



MAY 2015

Backroads

Motorcycles, Travel & Adventure

Volume 21 No. 5



Riding the Middle of the Planet
with Ecuador Freedom Bike Rental

MODERN CLASSICS
MACHINES OF THE 60s, '70s AND '80s

SHIRA'S ICE CREAM RUN
A RETURN TO SUMMER FUN

MONTHLY COLUMNS AND PRODUCT REVIEWS

*M*y watch showed one minute to midnight as the United Airlines 737 began its descent from the north into the deep Andean valley. Clouds and fog shrouded what little I could see of the peaks, as the jet roughly touched the tarmac.

Welcome to Quito, the capital of Ecuador.

Arriving into any foreign city in the middle of the night is always odd. The cab trip into the city centro took about 20 minutes of riding up finely paved and curvy roads that laced up and over the peaks toward the city. Seeing we were Americano the driver put on Bill Halley's Rock Around the Clock.

I felt like an ex-pat version of the Fonz.

A 1:30 am hotel snafu forced us back on the streets at 1:40 ¡Ay, caramba! but we found a hotel a few blocks away that had a room and, more importantly, a bed for the next couple of days.

The sounds of an awakening (and building) city woke us around 7 and by mid-morning we had begun our stroll around Quito, the only world capital located so close to the Equator and, at 9,350 feet, the highest in the world.

In fact, the Republic of Ecuador literally means "Republic of the Equator."

It was also the first capital to become a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Riding the Middle of the Planet

words and images: Brian Rathjen



We walked over to the offices of Freedom Bike Rentals, stopping along the way for a breakfast of eggs, veggies and chorizo before checking in with the shop.

Court Rand and Sylvain Galléa have been running Ecuador Freedom Bike Rentals & Tours, out of Quito, for a number of years now and have an impressive fleet of modern and well-maintained bikes, offering both guided and self-guided motorcycle adventures.

We set our plans for leaving the next day and picked up fellow traveler David Owen, from Wolfeboro, New Hampshire.

Like us Dave, and the others that we'd meet the next day, had chosen to escape the hard days of February and head to the one place on the planet we'd know it would be nice and hopefully warmer – the Equator.

With a free day ahead of us we cabbled to the Old City, where the modern city of Quito had been born in the early 1500s with the Spanish conquest. The Inca and others had lived here for thousands of years before.

Our taxi dropped us off across from the San Francisco Church, a magnificent structure and the oldest church in a city that is full of them. They were holding mass when we strolled in and the old altar boy in me could not walk out in the middle of that, in such a magnificent church, so we stayed till the blessing. Hell, I received Communion without getting hit by lightning. See? I knew I had been forgiven.

Strolling around you get the idea of how big Quito is (actually 30 miles long and just 2 miles wide - living in a long valley) so we decided to make it easy on ourselves and spent the day getting motored around



the city on the top of a double-decker tour bus. Laugh if you must, but it really is one of the easiest ways to see the sites, especially if you only have one day.

El Panecillo, with its giant aluminum statue of the Madonna of Quito, was very impressive, as were the volcanic peaks that surround the city and seem to always be in view. For lunch we found a local favorite off the Grande Plaza. Here you'll find the Presidential Palace, complete with guards and a number of restaurants as well as dozens of tiny capitalists vying to polish your shoes, sell you coca leaves or some local trinkets.

By evening we were done and after 'Trip Advising' a tiny local place for dinner and partaking a bit in Carnival that had just gotten under way, we made it an early night looking forward to the equatorial romp that would start in the morning.

Day One - Quito to Otavalo • Riding to the Center of the Earth

We got to Ecuador Freedom Bike Rentals & Tours shop (they are now in their new and improved shop, a short hop away) around 9ish that morning and were soon joined by the rest of our group - Bridget and Burt from South Carolina (a couple with so many interesting riding destinations under their tires that The Lonely Planet should give them a medal), Larry, a Canadian who was down with his family but decided on a few weeks on the motorcycle solo, David whom we explored Quito with the previous day and, also along for this tour, was Bob - Court's dad. The real ringleader was Salina, Freedom's mascot and all-around Rin Tin Tin sort of dog and our constant canine companion, protector and occasional "find the hotel on the dark street after dark" type of doggy.

We'd be riding a few Suzuki V-Stroms - two 650s and me on a 1000 - a Triumph 800 Tiger, Shira on a BMW G650GS and Court on a Suzuki DR650 - the truck was from Chevy and manned by Sylvain, Bob and Salina.

Luggage and gear was swapped into smaller waterproof bags and bikes were set up for each rider.



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Communication was made easy as Ecuador Freedom would set up each rider with a system from UCLEAR, allowing for directions, local information and historic tidbits to be fed right to us.

On an Ecuador Freedom adventure all your expenses - even fuel - are covered. So other than alcohol and free days, you really do not have to pull out your wallet. Ecuador uses USA dollars – so when we did buy something it



was very easy – and cheap.

We were on the machines by mid-morning, fighting back the Quito traffic as we made our way north through the valley toward the geographic center of the planet – zero degrees latitude – the Equator.

There are actually two markers for this and there is a bit of discussion on which is the exact spot. But, being that they are within a stone's throw from each other and we touched them both, I think we did okay.

We spent an hour or so at the park and museum learning about the history of finding the middle of the planet and how GPS technology has confirmed the exact spot. The woman at the museum talked to us about the local Amazon peoples, the Shuar and others whom we would visit, and their history. One truly intriguing artifact to view was an actual Tzantza – a shrunken head.

