



Ecuador – My own introduction

A delayed inbound flight from Nassau left me racing through the Miami terminal; but I reached the gate for my Quito bound flight with minutes to spare.

Sitting next to an excited Ecuadorian family with teaching jobs in Chicago, returning home for a wedding, I quickly learned of the congeniality of these people - everyone has a smile - hundreds of them as it turned out, pressed against the glass at the new terminal on a rainy but warm night at the mid city airport. Angel was there to meet me and I settled in for the hour and a half drive along the surprisingly good but winding Pan American highway, up into the Andes region and the little mountain town of San Pablo. I was welcomed to Casa Imbabura, on the grounds of *Hacienda Cusin*, by friends with more smiles, a roaring fire and a strong scotch!



The local rooster awoke me early to the wonderful view of snow capped Cotacachi volcano, and we visited Cusin, an old hacienda turned into a quaint small hotel by an eccentric Englishman. Nestled in a valley at 8,000 feet, overlooked by volcanoes, Its 23 rooms are comfortable cozy, and the general areas are crowded with antiques collected from all corners of South America. Here is a place for everyone's tastes, use it a base for hiking, riding or exploring the many Indian villages nearby.

On Wednesdays and Saturdays, there is a substantial crafts market at the nearby town of Otavalo: local Indians come from miles around in the Andean foothills to partake of the festivities, hang out with friends from nearby villages, or merely gain a few dollars for their offerings to continue to survive. Colorful rugs, gorgeous white alpaca blankets, meat and fruits and jewelry of every description lend to the occasion. We enjoyed a delicious local lunch with potato soup and avocado at another hacienda - the slightly more tired yet characterful *Hacienda Pinsaqui*.

It was Palm Sunday and we ambled a short way into town to be greeted by a fast assembling crowd at a small outdoor shrine of colorfully clad Indian peoples, fervent worshippers all clutching their cornshucks - or carefully knotted palm fronds. Service for the entirely ethnic gathering was said by a visiting priest, the blessing given by flicking a frond in and out of a bucket of water: the crowd melted contentedly away into the town as silently as it had come.

Collecting our ever eager taxi driver, pausing in the town center to witness an emotional larger service, we headed for lunch at the five star Relais and Chateaux *La Mirage*. Here is absolute luxury, should that be your need: along with a spa, it is superbly appointed with every attention to detail in food and rooms. Peacocks strolled the manicured lawns, and a vermilion flycatcher proudly used the central fountain as his hunting perch. After lunch we took the short walk into Cotacachi town, famous for its leather, which had everything imaginable on display at very reasonable prices - even though I could not find a single jacket that actually fitted me properly!

Marcia Simon-Alvarez, one of Ecuador's characters and top guides, was to be our friend and escort for the next six days. Leaving Cusin, soon we were climbing up into the mountains in her 4 x 4, the

pretty green landscape constantly changing before we penetrated the clouds to cross the pass at 12,000ft. After lunch at *Papallacta*, and a thoroughly relaxing hour in its famous hot springs, we descended to *Chillo Jijon*. Jacinto and Mariana Jijon welcomed us to their grand home, just 45 minutes out of Quito, built in 1720 on a large estate, now mostly sold off to pay bills. This influential family has always lived in this charming spacious hacienda, which retains its majesty much as it always has been, though now modernized to 10 rooms to offer every comfort. We strolled through their adjoining eucalyptus and pine park, home to ostriches and its own hydro power station. Jacinto himself was recently a member of the Ecuador congress, and had been ambassador to Rome in the mid nineties. Dinner, served with crystal and candelabras by white-gloved servants in the vast dining room, overlooked by relatives from four generations past, was a highly stimulating affair.

