

Hi,

Hope all is well in your world. It's been a while since I wrote, so I figured I'd better catch up 'cos people keep asking where I am. I'm still in Ecuador and will be here until December... Believe me, you will know when I leave Ecuador... It will be an 'event' to remember!

There are many things I love about living in Ecuador, little things I notice on a daily basis, even though the cold mornings in Quito were kind of getting to me... I love that children can walk to school, groups of little kids, without fear of being snatched off the streets by strangers who want to hurt them. I love that families are close-knit and can live, laugh, love and play together. I love the food; the fresh fruit especially! I love that I can buy mangoes and strawberries from the market and don't have to worry about what is seasonal; there are pineapple and peaches, bananas and plums, rambutans and mandarins... and all the exotic fruit you could possibly eat in a lifetime!

One thing I love especially about living in Quito is that I can get away for weekends... And I do! In the last month or so, I've begun living a new double life which goes kind of like this... (the extremely simplified version) I take the midnight bus on Thursday, arrive at the beach Friday morning. Spend two and a half days chilling... Take the Sunday afternoon bus to another beach, spend 5hrs there dancing and having fun, get the midnight bus to Quito, arrive 6am and go to work... By the end of Monday, after a leisurely siesta, I have only three more days til I can go back to the beach!

This double life started as an exploratory mission to see what's on the coast. On my travels, I found myself in the city of Esmeraldas. Arriving very late at night, around 1am, I was lost. I'd never been there, didn't know the city. While walking around, I heard the zipper on my bag being opened. Responding quickly, I turned to find a woman with both her hands in the outside pockets. Wrestling the wannabee thief out of my bag, and affecting a "Mexican stand-off" type defense while she circled me, all the while making threats, I simply raised a fist and made a face that told her she was messing with the wrong person. She got the message and took off.

After much fruitless searching through deserted streets, I finally found what I think must have been the most "fleabag-type" hotel I've ever seen in my life! Cardboard walls! (If you can believe that!) Exhausted at 2am, I couldn't afford to be fussy, so I did my best to get some sleep; an unsuccessful mission. In the morning, I discovered a little hole in the wall serving the best Pescado Encocado (Fish in Coconut Sauce) I'd ever tasted... Deciding to give the place a chance, I headed to the beach. Hmmm... I figured there were better beaches around there somewhere, and set out to find them... I haven't been back to Esmeraldas since that night; I don't feel any burning desire to experience that city again.

That decision took me to Atacames; party town 20kms from Esmeraldas... Hoards of Ecuadorian and international tourists living it up on the beach... This wasn't quite what I was looking for... Too noisy... Too crowded... Too Generic... (If you have been to Goa, Bodrum, St Tropez, Gold Coast, Montañita, etc., you have already been to Atacames, they're all the same!) However, I decided to enjoy myself a little and then move on. I bought a new swimming costume and for the first time in my life did not feel like I was trying to squeeze into a piece of undersized lycra that felt like a girdle which left my skin resembling used chewing gum... I had fun, ate fantastic calamari, wonderful ceviche and drank fresh fruit juices... Then, danced all night with the locals who were happy to teach me a few new Salsa moves...

In the morning, I broke camp and headed for a secret little cove further along the coast that someone had told me about. Mompiche... About 2hrs by bus from Atacames... Part of the road is a half hidden dirt track... I'd finally found what I was looking for... chilled out... bamboo huts... palm trees... hammocks... long deserted sandy beach... without the over-touristed over-hyped bullshit of Montañita or Atacames. Paradise. I wanted more of that, so I made it happen.

Mompiche has become a second home, and I spend half my week there, eating fresh fish caught by local fishermen. I mostly buy Prago Blanco (kind of like Bream) which cost 75c/lb and I clean them myself, sitting under the sun on an upturned tank and surrounded by eagerly clacking turkey vultures all waiting for me to throw them the guts - I have scars on my fingers to prove it! This week I bought nine fresh fish; three large prago blanco, a large plate-sized flounder, two medium corvina, and three medium-sized unidentified species for \$4USD. I could happily live on fish alone!

Often walking 20 minutes to the black sand beach for a skinny dip and sunbathe, sometimes alone, sometimes with my girlfriends; we're now known as "Las Tres Sirenas de la Playa Negra". I take long long long walks on the beach, sometimes walking an hour or two in one direction without reaching anywhere near the other end... then return for a seafood lunch and a siesta in a hammock... Hang out with friends on the beach, dance with everyone at the discotech, which is actually much more like a party with friends... Taking off my shoes when I arrive, I don't put them on again until I leave... Sunday afternoon comes around all too fast, and I take the 4.30pm bus back to the city... But it's only a few days working in the city and then I'm back again for another long weekend. Life is good!

Some of the best *Encebollado* I've eaten in Ecuador has been at a shack on the beach in Mompiche (see photo attached). (It's a little bit like the infamous Turkish Iskembe (tripe soup) in that it's known locally as a great hangover cure... Not that I would know! I haven't had a hangover for many years now...) It's a tomato-based fish soup served with freshly popped popcorn and crunchy chifles (salted banana chips)... Truly delicious! This is one dish I want to learn how to make like a local...

