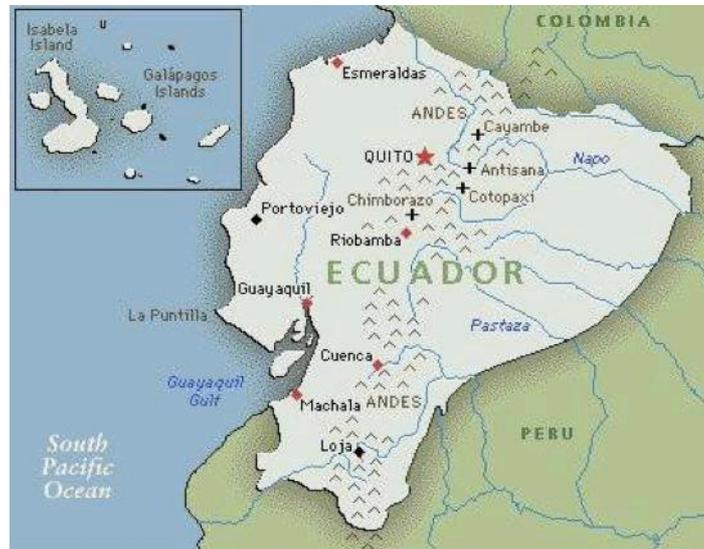


Tropical South America and Cuba Tour 2016

Report: Part 1- Ecuador and the Galapagos Islands.

The tour, comprising three different segments, departed Sydney on the 6th April with 10 passengers (plus one who had departed earlier) flying to Quito via Santiago and Lima. Although the journey was long and tiring, the group was ready the next morning for Stage 1 of the tour.



Day 2 began with a tour of Quito, a city of 1.8 million sprawling along a valley and up the mountains on either side. The Spanish effectively erased any evidence of the original inhabitants of the city, but their influence is obvious in the narrow streets, colonial architecture and lively plazas of the UNESCO Heritage rated old town

First stop was near the Basilica del Voto Nacional, a towering gothic edifice perched high on a hill. Deceptively, the building is relatively modern, having been started in 1926 and finished in the 1980s. The 'gargoyles' on the church's side feature turtles, iguanas and endemic birds

Walking down hill past monasteries, shops and houses, the group arrived at the palm-fringed Plaza Grande, the main square, flanked by an impressive array of official buildings including the Presidential Palace, City Hall, the Bishop's Palace (now housing a restaurant called 'Mea Culpa'), the house of the city Mayor and, of course, the Cathedral.

The plaza itself contains a monument to those who initiated rebellion against the Spanish in 1809. Here the group learned about the contribution of Simon Bolivar to the fight for independence and how Ecuador became part of Bolivar's notion of Gran Columbia, an amalgamation of 6 adjoining countries that disintegrated on his death. Ecuador became fully independent in 1830.

Next was La Compania de Jesus, a baroque church with an elaborately decorated interior that blends Spanish, Moorish and indigenous elements in glittering gold. Nearby was the Plaza San Fransisco, a sweeping cobblestone plaza in front of the white washed walls and twin bell towers of Ecuador's oldest church. On this day, however, the most striking feature in the square was the massing of high viz clad police in the square in anticipation of a planned protest again taxes.

After lunch in the square, a drive up a high hill brought the group to the base of the massive statue of the Virgin, where there were wonderful views over the city to the volcanoes beyond.

To conclude the day's activities there was a drive north of the city to a museum and monument marking the equator, the presence of which gives rise to the name Ecuador. Here displays demonstrated the traditional ways of life of Indian tribes and a few 'experiments' were conducted to test the peculiarities of being on the equator.



The following day the group travelled along the Avenue of Volcanoes, towards Cotopaxi National Park. With a peak at 5,900m above sea, Cotopaxi is the highest active volcano in the world. Near the base of the cloud covered volcano, at a mere 3,840m, group members strolled around Lake Limpiopungo and through an adjacent meadow to observe the fascinating fauna and flora of the area.

