



STORY BY JESS MCKINLEY

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SYLVAIN GALLEA,
JESS MCKINLEY, AND COURT RAND

ANDES TO AMAZON

ECUADOR FREEDOM BIKE RENTAL AND MOTORCYCLE TOURS ADVENTURE



Far above the tree line, though still short of where the sunlight begins, I cling to the side-cut slope of Guagua Pichincha, an active stratovolcano that soars 15,000 feet above the Ecuadorian capital of Quito. Although confident in my rudimentary mountaineering skills, I'm not roped into a climbing harness today. I am on a motorcycle—completely self-contained with the kit necessary to ride up cold snow-blown Andean peaks, traverse high desert plateaus, and survive the heat and humidity of the Amazon.



A loud gasp comes from my Husqvarna Terra, as even fuel injection is not enough to aspirate the 650cc engine in the oxygen-depleted air near the top of the volcano. I decide to lean the bike against a basalt rock outcropping and continue the last 200 feet to the summit on foot.

I quickly find that I have to pause every few steps to catch my breath as the altitude relegates both man and machine to the same fate. Kneeling down, the whirling clouds part for a precious few seconds, providing an extraordinary glimpse of the expansive cityscape in the valley below.

And so it happens, every few celestial cycles—a faint call, itchy feet, the burning need for priority realignment in life. Just three weeks prior, an older version of me was fully consumed by the proverbial rat race, chained to the office by day and constantly thumbing my smartphone at night. I was pursuing success as outlined by the fraternal American yardstick I had adopted in business school, but I was light-years away from the vision I had of myself as a wondrous kid riding a minibike through the dry and dusty riverbeds of Southern California.

The difficulty of clearing two weeks from a busy schedule to mentally and physically unplug seemed insurmountable and, assuming that could be done, how would two weeks be sufficient for the magnitude of life adjustment I was in quest of?

Serendipity and providence often tend to work in very peculiar ways. No sooner than I am put in touch with a man that claimed to have the cure I was seeking, do I find myself on a jetliner, descending through layers of altostratus clouds destined for the high-altitude landing at Quito's new Aeropuerto Internacional Mariscal Sucre.

Disembarking the aircraft, it is hard to overlook a man in a well-used day-glow adventure jacket and road-grimed denim jeans securely tucked into off-road riding boots. He has a large



Giant Loop dry-bag over his shoulder and greets me with a smile, “I’m Court. Welcome to Ecuador. All your shit needs to fit into here,” as he hands me the dry-bag.

Court Rand is a jovial New Englander who now resides in Ecuador and lives for the sole purpose of combining his love of motorcycle adventure touring and Andean culture, and sharing it with others. However, today, I’m under the illusion that we will be riding two-up through rush-hour traffic with my entire luggage collection expected to fit in a waterproof saddlebag!

Court puts my mind at ease as he hails a taxi cab, explaining that there are driving restrictions on certain days in the city center and that he arrived by motorcycle and will guide the cab driver back to his shop in the heart of the city. By this time, we are joined by photog extraordinaire Sylvain Gallea, Court’s business partner in Ecuador Freedom Bike Rental and Motorcycle Tours, and I have an inkling that we have the makings of a good team.

Two days and hundreds of miles have passed since I touched down in Quito, and I can’t help but to be utterly overwhelmed as I revel in motorcycling bliss; the variety of terrain and the sheer enormity of the landscapes are endless. Fortunately, I didn’t have the time to mentally prepare myself for such a visceral experience, which only helps to compound the effect.

High above the clouds, the sun is setting behind us, casting larger than life shadows as we descend down a winding dirt path. We are headed toward the small town of Sigchos, in the central sierra, that promises a hot meal and a warm bed. A mix of clay and imbedded igneous rock offer a fairly smooth ride, but my attention is drawn to the cloud formations as they flow and contort like gaseous glaciers slithering through the valleys below.

The innkeeper at Hosteria San José welcomes us through the gates as we park the bikes and prepare to settle in for the night. The Husqvarna Terra may just be the perfect steed for this type of adventure. Light and nimble compared to a large travel enduro bike, yet powerful enough to tackle steep terrain and fast enough to overtake just about all other vehicles on Ecuadorian roads. The upright dirt bike riding position is comfortable while seated or standing, and the seat material is surprisingly kind to the backside for hours on end.

