

Saturday, April 26

Our last day in Ecuador, and it's a long one. Barbara and my mother are scheduled to take an all-day tour to the Indian market at Otavalo. Eric, Jeffrey and I will be going to Cotopaxi national park. But this is only the beginning. After we return to Quito late in the afternoon, we will be having dinner, then heading out to the airport to start our flight home – which is scheduled to leave at about 11:30 PM. Mom will be staying in Quito for one more night and catching a plane for Miami early tomorrow morning.

Santiago, our tour guide from yesterday, will be escorting Barbara and Mom to Otavalo. This town, which is about 100 kilometers north of Quito on the highway Panamericana, is the site of a famous Indian market. While the cognoscenti now turn their noses up at this particular market, and claim that others in Ecuador are more “authentic,” this market is by far the most renowned. But for us all of this vacillation is beside the point, each town's Indian market is only open one or two days each week. The Otavalo market is open today, and most others are not, so the decision is simple.

The boys, though, are not into shopping and handicrafts. Otavalo would bore them, and they do not suffer boredom graciously. So we are setting out on a more active excursion to the mountains south of Quito. But before we leave, Eric puts in a purchase request to Barbara that she buy him a shrunken head at the market – a curio that he has heard (falsely) may be available. Our driver and guide is Diego, who pulls up in front of the Río Amazonas in a small Japanese SUV. I did not yet know how happy I would be for this choice of vehicle.

Cotopaxi park is the home of the famous Cotopaxi volcano. This perfectly conical peak is the iconic mountain of Quito, similar to Fujiyama and Tokyo. It lies about 70 kilometers south of Quito, and on clear days is quite visible from the city. We have not been so visually fortunate. Instead, we have had to content ourselves with seeing images of this mountain placed as a backdrop in paintings of Quito scenes pressed in front of our faces by numerous street vendors.

Our route to the mountains takes us south out of Quito on the Panamericana. This stretch of highway follows the valley that Alexander Humboldt, the famous 16th century explorer, dubbed the “Avenue of the Volcanoes” – so named because it is bracketed by strings of huge peaks that form the backbone of the central Andes. Unfortunately, the morning is very cloudy and we only glimpse summits at very brief intervals. This lowland valley (a misnomer if there ever was one because its floor is roughly 9000 to 10,000 feet in altitude) is tiled with farm fields and terraces mounting its hillsides. It is also extremely lush and green – no doubt due to the extremely frequent rains.

Here, the Panamericana fluctuates between two and four lanes. Its road surface is a cratered moonscape, lacking any niceties such as lane markers – or even a white line to delineate the center of the road. Not that the existence of such a line would be guaranteed to reduce the disturbing regularity with which oncoming vehicles appear directly in front of us. But as we turn off the highway and onto the

Cotopaxi access road, conditions become far, far worse. This road is completely ungraded gravel. Punctuating its continuous washboard bumps are large rocks and numerous ditches that range between six and twelve inches deep. However, these are the conditions that we experience where the road exists. At regular intervals, the road disappears altogether due to washouts, missing bridges, extensive mudflats, etc. These obstacles we ford directly. I become very thankful that the SUV has four wheel drive available – but Diego so far has disdained to use it.

After jolting along this access road for close to an hour, we reach a small interpretive center. Desperate for an opportunity to stretch my back and for the kids to use the facilities, we stop. The air is already cold and clammy as low-hanging clouds slide by on the mountainsides. Because we're here, we peruse the sparse exhibits of the center. A few relief maps of the park plus some old photos, and the pride and joy of the center, the mangiest stuffed condor you ever saw. Although Andean condors are basically just large vultures that display all of the unattractive characteristics of the species (e.g., small bald head, wattled neck) this one also looks like half of its wing and tail feathers have been plucked out – perhaps by several decades of school trip visits to the center. We leave the center resolved to keep scanning the skies in hopes of seeing a more majestic live version of this mammoth scavenger.

We climb rather steeply up the mountain in and out of the clouds. Presently we reach the end of the road at its highest parking area. We are 300 meters below the Jose Ribera hiking refuge. Our view of which alternately appears and disappears as fog wisps lift, then settle again. We are at 4500 meters – over 14,700 feet – the highest that I have ever been on foot or by car. The Cotopaxi summit is still almost 4600 feet higher at 5897 meters. It is from this refuge that hikers spend the night before attacking the summit in the early hours of the morning.

