



MindStormPhoto
Ecuador
2013 pt 2

Burt and Evelyn Johnson

Ecuador 2013 pt 2

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Magic and Fireworks

Magic and Fireworks



We went to a magic show tonight. This was a special event for a couple of reasons -- perhaps the biggest being it was the first time I walked 3 blocks since breaking my ankle.

Magic and Fireworks

The theater is just off the Park Calerderon square in the center of town. There were two shows, and we got tickets for the first show at 6:00. We showed up at 5:30, and found ourselves maybe 15th in line standing in front of a closed door.

The doors didn't open until 5:52 -- just 8 minutes before the scheduled show start. We then remembered the same thing happened when we went to the symphony here last year. The time on the schedule seems more when doors open rather than when the show actually begins. Since the shows are all open seating, getting there early got us 3rd row seats, so it was a benefit to get there early.

There were 5 magicians in the show, all Cuenca based. All of the tricks were ones we have seen before, but they were mostly very well done.



Magic and Fireworks

The show opened with a magician and his assistant switching places within an instant between a tied up bag in a logged trunk and standing on top of the trunk raising -- and then instantly lowering a curtain. I've seen it before, but I am still pretty darned impressed, both with the trick itself and how well this magical pulled it off less than 10 feet from me.

Tricks that followed included the standard range of levitation, card sleight-of-hand, kerchiefs that go on for miles and then burst into flame turning into flowers, newspaper torn to shreds and returned whole with a single shake of the wrist, etc. The grand finale was with Mauri Mogoo, who did a series of tricks with doves, having them burst into flames, or turn into shards of ribbon, from which he plucked dove chicks, etc. His tricks were pretty good, but I'm not sure I would have made him the headliner -- a couple others, such as Daniel who opened with the box escape, seemed better showmen.

Only one of the magicians used any words in his show. The announcer went on in Spanish that we couldn't understand, but 4 of the magicians did their complete show in pantomime, which was an extra benefit for the language impaired in the audience. (Actually, we appeared to be the only Gringos in the house.)

Magic and Fireworks



After we got back home, we heard BOOM, BOOM, BOOM. Looked out our living room window and saw fireworks at Park Calderon. This was a fairly long display, so I grabbed my Sony RX-100 point-and-shoot, opened the window and grabbed a few shots, as seen above.

Last year we noted that we often heard fireworks, but almost never managed to see them. That has changed this year -- because of our location. During the current Independence celebration, we hear fireworks almost every hour at night. If we don't see them in the living room window, we just shift to the office or bedroom window, which points West to Otorongo Plaza. They are usually there. Most of the displays only last a minute or so, meaning you get a quick look and they are over. We do get to see them now though!

This Feels Like Home Already

This Feels Like Home Already



View From Our Living Room Window

Evelyn made an interesting comment this afternoon. She said "*This feels like home already. California is already just a memory.*" When she said that, I knew exactly what she meant. Though I have been much more house-bound than her (due to the broken ankle and crutches), living here just seems "normal." We went through the expected issues of setting up the electrical bill, telephones, TV, etc that come with any move to a new neighborhood. We had a washing machine break, and got it repaired.

No drama though. We simply went somewhere and did it ("we" in this case mostly means "Evelyn"...). Service people arrived for their appointments on time, were professional, and got their jobs done with the minimum of fuss.

I'm sure it helps a lot that we spent 3 months here last year. We now live pretty much in the center of the region we walked extensively back then. As a result, the neighborhoods are familiar, we already know the streets, how to direct taxis to our destination, etc.

In short: We feel like we have returned home, rather than embarked on a new adventure. That is a nice, comfortable way to spend our time...

This Feels Like Home Already

, November 14, 2013

Ecuador

A Day At The Immigration Office

Or How Three NO's Were Turned Into a YES



Today we were finally ready to go to the Immigration Office to apply for our Ecuadorian Residency Visa. We have heard several times not to expect to get anything else done when you do this, and they were sooo right! I thought it might be interesting to put together a timeline of how the day progressed. I was using EverNotes on my iPhone to make notes during the day -- there wasn't much else to do most of the time...

This Feels Like Home Already

A Day At The Immigration Office

We had originally planned on doing this more than two weeks ago. We had all of our American papers in order and met with our lawyer. He said we had to also get a Migration Report. That turned into a mini-drama (see blog entry ' [Doctors, Lawyers, Carpenters, Electricians, Oh My](#)' for the details). Our lawyer had to drive our passports and erroneous Migration Report to Quito to get the report fixed. A couple days ago we were told to go get a new Migration Report. We did so, and found everything corrected as it should be this time. With that in hand, we were told to go to the Immigration Office by 7:30 this morning.

We arose to light rain, and took a taxi to the office. What follows is an account of how our day unfolded.

7:30AM

- Arrived at the Immigration Office. There were already about a dozen people in line.



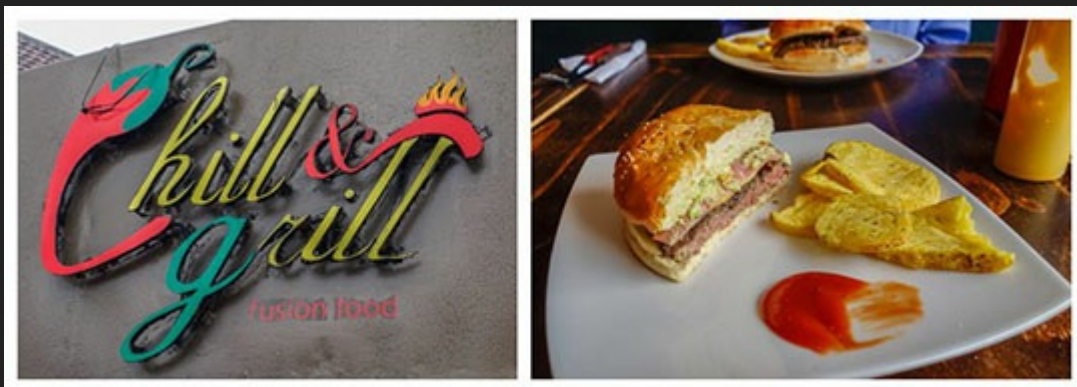
A Day At The Immigration Office

By 8:15 I was bored and still waiting...

