



DIEZ DÍAS EN ECUADOR

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Motorcycle Adventures at the Middle of the Earth



In all of my overseas adventures, I have never had a guided ride. I've always enjoyed and felt confident in my own research, which sometimes began months before the actual trip. This time, however, I had assistance in planning from Court Rand, who enabled me to cross Ecuador off of my bucket list without having to wade through guidebooks first. Rand has a company in Ecuador that offers rides to suit most levels of competence, and you can even rent a bike without a guide. This was a no-brainer, so I signed up for my first visit to South America.

My plan was for a 10-day trip with eight days of actual riding with Rand as my guide. Rand is an American with a lot of riding experience all over South America. He chose to live in Ecuador more than three years ago and has been operating guided tours ever since. We both rode 650 V-Stroms, two of the 22 bikes he has in his rental fleet.

Arriving on Christmas day at Quito airport, elevation 9,200 feet, I flew through a sculptured city of towering white cumulus clouds, an utterly stunning sight but often, as I learned, the precursor of an impressive thunderstorm.

The first day of my ride took us a short distance north to the equator at San Antonio de Pichincha through some heavy traffic aggravated by lots of roadwork. But it was not long before I was out in the country and straddling the painted line of the equator, the Earth's big belly.

The short 50-mile afternoon ride to the small country town of Mindo wrapped up a day that was a gentle introduction to Ecuador. Mindo is most famous for its chocolate factory and sits high up in the cloud forest, where it rained, and we were headed to the rain forest, where it did not. Don't think we didn't appreciate the irony.

The two-lane roads are well paved, meandering, undulating, multi-cambered, and provide an invigorating ride. It was also an attention-getting ride since, among other things, this is a rural area, and animals are often allowed to roam without restraint or supervision. However, they were often more attentive to traffic than some of the bus drivers!

We stopped at Cascadas Verdes, near the town of Pedro Vicente Maldonado, for a two-hour hike to some very pretty waterfalls and swimming holes deep in the rain forest. That was strenuous, but we were rewarded at the end with a large cup of sugarcane juice with lemon. Duly reenergized and back on the bikes, we headed along some bracing motorcycle roads until we reached the Pacific coast at Pedernales.

The interesting fact about living on the equator is that the sun rises at 6:30 a.m. each day and sets at 6:30 p.m., like clockwork. Every day.

Clockwise from top left: This rickety—but safe—swinging bridge is an example of the engineering used to cross the Rio Abundancia in the very remote community of Puerto Quito. This huge statue of San Pedro overlooking the whole town is a constant reminder of the promise of the life hereafter. Yes, we actually did find these beautiful ladies practicing yoga on the beach. One dude, too. The people in the coastal province of Manabi, as evidence of their friendliness, created this unusual welcoming arch.

With the sun lowering in the direction of the Galápagos Islands, we headed 50 miles south, back across the equator, to the small fishing/vacation village of Canoa and the Baloo cabana beach hotel. This completed our 182 miles for the day. Canoa is about as laid-back a community as I have ever experienced. Tourists craving the beach and sunshine come to party, fishermen sell their fresh catch on the beach, and the many bars cater to revelers for as long as they can drink. Phil Laxton Hull owns the Baloo and is an ex-pat Brit who worked in the Ecuadorian oil fields for more than 30 years before retiring to



this hotel. I was surprised by his knowledge of motorcycle sport in the UK during the '50s and '60s. As a teenager he had followed Bob McIntyre, Mike Hailwood, and Derek Minter—the very same people who inspired me to pursue a racing career. We had a lot to talk about over some interesting libations he threw together.

Ecuador has almost 1,400 miles of coastline with a road paralleling most of it. The road is exciting enough for most sport-bike riders. Arriving at Manta, we got a chance to witness the rarely observed art of wooden-boat building on the beach and eat fresh tuna sushi cut up right before our eyes. It comes no fresher than that.

Our next stop was Santa Marianita for a fish and shrimp ceviche lunch followed by a strong, fresh espresso, then a dirt-road short-cut through some farming communities, occasionally dodging free-to-roam animals, and finally back along the coast stopping briefly at the fishing villages at Santa Rosa and Puerto Cayo.

Clockwise from top left: Court rides through the Rio Abundancia near Puerto Quito. "Cuy," or guinea pig, is a delicacy served at The Café on the equator. In the mountains, the central marketing community of El Cisne in Loja is famous for its cathedral. Your author with indigenous ladies in Saraguro. Court negotiated a photo op with this group who at first were quite hesitant to be photographed. Fresh coconuts harvested nearby that, when iced, are so refreshing. Santa Ana Hill in Guayaquil where a mosaic of colorful houses look out over the harbor. Guayaquil is Ecuador's largest city and is located along the Pacific. Wide boulevards along the port, with scenic views such as this, are everywhere in this modern city. Most of Ecuador is very rural, so one has to be aware that around any corner might be a herd of cows being shuffled to their next pasture.