I am astounded to see the motley collection of vehicles that litter the parking area. I had thought that our rough ascent to this spot had been something special, but not so. There are two large tour buses unloading groups of schoolchildren who are hiking to the refuge. They are joined by a number of SUVs that have transported more serious hikers to this altitude. There is even an ordinary Quito taxicab with less than six inches of ground clearance that pulls up to disgorge several tourist passengers. There are also several vans that have carried loads of mountain bikes on their roofs or in trailers to the parking lot. These bikes are being unloaded and mated with riders from the passenger compartments of the vans. Upon mounting their metal steeds, these riders will bump down the mountain – sometimes on the access road, sometimes cross-country. Given the poor condition of the road, it makes little difference. I assume that after twelve hundred or so meters of descent and many linear kilometers of distance, the riders and bikes will be picked up by the vans and returned to Quito.

Because we have not brought any heavy clothes with us to Ecuador, we shiver in the parking lot for about twenty minutes waiting for the clouds to stop pelting us with rain and/or clear away from the summit. Neither occurs. We pile back into Diego's car and retreat down the mountain to a pretty picnic area alongside a lake at about 3850 meters. Here we eat the "box lunches" that were

added to this tour for a supplemental charge of \$10 per head. Evidently they were assembled in Diego's kitchen that morning and each consists of a single white bread sandwich, a can of diet soda and a chocolate bar. I am none too fond of the mystery meat that inhabits the center of my sandwich and the kids turn their noses up at their Ecuadoran peanut butter and jelly. I trade them my chocolate for their sandwiches and rifle through my backpack to find two stray juice boxes and a candy bar, which I give them as well. None of us is very fond of diet soda and drinking the local tap water is inadvisable.

While we eat, we enjoy watching the many birds that are circling over the lake. Diego, who is an ardent birder, points out the rather rare Andean gull. We, who are less impressed by ornithological nuance, stay on the lookout for a condor, but we see none. We do, however, see some wild horses as we hike around the edges of the lake. As the rain redoubles, we start our return to Quito. It is to prove even more of an adventure than our ascent.

Because of the rains, the access road is no longer a washboard. It is a flowing stream. The areas that were gullies and mudflats on the way up this morning are now coursing with water and the road underneath them is unrecognizable. I am grateful for the relatively high road clearance of the SUV and that we have gravity on our side. Even Diego decides that it is worthwhile to engage the 4WD. I cannot believe that any of the ordinary Ecuadoran minicars, such as the taxi that we saw up on the mountain, will be able to negotiate this now invisible road. Given the amount of rain that has been falling and the treachery of the access road at night, I wonder whether they will have to spend the night before being able to descend.

Luckily, we are able to make it down the access road and back onto the Panamericana. The rain even lets up as we travel back north up the Avenue of the Volcanoes to Quito. But as we reach the outskirts, the sky opens up again. Hail the size of pencil erasers comes pelting down. It builds up so quickly on grass surfaces that they become white like snow. Gradually, the hail shifts over to bucketing rain. It is so severe (and Quito's storm sewers so inadequate), that the steep streets turn into open rivers several inches deep. The flow is so strong that medium-sized rocks are pulled along in the current and bounce off of tires and the sides of cars. This storm turns the sky so dark that most drivers are even induced to switch on their headlights, something that Quitenos appear loathe to do even in the black of night.

Nevertheless, Diego's excellent driving and knowledge of Quito's streets gets us back to the Río Amazonas at about 4:00 PM. As we disembark, I discover that one of the chocolate bars that I had given the kids had been sat on. So several extra minutes are spent cleaning the seat and Diego's tip is increased commensurately.

Mom and Barbara return to the hotel from Otavalo at 5:30 PM. After leaving the Río Amazonas shortly after us this morning, they drove with Santiago for about two hours – reaching Otavalo a bit after 10:00 AM. There, they spend close to three hours roaming the indigenous markets. Despite the profusion of retail opportunities, they purchase relatively little: a picture, some textiles and a fake plastic skull for Eric. While not the genuine shrunken head that he requested, it is

a far more satisfactory substitute than I expected to be available. Eric is pleased and all is well with the world.

After leaving the Indian market in Otavalo, Mom and Barbara are taken to a nearby hacienda where they enjoy a big lunch and folkloric show. Their description of this lunch makes my tastebuds water and hunger pangs grow – especially in light of the unsatisfactory meal that was my box lunch at Cotopaxi. On their way back to Quito, Santiago takes Mom and Barbara via a local woodworking center where a few more souvenirs are procured.

Seeking to assuage my hunger, I go downstairs to locate a place to eat. I find a simple restaurant just around the corner from the hotel. My ordered meal comes served on a plate that is fashioned out of a coarse wooden slab. I immediately think of all the bacteria and microorganisms that must be harbored in the wood's pores. But what the heck, I have been very good on this trip in avoiding dangerous food. This is the last night. At least if I get the turista, it will only ruin my flight home, and not the entire vacation. So I eat most of the dinner – but it is hard to enjoy it.

