

# Ecuador, 11. to 29 of December 08

We arrived on 2800m high in Quito late at night and were met with an arrival hall crammed with people and taxi drivers eager to take us to a hotel of their choice. Many signs were held up. We did not find the taxidriver holding up a sign with our name that our friend Iris had arranged for. This was the sure option to bring us to her home in Tumbaco, a suburb of Quito late at night. We did not have a telephone number either. Once again we did this mistake, because all was arranged so perfectly we could not imagine it not working.

## Quito and Tumbaco

As we found out later in a hostel in Quito, the taxidriver had been there and waited long hours to find us.

After a day in Quito with blazing sun in the morning and plastering rain in afternoon, we finally met Iris at her work as a film journalist. A taxidriver explained to us that in Ecuador all seasons happen during one day, while all days are more or less the same during the course of a year. In the mornings there is summer and in the afternoon winter with heavy rains.

All in all we saw more clouds and rain and mist and drizzel than sun. A harsh change after the sun fludded Mexico. Ina said after the first two weeks in Ecuador with clouds and rain every day, be it coast or highlands: „Now I understand why it is called 'rainforest' or 'cloudforest'.“



We finally landed in the beautiful house of Iris, David and their 18 year old son Wind. Iris is a friend of us, an artist and a filmmaker on social, political and art issues. We know each other for a long time as she has been visiting ZEGG for many years and inspired us with her work. We spent some relaxed days with good food in a beautiful and inspirering atmosphere. For Iris xmas holidays just started. David founded an organization „cozinas sin fronteras“ (kitchens

without borders) and helps build kitchens in crisis areas like he just did in San Josecito in Colombia, where many groups and organizations throughout the world support a small village in their threatened peace efforts.

Public transport in Ecuador is mainly busses and very cheap. As a rule of thumb you can expect one hour ride in a bus to cost about one Dollar US.

Recently Ecuador is reopening parts of a train line running from North to South. The plan is to reopen it completely. Around the year 2000 Ecuador converted their official currency to US\$. Many regret, as now the Ecuadorian economy is tightly linked to the sinking ship of the US economy. In this way unvoluntarily it helps carry the incredible US debt (along with many other countries in the world who bound their currencies to the dollar).

## Mindo

From Quito we started off to the little town Mindo. A renowned tourist place for wildlife, flora and before all, birdwatching. We were looking forward to warmer climate and sun. We were happy to meet again an other ecuadorian friend named Milton, who had been taking refuge in Europe and Germany about 8 years ago, studying and visiting many intentional communities. He had to leave the country then to avoid imminent danger because of his environmental and political activism fighting an oil pipeline being built through a protected refuge in Mindo. At that time he was a frequent guest at ZEGG. Since then he had started his own project: "Biomindo" working with international volunteers to build up the site for an ecovillage in Mindo. This is his dream. ([http://www.virb.com/biomindo\\_de](http://www.virb.com/biomindo_de))



The site is beautiful, uphill from Mindo with relatively unpolluted water running through and huts and "houses" built from an enormous variety of Bamboo that grows up to 25m and to a diameter of about 15cm. Roofs are covered with palm leaves. Life there is very simple with one tap of community water, fruit trees, a bucket toilet and an outdoor cold shower. There is no electricity on the site. The footprint is lower than low

and almost non-existent. It is very low budget and some ecuadorians live there from time to time and experience ecological thinking. Options are ample. The only long termers are Milton, his German wife Barbara and his Ecuadorian child. They find it difficult to attract more responsible co-comunitarians. The land is fertile, very wet with streams running through and swampy bits and frequent rains. Everage temperatures go from humid 18° to 24°C throughout the year.

In Ecuador ecological consciousness is low and garbage separation a novelty. Wherever it is tried in an eager effort, it fails due to lack of information. It reminds me a lot of how it was in Germany about 35 years ago. Most of plastics and metals and inorganic waste lands in the landscape or is burned producing toxic fumes. Energy consciousness is non existing and the same

about the pollution of water. In this land of ample water resources and daily heavy rainfalls it is not hard to understand that water is seen as an ample commodity and not as a scarce resource. As a consequence all bigger rivers are very polluted and filled with sewage.

As I experienced and started to understand in Mexico, the understanding is not there yet that suddenly waste is not fertilizer for the land around where I live as it used to be in times of organic only materials. I saw plastic bags imprinted with "not biodegradable" to make people learn the difference. There are lots of signs not to throw waste into the landscape with drastic fines, but effects evidently are still low.



For us it was far too wet in Mindo and too cold due to the moisture though the first thing we bought were rubber boots. We had the feeling to never become dry. So we welcomed the idea to make a three day trip to the beach with parts of Miltons family and the Ecuadorian volunteers. His brother owns an open tourist bus.

