



El Clima Magazine

The Official Peace Corps Ecuador Volunteer Magazine

Sites Not Seen Issue
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Editor's Note

Site assignment is by far the most anticipated day of Pre-Service Training. It's the day you have been imagining since you first applied to Peace Corps and began to daydream about what your daily life would be like in Ecuador.

This is the day that determines where you will spend 24 months of your service and the community you will call home. Regardless of where you are assigned to serve, PCVs have proven time and again that the best site is ultimately your site.

Within Peace Corps Ecuador, your site can be in one of three completely distinctive regions. Due to Ecuador's natural diversity and touristic appeal, some PCVs call world-class locations home.

This issue isn't about those sites.

This issue is for the sites that the majority of volunteers might never get to during their cross-country trips but are nonetheless gems for the PCVs who call them home. Consider this issue a visitor's guide to the lesser known Peace Corps Ecuador sites.

Take note of these sites that aren't often visited and lay off the proverbial beaten path. They may not be glamorous but your fellow PCVs are doing extraordinary work serving and adapting in these communities. Pay them a visit and let them show off their sites.

-Amanda Morales, Administrative Editor



Río Negro

by Sam Archibald



Río Negro is a small town in central Ecuador, located halfway along the sixty-mile mountain corridor that stretches from Baños, a city at the eastern edge of the Andes, to Puyo, a city that marks the beginning of the Amazon. This corridor is a continual transition zone of steadily diminishing mountains and ever thickening vegetation.

Though there are no bluffs in Río Negro, the mountains are still high enough to form tumbling streams such as the one that gives the town its name. In the wet season, these streams are overflowing with white water. In the dryer months, the water slows in clear pools that attract both bathers and butterflies. On either side of the valley, dense forests rise on dark green hills, mingling with the clouds on wet days.

Río Negro is far enough from the tourist hub of Baños that one finds few foreigners here. For Ecuadorians, however, it is a popular weekend destination. They come to swim in the many balnearios, or natural swimming holes, taking advantage of the clear fresh water. Trout fishing is another popular attraction, either in the river, or in one of the many stocked pools around the area.

For those who hike, there is a small trail up in the mountains, although I prefer to walk, wade, and jump my way up one of the rocky streambeds. The vegetation is thick enough that it's hard to penetrate the undergrowth, but the streams allow one to admire the palms, vines, moss, and orchids, as well as occasional wildlife, like the bright red Andean cock-of-the-rock. There is so much beauty in this part of Ecuador; it's a shame that so many pass it by.

Despite the beautiful backdrop, daily life in Río Negro begins to feel ordinary. One grows used to the rhythms of small town life. People move slowly, though neighbors could drop by at any minute. The park is always full of people playing soccer and volleyball, or simply enjoying the evening breeze.

With only one street in town, anonymity is hopeless. A walk down the street turns into a chorus of saludos (greetings). There's Pablo in front of the restaurant, patiently grilling trout. There's Cecilia in her tienda (shop), cheerfully making everyone's day a little brighter. There's Ángel sitting on his stoop, watching the world go by. These faces have become constants in my life, as sure as the 6 a.m. sunrise.

For visitors, these personal elements may be harder to appreciate than the stunning landscape, but they mark the difference between authentic travel and simple sightseeing. Travel is about broadening your horizons and making connections, not just with a place, but also with people.

A small site like Rio Negro provides the opportunity to have sincere conversations, to learn, to share, and to recognize the humanity that transcends culture. My neighbors are open and warm hearted. They have welcomed my visitors with enthusiasm and hospitality. Should you come to Río Negro, I am sure these friendly faces would happily tell you all about this beautiful place they call home.



Pasaje: When you're here you're family

by Jennifer Valencia



If you've seen the movie, *Cars*, you know about the town of Radiator Springs, the small town on Route 66. Radiator Springs is small, convenient, in the middle of nowhere and the best comparison for me to describe my site, Pasaje de las Nieves, in Ecuador

As a TEFL volunteer, I've lived and worked in Pasaje de las Nieves for more than 18 months. Pasaje is conveniently located on the highway between Machala and Cuenca in the province of El Oro. In English, it means, "the passage or scenery of snow". That is because you are able to see the snow-capped mountains from this point. Although it's considered a coastal town, Pasaje is on the foothills of the Andes and is the last major city one passes before scaling the mountains.

