

Hi,

How are you? What's new in your life? What is the most interesting thing you have done so far this year? I'd like to hear about it... And while you're figuring out what to write, I'll continue to tell you what's been going on at latitude zero...

I recently went on vacation... It strikes me as completely absurd that I would go anywhere on vacation, since my life has been a perpetual holiday for many years... School starts in a week and I took the opportunity to go to the beach and do as little as possible.

With sticky thick clay mud sucking at my knee-high rubber boots every step, I trekked higher and higher up the mountain, deeper and deeper into the steamy jungle with three *Ecuadoriaños*. One man I hadn't known long and didn't know very well, the other two men I didn't know at all. Each man carried a huge razor sharp machete and a hessian sack filled with I don't know what. None of the men spoke a word of intelligible English. I didn't really know where we were going. Or how long it would take to get there. I didn't even know how long we would be there. All I knew was that we were going to the mountain. There was work to be done. In Ecuador, this could mean anything; limited only by imagination.

On the way, the men stopped briefly to pick ripe *chirimoya* (see photo) from a spindly but very leafy fruit tree on the side of the mud track. My backpack, over-filled to seam-bursting proportions with food supplies, camera, flipflops, toothbrush and a change of clothes became unbearably heavy as I slipped and slid in the thick mud. Struggling to stay vertical, raindrops dripping from my forehead into my eyes as I battled to retain control of my feet and not land flat on my back in the middle of a river of red-brown clay-mud, and trying to balance my pack as I wobbled uncertainly passed deep puddles, I wondered how much longer I could hold out before I collapsed tragically into the detested role of helpless useless female; embarrassingly stuck in the mud. Gritting teeth and flexing tired muscles, I trudged on, heaving my over-sized rubber boots out of each mini-vacuum, determined to keep up with the men. Suddenly someone yelled, "We're here!"

I looked up in time to see Pusuco (Chavo's Uncle Mario) reach upwards and pick a cacao bean (see photo) straight from the tree. Splitting the thick outer shell with a machete, he offered me the fruit. "Try this. It's delicious," he grinned toothlessly, nodding at me to take the huge seed pod and taste the juicy seeds. As I sucked on the gooey white flesh of a potential Mars Bar, I was introduced to the farm; the land being cleared and the soil prepared to grow mostly cacao trees, as well as every other tropical and temperate fruit you could possibly imagine. The overall plan for the property is to produce 100% natural organic chocolate. I stood at the top of the mountain and looked towards the horizon at Bolivar Beach, and could see surf crashing on the sandy coast about 10 kilometers away.

It was late afternoon by the time we arrived at the campsite – which is also the building site of the first bamboo cottage the family is planning to build. In the kitchen (see photo), Pusuco started a fire in the oven (see photo) and began peeling vegetables. As Chavo and I took buckets and descended down a steep narrow winding muddy track towards the river, where we would strip naked and toss buckets of freezing cold rain water over our heads to bathe before taking our freshly filled buckets back to camp, Guachafa (Chavo's father, Fransisco) walked around his property inspecting this fruit tree and that seedling, this wild orchid and that white leaf plant – a tropical plant perfect for paper production, striding tall and proud as he breathed in the air on his land; the king of the mountain.

It was dark when Chavo and I started heading back from the river. We slipped and slithered up the hill slick with gooey mud, still wet from the icy bath, loaded down with filled buckets, and barely able to see the track. By the time we arrived at the top of the hill and back at camp, I felt like I had successfully completed the second Survivor Challenge. After a dinner of enough rice for an extended Chinese family on each plate, topped by boiled green plantain bananas and vegetable stew, we spent an hour laughing our heads off at Pusuco's antics by firelight until exhaustion beckoned us all to bed. Guachafa and Pusuco slept in the lean-to and Chavo and I brought a tent we'd borrowed from his Italian sister-in-law. Unfortunately, we forgot to pack the 'deluxe mattress' and ended up tossing and turning, trying to arrange our bodies around the sharp rocks and knobby tree roots poking us awake each time we moved. Over the next four nights, despite numerous attempts at rock clearing and tree-root flattening, we didn't get a lot of sleep. I still have tree-root-shaped bruises on my butt.

Luckily, a lifetime of camping vacations have prepared me to live comfortably sans mod-cons. This is the kind of lifestyle I was thinking about when I said I wanted to live without electricity and running water, grow organic fruits and vegetables and live off the land. Suddenly, I was right in the middle of my own dream! But it was someone else's reality... WOW! I kind of felt like I was in the middle of a real-time live preview of how things could be if that was what I really wanted; including clearing the land with machetes and learning how to run downhill in thick mud wearing knee-high gumboots. I guess this is the part where I get to decide if that's what I really want... I spent a lot of time listening to the wind caress the balsa trees, to birds singing to each other, to monkeys with calls that resembled growling stomachs on steroids rather than animal sounds, and to the thwack of machetes in the distance clearing the land, and I thought about it. What I think is; if I had the *cusci*, I'd go for it.

