



ECUADOR

Compared to other South American countries Ecuador is tiny. But nevertheless it combines all the special things South America is famous for, it has coast, jungle, parts of the Andes and, best of all, the Galapagos Islands.

I'll never forget the landing in Quito, Ecuador's capital city. It's incredibly beautifully situated at an altitude of 2800m and from above I had a marvellous view of the surrounding mountains of the Andes, valleys, high plateaus and small canyons.



As usual when I arrive in a foreign country I try to leave behind the cities in order to have a little rest and get my plans organised. So I took a bus to “Otavalo”, a town famous for its indigenous culture. Otavalo really lived up to my expectations, it is quite pretty and there was a huge market right in the main square where Indios were selling handiworks such as pullovers knitted from alpaca wool, pants, hats and shoes, carpets, jewellery and food. The selection was just overwhelming and I loved the bright colours and patterns showing scenes of Andean life. Both, grown ups and children were busy selling and bargaining and the market was lively. But at the same time Otavalo had a special quietness and

calm I enjoyed very much, time didn't seem to exist.

The rather fresh climate was a good excuse for me to buy a woollen jumper with a hood and a hat. Also, I had a reason to visit the local cafés hoping to warm up again with a cup of good South American hot coffee. I got disappointed in this respect when I was served a cup of hot milk and a sachet of coffee powder. What a shame I thought that the Ecuadorians export their quality coffee and replace it by some mediocre powder. Anyway, it didn't take me long until I started getting used to this and the effect was the same – slowly I defrosted and accepted the cold facts.

Back in modern Quito I was stunned by the amazing beauty of the colonial parts of the city with its old historical cathedrals, churches and squares. Every South American city has a “Plaza de armas”, a main square which is usually decorated with fountains and flower beds and is brightly illuminated at night.

I spent some days exploring Quito, following the hilly, sometimes narrow streets and was wondering how strenuous these walks were - until I realized that my condition was okay but I hadn't acclimatised yet to the high altitude.



Some years ago Ecuador gave up its old currency for the US-Dollar and especially Quito seemed to be influenced by the US. In the modern parts of the city there were huge office buildings, parks, shopping malls with fast food chains. And unfortunately the wealthier families seemed to be proud of shopping there and dining on hamburgers, French fries and coke, neglecting their own delicious cuisine.

I was dying to get some warmth again and spent one long night on a bus that took me into the jungle of the Amazon area. Unlike my usual preference to exploring things on my own I booked a tour because there are many deadly dangers which I probably wouldn't even have been aware of. My guide was a young Indian called Misael and he took me to his uncle's family. It was a long way, first we drove through a quite dead area which in former times was rainforest. Now there were just big pumps producing oil and pipelines of endless length. Then we entered forest again and I was happy to leave the deserted area behind us. After quite a long time of driving through dense forest I was convinced that we were in the very heart of the forest – when all of a sudden we arrived at barren ground again and the sight of this wasteland caused me some pain. Again and again desert and rainforest took turns but finally we didn't leave the forest anymore.

We arrived at a river and changed means of transport: the next two hours we spent paddling down the river in a long, narrow boat carved from one big tree. Finally we arrived at the Indian settlement. During the following days I experienced great things, saw snakes and huge insects such as ants, wasps and spiders, some of them poisonous. One morning Misael's uncle, a shaman showed me the impressive sight of a tarantula sunbathing on the table. Maybe this should've taught me to wear other shoes than flip-flops but I just trusted in the knowledge and healing power of the shaman and therefore felt quite safe. Only before I went to bed I double checked if my mosquito net didn't have any holes.



In the late afternoon Misael and I went out on the river in a boat and took some fishing rods with us. I wanted to know what kind of fish we were after and as if it was the most normal thing on earth, Misael answered, "Piranhas!" Frankly, I was not really cool about that, especially when suddenly the water around our hooks seemed to start boiling and a tiny moment later the meat on the hooks had gone. Finally Misael caught the first piranha and when it came sailing into the boat, opening its small mouth in order to catch some air, revealing its razor sharp teeth I froze with my feet lifted from the ground as I didn't want to lose my toes, still wearing flip flops.

