

A Case for Ecuadorian Splendor

Following my three week “motion study” in the UK, I “hopped the pond” to Quito, Ecuador to sort out some unfinished business from my last “rounding. Back in the spring of 2017 I had the choice to spend three weeks in Ecuador and three in Colombia, but I chose to spend the entire six weeks in Colombia with no regrets. So now it was Ecuador’s turn, and here too, I have no regrets.

I’ve been working on my “app Spanish” daily since meeting my friends Dania and Danielle who gracefully move between three languages back in 2016, and made me look bad. The first year of Duo-Lingo was considered a wash; I knew some words and phrases, but my recall wasn’t fast enough to be useful when speaking. Touching down in Quito, suddenly it all came together and I was able to ask for the bus, determine the direction and even carry on a halted conversation while traveling.

Looking like Santa, I don’t pass for an Ecuadorian, nor are my language skills by any means complete, but I now have the confidence to ask for things, and can pick up conversations happening around me..and it’s a great feeling.

Quito will literally take your breath away...not for any abject beauty upon leaving the airport, but at 9,350ft there’s just not a lotta air to breath...so you move in slow motion for the first days.

Ecuador has “adopted” the US\$ as the mode of currency, but there are few actual dollar bills here. Ecuador prefers the \$1 coin; the “Sacajawea” ..considering these are relatively scarce in the US, I think we export them all here...they are everywhere. Electrical outlets are also “American” and gas is sold by the gallon..it’s a most “American” of places.

By South American standards, Ecuador is on the smaller size, but I hadn’t done much planning before I landed, owing to the fast pace I kept in the UK. My first days were spent talking to the hostellers who had already been around and slowly a plan came together.

First stop was the Mindo cloud forest, a two-hour bus ride to the north. There was the promise of butterflies, hummingbirds and a dense fores; I was all in. My long weekend was spent hoofing around the jungle, capturing images of butterflies and giving the hummingbirds their due- they were faster than my lens..

Mindo waterfall,leaves

I popped back to Quito for a day to sort out my belongings and make a plane reservation for the Galapagos and I was back on the road, heading south on a three week adventure.

The first stop was Banos, adventure playground for Ecuador. Here there is bungee jumping, hiking, waterfalls, rafting, the Amazon and mountain biking. I had planned on three or four days here, but when I realized that I wouldn’t be jumping off any cliffs, or rafting or biking, my stay here became shorter. I opted for two days, then to Riobamba to catch the artisanal market, another two hours away. In the

end, the bed I slept in was better than the market, but I got some great shots at the market and was on my way to Cuenca, the cultural capital of Ecuador.

The buses in Ecuador are great. They're relatively new, so there's never that "sat out" feeling you get when traveling the older buses...air conditioning if needed, and movies, always movies. Considering the longest "run" you can do in a bus here is around 10hrs, the trips are short and cheap. You usually pay about \$1 per hour of travel.

I had heard that there is a huge ex-pat community in Cuenca, which in turn creates a "gringo" section of town for the foreigners to feel "at home", but at a higher price. I found this area on my first day and have to agree, it's at a higher price. Meals are \$4 to \$7 and while that sounds OK by Euro or American standards, that's a lot of money for a local. I'm eating at the "mercados" daily for about \$2 a meal...and I would have trouble finishing \$4 worth of food there.

The stay in Cuenca was split between the "old" and "new" sections of town, neatly divided by a river. The old section is churches, doorways and trees. The new section is restaurants and shopping. I had a serviceable stay at a hotel on the old side, but a fantastic stay at a place called Mallki hostel for the last days. They had a few cats that ran the show. The elder even having his own hammock...The crowd was great and I got a lot of planning done for my trip to the islands.

I went with some hostellers on a city tour on my last day. Here I was able to sample "Cuy" – guinea pig..it was really quite tasty...and have a shaman give me a spiritual "cleansing"..where they rub plants, flowers and an egg all over you and eventually spit purified water in your face...and it only cost \$5.

Leaving Cuenca, a four hour bus brought me to Guyaquil for a night, just long enough to catch dinner and an early cab to the airport in the morning.

So about going to the Galapagos....

I'm going to publish "The Bohemians Guide to the Galapagos" following this post, so I won't weigh down this update with the nuts and bolts of discount travel, but rest assured, it can be done.

I spent twelve days on three islands, San Cristobal, Isabela and Santa Cruz. Instead of spending my time and money on a cruise, I spent most of my time walking....with all my camera equipment...it was hot, but SO worth the effort. While I'm sure I didn't see the widest variety of animals possible, those I did see were accessible and I had the time to just sit there and shoot...there are few time constraints when you're on your own.

Isabela is the least inhabited, so the wildlife was more plentiful. San Cristobal had more people and only slightly fewer animals; and Santa Cruz was a major city by Galapagos standards, but they actually had the most access to pedestrian things to do...long paved trails to beaches and mangrove swamps.

The camera got a work out, and the "good" shots were taken in multiples of a hundred, as in I have hundreds of each scenario.

Galapagos pictures.