My dry bag weighs about 50 pounds, as it is chock full of camera gear, chargers, converters, inverters, maps, Spanish books, laptop, and a set of street clothes. A handy tail-bag is perfect for items such as goggle wipes, steno book, point-and-shoot camera, and a set of rain gear. With the rear shock spring pre-load adjusted a few turns stiffer, the rear sag is perfect for the added luggage and the steering angle; the resultant handling is spot-on.

“After much banter and debate, we decide that the best plan is no plan at all. Let our senses be our guide, and experience everything to the fullest.”



Thoroughly satisfied with my bike setup, we dig into a dinner and break out the topo maps to plan the expedition ahead. Although a bit smaller than the state of Colorado, Ecuador is named such because of its location at the equator. Unique to most other equatorial countries, its elevation ranges from sea level at the Pacific Ocean to over 20,000 feet atop the towering Chimborazo volcano.

The eastern slope of the Andes gives way to dense jungle, which becomes the Amazon Basin and the tropical environment one would expect to find at the equator. Interestingly enough, weather and temperature are quite predictable year round, varying largely by elevation—snow and wind at the top, heat and humidity at the bottom, and every climate in between. This mandates highly adaptable gear in the form of waterproofing and warmth, as well as venting.



After much banter and debate, we decide that the best plan is no plan at all. Let our senses be our guide, and experience everything to the fullest—a great advantage when dealing with a small tour company that can personalize your trip on the fly.

Morning breaks as we navigate our way around the rim of a two-mile wide volcanic caldera with jaw-dropping views of Quilotoa and the mineral rich waters that have filled the void. The rugged burro trails make for challenging terrain on a motorcycle; the visual payoff is amazing as the luminous emerald green lake reflects the images of the snow covered peaks of Cotopaxi and the Illinizas in the background, absolutely devoid of people, save us.

Fully consumed by wanderlust, I turn on my helmet-mounted GoPro in an effort to memorialize the imagery as we ascend through thinner and thinner air. The high desert terrain sur-

rounding the flanks of Chimborazo is harsh and inhospitable, yet filled with hundreds of delicate and agile vicuñas, a wild ancestor of the domesticated alpaca. They are curious about us, too, perhaps thinking that we are a less evolved version of them. Together we share each other's company for a few minutes, keeping a comfortable 50-yard buffer between us.

Winding through small Andean villages speckled with the colorful clothing and distinctive bowler-style hats of the indigenous Quechua people, we pass four large roosters tethered in front of a ramshackle hangout, the lucky winners from the previous evening's competition. All eyes are on us as we rumble through the main drag, looking like two-wheeled astronauts vis-à-vis the normal passersby. Young mothers toil in the garden, with babies securely wrapped in ornate woven blankets around their backs. I figure that we must be just as exotic to them as they are to us, which seems to be a fair trade.

Days and experiences begin to blur together as my cerebral faculties become saturated by the never-ending beautiful vistas. The search for gasoline and a bite to eat are perennial, and the resulting long conversations often provide a unique insight into the local psyche.

Ramon, a local Quechua man, has a 55-gallon barrel outside of his earthen dwelling with the letters "G-A-S" spray-painted across it. We asked if he had premium fuel and he confirmed that, indeed, he did, as he pumped the contents out of the barrel into an old laundry detergent bottle that had "Super" painted on the outside. I smartly surmise that he passes off the description as being accurate, regardless of the contents contained within.

Ramon asked if we were riding to the Valley of Longevity, and tells us of a village called Vilcabamba where locals believe the waters of the Fountain of Youth flow. A little taken aback, I was overcome with the feeling that Ramon and I had crossed paths before, perhaps in a previous lifetime. I quickly dismiss the notion and we hurry on, needing to fill our bellies before departing.



ECUADOR FREEDOM BIKE RENTAL
AND MOTORCYCLE TOURS ADVENTURE



An old woman with a well-weathered face, youthful eyes, and a broad smile peers out of an open kitchen window and waves us over. There is no menu to be had, so we kindly ask what she's cooking today. Pan-fried chicken with yuca (a potato-like tuber) is absolutely delicious, which is fortunate, as it's our only choice; with a small bottle of sugar-sweetened Coca-Cola to wash it down, I am 100-percent satiated. I also take no small comfort in knowing that, apart from the juice cart proffering up fresh squeezed juices and ice cream bars, American-style fast food has not infected its way into the Central Andes.

