol) mixed with a green liqueur. I think I gave mine to Paul and Christin.

After the toast, Javier spent the next thirty minutes talking about tomorrow's activities. He tried, as best he could, to describe what the hike would be like, informing us upfront that it was going to be very strenuous at times. We would need to take a twenty minute canoe ride to the rainforest reserve, at which point we would be split up into two groups, led by two guides each. The trails would be very muddy and covered with the slippery roots of nearby trees. He cautioned us to be very careful, that this was the rainforest, home to a lot of strange animals and insects. If we needed to support ourselves by holding onto a tree trunk or branch, he warned us to look first before we placed our hands on anything. *Gulp*. He mentioned we would ascend a hilly area and would have to cross small ravines using a suspension bridge and a seated zip line. At some point during the hike, the two groups would meet at a designated half way point, and those who did not wish to continue to the top of the hill could return to the canoe area following a shorter, easier downward trail. Those of us who wanted to go to the top would have to huff it and puff it, but Javier assured us we would be rewarded not only by the additional scenery within the rainforest, including several old trees (that were truly spectacular in size), but we would also witness an awe-inspiring view of the rainforest valley from the top of the ridge. He made it sound scary and exciting at the same time. *I couldn't wait*.

The rainforest hike would consume our entire morning, but the afternoon was a free time for us, and Javier suggested several things we could do. Almost everyone, though, opted to visit an animal rescue center called AmaZoonico along the Napo River near the city of Tena. We would head out there after lunch. With the details of the following day's activities outlined and discussed, we broke for dinner. It was another wonderful buffet spread. I sat with Rita, Jim, Jane, Sandy and Ann. The conversation centered on our traveling experiences. After dinner, a small group of us watched a video presentation of an Amazon adventure park nearby that offered somewhat challenging and thrilling obstacle courses (including tree climbing and zip lining). I think Todd and Amy (both in great shape) were debating whether to give it a try, but elected instead to join the rest of the group at the

animal rescue center. I returned to my room by 9:30pm. There were no television sets in the cabins so I went straight to bed. As hot as it had been in the rainforest, I was surprised how pleasantly cool my room was with just the ceiling fan running. Outside my windows, the insects of the jungle began their symphony, lulling me to sleep…

…I dreamt I was being chased through the rainforest by a tribe of headhunting cannibals!

Day Five

I awoke at 4:00am to the unusual insect noises outside; a cacophony of cricking, clicking and ticking sounds one never hears back home (unless 'back home' is the Louisiana Bayou). I made several cups of instant coffee and wrote in my journal. From my cabin deck I watched as daybreak unfolded over the Napo River. What a beautiful moment. I showered, donned my nylon sporting wear and headed to the breakfast buffet. We gathered in the reception area at 8:30am for our rainforest hike excursion. Back in my room I had liberally applied insect repellent to my face, neck and hands (everything else was covered), and put my rain poncho and an extra cap inside my backpack in case the weather turned bad (at that moment it was not raining). As usual, we made our way to the 'boot room' and then grabbed our life jackets before boarding our motorized canoes. There were two new guides with us that day, Josefa (a very pretty mestiza Ecuadorian) and Wami (a local Quichua man), both in their twenties.

We traversed the Napo River upstream for a good fifteen minutes, passing Quichua natives as they went about their business, including a group of women along the banks of the river doing laundry. Because of the thick vegetation between the trees it was impossible to see the villages where these folks lived. The further up the river we went the more desolate the wilderness became. On one tree we saw hanging birds' nests, which resembled bats perched upside down. I was looking forward to the unusual

flora of the rainforest. Back at the lodge I had photographed several different species of orchids and flowers around my cabin. A friend from work, Pedro Dominguez, who considers himself a 'recreational botanist', helped me to identify some of them, like the heliconia crab claws and the red and pink ginger flowers. But our hike through the rainforest would expose us to an incredible assortment of exotic plants and trees, many of which I'd never seen or heard of before.

Our canoes docked at the bottom of a wooden platform within the Misicocha Hotel Reserve, a private natural reserve owned by the Casa del Suizo Lodge. I have no idea how large the Misicocha reserve is, but it contains *both* a primary forest (the most bio-diverse, relatively unaffected by human activity) and a secondary forest with numerous trails. We gathered on the platform above the river and helped ourselves to walking sticks bunched upright in one corner. Not accustomed to nature hikes, I almost decided against grabbing a walking stick, which would have been a *huge* mistake since I relied heavily on it to prevent me from falling on my way back down the muddy path from the top of the hill. At this point we split into two groups. Javier and Wami led our group. We set out first, following a trail that wound its way up the rainforest, the second group bringing up the rear.

The Amazon is a vast ecosystem extending through eight different South American countries. Ecuador's portion, the upper Amazon basin, contains thousands upon thousands of species of plants and trees, 350 species of reptiles (including iguanas and anacondas), over 300 species of mammals (including monkeys and pumas), 800 species of fish (including several types of piranhas) and enough insect species – I'm talking by the tens of thousands per acre in some areas – to create lifelong phobias in anyone.

Scientists believe there are more than 400 billion trees – belonging to 16,000 species – within the entire Amazon rainforest. Throughout our hike, Wami pointed out a few of them to us. The first was a group of balsa trees. He explained that there were two types: the jungle balsa (which take about 15 years to grow) and the Island balsa (which takes only two years to grow). The ones we saw were Island balsa and are used primarily by the locals to build river rafts; utilizing ten to twelve logs fastened together. The use of naturally buoyant balsa for rafting has been a means of navigation in the Amazon for more than a thousand years. Balsa wood is also used to make figurines. Javier told us that Wami is an exceptional sculptor, and sells his

figurines in the marketplace. During our trek we found the thick, exposed roots of trees everywhere. They were slippery and at times cumbersome to cross and maneuver around. Wami explained that because the soil here was only 50-70 cm deep, the roots had no choice but to expand and grow outwardly.

A short distance later we came upon a medium-sized tree roughly 20 meters tall with a smooth mottled bark. It had large, heart-shaped green leaves with white flowers on long stalks. Known locally as *Sangre de Drago* (Dragon's Blood) the trunk produces a dark red sappy resin that can be applied to heal wounds. Many scientists believe that the cure to *everything* that ails the human body may one day be found within the trees and plant life growing in the rainforest; one very important reason why deforestation of the region must be stopped. Any one-acre section of forest deep within the Amazon can yield a multitude of new species of plants, trees and insects, with who knows how many practical applications benefiting humankind. Case in point, nearby was another medicinal plant referred to as *cana brava* (brave cane), a bamboo species, used by the locals to treat diabetes. In fact, throughout our entire hike, Wami continuously pointed out plant and tree species used by the indigenous people to heal an assortment of common ailments. Because he often used the local term for these species it was difficult for me to locate them later under their botanical names, no matter how many databases I searched.

We came upon a small stream and Wami picked up several rocks along its banks to show us how the minerals within the rocks can produce colors such as red, white and black. A few meters beyond he found a cork tree seed on the ground and passed it around. Wami told us spider monkeys use the black, round thorny seed as a comb for grooming. Speaking of monkeys, we could hear them occasionally but they remained high up in the trees, suspicious of our intrusion into their territory. A few steps further we found a large black centipede that Rob allowed to crawl across his open hand while we photographed it.

Continuing up the trail, we stopped briefly in front of a group of palm trees. According to Wami there are two types of palm trees in the upper Amazon basin, the ones used to build with are referred to locally as *iron palm trees* because the bottom portion produces very hard lumber. But right now he was showing us traditional *walking palm trees*, which can grow up to 25 meters tall and have unusually stilted roots that grow out in all

directions at the base of the tree. For years, rainforest guides have been telling gullible tourists that these trees can walk, moving ever-so-slightly in search of sunlight. But that is not true. Although, in my own research, there seems to be different explanations for why the palm tree roots are so stilted. Some suggests it is to propel the tree higher (towards sunlight); while others believe they are the after-effects of other tree limbs falling on the roots causing new ones to sprout haphazardly. Near these palm trees, high up in the canopy, was an enormous termites nest. We walked over to the tree where it was suspended from and witnesses an army of termites marching four in a row down the tree. Unlike termites back home, which can be a costly nuisance, Amazon termites are seen in a good light: they remove dead trees from the forest (by eating them) and they secrete chemicals that are used as a bug repellent by the locals.

The forest canopy continued to thicken the further along the trail we went. At one point we reached a small ravine and had to use a basket zip line to cross over to the other side, a distance of about 200 feet or so. We sat in the basket, one by one, and propelled ourselves across the heavily wooded hillside. It was a lot of fun, and once on the other side I was able to photograph Joan and Diane as they flung across. Before we continued on the trail, some of our members asked Wami what was hiding in a series of holes near the zip line landing base. He prodded gently with a stick and out popped a baby tarantula! *Okay*. We took photos and moved on quickly, passing a group of trees – part of the *brosimum* genus – that Wami called *leche* (milk) trees, the bark producing a milky-like substance used for medicinal purposes, mostly intestinal. A bit further we saw a rubber tree oozing its gummy sap.