After some time I got used to the piranhas in the boat, I learned how to kill them and their size wasn't that impressive. A single one wouldn't even be able to bite off my small toe.

Slowly the sun set and Misael tried to discover some nocturnal animals which come out at dusk. With a torch he pointed at the shores and the water. Suddenly a pair of orange eyes in the water reflected the light and after a moment slowly sank into the water – it belonged to a crocodile! Now the boat felt quite tiny and fragile but Misael reassured that crocodiles were too much used to humans to attack a boat. Then he imitated the sound crocodiles produce to attract females or rivals. Somewhere in the bush a heavy body slid into the water with a splash and I was waiting for the reptile to flip over our boat. Nothing happened and although my skin seemed to be covered by Goosebumps only, I truly enjoyed the thrill.

For dinner we had grilled piranha which I found delicious!

The only creatures even the Indians seemed to fear were anacondas. I was curious to see one but then again I thought about their leading role in some quite disgusting Indian myths and wasn't too keen on solving this mystery. One afternoon when we were fishing again something really heavy got caught on Misael's hook. In the first moment I thought of a crocodile but then a snakelike head

appeared. I can't express my horror when Misael murmured, "Anaconda...". A moment later his face relaxed again when he realized the thing on the hook was a huge eel. But the adventure didn't end at this point. Fearing the power of electric shocks, Misael tried to kill the eel with his paddle while it was still in the water. Finally the eel didn't move anymore when the rod tore and the fish sank into the water. Misael hesitated for a moment then took off his shirt and dived into the dark river where we had been fishing piranhas some minutes before. At that moment I started praying for him, picturing crocodiles and piranhas feasting on him, waiting for the water to turn red like in bad movies.

To cut it short, he survived without a single scratch and without the eel. I thought I had seen enough but my experience was more than humble in comparison to the knowledge of the shaman and on my own I probably wouldn't have lasted long enough to say the name of what was killing me. Another highlight as thrilling as the jungle but probably less dangerous was my trip to the Galapagos islands.

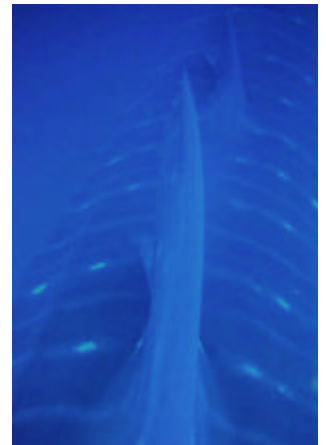


Again I had no other chance but taking a tour and spent four days on a luxurious sailing boat. We visited different islands and I saw strange vegetation, albatross, pelicans, flamingos and other colourful birds, I swam with seals and also had to smell them, there were big colonies of them. I saw crabs, different fish, turtles, dolphins, sting rays and once I discovered a reef shark in a cave while snorkelling. I was impressed by marine and land iguanas and giant tortoises. But the once-in-a-lifetime-experience I had when I went diving after I returned from the sailing trip. Our team had just gone down and enjoyed watching some hammerhead sharks when suddenly someone pointed up. Above us

there was a big oval shadow which in the first moment I took for our boat. But swimming closer I discovered that the thing was grey and had huge blue spots: it was a whale shark!



Again I can't express what I felt because but that's what maybe 99% of all divers are dreaming of and only 1% experience. This fish was about 12 metres in length, slowly we swam around it and I tried to swim rather above its back than in front of its mouth, although they eat plankton. But you never know... suddenly it made a turn and accidentally hit me with its tail fin that was bigger than me. Although it just touched me I felt like being shot through the water. Impressed by that body contact I kept a distance. Finally the whale shark decided to leave us and even when we were back in the boat above water we couldn't really say much.



PERU

Travelling down along the coast to Peru on a coach was a quite long and cold trip. My only plan for Peru was to hike the Inca trail to the lost city of Machu Picchu. I had expected Peru to consist of mountains and was impressed to see that the North of Peru's coastline was a huge desert with massive sand dunes. Soon I found out that there were many things to see on the way to Machu Picchu: I went to Nasca and learned about the history of this highly developed people that lived several thousand years ago. They left one of the unsolved mysteries, the big lines built of stones on the desert ground which show geometrical figures and pictures of animals but can be seen best from



a bird's eye view. Flying in a small aeroplane above them reveals their impressive size but the people of Nasca surely didn't have planes to admire their work.

