

Hi there, I hope you are well...

As I scoop globs of pink-orange *Taxo* into a bowl, add the seeds and flesh from a fresh *Granadilla* and mix the whole delicious mess together with a few spoons of natural organic yogurt, the early morning traffic, several floors below on the main road where I live in central Quito begins to roar as the city wakes up with the sun and goes to work. That's where I'm headed too... to teach English at a private grade school in Carapungo about 45 minutes north. *Carapungo* is the Kichwa word for "the place where the sun enters your body". I teach there four days a week, four hours a day, but the early mornings wipe me out so I come home to have lunch and then siesta under the sun on the rooftop terrace with a good book and as few clothes as possible (if it's not raining) for a few hours before deciding how to spend the rest of the afternoon/evening. I guess I could always get another teaching job... make a few extra bucks in the afternoons... it's under consideration...

So, I hear you ask, what happened to my idyllic life on the beach? Life lesson #506978: Life is only idyllic when all the pieces coexist in unison... The people I was working for didn't pay me for two months. Things were getting a little too close to nature: the number of large black scorpions visiting my bamboo cabaña at night got out of control... As did all too frequent break-ins from the resident dogs and their uncontrolled infestations of fleas... Between mosquitoes, sandflies and fleas my ankles and feet got sick of being itchy... I got tired of groping around in the dark to find my way to bed every night... not to mention the break and enter pervert who busted through my grass roof and scared the stuffing out of me at 2am... and the subsequent bungalow repairs that never happened... The weekly police bribes took what little food there was from our mouths... The same places, same faces, same music, same bullshit at every bar in town every night got old very quickly... Especially without my Argentinian girlfriends to make jokes and break the monotony... and 99% of the men were short and ugly! These are several very good reasons to pack bongos and get out of dodge.

I don't miss too much about Montañita except the beach and the sound of the waves crashing on the sand. And the fact that I didn't need clothes... Looking skyward, high above the buildings and streets washed in golden light at sunset, it saddened me to watch hundreds of birds settling precariously on electrical wires for the night, the only place left for them after all the trees they used to sleep in were cut down and sliced up to build the tourist town. On the birds' side, I cheered silently each time an unsuspecting tourist was splattered with a little gooey white blob from above. After each rainstorm, I had to abandon flipflops to walk down unpaved streets, thick mud squelching through my toes, sucking at my bare feet with each careful step. Not that this really bothered me because, like most people running around town, I was usually barefoot and commando... (and if you have to ask what that means, you are too young to know!)

During *Carnaval*, the riotous week-long celebration 40 days before Easter which takes place right across Central and South America, I suspect I was the only person in Montañita to avoid being soaked by constant water fights in the streets, being doused with brightly colored foam spray and silly string, or being pelted from numerous balconies with eggs. From the safety of my computer screen inside the office or perched in the hanging chair in front of the dive center, I watched the proceedings quietly. There were a number of other obstacles I had to contend with; such as being technologically challenged... I couldn't get a computer printout to save my life anywhere in town, having to hunt down credit card facilities because we didn't have any, trying to do banking when the bank wasn't open on Monday or Tuesday, and removing the beach from the shop several times a day was enough to manage without being drenched and sticky.

Living on fresh bananas, banana pancakes, banana juice, sautéed bananas, patacones (squashed green plantains), maduras (sliced yellow plantains) and bolon (fried green plantains mashed into a ball) was also a daily challenge I was prepared to walk away from happily. I think I may have developed an allergy to bananas... and I have this unstoppable urge to climb trees

and swing one-armed from the branches while beating my chest and screaming loudly at passersby...

While in Montañita – or more specifically, Kamala – I was self-studying eye-crossing diving physics: Boyle's law, Charles' law, Dalton's law, and we may as well add Murphy's law and Buckley's while we're at it... since the empty promise to take me through the Divemaster Course was never fulfilled. However, I managed to score 90% in the physics exam... not that it means anything now, although I did keep all the books and course materials. I will have to repeat everything again if I ever get the opportunity to start the course over with instructors who actually mean what they say and do what they promise. This is one of the main reasons I left the beach...

Bringing me to Quito, the capitol city of Ecuador at 2850m altitude (10,000 feet), living next door to a living volcano on the Andes Ranges: Pichincha which I can see clearly with its crown of cloud from the kitchen and dining room windows of my (unheated) 6th floor apartment in the center of town. Thick clouds roll in around dusk, often sinking low over the city and obscuring the upper floors of tall buildings. When our building is covered we can't see anything out the windows, giving me a strong sense of living with my head in the clouds. Apart from nightly bouts of insomnia, the high altitude doesn't seem to bother me that much. I don't have any trouble breathing, but the cool weather is harder to handle. Temperatures ranging from 9°C–25°C and the daily rain showers keep me in socks, sweaters and jackets most of the time. It's a long city, running about 40-50km north to south along the valley, and at its widest point, Quito is about 8km across. The equator is 22kms north of downtown. The 'actual' equator is 200m north of the grandiose monument dedicated to longitude 0'0'0' but most people who visit don't ever realize that. So in the photo below, I'm standing 200m south of the real 0'0'0'.

While I was still on the beach making all these radical life-altering decisions, my Canadian friend Renata came to visit Ecuador. We met at the airport in Quito and did some exploring around the city and surrounds before she went off to do her touring thing and I went back to the beach. By the time Renata had returned to Quito, I had moved into the Belmont Hotel in the Historical Center and we went off exploring together for a few more days – including a disappointing trip to the famed (or over-hyped) *Otavalo Indian Market* – before she went home. My favorite part was playing on the swings in the park by the artisan's market on Sunday morning... but we saw loads of great stuff including the bohemian *La Calle De Ronda*, and another of the best things was discovering the Central Market with its high pyramids of exotic tropical fruit.

*Pitahaya* is a personal favorite; South America's answer to Asia's spiky pink dragon fruit. Cut in half and eaten with a spoon, it's absolutely delicious! And quite ugly with its rough yellow horns... I'm told it's the best natural cure on earth for constipation (Who knew! I didn't even know people actually suffered that here!)... One by one, I'm discovering the delicious fruity flavors of Ecuador: *Taxo* is similar to a long thin yellow passionfruit with pinkish seeds set into juicy baubles... *Granadilla* is an orange passionfruit-type fruit with white flesh and seeds without the tartness of passionfruit. *Naranjilla* is one of the most amazing fruits on the planet, round-shaped with a peach-orange flavor that makes very tasty juice for breakfast. *Tomatilla* (or tree tomato) is also great for fresh fruit juice, and brown hard-shell covered *Sapote* is just good... damn good! As is freshly made *Guanabana* (soursop) juice. And, purple-skinned bananas are great for a fresh snack too.. There are more wonderful fruits... many more... and Renata even discovered a hundred year old ice-cream shop in the Historical Quarter serving all these exotic flavors in cones, alongside the traditional flavors of ice-cream for just a few pennies... YUM! I'll fill you in on more secrets of Ecuador's exotic tropical fruits as I discover them and their names... and how to eat them... Hmm... I can feel that primal urge to climb trees and shriek gradually receding...

Be well, be happy, be you! I hope to hear from you very soon.

Big love, big hugs, big volcanoes

Roni