

A photograph of a fisherman in Ecuador carrying a large grey plastic crate filled with fish on his shoulder. The fisherman is wearing a grey and red striped shirt, a white long-sleeved shirt underneath, a yellow cap with a black brim, and a green string bracelet. He is looking down at the crate. The background shows a body of water and a wooden pier.

MindStormPhoto Ecuador 2012 pt 1

Burt and Evelyn Johnson

Ecuador 2012 pt 1

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Flying Down to Ecuador

Flying Down to Ecuador

Our trusty airport limo driver was outside our door this morning at 4:00AM sharp. Oh well, I'm already up and showered, so no need to curse him for being prompt at that hour...

The American Airlines flight from San Francisco to Miami was one of the roughest commercial flights I can remember. I got a couple hours sleep, but was jostled awake repeatedly from severe turbulence over both the Sierras and Rockies.

The flight was a completely full narrow-body plane, and the guy in the middle seat should have bought two seats, but that seems to be more common these days, making flying akin to a trip to the casino -- who will squeeze between us this time? To help make the trip more pleasant, the plane had a single movie playing on a tiny monitor several rows forward of our seat. Of course they help to minimize the screen problem by only showing a movie I would never want to watch anyway...

In Miami, I approached a person at the American Airlines counter, and asked if there was a meal on the flight from Miami to Guayaquil (Ecuador). He checked the roster, then said "Yes, but it is airline food, so don't get too excited about it."

Nice to hear an employee give an honest response occasionally! (and yes, the food was terrible -- worst international flight food I can remember having)

The flight from Miami to Ecuador was another full narrow-body plane. This time we were pleasantly surprised to find a very nice (and thin) man sitting between us. His wife was one row back.

Flying Down to Ecuador

David Linn told us he is moving to Salinas, Ecuador for a year, or possibly more. I knew from prior research that Salinas is an up-and-coming beach resort town on the North Coast of Ecuador. Warm days laying on the beach. Sounds like a nice vacation, but I have a hard time envisioning retiring there. I'm pretty sure I would get bored before very long.

David runs a printing company in Colorado Springs though (TOPS printing -- www.TopStops.net), with employees back in Colorado that can run most of the business. He says he can do his part over the Internet. Now, *that* sounds like a life I could enjoy -- sit on the beach and do my work in shorts under a thatch-roofed section of beach.

When we arrived in Guayaquil, we stayed at the Hotel St Rafael -- a little hole-in-the-wall downtown. Pleasant enough, and in a good part of town, for \$42 per night (after taxes), so I would give a qualified recommendation for them to anyone else coming down this way.

We walked around the neighborhood, but only found one restaurant open at 10:30PM, so went in. We paid \$10 for a pollo (chicken) dinner. Food was OK, but not great. Certainly filling enough though. Walked back to the hotel, and hit the sack, since we have a 7AM flight to Cuenca.

Cuenca

We took a 30 minute TAME flight from Guayaquil to Cuenca at 7AM. While in the airport and on the flight, I attempted to read the Spanish language newspaper, and was very pleasantly surprised at how much I could understand. I have rarely attempted any spoken Spanish since we sold our last airplane in 1992 and stopped taking weekend trips into Mexico. We have been an occasional tourist to Spain and other Spanish speaking countries since then, but not really tried to use the language very much in the past 20 years.

Cuenca

I also listened to the speakers around me. Though I didn't know much of the vocabulary, I found that I could hear where one word stopped and the next began. I have never been able to do that in other Spanish speaking surroundings. What we have read about Ecuadorian Spanish being spoken more slowly and precisely seems true on first impression.

Most of the ground below was brown for much of the trip. Just as I was beginning to think Cuenca might be a brown featureless landscape, we topped a mountain and saw the green valley ahead -- we could now see Cuenca.

We had arrived to be picked up at the airport for a "rental real estate tour" to see the kind of rental properties available in Cuenca, in preparation for possibly returning in December for Spanish lessons. This was arranged with Cuenca Real Estate (www.CuencaRealEstate.com). A few hours before we had boarded the plane in San Francisco, an email exchange with the owner made us worry that they were backing out entirely. We looked around the airport terminal, and found nobody waiting to pick us up. Uh-oh. Bad start for the trip...

We decided to wait a half hour in case there was some mixup. Our Cuenca Real Estate contact was William, and he arrived about half an hour after we had collected our bags. He had been given the wrong flight time, and thought he was arriving early to pick us up. A trip to their office allowed us to meet other members of the team. It turned out that the email just before our departure was a misunderstanding. They assigned a "rental real estate guide" and we were off and running.

Svein took us around to see several apartments that were vacant. We got a good idea of the range of living spaces available for a month's rent, though of course we will have to see what is specifically available come December. Svein also gave us some good information about the city in general, and even helped us go to a Claro (mobile phone) store to get a SIM card put into Evelyn's iPhone4S (which failed, but that is another story).

Cuenca

One apartment Svein showed us was currently occupied by the owners. We met Peter and Chris, a couple from Montana that has purchased an excellent Cuenca apartment and plan on living here during the Winter, while summering in Montana. We talked with Peter for quite awhile, and finally had to continue our rental property tour. Before we left, Peter offered to get together later to talk some more, and we jumped at the chance.

We continued our rental property tour, seeing some nice units, and seeing others that we decided weren't desirably primarily because they were in "Gringo Land" - where many of the expats lived. We prefer staying more among the Ecuadorians, where we hope to have more chance to practice our Spanish -- once we have much anyway...

Svein also gave us a running commentary on the best places to go in town:

- Inca Lounge for Best Burger
- Junes had biggest burger in town
- Mall de Rio was largest mall
- Almacenes Chordeleg for electronics
- Coral for a wide variety (think Walmart)
- San Blas for ice cream
- Kookaburra for breakfast

Cuenca



Svein dropped us off at the condo of Peter and Chris, and we offered to take them out to lunch. We walked to "El Tunel", where we had "menu de dia," which means you skip the printed menu and just have whatever the restaurant is serving for lunch. Juice, soup, main course and desert came to \$2.25 per person - - filling and delicious for the price of a cup of coffee at Starbucks! After lunch, Peter and Chris took us on a walking tour of the area, including their favorite local market co-op.

Cuenca



For dinner, we went to Gringo Night at California Kitchen. We met David Morrill (author of "Ecuador: The Owners Manual" available through International Living), plus an American couple from Florida whose name I neglected to note. That couple was an interesting side-note, in that they had come planning on retiring in Cuenca and decided they did not like the city. They were the perfect poster couple for why you need to investigate in person before deciding to move here. As they went through the things they did not like, Evelyn and I just smiled and nodded, while thinking "those are the exact things we *do* like"...

One big lesson from today's travels -- when taking a Taxi, you must know the address and cross-street of your destination. Every time we just gave a name of a hotel or restaurant, the taxi drivers had no idea where we wanted to go. We always had to go back and get an address before they could get us where we were going.

Cuenca

Our first day in Cuenca was full, and we met far more friendly expats and locals than we expected. The trip is off to a good start!

Squirt Guns

Shot in the back! Squirt guns rule the roads! All flee in panic!

Carnaval is upon us, and here in Cuenca, Carnaval is more "water war" than booze. The weather is warm and (mostly) kids roam the streets, often in the back of their parent's pick-up truck, spraying anyone they see -- with Gringos being an especially favorite target. Within a few minutes of the passing attack, you are dry again and can probably expect another shot Real Soon Now...