Notso Happy was impressed.

We spent some time at the equatorial line, learning about the Coriolis effect and Shira even balanced an egg on the head of a nail. Such talent.

Lunch was found within sight of the monuments and then we played follow the leader up into the Andes.

While the northeast United States would fight with record setting cold temperatures we played with the curves winding through the mountains of Ecuador. Which, this high up, was not nearly as warm as you would believe.

Most of us would pack, and ride with, layers of gear.

It would be a good thing to mention a Freedom Bike Rental tradition here.

If, for some reason, somebody does something silly - or if gravity won a battle with one of the bikes - that rider will carry El Bebé – a small toy child strapped to their motorcycle - until the next incident. This was all done in fun and should never be taken personally – although Shira, nor I, wanted the little passenger for any part of this trip. The Baby basically moved between two of our riders who seemed in competition for the little tike.



We stopped by one small Andean town across from the church that dominates all of them, taking a little break before the first real challenging road

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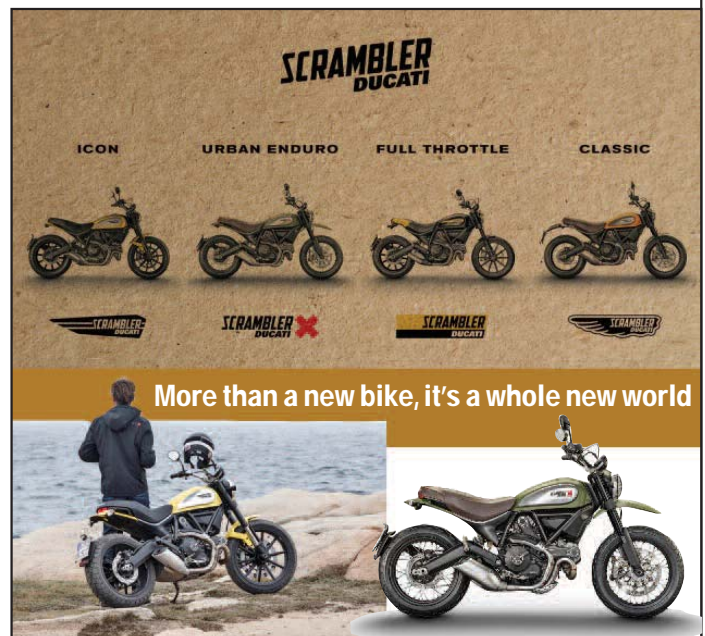


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of the trip, a gnarly unpaved road that traversed up and over the next few peaks. The ride was certainly not impossible, but it would not be a fun ride for those who have terminal CFP syndrome or “cravement for pavement.” Know this road and others took a slight bit of fortitude and some hard gravel road skill.

This rocky road ran for a number of rough miles, mostly up, and brought us high and into fog, or were they clouds? And, then it lightened up a bit into miles of just ancient stony cobblestone that had to be a century old.

Rock, gravel and dusty roads are easier than old Ecuadorian cobblestones any day.

Once again we rode high into the Andes eventually stopping, where the road more or less ended, at Mojanda Lakes. Flanked by the ancient volcanoes, Fuya-Fuya and Yanahurco, it is really a series of three high mountain lakes and a wonderful turn-around spot at some 12,250 feet in altitude. These Andes Highlands were long inhabited by the local Quichua tribe, the altitude limiting the numbers of outsiders who even knew these picturesque crater lakes existed.

We had to backtrack down the peaks to the town of Otavalo and by dusk pulled into the stunning Hacienda Pibsqui.

Ecuadorian history had been created here in the sprawling home. Considered South America’s Washington - Simón Bolívar - had of course slept here and a treaty with neighboring Colombia was signed here as well.



of puppies and kittens too but, no worries, they are loved pets here. Sometimes.



There are a lot of dogs roaming everywhere in Ecuador and like all dogs, they feel the need to herd motorcycles as they ride through their domain. This can make for a slightly stressful ride through some towns and we did see one pup get clipped.



That night there was a cocktail party to greet the guests with servings of local teas and a liquor, much like anisette, served in a great room with a fireplace large enough for a Gold Wing and a traditional band playing both old and new style Andean tunes.

Dinner was served in another wing of this fantastic estate. I made it a point to get up and out early to stroll the grounds before breakfast and our early departure.

Day Two - Otavalo to the Amazon Basin

Breakfast was at 7 sharp and we quickly loaded up and got going; making a few stops locally before riding up the mountains once again. Being on the equator, the length of the day stays the same all year round – twelve hours sun, twelve hours dark – with sunrise and sunset holding pretty constant at 6:15 am and pm.

Our first stop was at the nearby animal market. Here the locals from the entire valley region bring livestock – bought, sold or traded. Sure there were plenty of cow and pig, but also fowl of all types - chickens, roosters, ducks, turkeys. There was also plenty of guinea pig; known locally as Cuy (pronounced Kwee). You will find them all around Ecuador as, broiled on a spit, they are a staple dish in the mountains. There were also lots



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People of Ecuador.... Spay and neuter is a good thing.

We made another market stop, this one more traditional with clothing, jewelry and art.

Back on the road we headed south, rolling back into the southern hemisphere – stopping for that digital moment at the “Zeroes.”

Our ride would bring us south, along the Pan American Highway for the morning, and then east and over a number of high Andean passes – one topping out at 13,350 feet above sea level.

