

Where North and South meet: Ecuador.

Before we went

This year, we celebrated our 25th Wedding Anniversary. Therefore we were looking for a very special vacation destination for our family of four (me, my husband, our son (20) and daughter (18)). We read something about Ecuador in AAA's Going Places, googled a lot on the internet and found the perfect destination: [Hakuna Matata](#), close to the town of Tena, in the province Napo, Ecuador. It's a small resort, maximum occupation is 32 visitors, owned by a Belgium couple, Rudy and Marcellina. They came up with a complete program for our trip, including a car and guide, Paul Salazar, for the first 5 days. The second part of the trip, 6 days, we were going to spend at their resort Hakuna Matata.

Now you can read Olga's day by day journal of this amazing trip.

July 29, 2009

We leave Norfolk at 11 am, to arrive on time at Washington DC. The transfer at the airport from Bogota (Columbia) is not successful: we miss the connection to the capital of Ecuador, Quito. Actually it is not surprising, as we only had 35 minute transfer time. But Avianca (the oldest Columbian airline) did a great job: a car was ready to bring us to a nice hotel, we got a voucher for a late dinner, and the next morning a car took us to the airport in time to catch the 8.45 am flight to Quito.

July 30

Our guide Paul picks us up at the airport, and drives us right away to the historical town center of Quito (at an altitude of 8,400 ft! We have to get used to that). It dates back to 1534, and you can see clearly that there was a big catholic influence. And a lot of gold leaf, used to brighten up the churches (there is still gold to find in Ecuador). For sure at La Compania de Jesus Church they used a lot of gold leaf: 50 pounds!

We also find the statue of Fray Jodoco Ricke, a Belgium Franciscan monk (the first Franciscan monk in Quito), who arrived around 1534 and brought bread and – not surprisingly – beer to the area.



Fransiscaner monastery



La Compania de Jesus Church

We also visit the old library, a Franciscan Monastery (beautiful garden!), the Presidential palace (very easy to get in, the first part of the building has no security at all) with a beautiful square in front, and a very nice old hotel. Very impressive; this old Quito. The atmosphere is relaxed and friendly



Square in front of the Presidential Palace

At the end of the afternoon, Paul brings us to our hotel, the NüHaus Hotel, a new, temporarily venue, in the lively modern center of Quito: lots of restaurants, pubs, terraces.

After a few drinks and something to eat, we walk to the Bazaar, an indoor market. Marjolein, our daughter, does a very good deal here, buying a wool sweater vest: they told us never to pay the price they ask, but to bargain. So she asks the vendor how much it is. “\$ 30.00”. No, too much, I will give you \$ 25, she says. The vendor answers: “\$10.00?” What? \$ 10? Oh, OK!! Sold!

Well, we think we did not understand his Spanish-English, and he didn’t understand our American-English. We had great fun. And a bargain!

Later that evening, we have drinks and play some cards at the Lennon Café Concierto. We pay \$7.50 for two pots of hot tea, 2 bottles of beer, and a big plate of nacho chips and dip. Ecuador doesn’t have its own currency, but uses the American dollar which makes it easy for us. But they do mint their own version of quarters and dollar coins which you see much more here than in the USA.

The weather is great by the way. Not too warm, not too cold, about 80° F during the days, but much colder at night, about 50° F. But Paul, our guide, warns us about the high UV index because we are so close to the equator. A hat, sun glasses and sunscreen are a must in this country!

The other thing we notice: the sun is in the wrong spot in the middle of the day: instead of in the south, we see it in the north. Welcome to the southern hemisphere! This is very weird to us.

July 31

Paul picks us up at 9 am, to drive us to Otavalo, a town famous for its traditional market. The outskirts of Quito seem to be poor: little, shabby houses. Paul tells us: that Quito,

with 2 million habitants, is the second city of Ecuador after Guayaquil, which has 3 million. Number third city is..... New York City, where more than 750.000 Ecuadorians live.

On our way to Otavalo we stop at Guachalá, the exact center of the earth! The equator (Ecuador is obvious named after that). We think it is very impressive to stand with one foot in one halve of the earth, and with the other foot in the other halve. There is a nice landmark here, which they built actually not too long ago. Before they had GPS, French men measured the equator to be about 600 ft further away. Well, they came pretty close. But on the exact equator you see '0.0.0' on your GPS. Amazing.

There is a nice landmark on this spot, with a special guide who tells us all kinds of interesting things about this spot. One of them is that the mountain we see is the only spot on earth where there is snow on the equator.