We now reached another, steeper hillside, lined with thicker vegetation, preventing us from seeing how far down it went. A very long, planked hanging bridge had been erected over the area. In fact, it was so long I couldn't see the other side. *Gulp*. Before we crossed the bridge, Wami walked over to a small cluster of trees nearby and pulled off a leaf and passed it around. He wanted us to feel how soft it was. Known locally by the Quichua term for 'butt', he told us this leaf is used as toilet paper in the Amazon basin, especially in the more remote areas. Besides its soft, but durable, paper-like texture, the leaf doubled as a snack. Wami pressed down on a small bud at the base of the leaf and out came a swarm of tiny lemon ants. These ants secrete formic acid, which serves as a herbicide that kills off surrounding plant life, creating a patch of what is referred to as a Devil's

Garden, an area of trees consisting almost entirely of a single species. When licked, the ants' chemical defenses give off a citrus taste, hence their name. Wami asked for a volunteer; Rob immediately stepped forward. Wami trickled some of the ants onto his hand and Rob gobbled them up like Halloween candy. *Yes*, he announced with a smile, *they do taste lemony*. I figured, what the heck, I've already eaten beetle larvae, how bad could this be? I went next and before you knew it our group was lapping ants off the leaves like we were human aardvarks. What a sight we must have made! For a brief moment I got the nagging suspicion perhaps this was just a prank; that maybe later in the evening the guides get together in a bar and say things like: "You got the gringos to lick *what*?! Hahahahaha!" But it was a unique (and tasty) experience nonetheless.

Next, we had to cross the small valley. I asked Javier just who maintains the zip lines and hanging bridges out here? He informed me the hotel sends technicians on a routine basis to inspect them. *Hmmmmmmm*. The moisture in the region was enough to turn most metal, including the cable material used for the bridge, a mottled green. Not a good sign, I thought. And they made us go across one at a time, too; another indication that perhaps this thing wasn't as sturdy as could be. Look, I'm not trying to sound like a pussy here, but I was the heaviest person in the group. I didn't want to get halfway across the bridge and have my foot go through the planks like a scene from *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*. Um, if you haven't figured it out yet, I can be melodramatic at times.

Joan went ahead of me and volunteered to take my picture as I crossed the bridge. I gave her my Nikon Cool Pix without hesitation, but then watched nervously as she maneuvered the swaying bridge to the other side; at times she suddenly (and alarmingly) grabbed hold of the cable railing using the same hand she held my camera with. I started chanting in my head: "*Please don't drop my Nikon, please don't drop my Nikon*" I won't lie to you, the thought of Joan accidentally tumbling off the bridge briefly entered my mind…as did the notion that maybe, *just maybe*, she might be nice enough to lob my camera onto the bridge before hurtling to her tragic end. (I'm kidding, Joan… and by the way, you took *wonderful* pictures of me). When it was my turn to cross I did so slowly, holding onto the cable railing most of the time. The scary part was in the middle where the bridge sags in what is known as a catenary curve due to its own weight, causing the railings to droop as well, and I found myself temporarily having to balance myself without any assistance. *Double gulp*.

Safely across, we waited for the other group to join us before we continued to the top. Wami showed us what he called a *blood leaf* (not to be confused with *iresine*, a relatively uncommon reddish plant). The leaf he held up was green with the exception of the tips, which had a rusty red color. He said these leaves are medicinal, and used to regulate a woman's menstrual cycle and ease blood loss during childbirth. Along the path, just beyond the hanging bridge, we also saw bright orange, bulbous-looking flowers growing close to the ground. We asked Wami what they were; he told us they had hallucinogenic properties. But when I showed a picture of them to my friend Pedro Dominguez back in Miami, who grows exotic orchids in his yard, he frowned and refuted Wami's claim, telling me they looked like simple begonias about to bloom. Also growing wildly near the trail were *ala (or winged) mushrooms*, so-called because the top portion of this fungus has a splayed shape that resembles butterfly wings. Wami said there were two types in the rainforest: one poisonous, one edible. He explained how to tell the difference, but since I wasn't going to be eating them I didn't jot it down.

When the other group caught up with us, we split in two again. Marco and one of the other guides led one group – those not wanting to rough it all the way to the top – back to the canoes on what was suppose to be a relatively easy downward trail. The hike thus far was not too strenuous, but that was about to change the further up we climbed. Our new group followed Javier and Wami up the heavily forested hill. We passed a couple of tall kapok trees (also known as a ceiba trees) along the way, but nothing like the 300-year old specimen we would soon by seeing near the top. At one point we came upon an iron palm tree with peculiarly stilted roots, some breaking off and jutting outward, covered with thorny protrusions and knobby heads. Locals call these phallic-looking roots the Devil's Penis. About halfway up the hill we stopped for a breather in front of an *enormous* ficus (or fig) tree that was more than a 100 years old, the base of the tree had an unusually large knothole resembling the entrance to a Hobbit house. The fruits of this ficus provided nourishment for birds and monkeys in the area, and according to Wami could also be used to make chicha.

The most impressive tree we saw was a bit further up the trail. Javier had mentioned it the night before, telling us it was the oldest and largest tree within the Misicocha Reserve. When we finally came upon it I was awestruck. It was a gigantic, three-centuries old kapok tree, over 150 meters

tall (the top actually disappeared above the jungle canopy). The trunk was so thick and wide it resembled a wooden wall when we stood before it to have our pictures taken. As we walked around this ginormous kapok, Peter inadvertently walked through a spider web suspended between the bushes. Nothing can be more disconcerting. He quickly brushed at the web lining stuck to his T-shirt and asked – somewhat urgently – if there was a spider clinging to his clothing. We checked him over and found nothing. I'm sure he was *very* relieved. The rainforest is full of creepy crawlies, most of which you wouldn't want on your person. Wami actually discovered the spider hiding behind a leaf next to its own web; it was fairly large – the size of a child's fist – light brown and hunched into a defensive posture. He told us to avoid it. A more *unnecessary* statement has never been uttered.

Dangling from one side of the kapok tree were sturdy vines and some of our group members couldn't resist swinging themselves to and fro like wannabe Tarzans. At this point, it began to drizzle lightly. Even through the heavy canopy you could tell that a lot more rain was on the way. The sky had been gray all morning. Before we continued up the hill, Wami quickly wove a tiara out of leaves and we christened Whitney the new 'Queen of the Jungle'. Some of the women had their faces painted using *achiote* pods from a nearby shrub. It was raining steadily now, so I put on my rain poncho and donned my red cap (my poor cotton boonie hat was once again soaked). We trekked up the trail in the rain and came to a ridge overlooking the pristine jungle beyond the reserve, a beautiful panoramic view of the primary forest with mist clouds suspended above the tree lines. *Wow*. What amazing natural scenery, we couldn't take enough photos. With the rain coming down harder, Javier announced we had to return to the canoes. He cautioned us to be careful, as the path would be even muddier.

We took a different trail heading back down; one that was supposed to be easier and more direct. But between the rain, thick tree roots and the muddy patches along the way, I found this pathway more difficult than the one going up. I relied on my walking stick to steady myself repeatedly. At times there were hilly drops on both sides of the trail, and on more than one occasion my lead foot slid in the muck and I came very close to the edges. This led to brief moments of paranoia; I convinced myself that giant reptiles were following my every clumsy move, thinking: *if this fat American falls off the hill I'm going to eat him*. I stepped ever more cautiously, slowing my pace. The only people in back of me were Jim and Jane. At one point we fell so far behind I couldn't see the others ahead of me. I was praying the

trail didn't splinter off in different directions, because, as far as I could tell, the only silver lining about getting lost in the jungle would be the immense weigh-loss a steady diet of lemon ants and beetle larvae would induce. *Gulp*.

About forty minutes later we finally reached the wooden platform above the Napo River. The rain stopped and I removed my poncho, although I was thoroughly soaked underneath. We boarded our canoes and traveled upstream for a few minutes, to a sandy riverbank containing two balsa river rafts. Our excursion that day included the experience of rafting down the Napo River as the locals do. Each raft was made by fastening 12 balsa logs together. I couldn't think of anything cruder; visions of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn danced through my head. We had to remove our boots and socks to avoid slipping on the balsa logs.

