

MindStormPhoto Ecuador 2013 pt 1



Burt and Evelyn Johnson

Ecuador 2013 pt 1

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Looks Like a War Zone Out There!

Looks Like a War Zone Out There!



New Year's Eve in Ecuador is unique, and Cuenca celebrates it larger than any other Ecuadorian city. For the week leading up to NYE, people make elaborate or simple effigies. Some families manufacture them and sell them to those who don't want to make their own. On NYE, they write notes about things they want to forget from the old year, attach them to the effigies and then burn them at the stroke of midnight, banishing the old problems and allowing the New Year to start off fresh.

Looks Like a War Zone Out There!

Looks Like a War Zone Out There!

We headed out in the early afternoon to scout where effigies would be concentrated. We discovered a town getting ready for the Big Night. Another Ecuadorian custom is to wear yellow undergarments to bring you money in the New Year (yellow being close to gold), or to wear red to bring love. We saw several shops with red and yellow underwear and bras for sale. We also saw fireworks stands, and kids playing with their poppers. Masks were for sale, and lots of kids were wearing them. We even found one family had blocked off a street and were playing musical chairs and laughing uproariously.



Looks Like a War Zone Out There!

Looks Like a War Zone Out There!



Effigies came in size from infant sized to huge, and in the form of men, donkeys, spaceships, and even aliens.

Looks Like a War Zone Out There!

Looks Like a War Zone Out There!



Looks Like a War Zone Out There!

Looks Like a War Zone Out There!



There were even cartoon effigies, and the occasional full costume

Looks Like a War Zone Out There!

Looks Like a War Zone Out There!



There were a couple of tableaux of politicians, with loudspeakers denouncing the president, the mayor, and pretty much anyone in politics -- except themselves of course...



Looks Like a War Zone Out There!

Looks Like a War Zone Out There!

This family got an early start by burning their effigy at 3:00 in the afternoon



While waiting for midnight to approach, we had a delicious shish kabob at this vendor. Dinner costs us \$1.50...



At the stroke of midnight, the effigies were piled in the street and fires started

Looks Like a War Zone Out There!

Looks Like a War Zone Out There!



Some of the bigger piles burned so hot you couldn't get near them. Some lone effigies burned to a corpse-shaped pile of ash



Looks Like a War Zone Out There!

Looks Like a War Zone Out There!

As all the effigies were set fire, the place started to look like a war zone, with fires burning everywhere in the streets. Brought back memories of the riots in Berkeley when we were in college in the late 60's



As the fires burned, people started dancing -- alone, in pairs, and in conga lines



Mas Agua, Poco Color

Looks Like a War Zone Out There!

Mas Agua, Poco Color



[Note: This post by Evelyn] I had my last watercolor lesson with Alberto Soriano, a world class Ecuadorian painter, today. It was an honor and privilege for me to learn from such a talented artist, and be so welcomed into his world. Alberto is quite passionate, warm, with a positive energy, that is absolutely inspiring.

One of the biggest challenges is that Alberto speaks no English and I speak almost no Spanish. However we were able to communicate with visual demonstrations of the principles, as well as my learning a bit more Spanish along the way. To discuss concepts, we resorted to using the *Google Translator* via Alberto's 16-year old daughter, who aspires to be a rock star.

Mas Agua, Poco Color

The first lesson was the importance of "*dibujo*" and the value of a "*bosquejo*". Of course, it helps to spell the words correctly before it can be translated, so it took several iterations before I understood that I had to start with a good value sketch using different cross hatching marks to represent various planes. And, good drawing ("*dibujo*") skills were essential to being a good painter.

The first few paintings included still life, plants, and sun flowers, in which Alberto kept emphasizing "*mas agua..mas aqua.. poco color*" to retain the transparency of a watercolor compared to an oil painting. Then, it was the emphasis on "*sombra*", "*luz*", "*voluminous*", "*fondo*", "*primero plano*" and "*manchas*" -- the latter of which, doesn't translate properly in my Spanish dictionary. The dictionary translation for "*mancha*" is "stain or mark". It wasn't understood until later that the word really meant "*layer*", so the lighter colors are applied "*antes*" (before), and dark layers "*despues*" (later), completing the painting with "*detalles*".