- **8:30AM** - The office door opened, and a woman emerged to take everyone's names and passport numbers. The line that had formed pretty much collapsed, with everyone crowding to the front, regardless of any line that existed moments before. Two men tried to cut in front of us, and I strategically used my crutches to block their approach. I'm already learning how to live like an Ecuadorian!
- **8:45AM** - An agent came out and told us when our appointment would be. We were told to return at 10:00AM. Our attorney had asked us to try to get an appointment after 12:00, so he could finish some notarization, but the agent said "No, that is your appointment. You can come back tomorrow if you are not ready." (All customer-facing people in the office are bilingual, and speak both Spanish and English, at a minimum). We called our lawyer, and he said OK and that his daughter would be there with our papers at 10:00.
- **9:00AM** - Evelyn went around the corner to Tuddo Freddi's and brought back a small breakfast. \$4 got us a small breakfast of scrambled eggs, biscuit and juice. We got kicked out of the office for eating, so went on the steps to finish.
- **10:00AM** - Gaby (our lawyer's daughter) arrived, but she was not really ready. She still had a doc to notarize (since they had all these from us for weeks, why wait till today to do this???). She convinced the Immigration agent to use a photocopy for review, and said she would be back at 11:00 with the final document. Agents then took our docs into a back room to study.

A Day At The Immigration Office

- **11:15AM** - Gaby still not back, but agent pulls us up and questions why my birth name (Burton) does not match my passport name (Burt). We state that there should be a document there explaining my name changes during my life. Nope. It isn't there. We call our attorney, who speaks to the agent. After failing to convince the agent that the passport should be sufficient to show the name change was legit, he says he will translate that doc (that we gave him 2 months ago) and get it here. ***First NO has been received..*** (I had fully expected that name variations would be a sticking point for my application, and had taken extra steps to try and alleviate it)
- **11:45AM** - Lawyer has still not arrived. Agent tells us that if they are not here in 5 minutes, we have to come back tomorrow and start over. Agent refuses to talk to lawyer on phone.
- **11:50AM** - Agent tells us our papers are not acceptable, hands them back to us, and tells us we have to start over tomorrow. ***Second NO has been received...***
- **12:00PM** - Jenny (our lawyer's wife) arrives, still without needed papers. She talks to agent, and convinces the agent to give us an appointment for 2:30 this afternoon. We are back in the game! Jenny then leaves and says she will be back at 2:30 (she does not speak English, but we can get the basics communicated).



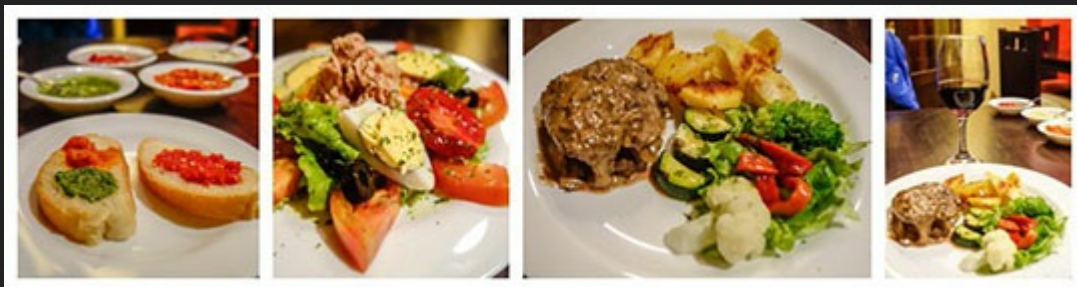
Delicious burger, oregano fries and milkshake lunch cost us less than \$6

A Day At The Immigration Office

- **12:15PM** - Went around the corner to Chill & Grill for an inexpensive and delicious hamburger, fries and shake. As the restaurant filled up, we moved next door to SuperMaxi, where we sat on a bench until our afternoon appointment.
- **2:20PM** - Returned to the Immigration Office. Jenny was already there, and she gave the agent our full set of documents.
- **2:50PM** - Agent came back out and complained about a referenced name change in Oregon in 1980, and said they would not accept our documents unless we could show an apostilled copy of that court order. (I had not gotten it because it looked like I would have to fly to Oregon to get it in person, and our lawyer said it wasn't needed). They handed me back our documents and said the application was not acceptable. ***Third NO has been received...***
- **2:55PM** - Jenny was allowed to go into the back room and talk to the immigration lawyers (rather than the front desk agent). Evelyn and I start talking about alternatives for how to get that 1980 court document notarized and apostilled. Some ideas are hatched.
- **3:30PM** - Jenny returns, and the agent asks us to come to the desk to sign the applications. We have been approved! Jenny convinced their lawyers that the US government checks out name changes and that they accepted my name change for my first passport in 1980, and all subsequent passports, and that Ecuador should also accept it. They finally agreed! ***OUR NO TURNED INTO A YES!***
- **3:35PM** - The agent asks me to sit in front of a camera for a photo. She waits a minute or more, then clicks with no warning. I blinked... She says to try again. She again waits a very long time, then clicks as I blink. After 6 tries, she says "maybe we will shoot it next time you come in." I failed at having a photo taken!?

