

Poor yet Wealthy

Looking at the magnificent paintings inside the La Merced church in Quito, Ecuador, I was met by a middle-aged man wearing a dress shirt and dress pants.

“I can give you a tour.”

“No, not interested.”

“You will know more if I give you a tour. I’m the priest here.”

Seriously doubting his claim that he was the priest, I shook my head and left the church. The next day I saw him at another church, the Church of El Sagrario, again claiming he was the church’s priest and offering his services to other tourists. They had also declined paying him for a tour and thus he asked me, who he did not immediately recognize.

Sarcastically, I began, “Hey Padre, save any souls today? I thought you were the priest at La Merced.”

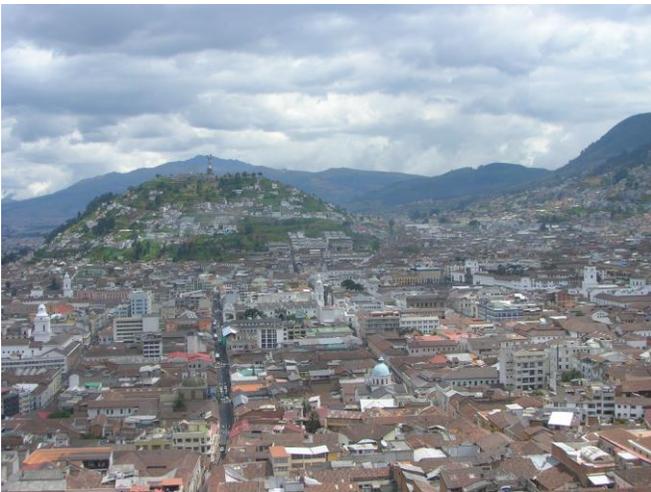
He then recognized me, “Oh yes, the cheap tourist.”

“What you do is disgusting, pretending to be a priest, using people’s faith for your own monetary gain.”

“We are poor here in Ecuador.”

“A poor person is someone who lies and cheats. It has nothing to do with finances. Surely a priest like you would know this.”

He grunted and tried to influence another tourist. “The priest” was right in that Ecuador was financially poor, but is wealthy in regards to its vast natural beauty and historical attractions. The city of Ibarra, not too far from Columbia, seems poorer than its northern neighbor. There are a lot of horses used for transport as well as horseshoe imprints in the cement. Prices for food and accommodations are cheaper, but conversely people appear to have less money. However, the Andes Mountains are higher and more scenic in this area and there are a couple of parks to hike in and get even better views of the mountains. In Ibarra, there are a few nice buildings such as



the Dolorosa church and an organized bus station. There are many good fruits to sample at the market as well as Rosalia Suarez Ice Cream which is famous in Ecuador.

Quito is a hilly city which makes it difficult to traverse but also allows for some picturesque views. The Old Town is where most of the attractions are located. There are a series of plazas with accompanying churches including Plaza Santo Domingo, Plaza de San Francisco, Plaza Grande and Plaza del Teatro. Santo Domingo was closest

to my hotel and has a small church in comparison to the larger San Francisco church. Plaza del Teatro is where the theater is and where there are many music performances. Plaza Grande is the square where most people go to and relax in. It is surrounded by several important buildings, including the cathedral in the southern corner of the square. On the north side is the Palacio Arzobispal, although the archbishop does not reside here, instead there are numerous shops and restaurants. On the western side is the Palacio del Gobierno, in which the president does conduct official business. Just off the square is the Cento Cultural Metropolitana, which houses artwork.

Quito is known for being near the equator and has many attractions related to this geographic feature. The Mitad del Mundo is a touristy attraction that allows visitors to jump back and forth between hemispheres. It's just a statue that houses a museum largely dedicated to the indigenous people. The museum admits that it is off a couple hundred meters from the equator. The Museo Solar Inti Nan claims to be the real equator and has some cheesy exhibits. At the museum, they throw water down a sink at the northern and then southern hemisphere a few feet away and the water swirls in different directions, but this is due to how the sink is balanced not the equator. Visitors can balance an egg on a nail and perform other balance tests. Between these two museums is a third place that claims to be the real equator and bases its claim on indigenous people's calculation. Since Ecuador is the only place on the equator with mountains, the locals calculated latitude and longitude via the mountains without the use of modern science.



Another attraction close to Quito is the Otavalo Saturday market. Otavalo in and of itself is a charming city, but the effervescent Saturday market is why most people visit the city. Tourists visit the handicrafts market, which is okay but obviously touristy. There is a lot of clothing, masks, dolls and nativity scenes in the crafts market. More interesting and more of a local favorite are the animal and food markets. The locals, *otavaleños*, are indigenous people famous for their appearance. The males wear pig-tails and white pants while the women wear colorful blouses and shawls which they use to store food and chickens.

No trip to Ecuador would be complete without a trip to the Galapagos Islands. Unfortunately, the trip is quite expensive, but it is also a unique experience. Pulling out money in Quito to make a bank transfer to pay for the trip, a little street girl was watching me at the ATM. The money was dispensed mostly in five and ten dollar bills (they use US dollars) which made for a large wad of money. Looking at the wad of money, her eyes opened, she gasped, pointed at me and then exclaimed, "Mama, mama, el hombre tiene mucho, mucho dinero." I needed to make another withdrawal as there was a money limit on my initial one. This was met by the same response and since her ma was talking to someone else, she screamed towards her. Not the best situation but with the trip paid for, I went to the Galapagos.

There are several islands to visit but most people base themselves on Isla Santa Cruz which also has the airport. Without even leaving the island, one can see some of the animals like sea lions, pelicans, and some birds. El Chato Tortoise Reserve contains a handful of giant tortoises, some weighing several hundred pounds. The main entrance has a couple tortoise shells of deceased tortoises in which people can slide into. The Charles Darwin Research Station raises lizards and tortoises, which have their shell's color-coded to indicate which island they will be relocated to. There are also some interesting lava tubes that were created after the formation of the island.

Boat cruises and guided tours allow for a more in-depth look at the animals. The most famous is the blue-footed booby, which is a bird with a foot stomping mating dance and unique



mating call. There are red-footed boobies as well and several other birds on the rugged islands. It is a bit eerie as the birds just stare at humans as there are minimal predators on the protected islands. It reminded me a little bit of Hitchcock's movie, *The Birds*, and I was waiting for them to attack, but they never did. Other animals that can be seen are hammerhead sharks and ugly lava lizards that blend into the volcanic rock, and thus sometimes they get stepped on. There are also the lazy sea lions that slide by as humans are lying on the beaches as if they were

not there. I liked a particular sea lion that was too lazy to get up and off of the beach and into the water. So it just waited for the tide to come in and then slowly rolled out as the tide went out.

Ecuador has a wealth of physical beauty that contrasts the financial lack of capital. The Galapagos and the animals that inhabit the island are an obvious part of the beauty of Ecuador. The hills of Quito allow for some amazing views of the city that compliment the attractive areas within the city center. Visiting Ecuador, one will be wealthier after the experience.