The fuel-injected machines travelled this altitude easily, but I wondered about the DR and its carbureted engine.

The roads were excellent and seemed to be an endless run of hard leanings lefts and rights.

On our approach up the mountain we stopped and layered up and then crossed over the summit.

This is also the Continental Divide in Ecuador with rain on one side flowing to

the Pacific and on the other side to the Amazon and, eventually, the Atlantic Ocean.

Not far from the summit we stopped for lunch at the end of a two-track rock road that headed up towards the surrounding mountains. The restaurant, the fresh trout and the view could not be beat. Later on both Shira and I would agree that the location, landscape and flavorful fresh trout made this stop the finest lunch of many good ones on this journey.

You could see for miles and the approaching storm as well.

When we signed up for the Ecuador tour we knew we’d get some rain and the rest of our ride that day was in and out of the wet.

Mostly in. But, it is us, and we’re used to it.

Still the panorama was outstanding with waterfalls rolling off the peaks and falling for hundreds of feet to the small, but strong rivers that would become the mighty Amazon.

We passed through small towns that had that unique third world Latin American feel to them. We rode down the eastern slope of the Andes and entered the Amazonian Basin.

Stopping for fuel I killed the V-Strom’s engine and took off my helmet.

The sound of the birds, after leaving the middle of the silent winter of the north, was outstanding.

We went from high rocky and, almost barren peaks to lush green that would almost put Ireland to shame, in about 30 miles.

The lower we rode the denser the vegetation became and soon it was a jungle out there, kids!

The Suzuki’s temperature gauge read 40 Celsius (104°).

We made a quick stop at Puerto Misahuallí to see the Capuchin monkeys that seem to own the river’s shoreline. A few of us became targets for their fancy but due to our Monkey With A Gun street cred, we survived.



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This town is the westernmost port for the Amazon River and you could, possibly, sail from here to the Atlantic. To give you a size of how big the Amazon becomes realize that 20% of the Earth’s fresh water entering the oceans comes from the Amazon and the fresh water and sediment discharge has been found hundreds of miles into the Atlantic Ocean.

Thus, the name Amazon. Just sayin.

From there we crossed the river, on a bridge that moved far more than it should, and as night was creeping in we stashed the bikes, locked and secure, and got onto outboard-powered canoes that brought us upstream for a number of miles to Itamandi, an eco-friendly resort along the Arajuno river.

Here it was Valentine’s Day and we got to spend the night in the Amazon with the sound of thousands of unseen singing through the night.

Michael Douglas and Kathleen Turner had nothing on us.

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Day Three - Arajuno River to RioBamba



Sleep came easily that night with the soft sounds of light rain on the roof and the tittering of creatures along the river.

We awoke with the dawn, taking to a set of swings on our porch watching the early canoes bringing traveler and locals to different destinations and eco-wonders.

From the porch we could watch worker ants busily building a clay nest and smallish wasps flitting in and out of a hidden lair just a few feet from us, inside the metal beams used to build this place.

Everything here at Itamandi was brought in by the river. There are no roads.

We had a later start this day and at breakfast Court went over the day's options and we all voted for a canoe ride a bit further up river which, with the light patchy rain, made for an adventurous, almost mysterious mood.

The image of the Tzantza, from earlier in the trip, played across my mind.

We headed up a few miles and then reversed course and headed for a quick float downriver to retrieve the bikes.

By late morning we were back in the saddle and riding up and back out of the Amazon Basin and into what is called the Cloud Forest, aptly named for the intense mist. The light rain became a bit stronger and those that needed to donned wet riding gear.

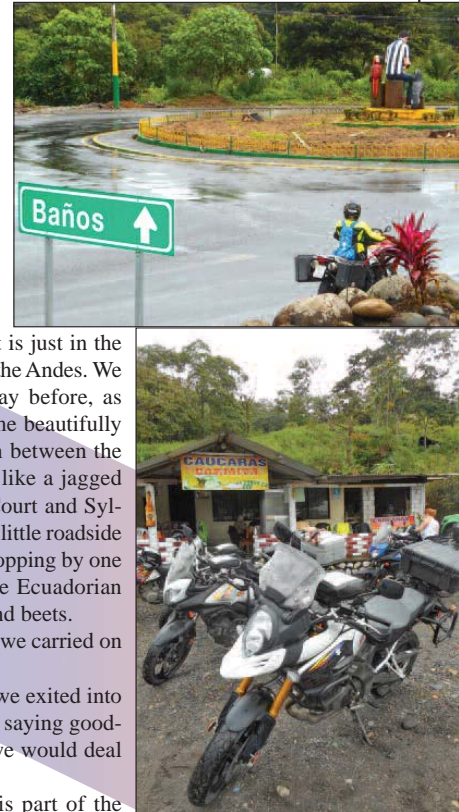
Heading higher in altitude the temps began to drop. It was a bit surprising to realize you are riding at the equator and it is just in the low-40s as you head deep into the Andes. We didn't cross as high as the day before, as Court had routed us along some beautifully curved pass roads that rode in between the mountains that began to look like a jagged old saw reaching to the sky. Court and Sylvain like local restaurants – the little roadside places that so many ride by. Stopping by one such we were treated to a true Ecuadorian meal of pork, eggs, potatoes and beets.

Bellies full and minds ready we carried on along the high crags.

Passing through one tunnel we exited into breaking sun and we would be saying goodbye to the last real hard rain we would deal with on this journey.

