

Ecuador New Year 26 December 1997 – 4 January 1998

Friday, 26 December – Agoura Hills to Quito

Quito! At 2800 meters – approximately 10,000 feet – the highest city we’ve flown into. We arrived at about 10:00 PM local time (EST). The lights of the city seemed not to extend too far into the inky darkness, and likely the darkness hid the mountainous surroundings; just as well, we thought.



Quito skyline from the Hotel Alameda.

Did the customs routine; somehow we came into passport control in the middle of the plane load, but exited nearly last. A short bus ride later, we were at the elegant Hotel Alameda, in the comparatively nice “tourist” area of Quito.

We were in Ecuador with Peter English and Victor Emanuel, with whom we had travelled to Belize in December 1995. Our stay in Quito would be brief, as the next day we’d head to the hot, steamy lowlands, to the Tiputini Biodiversity Station. It was almost too bad; the weather in Quito was lovely, about 65° at 10:00 PM.

Saturday, 27 December – Quito to Tiputini

“The water’s not good...use bottled water. Brush your teeth with the bottled water; don’t even open your mouth in the shower.” – Peter English

Peter’s words of the previous evening rattled around in my head as I showered in the morning, mouth clamped tightly shut.

The Hotel Alameda, on Avenida Río Amazonas, was very nice, obviously catering to business travelers. From our eighth floor balcony we had a broad view of the city, which in daylight looked hilly (big surprise) and deserted due to the Christmas holiday. A street vendor, himself looking very Andean (high cheekbones, tan skin, sporting a long, thick dark braid and wearing a square hat) set up his merchandise across the street from where we sat at breakfast: cheap, colorful rugs, sweaters, and other items. Souvenirs would wait for trip’s end, however. Breakfast was a buffet, but we both played it safe, eating no tomatoes or fruit (“tomatoes?” said Peter, “that’s nothing – for a whole new illness experience, try strawberries.”).

After breakfast, we took a short walk outside the hotel. Avenida Río Amazonas had wide, cobblestone (well, brick), tree-shaded sidewalks, and was lined with tourist shops, restaurants, and banks. At least one bank had an automated teller machine that we could have used, but we didn’t bother trying it. A block or so away we found a beautiful gothic church, La Iglesia de Santa Teresita. We had to ignore the entreaties of some poor women and children on the way, but even had we wanted to, we had nothing on us to give.

The bus ride back to the airport retraced the previous night’s route, with the difference that this time we could see our surroundings. The tree-covered volcano Pichincha towered over the city to the west, and we passed a number of parks, as well as the freshly-painted bullfighting arena (“home of in-bred bulls and poorly-trained matadors,” as Peter said¹). Definitely there were some well-off parts of Quito, but also poorer sections; no different, really, than any other major city. In the better areas, monthly rent could reportedly be as high as \$2000/month.

¹ Lots of quotes by Peter English are in this journal. We spent a lot of time talking with him and listening to his “jungle stories” and unique ways of describing things – he was quite funny. And he still reminded us of our USC friend Bob Schwartzkopf.



The main drag in Coca.

Quito was a “long” city, situated north-to-south; the southern third was called “Old Quito”, with the remaining two-thirds considered the “new” part of the city. Peter said not to bother dressing well in any part of the city, as one would stick out like a sore thumb. “There are bands of old lady pickpockets,” he said, “they’re old and fat, and while you’re worried about the big muscled thugs, it’s the old ladies who will come up behind and strip you clean.” Despite the problems, he said there was a fine Franciscan church in Old Quito worth visiting when we return, but I didn’t know if we’d get there.

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From the airport terminal, we walked across the tarmac to a Fuerza Aerea Ecuatoriana prop plane, maximum seating 40, which flew us from Quito to Coca. It was about a 40-minute flight, and we had a great view of the volcano Cuyambe rising above both the clouds and us, snow and ice shining in the sunlight. Below us, closer to Quito, we saw a lot of huge hothouses which we heard were rose farms. Much of the flight was in the clouds, an interesting feeling when one considered that we were flying next to mountain ridges part of the way! But here and there the clouds would mistily part, and we’d catch a glimpse of winding road, forest, and river.