Toward the end of the lessons, it seemed so natural to talk and laugh together between student and teacher. I felt like a slow learner, though. Here are the final two paintings:

Mas Agua, Poco Color



Near the end of my private lessons, Alberto had a show and sale of his works. I couldn't help buying one for myself:



Don't Rain On My Parade

Don't Rain On My Parade



or

[Note: I haven't posted for a few days because I have been sick with a bad head cold, and have been staying mostly indoor for the past couple days. This will probably be our last post before returning home Tuesday.]

Today marks the end of *Santos Inocentes*, and includes the second largest parade of Cuenca's year (Christmas Eve *Pase de Nino Viejo* is the largest). This event originated as a remembrance of Herod slaying all newborn males after the birth of Jesus, but is now a free-for-all, and much closer to a Halloween parade, with lots of outlandish costumes and masks,

The morning started with us hearing a band in the street out front again. I went out front and grabbed a few shots of a standard small parish religious parade, as we have seen come by before. We assumed they were headed for the main parade, though it later appeared not to be the case.

Don't Rain On My Parade



The main parade was scheduled to begin at 4:00, so we took a bus across town (for 25 cents) to photograph the staging area. On the bus, Evelyn played peek-a-boo with a girl in the seat in front of us.



Don't Rain On My Parade

Don't Rain On My Parade

We arrived at the staging area... but found no evidence of staging? We did see a different view of San Blas church than we had seen before, along with plenty of masks for sale and lots of police getting organized, so we knew we were in the right place.



We never did find a staging area. This entire parade evolved somewhat differently than the Christmas Eve parade. Of course that parade had 60,000 participants while this one was estimated at 1,000 which may account for some of the change. While waiting for the main event to start, we had fun looking at the audience. The kids in particular were mostly in costumes or wearing masks, while some of the adults joined in the Halloween atmosphere too.

Don't Rain On My Parade



Notice the kid in the lower left seems to have confused Superman with Spider Man....:)

4:00 came and went with no parade. 4:30, still nada. 5:00 it started to rain and out came umbrellas (see top photo). The umbrella vendors went wild and sold out in about 5 minutes... after which the rain passed and the rest of the evening was dry... At 5:30, the first of the parade started to come down the street. One very common theme was a huge foam mask. I never did quite understand what that was all about or what it is supposed to represent...

Don't Rain On My Parade



There were a couple dozen clowns in the parade. They led things off, then wandered back through the parade length. After awhile it became clear that they were actually aiding the police (perhaps they were police?) in trying to control the crowd -- which was a lost cause, as the audience kept pushing further and further into the streets.

Don't Rain On My Parade



That clown in the lower left is doing high kicks, trying to push the crowd back to allow room for the parade to pass. The audience moved back from his kicks, then moved forward into the street again as soon as he passed...



Don't Rain On My Parade

Don't Rain On My Parade

Can you tell where the parade ends and the audience starts? They were completely intertwined most of the time.



As with every parade, there were a few dancing groups

Don't Rain On My Parade



There were also a few religious themes groups

Don't Rain On My Parade



Don't Rain On My Parade

Don't Rain On My Parade

Most of the Halloween costumes didn't appear to have anything to do with Herod and killing of infants...



Everyone seemed in a happy mood at the party / parade

Coming Home, Buying Home, Selling Home...

We returned home to California last week. Seems strange to be back in The States again, and strange to be going into an office for a thing called a "job" again. It is amazing how quickly we were able to adapt to life in Ecuador.

Coming Home, Buying Home, Selling Home...

Which brings up a bit of news. We decided around the first of the year that we *do* want to retire, and we want to do it in Cuenca. For the prior month, we had been asking everyone we knew to let us visit their apartment, and then grilled them on what they paid and how they liked the area. From this, we had developed a rough map of the region we wanted to rent in when we returned to Cuenca.

