

Friday, April 25

No longer able to rely on the kitchen crew of the Santa Cruz to provide delicious meals – and knowing the battle necessary to get the kids out of the hotel and into a restaurant for a quick breakfast – I set off early in the morning to see what I can score for takeout. Because the Río Amazonas provides coffee in the lobby, all I need to locate is some solid food. This proves not to be difficult as I quickly come upon a bakery just a few doors down from the hotel entrance. I purchase six huge sweet rolls and for this bounty I am relieved of a total of \$1.40. While I find this figure to be a bit confusing because \$1.40 is not evenly divisible by 6 and there is no added sales tax in Ecuador, I can only assume that a partial dozen discount has been applied (i.e., 25 cents each or 6 for \$1.40). Proud of my rapid and economical procurement, I am quickly brought to earth upon returning to the hotel as Eric and Jeffrey turn their noses up at this selection – preferring to consume the remains of some candy that we had bought the night before.

After this makeshift breakfast, we herd everyone down to the lobby to await the arrival of our tour guide for the day. Presently, Santiago arrives with a driver and minivan in tow. We make our introductions, discuss a bit what we would like to see, and then set off. Our first stop is one of Santiago's favorite overlooks of the city. Because Quito is a city that sprawls over many hills and valleys, there are many such overlooks. This first overlook is on the same hilltop as is occupied by the [Hotel Quito](#). From here you see a profusion of high rise apartments clinging to the hillsides as well as houses and other neighborhoods occupying the valleys.

Our next stop is Quito's Old Town. This section of Quito was constructed during the 16<sup>th</sup> through 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and is much more picturesque than the Mariscal. We visit several of its cathedrals and churches. Each of these structures shows decoration that reflects a mélange of traditional Catholic and pre-Columbian Indian influences, e.g., sculptures of saints with a gathering of frogs around their feet. All of the churches are in constant use and are filled with people praying, receiving confession, celebrating mass, etc. This is far different from my experience with European cathedrals that now seem to serve primarily touristic purposes and show little evidence of continuing active use. Unfortunately, Quito lies in a very active fault zone and its architecture has fallen victim to repeated earthquakes since its founding in 1534. The most recent major earthquake in 1987 damaged nearly all of Quito's ancient churches. Because Ecuador is a poor country, repairs are achingly slow. Hence much of these churches' beauty remains obscured by protective scaffolding.

The most impressive of Quito's cathedrals is San Francisco de Quito. It sets as the backdrop to a large municipal square. This square features many vendors (largely children) eager to seek the custom of tourists. Particularly popular souvenirs are brightly colored scenes of Ecuador and Quito painted either on goat skin stretched over small frames or on small wooden boxes. One of the youngest of these vendors engages Barbara in a conversation through Santiago. He claims to be about 10 years old (my guess is that this may be a slight understatement) and states that he has painted these scenes himself (which may also be an exaggeration because there appears to be a certain standardization across the different vendors'

merchandise. In solidarity with a fellow artist, Barbara succumbs and we are now proud owners of several of these souvenirs. Would that our children be already earning their keep.

In addition to this tourist commerce, other dramas play out in and around the square. Because it is ringed by government offices, many of the people coming and going appear to have official business, e.g., paying tax bills, seeking marriage licenses and birth certificates, etc. Especially colorful are the sprinkling of Indians. The bright hues of their clothing punctuate the otherwise dull coloring of the square. These are mostly women – typically between 15 and 25 years old and almost always with several small children in tow and a baby strapped papoose fashion to her back. Rather than appreciating the difference of their circumstances from that of the children in square, our boys are more interested in a toy store located in its northwest corner.

As we continue our walk through Old Town, we traverse streets given over completely to market stalls. Some of these stalls appear to take specialization to a new level. In my experience, the previous holders of the world championship belt for market specialization are the electronics stalls in Tokyo's Akihabara district. There you would see a stalls devoted to specialties like different types of electrical plugs – just the kind that grace the end of a cord. But in Quito we see individual stalls dedicated solely to shoe polish, solely to clothespins and solely to Oster blender parts. I remain at a loss as to why Oster blenders are of such unique importance to Quitoenos.

