



MindStormPhoto
Ecuador
2014 pt 4

Burt and Evelyn Johnson

Ecuador 2014 Pt 4

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Nomadic Art

Nomadic Art



The [Musical Nomads](#) opened their Cuenca home tonight for an evening of art, music and food. They are one of our favorite local bands, performing "*Classic Hits For All Occasions*" (the byline on their business card).

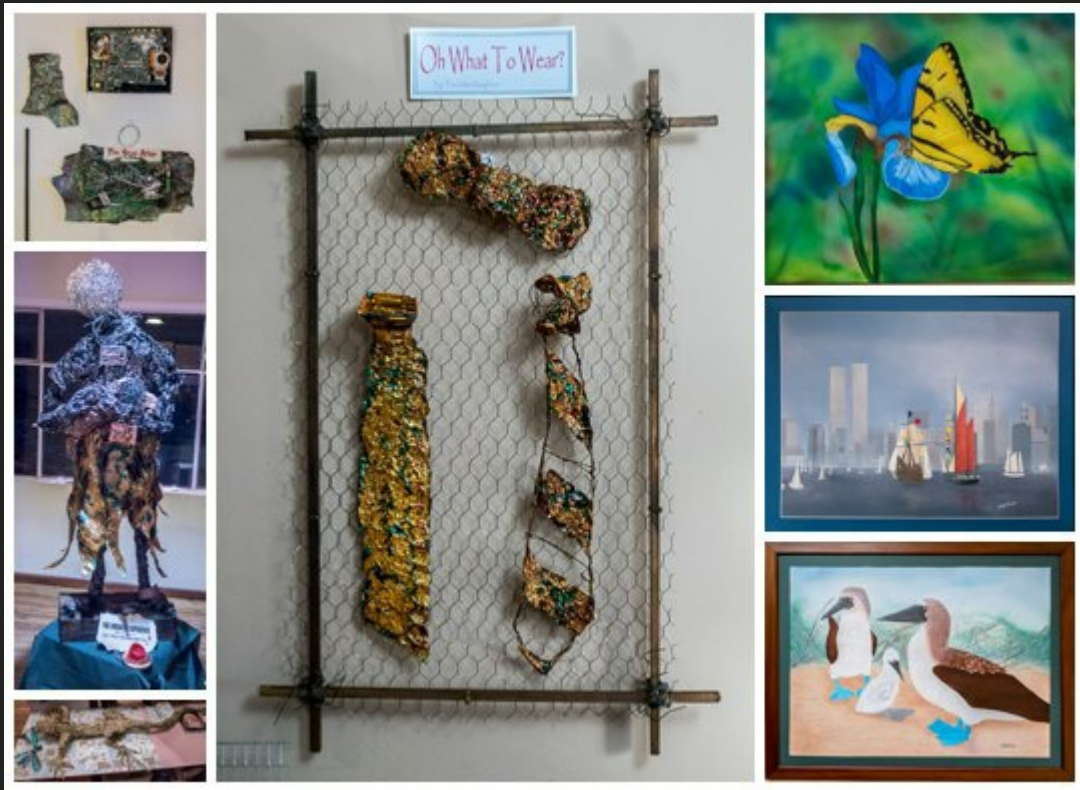
Nomadic Art



They had a sold-out crowd for the event. Everyone first socialized while walking around the improvised art gallery, then sat and listened to the Nomads. The second half of the music cleared the chairs and the dancing started.

Two artists were displaying their work, Dale Lance as a painter and Tom McNaughton showing metalwork.

Nomadic Art



Almost all the songs played by the Musical Nomads tonight were ones I have in my iTunes collection. They included such songs as:

- [People Are Strange](#) (The Doors)
- [Ode to Billie Joe](#) (Billy Gentry)
- [The House of the Rising Sun](#) (The Animals)
- [Africa](#) (Toto)
- [Fever](#) (Peggy Lee, and others)
- [Stuck in the Middle with You](#) (Stealers Wheel)
- [Amie](#) (Pure Prairie League)
- [Moondance](#) (Van Morrison)
- [Hey Good Looking](#) (Hank Williams)
- [Sweet Home Alabama](#) (Lynyrd Skynyrd)
- ... and on and on...

