

# MindStormPhoto Ecuador 2015 pt 2



Burt and Evelyn Johnson

# Ecuador 2015 pt 2

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# Excited About Potatoes

## Excited About Potatoes



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In our Spanish class, one of the people said she overheard two women talking excitedly about papa. It was papa this, and papa that. She knew just enough Spanish to know that 'papa' is Spanish for potato, and she couldn't figure out why these women were so excited about potatoes?

Only later did she realize that the Pope is also called Papa in Ecuador. The Pope is in Guayaquil giving mass to over 1 million people today, and will give mass tomorrow in Quito. This is such a Big Deal in this country that the president has declared today and tomorrow as holidays.

# Excited About Potatoes

Today, Evelyn was walking near Parque Calderon (the park in the center of town, about 4 blocks from our apartment) when she saw what she thought was a cardboard image of the Pope... until he started walking! Sure enough, a man was in a Pope costume, complete with cardboard image of the Pope's face on top.

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, July 6, 2015

[Ecuador](#), [Festival](#) · [Church](#), [Pope](#)

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# Cañar Animal Market

## Cañar Animal Market



# Cañar Animal Market

Two and half years ago, in November 2012, we attempted to visit the animal market in Cañar, which is 70 km NE of Cuenca at 10,400 ft elevation, and is supposed to be the largest such market in Southern Ecuador. Unfortunately, our driver that day did not understand what we wanted, and by the time we got there (around noon), **the market was closed**. Today we finally went back, and this time, it was a success.

The weather looked like rain was imminent all morning, but it stayed dry, allowing us to roam freely with our cameras to capture the unfolding scene. This is a market where farmers come to sell their animals. Some buyers are other farmers, here to purchase stock for their farms. Others are butchers, here to buy animals ready for your table.



# Cañar Animal Market

As you enter the market area, the first thing you see are pigs. Hundreds of pigs.

From piglets that make you think of pets, up to 200+ pound monsters that remind you more of horses. The smaller pigs are often forced to go where the buyer wants by pulling on one leg, while the larger ones require a lot more muscle and teamwork. While waiting for sale, most of the pigs are quiet and patiently standing. Once a sale is made, and the pig is hauled off to the new owner, the oinks pierce the air, and sound an awful lot like they are squealing "NNNNOOOOO!!!!!"

We observed many transactions, as buyers were shoving money into the vendors hands and yelling "ochenta dólaress...ochenta dólares" (\$80) for some of the piglets, and "doscientos cincuenta dólares" (\$250) for some of the larger pigs. With lots of cash on hand, there was lots of haggling and transactions taking place. When the purchase was completed, you could see small piglets stuffed into sacks and carried out on the backs of some of the indigenous women. Larger animals were lead out with new colorful rope harnesses, while other animals were loaded into pick up trucks.





# Cañar Animal Market

As you move further through the market, you come to an area where cattle are being sold. Some of these will become beef on your table, but most are dairy cattle. They are less noisy than the pigs, but are big enough and crowded enough to make photography difficult.



The last animal area of this market has sheep. Some farmers come with a single sheep to sell, while others have a couple dozen, usually tied together head to head, to keep them docile and stationary. Some buyers want to flip the sheep on its back to fully inspect before buying, and before loading them on their truck for return to their new farm.



# Cañar Animal Market

This was a photographically rich day, and there is a lot more to tell and show. We will break this into a two or three blogs to cover it all. Stay tuned tomorrow!

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, July 12, 2015

[Animals](#), [Ecuador](#), [Festival](#), [Market](#)

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# Cañar People and Murals

## Cañar People and Murals



Yesterday we went to the Cañar animal market, and I created the [first part of the report of that trip](#), talking about the various animals for sale. Today I want to show some of the people that were there at the market.



# Cañar People and Murals

Top left above is Alberto, Evelyn's art instructor and our driver for the day. Middle-left is Maite, his wife, and one of my cooking instructors. The others are people attending the market, either to sell their animals, or to purchase them.





# Cañar People and Murals

Babysitters are rare in Ecuador, as are strollers. When mothers go about their business, they bring their children with them. If they are young enough, they are typically tied in a cloth and strapped to the mother's back. Though you will occasionally see fathers with older children in tow, it is almost always the mother that carries the infants until they are old enough to walk on their own.





# Cañar People and Murals

Along the periphery of the main animal market were vendors selling dry goods and food. Some put a meager assortment of goods on a small tarp. Others just draped their ropes out in a colorful array, so that those who bought a new animal could properly lead their purchase away. One woman (lower left) just piled hundreds of shoes on the back of her car, while one enterprising man (upper right) emptied a large van onto tables and had a loudspeaker blasting his sales pitch for all to hear. The vendor bottom-center above was selling wooden plows. They don't look like they would last very long in plowing fields, but he had plenty of people asking about them, and I saw at least two sales.

# Cañar People and Murals



As we were driving out of town, we came across a long stretch with interesting murals. I have posted a couple of blogs about the murals in Cuenca, so thought I would show that they exist in other towns of Ecuador too.

, July 13, 2015



# Cañar Mercado and Biblián Church

## Cañar Mercado and Biblián Church





# Cañar Mercado and Biblián Church

After going to the [Cañar animal market](#), we went into town to the main mercado for some people watching. According to Alberto (our driver for the day), most of the younger generation left the city to find work in the United States or Spain, so you mostly find older Cañari people in this town of 225,000. On Sundays, Cañar comes to life with several markets, from the indoor central mercado to the smaller potato market.





# Cañar Mercado and Biblián Church

*Every local mercado in Ecuador is interesting, and this one in Cañar was no different.*



After leaving the Cañar mercado, and having lunch, we traveled to Biblián, on our way back to Cuenca. Biblián is the capital city of the Cañar canton of Ecuador, with a population a little over 20,000. According to Alberto (our driver for the day), most of the original inhabitants of this city have left the country, a statement supported by [Wikipedia](#).

Our last stop of the day was at the [Santuario de la Virgen del Rocío](#). This church sits high on a hill overlooking the city. You must then climb a series of very steep steps up to the church itself, giving you a tremendous overview of the valley city below. This is very close to [Incapirca](#), an Inca ruins that is a popular tourist stop. We were the only gringos visiting the church though, being out of the way, and less known.

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, July 14, 2015

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

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# National Strike — Cuenca Style

## National Strike — Cuenca Style





# National Strike – Cuenca Style

Ecuadorian president Correa has had an unprecedented 84% approval rating in his country until recently. He has improved education on many fronts, reduced crime in every category, improved infrastructure, and generally been a very positive, and thus popular, president. With his political party having an overwhelming majority in Congress, he can push through almost any new law he wishes. Unfortunately, he is also seen as brash and egocentric, and has often been accused of feeling that he alone, knows what is best for the country. As a result, he tried to push through several unpopular laws earlier this year, and his popularity has fallen below 50% for the first time since he was elected in 2007.