Ecuadorian time had us leaving late on the two hour trip to San Agustin. Built on the site of an Inca temple, it features many of the original perfectly carved stone Inca walls. One dines in Inca splendor, candles glowing in the same nooks which once held those of the Incas themselves, centuries ago. Owned for many generations by the Plaza family, five of whom have been Ecuadorian Presidents, Mignon Plaza still hosts this imaginative 10 room Hacienda, nestled on the fertile lower slopes of 19,000ft Cotopaxi. Each room is uniquely stylized, the llamas roam freely in the ancient cobbled courtyard, elegant gauchos bring in horses much as they have done for hundreds of years. We were ready for our evening ride on comfortable fit horses through the local area.

We anxiously waited for days to see if the gods would grant us a reasonable view of this famous volcano - but it was not to be, until we flew out to the Galapagos!

The next morning we took a picnic lunch and drove the winding road up into the Cotopaxi national park, heading up into the high alpine desert on this famous volcano. Finally, at 4,200 meters, all vegetation gave way to crumbly volcanic scree. The wind howled through the damp clouds as we set off up the steep hill trying to reach the Refuge, the simple hut for hikers challenging the summit. The conditions and the sudden altitude convinced me to abandon this for another day!

Jean Pablo proudly showed us around his nearby family rose farm, one of hundreds in the area providing vital employment for a fast expanding population. The rich volcanic soil of Cotapaxi hosts explosions of vivid color from their seven hectares. They process 20,000 stems a day for the world market, yielding 25 cents each, and each rose bush produces one stem a month for nearly twelve years. Driving back, through rural towns, a sunset lit glimpse of Chimborazo - at 21,000ft Ecuador's highest volcano, set the scene for another intimate dinner at our Hacienda San Agustin.

It was Good Friday, and we piled back into our faithful chariot to return to Quito. The procession through the historic streets of old Quito is surely one of the great highlights of a visit to South America. Marcia, as always, timed our arrival perfectly to join the throngs just as the *Jesus des Grand Poder* the emotive black statue of Christ struggling with the cross appeared, inching its way along the packed cobbled street, flanked on all sides by fervent marchers of all ages. Pressing all around me were tear stained faces of rich and poor alike; men and women pushed and shoved for a view, to pay homage and express their grief for the past.

The contrast between them and the sinister Rayban equipped soldiers who shoved the crowds back was marked. As a tall



gringo I was privileged to a view well above the short Ecuadorians. Above us gray clouds threatened rain, but suddenly the sun broke through, bringing that intense heat of high altitude.

A flock of umbrellas exploded in my face, and only diligent ducking and weaving prevented the loss of an eye! After the procession passed, we needed to cross the street, against the flow - a sobering experience. We held hands while the tide of people swept us sideways, a slip could really have been fatal under the feet of this fervent crowd.

Marcia led us skillfully through back lanes across the old city to meet the procession near its head, and we weaved our way up through the crowd to the very front where the Cuchurus marched in their sinister looking purple hoods seeking atonement for their sins. Some flagellated themselves, while behind them stumbled a reenactment of Jesus carrying a very heavy wooden cross. Vendors enjoyed brisk sales of pirated copies of Mel Gibson's Passion of Christ, umbrellas, hand spun ice cream and cold drinks. Tears rolled freely from the eyes of many impassioned faces, soaking up this the most spiritual day of the year, as people hung from every vantage point off the San Francisco cathedral.

It is time to retreat: Marcia has paid the guard of the museum car park to keep it open especially for us, and we retire to nearby parking and drive out to comfortable suburbs to a party with Adele Tovar. She has invited us to join a group of friends for Fanesca, the traditional Good Friday fish soup - which was completely fulfilling! Laughter wine and music complete a special day.

The ornate baroque hotel Mansion de Angel provided a central location for shopping in Quito, prior to an early start for our flight to the Galapagos Islands.

