

Rich and Cheryll's Excellent Adventure in Ecuador

December 1999

Cheryll and I left on December 18th for two weeks in Ecuador. Our tortuous routing required flying to Fort Lauderdale, renting a car, finding a room for the night, driving to the Miami airport, flying to Panama on COPA Airlines, connecting to a flight to Guayaquil, Ecuador, and then continuing on to Quito. There we would spend our second night before an early morning flight back to Guayaquil which continued on to San Cristobal Island in the Galapagos, some 600 miles west of the mainland. The first problem occurred on the day before departure when the recently active Pinchincha Volcano immediately adjacent to Quito decided to erupt, sending a cloud of ash over the city and closing the airport. Our Ecuadorian travel agent was able to reroute us so that we could spend our second night in the port city of Guayaquil, well distant from the volcanoes. Everything worked well except for the baggage which didn't manage to accompany us. More on this later.

We spent our week in the Galapagos Islands aboard the 75-foot motor yacht Dorado. Dorado carries up to 16 passengers in eight cabins and has a crew of eight. There's a dining area with a small bar where you keep your own tab, two sun decks, a large main salon, and two shady outside areas. A bell is rung at mealtimes which are served family style. The crew fished whenever the boat was moving and they managed to catch some large tuna. The fruit was excellent. The food can best be described as adequate, but we didn't come here for the cuisine. Our group consisted of Blair and Bob, two fun-loving guys from Laguna Beach, California and Mary, Angelika, Jennifer and Bev; four lovely, young, adventuresome teachers from the International School in Guayaquil. They're all North Americans and spend their spare time travelling around South America. A family of six from Norway joined us later in the week. The kids were in their twenties and they all spoke fluent English. The crew kept the boat clean and especially concentrated on the windows of the girl's cabins.

A typical day consisted of breakfast, a trip to shore in the dingy, an hour or two walk with our naturalist guide, snorkeling and then lunch. After lunch and siesta time, we'd go ashore in a different spot. After dinner, the guide would brief us on the next day's activities and wildlife. In the evenings, we had sing-a-longs and charades. If this is starting to sound like summer camp, you're right. Except, we're getting older and didn't stay up late telling ghost stories, and they don't allow campfires. Two of the passengers were music teachers and they wrote a song about Cheryll and I. On Christmas Eve, all four of the teachers sang it for us. It was the best present ever. The whole group of passengers composed a Galapagos version of the "Twelve Days of Christmas". The twelfth day was something like this; Twelve sea lions clapping, eleven sharks a biting, ten sun-burnt tourists, nine Darwin finches, eight land iguanas, seven penguins

swimming, six giant tortoises, five staaaarrrr fiiish, four albatross, three manta rays, two hammer-head sharks and a blue-footed boooobie.

The islands are basically deserts with minimal vegetation and lots of lava rocks, and we also visited a few lava tunnels. The amazing thing about Galapagos wildlife is that it is so approachable. It's as though all the animals and fish have been trained to ignore the tourists. We swam with sharks, penguins, sea lions, and countless other fish. We stepped over sleeping iguanas, watched the albatross mating dance from ten feet away, waited for a giant tortoise to cross the road and strolled by blue-footed boobies hatching eggs and feeding their young. We saw pink flamingoes and male frigate birds with huge, red inflated pouches under their chins. Most of the area is a National Park and humans have never been predators, so the animals could care less about us watching them. Each island is a little different in its appearance and wildlife, and the combination of good tour books and our mediocre guide kept us well informed. This is considered the birthplace of the theory of evolution, so don't tell televangelist Pat Robertson, but Charles Darwin is a real hero here.

When we returned to the mainland there was a double hit. The Ecuadorian Sucre had been devalued by ten percent against the dollar, so the money in our pocket was worth ten percent less than it was a week earlier (there would be five percent further devaluation in the coming week), and our bags were still lost. We spent our first night back in Guayaquil, and while we didn't have any problem, it had all the signs of a crime problem. The small stores left the bars in front of their shops out even when they were open. Transactions are conducted through the bars.

For our second week we splurged and hired a private guide and driver for a tour of the center of the country. It was great. In the National Parks we could be dropped off near the top of some mountains, hike down with the guide and be picked up at lower elevation. Carlos Recalde was our guide, and he was excellent. He'd lived in LA for three years, but decided he was happier in the mountains of Ecuador than in an office. He speaks good English and knows the country like the back of his hand.

We spent two nights in the city of Cuenca at 8500 feet. Our bags finally caught up to us here ten days after we had last seen them in Miami. It seems that there was a lot of excess baggage and the plane was too full when we left Miami so COPA just left our suitcases and twenty five other people's bags behind. They shipped them to the Galapagos when they arrived in Guayaquil the next day, but failed to identify the recipient. When we asked in the Galapagos, everyone insisted that they hadn't arrived. They sat in the airline office unidentified until we returned to Guayaquil and Carlos spent some time with the airline manager. They were then shipped back to Guayaquil, but the local agent in Cuenca said he didn't know anything about them, so don't ship them there. He was chastised

and the bags arrived on the first flight the next day, albeit with a broken zipper and missing lock.