When planning a trip to this part of the globe don't be a lemming. If you look to places like the Weather Channel for the Ecuadorian forecast they will always tell you it will rain – every day. Don't believe them.

These big-weather sources can sometimes be a bit blind to what is going on outside their windows and they paint the maps with wide swaths of green. Rain here usually last a short time and then the Andes soak in the sun again.



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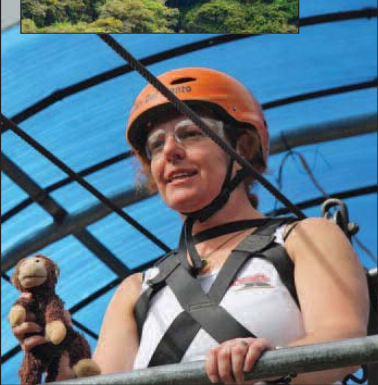
Sun: Gone Riding



True to form the high waterfalls began to flow along the road they call "Ruta de las Cascadas" and we stopped to take in the vista of Paillon del Diablo the Devil's Cauldron, a massive and powerful fall that thunders down the cliff. If you wish you can park and take a short hike down to see the mountains and water showing off its splendor.

Watching a condor pass overhead I had to wonder how that would feel?

Well, a few of us were about to find out as we made a stop at a zip-line that would allow you to "fly" over the 200 foot chasm and straight towards the Agoyan Falls – head first.



Asked who would go first our intrepid redhead picked up the challenge and took the plunge like Super Girl over the edge.

A few of us went and a few did not – no pressure, as it was 'all good.' And, those who went over the edge got to do it twice as you did have to come back. The trek back was worth it.

Today was Sunday and like anyplace else on the planet the riders were out and we ran into a few, including some Peruvians on a big ride with full on GSs and KLRs, spare tires and big smiles.

The mood in each town was infectious as this was Carnival, the Ecuadorian

version of Mardi Gras and the big holiday in the country, where families and friends cut loose.

Interestingly part of the celebration is to have friendly water fights. Riding through one town we became moving targets for passing cars with wide-eyed little kids armed to the teeth with homemade super soakers.

I was slowed by traffic when I spied one little guy who was, maybe, 50 pounds wet – which he was – standing at the curb.

He spied me too and I could see 'that look' as he took off running at me and hurling a water balloon that was bigger than his hand. Tom Seaver would have been proud as this little hombre' nailed me but good.

Glad to be part of his holiday!

By this time the sun began to set and as it did we came into view of the Tungurahua Volcano – which means "Throat of Fire." A perfect conical shaped volcano, it is massive at some 16,500 feet high, and it dominated our view for miles. The volcano erupts often and you never know when Mother Nature will turn on the fireworks. The road here, in long sections, was just paved (as in the paver was still there with work to do) and with little traffic it was good to stretch out the group and make sure the bikes had fourth and fifth gear. I have heard that the Suzuki V-Strom 1000 has sixth gear, but I would not have first hand knowledge of that on this twisty and mountainous trek.

There was another even more impressive mountain to be seen as we rode up and around Chimborazo, which at 20,564 feet, is the highest mountain along the equator as well as the highest point, due to the fact that the Earth bulges at its middle, from the center of the Earth. It is also the point along the equatorial line that has snow 365

days a year.

I don't think I am riding to Everest, so this works for me.

Ride to world's biggest mountain...check!

Banos was our planned overnight, but the Carnival had eaten up all the rooms and the crowds were going to make for a difficult entry and exit so Ecuador Freedom found a Plan B – which worked for us.

We got in late, tired but happy as the sun slipped to the far side of the planet and we parked miles from Chimborazo, a monster we would sidle up to later in the ride.



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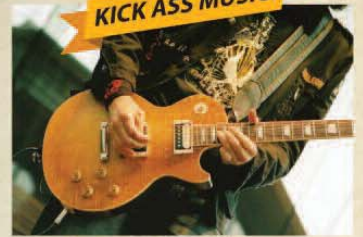
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Day Four - Riobamba to Alausi

So I'm packing my bags for the Misty Mountains
Where the spirits go now,
Over the hills where the spirits fly, ooh.

Led Zeppelin

By moving the previous night's final destination further south than we had originally planned we had a far shorter day's than we were used to, so we started a little later and hoped for an easy, but pleasurable, ride south.
One can hope.



We bought a few cans of spray foam of our own, since all the youngsters are armed to the teeth with this stuff, and duct taped them to our mirrors. We needed to put up our own fight and some kids wouldn't know what hit them.

As we would pass by we would cut close, spray the kids and take off.

Like a stealth fighter jet the enemy didn't know they were going to get hit... until they did.

They retaliated with water balloons, buckets and spray - it was all good fun.

We needed a detour around this town and found it in miles of dust, dirt and silt that brought us up and over the steep hills along a road that were strangely quiet. After some miles I began to think too quiet.

Thankfully some traffic began to come from the other direction (a good sign we were heading toward an actual road) and somewhere down the line we ran into the main route and continued on.

Sure we got a bit off track, bombed by water and were coating in a fine dust - but, considering the last couple of years, I was having the best time I have had in a long time!

Now the land leveled off with fresh copse of pine trees along both side; Ecuador's successful attempt at stopping the encroaching Palmira desert, which was once the fastest growing desert in the world.



Not far south the high Andes began to give way to a more rolling, but still immense, series of mountains. We motored through the Chambo River Valley and the Tungurahua province, and through a number of villages all in the midst of Carnival. We moved slowly through some fairly easily, but one town was just cemented shut with people and semi-militant children (not really people, yet).