I call Pasaje a town although it is technically a city. Pasaje is the second largest city in the province of El Oro right after Machala, the capital. Pasaje is mainly made up of acres of rural land filled with crops ranging from bananas to cacao. The downtown area is the only urban part of pasaje.

Although it's the second largest city, it doesn't feel like a city. Pasaje does not have universities, malls, movie theaters, or any known fast food chains.

You won't find a bus terminal and you will definitely not find Ubers in town. What you will find is that you can walk from one side of town to the other in a matter of minutes. Pasaje is so small that just about everyone knows you or knows you're not from here. Even I, a latina with Fluent spanish, can be spotted as a foreigner.

Coming from San Diego, California, I didn't think that a small town would have best suited me. In the beginning, it was hard for me to integrate because I am used to walking around for hours and being anonymous in a big city. But here, everyone knows everyone. I found out that most of my neighbors are related and that your last name is significant. With your last name, someone knows where you live, where your family came from and can tell exactly who you are. Who needs background checks in such a tight-knit community?

Every time I walk outside my door, I bump into someone who knows me, even though I didn't even know my next door neighbors in San Diego.

Slowly, Pasaje has turned into my home away from home for this exact reason. People whom I would least expect to, miss me when I am out of town. They know when I have a new shirt or if my hair is styled differently. At night, I feel safe and protected because I am never truly alone. Everyone within a one-block radius of my house is considered my "veci," aka, vecino (neighbor). That doesn't happen in a big city. This town feels like extended family, and being miles away from home, Pasaje is exactly what I needed.



Imbabura: More than Just Otavalo

by Becky Wandell



You've heard about the beautiful mountains of Imbabura, its green valleys and the beautiful textiles and silverwork of the people of Otavalo, but... it's so far north! It's hard to justify a trip deep into Imbabura when Otavalo, itself a gem, sits so close to Quito at Imbabura's southern border. But I'd like to assure you there's a lot to see and do up here, if you're willing to make the trip.

First stop, Ibarra. As the capital of Imbabura, Ibarra is a diverse and modern city with Old World charm. Set in a bowl of mountains at 7,300 feet, the climate is warm and inviting. I love to wander the cobblestone streets of the centro histórico, enjoy the colonial architecture, visit the hidden art museums (don't miss the Centro Cultural El Cuartel), and spend time in the plazas and cafes. You can while away an afternoon in Plaza Pedro Moncayo, get an iconic Helado de Paila – Ibarra's fruity sorbet hand-stirred in a shallow metal pan – or find other yummy treats at Café Olor, Café Botica, or nearby Centro Cultural Tahuandas. Mercado Amazonas by the bus station has a plethora of stalls waiting to sell you anything you might need from the Coast, the Oriente (rainforest to the east), and Chota Valley.

If you're looking for action, Ibarra also has a healthy nightlife with live music at the Bolivar Food Park , free salsa dancing at Gong, and a variety of neighborhood watering holes. All this diversity and the easy lifestyle will make you think you're in Europe.



Just as Otavalo isn't all there is to Imbabura, the center of Ibarra is only just the beginning. Hike up into Parque Guayabillas to the Mirador Arcangel San Miguel. The Archangel Saint Michael has an impressive view of Ibarra and Lago Yaguarcocha from his lookout. This lake, just a 15-minute bus ride from town, is a popular spot for running, biking, and gathering with families. And if you like tilapia, there are many restaurants around the lake that will tempt you with their fare.

To the west of Ibarra stands Volcán Cotacachi, which overlooks a community by the same name. This community, a favorite of expatriates, is known for its fine leather shoes and bags, products from the United States, and a selection of international foods. From here, take a taxi up to Lago Cuicocha, a beautiful blue sunken crater lake. Spend the day hiking the rim trail or taking a boat ride around its islands.

To the south lie the pueblos of Esperanza and Zuleta, a 15-45 minute bus ride away. These charming communities, set at the base of Volcán Imbabura, offer traditional foods, famous cheese, and sweet Saturday markets selling beautifully embroidered linens and blouses. From here, there are many hiking opportunities into the paramo. Climb to the crater lakes of Culbilche or summit Imbabura. Whichever way you wander, I promise it will be beautiful.

For some, encebollado is medicinal. The dish has long been hailed as a remedy for late nights of tossing back Pilsners, the beer of choice in Ecuador. Some Ecuadorians swear by its healing powers to cure “chuchaqui” or a hangover.

While the science is unclear, one thing is certain; encebollado is purely Ecuadorian and I can't get enough of it.