Prior to getting on the rafts we were privy to a bizarre incident. Marco had told us the day before that we were his last tour group; he was returning to his hometown to pursue a private business venture. Josefa, the very pretty new guide, was to be his replacement. He now picked her up and dumped her unceremoniously into the river in what turned out to be an initiation ritual amongst the local guides. She put up a brave face, but I don't think she was all too happy about it. Especially when we felt how cold the Napo River was! You'd think the heat of the jungle would warm the water, but it was actually *very* chilly.

Once again, we split up into two groups (although, a few members stayed on the canoes not wanting to experience this). On my raft were Todd, Amy, Paul, Christin and Rita. Maybe two more, I can't remember. Ambrosio, our 'captain', had to steady the raft while we stepped, slipped and crawled our way onto it. It did not feel secure at all, and with our combined weight the raft became partially submerged in the river. By the time we took off, I had serious concerns about the raft's ability to stay afloat. Ambrosio slowly steered us towards the current by dragging an oar along the bottom of the river, which was perhaps four or five feet deep at this level (it got much deeper as we inched our way towards the middle of the waterway). All I could think about were the piranha. I had seen a group of local boys in the river the previous day, and they didn't seem concerned. A few weeks later, while doing the research to write this journal, I discovered that piranha are not as ferocious as their myth would imply. They *rarely* attack humans, and only if there is blood in the water. But at the time I didn't know this, so you can only imagine my dismay when the raft continued to take on water due to

our weight. Suddenly, I felt this very cold sensation between my legs. It finally dawned on me: *Holy fish niblets, my BALLS were in the Napo River!* I tried to squirm one way or another to avoid the water – and the imaginary school of testicle-eating piranha I was *certain* were closing in on my crotch – but it was impossible. Our raft was now completely submerged in about three inches of murky water. As we followed the ebb and flow downstream, each gentle rise and fall of the raft made me feel like I was 'tea bagging' the Napo River.

Ambrosio didn't speak English, so I engaged him in Spanish, fielding questions from the others and asking a few of my own, including whether or not he thought this raft could carry us down the river's current safely, which was coming up ahead and seemed quite strong. I would catch him glancing down nervously at the partially submerged raft; the look in his eyes did not convey confidence. Luckily, it took a while for us to float our way to the middle of the river, giving Javier – who was following us in one of the canoes – enough time to assess the situation and pull us off these slowing-sinking Titanics. And if climbing onto the rafts near the riverbank was daunting, you should have seen us trying to get back into the canoes midstream, it was downright hilarious. Once onboard the canoes Javier tried to put a positive spin on the experience, telling us that we were not actually going to ride the current. But if you book a river raft tour independently, they will take you downriver along the current back to your lodge. Not that I was complaining, mind you; on top of all my other shortcomings, I do not know how to swim.

We rode back to our lodge in the canoes. I gingerly walked to my cabin, still barefoot, and quickly removed my waterlogged clothing, dumping my underwear and socks in the trashcan underneath the bathroom sink. I took a hot shower and put on a new set of (wonderfully) fresh and dry clothes and headed to the lunch buffet at 2:00pm. Forty-five minutes later most of us gathered at the reception center for a visit to the animal rescue shelter. It was no longer raining, and the sky had cleared. We did not have to don our rubber boots since the animal shelter trails were not going to be muddy. And frankly, I was relieved. After putting on our life jackets we climbed aboard the canoes and went down the Napo River for what turned out to be a fairly longer ride than what we'd been accustomed to up to this point, following at first the river's current and then meandering off along narrower tributaries where we passed isolated lagoons, surrounded at all times by the denseness

of the rainforest. I wondered if this was the same view the conquistadors had when they first traveled the jungle rivers of the New World.

We docked on the banks in front of *AmaZOOnico*, the name of the animal rescue center. It is located in the middle of a large rainforest preserve and handles native animals that are either mistreated, abandoned or in danger of extinction. Many of them are victims of a growing illegal trade in exotic animals. The shelter opened in 1993 and is staffed primarily by college volunteers who commit 2 to 6 months caring for these animals and working with the forest rangers within the preserve itself, on ecological projects entitled Selva Viva. A young Ecuadorian college volunteer from Quito (of German descent) acted as our guide, and led us around the part of the shelter set up for visitors. We had to pay a few dollars for the tour; the money (and any donations or purchases you make in their small gift shop) is used to help maintain the shelter. Judging from the scruffy look of the volunteers – oddly, most were young women of European ancestry – they seemed to put in long hours, but it appeared to be a true labor of love.

We spent approximately two hours here, the guide taking us through a trail that led to various pens, cages and open areas housing numerous animals, reptiles and birds. According to the guide, almost half the animals are brought to the shelter by the police, usually after raids on illegal traders. But, she told us many police officers are also complicit in this trade, usually bringing animals to the shelter they were not able to sell or get rid of. Most of the other animals (those not found in the wild) are brought in by regular folks who thought it was cute to own an anaconda or a wild cat when they were small, only to watch them grow into unpredictable and often dangerous house pets. We began our tour in front of a large cage holding a pair of toucans. Next to this cage, roaming freely along the trail was Trumpy, a trumpeter who has the distinction of being the oldest inhabitant of *AmaZOOnico*. Resembling a hunched over large chicken, with spindly legs, a long neck and curved bill, Trumpy would often accompany the tour groups throughout the shelter. Today, though, he was not in the mood. He gave us the once-over and moved on.

As we arrived at each cage or pen, our young female guide (I don't remember her name) would tell us the story that led to the animal's captivity. Some were quite sad, like the funny-looking tapir that had been rescued from a circus where she had been mistreated. In a muddy pond inside her pen, the tapir's cute offspring was splashing about (after first

taking a massive poo into the water). Inside the pond, in one obscure corner, were the protruding eyes and long, slender jaw line of a caiman that enjoys sneaking into the water from the nearby jungle. We came upon a very large glass-sectioned cage containing an abandoned anaconda, but the snake was hiding somewhere and out of view. In another large cage were several species of Amazon birds: toucans, macaws and jungle parrots. Apparently, these birds have their own unique personalities, some were loners and others were very sociable. And a few were downright aggressive and had to be housed separately to avoid fighting with the others. As I moved in closer to photograph a spectacular toucan, my eye caught something along the fence, startling me. An enormous black conga ant (also known as a bullet ant) was crawling along the cage wire. I had never seen an ant this big before (it was almost the length of my thumb!) and pointed it out to the guide. She told me to stay away from it because not only did it bite, the conga ant also has a stinger that can inject painful venom, the effects lasting 24 hours. She said when she first arrived at the shelter, she actually had nightmares concerning these ferocious insects. I took a picture of it, and from that moment on I was on the lookout for these gigantic ants everywhere I walked.

One corralled section had a collection of very aggressive boars. The previous month one of them attacked a volunteer during feeding time and the worker had to be medivaced to the hospital with serious bite wounds to the arm. Our guide told us that while some of the animals at the shelter are returned into the wild, many cannot be, especially those born in captivity or as house pets because they had lost their instincts for hunting, and would probably starve if released. Others were injured in some way, or had deformities, and would not be able to fend for themselves. And yet others, like these boars, were too aggressive to be released into the nearby jungle because of the threat they posed to the human population. Therefore, many of the creatures at the shelter were permanent guests.

We saw several species of monkeys, from adorable tiny capuchins to the even more adorable wooly monkeys. One wooly monkey did stunts for us, and then stuck his hairy hand out of the cage for a high-five (but the guide told us not to touch the animals…*drats*!). Above us, in the trees, free-roaming spider monkeys followed us around the shelter grounds, swinging from limb to limb. One angry spider monkey even tried to defecate on us. Perhaps the most unusual animal I saw was the jaguarundi, a species of wild cat. There were three of them inside a big wire pen. They had short powerful legs, an elongated body and short, rounded ears. What made these feral cats

unusual (to me, anyway) was that they looked just like common house cats back home. *Only, you wouldn't want to pet one of these kitties*! The jaguarundis had been raised originally as house pets and had lost their ability to hunt. Workers at the shelter feed them raw meat to keep them alive. From time to time they introduce rats into the pen hoping to entice the cats to hunt, but they never do, avoiding the rats altogether, which is why they cannot be released into the wild. In another pen were two ocelots, a male and female, known also as dwarf leopards. These larger cats are often hunted for their fur or captured to be sold as exotic pets.

By 5:15pm we had concluded our tour of *AmaZOOnico* and returned to our lodge, enjoying the beautiful jungle scenery along the river. Back at Casa del Suizo, I joined Sandy, Ann, Todd and Amy in a brief walk along the streets of the tiny Quichua village behind our lodge, a backwater town if ever there was one. At 7:30pm, we gathered outside near the pool area with Javier to go over the following day's itinerary, but it started to rain again and we cut the meeting short and headed to the dinner buffet. Our last meal in the Amazon was wonderful. Grilled steaks, pork, chicken, a terrific cream of cassava soup, and chocolate cake for dessert. I sat with Jim and Jane, Rita, Joan and Diane, Sandy and Ann. We swapped funny stories about our travels as we ate. Great time!