The celebration, parade, water balloons and spray foam cans would not let us pass.



We were now at a steady ride at 11,000 plus feet and riding into the clouds brought visibility to minus zero. Yes, it seems there is such a thing.

We rode along at a lessened pace using the fog line on the side to make sure we stayed on the road and did not go airborne.

We had a momentary motorcycle glitch, which caused us to stop.

Well two, at the same exact moment, and both were an easy quick fix thanks to the use of the UCP or Universal Clamping Tool and an adjustment to the DR which had a case of altitude sickness.

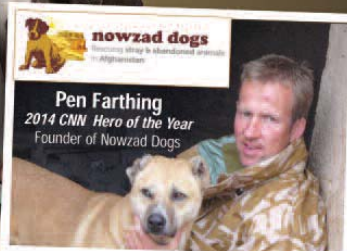


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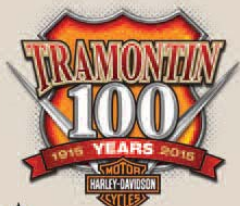
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While the fixes was being made both Shira and Bridget waved high-viz rain jackets to warn cars and trucks that were appearing out of the fog like some huge predatory megladon.

Helen Keller once said, "Life is either a daring adventure or nothing at all."

We found a small restaurant serving chicken and cuy on a spit, most stayed with the fowl but we went for the rodent. Crunchy and greasy (in a good way) it did not taste like chicken, but more duck and porky. Although some of you may cringe at the idea of eating your kid's pet – here in the Andes cuy has been a staple for centuries and when in Ecuador....



The town itself was bustling with Carnival activities, so we left the bikes and went for a long and hilly stroll around the vilage. This weekend was turned up to 11 on the Ecuadorian party scale. Bands, parades, vendors selling all sorts of things. Huge cooked pigs hanging off hooks and being butchered. The train rolled through the town square igniting a firestorm of water balloons and spray foam.

I haven't seen anything like it since we were hydro-bombed by the U.S. Coast Guard at Mallory Square in Key West.

Shira and Sylvain got into a one-on-one foam fight, with both sides taking serious and foamy damage.

One inebriated faction dragged Shira into the center of a dance, as a bottle of



local liquor was passed around. Shira declined the shot but enjoyed the rumba.

By mid-afternoon we rode out into the sun and down along some well paved and tight downhill twisties into Alausi, home to the famed train to the Devil's Nose.

We settled into La Quinta, a comfortable hotel overlooking the town and train and, after a shower and a bit of relaxing, it was time to go exploring.

We strolled into the town's center and spent some time watching the young men celebrate Carnival by baiting a good size bull.



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One part of me (the part that still thinks I control a 19 year old body) wanted to jump in the corral with the other cool kids. Shira, being the Debbie Downer, flatly said no.

God help me. What happened to the Hellen Keller quote, huh? After watching them taunt the animal I began rooting for the bull and it wasn't too long before some kid zigged, when he should have zagged, and down, well actually up, he went with El Toro giving him a literal ass kicking.

By evening time we had found an Ecuadorian pizza place that easily equaled any New York pie. Who would have thunk it?

From the porch that evening you could see the lights of the town and hear the festivities that carried through the gathering mist.

Day Five - Alausi to Cuenca

This train is bound for glory,
Don't carry nothing but the righteous and the holy.
This train is bound for glory, this train.

Woody Guthrie

This morning we left the bikes parked and walked over to the town's rail station and bought our tickets for one of the most incredibly difficult rails on the planet.

This train snakes up a mountain known as El Nariz del Diablo (The Devil's Nose). This nearly vertical wall of rock was the greatest natural obstacle engineers encountered during construction of the Ecuador's Southern Railway.



Looking back they may have made a mistake of going over instead of around the Devil's Nose, and it has become a point of engineering pride. A team of engineers lead by Americans William Shunck and brothers Archer and John Harman, came up with an ingenious solution. The track loops in a series of tight switchbacks on the rocky mountain face of Cónдор Puñuna (Condor Mountain). The engineering challenges in building this section earned it the nickname 'the most difficult railway in the world'.



The condors left when the first dynamite went off. Smart birds.

Explosion and construction accidents, of which there were many, gave the mountain the name Devil's Nose.



The train ride offered the most wonderful views of the sharply cliffed valley, with the clouds wrapping around the high peaks adding to another worldly feel.

We spent an hour at the station and museum at the bottom of the Devil's Nose, and then took the trip in reverse back to Alausi.

With only one road heading the way we needed to go we stuck with the Pan American Highway south, riding



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up and over on good pavement and ever changing riding conditions. Riding into the clouds at 12,000 feet meant wet and a temperature in the low 40s. Breaking into blue sky and brilliant sunshine saw the readings rise up into the low 70s. In some towns, while stopped, it hit near 90. This would go back and forth through this entire day.

They say you can experience all four seasons in Ecuador in one day – they are not kidding. It was almost difficult to find that sweet spot when it came to layering your riding gear.

Ecuador Freedom had planned a side trip to Ingapirca, the most revered archeological site in the nation. Ingapirca is local Kichwa for Incan Wall and it is the largest Inca ruin in the republic of Ecuador.

The Incas were not the first inhabitants of Ingapirca, as it had long been settled by the Cañari indigenous people, who called it Hatun Cañar.