Rainy Cañari Experience

Rainy Cañari Experience



We spent today at the "Kushiwaira Cañari Education Center" near Tarqui, to learn about the Cañari indigenous culture. As luck would have it, this was the first full day of rain we have had in about a month. We were fed a typical Cañari breakfast and a traditional Pampamesa lunch, where food was spread on table cloths right on the ground, to share with the earth.

Rainy Cañari Experience

We learned about medicinal plants, walked along the Inca Trail, listened to a musical performance with hand made instruments, as well as getting photos of the enterprising Ecuadorian indigenous family.

, August 12, 2014

Ecuador · Cañari

Hugh Done It

Hugh Done It



We are finding an increasing number of talented artists, musicians, actors, and others moving to Cuenca and developing ways of expressing their creativity. Last Saturday, we were treated to a murder mystery dinner show created by a witty and talented group of actors called *The Cuenca Characters*. Set on a cruise ship, the audience was involved in solving the murder of cruise director, Sunny Sails, who had been strangled.

Hugh Done It - MindStormPhoto Blog and Gallery

Five shady suspects were introduced: Lou Cruise, whose wrestling career Sunny destroyed, Becky Messer (suspected jewel thief), Harv Carver (cheating gambler), Molly Rotter (Seminar Marketing Director, who worked with Sunny's brother in the past), and Rhoda Blogger (scammer billionaire real estate developer who owed money to Sunny). The motives, means and opportunity of the five suspects unfolded throughout the night, and the plots were moved along by Inspector Hugh Dunit. With a name like this, he might have "done it", however Hugh wasn't a suspect. Using her "it can't be that obvious" skepticism, Evelyn was one of four people in the audience who correctly guessed the name of the murderer.

, August 16, 2014

[Art](#), [Event](#), [Food](#), [Theater](#)

Dramatic Elevator Rescue

Dramatic Elevator Rescue



Today we embarked on a short trip to Northern Peru, traveling with Alberto and Maite Soriano. It started off on an exciting note -- we were stuck in an elevator!

Dramatic Elevator Rescue

We loaded up our small packs and camera bag and got in the elevator at 6AM to go down to meet Alberto and Maite. The elevator started down... then suddenly stopped? I tried to force the door open. It would only open about six inches, and I could see the floor near the top of the elevator. We were stuck between floors at 6:00AM -- hours before anyone would show up for work and find us.

Fortunately, we both had our phones. Evelyn first called Maite to explain we were stuck and might be "a little late." She then called Edison (our security guard) at home and told him we were stuck. Edison doesn't speak a word of English and I wasn't sure she had really gotten the idea through, but 20 minutes later the elevator started up again. Edison had come in based on our call, saw the elevator was stuck, and performed some magic reset in the elevator control room.

We were off and on our way! For awhile...



Dramatic Elevator Rescue

After driving a few hours, we came close to the Peruvian border. Since auto gas is subsidized in Ecuador (\$1.48 / gallon!) and not in Peru, we stopped to top off the tank. When we tried to get going again after getting gas, the battery was stone dead and wouldn't start. Evelyn, Maite and I got out and had to push the car for two blocks before Alberto finally got it jump-started. We drove to the nearest town, revving the engine at every stop sign, and bought a new battery.

And we were off again! For awhile...

When we reached the Peru border, there were huge long lines at immigration, reaching out the door. With the wonders of government inefficiency, we found we had to go into four lines. First line gave us an exit stamp from Ecuador. Move over 4 feet and to the back of another line. That got us a stamp, but the officer said we had to go another line because we had an American passport. This line #3 got us a stamp in our passport, and sent us to line #4. That final line got us an entry visa into Peru. (Really? They can't do this all in a single line??)

Oh yeah, their computers were down, so the officers were on the phone to Lima. They read off the passport number to someone in Lima that looked up the data, then spoke some magic numbers back to the immigration person, who would then stamp your paper and pass you through to the next line. That is why it took even longer than normal and the lines were so long. (Three days later when we were going the other way, the computers were still down and it was still being done via phone...)

About this time I was wondering if the gods were trying to keep me out of Peru? We stopped for lunch at "El Brujo" though, and all doubt went away. That was the best seafood I had eaten since leaving San Francisco.

As we approached Zorrito, we checked several possible beach hotels. The place was completely vacant -- quite literally we were the only people in all five places we tried. We ended up with a fairly nice hotel, swam a little, had dinner and some great pisco sours (first time I have had that drink -- good stuff!).