Three airlines now serve the islands either direct or via Guayaquil - seemingly at their daily discretion, landing at Baltra or San Cristobal. We were met by our guide, whisked through the island immigration procedures and off by bus to the nearby harbor, each of us sizing up our companions for the coming week. Our three masted 16 passenger schooner **Alta** rode gently at anchor, awaiting our arrival. I had chosen a small boat for my Darwinian adventure, as I prefer the more personalized approach, though there are now 82 boats of all shapes, sizes and comfort levels to choose from. Each has its own advantages, which I would be happy to discuss with you. I personally toured six different ships from different companies to get a good idea of the options available.



Cabins vary in size, as they must on an old sailing boat. We had lunch on the foredeck as we set sail - actually motored as March is not a windy time - to a small rocky outcrop off San Cristobal island. Donning our snorkeling gear, soon we were rolling over the side of our panga, immersed in warm water and the playful inquisitive world of more than thirty baby sea lions.

An unforgettable start to our trip. Back on board ship we enjoyed sundowners, met new friends, accompanied by a classic fireball plunging into the sea. We set sail again for the long night journey to Genovesa Island, also known as Tower Island.

It was an early call for a substantial breakfast before boarding the panga to the shore, and a short climb up Prince Philip's steps 200 feet up to the volcano lip cliff top in the soft morning light. An avian paradise opened up before us - red footed boobies, masked boobies and heart carrying nesting

frigates. There had been rain at this season, so the trees carried a cloak of soft green foliage, which, upon closer inspection, revealed downy chicks of many descriptions. The frigates put on an

incredible mating display, each male occupying a potential nest, their warbling and wriggling blood red membranes flaring out as an eligible female glides gently overhead. The competition for a mate, it seems, is substantial!

We snorkel again as the tide comes in, and we make a second trip to other nesting sites, beaches crammed with sea lions who ignore us until we encroach within a predetermined line. We are tired

but exhilarated, and return to the Alta for the daily briefing by Whitman Cox our native islander guide, dinner and bed.



A twelve hour, 100nm sail through the brilliant tropical starlit night, our masts probing the heavens, brought us to Vincent Rock Point - the Northwest point of Isabella Island, the largest of the 13 islands, and 42 islets. The highest of five volcanoes peak at 5, 500 ft, and here we see the best geological indications of this archipelago's turbulent birth. Water depths around the interior are about 400 - 800 metres, but just one mile off to the west it drops suddenly to 2 km.

Anchored under 400 ft cliffs, a volcano towers above us to 5,000 ft, we clamber aboard the dinghy for a trip along the cliffs, sea turtles drift by, penguins looking more like black ducks furtively fish, marine iguanas slither out onto the rocks to start their daily battery charge. Alarmingly, we spot danger- a feral cat stalking baby iguanas on the cliffs, who over the millennia have never learned predatorial danger. Colder water from the deep Pacific currents catches our breath as we plunge in to snorkel, swimming after Whitman into a cave teeming with tropical fish, turtles and rays gliding along the bottom some 20 feet below us. Turning back towards the light, a wonderland of backlit fish faced us. We snorkeled on, following rays and turtles, one of which had a small conch shell firmly attached to its own shell. Back on board for a warm shower and nourishing lunch on the cool forward deck, we sailed on to another beach.

Our siesta did not seem long enough before we were onshore again to witness the spectacle of hundreds of Marine Iguanas, Galapagos Hawks and flightless cormorants whose big powerful legs have evolved perfectly for underwater fishing. Effortlessly hopping out onto the rocks, they return to their nests to court their chosen one with their haunting aquamarine eyes.

Born and bred here on the islands, our guide Whitman Cox has infinite knowledge on every subject, and clearly a good guide here is essential. He had us up early in the mornings spotting sperm whales feeding on plankton, and bottlenose dolphins riding our bow waves. Huge schools of common dolphins are also seen in this vast marine wonder.



Back around the North coast of Isabella picking up a bit of a swell to Santiago, San Salvador Island, and James bay.