Olga north, Joost south of the equator The only mountain with snow on the equator on earth

We also stop at San Pablo Lake to have a drink (awful coffee by the way!), at a local restaurant. Beautiful view! On the parking lot we see a lama, and a very old lady. She tries to sell Joost a chicken for \$ 12. Way too much, says Paul. We like the little puppies better. But can't take them with us either. Two local girls (8 and 13 years old) ask for a ride to Otavalo. They want to sell their craft works on the local market there to earn some money today. Paul tells us they can ride with us if we can take some pictures of them first. So they pose for us in their colorful clothing.



‘Wanna buy a chicken?’

In Otavalo we visit the local market. Very colorful, lots of the same –traditional – stuff: clothes, rugs, hats, bags. Today, Friday, it’s not a busy market day. Tomorrow will be different, much bigger and busier, so we decide to come back tomorrow.

After lunch (spaghetti with garlic and shrimp, delicious) we drive to Lago Cuicocha, a volcano crater lake, to hike. .



View of the crater lake

The tour around the lake takes 6 hours. That is too much for us today, so we hike for 2 hours. Paul shows us a lot of different flowers and plants, he knows all the names! We spot a lot of orchids, and we enjoy the view! A beautiful, peaceful place.

Then it is time to go to our hotel for two nights: Hacienda Chorlavi. On our way there we stop at a little village, Cotacachi. It has a surprisingly nice main street, with all leather shops.

Hacienda Chorlavi is an old Spanish farm (hacienda), very quiet. It’s a big lot, with a lot of small buildings, surrounded by gardens and orchards. Beautiful, but a little outdated. But it is very nice to wander around here, and relax. Too bad the pool and sauna are in the middle of remodeling, so no swimming today.

The rooms are big although a little outdated, but it has a nice atmosphere. Too bad the shower doesn’t seem to work. But an hour later, that problem is solved. So after a nice shower we go to dinner in the dining room. Paul left for a night of car racing (he can’t understand we see no fun in that), so we are stuck without our Spanish speaker, and have

to order for ourselves. The waiter doesn't speak any English, German or Dutch. And our Spanish is very poor, but we manage to order (Joost just gives it a try and that seems to work). And we have a great meal!



Breakfast at Hacienda Chorlavi

August 1

Today Paul drives us back to Otavalo at 9 am to visit the busy Saturday market. We first visit the animal market. Well, have a look at the pictures. Animal rights are no priority here. We are saddened when we see the puppies and kittens and little chickens, but that is animal life here. We enjoy the local people better: young, old, typical clothing, colorful, and the babies are so cute.



Animal Market of Otavalo

We walk to the center of Otavalo, where the market is everywhere in the streets. We love all the colors! Paul tells us about the local fruits, we taste it and love it. Paul also tells us a lot about the people and their habits and culture. Very interesting. We buy a big tapestry.

We have no idea if we pay too much or not, but the vendor is happy and so are we.



After lunch break (the same restaurant as yesterday, but today Paul recommends soup: very good), we drive to a waterfall. This place is sacred to the local Indian people. They come here several times a year to say thanks to their gods, to show gratitude for all they give to the people. We feel the special vibes. It is a wonderful place. We walk around, take some pictures and enjoy it very much!



The day is not over yet: Paul takes us to a home/ shop, where locals show us how they weave cloths. The products they make are of a much better quality as we saw on the Otavalo market. Therefore it is more expensive. But we see here how much effort it takes to make. Hard work! We buy a nice piece.



Before we go back to the hacienda, Paul takes us to the famous ice cream salon, La Bermejita, in Ibarra. Here they make ice cream in the traditional way, and it tastes great! Without our guide, we would never have found this. Another great day comes to an end with a good meal at the Hacienda dining room.

August 2

Today we will drive to the village Papallacta to visit the famous warm water wells. But first we visit [Hacienda Guachalá](#). This is another beautiful Spanish hacienda. The heirs still run a hotel here, but it is too big, costs too much money, to do all the remodeling it needs. It would be a great place to start a resort. Paul has all kinds of plans for it. It is his dream to, one day, own a place like this.

Our second stop today is at the town Quinche. Here, we see a very big church, more a cathedral. Every Sunday, people come from all over the place to have their cars blessed by a priest, to protect them from accidents. There are so many people and hundreds of cars, waiting patiently. We visit the church, and then watch the families film and photograph the blessing of their cars. It's a big family tradition. Paul tells us, there are very few car accidents in Ecuador. Now we know why.