Welcome to the Amazon and Yasuni National Park. Borders subject to change.

Coca, an “oil town”, wasn’t too impressive at first glance, consisting of a main mud street lined with ramshackle buildings. A forlorn restaurant sign said, in Spanish, “welcome to the Amazonas province”, without any indication of where the restaurant was. According to Peter, Coca was “really scary” when he first arrived in 1989, as the place was full of overworked oil workers staggering about like drunken zombies when off-shift – they’d work 12 hours on/12 hours off for 30 days at a stretch, then descend on Coca for a few days of mindless revelry.



Vehicle of choice for the Maxus Road.

No such people were in sight this day, though, as we made the short, bumpy drive from the airstrip to a restaurant, La Misión, overlooking the Río Napo. We picnicked on the restaurant’s terrace, watching the resident tame parrots as we removed the lettuce from our ham and cheese sandwiches (claims of “clean and safe” notwithstanding!). After a couple other people met up with us, including the young manager of the Tiputini Research Station, we continued on the long journey to the station...a one hour boat ride down the Napo, followed by about 50 kilometers in an open-sided bus/truck along the relatively decent Maxus Road², and ending with a

two-hour ride in the world’s largest canoe down the Río Tiputini. The Napo itself was a very broad river, and we zoomed along making big sweeping turns to avoid sandbars, logs, etc. The Tiputini, by contrast, was narrower, and wound this way and that; one moment we’d be going into the sun, the next it was behind us. The birding along the Tiputini, also, was superb; toucans, macaws, oropendulas, herons, even bats were observed as darkness fell.

² An 80-km road built by the US oil company, at a cost of about \$100,000/km; the company went bankrupt after the road was completed.



The Tiputini 2 bridge.

We reached the lodge about 7:00 PM, devoured dinner, and repaired to our room for a cold shower. Lights would go out by 10:00 PM, and we had a 5:30 AM call for the next morning, so we got organized as best we could for a fast start in the morning.

Sunday, 28 December – Tiputini

We needed to pick a hobby where waking up early was not a requirement, I thought...the alarm sounded at 5:00 AM, and the generator and lights went on soon after. We dressed quickly while trying not to be too disturbed by the cockroaches doing their Olympic sprint warmups the floor. Breakfast at 5:30, then at 6:00 we went along a short trail to a huge tower built around a *Ceiba* tree. The tower was 43 meters at its highest; three different platforms near the top gave us excellent views into the canopy. We both got up it just fine, despite the numerous views through the steps to remind us how high we were, then spent the next three-plus hours maneuvering to see different birds and swatting the occasional flying pest.

Eventually we had to come down; just as well, as I nearly fell asleep in a chair up top. I could tell from Robert's cold hand that he wasn't thrilled at the thought of going down the steps, so we went together at the back of the pack, nice and slow.

We birded closer to the buildings for another hour, then Robert went on while I caught a little snooze in the hammock, at least until some bugs drove me inside.

After lunch, which was semi-interrupted by the appearance of a mixed flock cruising past, we rested a bit more, then heard Peter give a talk on his specialty, mixed understory flocks. He spent a year (1994?) studying the flocks in a square kilometer near Tiputini; he had prepared the site by hacking a grid of trails 100m apart, getting fairly ill in the process (see the Belize trip description for details). The mixed flocks were made up of anywhere from 8 to 35 species, with an average of 20; only one pair of birds plus young per species. The make-up of the flock would vary as the flock moved through the forest, with some birds opportunistically coming out of vine tangles to join the flock briefly, then retreating back to the tangle as the flock moved on. Each flock had a "sentinel"; more often than not, the Cinereous Antshrike, or his "poor cousin", the Dusky-throated Antshrike, filled the sentinel role. Peter's work, as he described it, sounded both laid-back (sit in forest and watch birds) and pretty labor-intensive (*you* try watching what three or four birds are doing, and keeping tabs on where they are in relation to one another, while following a flock through the forest). He has still to complete analyzing the data he amassed, with an eye towards getting his Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin in summer 1998.