In Colca Canyon, a canyon which in certain areas is deeper than the Grand Canyon although less impressive I saw condors for the first time in my life. I admired these majestic birds but they've become such a magnet for tourists that bus loads of visitors go there. At least the Indios are taking the advantage of this mass tourism by selling their goods and letting people take photographs of their children dressed in traditional clothes for some extra money.

I spent a long time in Cusco, the most important city of the Inca culture. From there I explored the surrounding and found some impressive Inca architecture and ruins. Then I was looking forward to seeing Machu

Picchu, the old Inca city in the mountains which used to be hidden below green forest until it was discovered a little less than 100 years ago. It's said to be South America's most visited attraction. The bad news was that the Inca trail could only be hiked with a guided tour.

So I chose an alternative route which was also quite beautiful as it led through jungle in alpine area, I passed several ruins and could feel the mystical power of the Incas. The only thing disturbing the picture were tiny kiosks on the way with signs announcing "We accept Visa cards." Finally this path ended in a village 30 km away from Machu Picchu which from there could only be reached by train unless one preferred walking along the railway tracks. The train tickets were horribly expensive for Peruvian standards which made me quite angry as the company was a foreign company and Peru doesn't get the money it actually deserves.

Anyway, waiting for the train I enjoyed a concert played by a local band and watched some small boys playing in the street.

Finally I arrived at the foot of the mountain of Machu Picchu and started to hike up. The sun was just rising when I reached the top and there was hardly anyone around. It was a foggy morning and I sat down and stared at the beautiful ruins the mist was revealing from time to time, trying to imagine how the Incas had lived there some centuries ago.

My next destination was Lake Titicaca where I also wanted to cross the border to Bolivia, the last country on my trip.

I wanted to visit the island "Amantani" to see how people live by this huge lake. On the way there our boat stopped at the "floating islands", artificially made islands which allegedly are inhabited by people whose lifestyle hasn't changed in centuries. I thought it was a big joke to attract tourists. The giant lake was beautiful, the sky was blue and the sun was shining bright. Finally we landed at Amantani, I found a family who rented out a room and after moving in I explored the island. On some

hills on the other side of the island there were scattered ruins of former settlements, lamas and alpacas grazing between them. At night there was a fiesta celebrated to honour one of the many saints. The whole village gathered in the tiny plaza de armas, there was a brass band playing, dancers showing traditional dances in colourful costumes, the smell of barbecue and I enjoyed being in the right place at the right time. The temperatures dropped and I spent a horribly cold night looking forward to getting up again.



In the morning I returned to the village and heard children's voices behind a high wall. It was a school yard and I decided to visit it. Some pupils showed me the way to the headmaster's office and I was invited to spend a morning in different classes. It was pure pleasure to see how eagerly the children



tried to catch every word the teachers or I said because education is still regarded as a privilege. The inhabitants of Amantani were quite poor; electricity had just been established on the island but yet didn't work properly. The teacher asked me to play a game with the pupils and I chose "Fruit salad", a game where everybody gets the name of a different fruit and has to wait for a signal to change seats. I was quite surprised when the children didn't know most the fruits I chose, so we reduced the names to apples, bananas, strawberries and potatoes, the last being their main source of living.

BOLIVIA

I took a minibus to La Paz, the highest capital in the world and we were driving through endless nature, in front of us the beautiful view of the mountain ranges of the Andes. Every once in a while the peace was disturbed by military who stopped the bus and asked us to prove our identities. I was explained that the Bolivians, mostly farmers, were protesting against the government. After a long ride we arrived in La Paz, a city of such beauty that I fell in love with it immediately! It's situated in a craterlike valley, the houses are made of reddish stones reflecting the sun and there are markets everywhere in the streets.