Dramatic Elevator Rescue

And through all the trials and tribulations, Alberto just kept laughing and having a great time. Nothing ever gets him down. There is a lesson to be learned there...

A Free Lunch



A Free Lunch

Whoever said there is no such thing as a free lunch was obviously not thinking of blue footed boobies around a fisherman's catch!



A Free Lunch

The boobies would stand around the crates of fish being brought in by fishermen. As soon as the men turned their backs (with only a couple exceptions, they were all men), the boobies would walk up to a crate, grab a fish, and swallow it whole. No need for the birds to go fishing when the fish were being brought to them in bulk!



Birds were swarming in the skies above

A Free Lunch



Evelyn was looking for some pelican photos to paint from, and they were plentiful. The pelicans usually caught their own fish though, rather than stealing from the fisherman crates.

A Free Lunch



We took a tour among the mangrove marshes, where we saw many male frigate birds in full mating plumage.

A Free Lunch



, August 20, 2014

Animals, Travel • Peru

A Free Lunch

Always a Parade



Always a Parade

As I have said before, Ecuadorians will start a parade at the drop of a hat, and for almost any reason. Apparently this applies to Peru too. We went in the town of Tumbes, and quickly came across these school kids preparing for a parade on the theme of ecology.



Always a Parade

Taxis in Cuenca are plentiful, but are the normal cars we would see in San Francisco. The weather in Tumbes, Peru is much warmer though, and the taxis there are small motorcycles built on a three-wheel frame. In Peru, they call these "mototaxis", but we saw the same taxi transport system in much of Asia, where they were called "[tuk-tuk](#)". Each driver painted and decorated his taxi to his taste (all drivers we saw were men), and many also had advertisements painted on them.

, August 22, 2014

[Event](#), [Festival](#), [Travel](#) · [Peru](#)

Always a Parade

20/20 (and 19/20)



We are both now legal Ecuadorian drivers -- we both received our driver's licences today!

The process here is almost silly in the number of steps required, but we completed the last of the hoops today and walked out with our licenses. We can now rent and drive cars within Ecuador. (The International Driver's License is not valid past 90 days after receiving your cedula, so that was no longer an option.) These were steps we took:

- 1) Obtain our California driving history from California. Get it notarized, then apostilled, then translated into Spanish, then have the translation notarized.
- 2) Go to the Red Cross and get a blood test and obtain a blood card showing our blood types (this info goes on the final license).
- 3) Fill out a bunch of paperwork in Ecuador and turn it into the ANT (**Agencia Nacional de Tránsito**), the Ecuadorian equivalent of DMV -- which is an hour's drive from Cuenca. That paperwork included the driving history noted above, our California driver's licence, our cedula, and a bunch of paper forms filled out.
- 4) Wait about a week for all that paperwork to be approved in Quito (the capital of Ecuador), upon which time we were told we could go to the next step. Then, we studied 215 practice exam questions, all in Spanish, of which 20 would be randomly picked by the computer.

20/20 (and 19/20)

5) Drive to a different location and go through a battery of tests: eye test (left and right eye, distance and near, color blindness, recovery speed from dazzling, distance perception); hearing test (left and right ear on 7 frequencies); reaction speed (look at a screen and move from gas pedal to brake pedal when a red light shows); dexterity test (use two hands to move a pin around a complex curved track -- think of the child's game of 'doctor'); and a test something like the whack-a-mole game. It was pretty exhaustive, compared to California!

6) Drive back to the ANT with all those results, plus blood card, another set of photos, the original apostiled driving history, plus approval from Quito and fill out more paperwork.

7) Drive to a bank about a mile away to pay the \$38 per person for the license. Yep, can't pay at the ANT...

8) Drive back to the ANT and take a written test -- in Spanish -- of the driving laws of Ecuador. Surprisingly, they are very similar to the laws of California, though you wouldn't know it by stepping on any street in the country. These laws are completely ignored in the real world, and there is essentially no enforcement of them at all.

9) See the magic "**aprobado**" on the computer screen, meaning we've passed!

10) Get our picture taken, and a few minutes later get handed our laminated license.

Hurray!

Oh yeah, the title of the blog entry. You see, Evelyn will never let me live this down. She got 20 correct answers out of 20 Spanish questions, while I only got 19 correct. Oh, the shame of it!