Clear skies and hot weather prevailed as we turned inland along sparsely traveled roads toward Jipijapa in our long day's ride to get to the industrial city of Guayaquil. New Year's Day was fast approaching, and this was Friday night in a reputedly hard-partying town. Our accommodations were first-class at the Mansion del Rio that overlooks the broad estuary of the Guayas River. The hotel is at the base of a hill from which, in the not-so-distant past, the city was defended against pirate attacks. That same hill today has 454 steps that zigzag to the top while passing all manner of boisterous nightclubs and boutique restaurants. It takes a dedicated effort to tackle the climb, but once you get to the top, the view is stunning.

Day five out of Guayaquil was a very long day of road and off-road riding. After many miles of dodging heavy trucks, we finally left civilization behind and entered a quiet area of hectare upon hectare of banana plantations. Heading east, we made for a range of mountains shrouded with some big, black clouds. It began to rain as we crossed the divide and entered a lush green valley reminiscent of *Jurassic Park*. The rain was not so intense that we could not continue, but the more we climbed in altitude the colder it became. The rain became a downpour and the temperature plunged, so we stopped to put on an extra layer of clothes. We rode 80 miles along mountain farm roads, through simple villages, and finally into the night. In each village we rode through, the locals looked at us and waved as they sat on their porches.

The dirt roads and wet red clay gave way to cobblestones as we arrived at Zaruma. The roads around this small mountain town make Lombard Street in San Francisco seem like child's play. With the rain still pounding hard, we climbed like squirrels (very wet squirrels) toward the town center and parked at the Roland Hotel. This had been a long but very exhilarating day, and I was now halfway through my ride.

Day six, and we headed back into the mountains along more crumbled dirt roads. We climbed and climbed through the cloud layer and



finally had some remarkable views of 8,500-foot mountaintops with clouds swirling beneath us.

Rand carries his own espresso maker powered by propane. It is a dinky set, but at that altitude the locally grown coffee had an even more intense taste. It was not long before a local farmer arrived, riding his burro. He turned out to be quite the local character, as he stopped to talk to us and tried to show us just how well trained his burro was by parking it close to one of the motorcycles for a photo op. The stubborn burro was having nothing to do with this!

The villages passed by: Portobello, Salati, and then El Cisne with its impressive blue cathedral. Such a resplendent building that to me seemed totally out of place amidst so much paucity.

From El Cisne we were back on asphalt, and I for one was grateful. I don't mind the challenge of the mountain dirt tracks, but I love the road! It was sharp, twisty, with no encumbrance from traffic, and we were able to "fly" for the rest of the ride out of the mountains and to the town of Loja where we headed south for our New Year's Eve at Vilcabamba.

Ecuadorans do not celebrate Christmas, but they make up for it on New Year's Eve. The young men dress up in drag and string a rope across the road. You are expected to stop and hand over some money. If you don't and they catch you, they will kiss you—all of them! It is all amazingly good fun, and we were quite happy to go along with it. This happened in every village through which we passed. As midnight approached, the level of noise from the fireworks displays defies description. In our case, the entire Vilcabamba valley echoed explosions like we were in a July Fourth celebration in Washington, DC.

We had a day off in Vilcabamba to explore why it is called the Valley of Longevity. There is a large population of ex-pat Americans and some Brits who settled there to enjoy an organic lifestyle. Some of them gathered to meet us, and I showed my movie *Take It to the Limit*. It was a very small but appreciative group of ex-pat motorcycle



Clockwise from top left: This view from the cliffs overlooking Canoa shows an expanse of beach typical of Ecuador's coastal regions. The obligatory photo on the line of the Equator. For some families, motorcycles are their only transportation. Sunset at Canoa. I wasn't sure if this young man had the pig as a pet or if it was on its way to market in Bahía de Caráquez! Crossing the Napo River, one of the tributaries of the Amazon.

enthusiasts, including Don Cass, who had been an AMA dirttracker in California during his younger days. But the ride called, and the next day we headed back to Loja and then north to Cuenca.

While there was a lot of good riding ahead, I was anxious to see some of the indigenous people. I got that opportunity in the mountain town of Saraguro, a pretty little place with lots of natives whose costumes were colorful and enhanced their diminutive stature. But as friendly as they might have seemed, they remained suspicious of tourists. They will refuse to be photographed unless you pay them a fee. We offered to pay a group of women and they wanted \$10. Rand is fluent in Spanish and—no doubt having done this before—suggested, "You can keep your clothes on. We don't want to photograph you naked," in Spanish of course. They laughed and giggled and we settled on \$7.

After trying an herbal tea called horchata (drunk with lime juice) and eating some local concoctions for lunch, we headed for Cuenca, the third largest city in Ecuador. I could already feel the end of the ride coming, though we still had 400 miles of Andean mountain roads to get us back to Quito.

All in all, I enjoyed the trip immensely and learned a lot from my 10 days and 1,400 miles in Ecuador. The most important perhaps was my decision to travel with a guide. I would never have seen so much in so little time. But more than that, since Rand is fluent in Spanish, I learned so much about the local culture, whether it was along the coast in towns like Manta or at 15,000 feet in the Andes. Maybe next time I will go with a larger group. Stopping and brewing espresso on the top of those mountain passes with a group of like-minded people should be a blast! Thanks to Ecuador Freedom Bike Rental and Motorcycle Tours (freedombikerental.com) for making this trip possible.