Later that afternoon, we were off on a boat cruise down the Tiputini. The goal was a Fiery Topaz hummingbird that was expected to appear at dusk; it did, but only very briefly. But that was ok; floating along watching the clouds, trees, and other birds was very relaxing.

Monday, 29 December – Tiputini

Little sleep and a seven-hour hike; not the best combination. A couple of hours after "lights out" the previous evening, I felt lousy; in retrospect, it was likely dehydration rather than any specific food. I woke up Robert to compare symptoms and to help me get some Pepto-Bismol in the darkness. By then, though, as I feared, the blasted cockroaches were everywhere: on the nightstand (too close to my pillow!), my luggage, my comb, my glasses...and I became a little unglued. Eventually I got the medicine choked down and tried to get some rest, but it



The Tiputini Biodiversity Station.

was hard knowing that the bugs were doing the cha-cha around me³, taking over the room in the darkness.



A rainforest walkway at Tiputini.

The “morning” walk was a long one; seven hours to be exact, from 6:00 AM to 1:00 PM, and included crossing a few bridges of dubious strength (mostly mossy logs with and without shaky “handrails”). Up and down we strode, stopping to play tapes to draw out the birds, watching mixed flock dynamics, etc. The highlight of the long march was a Harpy Eagle, spied near the end. What a gorgeous bird; with talons bigger than my hand, and legs thicker than my wrist, it was one incredibly strong bird⁴. We considered ourselves darn lucky to see one, considering a Harpy’s range is about 100 square kilometers.

We relaxed in hammocks in the afternoon before going out on the boat again for another try at the Fiery Topaz. Robert had to go find a stick to unplug the toilet, and it rained a bunch, but otherwise it was a quiet few hours.

Tuesday, 30 December – Tiputini

We both managed to sleep decently the previous night, despite a very heavy dinner (fettuccini with heavy cream sauce), and my furniture rearranging kept the cockroaches on the floor, as far as I could tell. (At least we didn’t see the rat that visited next door!) However, Robert wasn’t feeling too hot once we were up; once again, we figured it had to be dehydration, since we’d both eaten all the same stuff.

Peter planned to take a group into the forest, while Victor was headed for the tower. I opted for tower (to save my aching feet), while Robert was going to be a forest guy. An early light rain delayed the start about an hour, but once at the tower, it was a marvelous morning. Good, closer looks at some bird already seen, including the Paradise Tanager, Black-bellied Cuckoo⁵, and a Violaceous Trogon – wow! The trogon looked a little bedraggled, but I really liked watching him, especially the slow, sad-eyed way he had of turning their head this way and that. The highlight of the morning, though, was a Crested Eagle, who landed in our treetop; he was spectacular.

We stayed up top until nearly 11:30, when Peter’s group showed up at the base, so we came on down. Victor’s pack had been swarmed by ½”-long wood ants, about 500 of them – ugh. As I came down the stairs, I looked around, and saw no Robert. “Is my husband dead?” I asked Peter. “If he is,” he replied, “he died in his room.” Hmm – for Robert not to go out, he must have been feeling really lousy...



Cathy Wooster of our VENT group climbing down the Tiputini tower.

³ “So what if they crawl on you,” asked Robert rhetorically, “what’s the worst that could happen?” Yeah, right.

⁴ Peter and Victor related that some another group had recently seen a Harpy attacking a howler monkey; the monkey had its arms and legs wrapped around a tree limb, and was apparently screaming bloody murder while the eagle picked at it, trying to get it to let go. Eventually the eagle tired of playing with the monkey, and simply sunk its talons into the monkey’s back and flew off, literally ripping it off the tree.