Then there are the famous *Encocado* dishes with tuna and shrimp, also lobster and langostino. Galapagos langostino are similar to Morton Bay Bugs or Crayfish. In Mompiche they are large red shrimp. Whatever goes into Encocado, it's always fantastic. Sauce of coconut milk spiced with a hint of chili... I made Albacora Encocado at home once with amazing success... Still, it wasn't the same as the local version.

Unbeatable on every level is *Ceviche* with fish, conch, octopus, oysters and shrimp... Raw fish marinated in lime juice, then garnished with onions, tomatoes and peppers... A friend made ceviche with hammerhead shark meat for me on my birthday recently... It was incredible!

Another seriously good favorite is *Corviche*, a stuffed meatball-style dish made with tuna and shrimp, then deep fried and served with coleslaw and the hottest eye-watering, mouth-burning, tongue-numbing fresh chili sauce I have ever experienced anywhere in the world! It's fabulous! There's a lady who makes corviche on the beach every weekend, so that's my snack of choice while hanging out on the beach before it's time to get on the bus and go back to my 'real' life... HAHAAHA...

I'm moving house this week. It's a decision I made a while back, soon after I realized the landlords here are both insane (quite literally; and one of them is a psychologist!). The random "inspections" at any time of the night or day and yelling abuse at me are too much. The wild accusations of apparent misdeeds and misbehavior are unfounded. (e.g.: I did not have a wild, all-night party with gangsters!) I need sanity, serenity and safety. I have none of those here. I'm moving four blocks down the same street where I will pay about a third of the rent I pay here and people will leave me alone. Yahoo!

And... it's only three more days until I'm headed back to the beach for the weekend.

Take care of you...

big love, big hugs, long beaches...

Roni

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[Encebollado.JPG](#)



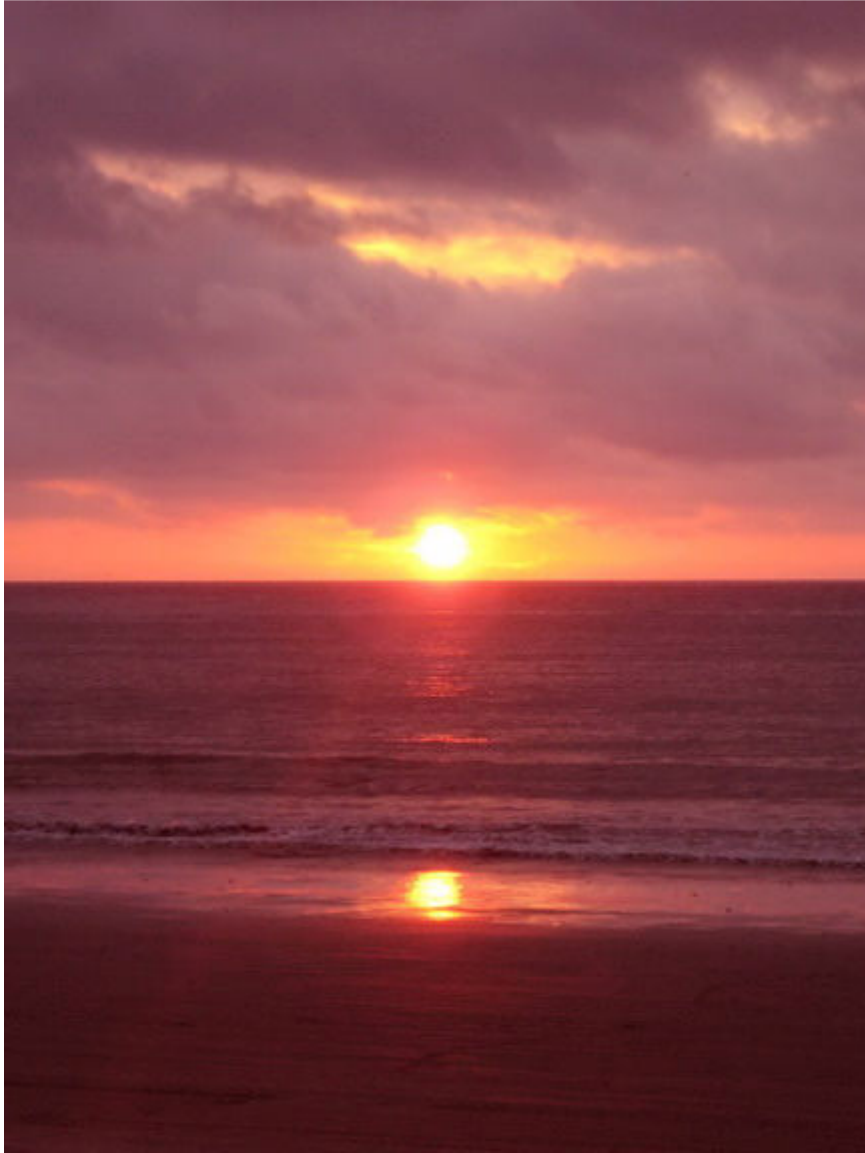
[Black Beach.JPG](#)



[Mompiche.JPG](#)



[Mompiche Beach.JPG](#)



[Sunset.JPG](#)