

Hi!

Hope you're well and life is giving you all those great surprises and gifts you so obviously deserve.

"Fell off the back of a truck" hmmm... How many times have I heard that phrase in my life? I couldn't tell you... I grew up hearing it from my father's lips quite frequently after some unexpected 'treasure' found its way to our house from an unknown or unspecified source. But when I recently fell off the back of a truck, it came to mind that this expression has more than one meaning...

There I was, minding my own business (as usual) bumping along in the back of a truck that was travelling way too fast on an undeveloped road and suddenly I found myself bouncing on my coccyx in the bed of the truck. No, I did not actually fall out of the truck – a small mercy. Even so, I saw stars as pain shot through my back, up my spinal column and into my head.

What was I doing in the back of a truck in the first place, you ask. Well, it's a normal mode of transport on the coast. With the lack of regular buses or public transport, everyone hitches rides with whoever is going in the same direction. We all do it so often that no one thinks about the fact that we're putting our lives in the hands of total strangers. I'd taken three friends on a tour of Black Beach where the sand is pure black and so fine that we use it to exfoliate our skin and give ourselves facials, washing the black powder from our bodies in the sea after it's dried in the sun and begun to flake away. Leaving the beach feeling about five kilos lighter, we began walking back to Mompiche – a 20-minute hike that is not at all arduous – when a truck came by and the boys in the back offered us a ride. And that's when all the trouble started...

For the next three days, I lay flat on my back in bed, unable to move, taking massive doses of painkillers to knock me out, almost fainting with pain every time I did move. While I slept (blissfully, there is no pain in sleep!) my body began to slowly heal itself. On the fourth day, I rose from the dead and took the bus to Muisne (an hour away on a bumpy road) to visit the radiography department of the local hospital.

My wonderful friend Alexander helped me get 'Express VIP Service' – his mother works in the pathology lab at the hospital – and we whizzed through the halls, skipping passed the long queues of waiting patients and before no time I was roughly laid out on a prehistoric x-ray machine by a radiographer whose bedside manner would suit King Kong nicely. He twisted my spine into excruciating yogic contortions usually only attempted by gurus and made me stay still and hold my breath in the pitch dark while he fiddled with buttons for way too long. The subsequent x-rays revealed no fractures. Phew! The doctor was more pleasant as we discussed possible physiotherapy solutions and decided on swimming as the most obvious choice, with short walks along the beach to strengthen the damaged muscles. I complemented these with shiatsu massage and relaxation massage and by the end of the week was feeling much better. On Saturday, (exactly one week later) I was dancing Salsa again. Though it still hurts to stand for long periods of time (and so I've been cutting classes!).

After leaving the hospital armed with a box of Ipobrufen (which is still in Mompiche with the packet of x-rays) and some sound medical advice, Alexander and I returned to the beach and hung around in hammocks for a couple of hours watching two humpback whales frolic off the coast nearby. They were close to the beach and we watched enormous tails thump into the sea shooting water high into the air. They spouted and leapt about for the entire length of the bay. We passed a leisurely afternoon on the beach before I returned to Mompiche, being dropped off on the corner and having to hitch a ride in a truck down to the beach. Yes, really! Unable to sit on the side, I stood up against the back of the cab, hanging on to the rails for dear life... When I arrived in

the beach, the first thing I heard was a friend laughing and calling out loudly, "Hang on tight Roni, you don't wanna fall off another truck!" Very funny!

The entire public health care experience at the Muisne Public Hospital was very interesting. Aside from the gruff radiographer, I was very impressed with the level of service and the high quality care I received. I paid \$10USD for the x-ray, the rest was free. The shiatsu massage cost \$15. The relaxation massage was a gift from a young friend. Swimming is free. Walking on the beach is free. In total, I spent \$25 to feel better. And you can't get health insurance that cheap anywhere in the world! I'll be back on the beach this weekend for 10 days more and will get another shiatsu massage, and another relaxation massage, swim some more and walk on the beach some more and continue my 'treatment' which I feel to be going slightly backwards in Quito because I have to stand in classes for so long and walk long distances around the city to avoid traffic jams and that's not comfortable at all. I'm just happy – and very grateful – that I didn't break my back.

Here are some things I have learned in Ecuador:

1. Always open your *Toni* yogurt AWAY from your body (so the large spurt of yogurt pushed out by internal air pressure doesn't splatter your shirt).
2. "Prestar" the verb meaning "to borrow" does not mean a loan of money, it is a gift... do not expect to be repaid (even when you are told you will be repaid!).
3. The bus will not necessarily stop at the bus stop where you have been waiting half an hour.
4. A pedestrian crossing does not indicate a safe crossing; drivers ignore them completely.
5. Never carry anything valuable; especially in Quito (you WILL get robbed).
6. Always carry toilet paper. ALWAYS. ALWAYS.
7. Everything is negotiable... from the price of a travel sachet of shampoo to your life while being robbed at knife-point...
8. Hang on tight to the truck you are bumping around the coast in...
9. 10 minutes can last an hour or more; and LATE is not a word.
10. There are over 100 ways to cook bananas.
11. Granadillas are addictive.
12. NOBODY has change. NEVER. EVER.
13. Rice three times a day is boring. I'm VERY TIRED of rice...
14. Galapagos is the most beautiful place in the world.

Take care, be well, be happy.

Big love, big hugs,

Roni 30/10/2009