We had an excellent breakfast at the Kookaburra Cafe. An Australian couple opened this place 4 years ago, and have recently sold it, to move to Paute. The Canadian couple that has purchased the restaurant have not yet taken it over though, so we had a nice chat with the original owners. If you go, I recommend their "stuffed omelet", though you should probably skip the veggie juice unless you are health nut that likes that kind of thing. Give me good old fashioned jugo naranja (orange juice) any time.

Next we walked over to the main square (Parque Calderon), and visited iTur -- the tourist information center. Nobody at iTur spoke a bit of English, but we managed to muddle through (hurray!) and got the map and info we wanted. We then walked around the square, where Evelyn photographed the cathedral.

Squirt Guns



I have variously read that there are 52 or 53 Catholic churches in Cuenca. Though I am not sure which number is correct, I have no trouble believing there is one for every day of the week. You can't go more than a few blocks without coming across another one.

Squirt Guns

We hopped on the double-decker bus for a city tour (\$5), since it had been recommended by two other couples. Of course we sat on the top, and thus found ourselves doused by a water bucket throwing teenager as we passed under his balcony. Oh, the joys of Carnaval again...

If you go on this bus, don't sit in the front row of the top level. There is a barrier there for looking pretty from the ground, but it completely obscures your view. We moved back a couple rows for a better view. They take you through town, speaking almost exclusively Spanish at far too rapid a clip for me to pick any of it up, and then take a short break on top of a hill overlooking the city for a scenic view.



On the way down, we opted to get off at Mall de Rio, so we could see what a mall was like in Cuenca. The anchor tenant there is Coral. Think Walmart + Best Buy (sans computer) + Home Depot + Ikea + motorcycles + groceries, and you begin to get an idea of the size and variety of this monster store.

Squirt Guns

We decided to buy a space heater, since our apartment was so darn cold at night (it is setting records, much to our chagrin). How do you say "space heater" in Spanish? We tried various iPhone translators, and got a variety of alternatives, none of which made sense or which the clerk could understand. Finally Evelyn just pantomimed being cold, and the clerk took us directly to the right place. The magic of hand gestures works round the world, even when the spoken word is not understood! The heater cost \$42 + tax, so we were perfectly happy to buy it for a week's use.

We also picked up some snacks for the apartment (we have a kitchen, so have occasionally made our own meals), and together with the space heater grabbed a taxi home.

Ah yes, the taxi. Be sure to come down here with lots of \$1 bills, because you will use taxis a lot, and they are \$2 whether going one block or across town. We came with far more \$1 bills than I thought we could possibly use, and by the end of the week was running low. \$1 buys a lot down here.

Back at our apartment, we met Vick and Joan, a retired Canadian couple that are now full time RVers roaming Canada and the US. They have been in Ecuador a couple months, but Joan "did a face plant" as she tells it, in Quito in their first week in-country. She now has a cast on both her wrist and foot, which makes getting around this hilly town difficult. They are both full of life and fun though, and aren't letting anything as small as some broken bones keep them down.

They found out about a show with great reviews for tonight, and invited us to join them. The show was at Likapaay, but was a disaster. The normal "traditional dancers" were replaced by a so-so Cuban singer, and the food was reduced to just appetizers. We asked the owner if there would be dancing later, and she said "yes, the guests will dance." I look around the almost-empty room, with literally nobody engaged with the music, and said "I don't think so..."

Squirt Guns



We asked for the check, and they tried to charge us much more than we had originally been quoted. We told the owner we would not pay that much, and were leaving in the middle of the show. To give the owner credit, she apologized, accepted the \$10 originally agreed to, and called a taxi for us.

Squirt Guns

When we left, another group of 6 also left (that meant that 10 of the 21 patrons walked out with us). Martha (pronounced 'Marti'), from the other group, invited us all over to another restaurant that she said had good food.

We all took 3 taxis down to the Eucalyptus restaurant (Gran Columbia 9-41 y Benigno Malo), where we had an excellent meal together. Marti was born in Ecuador and left at the age of 17 to go to the US. She later married and settled in San Francisco with a silver jewelry business. After 40 years, she decided to visit her home country for the first time -- and ended up with a damaged meniscus in Quito (sounds like a dangerous town -- two people we met on the same day were hurt there...). She was forced to stay in Ecuador for medical treatment, and by the time she was back on her feet, found she had fallen in love with the country.

We talked well into the night, and Marti helped turn a potential disaster into a night of fun and laughter. She was another of the people we kept running into all week where a stranger one minute became a friend the next, with little more than a Hello needed to make the switch.

Squirt Guns

Silly Foam Fight

Squirt guns have been left at the door, as it seems every kid in town is now toting an aerosol can of Carnaval Foam. This looks like a cousin of the "silly string" we have terrorized friends with in past years around New Years. A broad spray of foam is sent out to the hapless passerby. A few minutes later only the laughter of the kids remains.

Bring your sun block! The clouds have been constant since we arrived, often black and threatening, though there have only been a few scattered showers. I forgot to use sun block yesterday (who needs it when the sun can't be seen?), and today I am paying the price. My face is sunburned, and my ears have scabs from the burn. Sun block will be on my face every time I leave the apartment for the rest of the week!

We went walking into town again this morning, in search of Bananas, a highly recommended breakfast restaurant. We got hopelessly lost, and ended up eating at Cafe Austria, which was across the street when we gave up. There were only 4 breakfasts on the menu -- American, Continental, Austrian and <can't remember what #4 was called>. I ordered the Austrian - eggs, bacon and juice. Evelyn saw pancakes going by to another table and asked the waiter. Turns out they were available, even though not on the menu. Evelyn's pancakes were better than my passable eggs.

Afterwards, we walked over to Parque Calderon again. There was a band playing, and about 3 dozen varieties of rocking horses around the plaza, with a vendor taking pictures of kids sitting on the horses. While Evelyn was photographing, I sat down on a concrete bench to watch.

Silly Foam Fight



A Peruvian woman came over and started talking to me in rapid Spanish. When I replied "Hablo muy pequeño Espanol" ("I speak very little Spanish"), she sat down and we worked out a crude conversation with the limited Spanish Evelyn and I could muster. She was another example of just how easy it is to meet and talk to people here -- even if you don't share the same language.

At one point, she asked our plans for the day, and we said we were going to Banos. She was confused, and said that was a 4 hour drive, so we couldn't possibly be going this afternoon. I told her I thought it was only 20 minutes away, but she insisted. Oops, further than we thought, so I guess we can't go after all.

Silly Foam Fight



Later, our first Google search "distance from Banos to Cuenca" confirmed the 4 hour drive. However, after more research tonight, we discovered there is a "Banos resort" near Quito (the 4 hour drive), and another "Little Bano" with hot springs 20 minutes from Cuenca. Could have gone after all, but too late now. We will have to do that when we return to Cuenca sometime in the future.

After leaving the square, we walked about a block away and came across a flower market, then on to the local indoor co-op market where Peter and David (both Gringos we met earlier on the trip) shop for their produce. There were rows of open-air counter-tops with butchered beef, pork and poultry, just as we have seen in many Asian markets. The difference is there were no flies on this meat -- a benefit of being at 8,500 and too high for most bugs. We were later told that the merchants are required to sell the meat on the day it is slaughtered, and any remains are fed to dogs in the evening.

