

In 1971 I checked off the Spanish speaking region of South America on my Peace Corps application as my choice of service area, expecting this would give me the best chance of being located close to the Andes Mountains. Living in Southern California (although raised in Iowa), Spanish was my obvious language choice, and my hiking and camping trips in California's mountains attracted me to the Andes. With the luck of draw, I was assigned to Ecuador, a country that I decided, after visiting Columbia, Peru, Bolivia and Chile, has the most scenic and cultural contrasts of any in South America.

Since ending my tour in 1974, the only bars to returning were money, time and resolve; however, after years of mostly talking, my wife Isabel and I finally left on May 19, 1999 for a 16 day visit to stay in Quito, the capitol of Ecuador and my Peace Corps site. Our plans were to re-explore some parts of the country, visit some Ecuadorian friends, see just how the country had changed and, hopefully, collect seeds from the little known fruits grown in Ecuador.

Today, my high opinion of the country's attractions remains the same. But, instead of "natural or scenic beauty," the current descriptive term is "biodiversity." I've seen published studies ranking Ecuador as number one in biodiversity density. Two tourists I talked with extensively said they almost passed up Ecuador after reading about its political and economic turmoil online in Quito's main newspaper "El Comercio." This caused them to look further into Ecuador's history where they discovered continuous turmoil was normal, so they made the trip anyway.

Since the 1970's, Quito has grown from what seemed like an easy going town of 600,000 persons to a bustling metropolis of over 2 million. The impression is that the oil revenues, which started upon completion of the first pipeline in 1972, fueled Quito's development. However, some residents said that the most visible additions of new highways, overpasses and tunnels, the trolley system, and the many high-rise apartment buildings just started within the past five years.

Modern Quito now sprawls all along the base of the inactive volcano "Rucu Pichincha". Immediately on its back side is another active volcano "Guagua (baby) Pichincha" which belches steam and smoke almost daily. However, everything appears tranquil from city view points. The 4th floor of the new "El Jardin" shopping center has an all glass wall at the end of the food court facing the city and volcano, providing a spectacular view that reminds you that this isn't Portland or Indianapolis. Over a snack I pondered on the odds of a sudden eruption; however, the local line is not to worry as the most severe eruption in 1660 only scattered 10cm of ash over the city - probably much as was said before the blow-ups at Mt. St. Helens and Krakatau.

Additional benefits are that the oil money has brought a much improved infrastructure in the form of upgraded roads and a reliable supply of both electricity and water to the rest of the country. My impression, perhaps skewed by our short visit, was that education and schools remain poorly funded - newspaper articles about new school breakfast and lunch programs were encouraging, but new or remodeled schools were not obviously showcased along the main roads. Although the postal and telephone system remain untouched by the oil money; the Internet and e-mail has done wonders for communications in Ecuador and "cyber cafes" where you can rent Internet access for about \$1/hr and drink coffee are all the rage.

The Peace Corps program appears to be alive and well (fluctuating between 100-200 volunteers) - the same nurse who prescribed our dysentery pills in the early 70's was still on duty. She reported that my program "small business" had come and gone over the years but was being restarted again - the current term is "microbusiness". The headquarters offices in Quite have been pushed about a dozen blocks to the north from their 70's location and now appear to actually have an organizational structure. Behind the main staff offices (a converted house) is a smaller carriage type house converted solely for volunteer use. The second floor has an extensive library, including a librarian, with two computers and e-mail access for volunteers and the ground floor has a lounge, kitchen, shower, storage and rest area for visiting volunteers. After my group went to Ponce, Puerto Rico for training, the entire program was shifted in-country; and, finally after many changes of contractors, the office decided to run their own program on a nearby hacienda.

Hardly anyone can visit Quito without making a short sidetrip north to see the marking for the equator (Mitad del Mundo). Besides an impressive 30m tall monument topped with a globe in a large plaza marked with the points of a compass, the current complex boasts an extensive array of tourist restaurants and souvenir shops. You can climb to the top of the monument, but at 9500 feet another 100 ft. doesn't improve the view. The 10-15 foot high monument of the 60's & 70's has been moved down the road to the plaza of the next village.

Taxis and buses are everywhere now, amazingly well organized and judging from the low fares heavily subsidized. A later strike revealed that most were purchased with loans from the government and being in dollars a 100% devaluation of the local currency and a doubling of gasoline prices provoked this strike. The chauffeurs are a powerful political force because they can block all the main roads with their vehicles, effectively paralyzing the country. Eventually, a compromise was reached and everyone remained poised for the next crisis.

While Quito is the center of government, most economic activity (except oil) is really controlled from the principal port city of Guayaquil and depends on exports of bananas, coffee and cocoa. Unfortunately, Ecuador focuses on massive plantings of these basic commodities whose prices fluctuate widely with world markets instead of high value specialty crops. Partly, this is driven by high transportation costs which favor bulk shipments, although some new activities such as mango plantations and shrimp farms have been developed. In the Andes around Quito the main activity is still subsistence farming although I did notice one new high value export industry - namely the cultivation of roses - a year around high value business.

To the east of Quito, in the "oriente", is the vast rain forest of the amazon basin, the source of the oil which required building roads into the area. These roads have enabled settlers to move into the area, but the poor transportation limits them to subsistence farming. At present the oriente provides an outlet for an expanding population, but without a get rich magnet growth is slow - how long that will last remains a question.