

EL CLIMA

The Official Peace Corps Ecuador Volunteer Magazine

The FIESTAS Issue



03 ASK ANITA ANYTHING

05 ECUADORIAN FIESTAS TIMELINE

06 THE CURIQUINGUES DANCE
BY PATRICE DAVISON

08 HOW BEAUTIFUL IS CARNIVAL
BY HANNAH HARPER

10 THE PRIDE OF QUITO BY RAE STERRETT

12 MY INTRODUCTION TO GUAYAQUIL'S TRADITIONS
BY EMMA ROSE

14 SHAKING THINGS UP A BIT BY MARI EMORY

16 LONG LIVE SAN PABLITO! BY JON VANTREECK

18 IN HER OWN WORDS: A PRE-DEPARTURE INTERVIEW
WITH COUNTRY DIRECTOR, ALEXIS VAUGHN
BY TORI SIMS

20 PARTING SHOT



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Corps

EDITOR'S NOTE

One of the reasons we chose this theme was to share a small bit of Ecuadoran culture that most United States citizens do not get to experience. The following articles are only a sneak peak into the culture of fiestas here in Ecuador. There is a range of events from beauty pageants (for the local queen or the best dressed guinea pig) to more traditional indigenous ceremonies. Regardless of the purpose for the celebration, it is guaranteed to have lots of music and dancing.

In Ecuador as Peace Corps Volunteers, our lives are dictated by the fiestas and celebrations of our host country. Ask any volunteer, and I can guarantee you that at least one of their classes or projects was postponed because of a celebration in their sites. These fiestas allow us to integrate into our communities by being a part of the celebration. We participate in shows, march in parades, and even dance with fireworks coming out of a helmet. We do this because it is a new and amazing experience but also because we fall in love with our communities and their celebrations.

We hope you can begin to imagine what it must be like to dance in a parade for Carnival or have your face smashed into your very own birthday cake. Hopefully it will even inspire you to visit somewhere new in Ecuador that is off the beaten path.

El Clima is a digital publication written, organized, and published by Peace Corps volunteers for the broader Peace Corps community.

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ASK ANITA ANYTHING

EL CLIMA
03

Dear Anita,

I am super excited because I just got my invitation to be a Peace Corps Volunteer in Ecuador! I am also really nervous. What advice do you have for me of things I should do here in the States before I leave for two years?

Yours Truly,
Nervous NOOB

Hello NOOB,

First of all, congratulations on being accepted into the Peace Corps. You hit the jackpot; Ecuador is the best country that Peace Corps is currently serving. The truth is, I think being in the States should be the easiest part for you (you've been doing pretty well at it so far), but since you asked for some tips, here are some small things you should do before you leave:

- 1) While walking down the street, jump on all the sidewalk grates and man-hole covers that you can. Why, you ask? Because you can't trust those things here, if you step on one, your chance of falling right though is about 50/50.
- 2) You should get a marker, and write all over your face. Try random words like "tongue" or fake mustaches, and then walk around a public space or down the street. This will give you a good idea of the type of attention you will be getting as an American in Ecuador.
- 3) And the most important advice I can give: don't eat rice. Don't even think about rice. After two years, you're going to have eaten enough rice to fill our largest volcano in Ecuador, Chimborazo.

Hope this helps.

See you soon,
Know-It-All Anita

Dear Anita,

I have been serving as a volunteer for almost a year now, and this January, I will be celebrating my first New Years in Ecuador. Can you please tell me the “dos” and “don’ts” so I don’t look silly?

Ready for a Good Time

Dearest Good Time,

New Years in Ecuador is going to blow your mind. Not to get all “my dad can beat up your dad,” but the midnight fireworks show that is put on in the states is like a warm-up here in Ecuador. The Ecuadorian fireworks show eats the American fireworks show for an appetizer and then eats five more courses.