Silly Foam Fight



Silly Foam Fight



We tried to eat at Tiestos restaurant tonight, but it was closed. In fact, the first 4 restaurants we called were all closed. The city is largely shut down for Carnival.

Silly Foam Fight

We ended up eating at the Akelarre restaurant in the Hotel Inca, which was recommended to us by the California Kitchen when we called to get in there. The food was fabulous. We opened with a great potato soup (a specialty of Cuenca), then had the best sea bass béarnaise we have ever eaten. I talked to the owner for awhile. He said they have been there for 7 years, and are just starting to get positive reviews in Lonely Planet and other travel books. I added a 5-star review for them in Trip Advisor.

Silly Foam Fight

Playing Carnival

We had scheduled a tour of the surrounding craft villages for today. Efrain was there waiting to pick us up at our hotel a few minutes before the scheduled time. We have noticed that everyone is on time, and even restaurant service is fast in Cuenca -- not at all what we have come to expect in a Latin American country. Makes for a nice surprise...

We were barely out of town when a bucket of water was thrown on the car's windshield. Efrain laughed and said "everyone in Cuenca plays Carnival -- the kids play it in the streets with the water, and the adults play it behind closed doors with the drink." For the remainder of the day, we always drove with the windows rolled up, so the kids with buckets and hoses just washed down the car, and not the passengers.



Playing Carnival

Our first stop was in Gualaceo, a traditional weaving town. Because of Carnaval, most places were closed, but Efrain had arranged for one family to stay open just for us. Anna, a grandmother with no English showed us how she wove shawls the same way as has been done for the past 800 years. It takes her 3 days to make a shawl, which is then sold for \$15.



She also showed us how the cloth was dyed. Black is produced by volcanic rock. Flowers from Peru produce indigo blue, while a pea-pod kind of plant produces brown. She then showed the body of a tiny spider, which she crushed in her palm to create red. Mixing in a little lemon juice turned the ink orange, while baking soda made it purple. In all, she can 7 different permanent dye colors from the spider body, by combining various other materials. We ended up buying one small runner. How could we not buy something from this woman?

Playing Carnival



As we left Anna's workshop, Efrain spotted a BBQ cuy stand nearby and asked if we wanted to try it. Cuy is an Ecuadorian specialty, better known as guinea pig to Americans. Sure! It has an interesting taste that I am still trying to find the right words to describe. I guess you will just have to come down and try it for yourself. Then maybe you can give me the right words (it is good though -- I can at least attest to that much).

Playing Carnival



Playing Carnival



Playing Carnival



Next stop was Chordeleg for silver shops. We browsed a few open silver jewelry stores, but nothing caught our eye enough to want to buy, and we moved on.

Sigsig is the home of Panama hats. The hats have always been made in Ecuador, but in the 19th century they were shipped to Panama for export, and Europeans started calling them Panama hats, since that was the origin of the ships bringing them over.

We saw how the hats were made, which was rather interesting. They had 3 hat molding machines -- one over 100 years old and two more modern ones. It was the 100 year-old machine they used though, because it was the most reliable! The showroom was not very impressive, and no hat really looked good on either of us, so we moved on.

We passed through Paute, with its numerous fields of flowers, and San Bartolome with all the guitar workshops. Both towns were effectively shut down due to Carnival.

Playing Carnival

On the way back, Efrain drove by some apartments for rent at half the prices we had been shown Friday. The primary difference is that these were not going through a real estate agent, and in a couple cases were also a bit further out of town.

After Efrain dropped us off, we went looking for lunch. Not much in the town was open, and we ended up at Carbon. A large, delicious chicken soup, large lemonade and a bottle of water set us back \$7.

On our way home, we stopped by a tiny grocery store a block from our apartment for some supplies. The store was completely barricaded with a small window to tell the merchant what we wanted. I tried to say we wanted some toilet paper, and was getting nowhere until a woman came up, saw I was having trouble and asked what I needed. Turns out it is called "papel higienico". Add a new (important!) word to my vocabulary...

And of course, there was one more military band playing in the park, as we turn towards home.



Playing Carnaval

Gangland Attacks on Fat Tuesday!

Today was a lazy day for us. Most of the town was closed down for Fat Tuesday (the day before the Catholic holiday of Ash Wednesday). While Rio and New Orleans have massive parades on this day, Cuenca goes into a mass hysteria of kids bringing out all their big guns. Everywhere you go are squirt guns, buckets of water, "silly foam" aerosols and even water hoses. This is clearly a major day for every kid in town to make wet and get wet.

We noticed today that there are almost no birds in town. Occasionally you may hear a bird call, and even once we saw a bird, but they are a rarity. The reason is that there are almost no bugs for them to eat. Seems strange coming from the San Francisco area, but this is a natural side effect of living at 8,500 ft elevation.

Gangland Attacks on Fat Tuesday!



Gangland Attacks on Fat Tuesday!

Gangland Attacks on Fat Tuesday!



When wandering around town, we happened to meet the owners of San Sebas restaurant, on the San Sebastian square. We were told they opened 7 weeks ago, and we promised to return to try them out the next day (they were closed for Fat Tuesday too). It was interesting that they said they liked "Synergy Spanish" for learning the language, but did not like Simon Bolivar school because "they are too focussed on short term quick learning" -- actually that sounds like an endorsement to me...

Wandering near the center square again in the late afternoon, we came across a fireworks scaffolding being built from bamboo. We decided to wait around and watch the show. As soon as Evelyn pulled out her pocket camera, a couple of young kids started clowning around for pictures. They loved to see themselves in the LCD display after Evelyn shot them.

Gangland Attacks on Fat Tuesday!



Evelyn bought an "empty empanada" from a vendor on the square -- an empty pastry shell with powdered sugar on it, freshly fried by the vendor. It was so good that we ended up eating half a dozen of them during the hour we were waiting.

We also talked to a few other people in the square while waiting. Once again, strangers in this town are easy to approach, and always welcoming and friendly. Before the fireworks, a family started sending up fire lanterns -- paper lanterns with a small patch of burning hay suspended under them for hot air. Dozens lifted into the sky, as I wondered what would happen when they came back down, possibly with fire still burning...

Gangland Attacks on Fat Tuesday!



Gangland Attacks on Fat Tuesday!

Gangland Attacks on Fat Tuesday!



Once the Big Show started, a pyrotechnics worker put a cigarette lighter to a fireworks spinner and ran. He repeated this a few times, with one of the spinners going out of control and landing inches from a family with several small kids. The only thing to do was run fast as he lit the next one!

Gangland Attacks on Fat Tuesday!

After a few of these, he lit the major structure, which had several spinners, firecrackers, and sky rockets attached. He then dragged a box with roughly 30 tubes in it and lit that too. I was standing about 6 feet away, photographing the burning structure and this box exploding at my feet. When I finally thought to look up, I saw the standard fireworks exploding overhead, as you would see in any American fireworks display.



Gangland Attacks on Fat Tuesday!

Except in the US, you don't get to photograph it from 6 feet away. At that moment, I nearly regretted not bringing my "real camera equipment" for this scouting trip. Nearly, but not quite -- this has been a great week to just explore and experience with only a point-and-shoot occasionally brought out mostly for blog photos.

Gangland Attacks on Fat Tuesday!

El Cajas National Park

Today is Ash Wednesday, so the town is about half back to life. Many people are still taking today off, but tomorrow should return to normal around here.