In the pitch dark, a half-moon obscured by thick cloud, we lay awake listening to the monkeys calling to each other in the forest nearby. They came closer and closer, rustling leaves in the trees, alternately chortling madly and shrieking blue murder before moving away again. Not long afterwards, the rain began. It rained most of the time we were on the mountain – four days and nights. This wasn't a huge problem except that through a miscommunication – which could either have been a language issue; information in Spanish that I didn't understand, or a failure to supply adequate information about our trip to the mountain – I didn't have enough clothes. Between residual bath water and slippery mud, the few things I'd brought with me were quickly unwearable. By day two I was wearing Chavo's clothes, and hanging my own clothes over the leaves of coconut palms to dry in the breezy spells between rain showers. Fortunately, by the time we left, Chavo had reclaimed his pants and shirt, and I hiked down the mountain in my own still-damp pants.

One morning we awoke to the incongruous *wocca wocca* sound of an invisible helicopter concealed in the clouds obscuring the mountaintop. For breakfast, we baked green bananas over the balsa wood fire in the camp oven, peeled sweet baseball-sized grapefruit we'd shaken out of trees behind the lean-to and gathered a few more cacao pods to munch on while the eggs boiled. We threw cinnamon sticks and anise stars into water with random herbs to make *agua aromatica* – herbal tea – over the glowing coals.

While the men slashed the undergrowth away, I wandered around taking photos, reading my novel, drying wet clothes and doing a spot of basic camp cooking when I had the oven to myself. Mario cooked most meals, which were simple but good; *encebollado* made with tinned tuna, *pescado encocado*, chicken and vegetable soup. Served beside a mountain of rice and the ever-present baked or boiled *verde* (green plantain), we never went hungry. Finally, it was time to head back to the beach. I was torn. Part of me wanted to stay, but my bruised and battered body couldn't take another night of trying to sleep atop a bed of rocks and roots.

From Monpiche we can see the lights of Muisne, another fishing village across the bay. I'd never been there and we decided to take a day trip to see Alex, a friend who lives on the beach. Taking a series of buses and boats, we arrived on the island an hour after we'd left Monpiche and walked down the boulevard to the beach. Alex is at the center of a local garbage rehabilitation project; trying to elicit government funds and corporate support to create a self-sustainable garbage collection and recycling process on the island of Muisne.

At present, about 23km of what could be pristine sand is covered in rubbish because there are no bins on the beach and even if there were, there is no reliable collection service. Education is an issue too; most Ecuadorians still think it's okay to throw their emptied coke bottles and plastic wrappers on the ground. Even after a year, I still feel horrified whenever someone leans over me in a bus to throw their trash out the open window. It's not a very pretty sight for such a pretty beach. It doesn't help matters that there is little infrastructure, and the government is corrupt to its core. After recent tests, Alex reported to the authorities that 94% of the drinking water on the island contains faeces and is still awaiting their response. One would think this was a public health emergency that needed immediate attention, but no, not in Ecuador.

Flamboyant and loud, Alex stripped to his speedo (see photo: if wearing a speedo was declared a crime, I still wouldn't arrest him!), stoked up fire in the barbeque and grilled fish for lunch, with crushed *verde* (green plantains) followed by natural hot chocolate; grown locally, the beans were roasted over hot coals and ground with a stone then boiled into a bitter brew and served in a bowl. For the first time in many years, I actually used sugar to sweeten it! Delish! I imagined people drinking chocolate like this 1000 years ago... Gradually a crowd of friends joined the festivities as the afternoon proceeded, and we hung out on the cleaned stretch of beach in front of Alex's place until it was time to return to our own beach paradise.

On my way to the beach for an early morning swim, I heard shouts coming from down the street. One of the hotels was on fire. It was the hotel I used to stay in when I first started coming to the beach every weekend. The single living nightmare of a bamboo-built town is fire. Suddenly, at around 6.30am, the street was alive with sleepy-faced men leaping onto the blazing grass roof with buckets of water being passed to them along a line of women stretching down to the sea. Within minutes, using a combination of water and fire extinguishers, the men had doused the worst of the flames and had ripped the smouldering palm leaves from the roof frame, tossing them onto the lane below. An hour earlier and the town would have slumbered while the entire hotel burned to the ground.

Meanwhile, the electrical wires spat and sparkled above our heads, and the wire that had caused the fire to start in the kitchen finally burned out and dropped across the road. It was the second hotel in a week that caught alight in Monpiche due to an electrical fault. The first one was further along the beach towards the point. It caught fire at 1am, and fortunately for the occupants, some of the local boys were still partying by a fire on the beach and saw the flames. Unfortunately, the townsfolk woke too late to save the house, but the residents were all okay. These are not just hotels, they are also people's homes. Like Muisne, there is only the ghost of infrastructure in Monpiche. Electricity and water services are random and unreliable. Garbage collection is infrequent. The roads are graded sand. It's unlikely that anything will ever be done about the electrical faults burning down the grass and bamboo buildings in Monpiche; the tiny town at the end of the universe.

Be well, be happy, be you...

Love and hugs, Roni



[Alex in Muisne.JPG](#)



[Bring it on baby.JPG](#)



[cacao & chirimoya.JPG](#)



[Clearing the Land.JPG](#)



[Dedicated Foodie.JPG](#)



[Feels like Home.JPG](#)



[Forever the Clown.JPG](#)



[Guachafa and Pusuco.JPG](#)



[No More Trash.JPG](#)



[On Vacation in Muisne.JPG](#)





[The Campsite.JPG](#)



[The Kitchen.JPG](#)



[The Ladies Bathroom.JPG](#)



[The Oven.JPG](#)



[The Road to the Mountain.JPG](#)