A Day At The Immigration Office

- **3:40PM** - Evelyn is asked to sit by the same agent. This time the agent says "Ready, 3, 2, 1" and so, of course, no blinking and the photo is fine the first time...
- **3:41PM** - Evelyn suggests I try again. Once again, the agent waits a full minute and then, with no warning clicks the picture. What? How come Evelyn got a warning and I did not? Not sure what that was all about, but apparently the agent was happy that time, and I was released from the Death Chair (aka 'passport photo chair').
- **3:45PM** - Evelyn is pulled by the sleeves into a back room. I have no idea what is going on, but 10 minutes later she returns with a paid receipt for our application. ***We are now official!***
- **4:15PM** - We are back in the lawyer's office, where he tells us we are lucky -- not everyone can get by with name discrepancies like I have. We are told to expect our Visa in 30 days, after which we will apply for the Cedula, which will take another couple weeks.



A Day At The Immigration Office

Tonight we went out and celebrated at Mediteraneo's, an upscale Italian restaurant about half a block from our condo. Prime rib with mushrooms with all the trimmings, a tuna salad, and two glasses of very nice wine -- \$28. Gotta love this place!

, November 15, 2013

[Ecuador, Travel](#)

A Day At The Immigration Office

Strange Movie Theater Antics



Strange Movie Theater Antics

After a lazy day, we finally went to see Thor 2 in 3D at the Millennium Theater tonight. Millennium usually has current movies shown in two theaters -- one in English with Spanish subtitles (the one we choose, given our current language skills), and the other dubbed in Spanish. They usually have one major movie in 3D, with the English language version shown once per day in the late evening.

Current run movies are \$4 here, or \$7 for 3D. Once we turn 65, we will get them for half price. The movie was set to start at 9:15PM, so we arrived at 8:45, to give us time to get popcorn and choose a good seat.

It turns out that movies are now assigned seating. You choose your seat on a little touch screen outside the ticket agent's window. All the seats cost the same, but I guess this must be a way to give benefit to those that buy the tickets early. This is new since last year. Evelyn chose seats and we proceeded to the theaters... only to be told (in Spanish) that the doors wouldn't open for 10 more minutes.

Though the show started at 9:15 (and did start on time), they didn't even open the doors to the theater until 9:05. Most patrons didn't actually come in until about 9:30 -- after the trailers were done and the movie was actually about to start.

The show was OK, though neither of us thought it was all that strong. I won't go into details, in case you are still planning on seeing it, but I would give it a "4 out of 5 stars" if I still had NetFlix.

Strange Movie Theater Antics

Suddenly, the lights came on in the theater, even though the movie was still going? The Big Finale Battle was complete, but there was still action on the screen. In the US, the lights stay down until the credits have completed, but here they were up before the movie was even over. It looked like a rational place to end the movie (about 15 seconds after the lights came up), so we left the theater, as did about 1/3 of the other patrons.

As we climbed the steps and left the exit, someone called to come back. We went back to the exit door, and there was still action going on! The movie wasn't over for another 5 minutes!?! We were in the exit door, a couple families behind us unable to see, a bunch of people on the steps leading up to the exit, and about half the audience still in their seats, as though they knew this was going to happen.

It's going to take awhile to get used to Ecuadorian movie theaters...

Strange Movie Theater Antics

No More Crutches!



My GP (General Practitioner doctor) told me 3 weeks ago to contact him today to get a referral to a traumatologist (what they call orthopedic doctor in Ecuador). I jumped the gun and sent him a text message last night, saying I wanted to be at the top of his queue. To my surprise, I received back a response in about 10 minutes -- on a Sunday night! He gave me the name and number of a traumatologist and said to call him between 8:30 and 9:00 this morning.

No More Crutches!

I called about 8:45 this morning, and was told to come in at 10:00. I asked for a little later, and he suggested 11:00. Wow! Try calling a doctor in the US and getting your choice of two appointments within 2 hours of your call !

We arrived at the office a couple minutes late. We were met by a receptionist who took my name and \$25 for the visit, then told us to wait outside office #205. There was a waiting area with two other couples there. Apparently they take you in the order you arrived, and we were invited into the office at about 11:20.

The orthopedic doctor (his business card says "traumatologist and orthopedic") looked over our last X-Rays from 3 weeks ago. He said the ankle fracture is the most common broken bone around the world, and said that 6 weeks was enough time, as long as there was no pain in applying pressure. I was surprised that he did not request a fresh set of X-Rays, but instead just told me to start using a cane. When I asked if the cane was required or only when pain, he told me to use it for the next two weeks, and to come back and see him then.

He also gave me a prescription for physical therapy. When I called that therapist, he set me up for 3:00 tomorrow. Again, I am blown away how easy and fast it is to see doctors here in Cuenca, each of whom speaks good English.

, November 18, 2013

[Ecuador, Medical](#)

No More Crutches!

Helen Johnson, R.I.P.



My mother, Helen Johnson, passed away last night in her sleep. After battling colon cancer for the past year, she passed last night, at the age of 87.

In May, the doctors told us she would likely live another one or two years. In late October, just after we arrived in Ecuador, she was put into hospice, with the doctors saying she had two or three months remaining. Late last week she went into a coma, and died in her sleep last night. Fortunately, this meant that her suffering was shortened, and was able to pass comfortably.

Helen Johnson, R.I.P.

Helen raised two sons, Mike and me, mostly as a single mother, having married and divorced three times. She helped provide a good basis for future success for both sons, and we both went to college -- the first to do so in the family's history. As with most parents, she wanted her kids to succeed beyond what she had accomplished, and she was pleased that both kids had done so.