⁵ Peter’s vote for “most beautiful bird in the rainforest”.

All of us minus Robert took about 45 minutes to come the ½ kilometer or so from the tower back to the lodge. Two great birds held us back: a Black-faced Antthrush and a Rusty-belted Tapaculo. The forest group had apparently spent the better part of their morning going after the antthrush, to no avail. But with Victor and Peter standing apart from one another, both playing tapes of the antthrush's call, the bird slowly crept into view, a dark bird picking his way through the dark leaf litter, in shadow. It was tough but I got several really good looks. The tapaculos (two of them) were also on the ground, but not quite as shy; I saw them well, multiple times. (I kept trying to move to give others a chance, and would wind up with even better vantage points!)

The path back went directly past the rooms, and we found Robert on the porch, looking much better. I loaded up on lunch (intending to skip dinner) while he was, understandably, more conservative⁶.

We were going to hike out to a Wire-tailed Manakin lek at 2:00 PM, but it started raining hard shortly after 1:00, and showed little intention of stopping, so that was out. Instead, both Robert and I caught some more "hammock time", watching the rain as we gently swayed to and fro.

Later, when the rain lightened up, we went back out to the tower, Robert too. It rained on us a bit there too, but we stayed past dark to do a little owling. Nearly everyone else bailed to get back before dark, but it was nice to hang out. No sunset to watch, because it

was so misty...at one point I got Robert in the corner for a hug, and told him to remember he'd been hugged 130 feet up in an Ecuadoran rainforest at night. How many people can say that?



Robert relaxing outside our room at Tiputini, perusing his bird guide.

One interesting note...after it stopped raining, it continued to *sound* like rain for well over an hour, from all the water dripping off the trees. In a light rain, most of the water won't even hit the ground; the forest greenery acts like a big sponge.

Wednesday, 31 December – Tiputini to Sacha

New Year's Eve! If I hadn't been reminded, likely I would have forgotten. We were up again at 5:00 AM when the lights came on – the alarm had already gone off, but we ignored it – and tolerated the big roaches as we dressed (I had some measure of revenge by squashing one in the bathroom, and another at breakfast⁷). We birded the clearing around the rooms for just about an hour, then piled into the big canoe for the trip back down the Tiputini.

The boat ride started well enough; we saw an Ornate Hawk-Eagle, and bunches of parrots (Mealy, Orange-cheeked, Blue-headed) at a salt lick along the river bank. Peter showed us his hand-held GPS device and how we could track where we were exactly; later, talking



A beautiful Heliconia at Tiputini.

⁶ Dehydration did indeed seem to have been both our problems. Once Victor and Peter tipped us off that most bouts of *turista* are really dehydration, Robert simply drank a big glass of water every hour and recovered fairly quickly. In retrospect, I thought most of my previous *turista* illnesses (Belize, Tanzania...) were likely due to dehydration, as I'd purposely drink very little so I wouldn't have to run off the trail or get out of the vehicle. I wish I'd known!

⁷ A hopeless endeavour, at best. Another person in our group teased me, saying all that I accomplished by killing a couple was making all the rest of them mad, and that they'd come after me!



Soaking wet, but still Victor Emanuel waves the poncho at the Tiputini tower.

about parrots, he seemed surprised that we had remembered his “clap and roll” identification clues for the parrots in Belize. (What could we say – it was effective!)

We continued on, remarking how the weather was on our side; Peter related that the previous year, he and Victor had “gotten nailed” in a totally blinding rainstorm on the Napo. He figured we were in no danger of getting wet this day, because the Tiputini guys manning our boat didn’t even bother to put tarps over any of our stuff. Well...they were all wrong. Not long after listening to this story, it started to rain; first lightly, then harder, then harder still. We broke out the rain gear, but it was fairly hopeless; it rained so hard that even with Robert’s poncho (which I eventually tried to dive under, appearances be damned), we both got very soaked, as the water ran down our backs and pooled on our seat cushions. About all that stayed dry were my feet in my mud boots. For over an hour we sat huddled in the boat, getting drenched.

