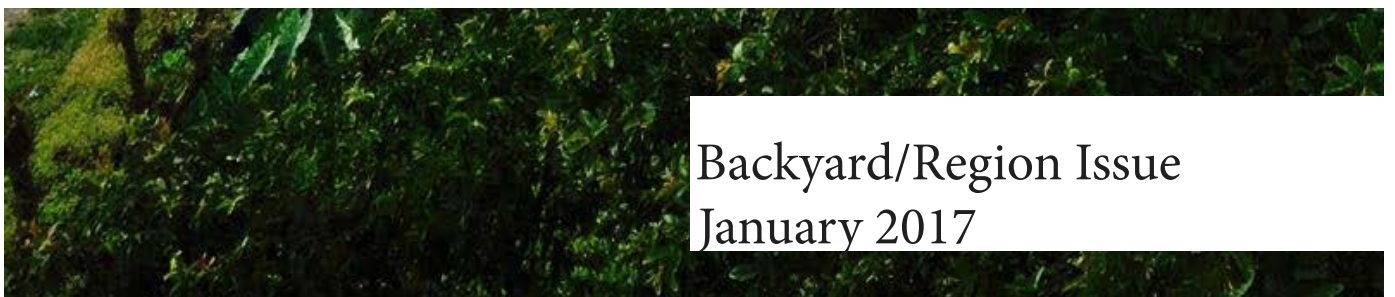




El Clima Magazine

The Official Peace Corps Ecuador Volunteer Magazine



Backyard/Region Issue
January 2017

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Editor's Note

In the past two years I have seen a variety of “backyards” while visiting my fellow volunteers. They range from quiet, sunset beaches to loud, urban city centers. Others include a jungle backdrop of the Amazon or a snow capped volcano. In a country the size of Colorado, volunteers live in much more diverse settings than your average “backyard” in the states. These differences shape the people, culture, and experiences that each volunteer has.

While many trainees arrive in country with preconceived ideas of what Peace Corps life is like, I can assure you it will be nothing you could ever imagine. Other trainees arrive and begin to prefer the cool sierra over the steamy coast or say they'd like to live in a city instead of a small jungle town. Each region, province, canton, and city is so unique that until you are integrated into your new backyard you'll never be able to appreciate the unique, beauty it contains. And therefore my advice it to hold off on any decisions because where you'll end up is definitely where you should be.

- Melia Cerrato

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A Morning in Guayaquil

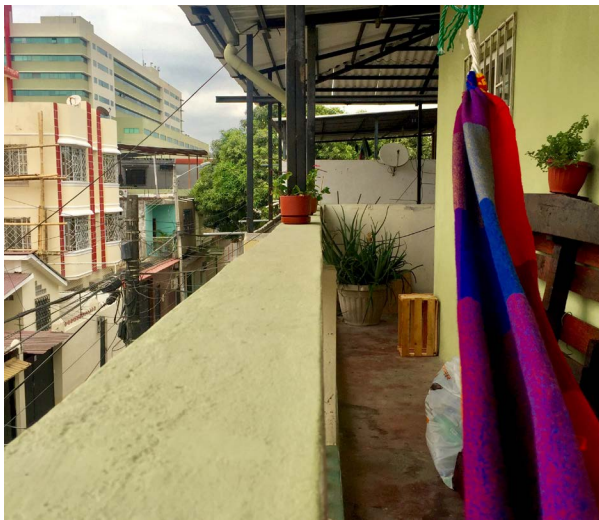
By Sean Speckin

I'm greeted by streaks of morning sun peeking through the curtains. Groggy, I crawl out of bed and pull them open, filling my bedroom with light. The neighbors are already up; mom's making breakfast while dad wrestles the kids into their school uniforms. I walk outside to water the plants on the balcony. The streets are slowly coming alive; kids run to catch the school bus, store owners carry last minute goods to their stores, and street cats search for shady spots to snooze the day away. Cars parked for the night now purr idly, patiently waiting to carry families to markets, jobs, and churches. I see an elderly woman hauling the family's laundry to the washboard out back with a smile; she'll likely spend the morning washing the mountain of clothes. I look to the houses. Each is unique; earth toned cement walls with occasional yet vibrant splashes of blues, reds, oranges, and greens. Some have roofs covered by layers of tin or clay shingles, while others remain exposed to the strong coastal sun. Almost all of them have hammocks, woven with fabrics of every color imaginable. The neighborhood is alive; the neighborhood is happy.