At 8:30 in the evening, we say goodbye to Mom and prepare to leave for the airport. We call a taxi from the hotel entrance and agree upon a \$5 rate for the five mile trip – which based on my experience from yesterday, likely constitutes an overpayment of close to 100% relative to what a metered trip would cost. Once we arrive at the airport, the cabby demands \$6. I refuse based on principle, but I am still bothered. What is an extra dollar to me relative to what it is for the taxi driver?

We check in at the Continental Airlines counter and our baggage undergoes a pretty rigorous security check. By 9:30 PM we are seated in the departure waiting area surrounded by a huge throng of high school-aged kids speaking French. I ascertain that this is a school group from Montreal who are returning from a service mission in Ecuador. We only have a single connection to make in Houston. They have two. First they fly to Houston, next to Chicago, and then on to Montreal.

By this time, our kids are crashing. The nonstop activity of the past week, Quito's altitude and this already long day of adventure get to them. Each falls asleep as we wait for the plane. Finally it arrives, and a bit after midnight we are on our way. The first stop comes quickly. It is Guayaquil, where some of the passengers inbound from Houston disembark. A few more board and the flight continues on, full. For all of us still awake, a simple meal is offered. But most on the plane, including the rest of my family, are asleep.

Sunday, April 27

We land in Houston at about 5:45 AM. We scramble to reclaim our bags, pass through customs and recheck our bags for Newark. While going through customs we are not queried about the usual contraband: liquor, tobacco, fruits or vegetables. Instead, the question of the day is, "are you carrying any prescription medicines that you have acquired outside the U.S.?" My mind begins to race. Why are they asking this question? Is it because they know that I scored some illicit Ecuadoran amoxicillin and acetaminophen with codeine at the Farmacia Vanessa in Puerto

Ayora in the Galápagos ten days ago? No, that couldn't be. Is it because codeine is a narcotic that is illegal in the U.S. without a prescription? Possibly, but these pills contain only a pissant amount of codeine, and I have brought back similar spiked analgesics from Canada on several previous occasions. Or is it part of a push on the part of customs to enforce U.S. pharmaceutical companies' patents against foreign interlopers – a topic that had been much in the news at the time? I quickly decide that this is the most likely reason for the inquiry – and I should be in the clear because the patents on both of these medications expired long ago. But not wanting to risk the delays attendant in a long colloquy or the need to search our five large pieces to luggage to find and surrender the offending items, I answer “no.” We are waved through and hurry on to catch our connecting flight.

The flight to Newark is similarly packed, but completely uneventful. We land shortly after noon eastern time, collect our bags and find the limo we had reserved to take us back to Bridgewater. Forty minutes later we are home. Shortly thereafter, we receive a call from Mom, her early morning flight from Quito to Miami worked out as well, and she is home, too. Truly a wonderful and completely successful trip. But I was wrong about one thing. This trip is not to be a “once in a lifetime” experience. Already I am planning what we should do on further visits to the Galápagos.

Concluding remarks

If you are now planning your own trip to the Galápagos, there are several decisions you need to make.

When to go: There is something to be said for any season. Different animals are resident (or in different stages of development) at different times of the year. During different seasons the weather varies from warmer to cooler and dryer to wetter, and the ocean temperatures may be more or less conducive to swimming or snorkeling. To help you wrestle with these decisions, I recommend you consult a guidebook. My favorite is by Barry Boyce, [A Traveler's Guide to the Galapagos Islands](#). You will quickly determine that there are strong points and weak points to any date, so you might as well be guided by the availability of time in your own vacation schedule. No matter when you go, you won't be disappointed.

For how long: Far more important than when you go, is for how long you go. Any visit will be magical, but given the strain of travel just to get there, a longer visit will be more rewarding. Although many travelers dash in and out in three or four days, I think a week is far better. None of us became bored after the first several island landings. Each subsequent landing always offered something new and unique. While I cannot opine as to whether stuff begins to become old after ten or fourteen days of visits, I can repeat again, one week is not too long a time! In addition, please try not to cut your transfer time between arriving in Ecuador and departing for the Galápagos as tightly as we did. Although everything worked out, the stress this entails and the awful penalty for missing a connection makes it just not worth it. Schedule an extra day or two at each end. If nothing else, you'll avoid the intense fatigue that ensues from traveling with multiple transfers over thirty-six continuous hours.