After the walk the bus returned to the Pan American Highway then headed west, passing through magnificent scenery of rugged peaks and steep green slopes covered in an agricultural patchwork. Some of the crops included potato, onion, wheat, barley, oats, lupins, carrots and garlic, but despite the sharp gradient, the small plots were not terraced.

The destination was Quilotoa, site of an ancient volcano containing a beautiful turquoise crater lake. At 3960m, the group declined the opportunity descend the very steep path to the water's edge, opting instead for lunch at a restaurant on the rim.

Later the bus turned back towards Quito, giving glimpses of Cotopaxi whose cloud mantle had lifted a little, then headed south through more attractive agricultural land, past the base of Chimborazo, Ecuador's highest peak (completely obscured by cloud) to a hacienda style hotel outside Riobamba.



Saturday is market day in Riobamba, so to leave the town the bus first had to negotiate a road seething with vehicles, people and all sorts of animals. Once past that congestion the route was through highly productive agricultural land producing mostly vegetable and cereal crops, especially quinoa. It was not hard to see why the Riobamba region is known as the 'grocery store' of Ecuador.

The first stop of the morning was at a colonial style chapel, Iglesia de la Barbanera, the oldest church in Ecuador. Parts of its simple façade date from 1534 and incorporate the remains of a former Incan structure. From its location on a hill it was possible to look back towards Riobamba and catch sight of the towering Volcan Chimborazo, which had shed some of its cloud cover

Continuing south, the bus descended to the picturesque town of Alausi, perched on the edge of the Rio Chanchan gorge, and presided over by a giant statue of St Peter. Here that the group boarded the Nariz del Diablo (Nose of the Devil), a 'retro' train to take a zig-zagging and spectacular ride down to the floor of the gorge.

In the early 20th Century the rail system connecting the coast to the highlands was the lifeline of the country. Sadly, highway construction and avalanches saw the demise of this system, but the steepest section between Alausi and Sibambe has been restored and operates as a tourist train. It crosses the Nariz del Diablo, a sheer 765m cliff of solid rock, by a series of switchbacks.

At the base, passengers were welcomed by a local dance troupe and there was the opportunity to buy artisan goods, but most worthwhile was the visit to the small museum that explained the lifestyle of

the local indigenous people and details the history of the railway line, particularly the great loss of life (over 2000) in the building process.

After returning to Alausi the route continued through Chunchi to Ingapirca, Ecuador's best preserved archaeological site. The indigenous Canari people used the location before being conquered by the Incans. The site, in a lovely rural setting, has the circular Temple of the Sun as its centrepiece around which are the ruins of store rooms, ceremonial baths and rooms where the temple attendants lived.

The last leg of the day's journey was to Cuenca, where the bus made its way into the old city, which was abuzz with activity. The proximity of the delightful colonial hotel to the festivities allowed most of the group to experience the music, food and colour of a celebration marking the founding of Cuenca.



Day 5 began with a walking tour of the beautiful historic sector of Cuenca, another UNESCO heritage site. The starting point was Parque Caldero, the city's largest plaza, situated in front of the massive Catedral de la Inmaculada or New Cathedral. Construction of the cathedral began in 1885, but it was never totally completed as a design fault meant that the building could not stand the weight of the proposed bell towers. Not that this imposing structure really needs more decoration as its blue domes already dominate the skyline.

On the other side of the park is El Sagrario, the whitewashed Old Cathedral. Its construction began as the town was being founded in 1557 and it served as the main church until the new cathedral superseded it. Now it is a museum and a gallery for religious art. One of its exhibits is the architectural model of the new cathedral; complete with the bell towers absent on the real building.

