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A Ride in the Clouds

Exploring Ecuador's hidden treasures along the backroads of the Andes.

By Christophe Noel



I DON'T KNOW IF IT WAS THE ALTITUDE OR HUNGER PANGS THAT MADE ME A LITTLE PUNCHY.

Either way, I gave my head a quick shake to steady my nerves as we turned onto a narrow dirt road, climbing the flanks of another Andean mountain-side. Darkness had overtaken the day and our once-brisk tempo was slowed to a more prudent speed. Carefully navigating a switchback as rocks skittered out from beneath our wheels, we became enveloped by an ominous wall of fog. I lifted my face shield, struggling to see the faint red glow of the taillight ahead. My eyes squinted as tight as I dared to shut out the flecks of dirt and mist hitting my face. Over the radio I heard Justin say, “Well, we came for an adventure. At least it’s not raining.” No sooner had he uttered the words than the downpour began. Sylvain’s voice chimed in with its unmistakable French accent, “Why did you say that? Aye, aye, aye...”

As we ascended above the 13,500-foot mark, the rain and fog worsened and the road began to deteriorate rapidly. Sections of chunky rock gave way to slick mud and flooded potholes of undetermined depth. I watched Justin’s rear wheel slither and spin, his unplanned trajectory taking him perilously close to the road’s exposed edge, beyond which was nothing more than an inky black abyss. I repeated Sylvain’s, “Aye, aye, aye” and added a nervous laugh as my own rear wheel waggged. Despite the tension of the scene, or more likely because of it, we were having the time of our lives. The worse it got, the more laughter and witty banter crackled over the radios.



Lonely roads allowed us to enjoy the countryside without traffic. **Opposite:** Once atop the peaks, the views extended for miles. **Opening spread:** The landscapes were often otherworldly. Strange plants called frailejón, stood in silent vigil as far as we could see.



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Our motorcycle trip through the mountains of northern Ecuador was not a long one, only a week in length. Outside of a few exciting moments, it wasn't particularly daring and didn't place us on the teetering brink of our personal limits...something I tend to fold into more trips than I should. For lack of a better word—one often applied as a pejorative amidst the adventure travel set—it was a vacation.

Prone to overorganize even the minutest details, this excursion was a deviation from my norm. Prior to departure I researched little, planned even less, and stepped onto the plane with helmet in hand and no idea of what I was getting into—a sensation I discovered was profoundly liberating. For the sake of full disclosure, my *laissez-faire* travel logistics were only made permissible because I had secured the services of Ecuador Freedom Bike Rental, based in the capital city of Quito. Owned by expats Court Rand and Sylvain Gallea, the company offers motorcycle rentals as well as self-guided and fully escorted tours. They had volunteered to personally lead me through the best roads in Ecuador; it was an opportunity I couldn't pass up. After a very brief phone call to my friend Justin Julian, we were both en route to Quito with little more to do than swing a leg over a motorcycle, follow wheels, and take in the sights.

Like most trips, ours started with a hurried scramble to get everything packed and loaded. For Court and Sylvain it was just another day at the office. Practiced as they are, their machines were idling and ready in minutes. After a round of head nods, and well before I could mentally prepare for it, we were rolling off the sidewalk and plunging into the busy streets of one of South America's largest cities. No sooner had I shifted into second gear when I became conspicuously aware of the cacophony of honking horns, each one of which I assumed were directed at me.

I wouldn't go so far as to say I'm phobic of city riding, but it certainly wins my full attention. Rolling onto the throttle in an effort to keep pace, I darted amidst traffic just inches from passing cars and other motorcycles. Rounding a turn onto a congested street, a pedestrian dashed in front of me, seemingly unfazed by the portent of death by motorcycle tourist. Amazed that I hadn't squashed my first Ecuadorian before breakfast, I blurted out an involuntary, "Holy crap!" I heard a trio of snickers over the radio, a cheeky reminder that my helmet was no longer my own private bubble.

For the next 20 miles our engines revved and idled as we pulsed from stoplight to stoplight, surging past lumbering trucks and precariously parked cars. Periodically I'd brush an elbow against the side of a bus, causing my nervous grip to make my fingers tingle. As hectic as it was, it was also exhilarating and more fun than it should have been. As I started to get into the chaotic rhythm of the city, making sport of the dangers it posed, the traffic began to thin. I relaxed my shoulders and unclenched my teeth, finally able to take in the expanding views. With each passing mile the road narrowed and became more serpentine, the crush of the city fading into the emerald green of the rural mountains. The noise of busy streets was soon replaced by the hypnotic hum of our engines and buzz of tires.