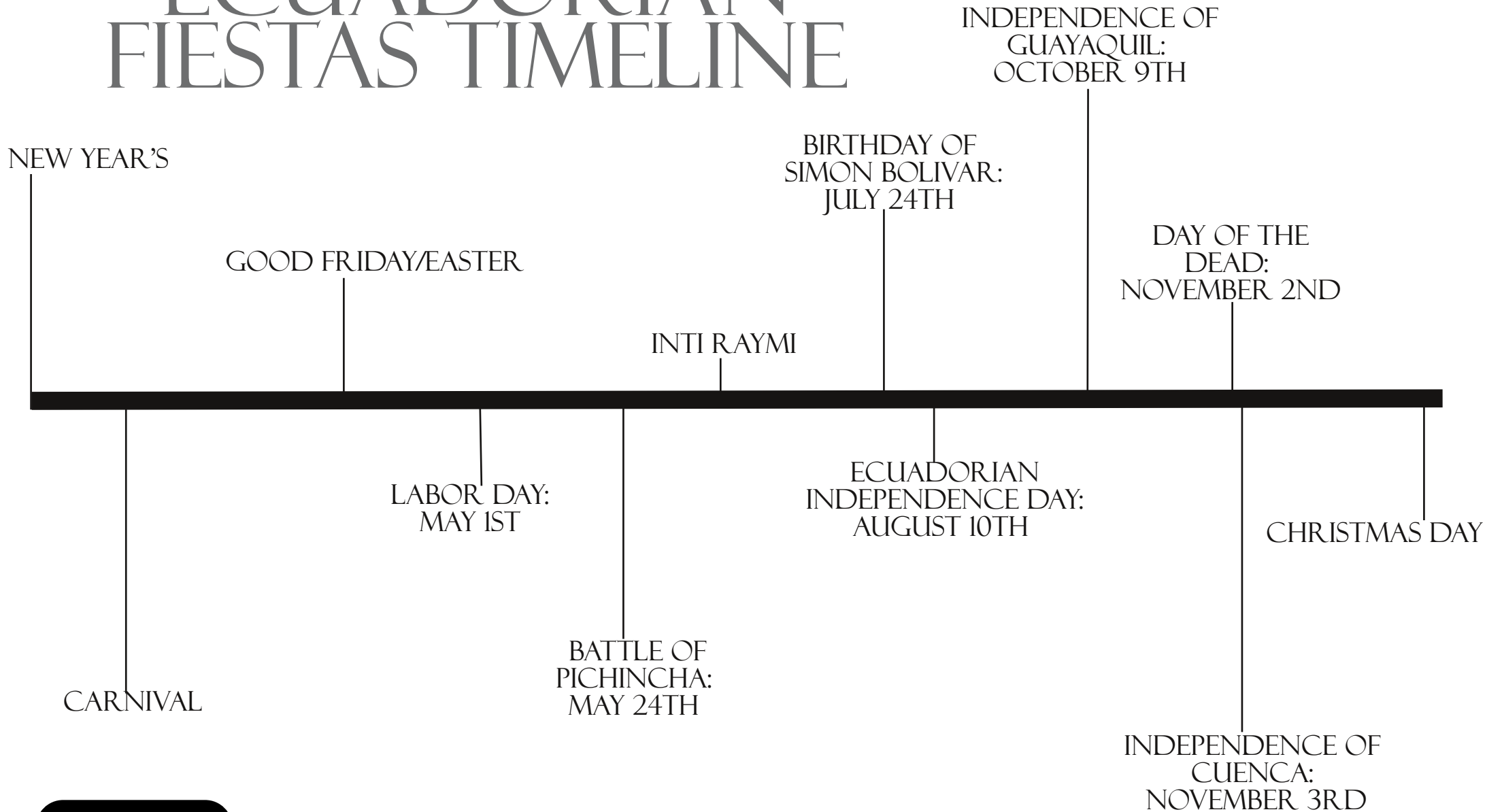
Here is everything you are going to need to know:

- What to wear: the tradition is to dress in white, but you have to wear yellow underwear (actual yellow underwear, not underwear that is stained yellow)
- What to eat: twelve grapes. That is, one grape a minute for the twelve minutes before midnight, and you’ll need to make a wish for the New Year on each one. (Expert tip: eat beforehand... I made the mistake of being hungry and ate all my grapes by 10 o’clock)
- Where to go: to the coast, of course! The sierra is too cold to be out past 6:00 in the evening, and you don’t want to miss all the men dressed in women’s attire as per tradition.
- What to do: This is the most important. You have to buy a papier-mâché doll called a monigote. You can buy dolls that will look like any character you want, from Bart Simpson to Nemo. They will range from \$5.00-100.00 and range in size from something you can carry in your hands to something that would barely fit in the back of a truck. Ecuadorians burn them at midnight, so you’ll need to cut a little hole in the buttocks area and shove it full of fireworks and explosives. You can also write down the regrets that you have from the past year and blow them up as well (great coping mechanism). A couple of my regrets that were jammed into my monigote last year included but were not limited to: “eating two tuna salad sandwiches from the street vender right before boarding a six-hour bus,” and “boarding said bus to the beach town of Montanita, only to end up in the Mountains six hours later.”

I hope this helps,
All-My-Advice-is-Golden Anita



ECUADORIAN FIESTAS TIMELINE



THE CURIQUINGUES DANCE

PATRICE DAVISON

I live in the small city of Guaranda. And typically, when I tell Ecuadorians this, I get one of two responses: “¡Que frio!” (It’s cold!), or, “Ah si, Carnaval/Pajaro Azul.” Indeed, it is cold here, but we are most famous for our Carnaval celebration and our traditional anise liquor called “Pajaro Azul.”

The month preceding Carnaval affects my life in two significant ways. As an English teacher, most classes are cancelled for students to practice their dances for the parades. As a pedestrian, I risk getting wet from children playing carnaval in the public fountains or throwing water balloons off the roof onto the unsuspecting public below (acts that start weeks before and become more frequent as Carnaval draws nearer).

