



# MindStormPhoto Ecuador 2016 pt 1

Burt and Evelyn Johnson



# MindStorm Photo Ecuador 2016 pt 1

## Table Of Contents

New Year's Eve 2015 – Salinas	3
New Year's Eve 2015 – Monigotes	12
Godfather of Foam	18
Carnaval Orquídea Parade	25
Evelyn Solo Art Show Announcement	36
Cooking With Fire	42
Belated 4th of July Symphony	46
Manabi Earthquake Relief	48
Ecuadorean Cooking School	51
Elements of Magic	56
Waterfall Moving From Still Image	59
Puerto López 1 – Whale Watching	61
Puerto López 2 – Fishermen	66
Puerto López 3 – The Malecón and People Watching	71
ACT Does It Again – “Talking With...”	76

## New Year's Eve 2015 – Salinas



After greeting the New Year for the past three years (2013, 2014, 2015) in Cuenca, we decided to see what Salinas had to offer, on the coast of Ecuador. As always, in our trips around Ecuador and the rest of South America, the results were both what we expected, and full of surprises. The monigotes (effigies) were one of the surprises, and we ended up making a second blog post just relating to those. Check out tomorrow's post for info on those.



# New Year's Eve 2015 – Salinas



In Salinas, fireworks were sold everywhere. They can be bought in Cuenca, but Salinas has them beat by an order of magnitude. There was a single block where I counted more than 20 vendors, and we saw three separate similar areas. Even as midnight approached, and fireworks filled the sky, these vendors were walking among the falling debris, selling whatever was left of their stock. The big boxes with 25 large, elaborate fireworks had an asking price of \$25. I never stopped to dicker and see how low they could go, but it was interesting to see people setting off several of those in quick succession at midnight.



# New Year's Eve 2015 – Salinas



At any event like this, people watching is half the enjoyment. Those watching the show ranged from infants in strollers, to great-grandparents in wheelchairs, helped by their adult children. A firetruck sat in the middle of it all, prepared to handle any fire that got out of control, and to wash out any live fires remaining at 3:00AM on the beach.



# New Year's Eve 2015 – Salinas



Have you yet tasted the true Carolina style bacon, or English muffins, or ham, (or continuously growing list of items) from [Carolina Smokehouse](#) (or on [Facebook here](#))? If not, get yourself over to their tienda on Honorato Vasquez y Hermano Miguel in Cuenca Centro and try some. Sure puts to shame anything you can buy at the mercados or SuperMaxi!



# New Year's Eve 2015 – Salinas

If you have bought from them, you will recognize David and Sandy in the montage above. They joined us for the weekend in Salinas, where they bought a menagerie of monigotes (aka effigies), some of which never made it past midnight, going up in flames. Others now decorate their tienda.



Fireworks started even before dark on New Year's Eve, but once it became fully dark, they were continuous. We saw six separate major bonfire locations on the beach to the north of our hotel and another 7-8 on the south side, and there were scattered ones throughout the city that we could also see from our rented condo. There were two major launching points for the fireworks, which were going off non-stop all night, as well as individuals were firing off their own sets that they had purchased from the numerous vendors in the streets earlier that day. You can see the carcasses of some of them in the lower right above. Fireworks were still being fired every few minutes at 3AM, when I went to bed.



# New Year's Eve 2015 – Salinas



Cuenca used to allow gobos, also known as "sky candles" or "wish lanterns," until some landed on church roofs in El Centro in 2013. They resulted in major fire damage to both churches, so they are no longer allowed here. They are still allowed in Salinas though, and we saw a dozen or so families gathering to send theirs off into the night. The wind pattern is such that the lanterns fly out over the ocean, so Salinas does not have as much fire risk from this tradition.



# New Year's Eve 2015 – Salinas



Of course cameras were everywhere. Obviously we had our own, which captured these scenes... After overdosing on photographing the fireworks and bonfires, I turned my camera to the other people with their cameras, for a specialized version of people watching.



# New Year's Eve 2015 – Salinas





# New Year's Eve 2015 – Salinas

A tradition in Ecuador is to write anything you want to leave behind in the old year, on a monigote, or effigy. You then burn it at midnight, symbolically leaving the problems of the old year behind. I was not planning on buying one, as 2015 was an excellent year and I had nothing I could think of to write (and we were told that to burn the monigote without such text is bad luck for the new year). However, Sandy and David found this monigote shaped in the form of an airplane. Remembering some of our flying stories from the 1980's when we roamed North America in our own plane, they showed it to me. I couldn't resist. The seller tied it to the roof of our rented car, where it flew with us back to our condo, where it almost lost its propeller after hitting the garage roof. One surprise was how quickly the large bonfires came to be at midnight. It seemed that nothing was going on, then with a can of gasoline, the entire beach caught on fire with dozens of large "hot" fires. Evelyn even caught on fire, but that's another story. That night, our airplane and its menagerie of monigotes, were loaded onto the bonfire, where they held on valiantly, but finally was totally engulfed and lost in a burst of glory.