Efrain, from MIO Tours, picked us up again today at 9:00 sharp, and drove us to El Cajon National Park. The trip was a little disappointing, through no fault of Efrain's. The weather was heavily overcast, cold, with frequent showers throughout the day. Also, we haven't totally acclimated to the 8,500 Cuenca yet, and were today trying to cope with a shack at 13,670 ft. We couldn't really move very fast, and certainly not do any hiking at that elevation.



El Cajas National Park



El Cajas National Park



As we got back into town, Efrain agreed to help us shop for a satellite internet dongle at Claro. I was sure that would take more Spanish than I could muster. At the store, we found that the price was prohibitive, so we passed. (\$99 without a plan, plus \$5 per 500MB data, or \$30/month for 4GB data/month, but with an 18 month commitment.)

El Cajas National Park

Efrain then drove us around some more possible rental areas, including one he referred to as "the 50-50 area," because about half the occupants are gringos and half locals. Looked like a very nice place to live, and he said a 2 bedroom apt there would run about \$200-\$300/month unfurnished.

We have seen several 'Costto' stores around, but have not ventured in. Efrain commented that they are the same as 'Costco' in the states, with the only difference being one letter in the name. Perhaps we will check them out on our next trip.

Efrain next drove us to Paute, because we had heard so much about it and wanted to see it a bit more. He stated that potato soup was invented in Paute (Wikipedia says it dates to 6000BC though, so we take that with a grain of salt), and that we should try it. We stopped at Corvel Eventos for lunch, and their version of the potato soup was worth coming back for -- delicious!

Paute is about 5 degrees Fahrenheit warmer than Cuenca, and is a bit lower, so there are birds (and bugs). We have heard of several expats deciding to move there, but the town seems too small and isolated for our tastes. Move that 5 degrees to Cuenca though, and we would be in heaven!

We have heard various things about an international airport being approved for Cuenca, but never anything definite. Efrain says that the issue was put to a vote and was resoundly defeated. I can find Google references to it being approved in 2009 if new radar was put in, but can't find any references more current nor to any vote, so am not really sure of the details -- other than it is clear we cannot use Cuenca airport as a port-of-entry at this time.

El Cajas National Park

We told Efrain that we were thinking of returning Nov 1 to study Spanish for a month. He warned us that Nov 1, 2, and 3 are big holidays (Dia de Muerta and Cuenca Independence Day) and that we should arrive a few days earlier to get settled before the big celebrations. Sounds like a good plan to us.

Dinner was at Guajibamba, where the house specialty is cuy. We had the cuy, but I think I prefer the preparation of the roadside vendor on Monday. The rest of the meal's side dishes were good though.

Another birthday survived...



El Cajas National Park

Spanish School Interviews

Today was mostly dedicated to interviewing Spanish Schools for taking lessons when we come back. But first, we had breakfast at San Sebas, as we had promised the owners yesterday.



Spanish School Interviews

We struck up a conversation with a man sitting at the next table, and then moved our meals over to join him. Jim Becker is a retired 3-star Lt General in the US Marines, who moved to Cuenca a little over a year ago. We spent the next hour regaled by his stories, and the reasons he chose Ecuador to live (primary was the use of the US Dollar, so no "up front loss of 30% like with the EU").

He is a member of the local Rotary Club, and we spent a great deal of time talking about that, and the good works they do in the region. He told us that most of the local chapter are doctors and lawyers, with very little English and that Jim is the only retired member at the moment. By the time we split up, he had offered to sponsor me into the local chapter, which I might seriously consider if we ever decide to move here for a longer term.

We visited and interviewed three Spanish schools -- Si Centro, Amauto and Simon Bolivar. All three had essentially the same pitch and the same price. Simon Bolivar was the most polished in the presentation, and had their own books (rather than the apparent rip-off xerox of Si Centro and "each instructor has his own book" of Amauto). We haven't really made a decision yet, but it appears that Simon Bolivar may be our choice to learn Spanish.

Spanish School Interviews



Everywhere you look there is construction going on. Mostly the streets are being ripped up and replaced with nice walkways, and with the old water piped replaced with modern. This latter is particularly good, since the Cuenca water is good, but the ancient pipes are often the source of sickness. It really seems the current president is putting the oil revenue to good use in providing construction employment and improving the overall infrastructure.

Spanish School Interviews



We had heard that you could fish from the Tomebamba river just outside our apartment. Today we saw it in action. A middle-aged local was throwing a small net, of maybe 2 meters diameter into the edge of the river, then pulling it out immediately. About every 3rd toss resulted in a fish. Some small (which he gave to a couple kids that had joined to watch), and some larger which he kept for himself. Every time he would pull out a fish, he would throw it against a rock to kill the fish, then put it into a small bag.

, February 24, 2012

[Travel](#)

Homeless in Cuenca, Ecuador!

Homeless in Cuenca, Ecuador!

We flew from San Francisco to Guayaquil, Ecuador today, to start our new 3-month adventure in Ecuador. The American Airlines flights to Miami, and then to Ecuador were both on time and smooth, though completely booked. Other than the lack of onboard food, it wasn't much different from the hundred+ other similar flights we have taken in the past.

We had arranged for a driver from MIO Travel to meet us in Guayaquil and drive us to Cuenca. We did that because we are traveling with a LOT more luggage than normal -- trying to guess what we will need for 3 months, including lots of computer and camera equipment. We didn't want to worry about the internal TAME small airlines with that luggage.

To our pleasant surprise, Efrain was there to meet us. He was our driver when we checked out Cuenca last Feb. We stopped for a quick dinner about an hour on the road (a small chicken-and-rice meal with more bone than chicken at a place I forgot to note or photograph), and then made it to Cuenca by midnight.

We pulled up to our Otorongo Apartments... only to find there was no apartment available for us!? Seems I had originally told the manager last March that I thought we would arrive around Oct 23. I updated that info in Sept, saying I would be here Oct 20. Though he responded to that email, he did not update his calendar, and someone was staying in our apartment.

HOMELESS IN CUENCA!

Well, we were that way for about 10 minutes anyway. Efrain got on the phone and found us a hotel about a block from city center. Small little hole-in-the-wall that you can walk by without finding it -- we did miss it several times the next day. Can **you** find our Hotel Ordonez in the following picture?

Homeless in Cuenca, Ecuador!



But it was warm and had a bed, so we took it and thanked Efrain profusely... The room was so tiny we barely fit our luggage into it and still made it to the bed:



It served us well for a couple days until our apartment was ready though. **LET THE ADVENTURE BEGIN!**

Mate de Coca — Cocaine For Altitude Sickness

Mate de Coca — Cocaine For Altitude Sickness



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Cuenca is at 8,200 ft elevation. When we were young, we skied at that altitude all Winter. Now, it is more of a challenge to walk 5 miles of hilly city at that altitude. Breath sometimes comes a bit too fast, or the head is a little too light after standing up quickly.

Cocaine to the rescue! Well, actually a tea available on many street corners made from a tincture of cocaine. It is a wonderful cure for all things that bother you from the altitude.

Mate de Coca — Cocaine For Altitude Sickness

I found a street urchin selling cocain derivatives near the Parca Calderon -- the central park of Cuenca. Most of his wares were mosquito repellant, which isn't much use at this altitude. But he did have the tea I was looking for.

"5 Dollars, senor."

"No. <shake my head> Too mucn. <walk away>"

"4 Dollars for you. Special today."