The good news is that we were eventually reimbursed \$228. If you're going to lose your luggage, Ecuador is the place to do it. Stuff is cheap! For \$114 in the Galapagos we bought 5 polos, 7 t-shirts, 6 underwear, 6 pairs of socks, sandals, tennis shoes, two bathing suits, toiletries and three rolls of film. We also were reimbursed for the broken suitcase and some warmer clothes we bought before venturing into the mountains.

Mainland Ecuador is not for people without a sense of adventure, but for those who do the rewards are great. The roads are rough, but the scenery is spectacular. During their time spent living in Guayaquil, the schoolteachers had developed a five-star bathroom rating scale; one star for there even being a bathroom, one star for a dry floor, one star for a seat, one star for paper, and one star for reasonable cleanliness. Outside of our hotels, the bathrooms averaged two or three stars. The people were very welcoming. They were incredibly polite, warm and service came with a smile. During the night we spent near Riobamba, Tungurahua erupted around 11:00 PM. It sounded like a cannon even though it was 30 miles away. In the morning, there was a dust cloud in the sky and a thin layer of volcanic ash covered everything. The combination of ash and altitude kept Cheryll and I sniffing for the rest of the trip. The climate was good; 80's near the ocean and in the Galapagos and 70's in the mountains.

On New Year's Eve we approached Quito and learned about the El Viejo (Spanish for "Old Man") tradition. Each year the Ecuadorians make dummies out of old clothes and sawdust to represent the old year. They adorn them with masks painted to look like politicians and wigs and set them by the side of the road. A group of five or ten people will dress in costumes or men will put on dresses and set up roadblocks next to the El Viejo and ask for money. Some of the scarier costumes included soldiers with what appeared to be real guns. The roadblocks ranged from rocks placed in the road and rope strung across the road, to elaborate poles on hinges. If I had been driving by myself, and the guide hadn't explained all of this in advance, I would have been incredibly scared, and I don't know what I would have done. In any case, you give the people at the roadblock a coin (the equivalent of a nickel) and everybody wishes you Happy New Year and removes the roadblock. We crossed through around a hundred of these on our way from Cuenca to Quito. At midnight on New Year's Eve the El Viejos are set on fire in the street or on the sidewalk. This removes all the bad things from the previous year and offers a fresh start for the new. We saw dozens of fires during the two-mile cab ride back to our hotel shortly after midnight. Carlos bought an El Viejo and we contributed a COPA Airlines t-shirt.

Speaking of midnight, I can tell you that nothing happened in Ecuador for Y2K in spite of the dire warnings about their preparedness. It's been widely reported that here in the US we spent \$400 for every man, woman and child to prepare for

Y2K. I don't know how much Ecuador spent, but it wasn't much. We probably spent more money figuring out how much money we spent than they spent altogether. But on January 1st in Quito, the utilities functioned, the planes flew, and we used our ATM card at an Ecuadorian bank. In the US, we probably could have spent one percent of what we did and eliminated 99.9% of the problems. On the news during New Year's Day I watched a guy being interviewed on the street in New York about the lack of problems. He declared it a credit to American ingenuity. I'm more inclined to conclude that the ingenious ones were the computer consultants who trumped up this scare in the first place. They've been exploiting the human instinct for fear and should be placed in the same category as people selling credit life insurance policies and extended warranties which return pennies on the dollar.

Our final tours took us to a market in Otavalo to buy crafts and to a monument which tourists pretend is on the equator. Ecuadorians are proud of having gotten their country's name from the equator. Scientists have declared that the earth wobbles a little and that the real equator is now about a half mile north of the monument.

The Ecuadorians have just endured two years of El Nino floods and washed out roads. In 1999, inflation was 300 percent. There is currently a banking crisis. Two active volcanoes are threatening the country. All of this has resulted in a major reduction in tourism. Many people are canceling and hotel rooms and cruise ship cabins sit empty. But the Ecuadorians are strong. Each time they get kicked, they get up and brush off the dust (or volcanic ash) and get on with life. It's a fascinating place and I heartily recommend a trip for the more adventuresome.

I'll close with one final sing-a-long (To the tune of Barry Manilow's "Copacabana");

To fly COPA, that was the plan - a.
But they left our bags north in Miami - a.
They claimed they shipped them here,
they said they sent them there.
But they did not appear,
so they bought us underwear.
Flying on COPA, was not a good plan!
Cheap T-shirts are the fashion,
and denials come with passion,
when you fly COPA, COPA Airlines!

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