Oh yeah, what did I write on the plane? I finally remembered that &^%\$ elevator that was such a headache for months. All thoughts of that failing elevator have now been burned away, so this year it will work perfectly. Right? Right? Please tell me I'm right...



# New Year's Eve 2015 – Monigotes

## New Year's Eve 2015 – Monigotes

Since we had rented a car from [CuencaCarShare](#), we had the mobility to check out the local coast, and drove around both Friday and Saturday. On New Year's Day, we discovered "the other Salinas", the one that tourists do not frequent, and it was delightful with lots of families playing on the beach. On Saturday, we drove north toward Puerto Lopez. First stop was Ayangue, a small fishing village which is also considered a well-kept secret well off the main road, where we stopped for breakfast. It had a sheltered bay with great seafood restaurants dotting the beach. We ate fresh langostino and shrimp. The vendor had to run next door to fetch the beer, and the service was impeccable. Mantanita, a hippie haven was the next stop and was massively crowded and noisy. As with much of Ecuador, everyone turns their music to full volume, regardless if the speakers can handle it. This was even worse than elsewhere though, as we drove slowly (no choice, due to traffic...), there was a cacophony of competing speakers. No thanks, so we left without ever stopping...

We next drove up to Olon, which was a far more pleasant town to visit. It was definitely a calmer environment, with a surfing school. We decided to return for dinner, however the beach restaurants were packed, and the service was absolutely terrible. After waiting for more than an hour and never even seeing our waiter again in that time, we just walked away and left town.

Our real destination was Puerto Lopez. We had enjoyed that town when we stayed there for a [few days in 2012](#). We had heard that the malecon was being rebuilt and almost done, the main street repaved, etc. Unfortunately, what we saw looked more like an abandoned construction site than any active work. There were piles of construction rubble everywhere, and the street paving had gone no more than about one block, then also abandoned. The charm of the 2012 town was lost, as the old beach tiendas were bulldozed by the city.



# New Year's Eve 2015 – Monigotes



This year we decided to check out Salinas, on the coast of Ecuador, for New Year's Eve. You can read our first blog, covering the actual NYE event [here](#). This is an addendum post about the huge variety of monigotes or años viejos that we saw in town. These doll-like figures are made from paper-maché and old clothes, sometimes filled with straw, sawdust, newspaper and firecrackers, and these puppets represent the past year. Burning the monigote at midnight on December 31st is a ritual purification to ward off the despair and bad luck of the year ending.



# New Year's Eve 2015 – Monigotes

We have spent the prior three New Year's Eves in Cuenca, which is where we first saw monigotes around town, and in bonfires at midnight. We have heard of large monigote markets in Cuenca, but since we do not have a car, we rarely get to where they supposedly exist. As such, we have only seen small sales displays of a few dozen monigotes here and there in Cuenca.

Salinas was a whole different ballgame. We passed three massive shopping areas selling monigotes enroute to Salinas. Each covered several blocks of nonstop vendors. Some of these vendors had more monigotes themselves than we saw for sale in all of Cuenca in past years. Many were small enough to carry under your arm, as seen above. Some vendors would have dozens of monigotes, with each one different, while others would concentrate on one or two styles, and then have multiple copies.



# New Year's Eve 2015 – Monigotes



Other monigotes were massive giants, sometimes 10 to 20 feet tall. Those tended to be the more elaborately produced models, and it almost seemed a shame to burn them at midnight. We did see a few of these giants go into the beach bonfire though.



# New Year's Eve 2015 – Monigotes



I spent the last seven years before retirement writing software for educational toys at LeapFrog, in California. The frog above was the first monigote we saw in Salinas. I wanted to get him, as a reminder of LeapFrog. Since we had not seen any others though, we thought it better to wait and see if there were better frogs later. Nope. A lesson learned decades ago had to be repeated -- if you see something you like, buy it then because you might not see another. This was the only "good frog" we saw in town. As it happened though, we later came across an airplane that I liked, and that became our NYE monigote instead (see yesterday's post for photos of its life from purchase to bonfire).