"<shake head> No. Tres Dollars (\$3)"

"Ok, OK. For you, Tres dollars"

And so, I have the altitude sickness cure I **need** for \$3 (which is actually about the right price, FWIW)

, October 21, 2012

[Ecuador](#), [Food](#), [Travel](#)

Eucalyptus Cafe (Cuenca)

Eucalyptus Cafe (Cuenca)

I was originally thinking of writing a post for every restaurant we ate at here in Cuenca, Ecuador. It very quickly became clear that would really need a separate food/restaurant blog, and that it would not really be very interesting to most people. Instead, I will try to create a post only for the **really good restaurants** that we visit. That is, those that we plan on visiting again multiple times during the next few months. I may do a summary post now and then on the other restaurants that we were not so thrilled about.

Without further ado, we present our first excellent candidate: **Cafe Eucalypus:**

Gran Columbia 9-41 y Benigno Malo

284-9157 or 091-001740

<http://www.cafeeucalyptus.com/>



Can you find the restaurant in that image above? Is it open? Very few restaurants in Cuenca have very much of a sign, so that half-hidden sign high up on the wall is actually better than most. In looking at the sign though, I would have sworn the restaurant was closed, since all 3 doors below the sign are closed. Nope. That open door on the far right is how you get into the restaurant.

Eucalyptus Cafe (Cuenca)

I neglected to take any photos of the interior, which is a shame (Note to self: photograph more than just the door and the food in the future!). Very nice ambiance inside, covering two floors, and including a rather massively stocked bar.

As with almost every restaurant we have visited this week, we had the place almost to ourselves. There were two other gringo couples there, and that was it. We have been told that this is the slow season, which is why several (other) restaurants are just now opening, so they can shake out the kinks before the crowds start arriving next month.

The food here was all absolutely excellent! The only negative was the house white wine -- if you like wine, steer clear of this stuff that tastes like it was crushed last week...

The menu is much larger and more varied than anywhere else we have seen in Cuenca. It included categories for soups, appetizers, spicy appetizers (yep, two groups just for appetizers), salads, pasta, seafood, beef, deserts, and curry.



Eucalyptus Cafe (Cuenca)

We started with a fabulous vegetable soup. It is common to have a large chunk of avocado floating at the top of many Ecuadorian soups, and this was no exception -- I just forgot to take the photo until after we had cut it up and stirred it in...



We followed that up with a delicious.... you know, I think I need to start taking better notes, because I can't remember what that was, but wow, did it taste good!



The next table over had another gringo couple. When their food arrived, I couldn't resist asking if I could photograph it. Thus, we met Betty and John from Klamath Falls, OR who are celebrating their 50th anniversary, and were traveling with an alumni group that came for Spanish classes. This was Jim's meal of Malaysian Beef.

[Food] Eucalyptus Cafe (Cuenca) - MindStormPhoto Blog and Gallery



Betty had Tad Puy.

Vampire's Bite At Sofy's Orchard

Vampire's Bite At Sofy's Orchard



Benigno Malo 5-72 y Juan Jaramillo

Even more than most, Sofy's Orchard is a hard-to-find restaurant. If we had not had that address in hand when looking for this new restaurant, we would have ended up eating elsewhere. We walked past it twice before counting off the address and found where it must be, finally finding it in the back of a courtyard of small stores.

They have only been open 2 months, but have already received very good reviews on several blogs. The almuerzos was delicious, though at \$4, it is twice as expensive as most other places in town.



Vampire's Bite At Sofy's Orchard

One thing that sets this eatery apart is a new tradition of Friday afternoon modeling sessions. These are free to anyone that wishes to come, though drinks and lunch are available for purchase. Anyone is free to bring a camera or drawing/painting materials. We went back today (Friday) for their theme of:

Vampire's Bite

5 models came in from [Mudo Dubujo](#), and they provided very professional modeling for all involved. I counted 8 cameras and 7 pen/pencil artists among the audience. I was one of the cameras, with Evelyn being one of the pen artists.

At one point, an extra bit of realism was inserted. Near the end of one 15-minute pose of a woman being bitten by a vampire, the victim actually fainted! All was well after a few minutes, and the show went on though.

Here are a couple of my photographs from this session, followed by a couple of Evelyn's drawings from this session:

Vampire's Bite At Sofy's Orchard



Vampire's Bite At Sofy's Orchard



Vampire's Bite At Sofy's Orchard



, October 27, 2012

Art, Ecuador, Food, Travel

Random Walk Through Cuenca, Ecuador

Random Walk Through Cuenca, Ecuador

Now that we have been in Cuenca, Ecuador for a week, we are starting to settle in and our initial routine is taking shape. I came down with a 24-hour flu last night, and have barely able to get out of bed most of today. I thought this might be a good time to take a random walk down some initial observations and thoughts about this city sitting high in the Andes on the equator.



DVD's here are an easy home entertainment. There is no Netflix available, but when you can buy the latest Hollywood release for \$1.25, who needs to bother with rentals? Yep, go into any of several DVD stores in town and pick out Men In Black 3, Expendables 2, Taken 2, etc and get 4 for \$5. Take them home and discover they are the same DVD that you would have bought back home for \$20 each. Almost all are in English. Some have Spanish subtitles (good for learning the language), while others have a language option allowing you to play it in English, Spanish or Portugese. And yes, they are pirate copies...

Random Walk Through Cuenca, Ecuador



The sidewalks here are pretty narrow, allowing 3 people shoulder-to-shoulder in most places. Schoolgirls are a plague, often seen walking arm-in-arm 3-abreast, talking rapid fire as only schoolgirls can, oblivious to anyone coming the other way -- those others just need to get off the sidewalk to make way... (Note: This particular image I captured has the girls eating ice cream rather than arms locked, and this is one of the wider sidewalks in town, but the girls act the same regardless of space, and "own the sidewalk")

Car sirens are a common sound downtown. Like a child crying wolf, they are ignored though. I heard one siren yesterday, and noticed a policeman 1/2 block away that did not even bother turning his head to look. The alarms have no value when they are heard so often...

There is a surprising amount of jiggle in the midriff of schoolgirls walking down the street. Everyone in the city walks a lot, and there are hills to conquer. The food here is fresh and American fast food can only be found in the malls at the very edge of town. So why are the girls so fat? Not really American-style obese, but definitely heavier than we see in many other countries. Surprising...

Random Walk Through Cuenca, Ecuador



Taxis are ubiquitous and cheap. \$2 gets you anywhere around town, with \$2.50 to go to the outlying malls. Of course most Ecuadorians make under \$5/hr, and many make under \$2/hr, so it only appears cheap to us. We only use the taxis ourselves when returning from a mall resupply trip, or perhaps when returning from the other end of town late at night. Walking is a way of life here, and I hope to come home needing new pants... (Note that the 6 taxis active on one block downtown, as shown in this photo, is a very common site)



Spanish school is unsettling at this point. More on that once I can figure out just what I think about it, and perhaps make a change in my approach.

Random Walk Through Cuenca, Ecuador

It is COLD here at night. At least it seems that way to us. We bought a room heater when we were here in February, and were pleased to have the apartment manager return it to us our first night here. We have met other gringos that say they like the temperature though, so maybe we have just gotten soft. Regardless, our heater is on from around 7PM through 9AM every night so far.

Rain is less predictable than we thought. On our February trip, it rains promptly at 4:00 every afternoon, and was done by 5:00. This time we have had it rain at night, in the morning, in the afternoon, and not at all. Local Cuencanas all say the weather cannot be predicted, and I am starting to believe they are right.