Above the streets and neighbors' houses, the CNT logo is visible on the sheer face of a nearby skyscraper. The towers of luxury hotels and Mall del Sol help populate the skyline. Inside the hotel rooms, tourists and entrepreneurs sleep soundly in frigid air-conditioning. Mall del Sol looms silent; it won't open until late morning. The bushes and trees that decorate each entrance are perfectly manicured, almost too perfectly. Inside, kiosks and stores await thousands of shoppers. From my balcony, I look the other way. Early flights arrive and take off from Guayaquil's airport, their engines roar through the sky, some carrying travelers to faraway adventures, others bringing them home. In the distance I can hear city buses and trucks speeding on the highways that snake through the distant high-rises. The city is alive; the city is busy. I recently moved into an apartment after



living with my host family for six months. My apartment lies in the middle of a small neighborhood with a strong sense of community. Though I've only been here a week, I've been welcomed with smiles by the store and restaurant owners. The neighborhood itself is much like what I expected from Peace Corps; there's so much character here that is otherwise lost as the modern corporations begin to creep in.



There's such a contrast between old and new here. When I accepted my invitation to serve in Peace Corps Ecuador, I never thought I'd spend my afternoons at Sweet & Coffee sipping iced tea in a mega mall. What's even more bizarre is that I can lie in my hammock in my tiny little neighborhood while gazing at the massive buildings next door. When friends and family back home ask me what it's like to live in Ecuador,

I have a hard time coming up with a response. So often people expect Peace Corps to be a 180 degree reversal from the norms of the U.S. It's certainly a shift, but it's nothing you'd ever expect. It's like nothing I've ever experienced... and something I'd never give up.



A Banana State of Mind

By Nathan Axdorff

The rooster sounds, the gas vendor shouts, and the whirl of the electric fan draws me out of my dreams. I yawn as I stretch awake, getting tangled in my eyelet canopy turned bug net. As I emerge from my royal slumber, my skin instantly reminds me of the dense humidity of coastal Ecuador. The three-legged street cat, turned house-pet, meows as I open the door of my room. I am greeted by the faint scent of mangoes and laundry – which isn't surprising when your room is next to a washing machine and the backyard. I shuffle to the kitchen and pour myself a cup of Ecuador's favorite coffee: instant. As I sip the bitter





reminder of caffeine, I open the pots and pans on the stove to eat whatever my host mother decided to prepare that morning. Sometimes I'm lucky and find bolon or tigrillo, a traditional breakfast food made of mashed plantains and egg or cheese then fried or cooked to perfection, but other days I uncover the tuna spaghetti surprise.

As I consume my breakfast, I scroll through the news on my cell phone until 7:45am. I dress up in my business casual and head outside. Walking down through the concrete jungle of Machala, I listen to the sounds of parrots and gulls as they flutter from palm tree to palm tree.

After running across the busy highway that goes to the port, I wave down a bus, hop on, pay 30 cents, and try to find a seat. The

bus bumps along the uneven road as we fly through the city. After about 30 minutes on the bus, I walk to the front of the bus and signal the driver that I need to exit. I hop off in front of my school and pass through the large grey gate. Saying hello to any of the staff relaxing near the gate, I shake their hands as I make my way toward the English room. My small public city high school sits under the hot sun as a fresh breeze rolls over the concrete walls, cooling my sweaty face. I walk into the English room and begin teaching my first class at 8:20am. At 5:10pm I leave the school and climb back on the bus to ride home. On Fridays I take the bus to the public university where I teach two classes to current English education students.

Machala Tour Guide Info:

On the weekends, Machala offers some modern fun with the movie theater in the new shopping mall. For a costly meal, you can dine at Chili's, just like in the United States. On the more natural side, Isla Jambeli offers a rustic beach getaway among the mangroves of this sandy escape. Despite the visible pollution, such as plastic bags that litter the beach, the warm water and beaming sun offer hours of fun. I personally enjoy beachcombing for seashells at low tide. Isla Santa Clara offers more adventurous opportunities such as snorkeling, whale watching, and scuba diving. I have yet to visit that island due to the cost and unknown safety of the boats and equipment.

Back on the mainland, make sure to ignore the smell of the city and the intense odor of drying cacao. You will find peace within any of Machala's beautiful parks strewn throughout the vast city. As with most of Latin America, soccer is the ultimate pastime in Machala. From playing on streets to fields, to watching it with a beer in hand, the people of Machala find spiritual sustenance in their holy team, Barcelona Sporting Club (BSC).

