

Thursday, June 25, 1981

## Ecuadorean diary

### On to the Avenue of the Volcanoes and the real home of Panama hats

By Iris Sanderson Jones  
special writer

**W**E ARE on our way down the Avenue of the Volcanoes, with a map of Ecuador spread out on the seat of our minibus. During the next two days, we will drive 300 miles southward from Quito through the Andes Mountains to Riobamba and Cuenca, with stops at several colorful markets and at the only Inca ruins outside of Peru.

On a relief map, Ecuador is three vertical stripes on the northwest coast of South America between Colombia and Peru: coast, highlands and jungle.

The coast to the west is humid, tropical land edged with white sand beaches; here the boats leave for the Galapagos Islands. The dense jungle to the east is the remote Upper Amazon, which has been under territorial dispute for centuries.

Between jungle and coast are the temperate highlands, two north-south ranges of the Andes with a great green valley between them. The floor of the valley is more than 9,000 feet above sea level. The capital city of Quito is set like a jewel in the northern end of the valley, and the Pan American Highway runs more or less through the middle of it.

**ALTHOUGH QUITO** is only 20 miles from the equator, it has a perpetual spring-like climate because of the altitude. Temperatures in the city never rise above 75 degrees in the daytime or drop below 65 degrees at night.

Several volcanic peaks, mostly dormant, some snow-capped, can be seen on both sides of the valley as we travel south. Hence the name "Avenue of the Volcanoes." The soil is black and rich, and the crops are lush but not tropical. The farms stretch from horizon to horizon, forming a green patchwork quilt in the crystal-clear atmosphere.

In the past, wealthy patrons owned all the bottomland, and the Indians owned the high harsher

slopes. Ecuador's four-year-old, very fragile democracy may change this; but the Indians still grow corn and potatoes high up the mountain sides, in their colorful ponchos and their dark fedora hats.

The story of the hats is incredible. Europeans brought various kinds of hats to South America, and Indian tribes eventually used them as a tribal identity. They are worn almost universally by men, women and children. The most common is a felt fedora, chosen because an Italian hatmaker founded a hat factory in Ecuador in the 1920s.

Now the fedoras are literally everywhere: on city streets, in town markets, on high mountain fields, beside the highway. As we drive south, we will see other hats — the flatter white hats of Riobamba and the straw hats around Cuenca, known to us as Panama hats.

There has been a great resurgence of Ecuadorian crafts in recent years. One of our stops is in the village of Salasaca, where American Peace Corps volunteers have helped develop the native weaving into a secondary industry as a supplement to farming.

The wall hangings are spread over the walls and floors of the display room between huge hand looms. Outside, tiny children, who already look like miniatures of their mothers, watch us curiously. The woolen wall hangings are good quality and inexpensive, about \$11 for a four-by-six-foot piece.

**THE SUN** is setting on us when the conical spendor of Mount Chimborazo bursts skyward 21,000 feet through a cap of clouds. The farmers heading home from the fields make picture postcard scenes: women in multiple dark skirts, ponchos and men's hats leading sheep; a man in a bright red poncho racing a horse down an asphalt road; two women wrapped in turquoise wool, knitting on the top of a hill; two women carrying buckets; two men in fedoras and ponchos riding bicycles.

The fields that climb the high hills are slighted by the sun now, making ridges that bend and curve up the green hillside.

We stay overnight at a two-story, motel-like hotel in Riobamba. Ecuador is just developing its tourist trade, so hotels are of uneven quality around

An Ecuadorean man (left) holds a Salasaca Indian weaving. Weaving has become a major industry for the South American country.

IRIS AND MICKY JONES

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