For the past couple weeks, some groups have warned there would be general strike today. This would centered in the three largest cities of Quito, Guayaquil, and here in Cuenca. Protests have always been peaceful in the past few years in Cuenca, so I decided to go see for myself.

What I observed was a peaceful march through the streets of Cuenca Centro. While protesters carried banners and shouted slogans, police maintained a loose barricade to clear all traffic on their route, and to assure that no trouble occurred. Though there were reports of small problems after dark, I did not witness any trouble at all.

# National Strike – Cuenca Style





# National Strike – Cuenca Style

Parque Calderon is in the center of Cuenca Centro, and is always an active place. Today, the government set up booths from apparently every ministry in the government, where people could get information on what help the government could provide. The "Cocinas de Induccion" booth in the middle-left image above, was giving people information on how to convert their kitchen cook tops from propane to electricity, and explaining the subsidies that are available to help the poor make the change. Other booths were similarly helping Ecuadorians understand the importance of their environment, how the new 911 system works, and even teaching children to play chess. There was also a stage on the corner of the park for musicians, but there weren't any playing in the couple of hours I spent there.



# National Strike – Cuenca Style

Hornado, or roasted pig, is a favorite Ecuadorian lunch meal, and booths were set up for that too. People crowded the food booths, where I had a large pig lunch with more food than I could eat -- for \$3.00. There were also some teenage boys practicing break-dancing in the rotunda. Parents took turns handing their children to the mounted police (lower right image), so they could take photographs of their kids on horseback.

Overall, the atmosphere was more like a festival than a protest, which is clearly what the government wanted to project.

Here is a short clip showing the marchers going down a street in Centro.

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, August 13, 2015

[Event](#), [Festival](#), [Food](#), [Police](#)

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# Lost In The Jungle (Sucúa)

## Lost In The Jungle (Sucúa)



# Lost In The Jungle (Sucúa)

Last week we spent a few days in the Amazon, called the Oriente by Ecuadorians. We had wanted a little time in warmer weather (Cuenca has been pretty cold all of August), so when a local tour operator said he wanted to do an exploratory trip and was looking for two people to join him, we jumped at the chance. We started in Sucúa, a sleepy little village about 15 minutes drive South of Macas.

When I was a kid in Cub Scouts, I was told that if I was ever lost in a forest, I could look at the moss on the trees to help me get out. I was told that it mostly grows on the North side of the tree, so I could always know which way North was. (Being 7 years old, they did not discuss Southern Hemisphere being opposite.) One of the highlights of Sucúa is a botanical park, which we visited. Turns out it is really just a walk in the forest. Looking at the trees, I was reminding of that Cub Scout lesson, and realized if I tried to use it here, I would get totally lost -- on the Equator, moss grows on all sides (since the sun is directly overhead all year).



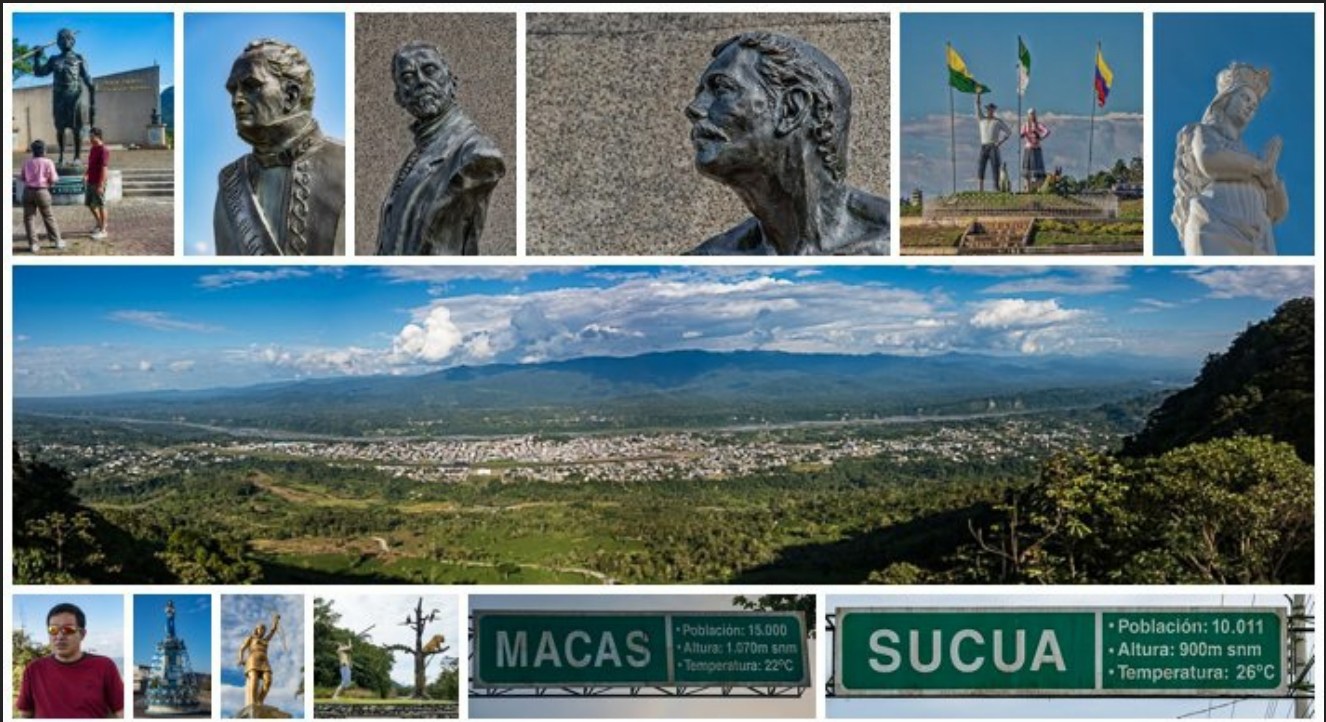
# Lost In The Jungle (Sucúa)



The other major stop we made in the town of Asunción, where we visited with a Shuar native family just outside of town. The kids did a ceremonial dance, and the men took us on a short hike to a waterfall, where they performed more rituals.



# Lost In The Jungle (Sucúa)



Enroute to Macas, we stopped at a small park that consisted of statues of Ecuadorian historic leaders. Each small town had a statue in the center of a roundabout, signifying something related to the city. Oddly, the signs announcing the city limits actually had a temperature printed right along with population and elevation. Apparently, the temperature is pretty consistent in this area?

