



Ecuador

AND THE JEWEL OF THE GALÁPAGOS ISLANDS

WORLD TRAVEL AS LIFESTYLE SERIES

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Ecuador



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The pathway to the adorable birds featured on the cover is a bit complicated. The blue footed booby and her chick live in the Galapagos Islands about 629 miles off the shore of Ecuador in the Eastern Pacific Ocean. She is vigorously protected by the Ecuadorean government by requiring all visitors to follow strict rules.



The trip began in Costa Rica where I joined my Dutch friend, Marjan Vuurman. She is the care giver to her 96 years young Mother, who is the Queen of the family. After



celebrating Marjan's birthday and Mother's Day at the Costa Rica Country Club, we were primed to head to Ecuador the next day. We chose Avianca Airlines, a Colombian Airline



which is a partner of United. The bright colored aircraft stopped in Bogota both ways. The views were stunning approaching Quito, the capital of Ecuador.

Quito

We were fortunate to engage Gerardo Gualpa, who owned his taxi, to be our driver for the area of Quito. He discounted his airport to town fares to \$26. He would drive us all day for \$120. In 2000, Ecuador adopted the U.S. dollar as its official currency. We traded the expressway for a two lane road to take us through a ravine and then up the mountainside to the city of Quito.

On arrival to the Hotel David, downtown, we learned that it was only 60 steps to our suite. And then only 47 more steps to breakfast in the morning, which was served in a beautiful mirador. The initial shock was assuaged when two brown skinned guys sporting pony tails came running to deliver our bags upstairs. They did this easily without any heavy breathing. Quito is situated at 9300' above sea level. After 60 steps, the newcomers lungs want to burst. The problem did get better in a few days. The city has 2 million inhabitants with another million in the suburbs. The area is not flat, the streets have plenty of hills, a bit like San Francisco. As a person from Lancaster Pa., I did question the wisdom of someone investing in a hotel with superb rooms but no elevator. The 107 steps to breakfast will surely put one in excellent shape to walk to church on Sunday. The closest restaurant from the bottom of the steps was a pizza shop owned by Enrique and his daughter Maria.





Their fare was good offering a variety of Italian dishes personalized for us and the bill never exceeded \$10...and the decor was colorful.

Quito was built on the ancient ruins of the Northern capitol of the Inca Empire which



fell to Spain in 1535. So the city is now 487 years old. It lies in the Andean foothills and surrounds some dormant volcanos. Today, the downtown encompasses a square kilometer area of restored buildings with a comfortable park called the Independence Square. It is a





must to visit for locals and visitors to wander and shop. The flowering Arupo, the native



tree, graces the Square for the enjoyment of every eye.

Seven blocks up the hill sits the Basilica del Voto Nacional (Basilica of National Vow). It is the largest neo-Gothic basilica in the Americas. The Roman Catholic Church opened in 1924; it is a focal point for the whole area because of its size. Today there were no crowds so





we were permitted to explore. The elevator ride to the eaves in the front exposed a metal walkway over the ceiling but under the roof rafters. The walk was a treat to see the details



of this construction. The walkway extends to the rear of the church where there are stairs to the base of the towers. Here is a photo of Marjan that shows a metal ladder she used to