Guayaquil Art Show

Guayaquil Art Show



Today we traveled to Guayaquil to attend the opening reception of an art show by four Ecuadorian artists. We were traveling with one of the main artists -- Alberto Soriano and his wife Maite. Other painters exhibiting included Boris Ordonez and Pepe Luque.

We had always fled Guayaquil as soon as our international flights arrived, so this was our first time to really visit the city. Unfortunately, though the Malecon and museum were nicer parts of town, in general I found it reinforced my earlier visions of the city -- hot, humid, smoggy, dirty, and generally dreary. Not a city I recommend to anyone for visiting...

Guayaquil Art Show



Eduardo Segovia was also there showing his ceramic art. Eduardo is another local favorite of Evelyn, and we have one of his pieces in our home.

Guayaquil Art Show



The artists were all on hand to autograph programs and mingle with the guests.

Guayaquil Art Show



Musical entertainment was also provided.

Guayaquil Art Show



Attendees were fascinated with the art on display.

Guayaquil Art Show



Attendees also mingled and were there to be seen.

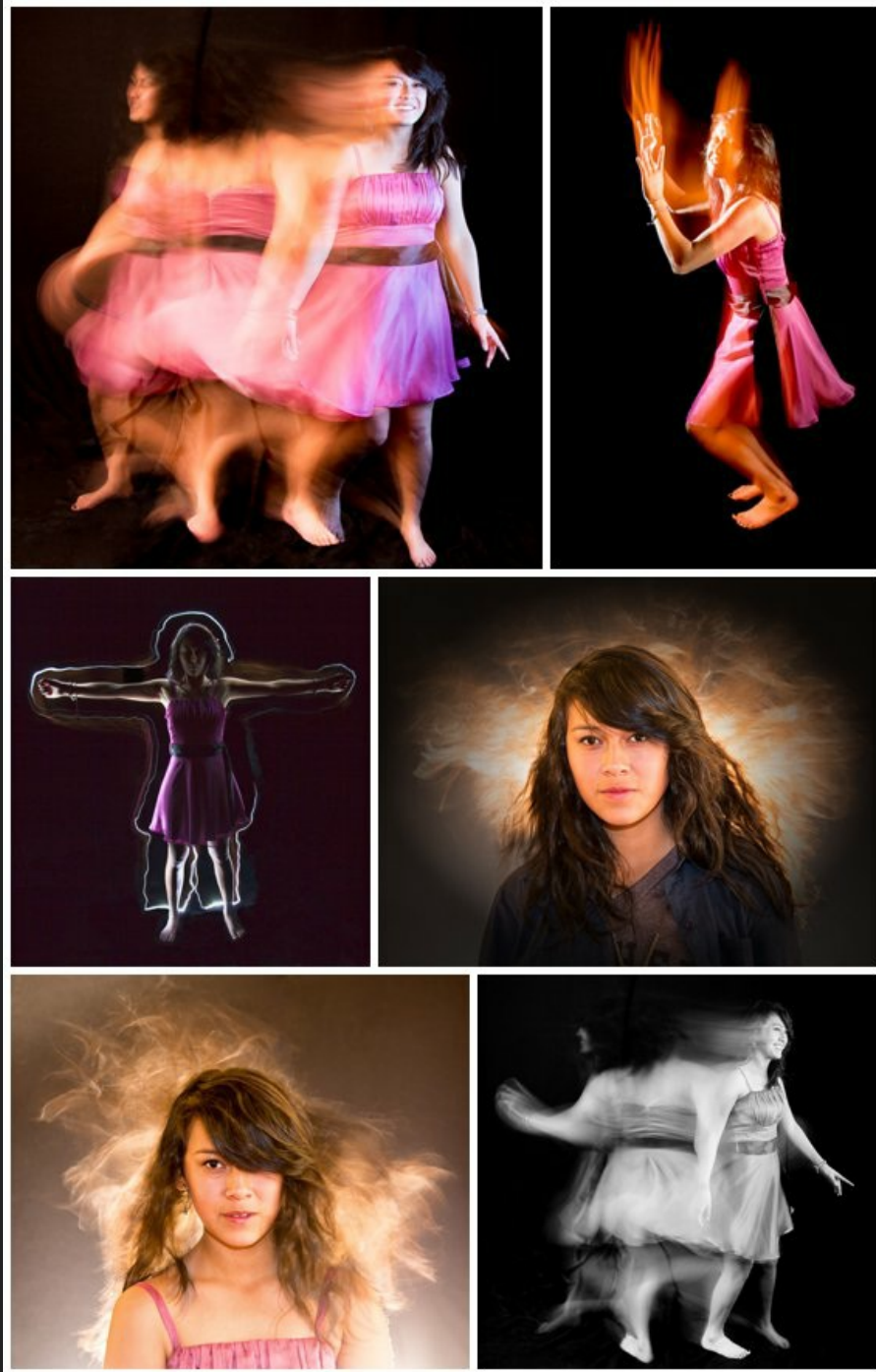
Karen Kennedy provided vocalist entertainment.