Gringos seem to be everywhere. Walking down the street, most of the people are certainly locals, and Spanish is the most common language. However, it seems you can't walk more than 15 minutes before hearing another English conversation between couples, or see someone that is clearly a gringo -- sometimes only a couple minutes between contacts. We had dinner with an American that has lived in Mexico & Ecuador for the past 23 years, and she tells us that is because we are walking in the Central and Commercial districts, but that English is rarely heard where she lives.

Smoking is almost nonexistent. I think I may have seen 4 or 5 men smoking cigarettes in week we have been here. No cigars and no women smokers. Yeah!

And let's not forget to mention how friendly everyone here is. At home, I eat at several restaurants for lunch, and after 7 years, do not know the names of any of the waiters, and have never once met anyone else eating in a restaurant, unless it was someone I knew from before. We have been here less than a week, and have already met close to a dozen new friends, several of which we have followed to other venues, and exchanged emails with tips and hints. It is taking me a little bit to get used to this new way of thinking about "strangers on the street."

Walking Off the Shakes

Walking Off the Shakes

Both Evelyn and I have worn pedometers every day for the past couple years, egging each other to get out and walk for exercise. It has helped my weight (though less than I would have liked), my blood pressure and my cholesterol. It has cost me nothing but a few bucks for the meter and time every day.

And it is *HARD* to reach 8000 steps in a day. I walk daily as far as a reasonable lunch hour will allow, and still often come up short of that goal. Evelyn walks the golf course once or twice a week, and though she easily hits the targets those days, the rest of the week I get to compare pedometers and gloat as hers is lower than mine.

Now, we come to Cuenca, and suddenly we are hitting over 12,000+ every single day, without any specific effort in doing so at all! We have no car, and rather than hailing a cab several times a day, we simply walk. At the end of the day our feet are tired, and our pedometers look like they are broken!



Walking Off the Shakes

Well, it turns out that it is a *really good thing* that we are now walking so much, because we have discovered one of the Cuenca delights that never seems to be mentioned in lesser blogs. I am talking about:



Strawberry Milk Shakes!

Yep, it turns out that Cuenca has a ton of ice cream shops, and they all make excellent strawberry shakes!

Walking Off the Shakes



Tutto Freddo is a local chain of ice cream shops, and is the first one we visited back in February. At the time, we had found ourselves stranded during Carnival with no nearby restaurants open except this one near the central Park Calderon, so went in and had a banana split for dinner. We hadn't eaten one of those since shortly after college, and it was a decadent treat!

We dropped in last week for a strawberry milkshake (\$2.20), and found it thick, creamy and just sweet enough. We knew we had to come back. A couple days ago we found ourselves down by the river at the other end of town, and noticed another ice cream shop. Well, of course we had to check out the competition!



Walking Off the Shakes

The ChocoCrema shop only charges \$1.80 for essentially the same shake. With a blind taste test, I doubt I could tell the difference. This quickly rose our 'favorites' list, though being so far away, we will probably not make it there as often as the chain Tutto Freddo.

Today we were in downtown Cuenca, and Evelyn noticed an ice cream shop that her Spanish instructor said was popular with the locals, so we had to do our homework and test it out...



We were a bit surprised to find that this was the most expensive strawberry shake of those tried so far (\$2.80), and wasn't as rich or sweet as the others. It is not likely we will return to this particular ice cream shop again.

Walking Off the Shakes



You can bet we will continue to do the hard research for you all over town though, as we **Walk Off Those (Strawberry Milk)Shakes!**

Cuenca Independence Begins!

Cuenca Independence Begins!

Cuenca's Independence Day is November 3, which is the day the city declared independence from Spain in 1820 (Quito had declared in August and Guayaquil in October earlier that same year). This is such a major celebration here that it actually covers 4 days -- from November 1 through November 4 each year.

Today started the celebration, and was a full day for us. It was a nice change from the bust of Halloween. Though Mexico goes all out for Halloween, it is not really celebrated in Ecuador. We saw a total of one child dressed up in costume, and she was crying, apparently not happy to have her mother force her to be different from everyone else in town. We heard of teenagers dressing as zombies and ghouls, and our neighbor got one photograph of 3 teens dressed that way, but we struck out.

Mexico celebrates Dia de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) with big festivals on Nov 1, but here it is strictly a religious occasion. However, the Independence Day festivities gave us plenty to see and do.

After breakfast at home, we walked over to the Parque Otorongo, where we had seen a large number of vendor tents being set up the last couple days. Unfortunately, this was a bust, with nothing but cheap trinkets and junk being sold. Very disappointing start.

We then walked towards Parque Calderon, and came across a High School parade going down the street next to the park. We watched it go by for roughly half an hour -- it was pretty good for a high school group.

Cuenca Independence Begins!



We then continued walking around the park, and came across the most unusual painter we have ever seen. He made masterpieces using only spray cans of paint.



Here are a couple finished examples that he had next to him for sale:

Cuenca Independence Begins!



Continuing our walk around the park, we came across a fair sized crowd around a pavillion with a very nice male singer blasting some darn good music. We couldn't really get very close, and it took awhile to even spot the singer. And were we ever surprised! There was a boy not more than 7 or 8, belting out the music while dancing up a storm. At first I thought it must be Kareoke, but no, that really was a small kid with all the moves and sound of a teenage heart-throb. When he finished, the crowd erupted in applause.



Cuenca Independence Begins!

That is him in the center, barely visible over the heads of the crowd.

As we continued wandering around the park, we could see the park filled with families enjoying the warm sunny day of festivities.



We next decided to walk over to Parque San Blas to see what was there. (We were supposed to go there last night, but got turned around and ended up at another park at the other end of town...). Though there were no official festivities there today, we found another very nice park, with two large churches, and a large fountain with kids playing in the water.



Cuenca Independence Begins!

We finally turned back towards the Simon Bolivar Spanish School for our 2PM class. This was my last class (I need to start doing some LeapFrog work next week), though Evelyn will be continuing for a couple more weeks. Her instructor took her out on the street as part of her class, where they found folk dancers on Plaza Santa Domingo.



Both our Spanish instructors told us that the Otorongo Plaza artisans were "not the real thing" and that we really needed to go see the Artesanias de America. This is a multi-national pavilion of artisans along the river, maybe a mile from our apartment on our same road.

We arrived to find a military band playing some suprisingly good music -- not what i normally associate with a military band at all.



Cuenca Independence Begins!

We walked around the various artisan booths, and were much more impressed. These were artisans every bit as good as the best street fairs ever bring out in the States. Evelyn ended up buying a new handmade belt, and a gift for her sister -- can't reveal what it was, since she reads this blog...



Dia de los Muertos

Dia de los Muertos

Dia de los Muertos is now over. It occurs on the second day of the extended Independence Day celebrations. Police presence in the city has been dramatically increased, with the newspapers explaining that they want to be sure no outside criminals come into town to prey on festival goers. I have seen no indication of any crime at all, so I guess it is working -- at least in my immediate vicinity. But then, we have never seen any crime in Cuenca. This feels like a very safe city.

For most of the day, the city skies were being circled by 3 military fighter planes. We have heard that President Correa is going to be visiting Cuenca tomorrow -- the official Cuenca Independence Day. Our guess is that the military flying the skies may be related to that visit, though we have no idea why it would be done *before* the visit?