Unfortunately, I was sick the week of Carnaval, so I was unable to fully partake in the heavy drinking and traditional meal of cuy (guinea pig). However, I did enjoy one of the many elections of the Mama, Tayta (father), and Ñusta (beauty queen) of Carnaval which are held in each

Top: Patrice in tradition attire during Carnaval; Bottom: Patrice with her friends in site during the parade



community. I also attended more parades than imaginable, including going to support my fellow Peace Corps Volunteers, Tamara and Hannah, as they danced in parades in their communities of San Miguel and Salinas respectively. I too was asked to participate in a number of parades, but since there was no further communication or planning, I assumed they wouldn't come to fruition. I was wrong.

Saturday morning, my teacher called me at 8:45 and asked if I could be at her house by 9:00. So straight uphill I hurried, where we dawdled the next few hours figuring out costumes. The dance, "Baile de los Curiquines," is about a bird, so my teacher had sold me this proposition on the idea that I would be in a bird costume. However, there were a number of other animals, and so it was decided I would be more suited as a horse. I borrowed an indigenous top, hefted the straps holding up the wooden frame of my horse onto my shoulders, and was ready for "rehearsal." Our small group of parade participants consisted of my teacher, her husband's indigenous radio station --some of whom were holding a sign, while others joined the half a dozen of us animal dancers-- and her son's small band of about five instruments. Gathered together on the basketball court by her house, her husband gave us instructions: the band would play and we would dance, but not in lines like everyone else, because "that's not how 'Baile de los Curiquines' worked." My instruction was to "be the horse." There were no steps to remember, no

"I became a small celebrity: me and my horse. I even made it onto the news station's Facebook page, and people still comment on my performance. As for next year...well you'll just have to come and find out."

order, just...acting like a horse. This seemed simple enough. I've spent enough time around horses to feel that I could embody one pretty well. After a few minutes of the band playing and my teacher's husband lecturing various animals on how they should act, it was show time.

We hurried downhill close to where the parade started, randomly inserted ourselves, and off we went. The parade wound across, up the main plaza and across, down the other plaza, finally ending by the plaza in front of my school-- meaning a few hours of dancing up and down hills. It was long, hot, and tiring; but we continued dancing. Eventually, I started to get really into it, and the more animated I became, the more into it the people around me became. I would charge small children as they got close to me and shy away at the last minute. I would go fast and then use my reins to slow my horse. The people loved it, and one man even commented, "That's how it's supposed to be!" Fortunately, people would take pictures and give you drinks (soft drinks and alcohol alike) along the route. I became a small celebrity: me and my horse. I even made it onto the news station's Facebook page, and people still comment on my performance. As for next year...well you'll just have to come and find out.



Hannah and her little friend walking during the parade of Carnival

HOW BEAUTIFUL IS CARNIVAL

HANNAH HARPER

When I first moved to my site nestled at 3,550 meters in the breathtaking Andes, I was pleasantly surprised by how calm life was. In comparison to the coastal culture, Sierran culture was respectful, simple, and in harmony with nature. No one blasted music at 5:00 am; no one cat-called me from the streets; no one seemed to party in excess. My town shuts down by 8:00 pm, and most people get up by 4:30 am to milk the cows and tend to their crops. The central plaza is clean, you can walk at night without fear, and the locals learn your name, greeting you every time you cross paths. For several months, I let this sleepy village lull me into a peaceful trance.

And then Carnival came to town...

For two weeks every February, my village wakes up in a big way. The Bolivar Province, where Salinas de Guaranda is located, is known to be the birthplace of Carnival in Ecuador. As a result, the region throws one of the biggest parties. Traditions include spraying foam at strangers, throwing water at strangers, parades, dancing, dancing horses in parades, throwing powdered dye, and eating lots of guinea pigs. Carnival is bigger than Christmas here in Ecuador, and its theme song, “Que Bonito Es Carnaval,” starts playing everywhere about a month before the fiesta begins.

On the first day of celebrations, I quickly realized that my chill countryside lifestyle was about to be shattered. I shared a roasted guinea pig with my elderly group. The rodent’s vacant eyes stared at me, and its teeth threatened to cut my trembling hands as I raised its halved body to my mouth. Guinea pig is considered

an expensive specialty in Ecuador and is usually served with a peanut sauce and potatoes for important occasions. I can confidently say that it was not the worst thing I have ever eaten, but I was more than happy to pass it off to Señora Rosa after a few bites...

Shortly thereafter, I was dressed up in traditional indigenous attire and danced through the town. By the end of the two-hour journey up and down the paved parts of the mountains, I was covered head to toe in foam, glitter, and water. The sun was shining, and the entire community was filled with life. People lined the roads, laughing and drinking the anise flavored alcohol typical to the area. Kids dressed as clowns, and cowboys skipped through the parade as the air filled with aromas of delicious street food. The music, fireworks, and chatter bounced off the mountains and transformed the town. However, the party did not end after one day, but rather continued for a week leading up to the big events of Friday and Saturday.