Finally, when we didn’t think we could take it much more, we reached the Tiputini 2 bridge, where we ran up the slippery, muddy bank to our open-sided truck for the 50 km drive back down the Maxus Road.

It continued to rain heavily through the drive, but we didn’t bother taking stock of the situation until we got back to the helicopter hangar/dock at Pompeya Sur, where we’d first caught our bus/truck a few days earlier. There everyone checked out their belongings – thank goodness for plastic bags inside the suitcases! – and as the bathroom was nonfunctional, took turns going “au naturel”. The toilet paper in my pocket was sopping wet, as was the rest of me, but it seemed so funny; staying dry had never seemed quite so futile. The locals would seem to have the right idea; shorts, a t-shirt, and no worries.

At any rate, we were soon picked up by another boat to take us to the Sacha Lodge. Our contact was a young, red-haired Scot named Lindsey, who told us all about the lodge’s hot water (the only jungle lodge in Ecuador with it!) while we all openly oohed and ah’d at the mere thought of a good, hot shower.



Leaving Tiputini the way we came...by canoe.

The boat took us along the broad Napo for at least 30-40 minutes; eventually we came to a little non-dock, where we (again) climbed up the bank, and walked a long (1 mile? More?) muddy, muddy trail to an equally long and slippery boardwalk. The boardwalk took us to a little boathouse, where we loaded into small dugout canoes, and rowed across a small lake. We chuckled as Victor’s canoe, with two rowers to our one, overtook us, with Victor looking positively regal as he held his umbrella over his head. Across the lake was, at long last, the lodge! The tall thatched-roof tower stood out over the greenery, looking very inviting.

Sacha was a real tourist lodge, meaning, in part, pretty decent food. (Tiputini’s food was fine, but this was a bit better.) And they have a real bar, too!⁸

After a very late lunch, we headed out to bird the little lake, and afterwards went out in the canoes, back across to the boardwalk to go owling. The slippery dampness was worth it – we got both Spectacled and Tawny-bellied Owls.

⁸ The drinking water – very safe, they said – was twice-filtered, boiled lake water. It was clean, but still had a yellowish color, kind of like very weak iced tea. We drank it, and had no problems, but it was a little disconcerting.

Back at the lodge, preparations were gearing up for the New Year's Eve party (sigh). A big sign said *Felices Pascales y Próspero Año Nuevo*; when we asked why "Happy Easter", Peter said, "this is Ecuador, it's probably the only sign they have." He asked, and sure enough, he was right! Dinner, music, and dancing followed, and apparently it's traditional to burn a doll at midnight, but we returned to our cabaña for a hot shower and to check out the bug situation...so far, so good. (Of course, they *do* only come out at night, not exactly a comforting thought to insect-phobic me.)



Victor Emanuel surveys the shoreline from the boat.

Thursday, 1 January – Sacha Lodge

"There's a cute little frog...the natives like to tie them to a board and poke them with hot coals. When you harass them like that, they exude this white liquid, and if you then lick it, it's hallucinogenic. What I'd like to know is, who figured this out, and how did he explain it to his friends? 'Well, I was torturing this frog one day, and licked its sides, and started hallucinating...'" – Peter

Happy New Year! We may not have stayed up until midnight, but had a good time anyway listening to Peter's jungle stories before retiring. And we started out the year relatively bug-free! Yes, our standards for comfort have slipped a bit. One roach flew across the room the previous night, but otherwise, no apparent problems.

This morning we walked about 30 minutes to another tree tower, after a breakfast where we puzzled over the "mystery bird" on the holiday card Peter and Victor had left in our room the night before...more on this later. This tower was about the same height as the Tiputini tower, but older, more weathered, and looked as if the termites were getting a good meal out of it. Nevertheless, up we went, and spent the better part of five hours birding the canopy.



Peter English of VENT.