I found a hostel close to the "witch market" where herbs and different remedies, such as dried alpaca fetus were sold. In my hostel I met two Austrian girls and we decided to go hiking together. We chose a seven day trek in the "Cordillera Apolobamba". After organising the equipment we'd need in order to survive this cold, ice and rain we took off, leaving civilization behind us. The hike was very beautiful but strenuous, we hardly ever saw the sun but were showered with rain or snow, and our gas ovens hardly worked because of the strong winds,

the rivers too cold to take a bath. We climbed snow-capped peaks at an altitude between 4500 and 5200 metres and enjoyed great views. I enjoyed being a small spot somewhere in the endless nature of the Andes. We didn't meet a single person during this week; only saw birds, marmots and herds of alpacas and wild horses.

Back in La Paz I relaxed for some days, had breakfast in the market every morning and did some shopping as I was about to return to Austria soon and didn't have to think of the weight of my backpack anymore. Accidentally I met a very close friend of mine who was also travelling in Bolivia.

Together with her I left for the last adventure, the huge salt desert in Bolivia, the "Salar de Uyuni". I enjoyed the train ride to Uyuni, seeing how the landscape changed from alpine area into empty, rocky desert again. There were shallow lakes reflecting the blue sky where flamingos were looking for food.

At night we arrived at Uyuni, checked accommodation and information on a trip to the Salar. During wet season the Salar is rather a salt lake than a desert but we visited it during dry season. The next morning we got up early, met our driver and entered the salt flats. I was truly impressed by it! Not only it seemed to be a natural wonder, it also meant work for the locals. There were workers



digging out big blocks of salt which they would sell to factories where the salt would be cleaned, packed and exported.

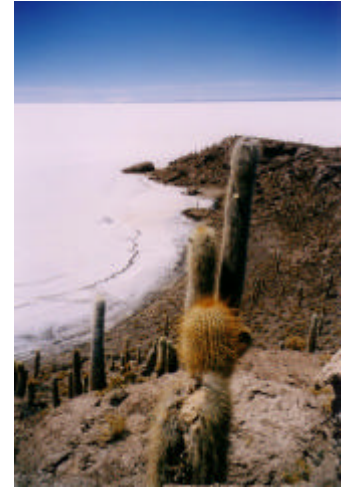
We drove on the salt flats and I felt like having stepped on another planet. The mountain ranges in the far distance appeared smaller and smaller and finally there was just salt left, touching the horizon, no matter where I looked.

At lunchtime we reached a small island called “Isla de los pescadores”, island of the fishermen. I had never been on an island before which was not surrounded by water and the place seemed somehow unreal.

We went for a small hike on the island, finding caves and giant cactus with a size of 12 metres. There was a sign explaining that the annual growth of the cactus was one centimetre. So that meant that they were around 1200 years old which also impressed me.

But then the fun part started, we stepped on the salt and ran around like playing children while the sun was shining and the cold wind was blowing hard. I didn't care about that, feeling comfortably protected by my Ecuadorian jumper. We played games with the shadows our bodies painted on the ground and took many pictures doing handstands, jumps and pretending to fly. We tried out photomontages with my friend moving in the distance behind me, apparently dancing on my palm.

What a pleasure trip!



Questions on the text

- Where can you find a typical Ecuadorian market in the greater region of Quito?
- What is there to be seen at Nasca?
- There is only one possibility to get to Machu Picchu. Which one and what's wrong with it?
- What is life like in Amantani?
- Use an atlas and try to find out at what altitude Bolivia's capital La Paz is situated.

Discussion Topics

Reading about creatures like tarantulas, piranhas, crocodiles and anacondas – would you like to spend some days in the jungle in the Amazons Area? Why or why not?

The famous British scientist Charles Darwin spent a year on the Galapagos Islands studying an only there existing type of finches. With the help of the research material he got there he was able to support his theory of the natural selection. To keep it short he was of the opinion that only the strongest examples of a species survive.

What does this mean for mankind?

Essay Writing

Nowadays you can find US-American fast food restaurants nearly all over the world. More and more people seem to prefer hamburgers and French fries to their local cuisine. Eating US-American food obviously makes them feel like living the American way of life. Are you of the opinion that the American culture should be exported to everywhere like American food? Why or why not?