Having passed the fresh flower market in front of Santuario Mariano, the group entered the Plaza of San Francisco, flanked by old arcaded buildings with balconies in order to visit an Artisan market where the crafts for which Cuenca is well known, are displayed – silver jewellery, leatherwork, ceramics and metalwork. Nearby was the local produce markets selling meat, fruit and vegetables. Here the guide, Jacobo, gave explanations about the nature and use of unfamiliar products.

Next was a stop at a factory manufacturing Panama hats, or more correctly the Sombrero de paja toquilla (straw hat), which is really an Ecuadoran product. Displays showed the process of making the iconic hats, from the harvesting of fibrous palm roots that are treated to become 'straw', the complicated weaving, through to the shaping of the hat. The grade of the weaving determines the price of the item - a very finely woven hat costs \$1000!

The walk continued by the fast flowing Rio Tombebamba, the border between the new and the old sections of the city where some of the 18th and 19th century houses seem to 'hang 'out over the river.



After lunch the journey southward continued with the bus climbing into the starkly beautiful mountains of Cajas National Park. In the high altitude grasslands, small lakes shiver in the cool breeze.

A viewpoint stop was made at 3,979m before crossing the continental divide at Tres Cruces (4166m) and starting the descent to the coast through fog and rain.

By the time the bus reached the tropical lowlands the clear mountain air was gone, replaced by a steamy fug and the change in vegetation was reinforced by a stop at a small farm, producing cacao, chilli and banana. The remainder of the journey was through large plantations and rice crops before entering the port city of Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest city (pop 3mill).



It was an early start to be at the airport at 6.30am the following morning, ready to fly 1000km off the coast to the famous Galapagos Islands. Waiting on the flat, dry island of Baltra was Ivan, the naturalist who would accompany the group on this section of the tour. He organised the transfer to Nemo 1, the catamaran that would be 'home' for the next five days.

After a lovely lunch aboard Nemo, the boat headed to nearby Santa Cruz Island where a zodiac took the group to the white sands of Bachas Beach. Within minutes group members were encountering marine iguanas, dodging colourful Sally Lightfoot crabs, watching sea turtles swimming just off shore and trying to photograph the Frigate birds that patrolled the skies while a large pelican observed these antics with curiosity. A wander along the beach revealed the skeleton of a US patrol boat scuttled after WW11, and slightly inland, a solitary flamingo fed in a shallow lagoon.

Returning to the beach, it was time to try out the snorkeling gear. Fish, turtles, rays, and small sharks were all visible in the clear waters off the beach and the rocky headland. Later, after dinner aboard, Nemo commenced its run to Isabela, the largest island in the archipelago.



By 6am the next morning a zodiac was transporting the group to a small island just off Isabela, landing among mangroves, where a sea lion had stretched out comfortably on a bench. The walk on the island passed by a collapsed lava tube that forms a rock channel, where tintoreas (sharks) cruised. They were White Tipped Sharks, some less metre in length, but others approaching two metres. Also visible were marine iguanas sunning themselves, multi-coloured crabs, lava lizards and sea lions frolicking at the shore's edge. Blue Footed Boobies and Little Penguins were also observed.

After breakfast, the group headed out again, this time to Isabela itself, landing at Port Villamil. A boardwalk through a mangrove area gave access to a protected lagoon where more snorkeling took place. Plenty of brightly coloured fish could be seen along the rock ledges and among the mangroves.

Back at the beach near where the zodiac had landed, it was low tide and the surf was gentle. Some of the party enjoyed wading in the shallow waters while others chose to sit in a nearby park where

benches in the shade were in high demand, but woe betide anyone who dared sit on the bench claimed by a particular sea lion and her baby.