During a lull, I returned to the enigma of the mystery bird. My two big clues from Peter were (1) the bird was in his study area (about 16 km from the Tiputini 2 bridge), and (2) the sexes were alike. I had already fixated on antwrens and wrens, but "sexes alike" left out the antwrens. So I puzzled over a borrowed field guide, found five eastern Ecuador wrens on Victor's tape, and eliminated all but the Musician Wren. The photo didn't really look terribly like the book illustration, but it was the best I could think of.

Cautiously, I told Peter I had a guess.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"No, so don't laugh...but I think it's a Musician Wren," I replied.

Peter grinned and gave me a big thumbs up. "Wow wow⁹! On the first try!...You RAND people, always thinking, thinking...hey, tell Victor."

So I did, and his reaction was similar. "It took me much longer," he said, adding "but I was in the office, and distracted." Peter joined in, saying, "Victor, you should call RAND and tell them to give Liza a raise!" ...and on and on...he said some "experts" couldn't even get the bird family right. But I knew I was just lucky.

⁹ His inside joke to himself – he later said he liked to say "wow wow" because that's what Ecuadorans say a dog's bark sounds like.

In the meantime, we wrapped up the tower birding, and returned to the lodge. I went for a quick lake swim (an interesting sensation, warm water layered on top, cool upwellings below) while Robert continued to work on the mystery bird before, throughout, and after lunch.



The Sacha Lodge.

Eventually, back in our room, Robert sighed, set down his book, and said, “Ok, I have a guess, but I’m not too happy with it...the Musician Wren.” I didn’t react, just gave him a quick kiss and told him to tell Peter. “Well, that’s a ‘you’re wrong’ kiss, isn’t it? Damn,” he said, and picked up the book again. “Just tell Peter what you think!” I said. He just shook his head and continued looking at the book, and staring at the picture of the bird, propped up on a shelf across the room.

We went out to the canoe dock at 3:00 PM, and Peter was sitting there washing off his mud boots. “Here’s your chance, Robert,” I needled, pushing him. “No,” he answered, “I want to look at the antbirds again.” I pushed him some more, and he said, “Oh, you just want me to look stupid, don’t you. I won’t even say it out loud.” He bent over and whispered in Peter’s ear.

“Uh huh,” Peter nodded.

“Uh huh what?” asked Robert.

“You’re absolutely right...the RAND people are two for two! Not the fastest, but you gathered the information, analyzed it, and came up with the answer. Only really smart people can work at RAND...”

Robert laughed, and told everyone I had tortured him. But it was fun...I’ll remember the picture of the wren propped up against the water bottle in the room for a long time.

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Our afternoon excursion was across the lake and down the boardwalk back to the river. It was hot and buggy (“my favorite combination of conditions,” joked Peter) but by that point, it scarcely mattered. Too bad, I thought, that I didn’t get used to the conditions until it was nearly time to go home! On the other hand, I don’t know if I could have tolerated it for a year as Peter did. Victor seemed unfazed by the weather as well, but he lived for awhile in Houston, and was undoubtedly used to it.

Friday, 2 January – Sacha Lodge

“In Texas, it’s illegal to cause ‘mischief at night’. So basically, if it is dark, and someone is bothering you, you can shoot them.” – Peter

Our last full day in eastern Ecuador dawned early, with the staff knocking at the cabaña door at 5:00 AM, and me still chuckling over random bits of Peter-ana. The staff beat on the door for awhile, until Robert was able to respond *buenos días* so they’d go away.

We spent 6½ hours in the morning on forest trails trying to pick up some hard-to-get birds. Victor and Peter worked the tapes; some birds would respond while others mocked us by calling and not moving. The sun was out so we had some light, at least, what could filter through the canopy.

Later, at lunch...

“Robert, you know that decurved bill you saw on that short-billed leaf-tosser?” Peter asked.

“Yes...”



The mystery bird...a Musician Wren. (Photo by Peter English.)