One interesting young pair of Americans we met (Jesse and Nancy Lopez) had a beautiful penthouse condo right on the edge of old-town, right smack in the middle of the area we had decided on. While we toured their place and praised it, Jesse mentioned that their neighbor was a British couple that wanted to return to England to care for a sick relative and were selling.

You can see their condo, which they are renting out at https://www.airbnb.com/rooms/758967?fb_login=1

We suggested having a look at it, and went next door. The place was *very* nice. The couple was going to the Amazon early the next morning, so we couldn't talk to them again for a week. During that week, Evelyn and I talked it over and decided we would love to live there. They returned 2 days before we were to leave to come home.

We called and arranged to have another look at the condo. Yes, it was as good as we first thought -- actually better since it included some amenities we were not aware of the first time. We sat down at their dining room table to discuss selling, and 15 minutes had a handshake agreement. We spent the next day with a lawyer and notary, giving him Power of Attorney to sign the sales document for us, just before we got on a plane and headed home.

Coming Home, Buying Home, Selling Home...

Coming Home, Buying Home, Selling Home...

The sale closed today. We are now happy owners of a penthouse condo in Cuenca on the edge of *Old Town*. It is a 3 bedroom unit (for us that means bedroom, office and photo studio) with about 1800 sq ft. It also includes a rooftop workshop, a rooftop gazebo, a rooftop washer-dryer room, and a locked parking spot. Oh yes, it also comes fully furnished, as the sellers decided they didn't need any of the furniture or contents when they return to England. We therefore have a turn-key penthouse ready to move into.

I will be staying at LeapFrog through the current product cycle, so we have until October to sell our Berkeley house and head South to the equator. Adventure awaits!

By the way, if you happen to know of someone that is looking for a 3500 sq ft, 5 bedroom, 3 story house in the Berkeley Hills with an amazing view covering 4 bridges, drop me a line. We are just now starting to get rid of a massive amount of "stuff" that has accumulated over the 24 years we have lived here, but this is an absolute fabulous house that we have loved for decades. Now time to empty it and start the next major adventure of our life.

Talk about joys and fears, all mixed up into one...

Blind Success!

Blind Success!

In January 2012, I was told that I have cataracts forming in both eyes. They were not bad enough to get insurance to pay for LASIC, but might be so in a year or two. Come back in a year and I might get LASIC in both eyes pretty cheaply. I have considered, and then chickened out, on vision improvement surgery for decades, and figured now was the time I would have to pull the switch and go ahead.

In the summer of 2012, I started noticing a wierd visual phenomenon. When I looked at a horizontal line that I **knew** was straight, it would have a bump in the middle. I figured it was my developing cataracts, and decided to wait to do anything about it, since we were going to Ecuador for 3 months shortly.

When I was in Ecuador, I realized that my glasses no longer helped. I saw the same blurry image with or without them. I left the glasses at home for the first time in 30 years, and relied on my "seeing eye Evelyn" for anything far away, or for something like a street sign across the street.

When we got home, I went to an opthamologist, and he said "LASIC won't do you any good because you have a hole in the center of your retina." Oops, that bump in straight lines was me seeing the line pass through the hole and distort. By this time though, trying to use my left eye made everything look like a funhouse mirror.

Blind Success!

My vision had gone from "20/60 correctable to 20/30" a year ago to 20/400 now, non-correctable. I was told that there was so much scar tissue due to the time since the damage, that the chance of success was only 85%, and that they would consider it a success if my vision doubled -- meaning going to 20/200, which is still legally blind...

I went ahead with the surgery (seeing a knife going for you eye is not something I recommend for the squimish...), which included a recovery period of 7 days during which I was required to be "face down" 24 hours per day. (Basically they cut the retina around the damaged area, put a gas bubble in the eye, then the face-plant encourages the eye to repair the damage tightly to the back of the eye, with no wrinkles or raised scar regions.)

7 absolutely, stunning, amazingly boring days later...

