

Ecuador: New and old contrast in Quito

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This high fertile valley has always attracted people — the native Indians who farmed it for thousands of years, the Incas who invaded it, the Spanish who colonized it, the modern businessmen who work in the capital city of Quito and the tourists, like me, who come to gaze at it all.

In time I will follow that Pan American Highway below, which leads down the green valley to Ambato, Riobamba and Cuenca, but first I must discover Quito.

AS WE APPROACH Quito, the clouds take on the creamy conical shapes of mountains. The high peaks of the Andes are wearing the clouds like a whipped cream topping.

Suddenly we are clear of clouds, and a rugged mountain slope leads down in rocky ridges to the rooftops of Quito, nestled high at the end of a magnificent, vivid-green valley.

Cultivated green fields make rectangular shapes high up to a dark green line of trees. We are hovering exactly above the equator, so vegetation grows almost to the top of the mountains.

Through the mist, houses climb the great slopes in cream and pastel stucco, to the top of a conical hill crowned with a huge aluminum statue of the Virgin of Quito. A high-rise city, and a spread of old red colonial rooftops, passes beneath us as we land.

Airports are all alike except for their setting. This one has a mountain called Pichincha that rises greening above it and follows our tour bus into the city. Contemporary cars, most of them small, fill the parking lot of the airport and crowd the roads.

PATRICIO Valencia, administrative director of the Ecuador National Tourism Commission, gives a quick rundown of facts from the microphone at the front of the bus. Quito is 9,300 feet high, and has a population of 800,000. Ecuador has 22 volcanic peaks with an average altitude of 18,000 feet. The agricultural economy is now also an oil economy; Ecuador has the highest oil pipeline in the world.

I'm listening, Patricio, and your English is better than mine, but I cannot keep my eyes off the scene that we are driving through. Roundabouts full of flowers. A pigtailed man in a dark felt hat, and a woman in a pink poncho. A Kentucky Fried Chicken sign that reads "Pollo Frito Kentucky."

A woman goes by with a baby slung on her back and a felt hat on her head. The men and women in native costume all seem to wear these hats. As we approach the Hotel Colon International, the Indian costume mixes with men and women in contemporary suits and dresses, under signs that read "discoteca, galeria, restaurante."

From our room high up in this contemporary hotel, it is easy to get our bearings. The modern city is around and behind us. Ahead, past great green

parks, the rooftops of the centuries-old colonial section of the city run ribbed red to the foot of Pano-cillo (Little Breadroll) Hill, the conical hill with the Virgin of Quito on its top.

It takes two hours of sleep to get rid of the jet lag, and then we are on a bus again touring the city. Our feet itch to walk those wonderful streets, and they will, but we have learned from experience that a quick bus tour is a good way to get your bearings in a new city.

Patricio recounts ancient history as we drive past elegant old colonial houses, contemporary bank buildings and the curved glass of the cultural museum to the lookout at Bejavisia, where the handsome-if-older Hotel Intercontinental looks down past the 17th century Sanctuary of Guapulo to the deep valley and the eastern range of the Andes. Quito is a constantly climbing road of wonderful views.

THE OLD COLONIAL part of Quito is the most populated, and the central shopping area of the city. Staggered, red-tile rooftops and old wrought-iron balconies lean over streets built of stones from the old Inca city on which Quito stands.

Everything moves here between the small shops, the ancient plazas, the church domes and the arch-covered streets. Business suits, stylish dresses, school uniforms, tourist slacks. But mostly there is the costume that will imprint itself on my mind as the most lasting image of Ecuador: the multiple colored skirts, or trousers, of the proud, poor, Indian people, with their ponchos and dark felt hats.

They move purposefully across Independence Square, the beautiful city center sided by the President's Palace, La Catedral and the Church of La Concepcion. They move down the wonderful old streets, past the 17th century Church La Compania and the monastery of San Agustin, to the heart of the old city, the Plaza of San Francisco.

CHURCH DOMES and crosses make a skyline all around us. Indians in ponchos and hats sit on the steps at the edge of the plaza, where heavy auto traffic constantly inches by. Faces of every color move across the plaza, in pigtails, in long tresses, under fedomas and carrying burdens on their heads. On the curved steps in front of the church women sell candles, bright umbrellas make an informal marketplace and a child offers to shine your shoes.

Against the sky, we can see the statue of the Virgin of Quito. We head there now, winding up the mountainsides. At the top, an Otavalo Indian with his wife and three children are selling hand-made wall hangings for \$9 each.

There is a wonderful personal excitement to the exchange as we buy from him. A wide, proud smile dominates his strong face, with its large hooked nose and long, traditional black pigtail under a black felt hat.

The woman is wrapped in the traditional long, dark skirts of the Otavalo with many strings of gold-colored beads making a huge choker around her neck.

It is this image of the Indian in poncho and felt hat that I will carry with me down the Valley of the Volcanoes and home as a permanent personal memory of Ecuador.

Next week: The Valley of the Volcanoes.



Independence Square is a center of activity in Quito.

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