When I returned to my cabin at 9:00pm, I was thoroughly exhausted by the day's activities. Too tired to repack my suitcase, I set my smartphone alarm for 5:00am and went straight to bed…

…I dreamt I was being chased through the rainforest by a giant razor-toothed boar.

Day Six

I awoke just after 4:30am, feeling very refreshed. I made coffee and went about repacking my luggage, trying to figure out how to keep my damp laundry separated from my clean clothes. In the end, I placed all of my still-

wet clothing inside the plastic bags I obtained during my shopping spree in Otavalo, hoping my suitcase (and its contents) didn't end up smelling like a used gym towel. I shaved, showered, dressed and spent nearly an hour and a half writing in my journal before heading to breakfast at 7:00am. An hour later we boarded our motorized canoes for a final time, saying our heartfelt 'goodbyes' to the wonderful Amazon guides who were there to see us off. We reached the small port of Punto Ahuano twenty minutes later and boarded the tour bus for the long ride to the Devil's Cauldron Waterfall.

We traveled south along E45 (the Amazon Highway) passing several nondescript villages like Costa Azul, El Capricho and Piatua. The homes mostly consisted of wooden shacks with corrugated tin roofs. This was still part of the upper Amazon basin. Javier told us the main difference between the upper and lower basins are primarily the animals (for example, he said, you will find pink dolphins in the lower portion); most of the vegetation is the same, so it is not necessary to visit the 'whole of the Amazon' to experience it's beauty, since one end pretty much resembles the other. Although, he did say there were probably fewer hills in the lower basin.

During the drive, Javier talked about the geography of Ecuador and some of its ecological challenges. He said there are 89 volcanoes in the country, with 24 of them active. An 'active' volcano doesn't mean one currently in eruption mode; it simply refers to any volcano that has erupted over the last several hundred years (and could possibly erupt in the future). The first national park was the Galapagos Islands in 1959. Since then, a total of 49 national parks have been designated, along with a growing demand to protect them. During the 2000's, oil drilling by international companies in the Ecuadorian rainforest was responsible for disastrous spills that contaminated many rivers and water tables here, producing a huge public outcry. Initially, the current president, Rafael Correa, pledged to stop the destruction caused by oil drilling when first elected. In 2010 he passed a law that strengthened the national oil company, Petroamazonas, allowing it to compete with both private and foreign oil companies. I guess the idea was that a national company would be more concerned with the country's ecology than an outsider or a private firm. President Correa made a novel proposal to the world; Ecuador would keep its oil in the ground if compensated annually for not drilling. Apparently, all this talk about 'global warming' and 'saving the environment' did little to spur the world's biggest economies to act. No funding was forthcoming, and in 2014 the government signed permits allowing for drilling in the Amazon's Yasuni National Park

starting in 2016. It remains to be seen what will come of this, or what the environmental consequences will be on the Amazon basin if drilling is resumed. Another thing Javier touched upon was the unpredictability of the weather. Ecuador's unique geography (a combination of Andean mountains, wet rainforest and coastal plains) makes predicting the weather a formidable task. If you want to know whether you'll need an umbrella on any given day, flipping a coin would probably be as accurate as any weather forecast.

Javier also conducted a quiz to see if we'd been paying attention throughout the tour. He asked a series of questions and whoever could answer correctly received a bar of delicious Ecuadorian chocolate. Thanks to my note-taking I won *two* bars of chocolate (for guessing the populations of Quito and Guayaquil, and for naming three towns in the Otavalo canton). I shared one chocolate bar with the bus…*and hoarded the other one for later* (hee-hee-hee). About an hour into our drive, along E45, we made a pit stop in the small town of Santa Clara. A dog on the rooftop of the gasoline station kept barking at us. Rita shut him up by tossing the canine some ice cream she'd purchased inside. Maybe I'll try that trick on my mail route. We continued heading south, and a short while later, in the town of San Vicente, Javier stopped the bus in front of a street vendor who was selling sugar cane juice and snacks made from Chinese potatoes. Part of the legume or bean family, the Chinese potato – judging from the surrounding fields and private gardens – was a very popular crop in this region. I purchased some fresh cut sugar cane cubes, sharing them with the rest of the bus, and a bag of chips made from fried Chinese potatoes.

Thirty minutes later we reached the city of Puyo, the capital of the Pastaza Province, situated near the Puyo River. This unassuming city, nestled on the eastern foothills of the Andean mountains, has one of the fastest growing populations in Ecuador, serving as a gateway into the Amazon region for travelers coming down from Banos. When we passed Puyo, we also left behind E45 and began a slow ascent along a two-lane switchback mountain rode that took us through some of the most beautifully forested valleys I have ever seen. We were climbing the Andes again, and by the time we reached the mountain town of Shell Mera, at approximately 3500 feet above sea level, we had re-entered the subtropical forest region.

Shell Mera was established in 1937 as an exploratory base for the Shell Oil Company (near the town of Mera), consisting of a few shacks and an airstrip. Apparently, local indigenous tribes took exception to the intrusion

and repeatedly attacked the Shell employees, killing several. By 1948, Shell decided the base was too dangerous and left. A year later, due to its abandoned airstrip, a group of aviating American missionaries moved in and the base eventually grew into the small town that exists there today. (Interesting to note that some of the missionaries were also killed). Beyond Shell Mera the scenery was spectacular, hillside after hillside of subtropical forests. The trees were so thick you could not see the ground anywhere. I think many of us on the bus sat in almost stunned silence at the undisturbed natural beauty of it all. I know I did. To our left, at the bottom of the valley, was the meandering Pastaza River. We drove for another thirty minutes or so – passing small mountain villages like Cumanda, Casurcu, Rio Negro – until we reached the town of Rio Verde, home to the famous *El Pailon del Diablo*, the Devil's Cauldron Waterfall, one of the most popular waterfalls in the country.

It was just before noon and the town of Rio Verde was hopping like festival day. Huge crowds of Ecuadorian tourists milled the streets. Turns out this was the last weekend of summer vacation for the kids, and families were out in full force to enjoy the final days before the opening of the new school year. Geraldo parked our bus at the top of a small hill leading into the waterfall park. We walked past several food vendors and merchants on our way into the park's entrance. Javier and Geraldo handed out bagged lunches that had been prepared by the kitchen staff of Casa del Suizo. Our guide suggested we visit the waterfall first, and then return to the park restaurant nearby where we could eat our lunch on the wooden deck over-looking the bottom of the waterfall.

The Devil's Cauldron is so named because the bottom of the waterfall resembles a pan, or cauldron, and, supposedly, there is a devilish image in the rock face next to the cascade, which can be seen from a suspension bridge that crosses the Pastaza River just in front of the waterfall. The drop is only about 100 feet high, but there are actually three separate waterfalls here that converge in a spectacular whirlpool at its base. To reach the Devil's Cauldron you first have to hike for about fifteen minutes down a curving nature trail. I was with Sandy and Ann on the way down. I'm not sure if it was the elevation (we were back in the Andes, after all) but I found this trail, which had its up and down momentums, a bit exhausting. We finally reached the stone lookout point about half way up the rock formation from where the waterfall cascades, only to find an incredibly long line of visitors. Stone steps led to several platforms alongside the waterfall, but the

view was somewhat obstructed by the jutting rock face and the surrounding shrubbery. Meanwhile, water was spraying everywhere!

A narrow tunnel went behind the waterfall, winding its way up the rocky ledge. A gazillion tourists, most of them soaked from the continuous spray, were jammed inside of it. Thinking about whether or not to enter the tunnel ratcheted up my claustrophobia anxiety considerably. I opted against it. Good thing, too, because Todd, Amy, Paul and Christin later told me it wasn't worth it; the tunnel was crowded, wet and uncomfortable, and the view was not very good. I took some pictures with Sandy, Ann, Peter and Lila on the platforms before heading over to the restaurant. Our bagged lunch consisted of a chicken sandwich, chips, fruit and a cookie.

After lunch, a group of us crossed the suspension bridge to get a frontal (and better) view of the waterfall. I still could not see the image of the devil. But the surrounding area was amazing. From the ledge on the other side of the bridge you can observe a massive rock face marked with lines etched over millions of years. The immediate jungle contains an interesting array of flora, including unique bromeliads and orchids that are studied by foreign universities, and exotic species of wildlife like tapirs and the colorfully bizarre cock-of-the-rock bird. There is also a large variety of butterfly species in this area. Above us a flock of large predatory birds kept circling the waterfall. By 1:15pm our group slowly made its way back up the nature trail to the park entrance. Before boarding our bus we stopped at a food vendor shop recommended by Javier that sold fried empanadas filled with chocolate and bananas. They were made fresh to order, and absolutely delicious. Joan and Diane shared one with me while I drank coffee. Todd, the avid runner with the thin build and revved up metabolism, must have tried everything on the menu. *Damn him*!