The terrain begins to dissolve away from volcanic rocks to softer clay and sand as we descend, literally for hours, from the Andes towards the Amazon basin. Mountainsides are seemingly bleeding water as snowmelt and tropical rain coalesce into rivers, lured by gravity into cascading waterfall crescendos. As we ride through misty and wet conditions, rain gear becomes the order of the day on the relatively good tarmac roads we ride toward the small river town of Puerto Misahuallí.

Despite what should be rush hour, car and bus traffic seems to dwindle the closer we get to town. This is soon explained by the fact that the asphalt comes to an abrupt end as it is swallowed by the sandy shore of the Rio Napo, the western-most tributary of the Amazon River. Local fishermen are mooring their canoes and shooing away mischievous capuchin monkeys that are seeking an easy meal.

The jungle comes alive at night, and I have a backstage pass in a mosquito-netted tree house bungalow just a few steps from Rio Napo. A quick huddle over breakfast seals our fate—our only viable option of navigating through the jungle to the northern route near the border with Colombia, is to take the only road available, the river itself!

The owner of the hostel overhears our plans and brings us a hot mug full of an herbal concoction made from coca leaves. It is stronger than coffee and supposedly wards off snakes, including the anaconda. I take it all in stride, of course, and toast the others, trying to mask any apprehension behind a nervous smile.

I can't help but savor a bucket-list moment as eight of us, sometimes more, wrestle the big Husky up and over the gunwale of the canoe. Indiscernible expletives are yelled about, as our Good Samaritan helpers figure out the hard way that hot header pipes and folding foot-pegs are not effective grab handles.

Our river guide hands me my helmet which I had set down on the ground, and he warns me that in the jungle, you never put your "hat" on the ground, as it only takes a moment before it's filled with a plethora of nasty little crawlies. I make a mental note, but I probably should have written it on my helmet, as I made the same mistake multiple times.

We wave goodbye to a beach full of enthusiastic villagers as our fully laden canoe departs for the town of Coca, 80 miles and a full day downriver. The canoe's manifest includes three motorcycles and all of the gear, two boxes of iced river-perch destined for market, a mother with suckling infant, the skipper, his younger brother as lookout and navigator, and Court, Sylvain, and me.





The headwaters of the Rio Napo are filled with sections of swirling rapids and uprooted trees, so the young navigator kneels vigilantly on the bow of the canoe. Via a series of hand signals and shouts, the skipper is able to pull into the right currents and to circumvent dangerous obstacles.

Midway through our amphibious journey, the banks widened and the water calmed, offering a peek into another way of life. In a time before the combustion engine, telephone, and Internet, a village on the Rio Napo was a major conduit of communication. Time stands still as I gaze upon a family mining operation, simply consisting of a shovel, bucket, and a homemade sluice box, while teenage boys in dug-out canoes set nets with two-liter soda bottles fashioned for buoys. There is something inherently peaceful about canoeing down the Rio Napo; I close my eyes and drift away to the hum of the boat motor, and a welcome respite from long days on the motorcycle.

"We're taking on water!" Court yells, interrupting my 30 seconds of mental solitude. Sure enough, there was water bubbling up like you would picture in a comic strip, through a knothole on the wooden floor.

The skipper stoically grabs a machete, the Swiss Army knife of the jungle, and deftly whacks away at a large stick to form a spear-like point that roughly matches the dimensions of the breach. He then pounds the point into the knot on the leaky plank, breaking off the point into the hole and plugging the leak. The whole repair takes under a minute, and I am thoroughly impressed at the ingenious and simple solution. He then mentions that leaks are pretty common on the maiden voyage of any canoe. With this newfound information, I decide to discretely tighten the strap on my life vest.

We arrive at a small muddy boat ramp in the boondocks of Coca and reverse the loading process with the same level of local fanfare as our departure in Misahuallí. Coca is a bustling port city with all types of people, a fair bit of industry, and the tell-tale sign of oil and natural resource exploitation in the form of red Halliburton trucks. We stay the night, leaving early the next morning with our sights set on heading north to beautiful and remote scenery along the Colombian border.

Apart from keeping the bikes full of gas, the maintenance routine consists of chain lube and the occasional 50 cents worth of air at a roadside garage—the currency of Ecuador is the US dollar. In the event of a flat tire, the going price of a hot vulcanized tire patch is \$3, which is cheaper and easier than carrying spare tubes.

Just when I thought all of our boat rides were behind us, we loaded up on an old rusty ferry to cross the Rio Coca. The name of the vessel is *Mi Pequeño Titanic*, which does not instill a lot of confidence; the locals don't seem to mind, so neither do we. The tarmac on the other side of the river is old and gravelly, but it felt good to be back on the motorcycle, where I feel most comfortable and in complete control.