# New Year's Eve 2015 – Monigotes



The variety of monigotes was mind boggling. A few themes kept repeating though, some of which are represented above. Simpsons are always a bit hit, and this year Minion joined the Most Popular List (that I just now made up...). Batman, Ninja Turtles, Spiderman, and others were seen repeatedly in various forms and sizes.

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, January 2, 2016

[Animals](#), [Art](#), [Ecuador](#), [Event](#), [Festival](#), [Fireworks](#)

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## Godfather of Foam





# Godfather of Foam

Tonight was the 3rd annual Godfather's Fiesta at Park Calderon (see our report from the [1st fiesta here](#)). Basically, it is an excuse to buy cans of spray foam or silly string and spray everyone in sight. Don't go near the park without taking your sense of childish delight with you on this night. That sense of fun seemed to be in ready supply, as smiles and laughs filled the park all night.



Vendors of spray silliness abounded, costing \$1 for a small can or \$2 for a larger one. Of course, where you have a lot of kids, you have a balloon vendor too. There was also a gastronomic school handing out free pastries and promoting their classes. And, surprisingly, only one brave newscaster (center top) trying to give a live report from the scene, while getting sprayed.



# Godfather of Foam



Pretty much everyone had at least one can of spray fun, and every attack was met with a vicious counter-attack, until everyone was covered in foam and smiles.



# Godfather of Foam



Kids were having at least as much fun as their parents. Some of the younger ones had the advantage of a higher plane of attack, as they rode their father's backs. All had plenty of ammunition though. The kid lower-right above thought he had an advantage with a monster super-soaker, but learned later in the night that a water squirt gun was no match for cans of foam...



# Godfather of Foam



Wherever our cameras were brought out, groups would instantly pose for their photographs. That didn't protect us from getting foamed though, and we both spent much time using a shammy cloth to wipe off the cameras and keep them working!



# Godfather of Foam



Castles are an Ecuadorian platform for fireworks, and frequently are part of celebrations such as this. They are bamboo structures 12 feet or more tall, loaded with fireworks, and are typically fired off just a few feet from the audience.



# Godfather of Foam



And yes, we were as foam covered as anyone in the crowd! Note lower-left above as Evelyn instigates an attack though. Her above-right image was taken just moments later...



## Carnaval Orquídea Parade





# Carnaval Orquídea Parade

Today was the 2nd annual Orquídea parade in Cuenca, which officially kicks off Carnaval. Last year was the first Cuenca Carnaval parade, but we were in Ambato for Carnaval and missed that one (see [here for our post on the Ambato parade](#) last year). When we first approached the parade starting area, we immediately saw numerous vendors selling spray foam and silly string aerosol cans, so it was pretty obvious how the day would unfold. Though almost nobody works during Carnaval (it's even hard to find an open restaurant), we were surprised to see two workmen putting finishing touches on a building (upper-left above).



# Carnaval Orquídea Parade



The streets started lining up early with families, waiting for the parade to start. Some were already armed with their spray cans, eager to start attacking anyone within range.



# Carnaval Orquídea Parade



Music is always a big part of any parade in Cuenca. These musicians kept playing, with big smiles on their faces, as they were sprayed with foam from the audience.



# Carnaval Orquídea Parade



There were a few floats in the parade, though most floats in Cuenca are not very elaborate (center-right above being the fanciest one today). Lately, every parade has one or more drones taking aerial photography (lower-right above). So far I have resisted the temptation for one more toy... er, I mean tool for my photography, so I am not flying one up there myself.



# Carnaval Orquídea Parade



This parade had a higher percentage of dancing groups than most parades we have seen here. There was even a young couple doing pretty fancy dance steps on stilts (lower-left above).



# Carnaval Orquídea Parade



Carnaval is largely an adult's celebration, and they were more center-stage here than in most other parades in Cuenca.



# Carnaval Orquídea Parade



That didn't mean kids weren't involved though, and they all seemed to love spraying and being sprayed.



# Carnaval Orquídea Parade



The first photo set showed enough foam vendors that you knew it was going to be a wet and soapy experience. Within minutes of the parade starting, the foam started flying. The parade participants shot the audience, and the audience shot back.



# Carnaval Orquídea Parade





# Carnaval Orquídea Parade

Expats are rare at these parades. We only account for roughly 1% of the local population, and many expats stay home, afraid of getting soaked, and thus missing out on most of the fun. One expat woman got in the thick of it today though, shooting everyone in sight. A free-for-all followed, leaving everyone within range covered in soapy foam. I have never quite figured out how that other expat in the fray managed to take that photo (lower-right above) when both his camera and eyes were totally covered!?