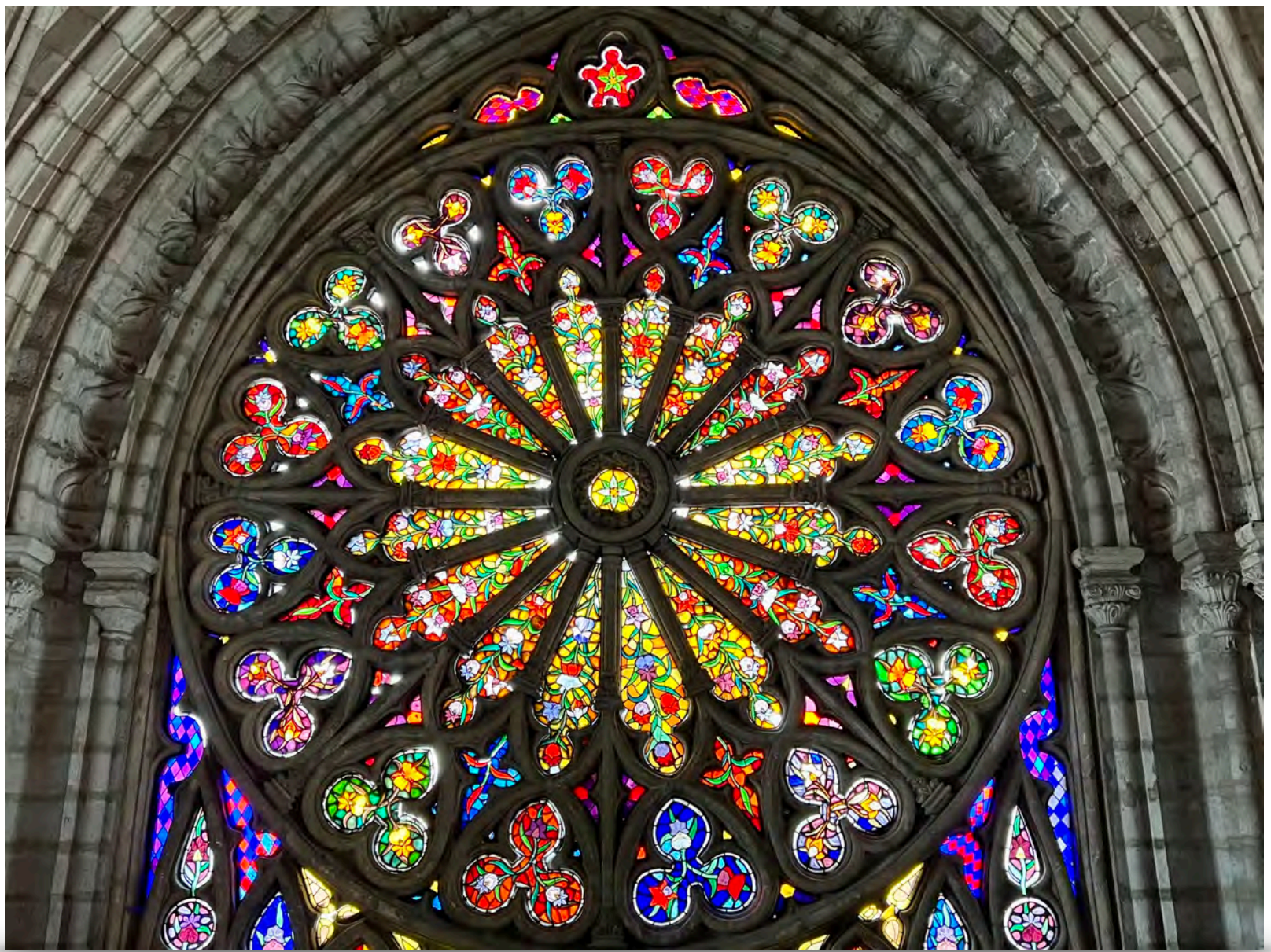


climb to the top of the tower. This took much bravery for me to give her permission to