On the east side of Espanola island, at Punta Suarez, we took a two hour walk along the shore line, viewing blue footed boobies, resident American oystercatchers, many migratory birds, sea lions

returning from feeding as the moon fades, arriving at the grottos. The endemic Galapagos fur seals, who roam as far as Peru and Chile, sunbathe in groups, hiding their heads under their soft flippers at the lava bridges. One is entertained by the marine iguanas who cannot sweat, so spit to cool down; striped heron and brilliant orange and yellow rock crabs.

362 steps take one up to a 115 metre look out point, giving an impressive view of the lava ring of the volcano. Past the famous sandstone rock tower, the mini cruise ship *Expedition* lies at anchor, reminding us that things here are changing fast as she disgorges 8 panga loads of camera toting tourists on to the small beaches. This fragile ecosystem is without doubt suffering increased pressure since Darwin landed here on Santiago Island Sept 17, 1783, from tourists, ferral goats, wild cats, illegal fishing and corruption.

Thursday - Heading now to Santa Cruz the main tourist island and population centre with its nearby Baltra airport, the night was spent resting in calm waters just off shore.

After breakfast we landed and picked up a comfortable 16 passenger bus and climbed a good tar road to top of the 1,800ft mountain. The southerly winds keep the South side moist and green, but the North in the rain shadow is noticeably drier. We stopped by the local gravel pit which gave us a chance to see the strata beneath this volcanic cover, Darwin finches abounded, and we took a short walk in the forest, enjoying the collapsed lava strata much like a caldera, and the scalesia broccoli trees which formed a substantial canopy across it. The prize of the day was the Vermillion flycatchers.

A nearby farm plays host to a 300m lava tunnel, which brought home the feeling of natures raw power, with the realization that this dynamic situation continues today. Meanwhile overhead the gentle giant tortoises sought shelter from the sun, gently chewing on the leaves. A wild life safari searching for these, is hardly like looking for lion, but fascinating to observe them in the wild living just as they have done for millennia.

An afternoon visit to the famous Charles Darwin station was a worthwhile experience to see firsthand the conservation efforts going on in the area, as well as lonesome George, a 200 year old giant tortoise.

The first residents settled, and before them pirates played out their colourful history on Floriana also known as Santa Maria. Anchoring just off Devils Crown, a caldera, 200 metres off Floriana, its craggy remnants oversee some of the finest snorkeling in the islands. Strong currents saw us dropping in at one end, and drifting westwards in the water, now colder from contact with the Humboldt current. We went ashore at Post Office Bay, dropping postcards at the legendary card swap, before climbing the 80 steps to take in the dramatically expanding view from Baroness Hill, watching 18 vast gentle turtles in the bay below drifting on the surface.



Large shoals of angel fish, parrotfish, the hieroglyphic hawk fish with its emerald green marbled skin, carpets of striped sardines and white tipped sharks made a spectacular dive to which we returned in the afternoon for more.

A seven hour sail through a fairly strong swell brought us into anchor on the east side of Espanola, at Punta Suarez. Whitman persuaded us to get up at 5:30 to be first onto this avian paradise at first light. We waded ashore past noisy territorial sealions and climbed a few steps into the boobery, alive

with mating blue footed boobies, in every nook and cranny. They demonstrated their *cari*, their unique mating parade, totally unphased by human presence. These elegant birds roll from one big

blue webbed foot to the other while stretching their necks contorting their wings to impress their chosen one. For several hours we lingered among this incredible sight of 12 to 15,000 mating pairs.

The cliffs in this same area are an impressive sight when the Albatross return here to nest, until leaving again in December to stay at sea. Different coloured marine iguanas abound here too.

After another snorkel, during which I took the time to visit other boats of other companies for comparison purposes we headed back to the anchorage at San Christobal, sad to have to bid adieu to our new found friends and guide.

Gazing down on the islands as we winged our way home, I truly felt privileged to have experienced one of the worlds great eco systems - before it becomes overrun with visitors.