# Evelyn's First Solo Exhibition

## Evelyn Solo Art Show Announcement





# Evelyn's First Solo Exhibition

Evelyn is opening her first solo art show this week! Her [first \(and only prior\) show](#) was in July, 2014, where she exhibited with two other artists. 19 months later, she is having her second show, and this time as the only artist. Not only that, but she is exhibiting at [Galería Larrazábal](#), an exclusive posh Cuenca gallery, where she will be the first Gringa (aka North American) allowed to exhibit.

Where: Galería Larrazábal at Parque de San Sebastián. Calle de San Sebastián 1-80 y Mariscal Sucre, Cuenca, Ecuador. For many people, the address is easier to relate to [Cafe San Sebas](#). If you are facing this cafe, the gallery is two doors to the right.

The exhibit will continue through April 5, 2016. Gallery hours are 9AM - 1PM and 3PM - 6PM Monday to Friday, plus 10AM - 1PM on Saturday.

Come and join us Wednesday evening, talk with the artist and enjoy her paintings, all inspired by her travels throughout Ecuador.

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, March 5, 2016

[Art](#), [Brag](#), [Evelyn](#), [Event](#), [Family](#)

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# Evelyn's First Solo Exhibition



*Lynda with her new painting from the Parada de Bus series*

How many people will come to Evelyn's reception? That was a question that plagued us for weeks. How much food and wine do we prepare? We have been to some art show receptions where only a handful of people showed up. We were advised to plan for no more than 40, but my gut said closer to 100. Then it started to rain... and rained *hard*, just a few minutes before the show was to open. Oh no! The rain will certainly keep most people home!



# Evelyn's First Solo Exhibition



*Center Photo Left to right - Diego Orellano, Eudoxia Estrella, Alberto Soriano, Evelyn Johnson, Lorena Duca*



# Evelyn's First Solo Exhibition

By the time the doors opened, there were a dozen soaking visitors waiting to be let in. Within the next 15 minutes, the numbers had swelled to 80, as the speeches began. The owner of the gallery, Eudoxia Estrella, an internationally renown artist and the first director of the Museum of Modern Art, welcomed everyone, then introduced the art critic, Diego Orellana. He then spoke a few words of why he found Evelyn's work so intriguing. When it was Evelyn's turn to speak, she told the crowd that she had been asked by her art teacher to give her talk in English.

However, she said she had practiced in Spanish and would therefore attempt presenting that way. Laughter ensued when Evelyn did a pretty good job of Spanish, and then had Lorena translate into English for most of the audience.

Evelyn's painting instructor, Alberto Soriano, is notoriously shy about speaking even at his own art shows. However, he was pulled into the front, where he gave glowing comments about his favorite student.





# Evelyn's First Solo Exhibition

In all, Evelyn exhibited 30 of her paintings for the show. To her surprise and delight, 10 of those were sold at the reception tonight, and a few people said they planned to return after they convinced their partners. Evelyn's art teacher, Alberto Soriano, was overwhelmed with pride with how receptive everyone was to his student's first solo show.





## Cooking With Fire



We have heard about [La Yunta](#) since shortly before we went on our Turkey adventure last March. This is a restaurant / tienda / deli that is about a 15 minute drive out of Cuenca, enroute to Loja. Being so far out in the sticks, they have to be creative to get people to come. Along those lines, they have started having free (yes, **free**!) cooking demonstrations most weeks. They even send a bus to pick you up in Cuenca, charging only \$3 round-trip.



# Cooking With Fire



The demonstration chef is Patricio Coronel, who owns the [Corvel](#) restaurant in Paute. Sole, owner of La Yunta, translates everything into English for the mostly Gringo audience.



# Cooking With Fire



We learned about the foods, such as the difference between "loma fino" and "loma faldo" and an explanation of why their fino is better than most of what is available in Cuenca. (Most cows around Cuenca are raised in hilly fields, and develop a lot of muscle, whereas cows raised on the flat lands in Tarqui develop more tasty fat.)

# Evelyn's First Solo Exhibition

We learned how to make "Lomo del Diablo" (top image on this post), "Corvina a la Manzana" (bottom left) and "Langostinos La Yunta Callimanta" (bottom right image).