By 1:45pm we were on the bus again, slowly maneuvering our way through the crowded streets of Rio Verde. We continued up the Andes, stopping just ten minutes later along the side of the rode for what turned out to be an exhilarating excursion. On the other side of the Rio Verde valley is another powerful waterfall called the *Manto de la Novia* (the Wedding Veil or Mantle). This powerful waterfall is located within the buffer zone of the Llanganates National Park – approximately 11 kilometers from Banos – and cascades over a basalt cliff into the Pastaza River gorge. The color of its rushing water is strikingly white, especially when contrasted against the surrounding rock face and vegetation. It can be seen from miles away. The

fauna in this area is incredible, but we were not interested in that at the moment. Javier asked us if we wanted to experience a cable car ride across the valley to get a better view of the waterfall. Along our side of the mountain were several platforms from which cable cars called *tarabitas* transported people across the steep river valley to the other side. The cost was only *one* dollar. We excitedly agreed.

Javier was able to find a *tarabita* operator who was not too busy (there were long lines here, as well), and within minutes our gang (divided into two groups) was slowly being hoisted over the valley by cable car. In my group were Joan, Diane, Sandy, Ann, Todd and Amy. Our cable car went first, and let me tell you, when the carriage cleared the platform and headed out over the steep valley, the drop made me woozy. Besides my claustrophobia, I also have a fear of heights. We must have been several hundred feet above the Pastaza River. I clutched the metal railing as if my life depended on it. At one point our operator stopped the cable car in the middle of the valley for several minutes so we could experience the scenery and take better pictures of the waterfall, which was to our right. The view was magnificent, but I remember a lot of *nervous* laughter as we hung, suspended so high in the air, with our carriage swaying gently. We made it to the other side and after a very brief period the cable car cranked in reverse and we headed back to the platform, in the process passing our companions who were crossing on the adjacent cable line. On the platform next to ours, people were actually zip-lining the valley lying flat with their arms outstretched as if they were flying. What an amazing (and terrifying) sensation *that* must have been!

It took less than thirty minutes from here to reach the city of Banos de Agua Santa, more commonly referred to as Banos. Nestled on the northern foothills of the Tungurahua volcano, in the province by the same name, Banos is the last major city on this side of the Andes before you descend into the Amazon region. Looking at it from a map of Ecuador, it lies almost smack in the middle of the country. There are numerous hot springs (hence the city's name which means Baths of Holy Water) located around the area. The city is famous as a strong Catholic center; the faithful believe that the Virgin Mary appeared at a nearby waterfall and conduct annual homages in her honor. Banos also serves as one of the country's main tourist attractions. In addition to being a 'gateway to the Amazon', the area boasts more than 60 waterfalls and is a launching point for hikes into the remote Llaganates National Park. If you're into adventure sports, then this is the place for you!

Besides hiking and biking, Banos offers a multitude of activities like kayaking, river rafting, rock climbing and bungee jumping.

Banos is a quaint, almost idyllic place, a city with a small town feel, its clean, hilly streets surrounded by so much highland beauty. The only danger here – and it seems to be a constant one – is the Tungurahua volcano, which has produced numerous eruptions and earthquakes throughout the city's history. Tungurahua became active again starting in 1999 and has had several major eruptions since then, the last one in February of 2014. In 2006, the most powerful of the eruptions occurred, necessitating the evacuation of the entire city. It deposited an ash plume over 740 kilometers long and created lava and mudflows that wiped out hamlets and roads along the eastern and northwestern slopes of the mountain. We actually passed some of these lava fields on our way to our lodge later that day. The volcano is currently being monitored by the international agency responsible for such things, and, quite frankly, I would be a tad concerned if I lived in the area. Javier told us there is a mountain in front of the city that acts as a barrier in case of lava or mud flows, but that wouldn't stop the poisonous ash and gases emitted from a major eruption.

When we arrived in Banos the place was hopping with families celebrating the last weekend before the start of the new school year. We parked along a busy narrow street leading into the city and made our way down the crowded sidewalk to visit a taffy shop called *Los Dulces de la Abuela* (Grandma's Sweets). Known as *melcocha* in Spanish, Banos produces the country's best taffy made from pure cane sugar. One of the shop employees demonstrated how the taffy was made and we were given delicious samples that 'sealed the deal'. Most of us purchased a box or two. *(I ate mine before we reached the lodge that night*). Across the street from the taffy shop we witnessed a local custom. A priest was blessing a couple's new car. Some in our group thought this was amusing, but to be honest, considering the region's dangerous mountain roads, the blinding fog and the possibility of an erupting volcano nearby, I think a little spiritual mojo couldn't hurt.

We continued into the heart of Banos, with the exception of Peter and Lila who took a cab to visit the *Casa de Arbol* (the Treehouse) on the edge of the city, overlooking the Bellavista cloud forest. The *Casa de Arbol* is actually a seismic monitoring station built within a tree house on top of a cliff overlooking the canyon. The view of the cloud forest from there is

phenomenal, but what attracts thrill-seekers (and apparently Lila is one of them) to the Treehouse is the world's scariest swing ride. Dangling from the tree is a simple wooden swing (attached to long thick ropes) that fling you over the abyss of the canyon and back with no safety features whatsoever. It is called the Swing at the End of the World and according to Lila – Peter stayed firmly on the ground and acted as her photographer – the experience makes you feel as if you're diving off the mountain. For those of my readers who are not convinced that a 'swing ride' can be scary, then Google it. I got vertigo just looking at the photos. My advise to Peter? Son, you married a wonderful girl, hang on to her…*literally*, cause she'll jump off anything!

Meanwhile, the rest of us gathered in Banos' largest square, known as *Parque de la Basilica,* directly in front of the cathedral while Javier give us a quick rundown on the city. There were huge festive crowds everywhere. The main plaza was filled with vendors and surrounded by the usual government buildings one sees in a Latin American town. Javier gave us twenty minutes to check out the cathedral and told us to meet back in the square for a walk through the nearby streets. The official name of the cathedral is *La Basilica de Nuestra Senora de Agua Santa* (the Basilica of Our Lady of the Holy Water) and it is clearly the most impressive structure in Banos. It was initially designed by a Belgian Dominican monk and later infused with Gothic styling, including a pair of 58-meter spires. The inside of the church was not as awe-inspiring a spectacle as those we'd seen in Quito, but it was very nice, with some rather dramatic paintings of the calamities that have befallen Banos in the past, and contains the Virgin Mary statue, a very sacred and popular icon that many locals believe has saved the city repeatedly from the wrath of the Tungurahua volcano. When we visited, a priest was giving a sermon to a small group of listeners. Next to the basilica is an old Dominican convent with a lovely cloister. The convent also houses a small museum filled with paintings and religious artifacts pertaining to the region. Some of us lit votive candles and said prayers inside the church before leaving.

We re-grouped in front of the cathedral and Javier led us up Ambato Street, probably the city's main avenue, lined with restaurants and small shops. A few of our members wanted to try guinea pig, a roasted delicacy in Ecuador. Javier told us early in the tour that if we wanted to sample this local delicacy we could purchase a piece of guinea pig meat for a few dollars from a restaurant in Banos (the cost of an entire roasted guinea pig was an outrageous $25). He now led us to this restaurant. When we arrived there

was a grill set up on the sidewalk. Several sectioned pieces of the animal, along with an entire one split open (and looking like a toasted rat), were slowly cooking on the grill. I think most of us took a gander and were thoroughly repulsed. But Todd and Amy had been hankering to try the meat since they stepped off the plane. I believe for $5 Todd purchased a fairly large piece, which he generously shared with the rest of us (or those willing to try it). So, there we were, standing on the sidewalk nibbling rodent meat. *Typical tourists*! I sampled a small piece and was immediately reminded of how nasty I thought it was when I first tried it in Peru. Personally, I preferred the beetle larvae. I watched the others as they hesitantly ate their share. Rob had the best reaction of the group; he seemed very enthusiastic, but when he began chewing on the mostly fatty chunk of guinea pig meat he'd been given, his face contorted into a grimace as if he were eating…*well, guinea pig fat.* He promptly spit it out.