Carnaval is a national holiday in Ecuador, so about 15 of my fellow Peace Corps Volunteers were able to make the trip to see what it was all about. My host family graciously offered to put us up in their second house, located in the woods about twenty

minutes outside of town. We settled into our new digs and cuddled each other and our dogs for warmth. On the first night, the pipes burst, and being the Peace Corps volunteers we are, we set to cleaning up the swimming pool that had been created on the first floor and boiled river water to use in case of emergency. What could have been a stressful experience turned into an evening full of laughter and creative thinking. We fell asleep staring at the stars, joking, and shivering. The following day, after making a big brunch of pancakes for my host family to say thank you for their hospitality, we headed down to the little city of Guaranda, the capital of the province of Bolivar, to take part in the festivities. The parade was huge, and water and foam wars broke out all along its route. Several of us were picked up, brought to a man with a giant bucket of icy water, and completely soaked. After our freezing bath, we armed ourselves with foam canisters and set out to seek revenge. A few hours and several foam battles later, we returned back to my site tired, freezing, and covered in colored dye. My white dog had a spot of blue on his head that didn't come out for weeks. Despite our exhaustion, the party raged on...

The following day I performed a flamenco-inspired dance with my counterpart foundation in another parade. Each business, school, and government organization put on their own dance. The normally deserted plaza buzzed with visitors and locals drinking, eating, and laughing. People walked around serving locally made delicacies: potatoes with cheese, pajaro azul (anise alcohol), and tiger's milk (fresh milk mixed with sugar, rum, raw egg, and pajaro azul.)

The final day of Carnaval was relatively calm. Several people went hiking to see the salt mines (where the name "Salinas" comes from), and the epic mountaintop views. I returned the keys to my host family, washed the dye from my hair and turned-in my dance costumes to my counterpart. The occasional reveler could be seen stumbling down the road, chasing after his horse; but as day turned to night, and I sadly said goodbye to my fellow Peace Corps volunteers, Salinas seemed to effortlessly lull itself back to sleep.

All visitors are welcome next February to experience how beautiful carnival really is... until then, I will be in hibernation.

Left: Hannah and her dancing crew during the parade; Left middle: Walking with her friends during the fiestas; Middle: Hannah with Salinas de Guaranda in the background; Right Middle: Some of Omnibus 114 that came to visit Hannah and Henry during carnival; Right; Hannah and her balerina class that preformed during the fiestas



THE PRIDE OF QUITO

RAE STERRETT

This past July I had the privilege of attending the PRIDE Festival in Quito for the second time. I have revealed going each year I've been in the Peace Corps. It is different from some of the festivals I have attended in the U.S. that celebrate the LGBTQ community. If anything, it's proven even more important for my mental health to attend the PRIDE Festival while living abroad. I have been out about my sexuality in the U.S. for several years, but coming to Ecuador has required that, with the exception of a few host family members and my fellow Peace Corps Volunteers, I go back into the closet. This makes the PRIDE Festival an even more important event for myself and many other members of our LGBTQ support group within Peace Corps Ecuador. For Ecuadorians themselves, it's an equally important opportunity to show support and solidarity.

Unlike many PRIDE parades and festivals I recall from the U.S., there was no counter-event to denounce the LGBTQ community that I witnessed here in Ecuador. The change is a welcome one, but it is more reflective of the "hush-hush" culture surrounding such events- or the refusal to acknowledge them- than it is a sign of acceptance. My host mother (who is aware of my sexual orientation) has counseled me that it is better to remain quiet if your orientation is anything other than heterosexual in Ecuador, because a person who is known as anything else would find themselves quietly shunned and cut off from contact with others, especially youth. I think so few people are willing to participate in the parade and festival itself because if word got out that they had demonstrated solidarity with the LGBTQ community, the ostracism against the person and their family would be overwhelming. This quiet but powerful