Also, we learned tips on seasoning meats, preparing "tiestos" (the ceramic cookware), sampling quinoa empanadas, and how to make flambé meats and bananas. And, we learned what not to do ... fire in the kitchen (yep, their stove skirt caught fire, which is why only one image above has a skirt).

We each got a sample of the recipes to taste, and later had the recipes emailed to us. La Yunta also has delivery 7 days per week to the Cuenca area of prepared meals, spices, and deli items such as their lomo fino. Send them an email to [lydelivers@gmail.com](mailto:lydelivers@gmail.com) to get a price list. We will certainly be using them in the future!

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, July 9, 2016

[cooking](#), [Ecuador](#), [Education](#), [Food](#)

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## Belated 4th of July Symphony



As we have noted before, the symphonies in Cuenca are always free, and in this case, jointly sponsored by the US Consulate and the Ministry of Culture. Tonight was a special performance of "*Portrait of Lincoln*" celebrating 240 years of independence in the United States, featuring all American composers and music, with the Cuenca Symphony directed by American conductor Jeffrey Sean Dokken, from West Virginia. Music was from composers Aaron Copland, George Whitefield Chadwick, and ending with John Philip Sousa's "*Stars and Stripes Forever*" march.

# Belated 4th of July Symphony

The program opened with the US Consulate General Patricia Fietz speaking, in both English and Spanish, about the ties between Ecuador and the US. She said this same program was given earlier in both Guayaquil (where the US Consulate is located) and Loja, and they decided to also bring it here to Cuenca. Also featured was the renown solo violinist from Guayaquil, Jorge Saade.

After the concert, we walked home, and passed by the gallery of [Miguel Illescas](#) (located on Calle Larga close to the Pumapungo Theater), and in our opinion the finest gallery in Cuenca. Miguel is a locally well known metal sculptor, and when we saw that he was open, we decided to drop in to see what was new. To our surprise, he was having an ad hoc reception for the symphony guests in his gallery, since the conductor had stopped in earlier that evening prior to the performance. Later, a number of attendees from the symphony, orchestra members, the Consulate General, all stopped in for some wine and h'ordeuvres. We continue to drool over his works. As usual, we saw several more we would love to have, and came home looking for places to put them. To top off the evening, we explored a new sushi restaurant enroute home. Such is our life in Cuenca, which provides continuing surprises for us.

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, July 16, 2016

[Art](#), [Ecuador](#), [Music](#)

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# Manabi Earthquake Relief



## SOLIDARIDAD CON LA GENTE DE MANABÍ

**Festival SANTA ANA GASTRONOMIA y ARTESANÍAS de MANABI y CUENCA**

**23 y 24 JULIO**  
10h00 a 21h00

**SEMINARIO SAN LUIS**  
Benigno Malo y Simón Bolívar

**Inauguración de prototipo de domo para viviendas temporales para 30,000 víctimas del terremoto – MASHI YURA**

**Dibujos de niños de Manabi – 7.8 PROYECTO ARTE**

**Eventos Artísticos: SÁBADO 19H00**

**Teatro Barojo**  
**Cindy Benson,**  
Actriz de Broadway

**Grupo de Danza, Kausanakunchi**  
**Peter Dudar,** Piano

**Grupo de Danza, Universidad Politécnica Salesiana**









### Concierto por las Víctimas del Terremoto

CELEBRA EL DÍA DE LA MADRE A TRAVÉS DE TU CONTRIBUCIÓN

**SÁBADO 7 de Mayo 19h00**  
Teatro Barojo, Cuenca y Luis Corbero

**MÚSICOS / ACTORES**  
Vanessa Regalado  
Teatro Barojo  
Ballet Andino - Causanacunchi  
Cindy Benson  
Quinteto Polifónico de Cuenca  
Umberto Ballone  
Luz Maria Crespo  
Paulo C. Morocho / Tiina Soé  
Peter Dudar

**ARTISTAS**  
Eduardo Vega  
Sofía Jaramillo  
Eduardo Segovia  
Fernanda García  
Pablo Cardoso  
Janneth Mendez  
José Cardoso  
Fausto Bravo  
Raúl Rabal  
Sally Marr

**AMIGOS DEL EVENTO**  
Felipe Cardoso  
Andrés de Muller  
René Lopez Moreño  
Fernanda Chica Duran

**¡Agradecimiento Especial!**






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"Cuenca a la vida, Ecuador a ti mundo en tu plato" "Cuenca an' life, Ecuador and the world on your dish"

A **magnitude 7.8 earthquake** hit Ecuador on April 16, 2016. We were in Istanbul, Turkey at the time. The couple that was staying in our Cuenca, Ecuador apartment said they could feel it, though we were 180 miles from the epicenter. More than 650 people were killed in the quake. 200 schools and thousands of homes were also destroyed. There was an immediate international relief effort, with over 13,000 police and military mobilized to help those affected.