For the economists, Machala boasts that it is the number one banana exporter in the world. Puerto Bolivar, Machala's expansive port, ships large quantities of shrimp, banana, and cacao every day. Although there is a large revenue from the exports, Machala remains severely segregated by socioeconomic status. On its darker side, this city is plagued with drug use and trafficking, sex trafficking, teenage pregnancy, and gangs. Efforts are being made to reduce these problems, but most of them are hiding just beneath the surface of the bustling city. Take care if you are visiting, although many of us who live here have never encountered these issues firsthand.

12 de Octubre, My New Favorite Day

By Casey Healey

I made my way back to Nayón on the bus after getting my site assignment. I dropped my bags, greeted my host family, and scurried into my room to have a laugh and a cry. I had just found out I would be moving to a very rural site and working with “El Cuerpo de Baile,” or as we would say in English, Dance Corps, even though I was born with two left feet and can barely clap to a beat. What did I get myself into? My mixed emotional response embodied my joy, anxiety, excitement, stress, and the reality that I had signed myself up, I volunteered, to move all the way from Fairfield County, Connecticut to El Barrio del 12 de Octubre in Coastal Ecuador, a place I struggle to locate on Google Maps .

El 12 de Octubre was founded by my host brother-in-law’s grandmother. When the barrio was established, there were only three or four homes made of sugar cane. Since the founding, El 12 de Octubre has grown exponentially, now boasting 400 residents, several piglets chasing mom for milk, dozens of chickens and roosters, and at least 20 dogs that make a game of chasing me on my bike rides. Several large, extended families call this community home. “El doce,” the community’s nickname, is nuzzled between two, also small, towns – Bellavista and Manantial de Guangala- in the sunny, coastal province of Santa Elena.

In the generations since the founding, residents have built homes of cement, opened several tiendas (stores), a barber shop, two restaurants, and motorcycle shops- the preferred method of transportation of all residents, except myself. We are also home to a relatively new basketball court and park. Walking a lap around my community takes approximately 3 minutes, maybe 5 on a particularly sunny afternoon. In your stroll around town, you’ll most likely bump into Gregorio selling granizado (extremely sweet snow cones) or you can snag 25 clementine’s for one dollar from a guy riding around on a truck. If you are walking with me, you’ll likely hear children shouting teacher, teacher, just to say hello.



A Walk Through Santo Domingo



By Abby Montine



It takes me 20 minutes to walk home from school to my apartment. Sure, there's a bus, but when I'm feeling motivated it can be relaxing to stroll through Santo Domingo, the city that I now call home. I start out on Avenida Quito, which is considered our "downtown." It's a busy street with some traffic; but compared to the downtown that I used to work in, Times Square, it seems like a quiet village road. Even though they are vastly different, both Avenida Quito and Times Square have one thing in common: street performers.

In NYC it was people dressed up as superheroes or Disney characters. In Santo Domingo, it's someone juggling or break dancing. My personal favorite: a guy who walks a tightrope while juggling machetes.

About halfway down the street, I walk past the corn vendors, also known as choclo. I usually start out my walk determined not to buy any. However, when I'm in front of the vendors, taking in the aroma of that grilled, cheesy choclo it's too hard to resist. I order one smothered in all of the toppings. The remainder of my walk also becomes a challenge: keep moving while eating, and don't get any of it on my work clothes.

As I walk I see the Parque Central – Central Park. It's nothing like NYC's Central Park -- my favorite place to go for a run or have a picnic with friends. Santo Domingo's Parque Central is a small and dirty square with some benches and trees. Walking through, it leads to a throng of clothing markets that goes on for blocks. Sometimes I'll stroll through the markets to do some shopping after a day of teaching. I used to do this when I was living in New York, too; after a day trapped in my cubicle, I'd de-stress by browsing the clothing stores near my office. It seems I'll always find a way to have retail therapy no matter where I live.

For today, I decide to forgo the clothing market and take a left to continue home. I'm gradually leaving the downtown area. Instead of crowded streets, I now walk past fruit vendors and little stores, tiendas. I contemplate if I need anything like pineapples or papayas. But once it's mango season, buying a few mangos on my way home becomes a necessary stop.

I also walk by a dog that I have named Kramer, a resident of one of the tiendas. I've named him that in honor of the dog that I grew up with; a Beagle, Basset Hound, Labrador, Springer Spaniel mix. In the picture, you can see Kramer in his prime, sporting some fashionable glasses. The Ecuadorian Kramer has a very similar vibe. He looks like an odd, mutant mix of too many breeds. He's an important fixture on my walk home. I usually forgo crossing the street just so I can spot him on his usual perch, sunbathing outside of his tienda. I plan to take a selfie with him before I leave.