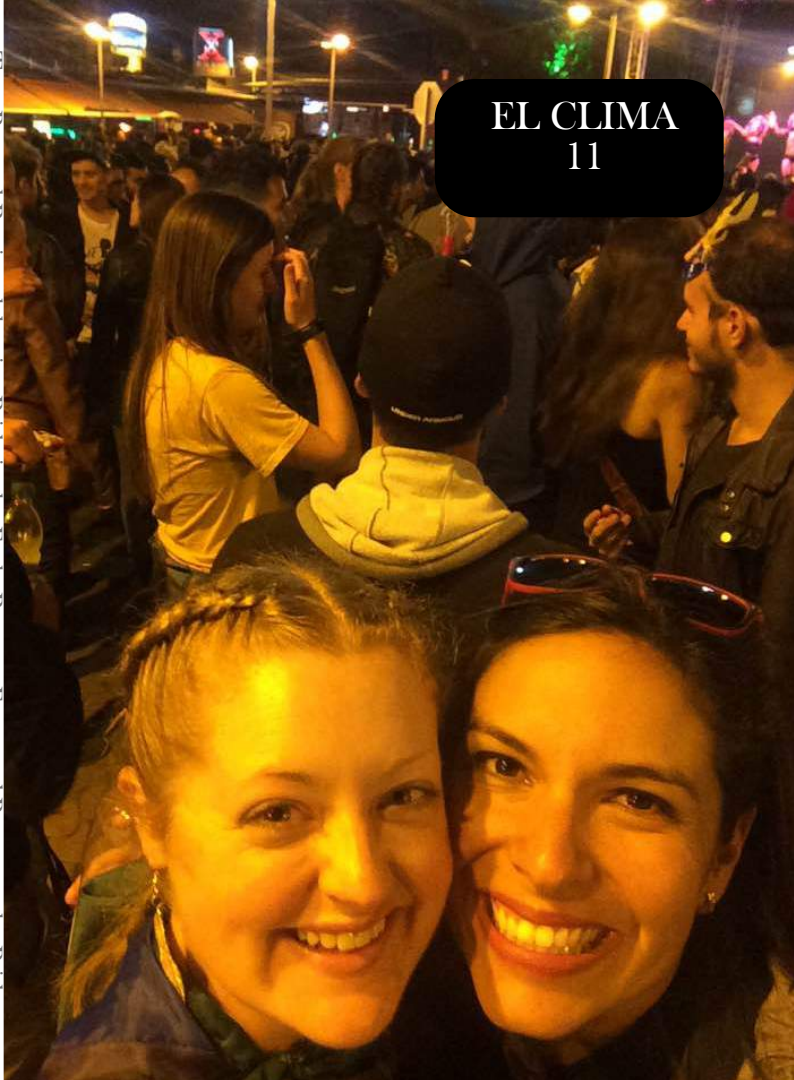
Top: Some of the creative signs that were made for the parade; Middle: Rae in front of the Foch Yeah sign in the center of the parade; Bottom: the parade in the center of Quito

discrimination made it even more poignant to witness the pride and celebration demonstrated by participants during the parade and following events in the Foch Plaza over the course of the afternoon and evening.

While there were less floats to be seen, drum circles and musical numbers were prevalent throughout the parade. There were incredible face paintings, wigs and hand-lettered signs, and the crowd, while only numbering a few hundred, was quite passionate. Both LGBTQ community members and straight allies were welcome to participate, and there were several groups who marched to raise awareness for advocating a cultural shift in how LGBTQ people are viewed in Ecuador's society. Many of the gay bars, such as Radar and Dionisios, also handed out leaflets and pointed to support groups. As customary, rainbow flags, rainbow Jell-O shots (\$1.00 each if you trust the girls with the coolers), rainbow hair, rainbow makeup and drag queens in full regalia abounded as well.

The drag queens were by far my favorite people at this event. They definitely take the pageantry to a high level, and the costumes were incredible. I loved the two queens dressed up together as one purple butterfly and the Miss Quito who was crowned from among the drag queens. As a personal fan of the "Huntsman" series, I also found the two queens who dressed as Freya and Ravena from the movie to be outstanding. They walked around together and took iconic poses from the film when posing for selfies with parade attendees. After the parade there were also dance performances from several groups, but once again, the drag queens blew me away. I have trouble merely walking in two-and-a-half inch heels, so to see those queens jam to bachata, reggaeton and pop music in three-plus inch heels was the coolest thing. Of course, after the plaza shows ended around 9:00, it was time to go dancing at the gay bars all around the Mariscal area. I couldn't rock out as well as the drag queens, but I definitely enjoyed a few more hours with magnificent friends and terrific music to celebrate PRIDE. All people of all sexual orientations are welcome at PRIDE celebrations, so pack a rainbow wig or flag next year and come out to join us in July!

Top: Rae and Betse celebrating Pride in the Foch; Bottom: Freya and Ravena at the Pride



MY INTRODUCTION TO GUAYAQUIL'S TRADITIONS

EMMA ROSE

The 25th of July celebrations are a week of blue and white dresses, vacations, food, drink, and dancing... lots and lots of dancing. It celebrates the foundation of Guayaquil in the 16th century, and for me, it was an introduction to the public holiday culture here in Ecuador.

Almost every month there is a holiday celebrating an important historical event. I first thought this was a combination of two excellent things: holidays and history. It also ended up being an introduction to something I will learn about for my whole service, which is the “come back tomorrow” attitude, or the idea that there is nothing stressful or inherently wrong with taking your time to do something, or even leaving it until tomorrow. While 99% of the time I really enjoy this way of life, many have strong opinions on it.