We calculated the diesel prices and who can pay and left early the next morning together with his 67 year old mother. We hoped to escape the clouds and find



warmth and sun. The 6h ride was fun on this open but roofed bus with the others. On the way on the coast we came upon fishermen unloading their catch and bought a huge bucket full of palm sized fish to fry for 1\$ directly from the net. We bought a full sized banana stub (I dont know the right word) and food for the next days for us 10 was set.





## Playa Platano



The beach “Playa Platano” was at the end of a long, curving dust road and does not know tourism. It is a small, remote and reportedly unpolluted fishing village with maybe 200 inhabitants. Arriving there we were met with a solid layer of clouds a dark beach, and non clear if not muddy water. We were not tempted to swim. The first meal cooked on a gas stove on the back of the bus was .... fried fish with the ecadorian staple: cooking

bananas and it was delcious.

We stayed in a very basic “hostel” together with the mother and child, the others on the beach in tents next to the bus.



From then on all meals were: fish! As we had bought a beautiful 4kg one the next day from the fishermen there. The wheather did not change much but it was still an adventure and enjoyable to be there. It was an original. The vultures, stray dogs and pigs where cleaning up the village of organic garbage, the rest stayed. Overall I had the impression that the ecuadorian taste does not seek beauty and “order” as I do cherish. There seems not to be a desire nor a striving for it, maybe not even a sense. This is similar as in Mexico.



After this time with fish and meat in every meal I was looking forward to less meat. Unfortunately the ecuadorian kitchen seems to be built on animal protein and vegies are not used much, especially never raw. And we missed Mexican tortillas and corn. Maize or corn, as in Germany, here is used and maybe seen only as animal food.



After two days we took off again to Mindo, eating chicken on the way. My stomach revolted.

The tour with the bus along the traffic vein, which runs from the big harbour town “Esmeralda” to “Lago Agrio” in



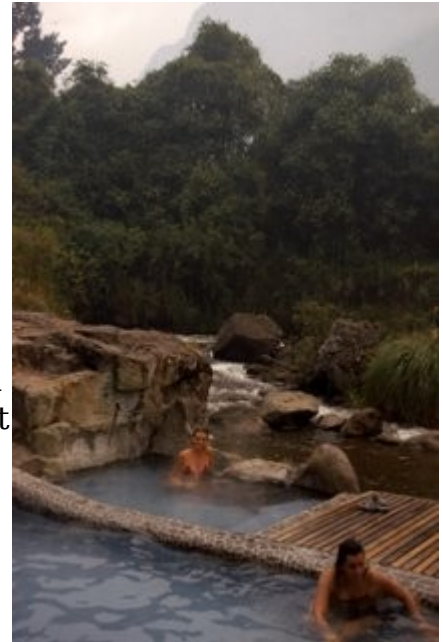
the Oriente close to the Colombian border, was very informative as we saw a lot. In Lago Agrio oil was found 40 years ago by Texaco. Since then a big pipeline runs through the whole country crossing a 4000m high pass. This of course causes pollution with every rupture of one of the now many pipelines in this water rich country.

## Papallacta



After a short stay in Mindo we continued to the 3400m high thermal baths in Papallacta on the way from Quito. Papallacta is surrounded by 6000m high steep mountains, has cows on the fields and again lots of streams and water. It is very cold due to the height. The surrounding reminded us of Switzerland and the Alps, with cows, green meadows and streams. It was very enjoyable to lay in the hot water pools which are many in the area. Many hostels and

hotels have their own and the biggest is public next to a cold mountain river running wild through growths of rich trees with bromelias and orchids. Achim had a hard time adapting to the height and was sick with diarrhea and was short of breath especially during sleep.



## Lumbaqui



From there we continued by bus to cross the rest of the Andes to Lumbaqui, a small, quiet town to meet Miguel. It was a short ride of 3-4 hours. We easily found him at km 60 of the pipeline. The km's serve like addresses here and the pipeline sometimes is the fastest and most direct connection between two points to walk on. Miguel is a friend of Iris and would be our guide for the next days. He is a shaman and had organized the shamans of Ecuador some



years ago to legalize the use of Ayahuasca. Ayahuasca was used over thousands of years by peoples all over Latin America. Iris got to know him as she documented this struggle. He had organized a Ayahuasca ritual for us with a tribe of Quechua for the following day, the night from the 23<sup>rd</sup> to the 24<sup>th</sup> of December. We had liked the idea to escape Xmas in this sensible way in the “wild”.



Miguel lives there in a simple wooden house with his 90 year old father on his farm. His father had lived there for more than 40 years a self reliant life. By the way: he is a frequent smoker since his youth with one package a day and a recent health check revealed that everything is at the best.



He grows most of what he needs including coffee, rich chocolate and cooking bananas for starch, has a cow and a calf for milk, two horses, about 25 chicken of all kinds laying manycolored eggs, and 4 cats that control mice and insect plagues. If he wants to eat meat, he goes out hunting in his forest. He of course is full of stories of how life was before the pipeline and the road with lots of wildlife up to the famous jaguar and many kinds of monkeys. The only thing he needs to buy to eat is salt.