I went back to the surgeon yesterday. Among other magic, he took another photograph of my retina, and then showed me the comparison. My left (damaged) eye now looked as good as my right (undamaged) eye. The doctor said that the level of success was amazing and that I would probably get my vision back to what it was a year ago! It will take about 6 months for my vision to stabilize at that level though.

I'm still nearly blind, have a gas bubble that fills up most of my left-eye vision, must still be face-down 2 hours per day (just enough for a movie on my iPad), can't drive, and can't use the computer more than an hour at a time. But I am ON THE MEND!

Blind Success!

I really feared that I had lost vision in that left eye. Though I live my life with a primary mantra of "*I refuse to live in fear*," I have to admit that I feared losing that eye. Looks like all will be well though. One side effect of this surgery is that it **will** create a cataract, but since I knew that was coming anyway, I consider that a small price to pay.

I am blind, but this was a success -- ***Blind Success!***

Home For Sale!

Home For Sale!

Wow... This has been a much longer process than I ever imagined, getting our Berkeley home ready for sale. After more than 4 months of giving away most of what we owned (65" HDTV? Hey, you, painting the inside of our house? You want that? It's yours!), and putting a few things into storage to ship with us to Ecuador, our home went up for sale today. Now the waiting begins as we find out how buyers react to the place we have loved for the past 25 years.

You can see the official Multiple Listing [here](#).

Open House is being held this coming Sunday (yep, Father's Day) June 16. Feel free to come by and maybe buy yourself a new home...

Our broker had the following line drawing made of the entrance to our house, which is used in the flyers:



Here are some other photos taken by the broker:

Home For Sale!



View from the deck outside our dining room



Front Entrance is on the street level, with other two floors below.

Home For Sale!



Entrance hall and main floor living room. Windows look out over bay.



Main level dining room plus two more views from the main level deck

Home For Sale!



Kitchen is also on the main (street) level. Stove is gas with 6 burners and 2 ovens.



Upper left photo is main floor sitting room. Next two are master bedroom on 2nd floor, then last is extra bedroom also on 2nd floor.

Home For Sale!



3rd (bottom) floor is a full "in-laws quarters" with kitchenette, living room, bedroom, bathroom.



Top two images show our office while last two show bottom deck and backyard.

Super Moon and Porch Sunset

Super Moon and Porch Sunset

This post is really just to show off a couple of photographs I took from our deck this weekend. Sunday was the official "Super Moon", which means the full moon was at its closest to earth. This happens once every 14 months, so is not completely rare. However, it is a bit more unusual to occur on a completely cloudless night in Berkeley... I shot 137 images of the moon (yes, it sounds like overkill, but was needed because...) and put it through some astrophotography software I have been wanting to try. The results are rather spectacular if I do say so myself. I have shot images of the moon before, but never got anywhere near this level of quality and detail.



Super Moon and Porch Sunset

137 images shot with Canon 5D MK III and 400mm lens, combined with astrophotography software

The next night was overcast and dreary, right until almost sunset. Then it became moody and dramatic. I grabbed my camera (after a kick in the rear from Evelyn...) and captured images for the next few hours, watching as the light changed. Here is one of my favorites from the series:



View from our back deck June 24, 2013 near sunset

, June 25, 2013

[Brag, Photography](#)

Happy 4th of July!

Happy 4th of July!



For the last few years, we have gone to the Richmond Crane Pavilion on July 3 for their "early July 4th" fireworks. Various music groups play for a couple hours, then the Oakland Symphony plays for an hour leading up to the fireworks, following with more music while the sky lights up. The area is extremely windy, which means the weather is usually clear, and the smoke never lingers over the fireworks target area. The celebration is not well advertised, and the crowds are pretty small, with (my guess) a thousand or so people, so it is always easy to get front row seating.

Happy 4th of July!

I decided to try some "artsy" photos this year. The top image shows three of the fireworks, composited onto the San Francisco Legion of Honor. While the fireworks in Richmond are great to view, there is no usable foreground to make the photographs more interesting, so I have to fake it...



A straight example of what I was experimenting with this year -- no editing done at all, other than cropping the final image.