But, in the early 1400s, the Inca began a conquest from the south. As the Inca Empire expanded into southern Ecuador, the Inca Túpac Yupanqui encountered the Hatun Cañar tribe and had difficulties in conquering them. So it was easier to just marry the Cañari princess – another way to conquer a people.

The Inca and Cañari decided to settle their differences and live together peacefully, and the astronomical observatories - the Temple of the Sun and Temple of the Moon - were built. The complex was remarkable and we spent a great deal of time at the Temple, which was built specifically to track the months of the year using the sun itself as a calendar.

It seems the centuries have not changed humans much as the Inca and Cañari had numerous ritual celebrations on the complex and a local fer-



mented drink called 'chicha' (like a corn beer) was used in these festivals.

As sun and moon worshippers, they tried to be as close to their gods as possible and lots of alcohol has always seem to help this endeavour.

Go to any Jimmy Buffett concert and tell me I'm wrong.

As we had found out first hand the weather changes here can happen within minutes of each other - calm and sunny one minute and rainy, windy, and cold another minute. Since there are no large changes in the season here near the equator, this climate volatility is typical year round. The people felt strongly that this was the place where the gods had led them, regardless of the climate.

It is a truly special place on the planet.

From Ingapirca we rode to the city of Cuenca along some awesome switch-back sweepers that ran along the valley. With the sun blinding us as it said 'good day,' we rode into town.

Cuenca is big with the expatriate crowd and we were looking forward to the visit and our planned two-night stop in this colonial-style city in the peaks.

We were told that this day the city would be packed with crowds and traffic

- this being the last day of Carnival, the Fat Tuesday of Ecuador.

But, we entered a ghost town and easily found the hotel.

It seems that the last few days of heavy partying had caught up with most Ecuadorians and tomorrow Lent would begin and they could all get ashes and reestablish their virtue and faith.

What goes on in Carnival stays in Carnival, I guess.

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Day Six - Free Day in Cuenca

Down to the Banana Republics
Down to the tropical sun
Go the expatriated American
Hopin' to find some fun

Steve Goodman

Cuenca, it turns out, is a much more pleasant city than Quito. Where the capital seems more urban, the smaller Cuenca still seems to hold onto its heritage and influences in a smoother way.

We simply liked it more and can see why Ex-Pats do too.

We took a morning bus ride around the town, taking in the Square and Cathedral and a high point to the north of

Cuenca where there was a phenomenal view of the entire city.

Making note of where some of the highlights were during the bus ride we took to the streets, stopping in the local motorcycle shop to see what they were selling, then spent a good hour wandering around the Centro Mercado.

They had everything here and we wished we had a kitchen with us.

Fresh fish and meats of all kinds – pig, cow and fowl. Rows of vegetables, fruits and cheeses of all kinds. Apparently Ecuador has a plethora of potatoes, and you could find any one of them right here.

Each aisle had its own aroma and flavor. The smells were powerful and fresh. This is how humans should buy their food. Shop Rite is not.

To steal from the Costa Ricans... here was Pura Vida – the Pure Life.

At the market in Cuenca a butchered animal gets used from nose to tail - as it should be.

The freshly cooked whole pig looked and smelled fantastic.

We bought some fresh peaches, found some equally fresh fruit drinks and sat upstairs watching the Cuencans go about their business.

We had passed an odd little art museum, Arte Extremo - Prohibido Contemporary, coming into town and we made a swing by that. It was full of anarchistic art with a strong sado-sexual flavor that made us vaguely tingly and



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excited; so we got out of there and considered going back to the Cathedral to repent and get marked this Ash Wednesday.

The Sombrero Museum was fun, as was the rest of the stroll.

Later that afternoon we cabbied it over to the volcanic hot springs at Novaqua for a good long mud and soak before heading for dinner and getting ready to vamonos the next morning. Finding the Jazz Café, which features live jazz courtesy of the Jazz Society of Ecuador, was a pleasant way to pass the evening and enjoy another surprisingly good amount of pizza.

Day Seven - Cuenca to Macas

As promised we got an early start and were clear of the city by 8 in the morning, motoring north and east back towards the mountains and then back down in the Amazon region of Ecuador. We would stay mostly on the main road which was a good size two-lane highway

that routes itself up and through the eastern edges of the Andes.

Deep valleys were filled with numerous lakes, themselves fed by long waterfalls that tumbled down the sides of the verdant green cliffs.

The road was sublime, by far the smoothest and quickest pace we had so far on the Ecuadorian adventure.

The Suzuki did indeed have a fourth and fifth gear.

Some of the falls crashed alongside this road and begged for us to stop for a moment if just to take a breath and a look-see to take it all in.

Just about then I saw the brake lights come on as one, as our group hastened to a halt to allow a monkey to scoot across the road.

Pepe was impressed.

It was truly a spectacular day. Dropping down from 12,000 feet to just 3,000 the temperature rocketed, going from a pleasant 60 degrees in Cuenca to a sweltering 104, as we rode into the deep jungle valley.

It was brutally hot.

This part of Ecuador is peopled by the Shuar and the Amazonian town of Sucua, the major home and center of the Shuar, which simply means "The People." During the Incan conquest the Incas stayed away from the Shuar as they were and are know as fierce warriors. The Shuar didn't just vanquish their enemies but would behead them and create Tzantzas - shrunken heads of their foes - like those we had seen days before at the Equator.



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The Spanish came here in the 1500s looking for gold and did their best to subjugate the locals.