Macas has a huge statue of Mary on a hill overlooking the city. The road is dirt and difficult to travel, but we got to the top, which allowed a nice panorama of the city below.





# Lost In The Jungle (Sucúa)

We had to divert around part of the downtown area of Macas, because some protesters had taken over the governor's office and barricaded the streets. There were lots of police in the area, but they let the protesters alone, standing by only in case of violence. This protest was independent of the National Strike of a few days before (see earlier blog posts on the strike in Cuenca). Here, they were unhappy that a road had not been completed between two villages -- apparently because the needed environmental impact studies had not been done.

An unexpected find were some of the best beef and fusion restaurants in Ecuador. If you go to Sucúa, be sure to check out ***Roncos***, whose owners were formerly from New York, and know what "medium rare" means. We heard that the beef was better in the Oriente, and we had the most tender filet mignon ever. The fusion flavors of ***Dulce Carbon*** were scrumptious, however our favorite place was ***Chocoberry***, where we treated ourselves to their large bowl of fresh fruit topped with yogurt every day. And for lunch, be sure to check out the traditional meal called "Ayampaco", which are goodies baked in a leaf, at the restaurant, ***Asadero Chelita***.

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, September 1, 2015

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

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# Turn Left At The Cow (Puyo)

## Turn Left At The Cow (Puyo)



Turn Left At The Cow (Puyo)



# Turn Left At The Cow (Puyo)

On the fifth day of our [road trip to the Amazon](#) (aka Oriente), we decided to take an unplanned side trip to [Puyo](#), about a two hour drive north of Sucúa, where we spent the first few days. We had wanted to visit the monkey refuge known as [Fundación Los Monos Selva y Vida](#) a couple years ago, but got rained out. We weren't exactly sure what to expect, but it had sounded interesting, and things were a bit slow in Sucúa, so off we went.

As we arrived in Puyo, we asked directions for how to reach "Los Monos." We were told to take a specific road out of town, and then "turn left at the cows." Huh?? We kept getting the same directions though, so headed out and hoped for the best. Sure enough, a couple miles out of town, there was a *statue of a cow and calf* (see photo top left above), that was at the intersection we were supposed to turn left at!

What we found was a fairly large refuge / conservation / research / zoo with various monkeys and a few other animals from South America. There were maybe half a dozen monkeys roaming free, while the others were in large cages. Unfortunately, we got there fairly late in the day, so could only spend an hour before they closed. Some day, we may make it back and spend longer. It might even be interesting to volunteer for awhile, as they do thrive on volunteers -- if only it were closer to Cuenca...

# Turn Left At The Cow (Puyo)



We also went to a bird refuge -- [Parque Real](#), a bird zoo in Puyo that houses approximately 500 birds from around the world. \$1 got us entrance to a very well maintained private zoo that was opened in 2001 by a couple of Puyo collectors. Interestingly, it is now illegal for anyone to own a caged or pet bird in Ecuador, but it appears this couple convinced authorities to allow them to keep what they had created prior to the ban.

Back in Macas, we decided to go a zoo that we had heard about. We caught a bus from Sucúa to Macas, where we watched people using an informal ride sharing program. Cars and taxis would pull up to the curb, indicate how many seats they had, and someone (or more) from the bus line would run over and jump in. We were told cost \$1 to share a ride to Macas. The bus was only \$1.15, which is how we got there.



# Turn Left At The Cow (Puyo)

We then took a taxi out to the zoo. It turned out there were two private zoos, and the driver suggested what he considered the better and larger. When we arrived, we discovered it was actually a small private zoo. It consisted of no more than 20 cages, none of which was really in very good condition. It was interesting to see the tigrillo (upper middle images above) and a single leopard. They then gave me a boa constrictor to hold (left middle above), and a couple of other small animals. 45 minutes and we were ready to leave though...

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, September 2, 2015

[Animals](#), [Ecuador](#), [Education](#), [Travel](#)

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# Shuar Tour Plus Car Breakdown (Secúa)

## Shuar Tour Plus Car Breakdown (Secúa)





# Shuar Tour Plus Car Breakdown (Secúa)

On our final full day in the Secúa area, Evelyn wanted to get more experience with the Shuar community (who were known for their process for shrinking heads as recently as the 1950's), so Gabriel arranged for a more in-depth visit with another family. This family was far more remote than the one we visited on the first day. After an hour drive by 4 wheel drive across unpaved roads, we were dropped off in the middle of nowhere. There was a guide with horses for us to go the rest of the way, because the car could go no further.

We then rode horseback for another hour, across impossibly rutted roads with the horse sinking up past his knees in mud (do horses have knees?). In some parts, there was no road at all. After an hour, we got off the horses -- because it became too steep for even them to go further! The last part on foot was only a couple hundred meters to the family's two room hut, and we were finally there. We were greeted by the patrician, who explained in passable English that he wanted to build a Shuar experience destination for visitors to come, but that not much was in place yet, not even the compost outhouses (we used the nearest tree as needed).

The rest of the family was dressed in their best blue dresses for the gringos that had come for a few hours. We were first painted with traditional face styles. Next we went on a surprisingly arduous hike through the rain forest, down to the river. The hike had several places that were essentially vertical for 3 or 4 meters (10+ feet), requiring small footholds and grasping on protruding tree trunks and branches. We then had to scramble back up the same route, back to their home.

# Shuar Tour Plus Car Breakdown (Secúa)

The tour was to include fishing. However, when we got to the river, one member of the tribe went upstream, out of sight, and caught a small trout via spear fishing. We did not really fish at all, and his fishing was done entirely out of sight from us, so we had little more than a rest on a rock on the river. When I gave feedback that he should at least be doing this in our vision, so we could see how it was done, the leader clearly had no idea why I would want that. They have some work to do on their "experience" yet, including learning that many older gringos would not have survived a hike of that nature at all.

The "experience" was also to include a lunch. We were served a thin broth with a small piece of chicken bone in it... and that was all. Though not obese by any stretch, the family was clearly well enough fed that they must have eaten far more than we were offered. Overall, I am afraid that I cannot recommend this portion of the trip, and think the first day's quick meet-and-greet was actually the better alternative.



Turn Left At The Cow (Puyo)



The next day we stopped by the local Sucúa mercado for a quick look at what an Amazonian native market was like. It was pretty much the same as our mercado in Cuenca, albeit much smaller.

The person we had arranged this trip with just disappeared the night before. No word to anyone. Gone. Seems he decided he had to be back in Cuenca for some other business, but never bothered to tell anyone -- including our driver. Fortunately, he left his driver behind, so we had a car to get back to Cuenca... or so we thought.