She went to college briefly in Minnesota, studying journalism, but dropped out at the end of WWII and moved to California. It was there that she met Fred, her first husband and my father, and married in 1948. Here is a photo from that wedding that I found when going through old photo albums. It is hard to believe that my mother was ever so young...!



Helen Johnson, R.I.P.

How Many Keys???



How Many Keys???

When we lived in California, I had two key rings. One for my motorcycle (house and bike keys) and one for my car (house, car, storage shed, car alarm). Since we do not plan on owning a car in Ecuador, I expected to be able to simplify my pocket and have only a single key ring with just a single house key. Heck -- no need for a key ring at all. I figured I would just stick the single house key in my "coin pocket" of my blue jeans.

Ha!

Yes, every one of those keys in the image above is now needed. They originally were all on one ring, but we split them up, since we don't really need all of them at the same time -- and I didn't want a bulge in my pocket the size of a baseball !

The upper-left red key ring is the one we carry whenever we leave the house. There are 5 keys on that ring, and each is needed to get from the front door to the street. Evelyn placed them in order of being needed, which helps make it a little less confusing to reach the street (or conversely, to get back into the house). The keys are:

1. House front door
2. Grate in front of that door
3. Elevator
4. Grate to exit residence portion of building
5. Grate to exit the external wall (at the end of the driveway)

The blue key ring (center-left) gives us access to our parking spot. Since we don't have a car, we keep those separate and rarely use them at this point. When we do need to park a car though, we need two keys for the front driveway gate, then another key for the parking spot itself.

The yellow key ring gives us access to the rooftop, a storage area where we keep the propane tanks (more on those in a later post), and our washer/dryer.

How Many Keys???

The other keys are for inside the condo, opening various locked cabinets left us by the sellers, and a safe that we had installed.

When I first saw all these keys, I was overwhelmed. After a month, we are getting used to it though. After awhile, it just become the "new normal."

, November 25, 2013

[Condo, Ecuador](#)

How Many Keys???

Gourmet Ghetto in Cuenca



One of the primary requirements we had for any retirement location was that it be "walkable." In searching cities, we found that word had very different meanings in different places. Many US locations that we considered, talked about being "walkable neighborhoods," when what they meant was "you can walk to a strip mall not too far away and get a Taco Bell lunch." Not really what we had in mind...

Gourmet Ghetto in Cuenca

When we visited Cuenca for three months last year, we were impressed by how close everything is. Within half an hour's walk (from our apartment on the Tomebamba river), you could get almost anywhere in the central part of town, including dozens of good restaurants. We had decided on living in a roughly circular area maybe a kilometer in radius, from behind the University of Cuenca into the Southern half of El Centro. The condo we purchased is on that Southern end of El Centro, and we really hit the jackpot!

Berkeley, California (where we lived for the last 25 years) has an area known as the "gourmet ghetto." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gourmet_Ghetto) This area is renown for the number of excellent eating establishments in a small area.

They are chump change when compared to Cuenca! There are **six excellent restaurants on our one block!** The photos above are each taken on our block (Luis Cordero) within 1/2 block of our front door. TripAdvisor says there are 24 such restaurants within 1/4 mile of our condo -- and we know of at least four good places that are not even listed. Expand that search to include all of Cuenca, and TripAdvisor says there are 119 restaurants, most with excellent (4 star or higher) ratings.

We eat out every day for lunch, and have only repeated restaurants a few times -- there are so many choices that it will be awhile before we have tried them all. It is entirely possible to get a good lunch here for \$2 to \$3 by choosing the 'almuerzo' (fixed lunch plate of each restaurant), though we frequently splurge and spend closer to \$5 and buy various meals off the main menu.

Originally we had planned on eating out for dinner 3 nights per week, and cooking at home the other 4. Well, that pretty much went out the door once I could walk again (got off crutches). There are so many good choices so close that we eat out almost every night too. Dinner for the two of us, including a glass of wine for each of us, usually comes in right around \$20.

Gourmet Ghetto in Cuenca

There are also more restaurants starting to provide live jazz entertainment several nights per week. We have been to three such places so far, and there are others we will go to in future weeks. These all have the music free, as a draw to bring in dinner patrons. Sometimes they include a tip jar, and the band tells us that they live off those tips. In those cases, the suggested tip is usually about \$3 per person.

Berkeley -- eat your heart out!

Gourmet Ghetto in Cuenca

Medical Care in Cuenca



Two physical therapists that are helping me walk again

I had not originally expected to have such an immediate interaction with the medical care capabilities of Cuenca. After breaking my ankle the day before being scheduled to fly here, I found myself needing their care immediately upon arriving. We had heard several stories about how good the medical care was here, but I must admit, I was a bit worried about having to really go out and try it myself.

Better, Faster and Cheaper

In software development (and probably in other fields), there is a very old saying: "You can have it better, faster, cheaper -- pick any two." Well, I found that in Ecuador, you can get all three!

Medical Care in Cuenca

When I arrived in Cuenca five weeks ago, I called to make an appointment with a GP (General Practitioner doctor) that I had heard of from other gringos. To my surprise, I was able to get in that very afternoon, only a few hours after my call. I have already told most of the story of that appointment, so I won't go into the details again here, other than to note that the full cost of the doctor visit was about the same as my copay with Kaiser back in California. (See the [original blog post here](#)).

A month later I went to an orthopedic surgeon, who told me I could now put full weight on my foot and no longer needed crutches. Again, I already wrote about that visit, which [you can read here](#).

The next day I started physical therapy. I had physical therapy on a couple occasions in California under Kaiser. Each visit there cost me \$20 co-pay, with each visit lasting 15 to 30 minutes, and consisting solely of the therapist giving me a set of exercises to do at home. There was almost never any hands-on treatment in those sessions.