While I continue to be surprised at how many overweight Cuencanas we see around town, belt tightening is the word of the day in our apartment. Both Evelyn and I have already moved our belts a notch tighter, and I actually went a second notch today. At this rate, I may look almost normal again by the time we return to the States in January!

The weather has been picture perfect that last couple days. Starts off with clear skies. Clouds form later, giving a nice background for photos, but the day stays short-sleeve weather, and no rain to spoil the afternoon.

We started today by stopping in at a Festival of the Arts we stumbled over. It was held in the same courtyard as our favorite milkshake stop (ChocoCream). Unfortunately, we just had breakfast, so just looked at the art and food, and skipped the milkshake.

Dia de los Muertos

I did buy a Colada Morada though -- a Cuencan drink that is only made available during the Independence Day weekend each year. It is a warm, purple fruit drink that reminds me of the green glop that Rene Russo drinks in the 1999 remake of The Thomas Crown Affair. I think I can easily wait a year before having another...

We then wandered over to Puente de la Centario for more high quality crafts. This town is filled with art and crafts during this weekend, though it is often hard to find them all.



Beautiful metal engravings



Dia de los Muertos

We next returned to the Artesenia de las Americas again, so Evelyn could buy another belt. We both ended up buying wallets there too. Very good quality and low prices (\$7 for wallets and \$12 for belts). Interestingly, there was no haggling on anything at this show. I saw a couple locals attempt to haggle, and they were totally turned down too, so it was not just a failure of us gringos.

We had read that there was another festival at Parque de las Madres, so we headed there next. There must have been a mistake though, since the park was surrounded with a construction fence and there was a large billboard touting renovation of the park. The fence had some interesting murals on it, helping keep the area attractive, and probably discouraging graffiti tagging.



Dia de los Muertos

Next was a walk across town to Parque San Blas. We stopped in for an almuerzos we found along the way. Very disappointing meal, but filling. A few minutes later we were sorry we had eaten there, as the park had a series of food vendors that looked like something we would rather have eaten. Several vendors cooking and selling Cuy (guinea pig) and Pollo (chicken).



This being Dia de la Muerto (Day of the Dead), we decided to trek out to the cemetery, which is the traditional destination on this day. Our maid assured us it was too far to walk, and was indeed out near the airport, but we walked anyway (see why our belts are tightening?).

Dia de los Muertos

The cemetery was one of the most elaborate and interesting I think I have ever seen. Immediately upon entering, we were confronted with building upon building of burial vaults. The only prior place I had seen these was in a James Bond movie "*Diamonds Are Forever*" where he gets a clue from such a vault...

There were many different styles of vaults, plus in-ground burial plots, and elaborate mausoleums. The area was so peaceful that we decided to sit on a bench under a tree and listen to the pleasant female vocalist that was serenading an outdoor Catholic service in a small square in the center of the vaults.



Dia de los Muertos



Independence Day Without Fireworks!?

Independence Day Without Fireworks!?

[NOTE: *Late Addendum*] It is now just after 1AM, and the fireworks have started! I can see them over the tops of the houses in 2 different directions. Nobody we talked to knew when or where, but we apparently gave up many hours too soon. They were all over in about 5 minutes, but they *did* exist.

----- Now back to the post I wrote a few hours ago...

Today is the official Independence Day for Cuenca. The various local festivities continued, with concerts in many parks. We had read that Park Calderon would have *Noche de la Cuenca* with fireworks starting at 7PM. Since we were not really interested in seeing the craft shows again, we took a lazy day at home, and didn't head out until 4PM.

There was a military parade on the other side of town (near the cemetery we went to yesterday) at 10AM, but we decided not to get up early for that. President Correa was supposedly there, and we did hear the military jets flying overhead until around noon, so they were likely providing air protection for him.

Our afternoon goal was to head back to Park San Blas and have a large cuy for dinner. Unfortunately, we got there about 4:30 and the vendors were tearing everything down. The only cuy left was a scrawny thing on a spit that did not look at all appetizing. Instead, we went over to Tuddo Freddo for a milkshake...

When we saw fireworks on our trip here in February, they had blocked off a street from car traffic, and erected a wooden frame they call a *castle*. We looked around Park Calderon and found nothing that looked like any fireworks preparation. We asked 5 different people (police and locals) and literally got 5 different and conflicting answers. Around 7:30 we asked a gringo that had moved to Cuenca permanently, and she said the fireworks would be at midnight.

Independence Day Without Fireworks!?

We gave up and walked until we found Mediterraneo, a new Italian restaurant. We have now added it to our list of Top Restaurants to return to -- details will follow in a later post covering several of our favorites.

Most of today's photographic opportunities were around Park Calderon, where there was a constant flux of impromptu performers, artists and vendors.



As the sun set, colors come out in the sky and the park area takes on a beautifully eerie appearance.

Independence Day Without Fireworks!?



There were several mimes around. This one was interesting, as he was suspended in air with no visible means of support. You could walk directly under him and put your hands anywhere around him, and there were no wires or support visible. He stayed up there for the two hours we were in the area.



Independence Day Without Fireworks!? - MindStormPhoto Blog and Gallery

This was another mime. Totally motionless until someone put a coin in the box at her feet. She would then touch the giver with a magic wand, do a slow twirl and return to motionlessness.



This "Tin Man" mime had less success than the others in attracting a crowd, but this boy did put a coin in his box, and got his picture taken by his mom.



Independence Day Without Fireworks!?

The band platform was taken over by a group of kids doing break-dancing.



There were a couple street artists in the area. This one of the better ones.



The "spray paint artist" was back again. Fascinating to watch him work, with completed samples around him. Unfortunately I never saw him make a sale, though his work was stunning and the method of creation completely unique.

Independence Day Without Fireworks!?



This is one the "spray paint artist" completed works that was laying next to him, while he was working.

Banos de Cuenca y Una Nuevo Impresora

Banos de Cuenca y Una Nuevo Impresora

Today was a day of exploration and struggling with Spanish. It ended with a meal at Evelyn's favorite restaurant (Chez Johnson) and a slap-stick bootleg DVD watched on a laptop.

We started the day with taking the metro Blue Bus for the first time. After finding the bus routes online, we discovered that #12 goes right by our apartment, and goes out to *Banos de Cuenca* -- a small town of natural hot springs, rather similar to Calstoga, North of San Francisco.

You just stand on the side of the road, and stick out your arm as the bus approaches. Much like flagging down a taxi. The bus stops barely long enough for you to get your feet on the bottom step, and it is off like a rocket. 25 cents takes you to the next block or to the end of the line. We watched the sign-board for stops, and 20 minutes later got off at "4 Corners" in Banos. Didn't really know where to stop, but that seemed like a logical place to try from.



This church was at the top of the hill, and dominated the view from any part of town.

Banos de Cuenca y Una Nuevo Impresora

Being Sunday, the info booth was closed, but a local saw we were testing the door, and asked if we needed help. He knew all the spas in town and pointed out several from our hilltop vantage point. I asked which he would go to, and he said *Novaqua*, so we went there.

About then, music started blaring out of a tower speaker just over our head, and all further conversation was impossible, so we started walking down the hill towards *Novaqua*. As we were walking, I was struck by how close we were to Cuenca, yet how third-world the town looked.



This woman, in typical indigenous dress, walks along along a road lined with half-built and poorly built homes.