We had noticed a bad noise in the car for the entire trip. Sounded like a transmission problem to me. Sure enough, part way back to Cuenca, the car suddenly started smoking seriously bad. Pulled over to the side, and there was transmission fluid leaking onto the road. A Good Samaritan stopped (we were out of cell phone range), and drove Gabriel (our driver) back to the town we had just passed. Several hours later, the car had been driven (very slowly, and downhill) back to a mechanic in town. More hours passed and they determined that it needed parts that could not be gotten for at least another day.

# International Day of Older Persons 2015

## International Day of Older Persons 2015



*[Post by Evelyn]*

It seems like there's a celebration in Cuenca every week, and today was no different.



# International Day of Older Persons 2015

When Burt was walking to Spanish class this morning, he was surprised to see people "pushing" several wheel chairs down from El Centro to Otorongo Plaza. Because the street was so steep, the drivers were actually in front holding back the wheel chairs from going too fast. Even with the car traffic backed up with the wheel chair traffic, not a single car honked.

Tents had been set up for a large event, and bus loads of indigenous were coming into town, many carrying and waving yellow balloons, to celebrate International Seniors Day. We very seldom see wheel chairs or walkers in Cuenca, due to the steep hills and poor sidewalk conditions. There were more in the plaza today than we had seen in total over the past 3 years.

And I have never seen such enthusiasm for tossing inflated rubber balls and hula hoops, as the staff were encouraging seniors to stay active.

We learned afterwards that the United Nations had designated October 1st as the "National Day of Older Persons". Cuenca's Ministry of Economic and Social Inclusion has programs for seniors through October 8th.

# International Day of Older Persons 2015



, October 1, 2015

Event, Festival

International Day of Older Persons 2015



# First Cuenca Art Walk

## First Cuenca Art Walk



# First Cuenca Art Walk

Last night was the first official Art Walk in Cuenca. We had these in California when we lived there, and it was always interesting to browse through the artist's open studios. The California ones were open to any artist that wished to participate, and frankly some of the art was not very good...

This Cuenca Art Walk was a very pleasant surprise in contrast. The art ranged from good to excellent, and showed just what a range of fantastic artists exist in Cuenca (plus some surrounding communities, where some artists drove in from).

The only disappointment was that all 40 venues were only open for 3 hours, from 5PM until 8PM. There was so much to see that it was impossible to visit them all in that amount of time.

We only visited half the 40 locations ourselves, because of the restricted time. I am only showing a tiny portion of a very few of my favorite pieces in this blog. With over 500 photos taken between a friend (David Owen) and ourselves that night, this would be a record setting blog entry if I attempted to show a larger sampling.

If you would like a copy of the full catalog, listing all the venues and artists, you can download it [here](#).



# First Cuenca Art Walk



Most exhibits were attended by the artist, so we had a chance to talk (albeit briefly, because of the number of spaces to cover) with many of them. One artist was unable to attend in person, so he had his partner represent him, while he attended via Skype (lower middle image above).

# First Cuenca Art Walk



As we were walking between studios, these mimes approached us, asking for a donation for a local orphanage. This is a fairly common activity for High School kids to reach out and do community service, while practicing their theater skills. We gave a small donation, and they were eager to pose for our cameras.



# Madre Tierra Festival 2015

## Madre Tierra Festival 2015





# Madre Tierra Festival 2015

This weekend was the first Madre Tierra (or "Mother Earth") festival in Tarqui, a town about 15 minutes from Cuenca by taxi. The eco-festival was organized by Sarah HB, a long time expat friend here in Cuenca. It consisted of 43 workshops, dozens of vendors, music and theater. The festival was very well attended, with many of the workshops being filled to capacity. Above is a small collection of some of the vendors, selling their organic and sustainable wares.



*Workshops were held in four tents plus a geodesic dome. There was a campground available for the weekend, where many of the attendees and instructors stayed for the entire festival.*



# Madre Tierra Festival 2015



*There were a dozen vendors making lunch for the attendees, mostly chicken and cuy (known in the US as "guinea pig"). We opted for cuy, choosing a nice fat one off the BBQ spit, and had a delicious lunch.*



# Madre Tierra Festival 2015



*Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves -- even the kids.*

, October 5, 2015

Ecuador, Event, Festival, Food



# Iglesia La Merced Symphony

## Iglesia La Merced Symphony



As we have noted before, the Cuenca symphony is free. They play at a few different venues around town. Tonight is the first time they have played at the Iglesia La Merced that we can remember. This church is only a block from our apartment, and we had never been in it, so it seemed that we should attend another symphony tonight.

There was heavy rain for several hours before the concert, which probably reduced the attendance. Still, the church was mostly full, with only a few seats here and there vacant. As we entered this magnificent 18th century church, we were handed programs, telling us (in Spanish, of course) what would be played, and why the symphony was here tonight. This was to celebrate the 131st anniversary of the opening of the La Merced church.

# Iglesia La Merced Symphony

The music consisted of selections from Mozart, Haydn and Franck, and was done with humor as well as typical symphonic musical talent. Towards the end of Haydn's Symphony #45, the orchestra began to leave the stage in groups of 5 or 6. The conductor waved with his baton for them to return, but they continued to leave. The piece ended with a solo violin (as the music is intended to be played) and the rest of the stage empty. The audience was clearly amused and confused. The woman sitting next to us jokingly said that maybe the orchestra was leaving because they had not been paid by the government.

After the main program was over, they received a standing ovation. At that point, many (mostly gringos, I noted) started to leave. However, the orchestra then came back with an encore, which included individuals and small groups standing while playing solos, as the audience continued to erupt in applause.



# Random Walk After Two Years, Part 1

## Random Walk After Two Years, Part 1



# Random Walk After Two Years, Part 1

Today marks the two year anniversary of when we first moved to Ecuador. We had visited Ecuador four times prior, and Cuenca specifically twice, but Oct 23, 2013 was the date we arrived with the intention of staying as residents. Many people since then have asked if we expect this to be our last move. My answer has always been the same -- we did not move here to die. This is just the "next adventure" in our life, and it seemed like a good way to kick off retirement. Some day we may find another place that calls to us, and we will move again. It might be Europe, or another South American country, or even someplace back in the US. We do not have any long term plans, and that is exactly how we like it at this stage. That being said, we moved to Berkeley, Calif in 1988 with the expectation of living there three to five years. We did finally move -- 26 years later, when we retired and came to Ecuador. Who knows? We might be in Cuenca for the next 26 years too!

I thought I would wind up our second year with a collection of mural photos from around Cuenca. I will also go on another "random walk" of ideas and thoughts about living here. I haven't done that in quite a long time. The following is no particular order. It is largely "train of thought," and if you think my train gets derailed sometimes, well, that in itself may say something about learning to live and love a South American city... [Note: It turned out my Random Walk got a bit long, so I have broken it into two posts.]