, September 11, 2014

[Art, Event](#)

Jhoss Joins Me In The Studio

Jhoss Joins Me In The Studio



Jhoss is a local Cuenca high school student that joined me recently in my studio. We both worked for several hours, trying out various photograph techniques, mostly revolving around capturing motion in still images. You can see some of our results above.

The Riot That Never Was

The Riot That Never Was



Walking home in Cuenca today I came across a group of protesters and an veritable army of police, many dressed in full riot gear with shields, helmets and tear gas canisters. The were two demonstrations going on, about three blocks from each other. One was at a plaza filled with anti-government protesters, while the other had government officials giving speeches, and a few (maybe 100 or so?) supporters standing around listening. The police surrounded the pro-government group, with the show of force clearly intended to dissuade any violence.

The Riot That Never Was

The same demonstrations were also going in Guayaquil and Quito. The one in Quito did turn violent, as protesters attacked the police with burning sticks and molotov cocktails. In that one, reports stated that 76 protesters were arrested, and that some police sustained unspecified injuries. The Cuenca demonstrations ended peacefully though.



The Riot That Never Was

The anti-government protesters outnumbered the government supporters by maybe 3 or 4 to 1. There were a variety of groups and topics included, from labor unions (the main organizer of the protest), to those objecting to the congress allowing President For Life (actually allowing unlimited reelections), protests over the oil damage in the Amazon, over the loss of water rights for indigenous peoples, and some others I didn't really understand.



The top image shows the pro-government speakers and crowd, while the lower two are from the anti-government rally about three blocks away.

, September 17, 2014

Ecuador, Event, Festival, Police

Ambassador Sings The Blues

Ambassador Sings The Blues



Ambassador Sings The Blues

Music is largely free in Cuenca, Ecuador. We could go to multiple music venues every week without spending a cent. Tonight there was a free Blues concert at the Teatro Sucre -- about 4 blocks from our condo. It was starring Adam Namm, the US ambassador to Ecuador, on keyboard and as lead singer. We enjoy the Blues, and thought it would be interesting to hear our ambassador, so of course we went and the theater was jam packed.

They played mostly an hour+ of "covers" plus one song of their own. Unfortunately, they followed the Ecuadorian habit of maxing out the volume of every mic on stage. That not only nearly made my ears bleed, but made it nearly impossible to hear the words. Blues is supposed to be about the words, but you couldn't tell it by the performance tonight. If I didn't know every song by heart, I would have had no idea what they were singing...

, September 24, 2014

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

Comedy and Magic

Comedy and Magic



Comedy and Magic

As we have noted several times, there is always something going on in Cuenca. You would have to be a hermit not to find something to do every week. We started this morning with a going away party for some friends that have decided to return to the States after several years in Cuenca. Walking to that party, we came across a food festival at a church (they are roasting cuy -- aka guinea pigs -- in the upper right image above). We left that party to meet with two other couples for brunch at a new restaurant (those crop up every week too!) a block from our condo.

If that wasn't enough, we then headed over to a comedy show headlined by [Cork Proctor](#) -- a Las Vegas performer for five decades, he is now living in Cuenca, with stories dating back to Sinatra and the Rat Pack, and others from that era. You can see him in the upper left image above. Hard to believe he is 82 and still going strong. The show was a sell-out in a small auditorium seating 100.

He was opened by Buddy Winston (center right above), a well known Cuenca resident who was a lead writer for Jay Leno for several years, and gave a very funny comedy launch to the show. When Cork started his routine, he introduced several people in the audience that were neighbors living near him in Cuenca.