Banos de Cuenca y Una Nuevo Impresora



Cows are in the of town, and often in the middle of the road. You can see the church at the top of the hill, dominating every view.

We arrived at *Novaqua*, which is a completely modern facility. For \$12 each, we had access to a warm swimming pool, hot pool, cold pool, steam sauna, and jacuzzi. For an extra charge, there was massage available too. I'm afraid I am not really much into these places, and was bored after 15 minutes... When I got into the hot pool, I neglected to read the advisory message next to it (in Spanish) -- "recommended stay no more than 5 minutes." After 15 minutes, I got out when I was feeling feint...



I didn't photograph any interiors, as it was discouraged with people in the pools.

Banos de Cuenca y Una Nuevo Impresora

We left after about an hour, and wandered around the rest of town. We found another hot springs right next door that was obviously a favorite of the locals, based on the line to get in. The price there was only \$4.25. We never explored the range of amenities there. We also looked in on *Piedra de Aqua*, which is the spa most heavily advertised. Their basic entry was \$10 (less than Novaqua), but they quickly tried to upsell to packages costing as much as \$175 per person. Yikes!

We wandered back into town and chose a restaurant for lunch that was packed with locals. We opted to order specific meals rather than the almuerzos. Evelyn's Sopa de Papa was \$3, as was my Seco de Pollo, and a monster size cerveza (beer) was another \$1.25. The meal was fairly tasty and set us back a whole \$7.25.

After another Blue Bus adventure back to the apartment to drop off our clothes, we took a taxi out to Mall de Rio to buy a new *impresora* (printer) at the HP store. The lone store clerk spoke absolutely no English, so we spent an interesting half hour or so making clear what we wanted to buy, and then completing the purchase.

Turns out they have no inventory in these stores, and you are buying the unit off the shelf. There were 4 empty PC display slots that were filled when we checked out printer models last week, apparently sold in the interim. The salesman was extremely thorough and helpful, making sure we had every cartridge, cable, disk, and what-not for the HP OfficeJet Pro 8000 that we bought for \$136.

Banos de Cuenca y Una Nuevo Impresora

By the way, you may have read my earlier warnings about making sure you brought any electronics with you from home that you want, because they are more expensive here. That does *not* include computer printers though. You can buy better ones in the States, but then you won't be able to get ink/toner for it. The printers sold here are not top-of-the-line from US standards, but they are reasonable, and supplies are then available when needed.



While waiting for the salesman to process our payment, Evelyn started playing with one of the PCs on display. She discovered a videoconferencing program that let her put bunny ears on herself.

We then went over to Coral, in the same mall, to stock up on some additional forks, plates, diet coke, and other necessities not available in the local mercado. Loaded down with our loot, we caught a taxi home.

It has been dry here for the past 4 days. Heavenly warm and dry for the entire Independence Day weekend. Just as we got home, around 5:30, it started sprinkling. By the time we had gotten everything inside, the sky opened up and it began to thunder and pour for the next couple hours. I guess the rain is back!

Banos de Cuenca y Una Nuevo Impresora

At home, I made pork chops and mashed potatoes. Chez Johnson is started to get his frying pan hands back in action again! We usually have breakfast at home (Evelyn cooks those), lunches out (we can't cook for the price the restaurants charge), and will probably get into a routine of eating at home for dinner 2 or 3 nights a week. That is much more restaurant eating than we are accustomed to, but the food here is so good, and the prices so reasonable, that we will enjoy it while we can...

After dinner, we popped *Johnny English Reborn*, a James Bond slapstick farce, into my Mac laptop. This was recommended by our South Vietnamese guide last year. I was skeptical, as I am not a fan of slapstick, but I have to admit, I was laughing through this one.

Where Have All the Birds Gone?

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Each morning, if we happen to wake around 5:30AM, we hear a cacophony of bird calls, and a lone rooster. Roll over and go back to sleep, and get up around 8:00, and it is completely quiet. We have been here for two weeks, and the only birds we have seen are a few pigeons on a single park (Parque San Blas) at the other end of town. Where do those noisy birds go once the sun rises???

In fact, where are *all* the animals? I saw 2 cats in one yard in Banos de Cuenca, but other than that no cats at all. Despite many flowers around, I have seen only one bee. No windows have screens, and we often leave our windows open for ventilation, yet I have seen (and killed) only one fly and one mosquito in the apartment in more than two weeks. I have seen no squirrels, or any other animal that would be common in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Of course, we are at 8,200 ft, which has a lot to do with the absence of many animals, but it still seems rather odd... and *where* are those birds that sing so loud before dawn?

We are settling into a more normal routine now. I stopped my formal Spanish tutor classes (more on that in the future), though Evelyn continues with her tutor. I am now spending 1/2 hour per day to do a Pimsleur audio tape. Yesterday I started writing software for LeapFrog again, as was my agreement when coming here for this long. I got off to a rocky start at first, as I discovered my programming environment needed more updating and tweaking than I expected, but I was still able to deliver my first completed project today, on schedule.

The rain has returned --- with a vengeance. After staying away for the entire 4-day Independence celebration, the sky opened up yesterday and poured for 4+ hours, then again last night, then again today. We are told the rainy season is coming, and it looks like the weather is trying to make believers of us.

Fooled Again!

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We have heard several Cuencanans tell us that the weather here is unpredictable. We are starting to sing that same tune... We left the apartment for lunch around 11:30 this morning. The sky was clear and sunny, with some clouds far on the horizon. We figured it wouldn't rain for several hours, so no need for umbrellas.

We walked a few blocks to *Rincon del Mar* -- a small breakfast and lunch restaurant just around the corner from the laundromat we use. Instead of getting their almerzos, we decided to explore the menu and splurge. I had heard of *chaulafan*, a local specialty, and decided to try it for \$4. We have also heard that the trout here is very fresh, coming from the National Park just a few miles from town, so Evelyn ordered the *Trucha con Menestra* (trout with mixed vegetables) for \$4.50.



Wow! Those portions are HUGE! The chaulafan on the left was enough for 4 people -- most of it is in our fridge now as leftovers (It is basically fried rice with chicken, shrimp and egg -- same as the Chinese dish that Evelyn used to make before I took over cooking at home). Evelyn's trout was fresh and the whole plate was delicious, again enough for at least 2 people though. Next time we will order one meal and split it...

Fooled Again!

I wonder how these restaurants stay in business. The meals are so super cheap, and I walked past 5 restaurants within a couple blocks of our apartment -- every one of which was completely empty. *Rincon del Mar* was also empty when we came in, though 3 other locals did arrive for lunch while we were there.

As we left the restaurant, I looked up and said to Evelyn "It will probably rain in about 4 hours." We then headed out for her to show me a meat market and local specialty food store she had discovered while I was sick the first week. We spent about an hour walking and doing some light food shopping.

As we stepped out of the last market, we heard thunder and felt the first few drops of rain... and we were about a mile from home with no umbrella. Oops! I said we had to hustle, and stated that we would probably be drenched before getting home. Thunder rolled over us repeatedly as the skies darkened further.

And it never more than spit on us!? The dark clouds moved past, and the thunder gradually moved into the distance, and we reached home completely dry.

Either some Weather God is playing games with us, or the weather really is simply unpredictable here in Cuenca...

Evelyn went off to her Spanish classes in the afternoon, and I returned to doing some software development for LeapFrog. Nice fresh salad for dinner at home, followed by watching a bootleg DVD of *Contraband* completed our day.