First up. [We had an earthquake last week](#). Woke both of us up at 5:10AM. We laid in bed feeling the building sway... then stop... then start to sway again. Lasted a total of roughly 8 seconds. Felt like the building would fall over. When it was done, we discovered it was a 5.6 quake centered about 50 miles from us. No damage anywhere in the city. I am surprised and impressed that a city built well over 100 years ago holds up so well to shakes like this. Coming from California, I have been in several big shakes, but this felt as bad as anything I ever experienced there, and the damage was no worse (or even better) than in California. I think Cuenca was just trying to make feel at home...



# Random Walk After Two Years, Part 1

Second, politics. I have heard lots of comments from those still in the States, wondering if Ecuador is about to explode with political turmoil, or implode with economic collapse. Yes, there have been a [few political protests lately](#), but nothing as violent as many in the States in recent month. And no mass killings here... There are many challenges facing Ecuador -- falling oil prices, two volcanoes likely to blow soon, el Nino looking like it may hit our coast with a bulls-eye. I could write an entire post on the politics and economics of Ecuador, but the short story is that they will likely survive. And if they do collapse under the Perfect Storm of problems? We can easily pick up and move to our next adventure somewhere else. In other words, I don't spend a lot of time or anguish worrying about it.

Before I get off that topic though, President Correa is immensely popular in this country, and for good reason. After [12 presidents in 15 years, including two that only lasted three days](#) we finally have stability here. Unlike other South American (and elsewhere) heads of state, Correa spent the money on improving schools, roads, social security, and improving the lives of the people here. I can shake my head at some of the seemingly stupid things he says, or his occasional paranoia, but there is no denying that he has improved the country dramatically in his tenure, and there is nobody else obvious to take up the reins and continue his progress.

# Random Walk After Two Years, Part 1

Back to what makes Cuenca and Ecuador special. Celebrations. Always. These are people that will celebrate almost anything at the drop of a hat. Starting next weekend, we will be celebrating Cuenca independence. After a two day battle, Cuenca became independent on November 3, 1820. Though the battle only lasted two days, the celebration will go on for five days! You can see an agenda listing more than 300 events over that weekend by downloading [here](#). With links to my blog posts from prior years, in the next couple months, we will have [Dia de los Muertos](#), a massive [Christmas parade](#), a very unique take on [New Year's Eve](#), [Fiesta de los Inocentes](#), and of course, [Carnaval](#). That doesn't even count the numerous parades and fireworks that are unannounced pretty much every week. It is a rare week that we cannot see fireworks from our apartment windows.

And then there are frequent music activities. The Jazz Society is less than a block away, where you can have a decent Italian meal while listening to jazz four nights a week. The music is free, though they ask for a \$5 donation, to pay the musicians and provide musical training to students. The Cuenca symphony plays roughly a dozen times per year, in various concert halls and churches around town, and is always totally free.

Tune in tomorrow for more of a rapid-fire conclusion to this Random Walk around Cuenca.



# Random Walk After Two Years, Part 2

## Random Walk After Two Years, Part 2



Now that we have been in Cuenca for two years, we are going on a Random Walk of thoughts about living here. [Part 1 of this walk was posted yesterday](#). We'll open today with a collection of mosaics on walls around Cuenca, shown above.

# Random Walk After Two Years, Part 2

Perhaps one of the largest changes for us in coming to Cuenca is our social calendar. I rarely mention this in our blog, because I don't want to put guests on the spot, and doubt you are interested in who was over for dinner last night. In California though, we would have guests over for dinner maybe 3 or 4 times per year. Last week, we were with guests 5 times in 4 days (one lunch and four dinners) within a single week. Though that was a particularly busy week, we have had guests over 97 times in the two years we have been here (yep, I keep a list, with what we serve, so we don't cook the same meal if they come multiple times ).

I had expected to get more involved with volunteer activities once I retired. We have done some, but so far only photographically, providing publicity photos for the [Alliance Francais Music Festival](#), [CinterAndes](#), [Madre Tierra Festival](#), and the [Cuenca Art Walk](#). We have recently agreed to start working with a local orphanage as a guest chef, and we will see how that goes.

Which brings up the next big change. I started cooking in 2002, when Pauline (Evelyn's sister) jokingly gave me [The Four Ingredient Cookbook](#). After Evelyn had done all the cooking for 30 years, it seemed fair for me to start that chore. Though I found I was reasonably good at cooking, it was just that -- a chore. Now that we are retired in Cuenca, it has become more of a passion. I now try at least one new recipe each week. Not all are winners, but a surprisingly large percentage are quite good and are then made multiple times. I have posted a few of our [favorites in my blog](#) over the past couple years.

Perhaps the largest surprise is that I have not really done very much with photography since arriving here, other than for posting in this blog. Without the constant high level competition of the [Berkeley Camera Club](#), I find I have little motivation to do highly [creative photography](#) anymore. There is a [camera club in Cuenca](#), but their quality is nowhere near the level of the BCC, and they generally don't like Photoshop, which is used heavily in all my creative efforts.



# Random Walk After Two Years, Part 2

Our Spanish is definitely improving, though much slower than we would like. We both take classes each week. We can now hold basic conversations with taxi drivers, or with our few Cuenecan friends that do not speak English. It will be a long time, if ever, before we can have a free flowing rapid discussion in any language other than English though. Fortunately, there are a *lot* of expats in Cuenca, and we meet new friends every month. A few are also leaving. One couple moved to Ireland earlier this year, and another friend is moving to Portugal soon. A couple others have returned to the States.

Which brings us to our travel. When we were working, we traveled a lot, but always 3 weeks then rush back to work, and only once per year. Now we are free to spend more time when we wish, and to travel more than once a year. In the two years here, we have made separate trips to California, Florida, Peru, Manhattan and New Jersey, Iceland, Argentina, and throughout much of Ecuador. We have been partially constrained by Ecuadorian immigration law for our first two years of our resident visa. In January, when our visa 2nd anniversary occurs, we will be allowed to be out of the country for longer periods. We already have plans for trips to Colombia, Turkey and Europe in the coming year.

I can't very well talk about our experience in Cuenca without mentioning our apartment. We are in probably the best part of town, on the Southern edge of the Old Town, known as El Centro, in a spacious 4 bedroom penthouse. We estimate there are roughly 30 restaurants within a two block radius (a future blog will actually count and report on them), many of which are quite excellent. We are only three blocks from the main square (Parque Calderon), half a block from the Jazz Society, four blocks to the local mercado (where I buy enough fresh fruits and veggies to fill two large bags each week for about \$6), six blocks to SuperMaxi (where I get milk, meat and other items weekly), etc. No need for a car, when the bus costs 12 cents or a taxi costs \$1.50 anywhere in town.