Happy 4th of July!

We sat on our deck and sipped wine while watching the fireworks tonight (the actual 4th). We could see lots of fireworks shows from our vantage point. Legal shows were seen at (right-to-left from our field of view) Golden Gate Fields, Berkeley Marina, Sausalito, Emeryville, San Francisco (Wow!), Oakland and San Leandro. We could also see more than a dozen illegal fireworks in the Oakland-Berkeley neighborhoods below us. When we turned on the 11:00 News later, they showed a camera pointed to the Oakland Hills, and commented on the numerous illegal fireworks shows going on there. As we were turning off the news, we heard that there is a fire in the Oakland Hills. We assume it was related to one of those illegal shows, which is the very reason they are illegal...

Here are some fireworks from last year's Crane Pavilion, shot with a more standard photographic technique:



Happy 4th of July!



Happy 4th of July!



Happy 4th of July!



, July 5, 2013

[Event](#), [Festival](#), [Photography](#)

Break a Leg!

Break a Leg!



We were supposed to be arriving in Ecuador about now, and arriving at our new penthouse condo in Cuenca a little after midnight.

Less than 12 hours before we were to leave for the San Francisco airport, we were still finishing the last minute packing. Evelyn was saying "there is no way we can finish this today!" And... I was falling down the stairs with one of those last boxes in my arms.

Break a Leg!

I spent the rest of the day at the hospital, and had surgery last night to repair 3 breaks in my ankle. I am not allowed to fly for at least two weeks, and "strongly recommend six weeks," so I am currently confined to one floor of our three-floor California home, hobbling around like a cripple, and sleeping most of the day away.

Everything is on hold right now. Retirement and Ecuador are still coming, but just a tad later than first expected...

, October 9, 2013

[Ecuador, Travel](#)

California Farewell Sunset

California Farewell Sunset



As we are packing for our move to Ecuador, California decided to send us off with a grand farewell sunset. One of the strangest and most exotic we have seen in years.

Unfortunately, all my "real" camera equipment was long packed, and I was confined to crutches due to my clumsy broken ankle, so all we could catch were done with Evelyn's iPhone 4S. The majesty really doesn't show through, but I wanted to post this anyway as a memory of the grandeur under which we left.



California Farewell Sunset

This truly was "Photoshop Gone Wild", with the fog rolling in just as the sun was setting. There was a race between the sun peeking below the fog, and then the fog covering it again. We essentially got 5 different sunsets in one evening, each with a painter's impressionist brush changing the sky, while only keeping the main red theme.

, October 23, 2013

[Ecuador, Travel](#)

Terrorist Comes Home to Ecuador

Terrorist Comes Home to Ecuador



We bought a one-way First Class ticket to Ecuador, intending to fly two weeks ago. After the broken ankle incident (see 'Break a Leg!' blog entry), we finally used the tickets today. We have never actually paid for a First Class ticket before, so this was kinda exciting. Since we are moving to Ecuador, we were taking 6 suitcases plus an oversize 27" iMac. It turned out that the cost of adding that baggage to an economy ticket was essentially the same price as upgrading to First Class, where luggage allowances are much more lenient.

Before leaving for the airport, I had to shoot myself first though. Ouch!

Actually it was a small prick, that I am told is similar to what diabetics must do daily. In my case, it was to prevent blood clots, which are a risk for those traveling with leg casts. I've never liked needles though, and the thought of shooting myself gave me the shivers.

Terrorist Comes Home to Ecuador

We arrived at the San Francisco airport 2 hours before the flight, only to discover that there was not yet any wheelchair services. We waited around (in comfy chairs!) for half an hour, until someone came to wheel me through TSA and to the gates.

CAUTION! TERRORIST ALERT!

Yeah, well, I told them I could not stand up without the crutches, so they did an "explosive patch swipe" on me. When they swiped my stomach, it came up with "possible explosive." Remember that shot I gave myself? I think it hurt more than just the needle in this case...