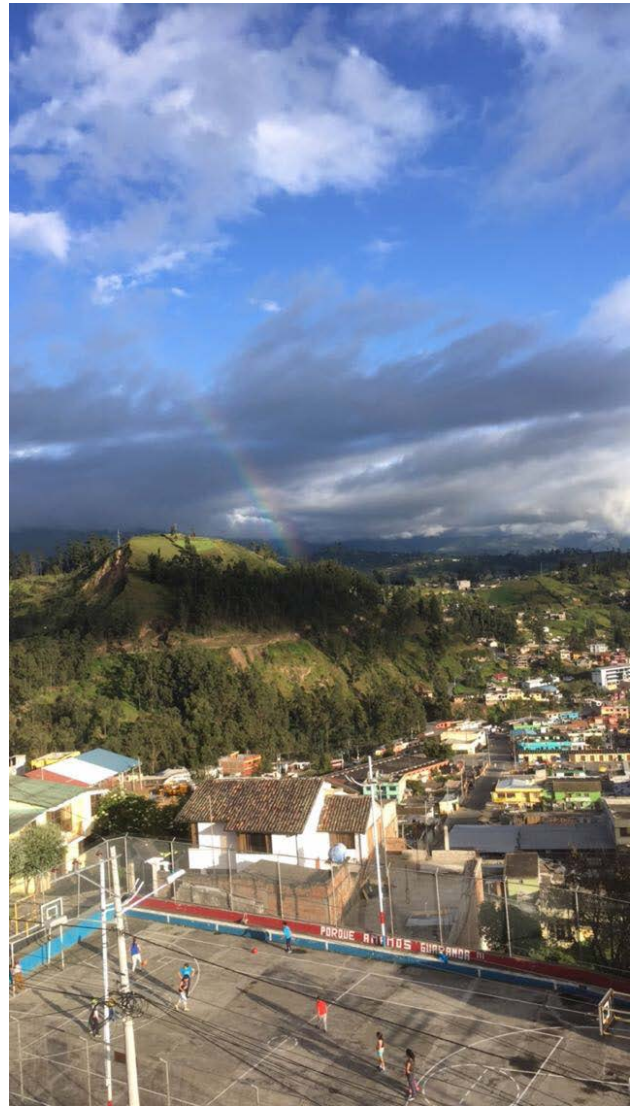


I make a right onto my street, Tsafiqui. At this point my feet hurt and I'm sweating. Calle Tsafiqui, like the rest of my city, is an industrial, gritty place. It's lined with a mix of mechanics shops, food stands, and tiendas. I walk past the guys on the sidewalk refurbishing cars and taxis, the stray dog eating out of a trash bag, and the woman selling pinchos, grilled meats on skewers, at an outdoor food tent.

Am I walking with the Andes Mountains as my backdrop? Nope. Can I hear the sound of ocean waves crashing nearby? Also no. Santo Domingo is a weird in-between place. It's not fully coast, and it's not fully sierra. It definitely isn't pretty. However, I have found a certain beauty in the familiarity of this walk home. Most days the sky is cloudy and the air is smoggy, but every once in a while the clouds will part and I'll see a multi-colored sunset right as I'm arriving to my apartment. That makes the walk worth it. And if the sunset doesn't happen, well, at least I got that choclo.

The Best of Both Worlds

By Guisel Hernandez



Before arriving to Ecuador, all I knew about the small country was the existence of the Galapagos Islands. Therefore, upon arrival to Quito, I was shocked and amused by the presence of the city lights on our bus ride at night from the airport to the hotel. While I did not have any expectations of what Ecuador would look like, I was shocked to see how big and developed the city was.

I was also amused by Quito because coming from a big city like Los Angeles, I did not feel like I was in a different country. However, although I consider Los Angeles home, I actually come from the small town of Lynwood, southwest of Los Angeles. Therefore, while I enjoyed my short time in Quito, I became overwhelmed by the daily commute in crowded busses and busy streets. Then, when I arrived to my site in the Sierra, an area outlined by a chain of mountains, I instantly felt the shock of being in a different country but I also fell in love and felt at home.

The city of Guaranda, also known as “Ciudad de las 7 Colinas,” or “City of the 7 Hills,” is located in the Bolivar province and is surrounded by large beautiful mountains, as its alias suggests. Being in the Sierra during the summer, specifically in Guaranda, the days are bright and hot and the nights are quiet and cool. Also, like my life in the city, buses are available to take me to school. However, because of the beautiful views throughout the 20 minute trip downhill, I prefer to walk. As a result, on the cold morning walks to school, my site never fails to surprise me with sneak peaks of Chimborazo and clear mountain views from my school. Living in the Sierra is different from my life in Los Angeles by the fact that instead of waking up to the view of nearby houses, I wake up to a beautiful morning view of the sun rising over the mountains.