Here in Cuenca, it is a different story. The visits still cost me \$20, but that is the full cost of the treatment, since we have no insurance here in Ecuador. Each visit lasts 60 to 90 minutes, and is comprised completely of hands-on therapy. The session always starts with an ultrasound treatment for 10 minutes, followed by electro-shock and heat therapy for another 10 minutes. Then the therapist goes to work on my foot and leg.

The main therapist that I work with has limited English. I thought that might be a problem at first, but quickly realized that by just adding a few targeted Spanish vocabulary words, I could communicate quite well. The last few days has had an intern do most of the work with me, and he speaks no English at all. Again, I have found that to be an advantage, as it is helping me push my Spanish learning a bit faster.

Medical Care in Cuenca

The therapist pushes and pulls and presses with make it hurt like a sun-of-a-gun. As I got stronger over the course of a week, they started having me spend the last 20 minutes on balance exercises -- I have a hard time balancing on a ball in the best of times, but this *hurts* with a healing ankle!

The progress has been remarkable. Nine days ago, I was on crutches. When released from those, I was told to use a cane for two weeks, yet I was able to abandon the cane after only 3 days. When I abandoned the cane, I could walk two or three blocks before my foot hurt too much. Now, one week later, I can walk two or three kilometers before my limp sets in again. At this pace, I expect to be able to walk 10 kilometers by the end of next week.

1. The physical therapy here is better than I ever got in California under Kaiser.
2. I can get an appointment the same day for a new doctor here, and sometimes within a couple hours. In California, I was lucky if I got an appointment in two weeks.
3. My cost per visit here is the same as I used to pay for the co-pay in California, but there is no insurance premium to pay. As such, this is cheaper than in California.

One more reason to fall in love with Cuenca!

Let The Baking Begin!

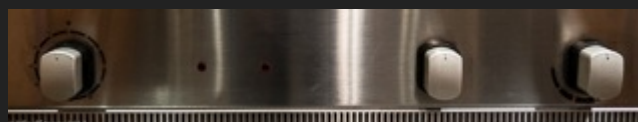
Let The Baking Begin!

We bought a condo earlier this year, and moved into it in October. We have loved the unit and its location, and one of the advantages was that it came fully furnished. The prior owners were returning to England after decades in South America and left us everything. Most of the stuff they left is quite good, and has made us realize we brought too many things from California. However, the oven has been an exception.



Original Indura oven

This was an Indura oven -- an Ecuadorian brand that is ubiquitous here. Unfortunately, the main reason it is so common is because it is so cheap -- in all senses of the word... It requires pressing a starter button for one full minute to get it lit. (That is no exaggeration -- release the button in less than a minute and the fire goes out) And when was the last time you saw an oven with no temperature controls?



Let The Baking Begin!

Indura oven controls

Look closely at that photo above. The far left dial is a timer. It doesn't actually control the oven at all. It is simply an old fashioned "turn all the way to the right, then back to the time you want -- it will buzz when the time has counted down from there" rotary kitchen timer. The button on the far right is a fan control (for convection heating), and a starter (hold down for a minute, as mentioned above). The middle button is 'off' if up, 'broiler/grill' if to the right, and 'bake' if to the left. No way to set or control the temperature. It is on or it is off. Period.

We know people who use this exact type of oven to make pizza or bread, or other baked items. We found it took more than twice as long to bake as our California oven, and with no temp controls, it was too hard to tell what was going on.

Doing some research, we discovered there is a General Electric store about six blocks away. Evelyn went over there yesterday, saw an oven she liked, and bought it.



Let The Baking Begin!

GE oven fits in same cabinet slot as the Indura

They promised to bring and install it this afternoon, and they arrived right on time. Remember when I said the store was six blocks away? The installer said there nobody was in the store to help him, so he carried the oven the entire way (with a hand-truck, of course) on foot, from the store. The box was too big to fit into our elevator, so he then carried it up five flights of stairs too. Somehow I can't see any installer from Home Depot in California going to such lengths -- he would have just decided he couldn't get it to us and not shown up... We continue to be impressed with the quality and fortitude of Ecuadorians.



The GE oven has temperature controls!

After he was done installing it, he went over the controls in detail with us. It was particularly helpful that he spoke English, so we could ask more detailed questions and get answers we fully understood. With this oven, we dial in the temperature we want, then press start. The digital LED shows the current temperature of the oven, so we know just when it has reached full temp. No need for an extra internal oven thermometer (which is what most people use for their Indura ovens). There is even a meat probe that can be used, and the front indicator will then give a constant readout of the meat's internal temperature.

It also has lots of controls for broil, convection bake, normal bake, defrost (I've never seen that on an oven before), steam clean (another new one to me), programmed start, etc.

Let The Baking Begin! - MindStormPhoto Blog and Gallery

Let the baking begin!

PS: Part of the agreement in buying this, was that the installer would cart our old Indura oven away. True to their word, he put it on his had cart and took it down the five flights of stairs. Edison (our building security guard) happened to see him about to leave the building and asked if he could have the oven. We would always rather have someone use an item, and that saved the installer from having to carry it back to the store, so we agreed. Edison was last seen reading over the instruction manual (which the people who sold us the condo were smart enough to keep and leave) and seeming quite happy to get a free oven.

41 Años!

41 Años!

(en English = 41 Years!)



CASA
ALONSO
GOURMET RESTAURANT

41 Años!

Today was our 41st anniversary. Hard to believe, but it was 41 years ago today that we skied between those ski patrol poles to the flash of the newspaper camera, and said "I do" over *The French Way of Skiing* at Kirkwood Meadows. (I posted details on the wedding on our 40th anniversary blog posting last year -- [you can read more here, along with photos](#)).