I was then taken into a private room where they proceeded to do *very* detailed swabbing of my entire body. The agent (a different one than first flagged me as dangerous) came and went half a dozen times, each with a swab from different parts of my body. After they found no positives this time, they went through each and every item in each of our 4 carry-ons.

During the entire process, I sympathized with the agents. They really do have a pretty bad job. People scream loudly if they get the screening level I did, but those same people would yell a lot louder if someone really did sneak a bomb on board.

All in all, we spent about half an hour through this process. We made it to our flight in plenty of time, so there was really no foul. Fun to tell the story though...

On Our Way

Terrorist Comes Home to Ecuador



We finally boarded and got our obligatory glass of champagne to launch our First Class trip into retirement. Yeah!

Flying on American Airlines between San Francisco and Miami was a bit of a letdown for First Class though. I have been on lots of flight (economy class), where I have full entertainment center control on the seat in front of me. Yet, here we just had tiny TV monitors hanging from the ceiling, giving us only one movie choice -- *The Interns*. I can't think of a worse movie made in last year, and very highly, definitely, NOT one that i want to waste my time watching. It was better to stare off into space than see that massive piece of *&^%\$. The leg from Miami to Ecuador only had the same small hanging monitor. At least the movie was better this time -- *Star Trek: Into Darkness*. However, I had already seen it, and indeed have it in my iTunes to watch (and pause) as I wish, so more time better spent staring into space...

The First Class food was good though!

Terrorist Comes Home to Ecuador

Miami Admiral's Club



I hobbled off the gangplank, where there was a waiting wheelchair to take us to the Admiral's Club. Last year, when we used the Club, everything was free. This time, we could get a glass of wine free, but everything else was charged for. I was curious about it, but we only stayed about 10 minutes, and were called to the front desk to be wheeled to the next gate.

One thing I discovered was that wheelchairs are NOT as nice a luxury as those of us walking may sometimes think. They are a downright nuisance, trying to get around tight corners, or through crowds. However, after going no more than 100 feet or so, we came across an electric cart that was available. One quick hop, and **NOW** we were in charge! Nyah, nyah to all those we whisk by. **THIS** is the way to travel in an airport! Seriously though, it was a **very** long way from the arrival gate to the departure gate. There is no way I could have done it on crutches, and I am not sure we would arrived on time using a wheelchair. I am very grateful to the American Airline staff for their help in getting around both San Francisco and Miami airports.

Terrorist Comes Home to Ecuador

Coming Home -- One More Glitch



One last nice sunset, this time from the plane (again limited to an iPhone 4S, but you can kinda get the feel of it). We were sure getting tired of flying by this point though, and glad to get off the plane in Guayaquil, Ecuador. We hired a porter to help with our mountain of luggage, which was a huge help. As we entered the Customs area, we found the now-common button an agent pushes to bring up either a red light or a green light. We ended up with the Dreaded Red Light, which meant full inspection of every suitcase.

Oh dear. Everything goes through X-RAY first. The agent on the conveyer belt asked what all those big black areas were on the scanner. I said we had several hard disks (our lives are on those!), plus some other stuff. The agent sighed, and said "that is too much electronics. We have to confiscate some of it." SAY WHAT??? (but I bit my tongue... I really did...).

Luck decided to smile on us at the end though. Not sure why, but after questioning the scans with "the big black boxes", he opened two of Evelyn's clothes suitcases first. After going through those two, he seemed to forget all about his initial question, and waved us through. The Power of Women's Clothing!

Terrorist Comes Home to Ecuador

Once outside Customs, we met Angel, the driver we had hired. He drove at his normal sane speed -- unusual for Ecuadorian drivers, but we have used him several times, and he is an excellent driver. We arrived home in Cuenca a little before midnight. Carried suitcases to our condo. Said a few pleasantries with Jesse and Nanci (our neighbors, who were holding down the fort for us), and dropped into oblivion in bed.

The adventure in Cuenca will continue tomorrow...