Then we drive to Papallacta, at an altitude of almost 10,000 feet. The road to Papallacta is beautiful and we pass through 12,000 feet altitude. On the other side of this mountain range the weather has changed: rain and clouds. But the resort where we stay is beautiful,

built completely around the warm water wells. Our cabin is on the pools with very hot steamy water, surrounded by a beautiful yard. Very relaxing, it's like a spa. And the restaurant is great too. We also hike a little, and furthermore: relax, relax, relax. The only thing is that the latitude gives you a headache. Even so, it is great and fun and ... relaxing. So we enjoy it the whole afternoon and evening.



Warm water pools of Papallacta

August 3

At 12 noon, Paul picks us up. So after some more water fun, breakfast, and packing, we are ready to leave for Hakuna Matata; the resort that will be our destination for 6 days. At lunch time, we stop in Baeza for a pizza at a Dutch guy's place; Pizzeria Kopal. Kos, the owner, loves to talk in his own language for a change, and he serves great pizza!! : om 12.00 hebben we met Paul afgesproken. Carlos is met Paul meegekomen, om gasten uit Hakuna Matata naar Quito te rijden.

Then, on the road again and after a few hours we reach Archidona, the village (very small) near Tena. Here, a 3.5 mile sand and stone path leads to Hakuna Matata. The path is an adventure in itself, in the middle of the rain forest, very small, with a even smaller rope bridge. Wow, we love this!



Rudy en Marcellina, the Belgium owners, welcome us and show us around. This is a wonderful place, even better than the pictures in the brochure. It looks like a small paradise. Nice cabins in local style, an open restaurant, a pool shaped like a coconut tree,

and a private little beach at the river side. And the dinner: great!! They serve a three course dinner every night, they use only fresh and organic produce. This is a great place!! And lots of things to do: you can go horse back riding and hiking (both with guides) on the resort's grounds, and sign up for a Amazon day, white water rafting, or visit Tena.

August 4



Today we signed up for horse back riding. It's just 3 today, Olga doesn't feel well, but Marcellina takes very good care of her: local herbal tea must do the job. Horse back riding is a whole new adventure here: through the river, up and down hills, though mud and over rocks. No normal paths. The horses work very hard in this terrain, but it's great fun! And what stunning nature here: tropical flowers, butterflies, trees. The rest

of the day we walk a small hike, and relax at the pool. This is vacation!!

August 5

Today, Arjo and the kids sign up for white water rafting while Olga stays at Hakuna Matata to relax and recover. They leave at 7.30 for a wild day!

The guide is a world champion white water rafter, and the raft is accompanied by 3 kayaks, for security reasons. The water is pretty wild, so there are some procedures to be followed. There are 7 persons in the raft, including the guide and a second guide.

There is a lot of fun, and a lot of serious rafting, and falling in the water. Pretty scary, because the water is cold, the waves are big, the raft is on top of you, and... no control. Is this fun? No! Is this challenging? YES! But after two water experiences, you feel you are in safe hands. The kayakers take very good care of you, and make you enter the raft again. And then the fun begins!!

The lunch is great, all fresh food, a lot of fruit. And relaxing...



The guides take every chance to add new challenges, but they make sure everybody is safe and everybody has a good time. A lot of fun, a lot of laughing, a lot of screaming. A great day!

At the end of the journey, a truck takes everybody back to Tena, and from there back to Hakuna Matata, where they arrive at 4 pm. Time enough to enjoy a drink, a splash in the pool, to read and relax, until it is time for dinner.

In the meanwhile, Olga felt good enough that afternoon for some horse back riding. So she had a great afternoon too!



August 6

The day starts with some rain (well, after all it is called a rain forest - now we know why). At lunch time, the sky is clear, and we decide to go on a hike with a guide, Fausto.



He takes us up and down the hills. It's very muddy so we are glad we wear the rubber boots Hakuna Matata provides. Fausto knows a lot about the living animals and plants in the rain forest, and finds little spiders, frogs, et cetera. But the snake Joost encounters was hidden, so this is a scary surprise! 'Don't move, stay where you are', Fausto tells us. The snake is angry, hisses and moves his tongue in and out. After a while the snakes backs out. Oempff.

We really enjoy this hike! Fausto makes it even more fun and interesting. So Arjo, Olga and Joost decide, after we come back, to hike a little bit further. Marjolein stays at the pool. So we walk along the river and see petroglyphs made by Indians 500 – 1500 years ago, they don't know the date exactly. And we admire the ants who carry leaves bigger than themselves to... well, that we couldn't figure out.



After this hike, we all relax at the pool, have a drink, and enjoy another great dinner at the resort's restaurant. A steak, home made fries, and homemade mayonnaise! Yummie!