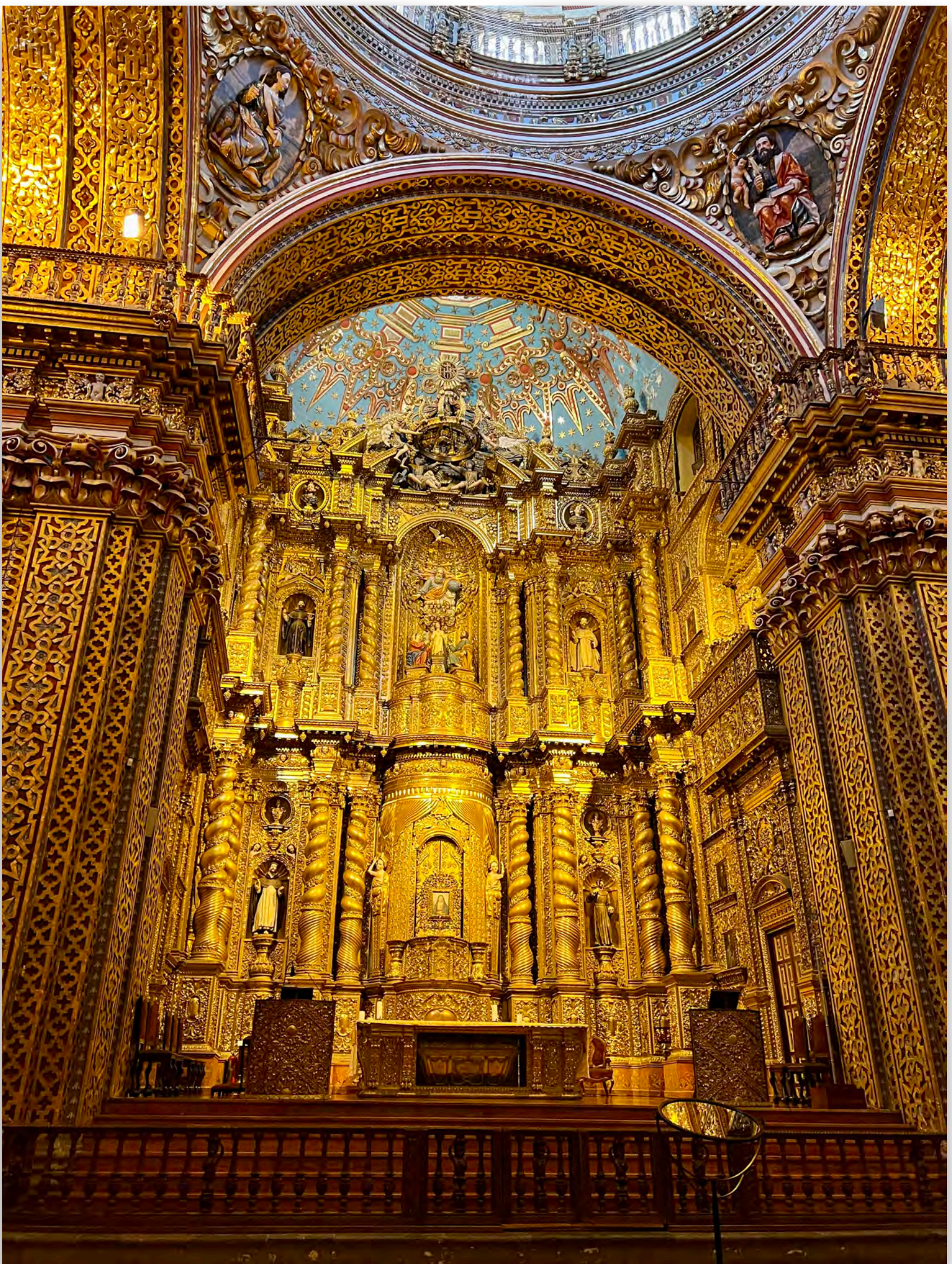
make the trek. The views were definitely worth the effort; especially of the Virgin Statue on the far hill. A few more photos





Only a block from Independence Square is the Church of San Ignacio de Loyola de la Compañía de Jesús; the Ecuadoreans call it La Compañía. Built in 1765, the facade is a bland





volcanic stone but the interior is a study of gold liberally applied. There are seven tons of gold leaf adorning the walls and ceilings. It took 160 years to build. The Jesuits were granted the land to build the church. The first stone was laid by Nicolás Duran, a Jesuit priest, in 1605. The church is the most lavish building in the country. The ceiling features the sun in

deference to the Quichua Indians. They worshiped the Sun God and did not get along with the Incas or the Spaniards. The Jesuits thought that if the sun was displayed on the ceiling of the church, the Quichuas would be pleased to attend the church. Sometimes good



thoughts do not bear much fruit.





