

Ecuador and Colombia

January and February 2023

My flight from Florida arrived in Quito at 11:30 PM on New Year's Eve. Clearing Customs was relatively easy and I was in a taxi to my hotel by 11:50. I celebrated the New Year with the driver. Hooray! 2023 is off to a fine start. Later that day, I flew to Cuenca, a city with a little over 500,000 inhabitants. It's situated in a valley high in the Andes at around 8400 feet above sea level.

My previous trip to Cuenca was 23 years earlier with Cheryl. I returned because I liked the city with its combination of history, culture, and outdoor adventure. The indigenous women with their wide, colorful skirts and Panama hats, often quietly laboring in the nearby fields, leave an unforgettable impression. The work ethic is strong, and everyone says that the beggars are Venezuelan immigrants. Ecuadorians would not sit around all day asking for money. I'm not certain that's a universal truth. Cuenca hosts literally thousands of foreign expatriates living here who have been similarly enchanted with the city. I met several and listened to their stories. The locals still refer to many as "Hippies." There was definitely an extraordinary amount of hair tied up into man-buns. Most of the foreigners seem to be looking for something, but aren't sure what that is.





I enrolled in a Spanish immersion program through the Yanapuma school that included a home stay with a family near the school, a private tutor for four hours a day and cultural excursions to museums, churches, historic neighborhoods, and so forth. One day, my instructor and I spent an hour in a hardware store practicing the names of tools and hardware. It's been 25 years since I took Spanish classes at the community College, and I was definitely rusty, but my teacher Juana was excellent, and our sessions turned into 4-hour chat sessions. We spent some time reviewing grammar, and she stopped me when I didn't know a word or my pronunciation needed help. After four hours of this, I was mentally exhausted! But that was the point; numerous studies have shown that mental exercise can slow the aging of the brain. So I've conceivably stalled the graying of my gray matter.



Me with Juana – My First and Favorite Spanish Teacher

On the weekends, I went hiking with a couple of groups in the mountains at nearby El Cajas National Park. The views are spectacular and we saw several llamas and alpacas grazing peacefully. The trails get up to around 13,000 feet, so I had to walk slowly in the relatively thin air.



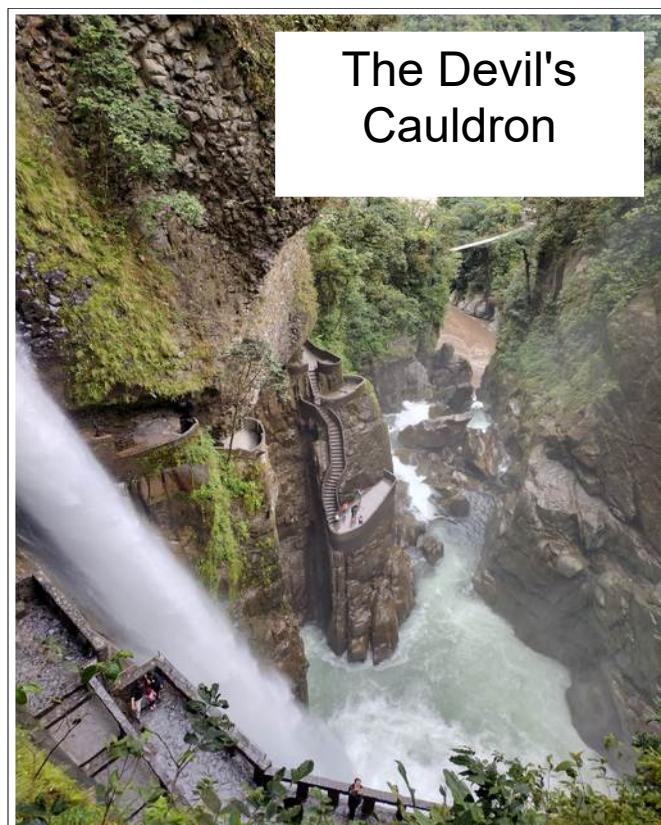
The school connected me with my hostess, Yolanda, and I stayed with her and her 31-year old son Carlos at her house. She cooked my dinner and breakfast. The fruit and vegetable market was nearby, and trucks arrived every day with fresh-picked produce. I was treated to a wide variety of fresh fruit and juices. After she learned that I am a widower, surprise dinner guests started arriving. The majority were her single friends, and the purpose was clear – Yolanda was conducting her own “Future Mrs. Odendahl Pageant.” It was obvious that these ladies had put great effort into primping and preparing for their opportunity to land a gringo. But I resisted their charms, and the Pageant had no winner. Yolanda is Venezuelan, and some of her friends were from other countries as well.