Last year we tried to have our anniversary dinner at *Casa Alonso* in the Mansion Alcazar hotel, but were unable to, due to a private party taking up the restaurant. We went back this year, and were able to get in. This is one of those rarified luxury restaurants, with luxury pricing that means we only come here for special occasions.

41 Años!



The meals tasted better than these low-light pocket camera photos do justice too I'm afraid. Evelyn's lomo fino above (basically steak) was tasty, but honestly not as tender as Tiestros -- the current reigning champion in Cuenca lomo fino. My shrimp encrusted corvina (sea bass) in the lower image was truly excellent.

41 Años!

The earlier part of the day was spent with physical therapists, a repairman coming to look at our brand new stove that broke the first day we used it (post later -- when it is hopefully fixed), and other routines of living in South America.

, December 17, 2013

[Brag](#), [Ecuador](#), [Event](#), [Family](#), [Food](#)

Lawsuit!

Lawsuit!

**CONDominio EDIFICIO LUIS
CORDERO**

**CONVOCATORIA A ASAMBLEA
EXTRAORDINARIA DE COPROPIETARIOS**

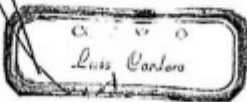
Señores Copropietarios:

De conformidad con el Reglamento Interno de Propiedad Horizontal del Condominio " Edificio Luis Cordero ", convoco a Asamblea Extraordinaria de Copropietarios, la que se efectuará en el Mezzanine del Condominio, el día 17 de diciembre de 2013, a las 15h00 siendo el orden del día:

- 1.- Pago de haberes a ex conserje Sr. LUIS SUAREZ SARMIENTO.
- 2.- Varios

De conformidad con el Reglamento citado, en caso de no asistencia de los copropietarios, se iniciará la Asamblea con el número de asistentes, luego de esperar una hora de la señalada en la convocatoria.

Atentamente



DR. IVAN CULCAY VILLAVICENCIO
ADMINISTRADOR

Lawsuits are not as common in Ecuador as they are in the US, but we just got a first-hand experience to show they do exist. We have read recently that labor suits are becoming a hot item, with several expats telling stories (sometimes second or third hand) about household help (maids, cooks, gardeners) going to the equivalent of the Labor Department and complaining that they were not paid fairly, or that their Social Security (their equivalent anyway) was not paid, etc.

Lawsuit!

Yesterday, we were handed the above notice by our building security guard. I was able to read most of it, and then used Google Translate to confirm that I was on the right track. Basically, it said that there would be a meeting of the Condo Owners Association today (what we call HOA in the US) to discuss "paying the salary of the ex-concierge Luis Suarez Sarmiento."

This seemed odd to us, since we were told that Mr Sarmiento had retired this past Spring. We now have a security guard (aka 'consierge') named Edison, whom we are very happy with. Since Mr Sarmiento is gone, wouldn't his salary have already been paid?

Since this would be our first HOA meeting, and we are the only non Spanish speaking occupants of the building, we decided to hire a translator (Sarah). The meeting was to start at 3:00 according to the notice, so we had her arrive then. We all went down and found where the 'mezzanine' was (not at all obvious), but found it totally empty?? The president of the HOA (Dr Culcay) wandered through a few minutes later, and Sarah asked him about the meeting. The translation we got back was "We set it to start at 3:00 to give people time to arrive. We will actually start talking at about 4:00."

Say What??? Yes, you read that right. They set the start of the meeting at a time to give everyone an hour to arrive. I think it may take me a long time to get the hang of some Ecuadorian practices...

We went back to our condo and talked for the next hour, then returned to the meeting room at 4:00. Sure enough, people were just starting to arrive, and the meeting started a little after 4:00.

Lawsuit! - MindStormPhoto Blog and Gallery

It turns out the prior security guard sued the HOA for \$30,000, saying he was not treated fairly. A settlement was made for \$10,900 plus \$800 lawyer fees. It was not clear to me whether this was the result of a court settlement or out of court, but they seemed happy with the settlement. Since we have only been here a couple months, we did not really want to raise a ruckus. I *did* make a point of asking how we can sure this won't happen again with our current guard. Dr Culcay assured us that our current arrangement was different, and that we have an iron-clad contract with Edison. Since we are in a building mostly comprised of lawyer offices, and Dr Culcay is a lawyer himself, I decided to take his word for it.

After some grumbling from the other half-dozen attendees (in Spanish), the meeting was adjourned. Our bill will turn out to be a little under \$1,100. Totally unexpected, out of the blue, and relating to a legal issue that occurred before we arrived. However, this amount equates to roughly one month of property taxes back in California, while our property taxes here are less than \$100 per year.

Basically, we lick our wounds, smile and go outside to continue to enjoy the fabulous city we have adopted!

Visa is Approved !

Visa is Approved !



Cuenca Immigration Office

Our Ecuadorian resident visa has been approved!

As with all things government, there are still some paperwork steps before we have it in our hands, but we received an approval email two days ago, and were told to go to the immigration office today to get the next phase of papers to sign. Turns out this set of papers is just a document to file with another department that will tie the condo we own to our visa. Normally this takes about 10 days, but we were told to expect 15 days -- probably because of the holidays.

At this point though, there is no longer any doubt that we will be accepted. The steps we took while still in California to get extra documentation, and double up when in doubt, paid off.

The email we received was:

"NOTIFICACION DE VISA

Estimado Señor JOHNSON BURT LOUIS Y ESPOSA

Visa is Approved !