Panama hats are not made in Panama. They are made in Ecuador. When the Spanish came to Ecuador in 1526 they noted the fibers from the palm tree called “paja toquilla” or toquilla straw. The natives wore a brimless hat made from toquilla straw. The Spanish designed the brim and the hat was sent to Panama to be sold to the world...thus the name. The price of the hat depends on the density and the style of the weave. The leading brand today is the Montecristi and their store is close to the Independence Square. Their displays for women and men can hold your interest for quite a while while looking at the jaw dropping prices. The featured hat in a separate glass case was only \$12,000. I did bring home a Montecristi with a few less strands of 50 to the inch. Their hats are excellent to wear on a hot, windless day.





The residents of Quito love dogs. They even look after homeless dogs. In the public parks there are dog houses equipped with water and food and a volunteer to watch over them. This phenomenon was a first for me.





About a two hour drive North of Quito is the



quaint town of Otavalo. The indigenous people here are economically successful from sales of handcrafts and alpaca wool clothing.

They are the most prosperous in Latin America. Their market off the square attracts



visitors worldwide. The men, in white trousers and dark ponchos and the women in dark skirts and heavily embroidered blouses with colorful waistbands, sell like crazy! Men and women wear their hair back and braided. And the hat resembles the men's British bowler. Outside of town where the poor folk live, the houses are primitive. The house sides are not made of bamboo but of other reeds. At our lunch at 3 pm, we were

introduced to Bizcochos. It was a sweet pastry, a kind of rolled pancake. In Colombia, a bizcocho is a pretty woman. Gerardo joined us for lunch. Our bill was about \$7 which included desert.



Nothing like a mid afternoon snooze in the park with your puppies.





The word Ecuador has relevance to the equator. The center of the world passes through Ecuador very close to Quito. There are two sites on both sides of the city which



causes a controversy. Each one claims to be the real one. The one on the Northern side was checked by the compass on my iPhone which showed: 0 degrees 0'0" N 78°10'30" at 9040'

elevation. This site had a convincing host on its credibility. Next door, he had a nice garden of dry land plants. The other “Mitad del Mundo” (Center of the World) was more touristy with many other attractions, shops and restaurants. The location on the mountainside had



an attractive, modern building used for Hispanic politics. The other “Middle of the World” spot was a large ball that Marjan could balance easily. I was too distracted to check my compass again but these children were not able to balance the egg on end.



A favorite dish of Ecuador is guinea pig prepared on the spit. Happiness is to have ice



cream for dessert after the guinea pig.



The El Panecillo (small piece of bread) is a statue to the Virgin Mary that contains



seven thousand pieces of aluminum. It was dedicated in 1975 in honor of the beloved archbishop of Quito, Pablo Muñoz Vega. It replaced a temple to the Sun God where the aboriginal inhabitants worshiped. The Virgin is stepping on a snake at 9895' above sea level. She can be seen from many points in the city.

The Teleférico (TelefériQo Cruz Loma) is a gondola lift beginning at the edge of the



city center that journeys up the eastern side of the Pichincha Volcano. At the top it is possible to hike to 13,451' above sea level. It can be chilly but oh what a view! The fare was



\$8.50 for adults, small dogs go free but medium sized on up go for \$4.50. The lift is quite





popular with the residents and tourists, a wonderful day “up” with family and pets. The Café en las Nubes (Cafe in the Clouds) was not to be missed after the picturesque hike. I was fascinated by the grasses and flowers that flourish in the wind and chill. It is one of the highest aerial lifts in the world.