After three weeks, it was time to say goodbye to Yolanda and Carlos. I took a bus to Baños de Agua Santa – traveling over seven hours along 200 miles of winding mountainous roads. The bus ticket was only \$11.50. Cheryl and I had been planning to visit Baños in 1999, but the nearby volcano then was spewing ash. Volcanologists incorrectly believed that a serious eruption was imminent. The city’s 16,000 residents were evacuated for three months until they finally defied authorities and forced their way back in. This devastated the economy. The wisdom of the evacuation is still being debated as the volcano never did erupt.



I was ready to see what we had missed 23 years earlier. My \$26/night room had a balcony with an awesome view of the valley from the hammock and included a delicious breakfast with more fruit and homemade baked goods. I hired a guide to tour the valley and the surrounding mountains before he delivered me to my next stop, back in Quito.



Yanapuma Spanish School has a second branch in Quito. My home-stay was canceled when the hosts came down with the flu, so I switched to the Hotel San Francisco de Quito. It's in a historic house that is centuries old. The breakfast room is now housed in the part of the house that was used to torture prisoners during the Spanish Inquisition. My friend Marie flew from Detroit to join me in Quito for a few days touring the city and surroundings.



Marie was craving some retail therapy, so we took a side trip to the indigenous market in Otavalo.



We then flew out to the Galapagos for a week of hiking and snorkeling in Charles Darwin's laboratory.



Fabulous snorkeling, and the guide had an underwater camera.



10-Mile Hike to Volcan Chico



This called for some serious relaxation later that day!





After we returned to the mainland, Marie flew home to her house in Michigan and Nurse Practitioner job, and I went to the beach for a few days. Spanish lessons in the morning, surfing in the afternoon and sunsets at a beach bar. I did manage to stand up on the surfboard a few times for a short distance. I'm glad for the experience, but I preferred humming The Beach Boy's "Catch a Wave" and "Surfer Girl" tunes during Happy Hour with a cold beer and watching the extremely talented and well-wedged Surfer Girls get in their last few rides of the evening.



My next stop was in Medellin, Colombia. The New York Times has placed Medellin on their list of the top 52 places to go in 2023. The authorities would not let me board my flight until I showed proof that I had a departure flight scheduled. I had to step aside from the check-in desk and buy a ticket using my phone and show proof before they would issue a boarding pass. I later learned from fellow students that this is a common problem, and it's possible to buy a fake ticket at some bogus website. Oh well, I needed to go home sometime, but I doubt that there is a serious problem with American tourists showing up and never leaving.



I arrived at my hotel in the Los Laureles entertainment district on a Saturday evening. The music volume was cranked up everywhere, and the street was lined with liquor stores, bars, casinos and night clubs. Colombians do not need an excuse to sing and dance. The streets were patrolled by girls in short, skin-tight dresses and slutty shoes. Another American warned me that many were prostitutes. When I asked how to distinguish the professionals from the amateurs, I was told that it was impossible. He asked them out to dinner, and then some of them told him the price. I declined to participate in the game of "Guess who's a prostitute."

Again, I enrolled in a Spanish school for lessons in the morning and cultural excursions in the afternoon. The Colombian accent is very different - not only the expressions and slang, but they drop a lot of trailing "s"s. For example, "Buenos Dias" becomes "Buen Dia." This took a lot of getting used to. The accent and culture may have been very different from Ecuador (where people tend to be quieter), but one common denominator was the extraordinary number of long-haired foreign men hanging out with some mysterious and unknown goal. A mid-life crisis can be very complicated.