Por medio del presente, cúpleme informarle que su solicitud de visa 9-II Y 9-VI han sido aprobadas, por lo que solicito acuda a las oficinas del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores ubicada en la Manuel J Calle 2-100 el día viernes 20 de diciembre de 2013 a las 09h00, con la finalidad de:

1ero: a las 09h00 retirar su certificado de custodia de bien, para llevarlo a la Registraduria de la Propiedad.

2do: al entregar todos los documentos al encargado, emitirá un certificado de custodia sustento de la visa que ha sido aprobada.

3ero: cuando usted tenga este documento, por favor acercarse inmediatamente a nuestras oficinas para ingresar el documento en su expediente, dado que será necesario agendar una cita con el departamento de extranjería Y poder emitir para usted la visa 9-II Y 9-VI, para lo cual deberá traer su pasaporte y \$320 por persona para el respectivo pago del arancel."

I have gotten so I can actually figure out the meaning of most Spanish writing if I have a context in which to work. To be sure, I put this one into Google Translate though, and read the following glowing report:

"Dear Sir BURT JOHNSON LOUIS AND WIFE

Hereby, I wish to inform you that your visa application 9-9-II and VI have been approved, so I apply go to the offices of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs located at 2-100 Manuel J Street on Friday 20 December 2013 at 09h00, in order to:

1st: 09h00 to withdraw its certificate of custody as well, to put it into Registraduria Property.

2do: to deliver all documents to the manager, issue a certificate of custody support the visa is approved.

Visa is Approved !

3rd: when you have this document, please immediately come to our offices to sign the document in his file, as it will be necessary to schedule an appointment with the department of immigration and to deliver to you the visa 9-II and 9-VI, for which you must bring your passport and \$ 320 per person for the payment of the respective tariff."

Music Everywhere

Music Everywhere



Brian Gary performing at LaParola

We have always enjoyed live music in small intimate surroundings, but we really have rarely gone to them. In Berkeley there were plenty of venues, but they required us getting into a car, driving to a specific destination, finding a parking place, listening to (usually expensive) music, then reversing the process to get home. It was always enough of a hassle that we only went through it once a year or so, and sometimes not even that.

Life sure is different here in Cuenca, Ecuador! We now eat lunch out almost every day, and eat dinner out five nights a week. There are so many good restaurants within a couple blocks radius of us, and the food is so inexpensive, that it seems like a shame to cook at home. Many of these venues have free live music every Wednesday to Saturday too.

Music Everywhere

Tonight was a fairly typical example. We decided to go see the new *Hobbit* sequel at Millenium Plaza, so walked to the theater. Upon getting there, we discovered that they had changed the 3D viewings and only had the Spanish version showing, rather than the English (with Spanish subtitles) that was scheduled as of yesterday. Our Spanish is not good enough to enjoy a movie yet, so we decided to walk to a bar we had passed along the way from which we had heard some pleasant singing.

We then walked to LaParola, a bar about two blocks from our condo, and walked in to hear [Brian Gary performing](#). He is a keyboard player / singer originating from Alameda, California in the 1970's to 1990's. He has a very pleasant voice and knows pretty much every classic rock song from that era. His set included music from the Beatles, Elvis, Eric Clapton, Billy Joel, Eagles and many others you would recognize if you grew up in that period. (The drinks at LaParola were not very good, but the dinner was excellent!)

When we got home, we began tallying the music venues we have been to in the last month. Within a three block radius, we have heard live music at:

- la Vina (The Jazz Society plays there every weekend)
- California Kitchen
- Wunderbar
- LaParola (where we heard Brian Gary tonight)
- il Chiaro de Luna
- el Cafeteria
- Eucalyptus Cafe
- Teatro de la Cultura (where we saw the [magic show](#), among others)

Music Everywhere

In addition, there is San Sebas (a dozen blocks away) and the symphony & opera (both about half a mile). That doesn't even count the literally dozens of discos and karaoke bars within two or three blocks of us. Of course, those latter tend to be filled with a much younger generation, though we will eventually get around to those too. The churches are also filled with Christmas music this time of year, often from children's choruses. Those are fun to drop in on, but aren't quite up to the level of the professional musicians we see in the evenings...

While I was writing this blog entry, Evelyn looked at what Frommer's said about [nightlife in Cuenca](#). Interestingly, half the places they mention are venues we have never been to. There is still a lot left to be explored!

Moving to Cuenca has changed us from enjoying live music maybe once a year to doing so multiple times a week. Gotta love this place!

Massive Pase del Niños Viajero Parade

Massive Pase del Niños Viajero Parade



Niños Viajero statue is center of attention

Every Christmas Eve, Cuenca puts on a massive parade that goes all day, from 8AM till around 6PM, and consists of some 60,000 participants (in a city of only 400,000 residents!). We first saw this last year, and you can [read that post and see those photographs here](#).

The parade is officially called the "Pase del Niño Viajero" parade, which translates as "passing of the traveling child." It celebrates a small statue of Jesus that was taken to Rome and blessed by the pope in the 1960's. This statue overlooks the parade during the day, and then it is brought along the parade route at the end of the day.

Between the two of us, we shot almost 2,000 photographs today. It was hard to distill a parade this massive into a rational number of images, but here is an attempt to bring the feel of the event to you.

Massive Pase del Niños Viajero Parade

Kids were a key part of the parade, and the girls always take cute photos



Boys certainly enjoy their day in the parade too

Massive Pase del Niños Viajero Parade



These women prove you are never too old to enjoy a parade!