On Monday, class was mainly kids staring out the window, comparing dresses, leaving to practice singing, and sometimes not coming to class at all. I had left the staff room for a planned English lesson on present perfect vs. past simple, only to find all of the 12th graders sitting on the patio for marching practice. This first sent me into overdrive until I realized I was the only one worried about this. I eventually chilled out and went home.

The 25th of July was actually celebrated on Friday, July 23rd and was a whole day of skits, dances, and traditional games. On the way to work, I saw two to three-year-old girls walking to school in



Top: Fearlessly climbing the totem pole with a screaming crowd to help; Bottom: The dress festival with 10th-12th grade girls;

beautiful Guayaquil dresses, which are floor-length silk gowns with light blue and white ruffles, smiling from ear to ear. The day started with the “25 de Julio” dance, in which the 10th-12th grade girls danced in a perfectly choreographed grid to the accompanying drums and bells. The 11 to 13-year-old students acted out “a Day in Guayaquil,” where they dressed up as street vendors and offered teachers gum. They were horrified when I played the stereotypical tourist by offering them my entire wallet with wide eyes. This is probably the only time I have kept up with a person from Guayaquil on a tourist joke.

There was the traditional game where a huge totem pole is put up and students climb to the top to collect the prizes like rice, beans, and tuna, and throw them down to their classmates. For me, this was confirmation that I wasn’t working with shrinking violets. These kids were next-level hardcore humans, especially when one boy sat at the top of the rickety 5-10 meter pole, swaying, and throwing bags of rice down to a screaming crowd.

Then there was the Guayaquil dress festival, where one girl would represent each class in the special dress. They did a lap around the patio, stood for photos, and then appropriately all won prizes. The prizes were candies, flowers, and screaming accolades from classmates.

Finally, to end the program, a few girls from 10th and 11th grade sang while all 2,000-3,000

"Almost every month there is a holiday celebrating an important historical event. I first thought this was a combination of two excellent things: holidays and history."

students danced in huge circles. I jumped up and joined the students in the huge circles, and for a long time after, students tried to show me the filmed footage captured on their phones. I thankfully haven’t seen it yet, as I always manage to run away before it starts playing.

I’m thoroughly enjoying all of the holidays here, and this will be one of many things I’ll struggle to leave behind when my service is finished.

The dress festival with 10th-12th grade girls





Right: Mari and Peace Corps friends sharing in the birthday celebration; Left: Mari and her host family with her cake

SHAKING UP A BIT THINGS

MARI EMORY

From my time here in Ecuador, I've noticed that just about any occasion is an occasion to celebrate; so when it's birthday time, they go big! Of course, when it came time to celebrate my birthday, we had to do it right. My host family and coworkers in Flavio Alfaro (my town) were probably way more excited to celebrate my first birthday in Ecuador than I was.

Months before my actual birthday, my host mom was already asking me: "And how many of your friends are coming? When are they coming? Are they staying the whole weekend?" She wanted to make sure everything in the house was set up to accommodate everyone because staying in a hotel was not an option. A month before my birthday weekend, we were discussing locations; and it was quite the ordeal. Just days before the party, we finally decided on a location: Bolivia's house (a family friend) because there's outdoor space, a kitchen, and the river within

walking distance. It was perfect.

Next was the food. I had confirmed that about 10-12 friends would be coming, plus my host family and friends in Flavio. This meant A LOT of people, which in turn meant A LOT of food. We bought tons of veggies for the salad, pounds of rice, and shrimp and meat for the grill. When my friends arrived, the house was stuffed to maximum capacity!

That night my host family opened up their discoteca (club/bar), which had been closed for some time, just for my birthday. It wasn't even the birthday celebration yet, and I was already feeling so loved.