20 Minutes and 700 Steps to the Top of Piedra Penol



Much of the recent cultural history of Medellín is centered on the violent drug trade and Pablo Escobar. Not only did he earn billions smuggling cocaine into the USA, but he used a portion of the money to build houses for the poor in a neighborhood that bears his name. After Pablo was killed in 1993, chaos ensued for many years. About ten years ago, the Colombian government gained a semblance of control. Pablo Escobar is revered as some sort of a Robin Hood by many, and some are attempting to turn the history of narco-trafficking into narco-tourism. His brother Roberto has been released from jail and has turned their house into a cartel museum where he now poses for pictures with the visitors. I paid the \$22 admission which includes a picture opportunity that I later regretted. In hindsight, the brother of a drug kingpin posing for pictures with a display of Pablo's toys seems rather insensitive to the families of the people Pablo had killed.



One of the cultural excursions with my Spanish school was to a Medellin versus Cali professional soccer match. The huge, throbbing crowd sang and chanted until late in the game when one member of the home team was once-again dramatically rolling on the ground with his face in his hands – the consequence of an alleged infraction on the part of the visitors. The referee was unconvinced of the reality behind the theatrics and allowed the game to play on. During this time the visitors scored the game's lone goal. The happy chants turned into angry taunts and screams, and the referee was the object of much scorn and derision. But his loss was my gain, and I received a bonus Spanish lesson with words and phrases that are not normally taught at the school. I learned the Spanish verb forms and adjectives used to equate a person to various body parts. The crowd also shared constructive information regarding the referee's lifestyle and relationship with his mother.



This is me with Francesca. She's an American who works in marketing at the Spanish school. One of the teachers also came along and helped with the translations

I spent my last few days in Jardin – Spanish for “Garden.” It's known for its brightly colored houses and lush farmland. I did some hikes through the country where coffee and bananas are cultivated together on impossibly steep slopes. Waterfalls cascade from the green mountainsides. I had originally planned a touristy visit to a coffee plantation, but opted to go hiking instead. At one remote point I asked a banana farmer for directions, and we ended up sitting on his porch chatting for half an hour. He told me that hikers pass by nearly every day, but I'm the first to have stopped to talk. We talked about life on the farm, and I answered some of his questions about the USA. Colombia is known as the land of the “Perpetual Spring” and he was horrified to hear about the ice storm that had just hit Michigan. I think that we both left appreciative of what we have. That experience may have been the highlight of Colombia for me.



My Spanish School conducted a field trip to play the Colombian National Sport - Tejo. The game is similar to the American game of Corn Hole. Instead of throwing a bean bag through a hole in an inclined board, Tejo players throw a steel disc toward a target set in an inclined tray full of clay. To make things more interesting, the target is surrounded by mechas – triangular paper envelopes filled with gunpowder. Mechas will explode with a loud bang and perhaps a small fire if hit precisely. The explosions earn extra points and extra hilarity. Like Corn Hole, players are usually holding a beer with their non-throwing hand. Whatever could go wrong? Tejo is boisterous and loud, it comes with an element of risk and you get a little dirty when you play - very much like Colombia itself.



I decided that after two months in South America, it was time to return to Florida for the rest of the Winter. While my Spanish is yet not fluent, I can understand more than 90% if people speak slowly. The real goal was the mental exercise of learning new things at 62 years of age, and I achieved that hands-down. After a four-hour Spanish lesson; translating everything and trying to come up with the correct verb conjugations, I was mentally exhausted. And surfing is even more difficult. My sunburn has since faded, and my ribs are no longer sore, but the memories will last forever. It was a fine trip, but the hippie lifestyle is not for me. In two months, my thinning hair had not grown enough for a man bun; not even a pony tail - in fact, I had it cut just prior to my return. A shave and a haircut cost \$3 plus a ridiculously generous \$2 tip. One thing is certain: the prices here are cheap for most everything, and it will be a difficult transition for me to return to the USA and normal prices. I do enjoy the cultural immersion that comes with meeting the people and learning the language. This was far more satisfying than a group bus tour.



My future travel plans are uncertain. Stay tuned for more trip reports at;

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