One was a very talented magician, with excellent "up close" magic and an excellent stage presence, named Juan Alvarez Estrella. He said he will have a show of his own here in Cuenca on November 19, but we will be out of the country on that date, so will have to miss it. He will also be part of an open air performance at Parque Paraiso on Oct 19, from 10:00 to 2:00.

We were actually planning on going to the free circus at the Pumapungo theater tonight too, but by the end of the comedy show, were tired and went home to relax for the rest of the evening...

Learning To Cook Italian in Cuenca

Learning To Cook Italian in Cuenca



For the last three weeks I have been taking Italian cooking classes at a restaurant a little over a block from our condo. I am still amazed whenever I process that sentence -- I have never lived somewhere with a good restaurant only a block away (let alone the 20 or so we now have), and certainly not one that would give excellent cooking lessons. Three weeks for \$80 including all materials, and a dinner to take home each time.

Learning To Cook Italian in Cuenca



L'aperitivo is a relatively new restaurant, only open for the past six months. It is on Benigno Malo, just a couple doors downhill from Calle Larga in Centro portion of Cuenca. Rafaela is the owner, chef, and sometimes pastry instructor. She speaks English quite well, and tells stories of her parents and their olive oil presses, as she reaches under the counter and brings up a 2 liter coke bottle filled with olive oil from her father's press and lets you sample it.

Learning To Cook Italian in Cuenca



Learning To Cook Italian in Cuenca

The first week we made [Pizza Margherita](#), which is a simple pizza with dough (made from scratch, of course), mozzarella cheese, tomato, and basil -- giving the red, green and white of the Italian flag. The second week, we made fresh lasagna, fettuccine, and spaghetti. The final week, we made an Italian dessert, shown above, and which I must admit I forgot the name of... I plan on dropping by next week and getting that name written down, as the Italian name just didn't stick in my mind as I had hoped.

Note that all this was being taught to a gringo that had never used yeast before, and normally only used the oven for a final crisping touch after slow cooking ribs (recipe coming soon -- just realized now that I haven't written it up yet). After Only Three Lessons (!), I am now an accomplished Italian pasta chef!

, October 8, 2014

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

Cuy, Family Style

Cuy, Family Style



Back in the USA, they are called guinea pigs and kept as pets. Here they are called cuy and are a gourmet feast most often served for special occasions and celebrations. We were invited to a special cuy dinner by Gloria, Evelyn's Spanish teacher, last night for a night of feasting, music... and Spanish.

Only one member of the family speaks fluent English, so aside from some quick computer assistance I provided (my Spanish ain't good enough for that!), the night was entirely in Spanish. For those of you following our progress in learning the language, you would be right in expecting that some conversations were stuttering and pidgin. As we have found throughout Ecuador though, if you try to speak Spanish, most people are more than willing to help and work with you. It can be frightening at times, but with a cuy meal as a reward, who could say no??

Cuy, Family Style



Dinner preparation was a family affair. All the more so the cooking of the cuy. We have had cuy in restaurants before, and found them somewhat dry. We were told that these cuy were "grown naturally, and fed all natural foods -- not like those production cuy raised on food pellets." (all said in Spanish, of course) We were eager to help with the cooking, and then taste the difference.

Cuy, Family Style

The cuy were already skinned and prepped when purchased, much like a chicken would be at your local butcher then marinated the night before. Special sticks, the size of broom handles, are then stuck through them from mouth through tail. The cuy must then be slowly rotated by hand over a BBQ pit, being periodically basted with achiote oil, for an hour. I commented that if I made this at home, I would use a motor for automatic turning. Gloria responded that they have a rotisserie, but that the thick poles needed for the cuy would not fit. Also, we had four people rotating four cuy, which would have been pretty hard on a normal rotisserie.

After about an hour, the cuy expert chef examined the mouth. I was told she was looking for any moisture, which must be gone for the cuy to be done. Sure seemed to me like the moisture was gone after half an hour, so we have eaten raw cuy if I had been doing the examination! When the meat was done, she used a cabbage leaf as a hot-mit and pulled the hot cuy from the stick.

When the BBQ was complete, the meal was assembled, and we sat down to the feast shown at the top of this post. The cuy was definitely tasty and moist, and the best we've had in Ecuador.