This did not work well for the Europeans. As the Shuar became deeply angered and attacked a Spanish outpost, killing hundreds of settlers. It is written that the Spanish Governor himself was then put to death by having

molten gold poured down his throat - their attempt at poetic justice. Ouch.

Even just a few years back when Ecuador was at war with neighboring Peru the Shuar people befuddled the Peruvians and proved themselves the real master of this part of the river, jungle and mountains that surround it.

The fierce facial tattoos of the old warriors are only seen these days on the elders, but these are a people to be respected.

We stopped in their main town of Sucua and had a small crowd stop to look at the bikes. Young men gathered looking suspiciously at the modern machines parked along the road in the late afternoon sun.

Instead of a fight we all had ice cream. Glad to see some things have changed for the better.

Our hotel outside the town of Macas was top notch, if empty, for we were the only ones here and the pool was just a bit refreshing after the fantastic day's ride.

After cooling off in the pool a few hiked to a waterfall near the hotel. I left later to catch up with them, wondering what I might have gotten myself into as I was told to walk down the trail that led into the jungle.

"Señor Brian... just down this trail - maybe ten minutes."

What trail? That hole in the jungle?

My solo hike went up and down and through the rain forest on a single, and a bit muddy in spots, track. Dozens of yellow, red and blue/black butterflies fluttered about me and leaf-cutter ants marched

across the path by the thousands, carrying part of the forest with them.

I knew I was not in Kansas anymore.

The waterfall, one of a couple of thousand of the headwaters of the Amazon, was worth the effort.

Day Eight - Macas to Sabinas de Guaranda

If the previous day's route was stunning, magnificent and memorable I would have to delve deep into the book of colorful adjectives to describe this day. For nearly 100 years Ecuador has talked about a roadway across this region, through the Andes to the Amazon. But in the past few years the dream has become a reality - not everyone is happy about this "progress" but we sure were this day as the romp over the Andes made the Tail of the Dragon look almost meek in comparison.

Leaving Macas I passed a Shuar girl, barely a woman, holding a small boy. She had on traditional dress and her dark skin was set off even more by her jet-black hair. They were at a fence and carefully watched



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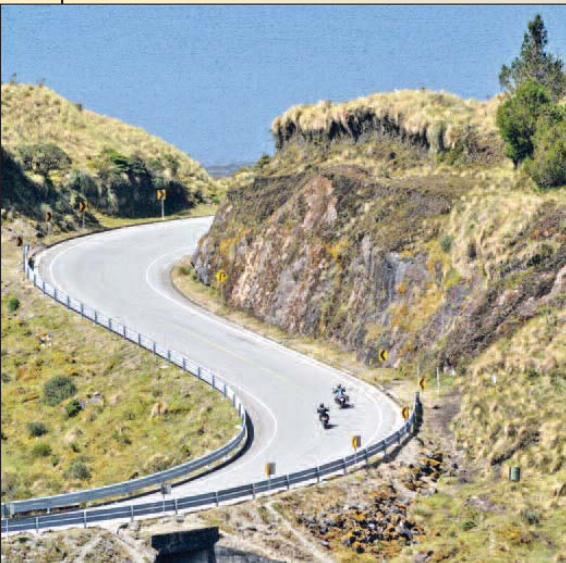
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as the semi-rare adventure machines rolled by. I made eye contact with this young lass and waved.

Her face lit up with a wide toothy smile and deep dimples – the little boy giggled – and they both waved back.

I have, on occasion, considered an au pair, but once again Shira said no.

Chimborazo stands still another 10,000 plus above this height. I felt small. It was humbling. It was beautiful. It was one of those rare moments in your life when everything...everything, is okay. Vicuña, a smaller and faster relative of the Llama, ran wild here and picked up their pace as they became spooked by the bikes.



We stopped for a digital moment and a group shot and then headed further west slowly sliding down in altitude and ever changing topography.

Soon the trees returned and the roadway followed along steep and rolling hills layered with mist.

Our final destination was the mountainside village of Salinas – named for the salt deposits and water that surround the town.

It is also known for its textiles and chocolate, which we searched out almost immediately upon entering the town.

Salinas is a challenging town to navigate with its steep and cobblestone streets, but we managed to find our hotel and then set off on foot to explore the village.



Still, it is the little things like this that make traveling on two wheels and places like Ecuador so satisfying.

The road headed west and crossed Sangay National Park, with its verdant views best seen from the roadside towers.

Once again waterfalls ruled the road as well as one volcano, Sangay, that was letting off a little steam as we passed by. Phenomenal.

Above us, riding the thermals rising from the jungle valley far below, Condors circled in a long spiraling glide.

We began to gather altitude once more and the forest slipped away as we entered a windswept paramo. The road snaked through this following the natural contours of the land and gaining and dropping altitude with every mile. We came up on Lagunas de Atillo and we were told that the Puruháe, the ancient natives of this region, would drown their criminals and enemies in the lake's icy waters.

Pour molten gold down one's throat. Hold people under water until they stop kicking. Make your hat size ten times smaller.

Pleasant people here back in the day. A dark bit of history for such a breathtaking region.

We hooked up with the Pan American Highway, heading north this time and then bore west with the mighty Chimborazo towering over the landscape like a rocky god.

We had passed this sleeping titan a few days back on this tour, but today we would ride right up to, far above the tree-line, and would summit the pass at 14,500 – the highest I think Shira and I have ever ridden.