# Manabi Earthquake Relief

Though the quake has moved off the front page, with other world events taking the focus on other parts of the world, there continues to be charity events held throughout Ecuador. Today was one such, called ***Solidaridad con la Gente de Manabi*** (*Solidarity with the people of Manabi*). The upper right poster was for a ***Concierto por las Victimas del Terremoto*** (*Concert for the Victims of the Earthquake*), which was held in May (while we were still in Turkey).





# Manabi Earthquake Relief

The fair was held across the street from Parque Calderon, in the center of Cuenca. The *San Luis Seminary* courtyard only recently opened again to the public. It had been closed since a major fire on August 15, 2012. The view of the *New Cathedral* (though built in 1885, that is still the name it is best known as) is spectacular, as seen in the upper left image. The highlight of the festival was the unveiling of a special tent for temporary housing for those who lost their home (upper right image) designed by Peter Dudar and an architect. Though small, the tent is cleverly made using umbrella material, PVC, rebar and recycled bicycle spokes to provide protection from the sun and heat on the coast, as well as provide ventilation. Designed to sleep 4, it was large enough to fit 35 dancers the night before. Each tent costs \$150 to produce, and the charity is attempting to raise enough money for 1000 tents.





As always, families with kids enjoyed the day at Parque Calderon across the street.

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, July 24, 2016

Event, Festival, Market

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## Ecuadorean Cooking School





# Ecuadorean Cooking School

We spent a full day last week at a cooking school here in Cuenca. Unfortunately, I got rather sick shortly afterwards (sore throat, etc -- not related to the school) and my brain went offline for most of the past week. I am only now getting around to writing about the experience.

The class was at the [San Isidro institute](#), a local cooking college where many of the best chefs in Cuenca restaurants learned their trade. It was organized by the [Cuenca Expat Magazine](#), a relatively new magazine that has organized trips for expats to experience unique places around Ecuador.

We opened with a tour of the facilities, where we came across a class of children learning to make pastries (bottom row), as well as college students preparing our lunch (middle right). We then spent about an hour in the classroom (upper right and middle left) where we learned something about the different cuisines of Ecuador's four regions (coastal, Andes, Amazon and Galapagos), and then some initial directions relating to the meal we would make that afternoon.

# Ecuadorean Cooking School



After classroom time, we went out for school Final Exam. That is, the students had prepared lunch for us, and our grade of their taste, presentation, texture, and service was part of the student's final grade for the semester. Each student was required to create his own personal dish, based upon the lessons of their most recent semester of training. As such, every table had a different meal, and there was no menu to choose from.

We ate outside, where it was a bit cool (this was late July in Cuenca after all, close into August, which is our coldest month). The meals were pieces of art (middle and lower left are examples from our table) that were almost a shame to eat. The taste and presentation of each course would feel right at home in an expensive 5-star restaurant. My only regret was that these were not courses we could return to have again in the future.



# Ecuadorean Cooking School

After lunch, and just before we entered the kitchen for our own cooking lesson, we got together for a group shot (lower right).



We then entered into the teaching kitchen to prepare our own meals. We learned to make plantain and cheese empanadas. We then made "seco de chivo" (a goat stew). Goat tends to be a rather tough meat, but the recipe and directions we were given resulted in a very tasty and tender meal -- one that will find its way into my home cookbook.

# Ecuadorean Cooking School

With every class, we learn something new, like how to chop onions without crying (by freezing them 15 minutes prior), as well as why knives are shaped a certain way. This was the first experience with San Isidro cooking school. Though there were a few rough edges, it is pretty clear this is something we will attend again next month, for the second session.



## Elements of Magic



There was a restaurant in El Centro that we enjoyed, called *Magica Cuchara*, or "*The Magic Spoon*." It was owned by a very talented local magician, Juan Estrella, who is a member of the exclusive Magic Circle of international magicians. Juan also performs around the world, and in *many places in the United States*. When you dined there (and the food was enough to bring you in), the owner would often show up unannounced and perform table magic right in front of you. It was always amazing, and we would spend the rest of our meal trying to figure out how he did that!

Unfortunately, the restaurant is right on the *Transvia* path, which means the street has been torn up and almost unreachable for more than a year. Juan had to close the restaurant... but like the magic Phoenix, it has been reborn as a weekly magic theater.