We walked a bit further down Ambato Street and crossed through a food mart (selling cooked meals) jam-packed with local families. Back on the street, Javier gave us about half an hour to wander around. I tagged along with Joan and Diane, who needed to get money, so we walked further down the street in search of an ATM. As I've mentioned, Banos is not a big sprawling city, it has the look and feel of a scenic town, consisting mostly of one and two story buildings. The inherent beauty of this place lies in the surrounding mountains and volcano, which offer a beautiful panoramic backdrop no matter what direction you look. Later, we rendezvoused in a park plaza (Peter and Lila joined us here from their *Casa de Arbol* visit; showing us the amazing photos of the swing ride). When everyone had gathered, Javier took us to a store right across the street named *"El Cade"*, an artisan shop featuring sculptures made out of tagua, a hard, coconut-like fruit. This was another one of those 'official store' visits, but it was quite interesting. The owner, and resident artisan, demonstrated for us how he carves and sculpts the tagua nut. Using a small lathe he made a tiny polished jar in a matter of minutes from just one nut. Incredible. The store was filled with various styles of figurines and finished products and we spent about twenty minutes here browsing and shopping. I purchased a decorative tagua pipe for my souvenir shelf back home.

From the shop we boarded our bus and headed to our lodge, the Hacienda Manteles, in the nearby Andean town of Patate. We didn't actually stop in Patate; we drove over it on a winding hillside highway, heading into a rural area above the valley, higher up into the mountains. Eventually we turned

into a two-lane road that followed a very scary switchback path with no railings along its edges. Every time Geraldo maneuvered a sharp turn we gasped in unison as our bus would come perilously close to the edge of a cliff, affording us a wonderful view of the valley below but also reminding us how high we were (and how far we'd fall if we went over the side!). It took 45 hair-raising minutes to reach the Hacienda Manteles. We stopped once to take picture of the valley. As we arrived, Javier told us the 'staff' would be on hand to give us a warm greeting. He wasn't kidding, either. Three adorable dogs – a beagle, a golden retriever and some kind of black lab/retriever mix – were waiting for us on the driveway leading into the lodge. We got off the bus and the dogs immediately went up to each one of us, tails wagging happily, giving us welcome sniffs. We reciprocated with hearty head scratches. The dogs were so well trained they would even accompany us to our cabins at night, and one actually went jogging with Todd the following morning.

Like all the other lodges, the Hacienda Marteles was another gem. Situated on a hill overlooking the volcano and surrounding forested mountains, the stone and wood lodge was originally a private home. The main house reminded me of a Swiss ski lodge, complete with wooden panels and a large cozy fireplace, spacious sitting rooms, a dining hall and bar. Along one area of the beautifully landscaped property, built on the edge of the hillsides, were a series of multi-room cabins, each one different in design. While they were all tiled and painted an ochre color, each cabin had its unique shape. Some were small, like mine, but had two-levels, others were huge, with a king-sized bed in the center and a living room section with panoramic windows that rendered breath-taking views of the Tungurahua volcano. Many had their own fireplaces or heating stoves. *I loved it*!

At 7:30pm we gathered in the dining hall for an included dinner. We each pre-ordered our meal when we checked in. I had the grilled steak. During dinner, the owner of the lodge went from table to table greeting us personally and asking us how the service and accommodations were. I sat with Rob, Whitney and Rita. We had a great conversation. I discovered that Rob and Whitney were high school sweethearts. In fact, that evening was a celebration of couples. Todd and Amy were celebrating their 14th wedding anniversary, while Dave and Anne were closing in on their fiftieth, and Peter and Lila were newlyweds. The staff later brought out a carrot cake and we toasted and cheered the happy couples! After dinner, many of us gathered in the sitting room, in front of the fireplace, exchanging stories of previous

trips and ideas for upcoming ones. And, as is customary on the night before the last full day of any tour, most of us were looking forward (or getting antsy) about going home and seeing our families and friends again. Before going to bed, some of us took turns visiting each other's cabins to see what they were like. By 10:00pm I called it a night. My room did not have a fireplace, so I pushed the portable electric heater as close to my bed as possible, flinging my damp hoodie – it had rained earlier – over a chair next to it hoping the jacket would dry by morning. I slept soundly.

Days Seven and Eight

I awoke around 5:00am to the sound of falling rain outside my cabin window. Surprisingly, the room was not too cold…*but the water for my shower was*! I let it run for a long while hoping it would warm up. It did not. I felt like I furless polar bear in the Antarctic Ocean. Later, as I wrote in my journal, I had to consume three cups of *very* hot coffee to keep my body from shivering. Through my window I tried to catch a glimpse of the sunrise, but the early-morning fog shrouding the hillsides made that impossible without actually stepping outside. And it was still raining.

By 7:00am I placed my luggage outside my door and headed over to the main house for breakfast. The golden retriever was lying next to the entrance and I could have sworn he nodded "good morning' to me as I went inside. I sat with Rita and Geraldo. We were served crepes, bread with butter and jam, bacon and eggs. During breakfast I finally had a chance to speak with our bus driver. He told me in Spanish that he normally does about ten tours a month for his bus company, Marco Tours, and that he'd been driving for nearly 38 years. Geraldo saw the frown on my face (I was 54 and the man was definitely younger than me by at least five years). To clarify he added he'd been driving since he was eleven years old, which only confused me further. I asked him how was that possible and he said he grew up in a small rural village where the laws were usually lax and the driving rules often

suspended. *I'll say*. Can you imagine driving down I-95 back home and seeing a kid behind the wheel of a car!

By 8:00am we were back on the bus for our long drive to Quito. As we left the Hacienda Manteles the three dogs sat silently by the side of the driveway. They seemed genuinely sad to see us go. I thought, *Geez, my ex-wife wasn't this attentive…The heck with the dogs of Peguche, these were the mutts we should be saving!* It was very foggy as we backtracked along the same mountain byway to the town of Patate, but at least we were hugging the mountain wall now as opposed to driving along its edges. Patate is a small town located between Banos and Ambato (the province's capital) on the foothills of the Tungurahua volcano. We made a brief stop here, getting off in front of the main square. Perhaps it was the early morning hour, but the stone-paved streets were unusually quiet, devoid of the normal hustle and bustle I'd seen in other smaller towns on our tour. Javier led us around the corner to a restaurant specializing in *arepas*. Costing only a quarter apiece we all sampled the tasty delicacy, made fresh in the restaurant's large brick oven. Unlike the flatbread arepas of Central America and other South American countries, which are usually made from ground maize dough, the Ecuadorian arepas (at least those made in Patate) were orange in color due to the pumpkin and cinnamon ingredients mixed into the flour, and served as a kind of muffin-like pastry. From the restaurant, we had about twenty minutes to walk around the gardened main square and take pictures. There was a gazebo in the middle of the plaza and some of us posed for a group photo. The only interesting thing I saw in Patate was the church adjacent to the main square, designed with both an angled steeple entrance and a dome; a rather unusual-looking combination for a Christian church.

We continued driving westward along the highlands (*La Sierra*), passing Pelileo, a fairly large town within the Tungurahua Province, famous for its production of *aguardiente* (a distilled spirit) and the factories that produce cotton jeans in its El Tambo parish. A short distance later we stopped for thirty minutes in Salasaca, another of Pelileo's parishes, to shop in a small native market known as the Plaza of the Arts. The village is named after the Native American tribal people known as the Salasaca, who were re-settled in the Ecuadorian Sierra from Bolivia by the Incas during the 1400's. They speak Spanish and their own Quichua language, and wear traditional dress, which includes the brimmed highland hats. Their way of life appears to be endangered, since most are poor subsistence farmers and modern-day life

continues to encroach on their small territory. They have tried to capitalize on the growing tourism trade (the way the Quichuas of Otavalo have done), by selling textiles in the Plaza of the Arts market. The Salasaca weave these items by hand on ancient looms. Had I known all this before going to Ecuador, I would definitely have purchased more than just a small shoulder bag for my stepmom and a few souvenir scarves for co-workers. But when we arrived it was drizzling steadily and the small marketplace – like Patate – seemed slow to awaken, with many of its stalls still not open for the day.

About twenty minutes further north we reached the large city of Ambato, the capital of the Tungurahua Province, a sprawling urban area lying on the banks of the Ambato River, surrounded by mountains, and, not too far away, the looming Tungurahua volcano. Founded in 1698, this city serves as a commercial hub for the region, famous for its textiles, tanneries, and fruit and food production. It is less attractive as a tourism site because it lacks the charm of other Ecuadorian cities, I read. When we reached the outer limits of Ambato we turned north onto Route 35 (the Pan-American Highway), which would take us all the way back to Quito. Forty-five minutes later we passed Latacunga, the capital of the Cotopaxi Province, and pulled over twice along the side of the highway to take pictures of the smoldering Cotopaxi volcano in the distance.