Massive Pase del Niños Viajero Parade



Ecuadorian men are not afraid to dress up and parade either

Massive Pase del Niños Viajero Parade



Women often travel in groups together in the parade

Massive Pase del Niños Viajero Parade



Parade dancing is mostly done by women



Santa was everywhere, as was the occasional clown

Massive Pase del Niños Viajero Parade



Parents were often found with the younger kids, and they enjoyed the day too

Massive Pase del Niños Viajero Parade



Most walked, some rode horses, and these people rode bicycles

Massive Pase del Niños Viajero Parade



Music was everywhere

Massive Pase del Niños Viajero Parade



Many groups were led by a sign identifying them or the parade itself

Massive Pase del Niños Viajero Parade



Many groups had their own baby Jesus statues too

Massive Pase del Niños Viajero Parade



A fire truck stood by to let people cool off, since it was such a warm day



Pig, chicken and cuy (guinea pig) were available on sidewalk stands

Massive Pase del Niños Viajero Parade



The balconies along the parade route were packed with watchers

Massive Pase del Niños Viajero Parade



While Evelyn kept her camera clicking in amongst the marchers



Massive Pase del Niños Viajero Parade

We attended a morning party before the parade, and another in the afternoon when the parade was done



As soon as the last marcher was done, the city cleanup crew made the area spotless again



Rooftop views of the neighboring churches from our afternoon party's home

Feliz Navidad

Feliz Navidad



Happy Holidays to all. For our annual holiday greeting, we thought you might enjoy Evelyn's copycat of a painting by Guayasamin shown above, one of Ecuador's most famous artists.

The art scene in Cuenca is just starting to emerge, and Evelyn has been attending artist's receptions and art exhibits at least once a week since we arrived 2 months ago. Cuenca enjoys the role as Ecuador's arts capital, and is home to several artists with international reputations. There is an incredible amount of talent in Cuenca, both local and expat artists as well as photographers, such as [Michael Hamilton](#).

Feliz Navidad

Art Cuenca is an organization that helps promote some of the local artists from Cuenca, setting up studio tours, gallery exhibitions and events, which you can [find on their website](#). In addition, there are artists promoted at the First Friday art event each month, as well as other artists who have their own studios including world-renown ceramist, Eduardo Segovia, Klever Moscoso, Ariel Dawi, sculptor Miguel Illescas, and others. And, there are exhibits by visiting Ecuadorean artists including Fausto Bravo, a world-renown ceramists from Quito.

Evelyn has been enjoying sketching and painting almost every day, as the city is rich with inspiration.

Feliz Navidad



, December 26, 2013

Ecuador, Event, Family

Jupiter!

Jupiter!



We have tried to get into the local planetarium several times, but were always turned away because it was either closed or the tickets were sold out. We decided to try again today.

We walked to the planetarium (it is only a 10 minute walk from our condo), and had lunch at one of our favorite hamburger places -- Chill & Grill. Afterwards we went next door and picked up our free tickets to the show. Yes, like the symphony and much of the music in town, the planetarium is free.

Jupiter!



Kids arrived with several volunteers in tow. And yes, that is a McDonalds across the street...

Jupiter!

We were the first in line for the tickets at 2:30, for the 3:00 showing. A few minutes later 20 kids got off a school bus, and one of the teachers got their tickets. Since this is primarily an educational service, the school kids got first seating. There was plenty of seating for all though, and there really isn't a bad seat in the place.

The presentation opened with a docent talking about the solar system in Spanish, so I only caught the general gist of the talk. At one point, he asked the audience "lo que es el planeta más grande?" (what is the largest planet?). One kid down front yelled "Jupiter!" and an image of Jupiter zoomed on the ceiling, to the gasps of many of the children.

The opening scene showed the Hubble, so I had expected some deep galaxy images from that telescope. As it turned out, the actual recorded part of the show only lasted 15 minutes, and we never left the solar system. It was a bit of a letdown.

The price is right though (free)!

Dummy!

Dummy!



This effigy head is about 4 feet high, and will sit upon a huge dummy on New Year's Eve

Ecuador has an exciting way of celebrating New Year's Eve, unlike anything seen in North America. ([see here for last year's report on it](#)) Each family creates or buys an effigy, or dummy, for the celebration. The family then writes short statements of things they want to leave behind in the new year. For some it is "too much alcohol" or "unable to find a job" or something related to their family health, or whatever they want to forget or wish did not happen. These slips of paper are either stuffed in the effigy or pinned to it, and at the stroke of midnight the effigy is set afire.

Dummy!

The streets are littered with fires, reminding me of the Berkeley streets during the riots of the 1960's and early 1970's (when we were both students there).

The difference though, is that people are dancing in the streets besides the bonfires, and the adventurous ones are jumping over the fires, which is supposed to bring added luck in the new year. Since many of the effigies are also stuffed with firecrackers or fireworks, such jumping also is the leading cause of hospital visits each New Year's Eve...



Those that do not want to make their own effigies can buy them on the street during the week leading up to the celebration. Some people buy generic dolls, costing \$4 for child sized ones or \$5 to \$6 for adult sized dolls. Others go for more identifiable effigies looking like cartoon figures, or the occasional obscene gesture -- presumably sold to teenagers...

, December 30, 2013

[Art](#), [Ecuador](#), [Event](#), [Festival](#), [Food](#)

Sleeping Is Not An Option

Sleeping Is Not An Option



Boom!... Boom, Boom, Boom!

That is the sound of bottle rockets going off starting around 6AM this morning and continuing several times an hour for the rest of the day.

They are often followed by the sound of car alarms being triggered, so the noise continues long past the initial explosions.

Sleeping Is Not An Option



These rockets and fireworks can be purchased at tiny stands throughout the city, which seem to be mostly frequented by teenagers. Kind of reminds me of that year in High School when I... well, that's another story, isn't it?