

Ecuadorian diary: tales from the Andes, beyond

By Iria Sanderson Jones
special writer

ECUATORIANA Flight #51: It is morning, time to get up, but we haven't slept yet, so it doesn't really matter. This flight originates in New York City at midnight, and by the time we joined it in Miami at 3:30 a.m., it was already half full.

Miami International is a very large airport. It's possible to walk for miles from one end to the other, or so it seems when you are carrying a heavy suitcase. At one time I was an efficient packer, but the more experienced I get, the worse I get, in defiance of all logic.

Also, my suitcase is heavier this time because it is new. A new, bigger suitcase holds more, so of course I have packed more.

BY THE END of what seemed like the third mile, we checked into Ecuatoriana Airlines at midnight and sat down to wait. This is a good time to contemplate this neighbor who always raves about our glamorous life.

I was too rushed to eat dinner at home, so I had cheese and crackers on the plane to Miami, then chili in the deserted airport cafeteria. Now I have indigestion. Some glamor.

When we checked into Gate 34, we learned that there are no seat assignments on this plane. I asked an official about this, and he was honest enough to reply, "South Americans will sit wherever they like, with or without seat assignments." He was a South American himself.

The waiting area was full of families obviously returning home to Ecuador after a trip to Florida. They squeezed down the aisle carrying small children, teddy bears, strollers and all the purchases made in Miami stores.

This is a 707, three seats on either side of the aisle. I chose the bulkhead aisle seat because it has leg room, even if my feet will eventually stick out into the kitchen. The two seats beside me are taken by a grandmother, mother and bright-eyed baby.

Grandma stacks a stroller, two fishing rods, several parcels and her handbag in the corner by the window, and somehow finds room for her feet. Mother, beautifully dressed, holds the large, smiling baby on her lap.

"This must be the nursery flight," a voice says into my right ear. Mickey is in the aisle seat behind me, his camera wrapped around his feet, with a similar three-generation family beside him.

There is little English spoken between us, but we get along with smiles and by talking with our hands and our feet. By the time we settle in, it is 4:30 a.m., and the ritual of trying to sleep on a plane begins.

I have taken the usual steps: worn loose clothes, removed anything binding, taken off my shoes. The baby sleeps with his head in grandma's lap and his feet in mine. Soon it is 6:15 a.m., and they are serving breakfast — omelet, ham, fruit, croissants and coffee. The croissants are fresh and the coffee excellent.

AT 9 A.M., we will land in Quito, the capital city high in the Andes Mountains, but first we stop at the coastal city of Guayaquil.

We get our first taste of wonderful Ecuadorian crafts in the duty-free airport store, with wall hangings, dolls, hats, ceramics and wood carvings. We will not pass through customs and immigration until we get to Quito, so we can still buy liquor, cigarettes and gifts at duty-free prices.

As we take off again for Quito, we see that the coastal land is lush and emerald green. Small volcanic hills rise out of the coastal plains.

There are three long parallel zones in Ecuador: the tropical coastal strip to the west, the darkness of the Amazon jungle to the east and the two high ranges of the Andes Mountains below us, with a long, long green valley slung like a hammock between the ranges.



IRIS AND MICKY JONES

An Ecuadorian child (above) symbolizes a land where the young mixes with the old, where a Kentucky Fried Chicken outlet stands near a 16th century church.

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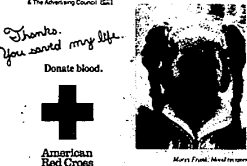
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