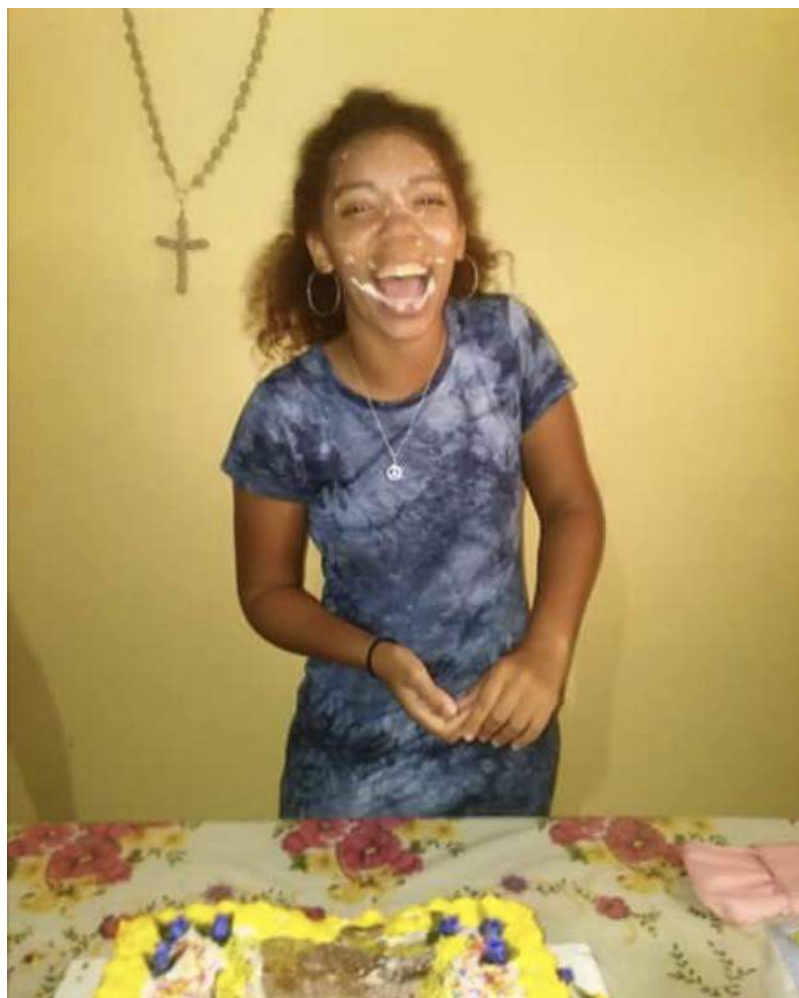
The next day we picked up some last-minute items and made our way to Bolivia's house. We made about three different car trips because there were so many of us. The moment we got to the house, my host mom and her friends went straight to the kitchen and the grill. Throughout the house there was music playing, people were dancing and

talking, and the weather was perfect. We went to the river and returned to a yummy meal of shrimp on top of the cutest rice mold with veggies, grilled plantains, steak, and chicken. Next, the cake! My host mom and her group of friends got me a cute Princess Sofia cake with yellow icing and purple flowers around the trimming. They have this thing about getting kids character cakes for adults, and I thought it was priceless! We sang “Happy Birthday” in Spanish and in English like any other Ecuadorian birthday party I’ve been to, except this time, the English version actually sounded like English.

After the singing, everybody chanted, “que la muerda,” or “bite the cake,” which is when someone comes up behind the birthday person after they blow out the candles and nicely shoves his or her face into the cake! So, my face was smashed into the cake, and then we took a bunch of pictures with everyone. At that moment, I looked around and truly felt the love, care, and compassion that each of those amazing people had for me. I didn’t feel like I was in another country. I was at home. They took time out of their lives and celebrated me. They didn’t have to, but they did; because when you care about someone here in Ecuador, that’s what you do.

After the cake, we all just sat around talking, and I guess the rest of Ecuador must’ve been moved by it too... literally. About 20 minutes later, on April 16th, 2016, a massive earthquake of 7.8 magnitude hit Ecuador. So, here’s to shaking things up for your birthday!

Mari after having her face stuffed in her birthday cake, and Ecuadorian tradition



LONG LIVE SAN PABLITO!

JON VANTREECK

I live in a small, rural, indigenous community called San Pablito de Agualongo, located about 1.5 hours north of Quito. Given its size and cultural context, for the majority of the year my site is fairly quiet and there aren't a lot of festivities. But from the beginning of June towards the end of August, this is usually a popular season for baptism and confirmation parties in San Pablito. In order for you to get a better picture of these events, I will describe a typical "boda" (regional Ecuadorian word for a "celebration").

Typically, these gatherings in-site take place outside under a bunch of tents and start around 7:00 p.m. Chairs are already pre-set on either the grass or dirt floor. The families of the young kid being baptized or confirmed usually expect between 200-400 people to show up; they are also the ones responsible for providing all the food for everyone. Once you arrive, you and your family are served porridge in a plastic bowl container. This contains a slice of cheese, a hard boiled egg, potatoes, and either a piece of chicken or guinea pig. For some people, that's enough food... right?

Next comes the entree served on a paper plate: first, there's a very generous portion of "mote" (boiled corn kernels) covering the entire base of your plate. Then, on top, there's always



Jon and two ladies from San Pablito

five boiled potatoes and two giant pieces of meat. These plates can weigh up to two pounds, no joke! They are also not meant to be finished. About 20 minutes into your gargantuan meal, the host walks around passing out plastic bags. It's for people to store their food and eat for breakfast the next day. Yes, breakfast.

As people finish, they begin the most important phase in the "boda": drinking. People walk around with a one-liter glass bottle of "Pilsener" -- Ecuador's Budweiser -- and a small plastic cup to serve those sitting down. If someone hands you a drink, however, it is customary to say "salud" (cheers) and the person offering the beer must drink the cup instead. As more and more people are done eating, the live band called the "orquesta" starts playing their ballads. This transitions into the next phase of San Pablito parties: dancing.