Returning to Quito after three weeks, I had one last change of clean clothes and boarded a bus to the market town of Otavalo for a few days. The artisanal market was the “carrot” that got me on the bus,

Market pictures

but after shooting that, I took a short cab ride up to this Parque de Condor. I had the big 400mm lens with me, thinking I’d catch birds in flight, but what I saw was much better. Birds of prey in large, natural enclosures. The animals were just close enough for the lens to reach and as I worked thru a light drizzle, I was rewarded in the end when a bald eagle swooped in and perched no more than eight feet away from me. Thankfully I had an empty memory card when I started the day..I took well over 500 shots of that eagle, figuring that I’d never be this close to one again (without being some sort of appetizer for him/her)..

Eagle Pictures

But lest you think that I don’t suffer enough for my art, I present to you the “price” for the owl pictures. These are chigger bites. I had a round of these in Mindo and they take about a week to go away. This attack lasted no more than five minutes, but the damage was done. I had bug spray, but they attacked before I could remember to put it on...my legs feel like they’re on fire...but this too shall pass...

Chigger photos.

In the end I’ve spent five weeks touring the central region of Ecuador. I never made it to the coast, but I had to leave something for the return trip (hopefully).

I head to Cancun, Mexico next; my first trip to a resort town...it will be start of another adventure that I’ll get into next time...

The Bohemian’s Guide to the Galapagos

OK, so if you’re a real “bohock” you won’t go to the Galapagos because travel is expensive and you’re cheap. Stay home, the interest will post to your savings account on the 3rd of the month...but if you’ve been granted dispensation to become a ‘spending Bohemian” here’s how to get thru the islands with some coins left in your pocket.

There are two ways to see the islands, “on boat” and “on land”. If your idea of the Galapagos involves a cruise ship, you can arrange that on the cheap as well by flying to Santa Cruz and walking the streets looking for last minute discounted cruises. You can save at least 30% by doing this, but I wanted to save even more by never getting on the ship.

I took a “land cruise” where you swap your deck shoes for some hiking boots and a backpack. There are four islands you’re allowed to “land” on; Santa Cruz, San Cristobal, Isabela and Florian. Florian has no

accommodation, so I went with the other three. I was thinking to stay in hostels all the way, but it turned out that I could save more money by booking hotel rooms via the booking.com website.

Round trip airfare is roughly \$400, and you'll be charged another \$120 in "foreigner fees", so before you've taken that first step, you'll be down close to \$600...but that's the standard fee.

So I take that first step on San Cristobal and walk the 500-meters to my hotel room. For \$17 a night I had a private room with "midnight wifi". "Midnight" as in that's when it starts working. I believe it was tied to satellites passing overhead..from midnight to about 7am it was strong...after that? Forget it...

There was a coastal walk behind the airport that brought me to iguanas, sea lions, more iguanas and even a few snakes...for free... heading thru town there was a paved path to another secluded cove with more of the same, with orange and red crabs....for free...

Dining on Cristobal ranged from \$2.50 the lunch of the day to about \$15 for a great burger in a modern shop in town. My budget for the three full days in San Cristobal was \$300 and I came at \$250 which included a tour to Lobo Island where we saw blue-footed boobies and went snorkeling.

You take small 30-person ferries between the islands for \$30 I had the somewhat nauseating experience of taking two; to Santa Cruz, then to Isabela for my next stop. On Isabela, another \$15 a night hotel room was reserved again with the "midnight wifi". Isabela is less populated and had more things to see by yourself. I took a \$35 hiking tour of Cerro Negro, the volcano chain about forty minutes away..five hours of hiking and it got rainy...but a definite change of pace.

Close to the hotel was a boardwalk that took you past a pile of sea iguanas and flamingos on your way to the tortoise farm. Since it was so close, I did this walk daily. I also took this tintoreros tour, white tipped sharks swim the shallows of this nearby islet, and it included more snorkeling. I also rented a bicycle to tour this "Wall of Tears" which was built by prisoners when the island was a penal colony in the 40's and 50's.

Dining options on Isabela were more limited, but it was here that I found my "asado dream" ...a great grilled meat palace where dinners were \$7.50 and huge portions of delicious food...so I ate there daily.

The budget was another \$300 here, and I came in at \$230.

Heading back to Santa Cruz, I splurged and had a \$25/night hotel with air conditioning and full time wifi..it was great. All sorts of options here, from tours, to dining, to public buses..

The Darwin Center was a six-minute walk from the hotel and took you by tortoises and some great orange iguanas...this I did early morning and again later in the day. There were long paved trails over 1km to take you to the coast to splash in the waves. You can take water taxis to other points for \$.80...I did the long walk out to the beach then hung a right to this secluded cove where I came across this blue-footed boobie.

Blue footed boobie..

I also took a pass on a \$40 tour of a tortoise ranch when I found I could get there by public bus and a 45 minute walk..Here the “ranch” is an open space with about 200 tortoises, around.

The budget was another \$300 here and I came in around \$230 after paying \$30 to get to the airport, the only time I felt really “abused” financially.

The 12 day adventure came in at around \$1,300...but almost half of that was in the airfare and fees to get onto the first island. I think it was enough time. I never got the sense that there were “hidden gems” that needed a more extensive stay to discover. If you’re a diver, there might be more of an incentive to stay, but I walked all the roads I saw and more time would have just meant returning to places I’ve already seen.

So about \$100 a day would cover a two week visit from Ecuador. Of course getting to Ecuador is an added expense I didn’t have to pay since I was already here.