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**Death Valley
Noob Rally**

**A Journey
Through Ecuador**

A JOURNEY THROUGH

EQUATOR

I've never been huge on group riding. For me, motorcycling is a somewhat personal thing, but when Court Rand, the owner of *Ecuador Freedom Bike Rental*, invited us to join their nine-day *Andes, Amazon and Pacific Coast Tour*, how could we refuse? It would be a South American ride of a lifetime covering a thousand miles of twisting roads winding past white sand beaches, through dense rain forests and among active volcanoes on the highest mountain passes.

My wife, Marisa, and I arrived early to get the bikes packed and ready. I'd be riding the *Triumph Tiger 800XC* and she a *BMW F800GS*. Court briefed the group on the route and Ecuadorian road etiquette before setting off from Quito,

Ecuador's capital city, which sits at nearly 10,000 ft. The chaotic Quito traffic calmed as we made our way out of town.

In Mitad del Mundo, after lunching on roasted chicken and cuy (guinea pig), we turned onto a gravel road that ascended into a cloud forest. The *Tiger* was a treat as almost every curve gave way to increasingly stunning Andean views. Near an inn perched on the steep mountainside we paused to observe a swarm of hummingbirds feeding. Just as it began to rain, we rode into the town of Mindo and took shelter at a chocolate factory to learn about the entire

DOOR

We double check our motorcycle bug-out bags, making sure they're all in order. Everything for the trip is packed in carry-ons to avoid arriving without gear. Some travellers plan ahead in order to avoid potential problems, while others obsess over the tiniest details. In my opinion, over-planning is a source of stress that often hinders the experience. But there's an alternative—a guided tour may better suit if you're looking for structure, or don't have the time to plan a trip....

by Caleb McInturff | Photos by Marisa McInturff



Caleb and Marisa spent a few days exploring the country on their own via two DR650s, the perfect bikes to ride the rural mountainside roads. They stopped here to catch a break and quick snack with a cloudy view of Volcán Tungurahua in the background, an active stratovolcano located in the Cordillera Oriental of Ecuador.

chocolate-making process, sampling the delicious product of each step along the way. Our final stop for the day, El Septimo Paraiso, was a paradise in the middle of the rain forest, and we took time for a few cervezas along with an outstanding dinner before turning in.

The following day's temps rose as we made our way westward toward the coastal town of Canoa and the hot, humid weather I expected when I booked a trip to the equator. Along the coast our group stopped to visit a school where English is taught as a second language. *Ecuador Freedom* is a member of *Pack for a Purpose*, a worldwide organization that teams up with travelers to get needed supplies to remote towns and villages. While there, we delivered school supplies for the children. Afterward it was lunch of fresh seafood followed by surfing and paragliding lessons. A hard day of relaxing was rewarded with a stunning sunset over the Pacific Ocean.

Heading inland through rice fields we made our way towards Vinces, where we stayed on a banana, teakwood, and cocoa plantation and were treated to an educational presentation by the plantation manager. A breakfast of fresh fruit and eggs fueled a walk in the banana groves before we hit the road, climbing into the thinning air toward the town of Sigchos. As we ascended into the mountains, the curves seemed to contract as the temperature dropped. We stopped to layer up and make some hot coffee to warm our chilled bones.

Climbing even higher, we passed through several small villages nestled into the mountainsides. Locals in traditional clothing looked up from their work to wave as we passed. The farmers use every inch of the land possible. Crops are even planted into the extremely steep slopes. The scenery was a quilt-like patchwork of farm fields as we rode the Quilotoa Loop, an asphalt ribbon that undulates through the mountains on the way up to Quilotoa Crater Lake—an immense blue-green gem wedged into the dull-colored earth.

The asphalt ended and with the sun low over the mountains, we made our way down gravel roads toward our hotel for the evening. Arriving just as the big yellow ball slipped behind a high ridge, we had completed an amazing day of riding. Without any doubt, this was one of my most memorable days on a motorcycle.

The views were no less stunning as the tour took us higher yet into the Andes. We rode past the major volcano, Cotopaxi, a widely known



Riding down the Pacific Coastline was a highlight of the trip.



Many of the roads throughout Ecuador had succumbed to landslides due to the presence of El Nino, an irregularly occurring and complex series of climactic changes affecting the Equatorial Pacific region every few years. One minute you would be on a nice stretch of twisty pavement and the next you would be riding over dirt and rocks. Occasionally you would find the road had completely disappeared. It really kept us on our toes!



Caleb prepares to ride through the Andean Highlands on his *Triumph Tiger 800XC*.



mountaineering destination, and continued climbing to 14,500 feet to witness Chimborazo. At 20,564 feet, Chimborazo is Ecuador's highest active volcano, with a summit closer to the sun than anywhere else on earth. Up there, the cold wind blows hard, making it difficult to keep the bikes upright. Riding on, we spied wild vicunas, a South American camelid which resembles a llama and lives in the high alpine areas of the Andes. The road then wove its way down toward the city of Banos, a perfect place for adventurous types and where our group decided to spend a rest day white water rafting on the Pastaza River followed by a soothing soak in the hot springs.

The tarmac continued twisting through Puyo into the Amazon rain forest as the climate turned hot and humid once again. The *Catacocha Amazon Lodge* has small cabanas along the Nabo River, a large tributary of the Amazon River. Dropping our gear off there, we boarded a motor canoe to a small town with a large population of monkeys. They were a blast to watch but one particularly ornery fellow decided to lift Court's lighter, climbing with it to the top of a nearby tree where he proceeded to strike it while amusingly trying to eat the flame.

Waking early, we were back to the canoe for a venture up river that stopped at a trailhead where a guide showed us local wildlife during a hike to a large waterfall. From there we floated downriver on tubes to enjoy our last lunch with the group.

I was happy to climb back aboard the *Tiger*, which had so reliably carried me through this stunning country. We had a late afternoon start, heading back to Quito along roads that

followed the contours of the valleys. Since the first day of this tour we'd experienced nothing but nonstop breathtaking views; now we were filtering back through the Quito traffic toward *Ecuador Freedom Bike Rental*. Our journey was ending far too soon. Nine days had flown by, riding over gorgeous mountain passes, by towering waterfalls, through corridors of banana plantations, and along the white Pacific coast beaches. Nine weeks wouldn't have been enough time to experience this exceedingly diverse country. Ecuador had not disappointed.

For anyone with limited time, the guided tour offers the most bang for the buck. You'll find yourself traveling to places you probably never knew were there, trying restaurants you wouldn't have known about, and riding scenic roads you might have never discovered. Court and Sylvan, our knowledgeable guides, did an excellent job showing us around. *Ecuador Freedom Bike Rental* offers guided tours, self-guided tours, and rentals.

It's nice to just get on a bike and ride in a foreign land without worrying about finding places to go or things to do. All you have to do is ride, soak up the beautiful scenery, and enjoy the Ecuadorian culture. We can't wait to go back!

FreedomBikeRental.com **ADV**



Newlyweds **Caleb** and **Marisa McInturff** share a thirst for adventure and a passion for motorcycling. They hope to inspire and motivate others not to get stuck in the daily routines of life, but to get out and find their own adventures by chasing their dreams. **YouTube.com/c/MotoDuoADV**

Riding through the rain forest region of the country—the group stopped for a quick hike to a waterfall for a swim, and to press our own jugo de cana.