# Random Walk After Two Years, Part 2

We did have a frustrating period earlier this year when our elevator broke down. After much negotiation and payment up front, we finally got it working again... after three months of needing to take the 5 flights of stairs to get to our penthouse apartment. We were thankful the building was not higher for that three months...! Our internet connection is also maddeningly slow. Even though we pay for 10 Mbps, there are days when it is only 30 Kbps -- slower than the dial-up lines we used 30 years ago. We have been told that fiber optic cable is supposed to be laid to our building, but it was to be here last February, and it is still not available. Neighboring streets have gotten it in recent months though, so we still have hope.

I could keep going with more random thoughts about living here, but I think this post is already getting too long. For summary, we are quite happy here -- more so than either of us really expected to be. We may not live here forever, but for now, this is home, and we like it that way.



# Art Expo Plus Outdoor Symphony

## Art Expo Plus Outdoor Symphony



Saturday will officially kick off the Cuenca Independence celebrations. There are over 300 different events planned in town between now and Tuesday, the majority of which are free. Cuenca expects 100,000 visitors to come to town over the weekend, and this is in a city with a population of only 450,000, so things will almost certainly become rather crowded for a few days.

# Art Expo Plus Outdoor Symphony

Some events get an early start on the festivities. One example was a private art exhibit tonight at Casa Asvoria, Plaza Otorongo, a 15 minute walk from our apartment. I happened to run into Eduardo Segovia yesterday, a world-famous ceramicist. He told me that he was showing off some of his art tonight, so we had to go. When we arrived, and looked around, I discovered he meant some of his collection of art, rather than new art he had created. That was added to by the collection of Karen Kennedy, whose husband Boris Ordoñez was also exhibiting. We had seen a few of these pieces before, at Segovia's home, but it was an impressive collection of 19 renown Latin American artists shown together in a pleasant temporary gallery.



# Art Expo Plus Outdoor Symphony

The gallery is also where I take Spanish language classes, which is how I happened to run into Segovia yesterday. Our Spanish professor was also there, and was surprised when she discovered that Evelyn and I were married. We have both taken classes from her, but never together. It was interesting holding the entire conversation with her in Spanish. Talking about it later, we realized just how good she is at putting conversation at the level of the person she is talking to, and putting them at ease. I always leave Ana thinking I can really speak Spanish... and then realizing that is only true when speaking to someone willing and able to keep the conversation at my 3 year-old level...



# Art Expo Plus Outdoor Symphony

We could only stay a short time at the art reception, because the Cuenca Symphony had another free concert tonight too. For the first time since we have been here, it was an outdoor venue, at Parque de la Madre -- also about a 10 minute walk from our apartment. The Cuenca Symphony concerts are all different, frequently including music I have never heard before. The symphony is also often whimsical at times, and tonight was a guest conductor, Patricio Alomoto.

About half way into the concert tonight, the conductor started speaking to the audience (in Spanish, of course). I only picked up part of what he said, but he appeared to be talking about a "tourist musician who be joining us tonight." A man then entered stage-right, looking confused. One of the violinists approached and gave him a rubber apron. He gestured to the crowd that he didn't know why he needed it, then put it on. Another violinist then got up and handed him two hammers. After more comedy of gestures, the man walked over to a tree stump and tapped the hammers on an anvil that was sitting on it. At that point, the symphony went into their next piece, while this "visiting musician" played the anvil with his hammers with them (man on left in center photo above). Typical Cuenca Symphony humor.

Symphony performances here often also include either a famed soloist, or a famed singer. Tonight Linda Alvarado joined the symphony to sing with the last several pieces. She was obviously well known and loved by the audience, who joined in singing on one piece (that I had never heard before), and clapping at her encouragement on another (photo lower right above).

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, October 29, 2015

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

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# Send In the Clowns

## Send In the Clowns





# Send In the Clowns

Halloween is not a big holiday in Cuenca. However, with more expats moving in and their kids grown up, the adults have gotten into the spirit of Halloween celebrations. This year, there were several Halloween parties held at local restaurants, as well as some private parties with people in costume. Evelyn went out earlier this week, and ended going to one of the party stores to find hair and make up. The selections were quite limited, unless you made your own outfit, so we went out as clowns. The kids were shyly waving at Evelyn (center image above) on the public bus, as they weren't expecting to see a clown on their bus.





# Send In the Clowns

Today also marks the start of a four-day celebration of Cuenca Independence. There will be more than 20 streets in Centro Cuenca (the old historic district, where we live) closed to cars for the next four days. Many of those streets are devoted to showing and selling crafts, such as these above.



*Many of the craft sellers were more interesting than the crafts themselves.*



# Day of Remembrance

## Day of Remembrance



Cuenca Independence Day weekend celebration continued today. There was a children's puppet show at the base of the Escalinita steps next to CIDAP, and there were much more arts and crafts being displayed on closed city streets and plazas throughout the neighborhoods compared to prior years. We also attended a party for Día de los Difuntos ("Day Of The Deceased") party (center image above), where we each received a **guagua de pan**, a traditional Ecuadorian bread served at this time of year, which appears as a swaddled baby, and represents those infants who have died.



# Day of Remembrance



We then crossed the street to the Cementerio Municipal, the largest cemetery in Cuenca. Families come on both Nov 1 and 2 to honor their deceased, and to care for their graves. As in much of Latin America, many graves are of a "condominium style" and are only rented for as long as the family continues to pay the rent for the space. A few wealthier families are buried in full ground graves, while the very wealthiest families have entire crypts.



# Independence Day, Cuenca 2015

## Independence Day, Cuenca 2015





# Independence Day, Cuenca 2015

Today is officially Independence Day in Cuenca, Ecuador, though the celebration has gone on for four days already. See our earlier post [here](#) and [here](#) for the start of the weekend. We started the day by taking the bus to Parque Paraiso, the largest public park in Cuenca, and one that we hesitate to admit we have not visited in all our time here. We had heard about a "parade of the giant mannequins," but never saw any sign of such. Instead, we saw the typical Cuenca park, filled with families having a good time and having fun together. There was a kid's racetrack, where they could peddle around the loop, or (more commonly) the younger ones were pushed by their parents. There is also a lake with paddle-boats, but surprisingly, the boats were locked up today.