With a summit topping 19,000 feet, Cotopaxi is one of the largest volcanoes in the world, and an extremely *active* one. Since 1738 it has erupted more than four dozen times, creating new valleys as a result of mudflows (known as lahars). Its most recent eruption was on August 15th, just a couple of weeks before we arrived in Ecuador. At first, the government evacuated everyone living within the valley immediately surrounding the volcano (remarkably, tens of thousands of people actually live around this powder keg), but I believe the threat level was later downsized and slowly the local residents have been returning to their homes, albeit with growing concern. As we stood along the highway taking our photographs, gray ash and steam was continuously coming out of the crater, mixing with the nearby clouds, producing a formidable haze around its peak. An ominous portent if ever I saw one.

Just further north along Route 35 we stopped in the small rural town of Lasso to visit a large rose producing business called The Unlimited Roses Company. Rows of white mesh-covered greenhouses extended for nearly 75 acres. Javier led us through the middle of one of them, pointing out the

different varieties of roses. They were grouped by species, with signs above the rows denoting their names. We saw traditional red roses, but also pink, orange, yellow and several combinations thereof. Apparently, roses do not respond well to direct sunlight (or strong winds), so they are commercially grown in greenhouses. The special mesh covering filters the amount of sunlight exposure they receive. Some of the more delicate budding roses were covered with small paper bags for added protection. We saw signs everywhere instructing workers at what length to cut the stems of certain species (usually between 4 and 4.5 cm). Much of what we saw in the greenhouse was for export. Approximately 40% went to the United States. Surprisingly, the next largest consumer was Russia.

At the end of the greenhouse was a processing plant where a group of female workers were checking the roses for quality control, cutting and pruning the good ones before boxing them. Javier asked one of the workers to explain her job and what she looks for when inspecting the roses. She picked up several roses stacked inside a plastic holder in front of her station and showed us how to determine which ones were suitable for export. The petals had to be perfect, but not yet blooming, and the stem had to be a certain length (for American exports the stems are usually shorter than the ones sent to Russia, for example). She would cut the stems of the good roses and then hang them on an appropriate holder for another worker to collect and box. The imperfect roses were set aside for the local markets, either as flowers or for producing oils. Little was wasted here. Once the roses are boxed or bunched for export, they are kept in refrigerated compartments throughout the entire shipping process (from the storage rooms within the company, to the cargo ships which take them around the world, and even inside the trucks in the final port of destination, the flowers must be kept at a certain temperature to insure they arrive fresh).

The workers at this particular company made, on average, $450 a month, working in 8 hour shifts and processing a staggering 10,000 stems per shift, *per worker*. According to Javier, the final cost to the company for each rose, including harvest, labor, storage and shipping, was 35 cents. *Hmmmmmm*. That seemed a little expensive to me. I usually buy my roses from this tiny old Mexican lady who sells them on the street a few blocks from my home. She gives me a dozen red roses for $5. I guess Mexican roses are a lot cheaper to produce. Before we left the facility we took pictures of the beautifully boxed roses in assorted colors ready for export. This was a fun, educational stop.

From here, we boarded our bus and drove about five minutes through Lasso to have lunch at the beautiful Hacienda La Cienega, a stone mansion constructed in the mid-1600's and now converted into a hotel and restaurant. If you want to get a feel of what a Spanish colonial estate was like back in the day, *then make sure to visit this place*! This historical structure, situated near the slopes of the Cotopaxi volcano, is the best-preserved country mansion in Ecuador, built in 1580 for the Marquis de Maenza, a landed Spanish aristocrat whose family occupied the hacienda for more than 300 years. When Latin America was first being colonized, the prime agricultural lands in the region were quickly wrested away from the native populations and turned into aristocratic estates. Many of the descendants of these colonial families are, till this day, amongst the richest and most influential people in the hemisphere. The homes they constructed for themselves back then were truly spectacular.

To reach the Hacienda La Cienega we drove through a stately road lined with tall, centuries-old eucalyptus trees. It was like something you see in the movies. The walls of the mansion were made from two-meter thick volcanic stone, beautifully restored now as a boutique hotel. There are 34 rooms, each different in style and shape. Throughout the mansion we discovered huge decorative windows, wooden patios, antique furniture and chandeliers, a gardened courtyard with Moorish-style fountains and even a chapel with a bell tower.

The friendly uniformed staff escorted us to a patio-dining hall overlooking the central courtyard where we ate lunch. For me, this was the only disappointing part of the visit. On the bus a few hours earlier, Javier read us the list of menu items offered at the hacienda, he then phoned in our selections so the food would be ready when we arrived. At my table, Whitney and I were the only ones to order the 'ham roll' thinking it would be quite good (based on the way it was initially described). Imagine our dismay when it turned out to be a spoonful of diced carrots and peas wrapped in a single slice of ham. And not a thick, cut-from-the-bone slice of ham, *either*. This was regular variety luncheon meat. If the staff had served this crap to the Marquis de Maenza's dog back in the 16th century they'd been flogged! Most of my companions ordered the chicken-filled crepe or the hearty beef soup, both looked very appetizing. I sat in my seat, silently grumbling, stocking up on the table bread. I glanced at my watch; it was only 1:30pm. Dinner was a long way off. *Damn you*, *ham roll*!

During lunch, a group of talented local musicians, playing traditional instruments, regaled us with several upbeat native tunes. They were so good I almost forgot how hungry I was. *Almost*. When they were done playing, the musicians went from table to table trying to sell us copies of their musical CDs for ten dollars. If they were edible, I would probably have bought one. After lunch we had time to explore the hacienda. Many of us had our pictures taken hanging out the chapel's tower. Along the long wooden corridors lining the central courtyard were photos and paintings from a bygone era, outlining the history of this place and the region. I saw black and white photographs of the snow-covered summit of the Cotopaxi volcano, and paintings depicting the Hacienda La Cienega during its plantation days.

The history associated with this place was incredible. Outside, in front of the entrance to the mansion was a simple carved stone monument dedicated to the contributions this estate played in the field of science. During the first half of the 18th century, the hacienda housed the noted French scientist Charles Marie de la Condamine, who was part of the geodesic team that measured the Equator and helped develop the metric system. Famed German botanist, Alexander Von Humbolt, stayed here in 1802 when he studied Cotopaxi's unique alpine flora. The hacienda even played a role in the country's independence from Spain, as the aristocratic de Maenza and Lasso families plotted their revolt against the Spanish Crown from within the walls of this mansion.

We took photos of the hacienda from the tree-lined driveway and soon discovered an open field adjacent to the house with several llamas roaming freely. The animals must have been accustomed to tourists because they didn't flinch when we went up to them and took their pictures. There was also a horse ranch not too far away that belonged to the estate; we caught glimpses of a running herd through the trees. Prior to leaving, Javier suggested we do a group photo in front of the mansion's entrance. This turned into a fifteen-minute endeavor as some of our tour members were missing from the original photograph and the hotel staff had to take the shot all over again. Then *everyone* wanted a photo on his or her own camera, so we posed again…and again…and again. We finally left the Hacienda La Cienega around 2:15pm.

Back on Route 35 we headed north towards Quito. The stretch of fertile lands along the central valley from Riobamba (a city to the south of Ambato) to the nation's capital is often referred to as the 'Avenue of the Volcanoes', a term coined by the German botanist Alexander Von Humbolt. The Pan American Highway goes straight through this long valley, and on opposite sides of the roadway one can see almost parallel sets of mountains containing nine of the country's tallest summits (including the snow-capped Chimborazo volcano if you're further south, its 20,565 foot peak the highest point in Ecuador). Just on our drive from Lasso to Quito alone we passed numerous volcanoes, including Cotopaxi, Ruminahui, Corazon, Pasochoa, Atacaso and, of course, the twin-peaked Pichincha (Quito lies on its eastern slope). In the small town of Machachi we had to go through a toll plaza, and I noticed that many of the residents of this town were sporting protective facemasks due to the ash emitted from Cotopaxi. I actually packed a few in my luggage, but I never needed to use them during the tour.

It was a long drive back to Quito; many of us took this opportunity to take a nap. I, myself, succumbed to the lull of the highway and began snoozing. At one point I awoke while we were driving through a pine forest. I thought, *how nice*, and promptly nodded off again. We reached the city by 4:00pm, the afternoon rush hour making our drive into the New Town section a bit cumbersome. Some in our group had asked Javier where they could buy quality Ecuadorian chocolates for souvenirs and he made Geraldo stop the bus at a high-end supermarket called Supermaxi. We stocked up on goodies and headed to the Hilton Colon for our final night in Ecuador.

On most guided tours there is usually a farewell dinner on the last evening before everyone returns home. But this trip would end the way it began; we would have to make our own arrangements for dinner. Javier suggested several places to eat both near our hotel and in the Old Town. It was still early and a group of us wanted to take full advantage of our last day in Ecuador and experience the *TeleferiQo* cable car ride that goes up the eastern side of the Pichincha volcano to a lookout spot known as Cruz Loma, overlooking the city and the valley beyond. This is one of the highest aerial lifts in the world, rising more than 2700 feet to an elevation point of almost 13,000 feet. Guidebooks touted the view from the top as spectacular and definitely worth the effort. Javier said the taxis in front of the hotel would only charge us $4 to take us there, but he cautioned that at night it might take longer to catch a cab ride back, so he recommended we didn't stay too long after dark.