Our route quickly delivered us to the first of many high vistas, and the grandeur of Ecuador's quiet countryside stretched out before us. The views unfurled for miles in all directions, a patchwork of verdant pastures flanked by untamed thickets of wild vegetation. Overhead, billowy clouds speckled

An elderly woman surveys the quiet streets outside her home. **Opposite, clockwise from top left:** The last of a slaughtered pig awaits the final customer. The busy streets of Quito fall silent on Sunday mornings. Motorcycles are the most common mode of transport in the country, at times capable of transporting a family of five. Warned not to eat the bright red sausage, the chicken feet were tasty alternatives. A hulking sentinel (with formidable spurs) protected the back door of a home. There seems no better way to travel Ecuador than by motorcycle.





Few places on earth offer better motorcycling roads than Ecuador.
Right: A volcanic caldera is now a tranquil lake.



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the landscape with shadows and the faint outlines of tiny villages and farms became visible in the distance. As our wheels plied the narrow tracks connecting one small clutch of houses with the next, Justin broke the silence. “What is that?” Court’s taillight flashed on and we came to an abrupt stop.

It seemed like a presumptuous thing to do, to saunter up to a stranger’s house and ask for a tour, but to the smiling man on the side of the road holding a sizable chicken, it didn’t seem out of the ordinary. We had stumbled upon one of the region’s many small brick factories, the proprietor carefully washing his prized bird as the latest batch of bricks cured in a wood-fired kiln. While we ambled about the grounds clicking away with our cameras, Court acquired the details on the operation; they were staggering digits to comprehend.

Within the high walls of the kiln was a tower of 25,000 hand-formed bricks, glowing red hot like molten lava. They remained in this state for five days, after which they would be allowed to cool for an additional week. The bricks would then be removed by hand, one by one. For these laborious efforts, a process that entails a month of backbreaking work, the brick maker earns approximately \$175 American dollars. Oft prone to bragging about my Kansas-boy work ethic, I couldn’t wrap my head around the concept of toiling so hard for such a modest return. Grateful for his hospitality and the free tour, we gave the brick maker a few dollars for his time, his infectious smile made brighter by the gesture. We mounted our motorcycles and he returned to his fire, the clucking of chickens drowned out by the low grumble of our engines.

As the first days of our ride came to a close I began to realize just how splendid Ecuador is, and for reasons I had not foreseen. My cursory research illuminated the basics: it is home to the Galápagos Islands, Andes Mountains, and a verdurous section of the Amazon Basin. Though I was aware that this small country situated on the waistband of the planet contains some of nature’s most extraordinary treasures, nothing prepared me for seeing them firsthand. As the miles passed I could hardly process the diversity of



landscapes within such a small geographical area. Snowcapped volcanoes and lush jungles played contrast to arid plains and deep canyons suffused with raging rivers. Placid lakes filled once-steaming calderas, while banana trees shaded coffee plants and exotic birds of every color and description. As majestic as Ecuador's landscapes are, its real beauty lay within its residents, in the cheerful and curious faces of the children and the welcoming smiles of shopkeepers and passersby. They have a softness to them, a gentile disposition that is not just endearing, but enviable.

There is no better place to experience the affable nature of locals than within the bustling aisles of an open-air market, and knowing this, Court directed us to the town of Otavalo, nestled at the foot of the now dormant 15,000-foot Imbabura Volcano. Slipping into the narrow streets of the city we made our way to the Plaza de los Ponchos, where a dizzying cavalcade of colors, smells, and sounds filled the city square. Renowned for its vibrant textiles, the Otavalo market had been on Justin's radar from the moment he first learned of it. With an unusual sense of purpose, he wandered into the cramped walkways like a man on a mission. I knew exactly what he was after and as quickly as I could I grabbed my camera and followed in close pursuit.

At nearly six and a half feet tall, Justin towered over the diminutive Otavaleños like a sequoia in a cornfield. A frequent traveler to Asia, Justin, who has big grin and lumbering gate, is familiar with his role as a gentle giant. His diffusive smirk was reflected in the faces around him; giggles and smiles left in his wake gave the atmosphere an unusually cheerful buzz. Stopping to sample some local fare, I looked up to see that he had vanished into the throngs of shoppers, but I knew where he was headed.

With a gaggle of kids on his heels he reappeared with his prize, an authentic poncho (procured for the paltry sum of 15 bucks), draped over his motorcycle suit. Under its Ecuadoran Technicolor glory he looked like a bearded maypole. Peering through my lens I started to see the faces of other Anglo tourists in the background, their suppressed expressions belying their efforts to blend in. Justin clearly wasn't trying to blend in—not that he could have if he tried. With our hands full of souvenirs, we mounted up and beat a quick path to more dirt roads and were once again consumed by the solitude of the mountains.

At almost every stop, be it in the remote corners of the high peaks or the crowded confines of a city square, the people of Ecuador were much the same. They were eager to please, offering what little they could as if they had everything to give. More than once our weary crew rambled into a village long after the lunch hour had passed. Court would quietly rap his knuckles on a closed door and within minutes we'd be huddled around a table slurping at bowls of warm soup, the aroma of locally grown coffee perfuming the heavy air around us. Outside, children peeked through dirty windows, laughing and pointing at the strangely dressed people within: aliens to their rarely visited hamlets.