What type of boat: Boats range from six passengers up to ninety passengers. While the larger boats tend to be the most luxurious, there are some boats in the sixteen to twenty passenger range that are supposed to be very nice as well. In general, the competence of the guides is higher on the larger vessels. But that said, even though the Santa Cruz was very good at managing its ninety passengers, you will have a different experience on a smaller boat. Landing in this Eden-like environment is surely more intense the smaller the group that accompanies you. We selected a large boat because of the need for distractions for our children – and it was very successful choice. In addition, we enjoyed the superior food and accommodations that you will find on a larger ship. Still, if we visit the Islands again, we would likely try to sample the different attributes of a small boat experience.

How much does it cost: The trip is not cheap, but we never felt that we were overcharged for the value we received. When we traveled in April 2003, our costs were roughly as follows. Airfare from Newark to Quito was \$624 per person and from Quito to Baltra was about \$400 per person. Nice hotels in Quito were about \$80 per room per night. Admission to the Galápagos National Park was \$100 per person. Prices for the flight to Baltra, and the Park entry were discounted by 50% for children under 12 years. And proof of age was definitely required.

The biggest ticket item was the Santa Cruz. Our triple stateroom was about \$1800 for Eric and I, and since Jeffrey was under 12, his price was only \$900. Barbara and Mom in the double stateroom were \$2200 each. Thus, at full rates, the cruise was roughly \$300 per person per day. (I believe the 2006 prices for the Santa Cruz are close to \$100 per person per day higher than in 2003.) We traveled in low season and occupied the least expensive exterior cabins on the ship. Stateroom rates increase by close to \$100 per day during high season, and also increase if you select a higher class of cabin.

In general, high season is when visiting gringos have their most copious vacation time – summer, Christmas and Easter – but the particular dates can vary by boat, so it pays to investigate all possibilities. I don't think there is a great payoff to selecting the ship's fancier cabins. In general, these are simply on a higher deck with a better view or some extra floor space. But since daybreak and nightfall come quickly and punctually at 6 AM and 6 PM on the equator, there is little sunlight for external viewing during your cabin hours. Indeed, most of our non-sleeping time aboard ship was spent eating in the dining room or attending naturalist briefings in the lounge.

Rates are less expensive on smaller or less luxurious vessels. There are many boats in the \$250 to \$300 range. If you are willing to go on a "tourist class" boat, the daily rate can drop to as low as \$150 per person per night. Folklore exists that if you show up in Quito or Guayaquil (or especially on the docks of Puerto Ayora) you may find a booking agent needing to fill last-minute unoccupied space and offering truly cut rate prices – but this is an option that is likely only feasible for footloose college students or retirees. Altogether, including our pre- and post-cruise stays in Quito and Ecuadoran tours, the total cost of our 11 day vacation was just under \$4000 per person.

Note, all of these cruise prices assume that you are booking your Galápagos cruise separately and not as part of a complete pre-packaged tour. The latter is the most expensive option. Large travel operators like Globus, Tauck or Collette may have trips to the Galápagos, but their prices (which include all of their own markups and commissions to reseller travel agents) seem to be the highest. Deal with an agent who has personal familiarity with the Islands and boat options, and most importantly – one who will book your trip directly with its actual Ecuadoran cruise operator. We used such an agent (Ken Weemhoff) to make our Santa Cruz reservations with its Ecuadoran operator, Metropolitan Touring. He was also able to offer my mother a discount consolidator fare on American Airlines from Miami to Quito. Typically, your plane reservations from Quito or Guayaquil to Baltra will be handled by the Ecuadoran operator of your cruise (Metropolitan Touring in our case) to jibe with your boat's sailing schedule. We booked our own airfares on Continental from Newark to Quito and I used the Internet to make our hotel and tour reservations in Quito. See some of the following web sites for a rundown of the various boat and tour options for the Galápagos and their prices:

<http://www.discovergalapagos.com/> good general information about boats and the Islands

<http://www.galapagosisland.net/index.html> good general information about boats

<http://www.galapagosadventures.com/> we used this agent for our Santa Cruz booking – but he specializes more in dive trips

<http://www.galapagosvoyage.com/home.asp> website of Metropolitan Touring – the operator of the Santa Cruz

<http://www.galasam.com.ec/> we used this agent for our tours in Ecuador

Finally, if you are still on the fence about going to the Galápagos, go down to your local public library and check out one or both of these books by Tui De Roy (or Tui De Roy Moore as she was known when she was writing the first book). Galapagos: Islands Lost in Time or Galapagos: Islands Born of Fire. Her writing and photography are inspired. If reading these wonderful books doesn't make up your mind, nothing will.



View on the road to Otavalo



Market at Otavalo



Mom with Santiago in Otavalo



Barbara with vendor in Otavalo



Forklore show



Eric with skull in departure lounge at Quito airport

Because the digital camera went with Barbara to Otavalo, and I took the 35mm film camera to Cotopaxi, there are no electronic photos to display of Cotopaxi.