This view always reminds me that I am in a different country. Another difference about living in the Sierra is the random rain. In my site, when it rains, neither people nor cars can be seen outside. In contrast, this type of weather feels like a significant event in California and causes traffic and inconveniences to people who forget their umbrellas.

In addition, what makes my site the best are the monthly parades. Although I am still integrating and learning the different holidays, I always enjoy watching the parades from my window or my host mother's terrace. I also very much enjoy the variety of dishes the Sierra provides through crops like maiz and potatoes that become delicious plates like cevichochos (a mixed snack including lupini beans, lemon juice, popcorn, onion, tomato juice, banana chips and roasted corn), llapingachos (fried potato cakes), and fritadas (fried pork with a side of hominy). Then again, like in the city, if I ever feel like having a pizza or a hamburger, I can visit one of the nearby restaurants in my site.

Nevertheless, while living in the Sierra is somewhat different from my life in Los Angeles, I am familiar with the climate and sunset views from my experience of visiting my family in a small town in the Sierra of Oaxaca, Mexico. I am also very comfortable with the small town life in my site as it is similar to the life I am familiar with in Lynwood. As a result, Guaranda has become important to me because I see it is a mix of both my identities, the Sierra life from my Mexican heritage with a small taste of the city from my life in Los Angeles. In other words, living in Guaranda, I get the best of both worlds, the small city life while being constantly surrounded by nature.

From Loreto with Love

By Paul Torres

When I first considered writing this article, I was hesitant; I really didn't want to add more work to my already "busy" schedule. I also believed that there was nothing to write about since I didn't have much of an issue adapting to my new city because everything seemed so natural and smooth. So far, the experiences here have been "interesting", to say the least. Loreto is a new site for Peace Corps Ecuador. Three fourths of the population here are indigenous and they speak Kichwa. The road that goes through the town divides the indigenous community from the Mestizos or Colonos. Although I have an indigenous background, I am still considered a Colono by the people here. The town is so small that I walked around the whole town the first day of my site visit. My work, grocery place, and connections to the outside world are all in one place, the bus terminal.

My first night here, I experienced one of the most intense thunderstorms of my life. The rain here feels heavier but I can't really describe it better than that. The power that nature displays here is truly amazing. The intensity of the storm caused the power grid to fail, so for the rest of the night the only light was from the lightning streaking across the sky and the only sound were those that came from the loud thunder around me.



Then there are the monkeys. I was warned about holding my phone too close to them because they like to snatch them and run up the trees. Like a typical inexperienced monkey wrangler, I tried taking a picture of a monkey, and as if on cue he snatched my phone away from me. Lucky for me, my counterpart (who is totally awesome by the way) quickly grabbed a snack and offered it to the monkey king who proceeded to drop my phone. Fortunately for me, my phone survived. I don't care what anyone says, BlackBerrys are still awesome.