On more than a few occasions our path intersected with daily life in the Andes. Climbing the escarpment of a mountainside, the road suddenly fell away—quite literally. To the left was a towering wall of earth. To our right was a plummeting 500-foot drop to the river below. In front of us a bulldozer coughed plumes of black smoke as it scratched out a passable path of loose dirt above the gaping void. Landslides are not uncommon in the remote parts of the Andes and our route had been foiled, if temporarily. Dismounted from our motorcycles and unsure what to do next, an officious looking man moseyed towards Sylvain and informed him that forward progress would be delayed by at least two hours. The bad news delivered, the good news presented itself in the form of two local moonshiners, one with bottle in hand.



We made our way to Plaza de los Ponchos, where a dizzying cavalcade of colors, smells, and sounds filled the city square.

Tiny Otavaleños plied the market's walkways. **Opposite, clockwise from top left:** Roadside vendors grill guinea pigs for midday lunch. Sylvain and Justin blending in with the locals. A road crew supervisor takes a moment to sample some moonshine. Positioned on the center of the globe, Ecuador's name is fitting. It wouldn't be an adventure if it didn't include an unexpected setback now and then. A roadside butcher transacts his sales in an open-air market. A native Otavaleño woman tends to her wares at the market in Otavalo. This roadside eatery featured pig head and fritos (fried ripe plantain). **Center:** Justin rolls on the throttle as we ascended another mountain pass.



The pavement was stretched out like a racetrack, taunting us to twist the throttle a little more with each successive curve.

A boy hitches a ride on the back of a truck in Mindo. Locals bring their milk to the cheese factory daily.

In most parts of the world, heavy machinery operators and supervisors are typically sequestered from such things as homemade booze, but not in this neck of the woods. With several passes of a tin cup, everyone had sampled the shiner's hooch. It seemed like a harmless diversion given our anticipated internment on the side of the road. But just as we began to settle into our wait, word came down from the foreman that the road was ready. Though not fully repaired, he assured us it "should be" safe enough for our motorcycles. With hopeful encouragement we suggested Justin give it a go first. In retrospect, it might have been less nerve-racking to be the tip of the spear. Watching Justin's BMW plow a deep furrow through the loose dirt made me queasy, particularly when the rocks and debris started to plunge off the edge. Not wanting to overthink the potential outcome, I quickly followed in his tracks, forgetting to breathe until I was safely across the danger zone. In a matter of minutes we were back up to speed, the moonshiners and road workers left to their business.

As our course pushed us deeper and higher into the mountains over craggy peaks, the clouds, once thousands of feet overhead, were now reduced to a pillowy carpet far below. Court chimed in at regular intervals, "We're at 13,000 feet...now 13,500...here comes 14,000." It was amazing to think my plucky little Kawasaki KLR could ferry me to altitudes usually only attainable with a Cessna. With every high point came a corresponding low, occasionally on newly paved roads built to exacting tolerances with marble-smooth surfaces.

On the highway leading to the town of Mindo the pavement was stretched out like a racetrack, taunting us to twist the throttle a little more with each successive curve. Court set the pace and before long I noticed an increased level of enthusiasm as the dense jungle foliage around us was reduced to a blur of deep green. The rush of adrenaline was visible on our faces when we arrived at our beautiful hotel, our devilish grins persisted well into the last round of celebratory beers. Boys will be boys.

The last few days of our ride offered more tarmac carving and bumpy rides over remote dirt and cobbled roads. We visited a distillery cloistered under rusty steel rooftops and left with our bags filled with bottles of *Coco Loco*, a coconut infused spirit. I can't say it was particularly good—despite my ability to consume it in unhealthy quantities. In the town of Salinas, locals make Swiss-inspired cheeses, woolen yarn, and soccer balls. Ecuadoreans are a resourceful lot. Their resolve to eek out a comfortable living by any means necessary served as a reminder of how fortunate we are to be able to command our own fates.

The last hours of our journey were smothered in heavy rain. As we turned onto the road leading back to Quito, our strangely silent radios were a sullen cue that our playtime was nearing its end. Weaving through the traffic of the city toward our starting point, we eventually arrived on the sidewalk where the fun had begun. Inexplicably aware of my wheels' final rotation, I listened to the sounds of our engines being switched off one by one. Sitting on my motorcycle for a few seconds more, reluctant to admit the ride was over, I became cognizant of my excitement juxtaposed against my fatigue. The cold rain had left my hands as stiff as claws, their tenuous grip on the bars relenting only with deliberate effort. I felt the weight of my wet motorcycle suit, smelling its punky scent and the last hints of exhaust as they drifted on the breeze. Unable to justify sitting motionless for any longer, I lifted my helmet visor, gave a nod to my travel mates, and mumbled the only words I could summon: "Let's do it again." 🌐