Cuy, Family Style



After dinner everyone moved to the living room, where the music began. This is an incredibly talented musical family, where everyone either played an instrument or sang (or makes craftsman quality guitars!). We spent the next couple hours listening to music, and sometimes joining in -- picking up words off a smart phone when they were not known.

Approaching Our First Year Anniversary in Cuenca

Approaching Our First Year Anniversary in Cuenca



Approaching Our First Year Anniversary in Cuenca

Hard to believe, but we are only a couple days short of our one year anniversary of moving to Ecuador and starting our lives as a retired couple. So much has happened in this past year that it is hard to get my head around it. I find I go back and reread my own blog posts to remind me of all we have done -- and get tired just reading about it!

One of the highlights of our first year's anniversary is Evelyn's devotion to developing her skills as an artist. She has had talent for decades, but never really had the time to spend. In this last year, she has found a strong and supportive art community in Cuenca, and has been taking lessons from a [world-class painter](#), Alberto Soriano. This year, she also had her first art exposition.

We have finally gathered together her new work from this year, and updated the gallery. You can click on the "art" tab above, or [here](#) to see it.

, October 21, 2014

[Animals](#), [Art](#), [Education](#), [Evelyn](#)

Magic in Cuenca

Magic in Cuenca



Magic in Cuenca

Tomorrow marks our one year anniversary since we officially moved to Ecuador. In that time, we have become a bit jaded. With so much to do every week (and most nights), we often hear or read about an event, then ask each other "so you want to go?" The answer is often becoming "it looks like it might rain, it's cold outside, and <enter your own excuse here>." As a result, though we are now more connected and hear about more events, we no longer have the urgency to see and do everything in this magical city .

Tonight was a special event we did not want to miss though. Juan Alvarez Estrella is the only South American member of the prestigious Magic Circle based in London, and has performed more than 600 "close-up magic" shows around the world. We had seen one of his performances a while ago at [Cork Proctor's comedy show](#) , and loved his stage presence.

The night opened with a half-hour show by Juan with a variety of tricks. He always includes volunteers from the audience, and his magic performance was no more than three feet from my seat.

Yet, I never once figured out how he was doing it, so clearly it was *magic*!

were delicious, though I am afraid I can't say the same for the main course... During dinner, Juan came around to each table to perform more in-your-face magic that left you wondering about the true physics of nature! Bob Higgins had earlier acted as master of ceremony, and showed up at each table with his own display of magic. Though his tricks were more "standard fare," his execution was flawless, and left the table gasping at how well he pulled them off.

After the show was dinner at the Paladar restaurant. Soup and dessert

All in all, an excellent way to end our first year in Ecuador. *Happy Anniversary To Us!*

Murder He Wrote!

Murder He Wrote!



The body of prominent Reaper Junction resident, Grimsby Graves, was found early this morning at the bottom of a newly dug grave in the Reaper Cemetery. The eerie find was made by sheriff's deputies after they received a call from a local resident.

Graves, whose ancestors helped found the town in 1770, owned the large estate that borders both the cemetery and the pumpkin farm of Jack Lantern.

Murder He Wrote!

So began our evening as deputies during the murder mystery dinner at Roux restaurant tonight. There were six suspects that the local sheriff had identified, and it was up to us to determine who the real culprit was.

After each suspect gave their deposition to the audience, the court was kind enough to provide us with a delicious meal. Of course, anyone who has seen a crime drama on TV knows that work often interrupts meals for the best detectives. Sure enough, the suspects were all out on bail and each made their way to our table at some point during the meal, giving us a chance to interrogate them further.



Murder He Wrote!

With Halloween just around the corner, many of the deputies working the case were dressed out in their finest. In the end, each team had to come together and figure out whodunnit. Our team, composed of Beverly Ayler, Evelyn Johnson and your faithful reporter (Burt Johnson), nailed it by identifying who the culprit was (the clairvoyant), but also who was her unwitting assistant (the pastry chef), and how she pulled it off (combination of hypnosis and drugs). We never figured out a motive though -- it turns out the clairvoyant was the granddaughter of Evil-Eyed Emil, who had been escorted out of town on Halloween night 100 years earlier by a mob led by Grimsly Graves relatives, and she had promised to avenge her grandfather.

For our success, we each each awarded a free dessert at Roux restaurant, which we will almost certainly use.