We checked into the Hilton Colon and I went straight up to my room, put my luggage away and grabbed my heaviest hoodie jacket (I actually brought along two for the trip). At 13,000 feet, Cruz Loma was going to be very cold. By 5:00pm I joined Sandy, Ann, Todd, Amy, Paul, Christin, Joan and Diane in the lobby. I reminded those not wearing jackets that it was going to be quite chilly at the top of the mountain and a few returned to their rooms to put on something heavier. Shortly afterwards we piled into two taxis (Rita joined us as we were leaving) and made the 15-minute drive to the *TeleferiQo* station, located on the eastern edge of the city. Initially, the planners of the *TeleferiQo* skyrail envisioned an entire complex surrounding the lift. A mall, a cinema, several coffee houses and an amusement park were slated to be built at its base, but this project fell through and essentially there is only a small amusement park near the entrance. At the top of Cruz Loma is an enclosed mini-food mart with tables to sit and relax, and clean bathroom facilities. Thank goodness, too, because it was so cold when we reached the top we had to go inside repeatedly just to avoid the icy winds.

Normally there are long lines to ride the cable cars, which cost (as of this writing) $8.50 for the roundtrip, but due to the lateness of the hour we pretty much had the place to ourselves. After purchasing our tickets we split up into two groups of five and boarded our gondolas for the eight-minute ride to the top. The carriages were equipped with tinted plastic windows that dulled the view. Perhaps it was just as well, because it was a very steep and scary incline. Once we reached the platform, we waited for our companions and then proceeded to the various lookout points situated around Cruz Loma. The entire city of Quito can be seen from up here, nestled snuggly into the Pichincha valley. On another side of the lookout you can experience a Zen-like moment while viewing the mist-covered Andean mountain chain. Volcanoes as far as the eye can see. It was a breathtaking view…*in more ways than one*. The air was so thin I became light-headed just walking around. *And freezing*! Todd and Amy were not wearing jackets and, for the life of me, I don't know how they withstood the cold. Perhaps since they live in the northeast they're used to it. As for me? My Miami-bred testicles receded the moment I felt my first alpine breeze.

Dusk was approaching, and we decided to stay up there to see the sunset and experience the lights of Quito at night. We ordered hot drinks inside the mini-mart and waited about twenty minutes before going back outside to witness the orange glow of the sun disappearing over the mountaintops

while the city of Quito lit up like a Christmas tree. *Wow*. I took so many wonderful photographs of the event. By 6:50pm we boarded the cable cars again and headed back down in the dark. A taxi van driver employed by the *TeleferiQo* station offered to take us back to the hotel for $15. We took one sobering glance at the deserted and poorly lit streets in front of the station and quickly accepted his offer.

Back at the Hilton Colon we agreed to rendezvous in thirty minutes and go have dinner at one of the restaurants Javier recommended not too far from our hotel. I washed up in my room and jotted down some notes in my journal before heading back to the lobby at 7:30pm. Todd, Amy, Sandy, Ann, Paul, Christin, Diane and Joan were already there. We had announced earlier to the rest of the group that we were going to have dinner in town, in case anyone else wanted to join our little 'farewell' gathering. We waited for about ten minutes in the lobby, but when no one else showed up we left, leaving a message with the concierge where they could find us if anyone inquired.

The restaurant Javier suggested was in the trendy Mariscal District. We walked north along *Avenida Rios Amazonas* for several blocks…and this is when I had a deja vu moment. Javier had given Todd instructions on how to find the restaurant. At the moment, though, Todd couldn't remember the name of the establishment, only that it began with the letter 'A'. The more he looked at the map – and the more we walked around in circles – it dawned on me that I had come full circle. How ironic. This is how the trip began, getting lost on my way to dinner. Only now, I had eight companions on this nomadic journey! I lost count how many streets, bars and restaurants we passed that night. I asked a guy in Spanish who was parking his motorcycle if he knew where we could find a popular restaurant in the vicinity that started with the letter "A"? He glanced at us as if we were crazy and shook his head. We even tried contacting Javier on his cell phone, but got no answer. Finally, we ended up in the Plaza Foch area, in the heart of restaurant row. We decided to just pick any eatery and take our chances. We selected a three-story corner establishment overlooking the plaza. It seemed busy and offered exclusively Ecuadorian cuisine. Besides, it had the word 'mama' in its name (and who doesn't like mom's cooking?).

We wearily climbed a spiraling wooden staircase to the top level of the restaurant and the waiters put together a few tables for us. I wanted to experience an authentic Ecuadorian meal so I ordered a combination plate

with a little bit of everything: seasoned pork meat, fried pork skins, two types of empanadas, a corn and potato dish and avocado slices. Two musicians set up shop next to our table and serenaded us with – oddly enough – Simon and Garfunkel instrumentals. After a few tunes they asked us if we wanted to buy their musical CDs (a popular line of work down here, it seems) before moving on to another restaurant. We stayed late, ordering appetizers (some had beer) and chatted it up. We re-hashed the best moments of the tour, and then everyone took out his or her smartphone and the picture sharing began: families, homes, dogs, etc, etc. We had a great 'farewell' dinner and headed back to the hotel by 9:40pm.

In the lobby I gave Sandy and Ann a big hug goodbye, they were leaving for Panama at 3:00pm the following day and would not be joining the rest of us on our trip to the airport. I really enjoyed their company. Sandy had a dry, sarcastic wit that really cracked me up, and Ann was a bubbly, good-spirited woman. I promised them I would be in touch. Everyone had signed an email list for me. Exhausted, as usual, after another long busy day, I excused myself and retired to my room. I decided to repack in the morning and went straight to bed.

I was up by 5:00am. After several cups of coffee I spent an hour writing in my journal, intermittingly watching the CNN international news broadcast on TV. I took a shower, donned my last clean shirt and re-packed my suitcase. I dumped all the toiletries and items I no longer needed into the trashcan to lighten my luggage, hoping my combined souvenirs and dirty laundry didn't put me over the airline baggage weight limit. By 8:00am I went downstairs for breakfast. Afterwards, I joined a few of the others and headed over to the artisan marketplace down the street for some last minute souvenir buying. We were taken to the airport in two groups, leaving an hour apart. Mine left at 10:00am. Most of us tipped Javier and Geraldo that morning in the lobby before leaving to catch our flights. I'm certain they were adequately compensated by the group for a job well done. Both accompanied us to the airport, where we said our final goodbyes. Javier

actually made sure we were all ticketed and ready to go through the departure gate area before leaving us. *I love these guided tours*!

The trip home was pleasant and uneventful, so no need to bore you with the tedious details. *Except one*. Rob nearly had his own personal 'Midnight Express' moment when he was going through the security screening process at the Mariscal Sucre International Airport. A fun-loving, jovial person by nature, Rob was collecting his things after being waved through security when he innocently patted one of the airport personnel on the back and said, "Good job." This individual, not as good-natured or jovial as Rob, took it the wrong way. Before they knew it, Rob and Whitney were abruptly pulled to the side and had their luggage rummaged through in what they described as a very *impolite* manner. Live and learn, folks. Airport security personnel rarely have a sense of humor!

It felt great to be back home in Miami. I had the rest of the week off from work and I busied myself editing photographs and telling family and friends about my trip. For me, though, no tour is complete until I finish the journal. And now that it is done, I can close another traveling chapter in my life. *This was a wonderful tour*. I cannot imagine cramming more activities into such a short period of time than this. In seven days we traversed the Ecuadorian Andes and the upper Amazon basin, experiencing the history, the indigenous culture and some incredible natural wonders along the way. I cannot speak more fondly of the Ecuadorian people and their beautiful country. I will definitely go back one day. After all, I still have to see the Galapagos Islands.

Of course, what makes for a great trip are the people you travel with, and I couldn't have asked for better companions than this tour group. Thank you all for a memorable time, I hope when you read this journal it will always take you back to Ecuador and the short time we spent together. I write these traveling stories so they can serve as my memories when I am no longer capable of recalling the finer details; and now, they can serve as your memories, too. The opinions might be mine, but we all shared the same trip. This was a group effort…*like eating the beetle larvae*. I pray we can do it again in the future.

In closing, I dedicate this journal to the memory of my daughter Rachel. I would like to think a part of her made this trip with me…and that perhaps one day she'll be *my* guide when I embark on my 'final tour'.

Booby, I love you.

Until next time.

Richard C. Rodriguez
(My trip to Ecuador occurred during August/September 2015)