# Elements of Magic

The Magic Spoon is now a theater each Thursday night, alternating between Spanish and English presentations. Juan intends to have each of the 23 magicians from his Cuenca Magic Association perform at the new theater. He also hopes to open the restaurant again next year, after the Transvia rail system is operational, and business returns to Gran Colombia (the street of his theater cum restaurant).

Last night, we went there for the English performance by Juan Gonzolas. His English patter was a bit stilted at times, though he was easily understandable. His first tricks looked rather clumsy (intentionally, as it turned out), only to then end with a flourish that left you wondering "***How did he do that??!***"

This show was called "Elements", and had a series of tricks based on the elements of traditional Chinese beliefs. You can see above where he is lighting a series of envelopes on fire, each of which you think may have a \$20 bill in it. After all are burned, he has the audience participant open his hands, unfold the empty envelope in his hand -- only to see the \$20 bill there.

The magic is all "close up," with a tiny theater seating only about 40 people (we were in the first row). He was never more than 6 feet from us, and most of his tricks involved someone from the audience right at the table with him. As far as I know, nobody in the audience figured out how he did any of his magic.

Definitely a fun evening, and one we will be repeating when future magicians come to this theater.



# Elements of Magic



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, August 13, 2016

Theater · Magic

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## Waterfall Moving From Still Image





You may have noticed that a couple recent blogs have had moving images in them ([symphony](#) and [magic](#) as examples). These are animated GIF images that I have been experimenting with. Both those were made starting with videos that I shot during the event. With some masking magic, I am able to obtain a moving image where only one portion is moving in the frame, and which can be played in a loop on a browser without requiring you to press a 'start' button.

Yesterday I discovered a new trick in Photoshop that I think is rather cool, and which I may use now and then in the future too. In the image above, I had a single still image (no movie involved) from a waterfall in Iceland we visited in 2014. The basic trick is to select regions that are wanted to move, transform them in Photoshop along the desired path, then animate the result. A bit of cleanup masking, and the waterfall here is the result of my first attempt.

# Puerto López 1 – Whale Watching





# Puerto López 1 – Whale Watching

Last week we rented a car from [CuencaCarShare](#) and drove to Puerto López, a small fishing village on the coast of Ecuador, with two friends. We stayed at [Hostería Mandala](#), just as we did on our [first trip to this area in 2012](#). They have added some new deluxe suites, which we stayed in. The Colibrí suite was quiet, spacious, comfortable and came with a fridge.

As we approached Puerto López, the cloud cover became pretty thick, and we figured there would be no sunset. At the beach, we realized that the clouds didn't quite reach the horizon, so we grabbed our cameras and rushed to find something interesting for the foreground. There was only about a 5 minute window when the sun dropped out of clouds before it went below the horizon, during which time we got the above images. Good thing too, because the next few days became solid overcast by about 3PM each day, and we never again saw any hint of another sunset.

# Puerto López 1 – Whale Watching



This is peak whale watching season along the coast of Ecuador, so we took a boat trip along with about 15 passengers, and saw several whales surface, and two that breached.



# Puerto López 1 – Whale Watching



Our boat tour also included a stop at [Isla de la Plata](#), the island off the coast commonly referred to as "The Poor Man's Galapagos," because it is so close and inexpensive to reach. If you enjoy wildlife up-close, you can't pass up a chance to visit here. The island teams with Blue Footed Boobies. At this time of year, the eggs are hatching, and we saw dozens of birds, both male and female, trade off sitting on the eggs, and many others with their newly hatched chicks.



## Puerto López 1 – Whale Watching



The other predominant species on the island is the Galapagos Frigatebird, with wingspans of 7'+. We had hoped for some good images with the males puffing out their large red pouches, used to attract a mate. Though there were a few, they tended to be in the midst of heavily branched bushes. The mating season began a couple of months earlier, when the frigates were more active.



## Puerto López 2 – Fishermen





# Puerto López 2 – Fishermen

Yesterday I described the [whale watching trip and Isla de la Plata](#). Our favorite activity in Puerto López though is to photograph the fishermen as they come in with their daily catch. Peak activity is between 8AM and 11AM.... As you approach the stretch of beach near the wharf where the fishermen come in, there is no doubt that everything is in a full frenzy -- the sky is filled with birds circling and diving, hoping for an easy meal.