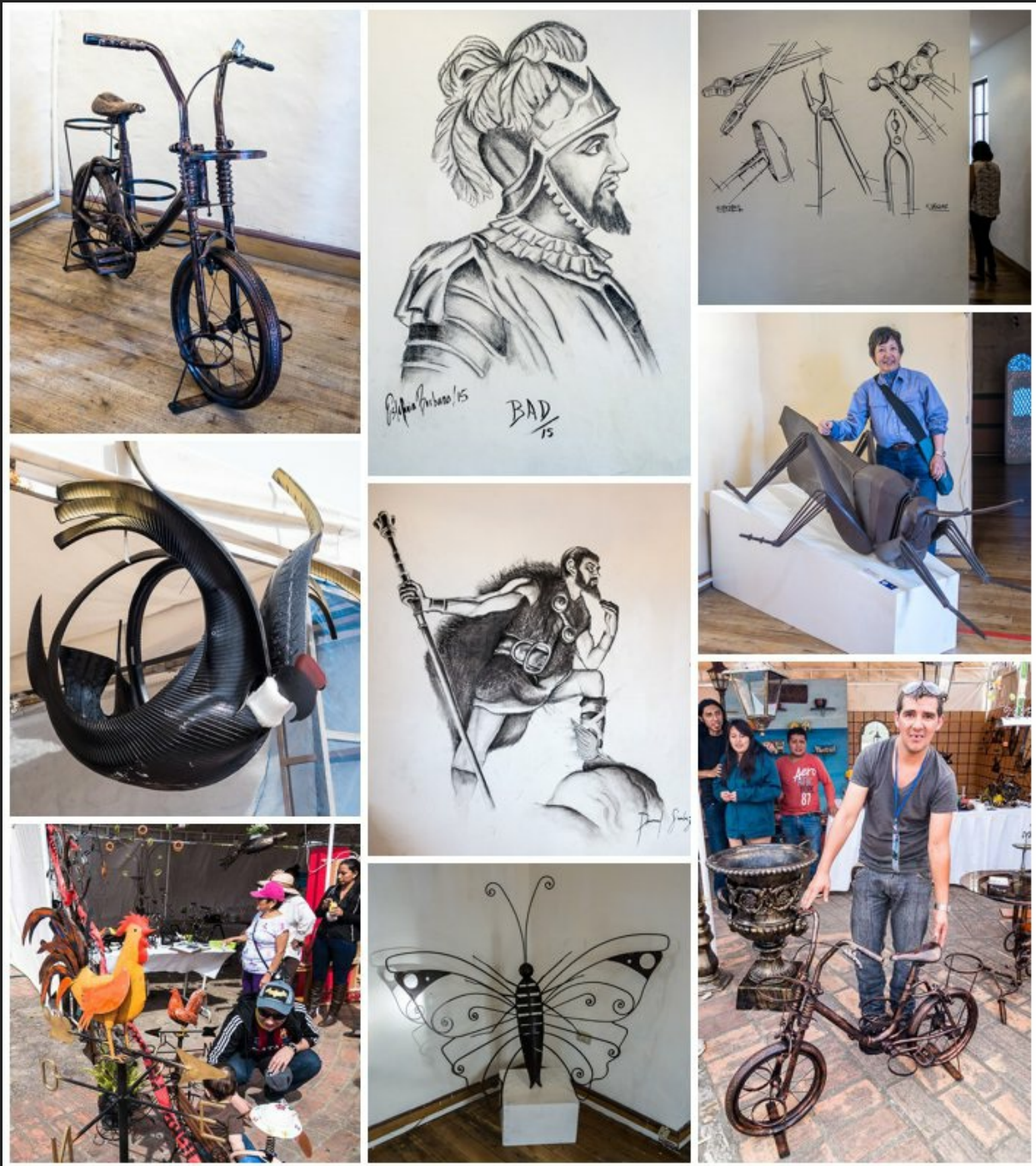
# Independence Day, Cuenca 2015



Of course, what is an Independence Day celebration without street food? There were plenty of vendors for candied apples, papas fritas (freshly fried potato chips), watermelon, cuy (known as guinea pigs in the States), chickens, and our choice for the day -- BBQ pork (they BBQ the entire pig, and you can choose which part of the remaining pig you want).



# Independence Day, Cuenca 2015





# Independence Day, Cuenca 2015



As we carried our new bicycle planter treasure back, we were surprised there were no taxis to help us with the load. We carried it a couple blocks, then noticed a hundred or more people lining the streets. We asked one couple that came up with chairs to wait, and they said Correa (the president of Ecuador) was coming. We knew he would be in town today, so apparently he was coming here. We sat and waited.



# Independence Day, Cuenca 2015

After about half an hour, police on motorcycles came racing down the streets, clearing it of pedestrians (cars had been blocked a long time earlier). Shortly after that, kids on go-karts came racing down the street. Seems we had stumbled upon an Independence Day Go Kart race! I had seen one of these before, where they send off teams 3 or 4 at a time, and that was what we saw today.

After about half the kids had passed us, ten adult men dressed in drag came dancing down the street! No signs or other indication of reason, but I am guessing they were Cuenca's version of Gay Pride parade (lower left image above). Most people ignored them, other than to glance and then look to the next karts. As soon as they passed, the rest of the kids came by. One very young boy had trouble, and the drag queens joined in to give him a push to get him back in the race.

Such is another day in this paradise called Cuenca. We never did see Correa though...

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, November 3, 2015

[Art](#), [Event](#), [Family](#), [Festival](#), [Sports](#)

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# Dead Tree Art

## Dead Tree Art





# Dead Tree Art

You never want to go out your front door without a camera in Cuenca, since you never know what you will trip across. For the next month or so, there will be many random pop-up parades and festivities, if past years are a guide. Today I crossed Parque de la Madre, enroute to our local grocery store, and came across massive amounts of sawdust on the ground and trees being chopped up -- for art. Sitting by one of the sculptures is the sign in the upper left, which translates as "The sculptures are on dead trees."

Apparently, some trees died in the park, and rather than dig them up, they decided to bring in artists to create totems. Since this is a city full of wall mural art, I guess it is not much of a surprise that they took this approach. A rather nice gift to the city to start the new year with.

I'll be interested to see how these all look when complete, and how they weather in coming years. Thought you might like to see them while still under construction though.

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, December 22, 2015

Art

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# Niño Viajero 2015, Part 1

## Niño Viajero 2015, Part 1



Christmas Eve has a massive parade in Cuenca every year. You can see our blog and photos from prior years here -- [2012](#), [2013](#), and [2014](#). In past years, we have photographed the preparations of the floats and participants. This year we decided to instead go to where the baby Jesus statue was being kept, and watch it proceed to the head of the parade, half a dozen blocks away. The mayor of Cuenca was there, giving interviews and taking the chance for a photo op. He then became the first bearer of the statue as it left the church.



# Niño Viajero 2015, Part 1





# Niño Viajero 2015, Part 1



The Ecuadorian National Police were the honor guard for the statue procession. They stood outside the Carmen de la Asunción church (beside the flower market in Centro), waiting for the service to complete. They then formed a nearly impenetrable barrier around the statue bearers, walking with locked arms ahead and behind, while each side was lined with officers whose arms were locked into the belt of the officer ahead of them.