After lunch and a siesta on Nemo the group again ventured onto the island where local vehicles were hired for transport to a lagoon featuring feeding flamingos. Nearby was the Arnold Turpiza Breeding Centre for the protection of Galapagos Giant Tortoises. Increasingly the nests of these creatures are coming under attack from introduced species such as Fire Ants, cats, dogs, goats and rats. Volunteers carefully dig up freshly laid eggs, transport them to the centre where they are hatched in incubators, then the surviving young ones are kept in wire topped cages for a few years until the shell hardens enough for them to have some protection against predators. The tortoises remain at the Centre, in larger and larger enclosures until they are released back into the natural environment where, hopefully, they can live out the rest of their long lives (150-200 years).

Later in the afternoon there was the opportunity to wander around Port Villamil, taking a look at the Darwin monument and the large, modern and simply decorated church featuring windows depicting the local wild life or to wander by the beach fronted by a row of restaurant/bars. In the evening the boat began the 5 hour haul to Floreana Island.



By daybreak Nemo was anchored off Puerto Cormorant, and shortly after breakfast, the group headed for shore, inspecting rock ledges on the cliffs along the way for Blue Footed Booby nests. After landing on a black sand beach covered with tiny pieces of obsidian and olivine, Little Penguins, Pelicans and more Booby nests were discovered.

A short walk through the scrub revealed a large lagoon fringed by numerous very pink flamingos then the group took a longer path that climbed over a ridge to reach a white sand beach where an American Oyster Catcher was dining in a rock pool. Frigates and Pelicans abounded along the beach and Black Tipped Sharks patrolled the water's edge.

Later in the morning those wishing to snorkel were taken back to the black sand beach. Following the cliff line revealed a magical underwater world of sea turtles, penguins, sea anemone and brightly coloured fish including Wrasse and Parrot Fish.

After lunch and a siesta on board the catamaran, the group was back in the zodiac cruising along the coast, exploring the rocky outcrops where sea lions frolicked, crabs swarmed, iguanas basked, sea turtles momentarily surfaced and Golden Rays gracefully flapped by.

Now crisped by the sun, the group returned to the boat to watch a BBC documentary on the Galapagos and during evening drinks, Nemo 1 started to move on again, this time heading for Espanola Is.



Another early start the next day had the group landing at Punta Suarez just after 6am. Espanola Island is known for its variety of wildlife, especially birds and it did not disappoint. The black rocks of the

jetty teemed with Marine Iguana, many of which were red in colour due to it being the mating season. Two Galapagos Hawks sat on the 'lighthouse' watching proceedings, lava lizards darted everywhere and sea lions played on and off the beach.

On the walk around the island there were encounters with the Galapagos Dove, the friendly Galapagos Mockingbird, the Galapagos Gull as well as a number of Darwin's famous finches including the Ground Finch and the Warbler Finch. Along the cliff edges the group walked among the nests of Nazca Boobies observing mating rituals and fluffy chicks. Blue Footed Boobies were also present in this location.

Crossing the peninsular towards the blowhole, the group came to the grounds of nesting Waved Albatross. These bulky birds are cumbersome on land, but so graceful in flight with their 2.5m wingspan. Two of them lumbered towards a cliff edge, poised, expanded their wings, then toppled off, trusting the air currents to provide the necessary lift. Not only was the take off zone observed but also the 'landing strip', a rocky patch that makes touchdown an even more precarious for such heavy birds. Albatross spend most of their time airborne and rarely come to land but being mating season, they were arriving on the island in large numbers in order to meet up with or choose a mate.

After about 3 hours of wandering on the island and finding new delights at every turn, it was back to the boat and the anchor was weighed, for a 5 hour journey past Santa Fe Island to Santa Cruz, the second largest of the islands in the archipelago and the one with the greatest population.

Once docked at Port Ayora, the group went ashore to visit the Charles Darwin Research Station to see the giant Saddleback Tortoises, the shape of which allegedly gave rise to the name Galapagos for the islands, and land iguana which differ in colour and shape to the marine variety.



Early the following morning the group disembarked from Nemo 1 for the final time heading for the highlands of Santa Cruz. The interior of the island is quite lush in comparison to the dry coast, supporting a number of small plantations (coffee, banana, sugar cane, tropical fruits) and ranches.