Peter English and some of the group heading back across Sacha Lake.

“Did you look in the field guide?”

“No, not yet,” Robert answered.

“Well,” Peter said, “Victor and I came back to the room and looked at the illustrations in three guides, and read all the descriptions, and after carefully considering all the information, we decided it was a tawny-throated, not a short-billed. And I realized, we’d done a RAND!”¹⁰

However, our local guide, Oscar, stated adamantly (in Spanish) that the tawny-throated was not in the Sacha area.

“What will you do now?” I asked Peter.

“Ignore him,” he said under his breath, laughing.

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And now for something completely different...a little genealogy. Victor’s father’s family was Jewish and originally from Worms-an-der-Rhein; he emigrated to Mississippi around 1915-1920. Interesting! The path and timing reminded me of the Maikammer Weisslers.

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After a pre-lunch swim, complete with some small fish (someone said piranhas, but I never saw anything) kissing another woman’s toes, and a post-lunch rest, the group headed out again around 3:30 PM. I tried washing out one of Robert’s long-sleeved shirts, surprisingly it dried out quickly. A Rufous-and-green Kingfisher greeted us on the railing as we emerged from our cabaña, and Speckled Chachalacas crashed about in the trees near the kitchen area. We loaded ourselves into the canoes and floated across the lake into the flooded forest, finding Rufescent Tiger-heron, Orange-crested and White-bearded Manakins en route. Eventually, we got to “the end”, where nearly everyone got out for a dusk visit to the tower for a little owling. I decided to canoe on back to the lodge with another couple, as my feet were pretty beat from the morning, while Robert went on to the tower.



Robert and Liza at Sacha Lake, no piranhas in sight.

After cleaning up, I retreated to the bar to read, relax, and enjoy a glass of Chilean chardonnay. A newly-arrived group of (older) Americans were whooping it up in the bar, cracking loud rude jokes about sex, and generally acting just a bit too loud and boorish...oh well. Made me realize that our return to “civilization” was nearly upon us. Too bad, I thought; a few roaches suddenly seemed like a very small (if creepy) price to pay for peace, quiet, and a chance to enjoy nature in all her glory.

Saturday, 3 January – Sacha to Quito

The morning routine...a knock on the door, *buenos días!*, find the lights, check the floor for cockroaches, fling the bathroom door open and jump back...

We left Sacha immediately after breakfast, canoeing across the lake and marching back across the boardwalk and mud-path to the Napo, only stopping a few times. An hour after leaving the lodge, we were on the big Sacha boat headed back to Coca. It was a long, 2½ hour

¹⁰ We later talked about getting people back at work to use the verb “to rand”, meaning, to analyze something to the point of exhaustion. ☺

ride, broken up by good looks at a few good birds, including an Oriole Blackbird and a Black Caracara fishing.

Approaching Coca after a week in the rainforest, the town seemed positively prosperous. We climbed out of the boat and hung around the concrete dock a little bit waiting for our bus, and taking a look at the nearby birds¹¹. It was a pretty nice, sunny day; one of our party approached Peter, asking, “Isn’t the airport close enough to walk?”

“It’s about a mile away,” he replied. “That’s farther than you want to walk in Coca.”

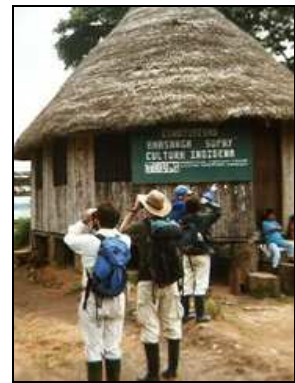
“Really, it’s that dangerous?” the woman asked, “even in a group in the daylight?”

“No,” said Peter, completely deadpan, “it’s just ugly.”

That line of Peter’s cracked me up every time I thought about it.