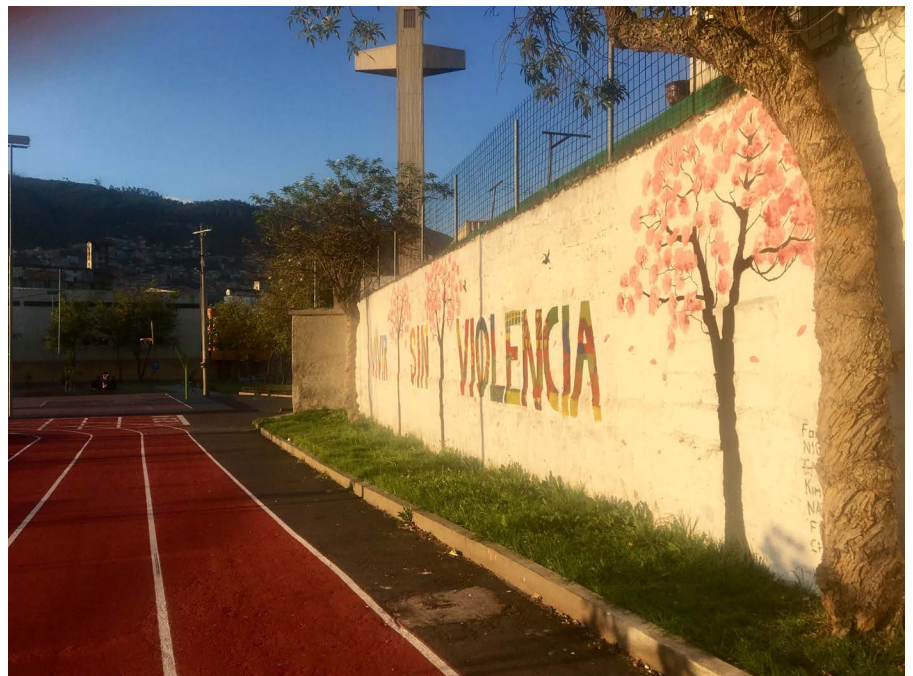
Loreto has been an interesting change from Miami. The town itself is surrounded by lush green forests, and when the power goes out on clear nights, you can see the stars with astounding clarity, in stark contrast to what I'm used to back in the States. There is also a vast variety of exotic fruits, animals, and insects, the most notable being the Conga ant, which is a 1 inch long ant with one incredibly painful sting. There is also a red seed that changes the taste of fruit from sour into sweet for about 30 minutes, just by chewing on its red shell. Because of that seed, I have never had so much lemon in my life. The food here has been great. There is one plate that is typical of the Oriente, the Maito, which is Tilapia fish cooked inside of a bijao leaf.

Of course, I must also write about my faithful companion, Atlas. According to a counterpart of mine, who specializes in dogs and other livestock, Atlas is a working line German Shepherd. Contrary to what my family and everyone else thinks, he is not named after an atlas that shows you the maps of the world. Instead, he is named after the titan, Atlas, from Greek mythology. I've heard from other volunteers that dogs help with adjustment, and since everyone in my community is keen to find out why I am carrying this dog like a baby, or why it's on a leash, this has turned out to be very true. He has accompanied me to some of my late-night events by the river. He sits there just watching people, and the kids like to come up to me to ask if they can walk him. The people here have been so welcoming. To them, I am that guy that looks Ecuadorian, but sounds foreign. All in all, it has been an interesting couple of months at site and I look forward to exploring more of the Oriente and working with the local communities here.



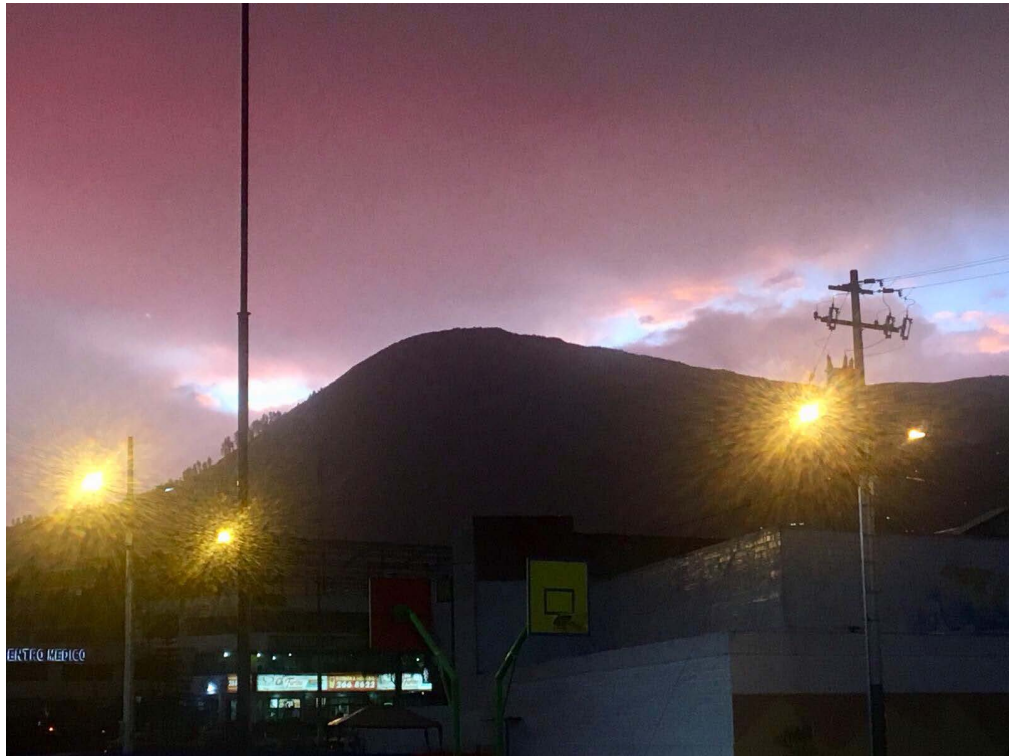
Quito: My City of Contrasts

By Christine Trahms



I've gotten used to the reaction of most Quito residents, called Quiteños, when I tell them where I live. Their eyes widen slightly, their mouths get a bit tighter, and they give me some form of this well-intentioned advice: "Oh, you need to be very careful there!" Hearing this advice repeated at least five times before moving to southern Quito left me feeling hesitant about my future home, to say the least.

