

Ecuador Report

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The first part of the trip we went to the Bellavista Cloud Forest Reserve. This is a privately-owned reserve about 2-1/2 hours northwest of Quito on the edge of the Mindo Cloud Forest. The lodge also has what they call a b7b in Quito that can be booked for \$45 per night. They had a driver meet us at the airport and take us to the property, which was actually a 3-bedroom apartment in a large apartment building. Each of the 3 bedrooms is being used as a b&b and there is a sitting area, kitchen, and what apparently is a maid's room off the kitchen. The only other guest was a naturalist from Columbia who was also going up to Bellavista the following day. There were no staff there — we just had the communal apartment to ourselves. In the morning a woman came in who fixed breakfast, then the driver appeared to take us to Bellavista. It was a pleasant place to stay, but I wouldn't stay there unless going going straight to Bellavista to make the transfer easier.

Bellavista is in a beautiful location, high on a steep slope in the cloud forest. Every morning that we were there was brilliantly sunny, but by about noon the fog started to form and every afternoon it rained, pretty much typical weather for the region. The reserve has a number of well-marked hiking trails and trail maps — they are graded easy, moderate, hard, and something called "SS" which we were informed was short for "slippery/suicidal". Even the easy ones were a bit of a challenge since the terrain is quite steep throughout the area. Every morning at 6 there were guided bird walks on the various trails, and the naturalists were quite good. We went on the morning walks, then back for breakfast, then out on our own, back for lunch, out on our own, back for dinner, and an early night. We spent 4 nights there, which is a longer than usual stay. The lodge also does a day tour business from Quito, so there are often bus loads of people coming in about 10:00am, taking a naturalist walk, having lunch, some free time, then back to Quito in the evening. They don't get to see as much since most of the wildlife is active in the early morning or late afternoon. The road to the property is gravel, about a 9 mile drive off the paved highway winding along a river valley then ascending up towards the lodge. The birding there is quite good — they record 59 species of hummingbirds alone, and the grounds are full of feeders so you can sit and watch hummingbirds all day if you want. It is a good area for birding; we saw a lot of toucans, trogons, barbets, and lots of other colorful birds. The accommodations are quite rustic — everything from a dorm room for backpackers with a shared bath, to larger units — we had a room that would have slept 4 or 5 in 2 double and 1 single bed. Bathrooms were nice, but walls quite thin. Our floor was bamboo strips, so bumpy and sticky to walk on. Things were a bit damp because of the climate, and the furniture was mis-matched, sort of like going to summer camp. I did enjoy it, although I think that 2 or 3 nights would have been plenty for me.

The driver from Bellavista stopped at an orchid reserve on the way back to Quito which was quite interesting — they had over 300 species of orchids on display in a garden setting, and a guide took us around although he only spoke Spanish. He was anxious that we get as much out of it as we could, however, so by a combination of Spanish and mime he really did impart a lot of information.

Next we were dropped off at the Hotel Vieja Cuba which is in a residential area of Quito. The hotel is quite lovely, owned by a Cuban family. Rooms are very nice. The hotel had a restaurant, although it was never open while we were there — not sure what the problem was. The hotel did own a second restaurant, Cuban of course, that was about 2 blocks away. They had the guard from the hotel walk us over, and when we were done eating the guard from the restaurant walked us back, leading us to think that perhaps security is an issue there. The hotel did have a nice breakfast in the morning in a room on the ground floor.

All of our guides were excellent — they spoke excellent English and had a good knowledge of the area.

We did a private city tour of Quito which was very good — through the cathedral, the old city, several of the old churches, the presidential palace, etc. Nice place on the main square to eat outside.

Prices were very reasonable for food there — you could get a very good meal for \$5-10, and a light meal for \$3 that was sufficient.

Took the Chiva Express package from Quito to Cuenca, which is a tourist train/bus trip. It starts with a drive of about 45 minutes to a village south of Quito where you board the train. The train is actually a bus on train wheels — very brightly painted and very comfortable on the inside with large windows and a toilet. There are also about 20 chairs mounted to the roof of the bus, with seat belts and a railing. If you choose you can ride on the roof to see the countryside going by. If there are more people than seats, they take care that you change places after a breakfast stop during the trip. Our English-speaking group was only 6 passengers, but there was a large 20+ group of Italians with a separate guide also on the tour. Most of them did not want to ride the roof, however, so we were able to do it for the entire trip.