The music played is very typical of indigenous communities in my region of Ecuador, mostly a lot of songs about love, drinking with friends, and dancing. One of my favorite song lyrics to a popular ballad goes: "eres chiquita, eres bonita / con tu carita color canela / por eso canto,

por eso soy lloron" (you are so small, you are so pretty / with your cinnamon-colored face / which is why I sing, and why I cry). Trust me, it sounds much better in Spanish. And eventually EVERYONE starts dancing: kids, adults, elders, teenagers, and even mothers with babies on their back! The dancing usually involves bouncing from one foot to another, and almost exclusively no physical contact. But I love it! It is probably the easiest thing to pick up and community members encourage more dancing (especially from the foreigner). This can go on for hours, with the "orquesta" usually ending around 5:00 a.m.

I am always happy when I hear about an upcoming "boda." I'm happy to participate and integrate myself, but I'm also happy for the people in San Pablito. Their lifestyle is extremely labor-intensive from all the cow-milking, agriculture, and domestic chores; hard work is undoubtedly ingrained in their culture. These "bodas" provide that opportunity for community members to relax a little, take a break, enjoy some free food and drinks, be in the company of friends and family, and maybe even dance. And you never know what surprises can arise at these kind of parties: I have had dance-offs with locals, sang with the "orquesta," helped season over 2,000 pounds of meat, and seen my three-year-old host sister squat down and pee right in front of me. For the past 14 months, I have experienced my community's nightlife to the fullest – something I'll never forget. Here's to another unforgettable year! I love you San Pablito!!



Top Right: Jon's host family's meet preparation for the fiesta. Bottom Right: Jon and his site friend enjoy the meal; Bottom Left: The delicious feast!



IN ^{HER} OWN
THE WORDS:
A PRE-DEPARTURE
INTERVIEW WITH
COUNTRY
DIRECTOR,
ALEXIS VAUGHN

EL CLIMA
18

TORI SIMS

Alexis Vaughn, or Lexie, as we know her, is off to serve as Country Director of Peace Corps Guatemala. When Lexie began as Country Director of Peace Corps Ecuador, we were considered a three-star post. She leaves it a five-star post. El Clima wanted to ask her a few questions before her departure, and here is what she had to say...

[How did you become involved with Peace Corps?](#)

“My high school Spanish teacher was a Peace Corps Volunteer from Colombia, and he inspired me to become a volunteer.”

[How did your service change you as a person?](#)

“As a poor Black kid from a Cleveland ghetto, Peace Corps service changed my life completely. It opened the world to me, gave me a second language, taught me how not to fear the unknown but to embrace it as an exercise in discovery and enlightenment, and finally, Peace Corps gave me the international career I always longed for, but never knew how to attain.”

[What made you decide to further pursue a career with Peace Corps?](#)

“I had been working internationally in the corporate sector, but after 9/11 I decided to come back to the States and work in the non-profit sector. After 12 years of working domestically, my international wanderlust kicked in again and I immediately thought of returning to Peace Corps in an executive capacity.”

[What are your main responsibilities as Country Director?](#)

“In a nutshell, to ensure that the proper conditions exist for Peace Corps Volunteers to safely and effectively carry out the three goals of Peace Corps:

1. To help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women.
2. To help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served
3. To help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans.

I do this by doing my best to ensure that we have the right people in the right places (staff and volunteers), creating policies that make sense, and keeping my finger on the pulse of what happens in our host country and understanding how we fit into it.”

What is a day-in-the-life of Country Director like?

“Lots of problem-solving, decision-making, and paperwork. I love it when Volunteers are in the office because it reminds me of our core purpose and fills the halls with stories and laughter. I always aim to make more PCV site visits than I can actually fulfill, because that’s where the true beauty of the job lies.”

How have you seen Peace Corps Ecuador grow or change during your time as CD?

“I have really seen us coalesce as a team.”

What has been your greatest challenge as CD of PC Ecuador?

“Trying to be diplomatic when I want so desperately just to state my unvarnished truth.”

What is the biggest lesson you have learned in all of your time with Peace Corps?

“The generosity of humble people is astounding.”

What is something about you that would surprise volunteers?

“I am an extreme introvert.”

Where do you see yourself in the future?

“Studying French language and cooking in Paris and living in a spacious Belle Epoque apartment in the Marais or St Germain des Pres.”

Left: Lexi with staff, PCVs, and PCVLs in the Quito Office; Middle: Lexi with PCV Chrissy Will; Right: Lexi with the former Ambassador to Ecuador and two PCVs.



Parting Shot

Top: PCV Nicholas Nguyen dressed up for his town's fiestas; Middle Left: PCV Nicholas Nguyen celebrating with his counterpart; Middle Right: PCV Emma Rose's students dancing in their school's festival; Bottom: PCV Anna Sombrio celebrating thanksgiving with other PCVs, her US family, and her Ecuadorian family