Before leaving Quito, we visit el Panecillo. This is a hilltop (that supposedly looks like a bread roll – panecillo) providing a vantage over the whole of Quito. Its top is crowned by a large statue of the Virgin. El Panecillo is alternatively reachable by car or a long series of steps. Car access is recommended because of tales of frequent muggings of those climbing the steps. Given Quito's 10,000 foot altitude, exhausted breathless tourists climbing these steps would seem to be easy marks for the brigands. Arriving by car, we experience no such problems, have a good view and grab a quick snack from the food vendors surrounding the parking lot at the statue's base.

Piling back into the van, we head for Mitad del Mundo (middle of the world). This is an exhibition park about 15 miles north of Quito that is located precisely on the equator. After taking the many obligatory photos of ourselves straddling the hemispheres, we have lunch at a very nice restaurant. The star of our meal is a very tasty potato and cheese soup. (Again, nowhere are so many varieties of potatoes so well prepared as in the Andean countries.)

On our way back to Quito, we search for an ATM. Because Galasam demands a 5% surcharge for credit cards, we are paying for our tours in cash and our banknote supply needs to be replenished. We stop at several banks along the way, but despite signs claiming that their ATMs are part of the Plus network, each rejects our transaction – but at least with the politeness of returning our card. Discussions between Santiago and our driver as to how to circumvent these refusals come to a conclusion that the best bet for a successful transaction is at a Banco de

Guayaquil ATM. And sure enough, when we visit its office in downtown Quito, the transaction goes through like a charm. There really is no substitute for local knowledge.

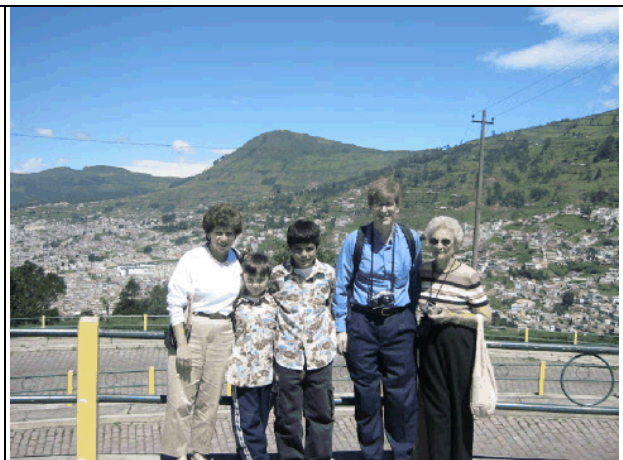
After being deposited back at our hotel, we plan the rest of the day's activities. There are several souvenirs that we saw earlier in Old Town that we have decided to purchase. But Jeffrey doesn't want to go out. So he and mom stay at the hotel while Barbara, Eric and I set forth to return to Old Town. We approach a taxi at the hotel entrance, and following Quito guidebook doctrine to prevent "inoperative" meter overcharges, we pre-negotiate a rate of \$5 for the several mile trip.

Upon reaching Old Town, we disembark and purchase several items at the market. One of these items is a digital watch whose face glows purple that was the apple of Jeffrey's eye during our morning visit. The price is \$10 and there is no instruction booklet available, either in English or in Spanish. (Back in our hotel room I will attempt to program the watch to the proper time and date. Even though there are only three buttons on the watch, do you know how long of a semi-educated trial and error process is necessary before an undocumented digital watch is correctly programmed? More than you might imagine.) We look around the market a bit more, but then the skies open up and it begins to pour. We hail a taxi for our return and the meter begins to tick. When we reach our hotel, the metered fare has mounted only to a decidedly un-munificent \$1.80. We exit the cab leaving a generous tip. So much for my acumen at pre-establishing taxi rates.

The boys demand to be returned to Pizza Hut for their dinner, and later we adults go out to a restaurant called La Crêperie for fondue bourguignon. Because we will be dispersing on different local tours tomorrow (plus Barbara, I and the kids will be boarding our return flight in the evening), upon our return to the hotel we split up our camera gear and begin to pack.



Eric and Richard in Quito



At one of Quito's overlooks



Mitad del Mundo monument north of Quito



On the equator



With Santiago on the equator



Eric and Jeffrey at Mitad del Mundo park