Take-Out and God Beams

Take-Out and God Beams



Take-Out and God Beams

I am still mostly house-bound. Living in Cuenca, but I might as well be back in California, since I barely get outside the condo. I got a bit of taste of Ecuador today when Evelyn brought home take-out from a local lunch place today though -- El Tunel. This is a very popular place that was a very long walk from where we stayed last year, but now is just over a block away. The lunch menu changes everyday at pretty much every restaurant, though the format is the same. As you can see from the board above, it is a sizable meal for \$2.50. They charge an extra 25 cents for take-out containers. When it was opened on our dining room table, here is what I saw:



That bag top-center is the juice. The soup was a delicious broth with spinach and potato strips. Main course was rice, salad, chicken with a tasty sauce over it. Overall, the taste reminded me of where I was, and made me all the more anxious to get this cast off.

Take-Out and God Beams

Later that evening, I was sitting in our office, as the sun began setting. We have a Western facing office, which can get a bit warm in the afternoon, so we open the window. There were some clouds in the sky, which is pretty common here in the Andes. Suddenly, I pointed out to Evelyn that a God Beam was forming:



The sun sets fast here at 8,200 ft elevation at the equator, and five minutes later we saw the sun disappear with a last flash of light:

Take-Out and God Beams



, October 29, 2013

Condo, Food

Doctors, Lawyers, Carpenters, Electricians, Oh My

Doctors, Lawyers, Carpenters, Electricians, Oh My



View from our living room window looks over the rooftops to the iconic "New Church" trio of blue domes.

Doctors, Lawyers, Carpenters, Electricians, Oh My

The last couple days have been a flurry of dealing with professionals of all types. We came to Ecuador, fully expecting locals to work on "Latin Time." We had heard many horror stories of people making appointments and showing up hours, or even days late. We were determined to just be laid back, realize that since we are retired that we have plenty of time, and go with the flow.

When was the last time you had Comcast or AT&T or similar installers out to your home in the US? Ours were almost often many hours late, sometimes into dinner time before they arrived. It was then a crap shoot if the person was competent or not -- some were very good, but others needed remedial training if everything didn't work exactly right.

In Ecuador, ETAPA or PuntaNet are the two main internet providers. We decided to have both installed, since Internet in Ecuador is slower than the US, and less reliable. DirecTV is our TV provider. Between them, we had three different professionals come out, each at a different time. Every one of them rang the doorbell precisely at the appointment time! I suspect they were waiting downstairs for the time to arrive, as I can't see how they could have been so extremely prompt otherwise. Each installer was completely professional, and resolved every problem that came up. None spoke a word of English, but we managed to get understood. In one case, my question for the DirecTV installer was too advanced for me to be understood with my limited Spanish, so he called his office, got an English speaker on the phone, and my questions were resolved quickly that way.

I was impressed, to say the least!

Doctors, Lawyers, Carpenters, Electricians, Oh My



We also brought in a carpenter for one day. Two guys showed up to install some shower grab bars (being on crutches, I needed them to be able to take a shower), fix a broken shower head, replace the under-sink plumbing in all 3 bathrooms, and various other items. They arrived at 8AM and worked solidly until well past 6PM (with about a half hour lunch break). The entire bill came to \$80. That would have bought about 90 minutes of one person's time back in California...

The Doctor Visit

I decided to see a general practitioner doctor a couple days after arriving. This doctor was recommended by two different Cuencana friends, and they said he would refer me to an orthopedic doctor if needed for my broken ankle. I had heard pretty good things about medical service here, but was still a bit anxious about entering into the system with an urgent immediate need (the broken ankle).

Doctors, Lawyers, Carpenters, Electricians, Oh My

We were told to instruct the taxi to go to *Pronto Pizza*. Huh?? Did that, and looked around. No doctor office anywhere in sight? Looked a little closer and discovered a tiny walkway to an office building behind the pizza joint. Walked about 30 feet, and there was the building entrance, with the doctor on the 2nd floor. That pizza joint sure does making taxi directions a lot easier, even if it does seem strange!