The first day of my commute did nothing to assuage my fears. On the mile-and-a-half walk, my lungs became well acquainted with the smog belched from every diesel burning bus that passed. Without formal crosswalks, I relied upon my wits (of which I have a few) and my coordination (which I entirely lack) to cross six lanes of traffic. I had believed naively that since I was in a large city I would be exempt from the gazes that befall obvious foreigners, or gringas. Gringas, however, are not so common in the south of Quito. From puzzled stares to catcalls, I drew plenty of attention. Encountering all of this and more on my return home, I wondered to myself, how will I ever get used to this?



Every morning, before the smog, speeding traffic, and unwanted attention, I have to cross a park to get to the main city streets. For weeks I was blind to this park, only worrying about my coming commute. One day a visiting friend pointed out a running track in the park, and thanks to her fresh perspective, I've uncovered the joys of this once-hidden track right in my backyard. On my runs, I see young parents walking the track while their little ones toddle alongside them. On a grassy hill, a group of teenagers practice parkour moves. My neighbors enjoy the public exercise equipment, shamelessly attempting, though often failing, the intended workout. Preteens have bike races that cross the track, and they earn a stern look when they cut too close in front of me. An elderly woman who sells fruits on the street faithfully walks the track every evening with her husband. The way they lean on each other during their walks mirrors the way I imagine they have supported each other throughout their lives. Groups of men play soccer on the field, and when the ball escapes over the fence, I throw it back in. As the sun sets, the guards meander around the park, sometimes pausing to rub the head of a stray dog and gaze at the mountains behind the urban sprawl. This is my backyard.

The Sierra of Ecuador is a land of contrasts, and Quito may be the epitome of those contrasts. Many Quiteños seem reserved at first, but after accepting you into their inner circle have unparalleled depths of love and generosity. Quito days begin with a sun that will burn your skin before you even notice, and end with a torrential downpour, an *augacero*. Quiteños on the bus maintain a rigid indifference until an old man struggles to board, or a woman with a baby needs a seat and several passengers rush to help. The contrasts of Quito are perplexing, fascinating, and refreshing. And here, in my city of contrasts, I found that the south was no exception. Those who told me I need to be careful here were right – I have to be constantly alert. But they were also correct in a way I never expected – I must also be careful not to miss the beauty here, of which there is so much.



Sunset from the Mountains

By Amy Runkle

What is a stroll through the city of Loja like? These days, you have to watch where you walk because the entire city has been undergoing an urban rejuvenation project for the last year.



The center of Loja is over 500 years old and is full of beauty and history, but it needs an update. Construction workers contracted by the city have been tearing up all the roads and sidewalks, which means you have to narrowly avoid hills of dirt, holes, stray wires, and bulldozers on your daily walk.

Even with all the construction, Loja is still one of the most beautiful cities I have been to Ecuador. Loja has won international awards for its beautiful parks, and it has one of the most organized recycling systems in all of Ecuador. For these reasons, aside from the polvo (dust) that you encounter while walking past a backhoe, it is a very clean, beautiful city. You can't walk through the center without passing at least 3 large parks. Once you leave the center and head north to where I live, you can't help but stop at Parque Jipiro, a park right across the street from my house.

This park has replicas of buildings from cultures all around the world, from the Eiffel Tower, to Mayan pyramids, to a Chinese pagoda surrounded by a little lake where you can rent paddleboats. Appropriately, Jipiro means "place of rest" in the extinct Palta language of the Ecuadorian Amazon.

From home, I sometimes head up to the neighborhood of Tierras Coloradas where I have a youth group. One of the saddening facts about Loja is the wealth disparity between the areas like the center and the north end compared to some of the barrios (neighborhoods) that are located on the outskirts. When you get up into Tierras Coloradas you don't have to worry about construction, but you start to get a workout as every street is a really sharp incline. It's important to bring a jacket up here too, since this neighborhood is in the middle of the mountains and the cold air hits by the time night falls. I've heard that this area began to be



populated in the late 1980s without the permission of the city. People looking for a place to live began to move up into the mountains and build houses from whatever materials they could find, such as cardboard and plastic. By the 1990s the municipal government realized that they couldn't exactly make the inhabitants of Tierras Coloradas move out of the homes they had built, so they officially incorporated the neighborhood as Barrio "Victor Emilio Valdivieso". However, the area continues to be known as Tierras Coloradas colloquially. Over time, the residents received loans and assistance and were able to build their homes out of more sturdy materials.