Giant Turtles were viewed in their 'natural' environment at Rancho Manzanillo. These slow moving tanks lumber across paddocks, forage in the forest or wallow in mud, uninhibited by wire fences, as the bottom strand has been raised to cater for their passage. Giant Turtles can go from between 6 months to a year without food or water, but if a female wishes to lay her eggs, she must make the long and torturous journey down to the coast to do so.

Continuing across the island, the bus rose to a point of 500ft and then coasted down a long, straight road to the narrow channel of water separating Santa Cruz from Baltra. A short ferry then bus ride returned the group to the airport marking the end of the Galapagos adventure.

Back in Guayaquil later that afternoon, there was a city tour, starting in Parque Bolivar. The pleasant green park contains monuments to historic figures but the real attraction is the large collection of land iguanas, some over a metre in length, residing in the park.

Nearby is St Peter's Cathedral. Like many buildings in Guayaquil, the original (1547) was destroyed by fire. The present structure was built in 1948 and was renovated in the 70s thus, despite the ornate entrance, the interior is simple and modern.

The walking tour continued to Administration Square, a pedestrian plaza fronted by stately buildings like the City Hall, the former Government House and a museum, then down the city's main

thoroughfare to El Malecon, the waterfront, one of Sth America's most impressive urban renewal projects.

Guayaquil is located on the banks of the wide and navigable Guayas River, so despite being 110 km from the sea, Guayaquil became a major port. The port facility has since been moved and the area along the river it once occupied has been converted into a popular public area containing gardens, playgrounds, restaurants, a museum, and a shopping mall. Starting at the Moorish-style clock tower (1770), the group strolled along this area, passing a moored naval clipper and an impressive monument depicting a meeting between the liberators Simon Bolivar and San Martin in 1822.

The tour continued by bus, visiting Santa Ana, the original part of the city with colourful houses covering the hill top and River Town, a newly developed business area incorporating old brewery buildings. It also passed a cemetery with elaborate family mausoleums and a fresh flower market.



Day 11 saw the group heading towards the coast, passing through rural landscapes that included plantations of banana, sugar cane and tropical fruits to eventually reach the fishing village of Puerto Morro on the banks of a mangrove lined estuary. At a wharf opposite a seething rookery for white herons and their fluffy chicks the group boarded a local boat and traveled down the estuary to enter open water where cargo ships and tankers plied the shipping lanes, along with a surfaced submarine.

The destination was Isla de Los Pajaros, home to a massive colony of Frigate birds. Frigates are agile sea birds capable of flying extraordinary distances day and night, but they do not dive into the water because their wing structure is too fragile to withstand that impact nor do they have the protective oils of other sea birds. Instead they range out over the ocean skimming the surface for any tasty morsel, which then they must battle to keep as Frigates are also kleptomaniacs.

The number of Frigates swooping around the boat increased as it approached the isle, which had a 'tornado' of birds circling above it. Once ashore, in the still, humid mangroves the heat oppressed, clouds of mosquitoes descended, the cacophony of calling birds was intense and the stench of mangrove flavoured guano was overwhelming. It was not pleasant.

The group passed shrimp farms created by enterprising locals in the swampy interior of the island, then under a mangrove canopy to reach a raised platform. From this vantage point the extent of the colony could be surveyed, with thousands upon thousands of birds competing for perching positions. Being mating season, many of the males had gathered in one spot, with red throat sacs fully inflated, a colourful display of machismo.

Back at Puerto Morro wharf, 'slabs' of live, uniform sized crabs had been prepared for restaurateurs from Guayaquil, an indication of the quality of the seafood in this location. To test this theory, lunch was at a simple local restaurant. It was then back to Guayaquil, to the Hilton Hotel, signaling the end of the first stage of the tour and the loss of one of the party who would return to Australia.