At any rate, once we did zip over to the airport by bus, we had a brief wait before getting on our plane (this time the plane really was full, unlike on the way out when apparently Peter and Victor were told the plane was full, when it wasn’t at all). By 12:30 PM we were back in the thin air of Quito, far away from my insect nemeses. Except for one more surprise...as I talked to some others in the group about the general lack of bugginess (except for roaches), I mentioned not getting many mosquito or gnat bites, but did wind up with a little heat rash. “Me too,” said Robert, and a couple of other people nodded affirmatively. “Well,” said Peter, overhearing us, “I didn’t want to tell y’all this, but Sacha had bedbugs.” Ick! Sometimes ignorance is bliss.

For me and a few others in the group, the afternoon activity was shopping. Peter showed us his favorite shops in the vicinity of our Hotel Alameda, and left us to our own devices. I picked up two alpaca sweaters and some balsa goodies, plus (after some agonizing) a special birthday present for Robert: a beautiful lithograph of Masked Trogons by Paul Greenfield¹², one of the plates for a forthcoming book on the birds of Ecuador. Robert, in the meantime, went on a last gasp birding expedition with Victor in Quito.



Robert and Peter checking out a Laughing Gull in Coca.

We ended the day with a lovely dinner at a restaurant atop a nearby office building. The restaurant gave us a great view of the city at night – apparently it was a holiday of some sort, as we could see fireworks going off – or else it was a typical Saturday night in Quito? Who knew. At any rate, a fine dinner, Chilean wine, good company; another great trip wrapped up. We were both pleased to be able to interact so much with Peter and Victor, more so than at Chan Chich; they’re both terrific company, great birders, and full of fun stories. We both hoped we could travel with them again.

Epilogue

¹¹ Robert and Peter got a fleeting glimpse at (they say) a Laughing Gull; if so, that would have been only the third record for Laughing Gull in Coca (the previous two being one collected 2 Dec 1975 near Limoncocha, across the Napo from Pompeya Sur, and one seen downstream from Coca on 8-10 Jan 1994).

¹² Purchased in a little art gallery. The bill in Ecuadoran *suces* was alarming: with ~4500 *suces* to the dollar, the bill was well over a million *suces*. I hoped the bank would get the currency correct.



The international terminal of the Quito airport – what an experience. We arrived well in advance of our flight, about four hours early, and were told by an American Airlines representative that we couldn't actually get in line yet. So we stood for an hour or so in the "line to get in line" before moving into the real line...which promptly went nowhere, as the agents at the counter looked pretty unconcerned. They eventually started checking people in, but still, the line didn't move, and we were very close to the front of the line, too.

It seemed an inordinate number of people were going through the First Class line, and the agents were helping only them. There couldn't possibly have been that many first class passengers on that flight. To make things worse, it looked to us as if passengers were paying some professional line-standers to take their tickets and passports and check them in; we kept seeing a couple of people holding big stacks of tickets appearing and re-appearing at the counter.

The people around us in line started getting restless, and we had to figure, at the rate things were going, either half the people would never get on the plane, or (more likely) the plane would be way late. A fellow in front of us started yelling, and the agents yelled back that they had to help the first class people. More people started waving their arms and arguing that there should be two lines, one for first class, one for coach. This just seemed to piss off the agents. "Once they get mad," I told Robert, "I bet they let us stand here forever!" While people got more and more steamed, I looked over to where Victor and Peter were standing, off to the side. "Is this normal?" I called out to them. "Yes," Peter answered. "Enjoy it, it's Ecuador!"

Figuring I had nothing to lose, I took Robert's ticket and passport, and muscled my way to the counter, standing as close as I dared to a woman who was getting checked in. The second the agent handed the woman back her boarding pass, I shoved our tickets and passports into the agent's face, beating out a couple people standing near me. I got screamed at by a few people for cheating, but what the heck, "when in Rome...". And as I emerged victorious from the mob, my worry about looking like an "ugly American" dissipated some when Peter said, "Congratulations...you figured it out how it works."

We resolved to write a letter to American Airlines about the lousy service, but never did so. It was just part of the overall experience.