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Day Nine - Salinas de Guaranda to Chugchilán

The high town of Salinas was down right cold overnight, but the heavy wool blankets were warm to the task and we were up at dawn to a light breakfast and then we cabled it Ecuador-style (piled into the bed of the truck) and drove over to the local cheese factory. Along the way we passed locals bringing the morning's milk to the cooperative that makes the famed cheese for the entire town.

Old men and women, children – some very young – all bringing what they had to the factory.

Using the beast of burden du jour the locals came up and down the mountains, along dusty unpaved roadways with horse, mule and alpaca carrying the day's milk. I dare say this life makes your morning commute seem easy.

We had some samples and did a quick tour of the factory before shutting back to the bikes and heading out for the day.

We doubled back along the last part of the previous day and rose back up past the tree line with the behemoth Chimborazo once again dominating the sky. If there were a few dozen Vicuña the previous day there were hundreds this morning. They were everywhere raising their small heads with black eyes tracking us as we rode by, as if we were some sort of noisy threat that would go after them.

Heading north under crystal blue skies we were stunned to see the volcano Tungurahua nearly 80 miles, as the condor flies, away.

To clearly see Chimborazo to the right and Cotopaxi to the left, we were told, is a truly rare occurrence and Shira claimed it was "Special Day!"

Most of the big paved highways in Ecuador are national roads of some sort but Court and Sylvain had some backroads up their sleeves and routed us along the Old Road to Guaranda. This was mostly roughly paved, except when it was a bombed out mess, but we had all gotten used to this and passed quickly and safely – stopping only to check out some hot spring pools we came across.

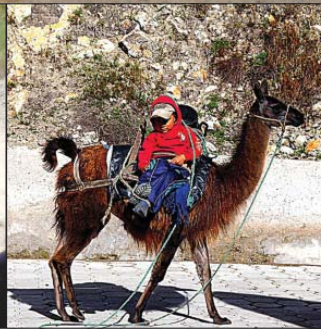
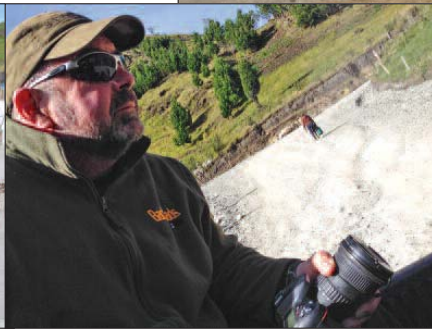

From there back to the Pan American, the road followed the land and rode deep into some winding gorges that were carved out thousands of years ago. Simply stunning.

Court told us over the UClears that the town we were riding through was famous for their ice cream shops.

Ice Cream?
Shira, should we stop?
We'd be fools not to.

We again headed east and higher crossing back into 13,000+ regions, along another páramo high in the mountains.

We stopped by a local art shop in a whistle stop of Tigua finding something that would look nice back home.

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Our next stop would be Laguna Quilotoa. This amazing lake was created by a collapsed volcano that left behind minerals that now give the deep crater-lake a wonderful blue-green color.

We were told that the next stretch would be unpaved (really?), and would wind through some incredibly picturesque countryside along jagged cliffs.

Along the way we made one more stop at a local school that makes some incredible furniture and then continued on our dusty and rocky way.

The road was a blast.

Did I mention that we all had become brilliant dirt-road riders?

Yep, we ruled - all of us, more or less were properly geared and talented, riding the latest technology, up on the pegs, picking our lines carefully and feeling very Walter Mitty'ish/Jimmy Lewis.

That is when we were authoritatively passed... by four guys on one Honda 175 beater.

Say what!? I mean... umm, what just happened?

Damn. It put things in perspective.

Slightly disheartened by our ass-whoopin' we carried on the last twenty miles of the ten mile ride, when we arrived at our destination for today, the small village of Chugchilán at a outstanding hotel; a favorite of Ecuadorian President Rafael Correa.

There was a hot tub and pool and, after the last nine days of the road, it was a well-deserved cold cerveza and whiskey for the soak.

That evening was our last for this group on the road, as tomorrow we would head back to Quito and start thinking of heading home and to that snowy wasteland they call New Jersey.



Day Ten - Chugchilán to Quito

Our last day heading back to the capital would be an easy one with a nice combination of dirt, cobblestone and pavement heading down the mountains along the prominent gorges and then to the main road back to Quito.

We had the baby, once again, change drivers after a gravity storm in some deep silt (dramatic, but no injuries) and it was not that much further down the road that we were all stopped in out tracks by the same thing.

We had rarely seen such an aberration along this trip, but there it was... bright, red and hanging in the sky. For a second I was stunned.

A fireball? A UFO? The return of the Incan Gods?

No. A stoplight. I remember these.

Our last 10 days had been some of the most distinct and interesting excursions Shira and I had been on in a long time. The sheer diversity in this tiny South American nation, about the size of the state of Oregon, was incredible to ride through.

From the world's greatest mountain range - the Andes, to the high paramo and lakes, to the cloud forest and the headwaters of the world's mightiest river - the Amazon. Combining the land with the wide ethnic range along the route also added to this fascinating trip. Examining the mix of Incan and older cultures up high, the Shuar and indigenous peoples of the jungle, the Spanish and European influences, and toss in the American and Canadian ex-pats in the larger cities, and you will find that this constellation that makes up today's Ecuador can and will boggle your mind.

And, we still had not ridden along its Pacific coast or explored the famous Galapagos Islands. I see a return trip in the near future.

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