There is an inner peace of mind connected with such a life where everything I need is there. From outside it may seem simplistic, even poor, but living it is rich of its own right. In a pleasant climate all year round and on fertile soil many things can grow or could be grown if wished for. We spent some hours roasting, peeling and milling previously dried Cacao beans which, together with the fresh milk from the cow, give a very rich and tasteful drink. Our breakfasts consist of cooked bananas with self made cheese, “omelettes” and either hot cacao with milk from the cow. It was tasty and rich.



Some of the forest is still first growth jungle, some has the big trees felled for cash income. One big stem of about 30 to almost 50m high and a diameter of about 80 to 100cm generates \$50, no more. It is felled and sawn into boards on site and transported out by horses. Trees that are sought

out are tropical, valuable hard woods with high density. All which is not perfect boards is left in the forest leaving an open strip where the tree fell. Miguel's forest is full of ravines and streams and many rare trees like this one bearing fruit on its stem. Unfortunately the fotos do not really portray the size of what they show as stems are huge and so are the leaves. Many leaves have the size of a small table.



On one piece of land which had been cultural land with bananas 20 years before, the jungle regrows with a broad variety of tall trees stretching high into the sky. Coming from German growth rates of forest I would have guessed that the forest is at least 80 years old. But here soils are still very fertile and it rains daily with constant warm temperatures. Normally it rains every morning and clears up during noon to let the sun come through.





## **Ayahuasca ritual** (see photo collection above)

We went to Lago Agrio and to the nearby wide river where the Chamans from the Quechoa were to pick us up with a canoe. We had to wait and due to strong rainfalls uphill in Lumbaqui the same morning the river rose about 10cm the half hour we waited.

They brought us over with a motor canoe made from one big tree that had just been loaded with broken gravel in order to construct a well in their village. It was a working day for the village where all participated in unloading the canoe by hand up to the village.

The ritual site was about 1km from the village on a 25m high bank of the river. They just had rebuilt it in a communal work effort after a storm had destroyed the old one. It was build with wood, bamboo and had a palm roofing. About 20 people including many children waited for us to welcome us and serve us a drink of fermented yucca, which was very special. They said that they "live" by it and always drink it when they need to work. It is a kind of liquid alimentation with starch and sugar, gives strength and fights thirst. After a while we were served a meal of yucca, bananas and fresh fish from the river. As the guests of course we had almost all of the fish and only after we could not finish it, it was shared. Everthing is "cooked" in large Banana leaves in an open fire. Again the food was delicious and we felt honoured.



At dusk the ritual started with smal cups of calabassa to share it out and with a sip of our present of aguadente to diffuse the bitter taste. About 6 to 7 of them participated with us two and Miguel. Others, also children watched and went to sleep along with some of the women on the wooden floor of the hut.

As nothing much occurred after half an hour or more a second cup followed for most of us. Achim saw some comic like pictures for a short time and felt deeply connected to the earth. Besides this he did not feel much. After a timeless time he had to through up twice. This is quite common in Ayahuasca rituals also for longterm practitioners. Ina had an inner cinema running with fast sequences of pictures, a widening of the soul and the special enery continued 'till the early morning. It is difficult to describe but



was a strong experience.

We had a cleansing ritual and felt very cared about and welcome into their hearts. When we left, both of the Chamans gave us the beautiful neckless they had worn during the ritual.



The following days we explored the surrounding of Lumbaqui with Miguel. On # one tour we came to the territory of the Kofánes, who are original to the area. We took to men in our car who were leaders of a Kofán organization. They offered to take us to their village crossing a wide river by boat. Miguel told us that some years ago came US american Evangelist missionaries, one married a woman from the village and built a church. Now only few of them are left following old traditions. All others converted. Another sad story of cultural usurpation.



The government is building concrete block houses for them next to their more traditional wood houses to do them good and to help them to more modern comfort. Concrete block buildings in this climate are like a stove in the sun. They heat up fast and the climate to live in is poor. But it is modern! #

We continued to live at his father's house and enjoyed it very much. It was hard to leave, especially as it was clear that it would be a farewell forever from his father.

After initially Ecuador had seemed a bit harsher as Mexico and after we reckoned it being for the harsher climate with rare blue in the sky or sun, the last week had changed our feeling and has rewarded us with sun and warmth. Ecuador is the second poorest country of South America, many Ecuadorians left the country to find work either in the US, Spain or other nearby countries. Child labor still is common specially in the big cities. Often we were amazed by the kids we saw. They seemed much calmer than we know it from kids in Germany and of course they carry responsibility much earlier and help to support their families by selling "chickles" (chewing gums), or cleaning shoes or other simple things.