August 7

Today is the Amazon-day trip. We have to get up early for breakfast at 7. Fausto will be our guide for the day again. First the taxi drives us to Misahauli. It's a little village, known for the many little monkeys that wander around the trees. Funny! But they are not pets!! So be warned.



The village is on the Napo River, very touristic. We don't mind leaving (and it is raining too). We drive to a place at the Napo River where we enter a long motorized canoe. On the way there we stop to watch a lot of parakeets and one toucan, high up in the trees. After 10 minutes by boat, we enter land again for a hike in a bamboo forest. We start with a visit to a small Indian village. Fausto shows us around one of the houses. Unbelievable how little furniture, and amazing the way they live here with a large family and a lot of small children. It all looks very poor to us. But they have food (they grow their own produce, go fishing, have cows), the children go to school (in their own community there is a small public school), and they have electricity and a TV.



Fausto en Joost walking to the Indian village

We got some tea and food to taste, the people are very friendly, and we have the feeling they talk about us to each other. We must be as strange to them as they are to us.

In the bamboo forest, Fausto finds the most amazing forest life: birds, insects, trees, plants, even a cayman. But only Joost might have seen that too. We love the way he teaches us about how the local people use the plants, the river, and what it means to them. They live so much closer to nature. After a while, we got back to the canoe, which brings us back to the place we started. There we have lunch of soup and tilapia fish. Very good!

After lunch the boat brings us to the rain forest, for a hike. It is warm and humid, like we expected. The first part is steep uphill... and then we have a great view!

Fausto is amazing: again he shows us the smallest animals, he just lifts a leaf and there it is: the tiniest little frog, bright blue and red.



We also find a very rare little spider, bright yellow. Later on this hike, Fausto teaches us how the local Indians used to communicate (and sometimes still do) in the rain forest: by drumming on the roots of large trees. Olga tries it too, and you really hear the sound. It's a very interesting hike, most of all because our guide knows so much about the forest and its habitants.

The last part of this day is [AmaZOOonica](#), an animal rescue center, run by volunteers. A French student (learning to be a vet) guides us around. We see all kind of local animals: different species of parrots, monkeys, a trumpet bird, pigs, cayman (hidden in the mud/water, so we don't actually see him) and so on. And the end of the tour, a lot of monkeys (the smallest monkeys on earth), to play around us in the trees.



This was a very special day, so much to see and so much to learn. Thanks to Fausto. We board our canoe again, find our taxi driver, and head back to Hakuna Matata (we take one of the volunteers of AmaZOOonica with us to Tena). Just in time for dinner, we arrive at Hakuna Matata.



Motorized river canoe

August 8

Today, Saturday, there is a market at Tena. Olga, Joost and Marjolein decide to visit and ask a cab to drive them. Arjo stays at Hakuna Matata, to relax, read and swim. Tena is old but pretty nice, with nice views of the river.



Tena: river and pedestrian bridge

After lunch, we go for another horse back riding tour, now the four of us together. We enjoyed the first ride so much! Octavio will be our guide. Again, we go through the river (three times), great fun! The water is deep, so be careful your boots don't get all wet! This time, we also visit another Indian Village. We get off the horses and walk to the village, where 70 people live together as one big family. Then we hike to a waterfall: well, it is more climbing than hiking. Through the water, mud and small paths. Very nice! This is what we like! We get stuck in the mud, have boots full of water, are sweating, but, we all have fun! The last part up to the waterfall is particular steep, and we try our best not to fall into the water. Octavio and the second guide (forgot his name) have a great time too.

Then back to the horses. Octavio tells us it is about 15 minutes to reach Hakuna Matata. We beg him to take a detour, which he does. So we ride our horses for more than another hour, through the hills, on steep paths, through the river again. Do we have a great time? Thank you Octavio! And thanks to the horses too, they did a great job! And not an easy job.



Back at Hakuna Matata, we take a quick dive into the pool, and then go to enjoy our last dinner here. We have a drink with the owners, and then our last night takes an end.

August 9

Today we drive back to Quito. After an early lunch, our driver picks us up at 1 pm. It takes us 4 hours to reach Quito, and we stay in the same hotel as before. The city is crowded because of a special holiday tomorrow. The president will even be there. We see a lot of security at the hotel where he is supposed to stay.

We find a nice little restaurant, built around a tree (they didn't want to cut it down) and then go to bed early, because tomorrow our plane leaves at 6 am.

We had a most wonderful time in Ecuador!! We hope to come back again to explore the country a bit more. There is so much more to see and to do, especially the Galapagos Islands, the property of Ecuador, must be spectacular. So maybe we'll see you, Ecuador!!