# Puerto López 2 – Fishermen

The real show is seen as you get closer though. There are crews of people who fill plastic bins with fish, then run up the beach to the waiting ice trucks and weighing stations. Over that 100 foot run, the pelicans and frigatebirds dive at the bins, trying to extract fish for a quick meal. Each time the bird succeeds, the bin is a little lighter, and the weighing station will reward the fishermen with a little less money. Therefore, many of them work in pairs, with one person carrying the bin, and a second person waving away the birds.

When we were here in 2012, the bins were totally open topped, and the birds got a substantial feast. Since then, the fishermen have learned to place a burlap tarp over the bin, making it harder for the birds to attain their prize. The birds have learned how to hover, pull back the tarp and grab a fish anyway though, as seen in the upper left image.

# Puerto López 2 – Fishermen



Larger sea life was dragged onto the beach to be prepared for market, with no concern for bird thieves due to the size of the fish. Three boats brought in sharks, and one butcher worked through all of them, cutting off fins first, then gutting the fish and cutting the balance into trunks that would be turned into steaks. One boat brought in half a dozen manta rays, piling them on the beach.



# Puerto López 2 – Fishermen



When most of the boats had arrived and been emptied, the focus moved higher on the beach. Some fishermen filled the bottom of small boats with their catch, selling it to local residents who would buy one fish or a string of them, presumably for their family dinner. Fish were segregated, and available for purchase directly as-caught.



# Puerto López 3 – The Malecón and People Watching





# Puerto López 3 – The Malecón and People Watching

There were also several dozen people scaling, fileting, and otherwise preparing fish for you to cook. It was obvious these people had done this a long time, as their practiced hands almost blurred as they worked through huge piles of fish.

, August 23, 2016



# Puerto López 3 – The Malecón and People Watching

The last two days, I have described our trip to Puerto Lopez, first with the [whales](#) and then with the [fishermen](#). I will wrap up describing the trip with other images of interest from our four day trip to the coast.

The malecón on Puerto Lopez has been under construction for a couple years. Work stopped for nearly a year when the government ran out of money (largely due to the drop in oil prices -- what is good for the American consumer can sometimes hurt developing countries like Ecuador). Everything is back in full swing though, and there were crews working along the entire stretch of unfinished work. As a side note, the remaining construction is all a fair distance from Hostería Mandala, where we stayed, so we did not have any disturbance.



# Puerto López 3 – The Malecón and People Watching



# Puerto López 3 – The Malecón and People Watching

In the afternoon, after the fishing boats were all emptied, it was time to repair the nets. This is a daily effort, always trying to keep the nets in optimal condition. Also, any holes allow part of the catch to escape, which hurts the success of the fishing crew. This is hard work, but I never saw anyone grumbling. Instead, they use this time to mend the nets and socialize with friends. As hard as they work, they always seem to have a smile on their face, and a friendly wave and glance to a passing tourist.



# ACT Does It Again – “Talking With...”



I will finish with a random collection of images from the coast. Kids playing soccer (or fútbol, as they call it here), ice cream vendors (delicious and made right there on the mobile cart!), a fisherman barbecuing in his wood boat, a boat repairman, families enjoying the beach and, of course, chimpers.

## ACT Does It Again – “Talking With...”



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# ACT Does It Again – “Talking With...”

Last night we attended another expat community theater performance with A.C.T. Theater here in Cuenca. The show was "Talking With..." and consisted of monologues by 11 women, each with a completely independent story. Each woman was in crisis in her life, and -- to be honest -- I expected a bit of a dark downer theater experience. Instead, these women each brought humor to their personal crisis moments of their life. There were definitely moments to be considered deeply, but the presentation kept the audience laughing... allowing the deeper thoughts to subtly intrude, while enjoying the antics of each actress.



# ACT Does It Again – “Talking With...”

Each gringa actress presented a wildly different woman in crisis. They varied from a bored housewife escaping to Oz while doing routine housework (my personal favorite), to a woman 23 hours in labor for a child already expected to be "challenged," to a homeless woman dreaming of living in McDonald's (another favorite of mine), to a snake charmer concerned with her loss of faith in gawd, and a host of others too numerous to mention here.



The cast originally expected to give a single performance, but the (English-speaking) expat audience wanted more, so a second performance was created, which we managed to get tickets for. The first performance was totally sold out, and the second was nearly so. Next time you hear of an ACT performance, be sure to jump at the chance for tickets, as we have been awed by how much new creative talent there is in Cuenca. We have been to all their shows so far, and can attest that even those that seem "dark and foreboding" in the initial description are interesting, and yes, fun. Kudos to Deana Culp, the director, and the entire expat cast.