Crossing the border from Ecuador to Colombia is as simple as a uniformed official manually lifting a wooden gate and waving us through. The border area is considered a free trade zone, so, although we were singled-out and asked for our passports, there is no official immigration or customs office. The biggest concern seemed to be Colombians driving into Ecuador to fuel up on state subsidized gasoline, which is about \$2 per gallon for premium.

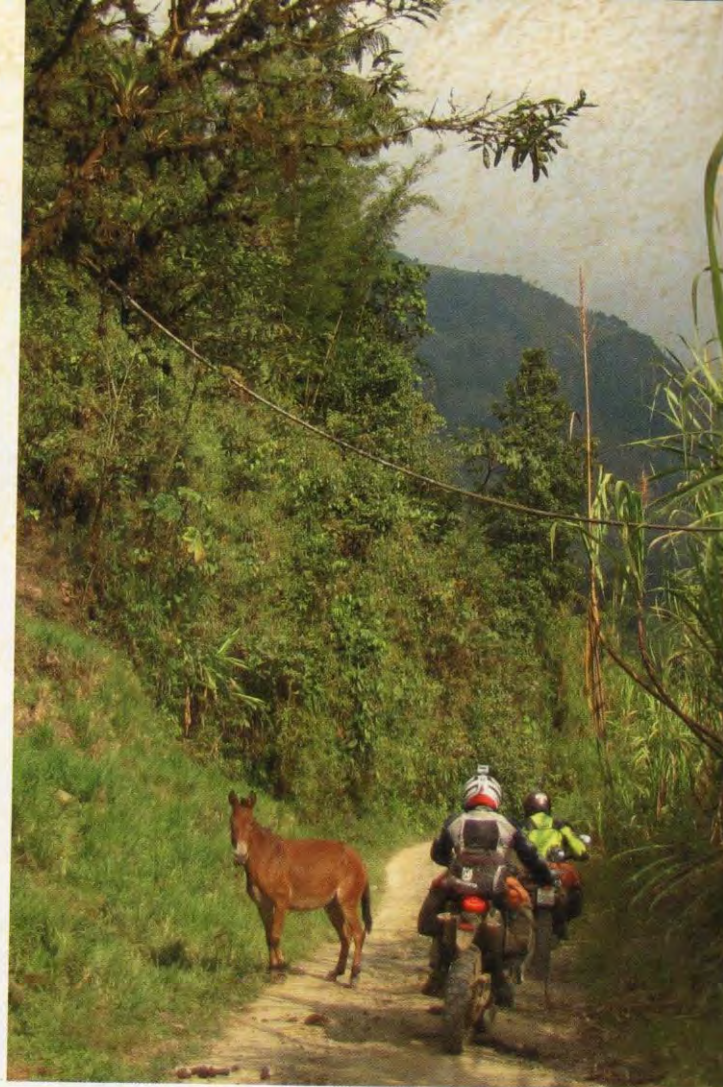
Dinner in Ipiales was strictly local Colombian fare—vegetable stew and cuy, which is guinea pig roasted on an outdoor rotisserie. Needless to say, as I gnaw through the salty, gamey meat, I do not have the same bucket-list feeling I had experienced previously, but it still provides a moment of reflection.

Dual-sporting throughout the country of Ecuador is a life-altering experience. The immense beauty of the landscape is humbling and provides a rich context to the importance of Mother Earth and our dependence upon her. The people and their way of life serve as a reminder to keep things simple, and to focus on what's important.

Riding back to Quito, the sun begins to set on the urban plateau below. I can't help thinking back to Ramon, the Quechua man that spoke of the Fountain of Youth as a physical place—a village that exists on a map. The next time I cross paths with Ramon, I will tell him that the prize is in the quest itself, and to enjoy the ride.

The roads in the city center are snarled by traffic, but somehow it's beautiful. I'm grinning and talking to myself under the helmet, overcome by a feeling of victory, which is ironic because this adventure was not designed to be a competition. In fact, its genesis was an escape from normalcy.

The feeling evolves into one of renewed balance, and the sensation of being present and aware, and empowered atop a motorcycle to experience all that is. I realize that Court was right; motorcycle adventures are the cure—especially when they start in the middle of the world, and a company such as Ecuador Freedom Bike Rental and Motorcycle Tours makes that possible. <



“The people and their way of life serve as a reminder to keep things simple.”