Walked into Dr Pedro Martinez's office about 10 minutes early. His receptionist told us he was not here yet, but to have a seat. Not the neat, futuristic office I would see at Kaiser in California. Rather, it seemed like a comfortable country doctor's office that you would see on a 60's TV show. Pedro (as he later told us he prefers to be called) walked in right on the dot of the appointed time. Batting 1000 for on-time professionals... He led us into his very cluttered office, on which sat a 2013 27" iMac -- I LOVE the man already! (same computer I use at home)

We did some small talk, then got down to my general health history. I had brought a flash drive from Kaiser California to give him a full history. He popped it in and started reading and asking questions. He knew each and every drug I used and what each was used for, as well as which were not available in Ecuador ("we will figure out a workable alternative, after the ankle is resolved"). Though I am older than he is (that seems to happen a lot lately...), I felt like I was talking to a kind old father -- one with one heck of a deep understanding of his profession.

When we were done, he gave me a prescription to get an X-Ray done. He explained that X-Rays here are different than in the States. Here, I own the X-Ray. It will be given to me, and I can then hand it to anyone I choose, but will keep it myself long term. We asked about payment, and he said the bill for this visit was \$30.

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Note that is \$30 total. No insurance. No co-pay / deductible / whatnot. Simply the doctor's visit was \$30. About what my copay was at Kaiser...

We went to get the X-Ray the next day. No appointment needed -- just walk in, have the X-Ray made, hand them \$40 and walk out with the film about 20 minutes after walking in. That was where the offices were more gleaming and remnescent of Kaiser. Returned to Pedro to have the film read. He showed us where the healing had ocured, where two screws had come out of their holes ("probably not a problem, but we will watch them"), and told me to call him in 3 weeks to arrange for the cast removal. Cost for the return visit? \$0. Zero. Nada. I would have paid my full copay at Kaiser for this second visit.

I will give a final blog entry detailing the entire medical cycle after the cast is off. For now though, color me impressed.

The Lawyer Visit

After we had gotten the medical issues taken care of, along with the household issues of internet, TV, grab bars, etc, it was time to turn our attention to getting our resident visas. I called our lawyer, and he said to come over at 3PM that afternoon. We used Carlos for the purchase of our condo last January, so knew where to go. We showed up about 10 minutes before our appointment, were greeted by his assistant (who also happens to be his daughter), and were told he was not here yet.

At precisely 3:00, Carlos walked in the door. Wow, I can get used to this level of promptness!

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Again, after a little small talk, he opened up our folder with our deed to the condo. He explained how it would be used for the visa, and other issues. Nothing new, but he was assuring we were starting with the same knowledge base. He then asked for our apostiled docs, went through them and announced they all looked good. Next he asked for our passports... and the first hint of trouble came up...

We travel so much that we often fill our passports before they expire. We were out of empty pages on our last passports, so got new ones this past Spring. That means there was only one entry on them -- the one getting us into the country a couple weeks ago. Carlos wanted to know if we had our old passports. Nope. We didn't think they would be useful, and had put them in a box with some stuff Evelyn stored with her brother back in California. After some hemming and hawing, he said he would try to make it work (whatever that means!).

He then told us we had to go cross-town to the *Policia Immigration* to get a Report Migration. We hopped in a taxi (when on crutches, 'hopped' is an even more appropriate description) and went to their office. 10 minutes later, we left with the reports. Showed that each of us had entered Ecuador 7 times in our lives, and that there are no arrest records for our time in country. Went back to Carlos.

OOPS! We had noticed that the report used the same passport (our old one) on each of the entries. It did not properly reflect the new passport numbers for the most recent entry. Wouldn't have changed anything if we had noticed though, as this can only be changed in Quito (the capital -- 6 hours drive to the North). Fortunately, Gaby (Carlos' daughter and assistant) was driving to Quito the next day to solve that exact same problem for 4 other clients. She was called in, the issue discussed briefly. She said "no problem, we hit this all the time" and took our passports.

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We expect to get a call from Carlos this coming week to come in and complete the application process. I'll keep you posted on progress and final success (at least I hope so...).



Changing clouds help keep the view from our living room interesting