

The Highlights

Prettiest Place:	Inside the greenhouse amongst a thousand rose bushes
Best thing I ate:	Chicken cooked on a volcanic rock
Best thing I drank:	\$3 Fresh Mango Daiquiri on the beach.
Favorite activity:	Hiking up Cotopaxi volcano
Scariest moment:	Almost getting knocked over by a purse snatcher in Quito.
Most exciting moment:	One foot in the northern hemisphere and one in the southern.
Most used gear:	My coffee French press
Least used:	My rain poncho
Most amazing view:	Cotopaxi
What I bought:	A handmade clay dutch oven made by a local indigenous tribe
New thing tasted:	Tomato Fruit
Interesting fact:	Roses grow straight up in Ecuador because it's so close to the Equator
Cost of 8 day trip:	\$1500.

I loved Ecuador! The people are so warm and welcoming and eager to please and I had a great trip. I started out in a sleepy surfer town called Montanita. I was arriving at 6pm so was going to miss the last direct bus to my destination, so instead of wasting a night in Guayaquil, I had arranged for a driver to pick me up. David, a cute, friendly young man was waiting for me at the airport with a sign. He whisked me off to his car and set off for our 2.5 hour ride. David drove fast, flashed his lights and beeped upon passing every car and bus...there were a lot of beeps. We arrived in Montanita without a glitch and I was warmly welcomed at the Hotel Kundalini, a 22 room two story complex right on the beach...for a whopping \$42 per night.

As luck would have it there were about two dozen men from Buenos Aires occupying half of the hotel. They were all rugby teammates from college and were all turning 40. They get

together every five years or so for a reunion. They were great fun and not too bad to look at. I had originally planned to stay only two nights in Montanita, but I liked it so much I decided to stay another day, so I paid \$70 to delay my domestic flight another day.

I spent my mornings working and then would have lunch and a cocktail and head to the beach just to chill out. It was super relaxing. The beach is wide, the town has a cool bohemium vibe.

From Montanita, I took the \$5 bus to Guayakil and then a quick taxi to the airport, hopped on the plane and arrived in Quito about 8pm. Since I was leaving for the mountains the next day, I stayed at a crappy hotel right next to the South bus terminal...it was only \$20 and was clean and safe. In the morning I arrived at the bus station and went to the tourist desk for assistance on which bus to take for Cotopaxi. The young uniformed man personally escorted me to the counter where I bought my \$1.50 ticket and then saw me on the bus. He instructed the driver to let me off at my destination, the Hacienda La Ciegna. Now my Lonely Planet guide said that the bus lets you off on the Panamerican Highway under the hotel's arch and from there you walk. What it didn't tell you is that you would have to climb over the guardrail and down a precipitous ravine to get to the two mile long driveway! Not an easy task with 40lbs strapped to your back!

La Ciegna is a special place standing still in time. The drive is lined with soaring eucalyptus trees which fill the air with their stimulating menthol aroma. The hacienda is about 400 years old and pictures of ancestors are hung throughout the rooms. Rooms are set around a floral garden courtyard facing a beautiful intimate chapel. My room was huge and had a great little fireplace. After a jambon and queso sandwich, I headed out exploring. The owners have a rose plantation down the road and the manager gave me a personal tour. Greenhouse after greenhouse hosting thousands of rose bushes of every color. The roses grow straight up from the bush instead of sloping like everywhere else. Apparently this is due to the proximity of the Equator and the magnetic field and this is what has made Ecuador the largest producer of roses in the world. It was very interesting to see how the roses were cut, sorted and packaged for export. Several bouquets were assembled to take back to the Hacienda and I volunteered to make the delivery. I would note that everywhere you went in Ecuador there were huge bouquets of gorgeous roses...it was very hard not to just grab them all.

I only had one night at La Ciegna because they were booked. But it is where I had my Thanksgiving dinner of local beef, corn, and salad. I had a great glass of wine and sat at candle adorned table while I wrote in my journal the things I was thankful for. I returned to my room, crawled under the down comforter and got lost in my book until I fell asleep under the warm amber glow and smoky scent of my crackling fire. It was a good Thanksgiving.

I have never rented a car when I am traveling alone in a foreign country. I have a bit of a fear about getting stranded in the middle of nowhere in some unsafe place. In addition, taking local transportation provides a more enriching experience, albeit challenging at times, and it is significantly cheaper. On the other hand, as I get a little older, have a little more money, and as the weight of my backpack feels just a bit heavier, I have been more prone to hire private drivers and taxis. This is also good because it gives you a little more flexibility to stop and see things (or of course go to the bathroom when you need to!) and to take some fun detours.

Because I was in a quite rural area my only option was to hire a private transport to my next destination about two hours away. I thought the \$70 price was a bit high, but when we got to the last 10 miles, I understood. The road from Mariachi is just a rock and dirt road, super steep and narrow and consists of about 30 switchbacks that climb about 3000 feet. You can't drive more than about ten miles an hour and it takes some skill for sure.

When I first saw the El Porvenir my disappointment of not being able to stay longer at La Cienaga immediately disappeared. It was stunning, magical, like something out of a fairy tale book. The grass thatched clay colored buildings were warm and welcoming and a snow capped Cotopaxi stood majestically in the background. My room plaster and wood beamed room was super cute with lots of nice touches...and of course an arrangement of roses. One of my favorite amenities was the hot water bladder they put in your bed at night to warm your sheets. I can't believe how long that thing stays warm and I plan to get one myself as soon as I get home.

I started the afternoon off with a horseback ride on Quesotino...which means "cheesy." A one-hour ride was only \$19 and worth every penny. The countryside was so beautiful and peaceful. Like in Montanita, I decided that I needed to stay an extra night. I was planning on going to Otavalo the next day. There is a giant market there that is supposed to be fabulous and if you have seen my travel pictures before, you know I love the markets! But I loved El Porvenir more and I wanted time to do some climbing on Cotopaxi. Roberto, the perky gregarious manager arranged for me to have a guide for 3 hours the next day to take me through the National Park and up on Cotopaxi. It was breathtaking...literally at about 17K Ft above sea level! We hiked around a lake looking at various birds and then headed toward the Volcano