The Case for Colimes

by Casey Blake

Recently, while walking through my small but sufficient site of Colimes in the province of Guayas, I was reminded of why I enjoy it.

Reflecting, as I walked and listened to music —Mr. Jones by The Counting Crows was playing—I remembered it had been about a month since I last left my site. I feel content with where I'm at.

My community is small—You can walk across the town in less than 15 minutes—but Colimes has everything I need. On a regular basis, I see a handful of people who recognize me, greeting me by name or as “profe” (teacher) as I walk through town.

I can't get good Ecuadorian coffee but we have instant coffee in spades. Instead of taxi cars we have moto taxis to get you from point A to point B. The only bus is the one that goes to Guayaquil, and from there you can go anywhere.

I'm pleasantly surprised most days because something is always going on. Yesterday I saw a circus tent going up.. In the evening, there were fireworks for some reason—which may be more frequent in larger communities, but it's a treat in Colimes.

I can't forget to talk about the canoe.

To go to school I have three options of travel: I can walk an hour, call a moto taxi, or I can take a canoe. Most days I opt for the relaxing walk through rice fields to gather my thoughts. If we take the canoe across the river we can find avocado, star fruit, pomegranate, mango, papaya, coconut, guava, or soursop.

If fruit isn't your thing but trees are, check out the Guayacanes trees just 5 kilometers outside of Colimes. These trees are unique and can only be found in Colimes or the Loja area. The Guayacanes bloom after the first coastal rains in December, and flower for about a week and a half. They are a bright, beautiful yellow when they bloom and a sight worth seeing.

Before coming to Ecuador I served as a PCV in West Africa. I didn't have running water, electricity and clothes was washed by hand. We ate rice three times a day from bags that sometimes said From the American People. The heat made coastal weather in Ecuador more manageable. I don't say any of this as a complaint but to provide context for my chill state now. I loved my time in my previous Peace Corps Service. That experience has made me enjoy all the quirks of my time in Colimes.



Your service will ingrain itself into your character whether good or bad after you leave. I'm lucky to have my previous experience in Peace Corps to use as a grounding for my experience in Colimes.

If you are looking for something off the beaten path, and would like to spend a relaxing day in a rural site, hit me up. Maybe we can learn something new about my site. We can chill at the Malecón or maybe take a dip in the river if that's your fancy.

Machala: A Latin American city

by Arielle Hernandez



In the food court of Quicentro Sur in Quito, a group of PCVs and I were discussing our favorite places in Ecuador. I picked Machala. I was met with disbelief from the others, and understandably so.

Machala is a major urban area located on the southern coast near the Peruvian border. The coastal climate is hot and humid. It's not a travel destination, so you're unlikely to see tourists on the streets as you would in other cities. In fact, the only reason you would probably find yourself in Machala is to visit one of the many PCVs who live here.

It took time for me to appreciate Machala. As a TEFL volunteer, I was lucky enough to be placed in a school with great counterparts who have been nothing but welcoming and receptive to me.



I've also been blessed with site mates who I can count on for support. My partner, Peter (also a PCV) and I have been able to build a life here. We have our favorite spots: The Hilary Deli, a cafe that we go to about twice a week; El Capitán, a cevicheria; Parque Ecológico, a park with a track that we run from time to time.

As far as the weather goes, I've gotten used to it. Yes it's hot, but there are distinct seasons here as well: around August the weather significantly cools down and there's usually a nice breeze throughout the day.

Few people would describe Machala as "charming"; I actually like this about the city since I've come to understand that "charming" is a term usually reserved for cities that retain vestiges of colonialism, most notably through their colonial architecture.

Take nearby Cuenca or Zaruma, for example; both would be described as "charming, colonial" cities. But colonial architecture also serves as a monument to a dark, violent history.

Not even Machala can escape the romanticism the world still retains for colonialism. Near the center of the city, there's a park named after Christopher Columbus with a giant replica of a ship, a symbol of his so-called "discovery" expedition. Neither Columbus nor his ships made it to Machala; in fact, the city was not even founded by the Spanish. A taxi driver once told me that the Spaniards didn't come to Machala because of all the mosquitoes.

Machala is not perfect by any means. The city is not immune to poverty and the disparities between classes and races, like any other city in the world, developing or not. But I feel like one of the things it has going for it, other than being the banana capital of the world, is that Machala is not a "charming, colonial" city; it's a Latin American city. A city where Ecuadorians, not tourists or expats, live and work, a city that I've come to appreciate and love.