As I pass these homes on the way back down the mountain after my youth group ends, I take a moment to look around. One of my favorite views of the whole week is the sunset over the mountains from outside the community center where the youth group is held. From the front door, you can see the mountains in the distance as well as the wind turbines that help bring power to Loja. Tierras Coloradas has never been seen as a desirable spot to live in due to its location high in the mountains and far away from the center, which is probably why no one raised much fuss when an impromptu community sprung up there. However, at the end of my night, after all the kids walk down the streets to their houses, I can't help but think that watching the sunset in this spot is the best view in all of Loja.

Welcome to the Jungle

By Bella Brandes



El Chaco, Ecuador. We're in the intercambio zone where the formidable Andes mountain range meets the impenetrable Amazonian rainforest. The best way I can describe my site is: everything you've imagined the jungle to be without any of your fears. A beautiful jungle canopy, clouds clinging to lush mountain ranges, a rare glimpse of a dangling monkey, or exotic fruits? We've got it all. My host family grows and roasts fresh coffee in our backyard alongside guava, passion fruit, naranjilla, cacao, and avocados. The majority of Ecuadorians drink instant coffee with breakfast (and dinner too) so access to fresh coffee is a luxury. But unpleasant things like melting heat, humidity, giant bugs that crawl into your bedroom at night, or malaria? You won't find those here. Admittedly, the active Volcán Reventador just 20 miles away spouts up ash plumes on an hourly basis. I can watch it from my roof if I like, but the locals reassure me it won't do any harm.

Working for the local government I can experience many of the different adventures the jungle offers and call it “work.” Two weeks ago my town helped host a 150 kilometer, three day bike ride. Alongside my coworkers, I spent the day handing out mandarin oranges and tuna fish sandwiches to the passing bikers. The area surrounding us was breathtaking; we stood near the base of the steaming Reventador volcano and a nearby side road led to the Cascada de San Rafael - the tallest waterfall in the country at 430 feet. I used to be able to recite “the Campanile stands at 307 feet tall, making it the third largest freestanding bell and clock tower in the world” in my sleep, as a tour guide for UC Berkeley. Now I have a new landmark in my backyard to share with visitors: the San Rafael waterfall, approximately 1.5 Campaniles tall.

On a different day, my coworkers asked me to head out to the nearby Petroglifos de Linares to capture photos for an upcoming project. The exact significance of the petroglyphs is still unknown, but we know the unique carvings on the rocks belong to the indigenous Kichwa people but predate current Shuar communities in the area. My coworkers insist it was a former sacrificial site. The ancient stone carvings starkly contrast the buzzing drone overhead, as it captures our trip for future marketing material.

Another perk unique to my site is my counterpart’s side job - he leads whitewater rafting and kayaking trips on the weekends. When enough of my fellow Peace Corps volunteers agree to come visit, he hooks us up with a good deal. Each November the town hosts a weekend-long rafting festival in which everyone participates. Of course, participation ranges from rafting down the raging Rio Quijos to enjoying a cold Pilsner on the banks.

If none of this has convinced you that sites in the Oriente are the best, the food will. We have the requisite exotic fruits and rice dishes, of course, but the local specialty maito is my favorite. Maito is made with freshly-caught tilapia, slightly seasoned with salt, and usually served with yuca, guayusa tea and a small mixed-veggie salad. To prepare the fish, you wrap it in two layers of a large native, fire-resistant leaf and secure the wrappings with the stem to tie it like a Christmas present. Then you carefully lay the packages across a low burning fire to steam the fish. My host family has an outdoor fire pit at their farm for this purpose. Around 20 minutes later, the fish is ready. Just repurpose the leaves as a plate and eat it whole, eyes, skin and all. If tilapia isn’t adventurous enough for you, traditional restaurants also serve chontacuro, a type of beetle grub indigenous to the area. You can eat them wriggling and raw, but I prefer mine roasted over the fire alongside my maito.

Sound yummy? If you like what you heard, next time you find yourself in the northern Amazon, I’ll take you on all my favorite adventures in el Cantón de El Chaco.