The first day we took the train south for views up to Cotopaxi volcano, which was out of the clouds and very beautiful. It was quite cold, but the train issued us these big yellow slickers to wear over our clothes which kept things warm. We stopped for breakfast at a hacienda which was right along the rail line. After we got to the road where the Cotopaxi climbers got off, we left the train and took a minibus (just our group of 6) on through the mountains to Riobamba. The overnight in Riobamba was at a hotel just on the outside of town.

Day 2 we left Riobamba by a second Chiva bus from the rail station there. This is the section where you go over the "devil's nose" a pretty spectacular series of switchbacks on the rail line that go down a very steep slope by the train going backwards and forwards, switching the rails. There is a larger tourist train that operates from Riobamba to the Devil's Nose and back again. This is part of the original train that used to operate all the way from Quito to Guayaquil. Part of the tracks have washed out, and the government has not repaired them so there is no longer any commercial rail in Ecuador, just the trains that are operated for tourists. The large train also had people riding on the roof. Our little bus/train left first because the guides explained that the large train went off the rails with alarming regularity and snarled up the line, so they let us go first to get through the Devil's Nose before the large train made the trip. It was pretty spectacular, especially from the roof.

After going down and then back up the Devil's Nose, we left the train and went by mini-bus to Cuenca. The tour included 2 nights in Cuenca. Along the way we stopped for lunch and visited the Inca ruins at Ingapirca, arriving in Cuenca in the early evening. The tour has a choice of several different hotels in Cuenca, some in the old city. However, we stayed at the Oro Verde Hotel about 10 minutes drive from the historical center. The hotel is really quite nice, just not well located for walking around.

We were taken on a walking tour through the historical area of Cuenca, then back to the Oro Verde. The next day we checked out of the hotel and were taken on a trip to El Cajas National Park for some walks. Cuenca is about 8000 feet in elevation, but our walks in the national park were at 13,400. Beautiful mountains and lakes full of trout, which we ate a lot of while we were there. I also got brave and tried some "cue" which is guinea pig roasted on a spit — somewhat like a boney rabbit, lots of body, not much to eat.

After the rest of the tour group left, we moved to a hotel in the old city for an extra 2 nights in Cuenca. I was really glad that we did this — the hotel itself was very spartan but clean, rooms very small, called the Hotel San Andres. It was only \$45 a night including tax and a cooked breakfast, so I thought a good value. This gave us time to explore the food market, go into several of the churches (there are hundreds it seems), and generally soak up the atmosphere at our own pace.

Because of the independence day, several of the shops were closed so there wasn't much opportunity for shopping, There were, however, lots of celebrations going on, a parade where all the workers of the town marched together — the mechanics with engines in the back of their cars, handicraft workers carrying a loom, people from the plastic factory all dressed alike and carrying a sign — rather like a labor day celebration of some kind. There was also a food fair in one of the plazas with local foods from different regions of southern Ecuador — roasting pigs, cue, and so on, and a couple of big open-air concerts and art displays in different parks in the city.

Flew on Tame Airlines back to Quito. My record is 100% now for the Quito Airport — when I don't carry it on, they lose my luggage. You can't carry-on the small planes within Ecuador, so when we arrived in Quito we discovered that Tame had not loaded ANY baggage on the flight, so the entire plane was without luggage. Some of the people were due to fly out that night, we were scheduled out a 7:00am the next morning. I didn't think that we had a chance of getting them in time, but the Tame representative said that the bags would be delivered to the Vieja Cuba that evening, and sure enough about 9:30 we got a call that the bags were downstairs. So everything ended well.

The people of Ecuador seem to be very friendly and helpful to visitors, not just in the tourist trade but people you encounter on the streets as well. The guides were among the best I've ever had, and we could have set our watch by the transfer people — everything was on time to the minute.