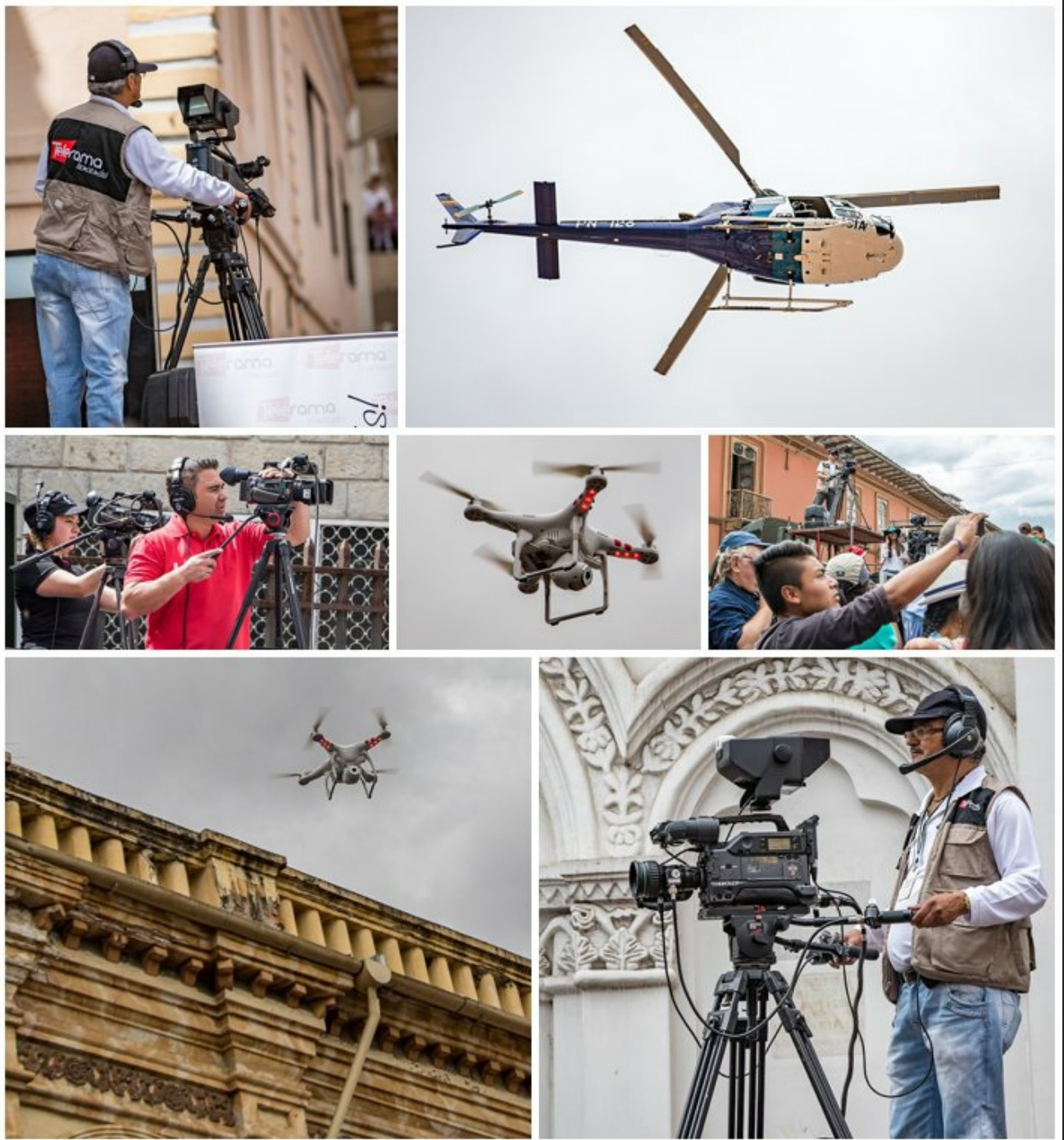


# Niño Viajero 2015, Part 1



Each bearer carried the statue for one block. It was then handed off to the next intended bearer, until it finally reached its position of honor, on a pedestal in front of Iglesia San Sebastián (center image above), where the parade began.

# Niño Viajero 2015, Part 1



While the statue was being walked to its pedestal, the National Police Mounted Band (not really sure of their proper name) marched on horseback behind the statue, playing their music while on the move.



# Niño Viajero 2015, Part 1

Every news organization was represented along the parade route, several doing live interviews and descriptions, like you would see when watching the Rose Bowl parade on TV in the States. There was even a news helicopter and a drone doing aerial video of the parade.

Come back tomorrow for Part 2, where we cover the parade itself.

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, December 24, 2015

[Event](#), [Festival](#), [Music](#), [Police](#)

# Niño Viajero 2015, Part 2

## Niño Viajero 2015, Part 2





# Niño Viajero 2015, Part 2

The annual Christmas Eve parade happened yesterday in Cuenca. See [here](#) for the first part of this blog post, covering the pre-parade activity. This part 2 shows some of what the actual parade was like. The parade was led by an angel on horseback. Mary and Joseph carrying a baby Jesus doll were common, as were other angels and wise men.



This parade is mostly centered around the kids, and even infants are dressed up in various costumes. Most derive from Christian themes, but there is also the occasional clown (upper right) too.

# Niño Viajero 2015, Part 2



Some parade groups attempted to keep the street clear for their dancing by having kids hold up moving barriers that followed them. As soon as the barrier advanced and was gone, the audience piled into the street creating the chaos common in prior years.



# Niño Viajero 2015, Part 2



Kids were everywhere, both in the parade and in the audience -- the latter often on the shoulders of their father.



# Niño Viajero 2015, Part 2



Along the parade were periodic marching bands, some composed of kids, and others of older men. Though girls were in the kid bands, there were no women in any of the adult bands...?



# Niño Viajero 2015, Part 2



There were scattered groups in exotic costumes. I don't pretend to even know what most of them were supposed to represent though...

# Niño Viajero 2015, Part 2



There were also many dancing groups. Some would dance down the street, while others would stop and then dance in one place for a minute or so, before moving along half a block and repeating their routines.



# Niño Viajero 2015, Part 2



Though kids dominated the parade, there were plenty of young adult women too. Though there were some men in this age group, they were hugely outnumbered by the women, who were also usually more ornately dressed.



# Niño Viajero 2015, Part 2



Older women enjoyed the parade too, though most of them were in the audience. I imagine many of these women were in the parade in decades past.

, December 25, 2015

Event, Festival, Music