Bellavista: Small Town Vibes

by Taz Markovich



One of the great opportunities that Peace Corps offers us is a chance to live within a community that we would have never heard of or visited if we were just tourists visiting the country.

For me, Bellavista was exactly that. I had no idea what to think when it was revealed to be my home for the next two years because I had no idea where it even was. As it turns out, Bellavista is a small community that consists of about 600 people, and is located somewhere in the middle of the province of Manabí a couple hours south of Portoviejo.

At first glance, it may seem like there isn't much of anything in the community. In theory, it takes no more than five minutes to walk from one side to the other. However, it is during this walk where you find out what the community has to offer.

It is a 'greet-everybody-you-see' community, which inevitably leads to many friendly conversations that make you feel right at home and forget where you were headed to. While the community lacks a Juan Valdez, Empanadas de Nico, or movie theater, it makes up for it with hospitality and kindness.

Even though there isn't a market, it is hard to visit with someone and not return home with fresh fruit or vegetables grown right there at their home as a parting gift showing the generosity of the people within the community. Depending on the season, there is an abundance of

avocados, mangos, oranges, papayas, and plantains to weigh down the journey back home. You won't find a great place to catch up in, like a bar or coffee shop, when people are visiting. However, there isn't a need for those places when you can have carne asado or grilled meat that involves fresh yucca and maduro harvested minutes ago and spend the rest of the day stretched out in hammocks under the shade of a 150-year old mango tree when your family visits for the weekend.

While actually living in a small community like Bellavista may not be for everybody, almost anybody could use a reminder to slow down, enjoy their surroundings, and form connections with the people around them.



Faces of 120

by Shekinah Davis



In May 2018 we welcomed Omnibus 120 to Ecuador. El Clima posed a couple of questions to get to know our newest volunteers! Meet Vi, Yessenia, Stephanie, Zachary, and Samuel.



Vi Tuong Nguyen
21 years old
Portland, Oregon

1. What other countries have you traveled to?

Mexico, Vietnam, Canada

2. What were you doing before Peace Corps?

Before Peace Corps, I was eating everything I could before I had to leave. Finishing up my last 2 college credits, and working full time as an hospice aide. The day after I graduated, I went straight into the Peace Corps.

Yessenia Gonzalez
24 years old
Englewood, New Jersey

1. What other countries have you traveled to?

Colombia, Canada, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, France, The Netherlands, Belgium, Greece, Italy, Spain, Morocco, and Egypt.

2. What were you doing before Peace Corps?

Before Peace Corps I was working at the Pan American Health Organization in Washington D.C. as an Emergency Response Consultant in the Emergency Operations Center for about two years. The six months right before I began my service, I was a Youth Development Specialist at my old high school (Dwight Morrow High School) in New Jersey, while consulting for an International Development Firm working on a country profile for the Cote D'Ivoire.





Stephanie Claire Busse
24 years old
Bird City, Kansas

1. What other countries have you traveled to?

Ireland, Scotland, England, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, Australia, Haiti, Mexico, and Canada.

2. What were you doing before Peace Corps?

Finishing college! I have a double-major from the University of Oklahoma in Psychology and Health Sciences.

Zachary Ryan Boyce
23 years old
Fayetteville, North Carolina

1. What other countries have you traveled to?

Costa Rica, Jamaica, Haiti, Mexico, Grand Cayman, and Nicaragua.

2. What were you doing before Peace Corps?

Two weeks before I arrived to Peace Corps, I graduated from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington with a BA in Psychology and a BS in Neuroscience.



Samuel Archibald
22 years old
Grove City, PA

1. What other countries have you traveled to?

U.K., Greece, Italy, South Korea, Turkey, and Canada.

2. What were you doing before Peace Corps?

Before PC I was at Grove City College getting a BA in History.

Three-hundred and four!

by Shekinah Davis

Midservice Conference for Omnibus 118 was a success. Three-hundred and four days after swearing in they jumped over the line that represents the remainder of their service; smiles were big and energy contagious. Omnibus 118 is only 10 months away from COS (close of service). During a four-day conference this group of over 30 PCVs, shared tips, hardships, and successes experienced during their first year. This long awaited reunion took place at the training center in Monteserrin, where a year ago they were daydreaming about what the next two years would like. We are so happy to see high spirits in these PCVs, who COS in August 2019.