The Galápagos Islands

The almost 20 islands lie 629 miles off the coast of Ecuador in the Pacific Ocean. Counting all islands that are at least one square kilometer the number goes to 18. Only 4 are inhabited where over 25,000 people live. Most of the area is a National Park that stands guard to preserve



the animal and plant life that exists nowhere else in the world. About 200,000 people visit annually who subject themselves to the strict supervision in order to maintain and cherish this jewel.

Our story began in the Quito Airport Terminal at 4:00 am. We stood in line for over an hour in order to be scrutinized to obtain the \$20 permit to enter the Galápagos Islands. We changed



planes on the mainland coast in Guayaquil for our flight to Baltra. Our first look from the window on the Avianca flight on the descent showed the wonderful color of what was to come.



We landed on a lunar landscape that had remotely scattered vegetation. The long, wide walk into



the terminal was also a first experience. Inside, we were greeted with friendly smiles as we paid our \$100 entrance fee to the Galápagos Islands. From here we paid \$2.50 for the bus to the Itabaca channel where it took \$1.00 for the boat to cross. These fares



included our luggage as well...and then another \$2.50 (senior rates) for the 30 km. bus ride to the town on Puerto Ayora. We could have chosen a more private mode of transportation but that would not have been any fun.



It is best to carry cash in Ecuador. The Sir Francis Drake Hotel accepted the credit card for only a 12% fee. The third floor room with balcony only required the energy to negotiate 52 steps.

Santa Cruz Island is a study of contrasts. The end near the airport is the moon while the environs of Puerto Ayora are highly

vegetated. Santa Cruz is a charming place where access to civilized things are all walkable. A wonderful attraction is the fish market. Beside the people that pay their way there are many thieves... sea lions, pelicans,



egrets, frigates, crabs and iguanas!



The unlucky fisherman can lose his treasure in the wink of an



eye. The electronic version of this book shows a video of this extraordinary speed. The fish



market is the source of unlimited entertainment. For instance, the next photos depict the order,



the prep, the completion of the sale and the cleanup. Notice the sea lion under the table. The sea



lions and pelicans have free use of any type of boat that ties up there. Two hours at the fish market can fly by swiftly with no problem of boredom.



It is not possible to see the Galápagos on your own; you must be accompanied by a guide. Ecuadorians cherish their inheritance so visitors need to join a tour. On the tour there is no need of a telephoto lens because you get to within 2 yards of these wonderful animals. There are many travel agencies that sell “last minute tours” at a discount for cash. It really pays to shop and design trips that are suitable and affordable. One can pre-book and spend thousands; but there are fine tours to be enjoyed in the hundreds.

We took a \$35 tour up the mountain to see a lava tube and then the land tortoises. On the way, we stopped at a dormant volcano crater that was covered with blackberries. The blackberry



was introduced some years ago. The favorable climate and seed distribution by the birds have made it a curse in the islands. The fruit is too tiny to be an asset commercially; like gorse in New Zealand, that was brought from the useful hedges in Scotland with good intentions. Gorse grows without control to the edges of roads because of an extremely favorable climate.



The COVID 19 problem was serious on the mainland where a lot of folks died. However, the Galápagos Islands shut down for 4 months. No one allowed in or out. No planes or ships allowed to enter or leave. Farmers traded potatoes and milk with the fishermen for their wares. The Pacific Ocean was a mighty insulator. The islands had 4 cases _ no deaths!



We spied a sleeping owl as we descended into the lava tube. The lava tube was just that, a colorful tube about five blocks long created by an





eruption centuries ago. On our ascent out of the end of the tube, we came to a luscious pasture with dairy cattle serenely grazing! Hard to imagine that this would exist in the Galápagos Islands. Within a mile from here were the giant tortoises in a meadow. We were left on our own to explore



but to keep a distance of two yards. The pasture was full of males now. The land tortoises can be 6' long and weigh 500-900 pounds. A normal lifespan is 100 years. Some in captivity have reached

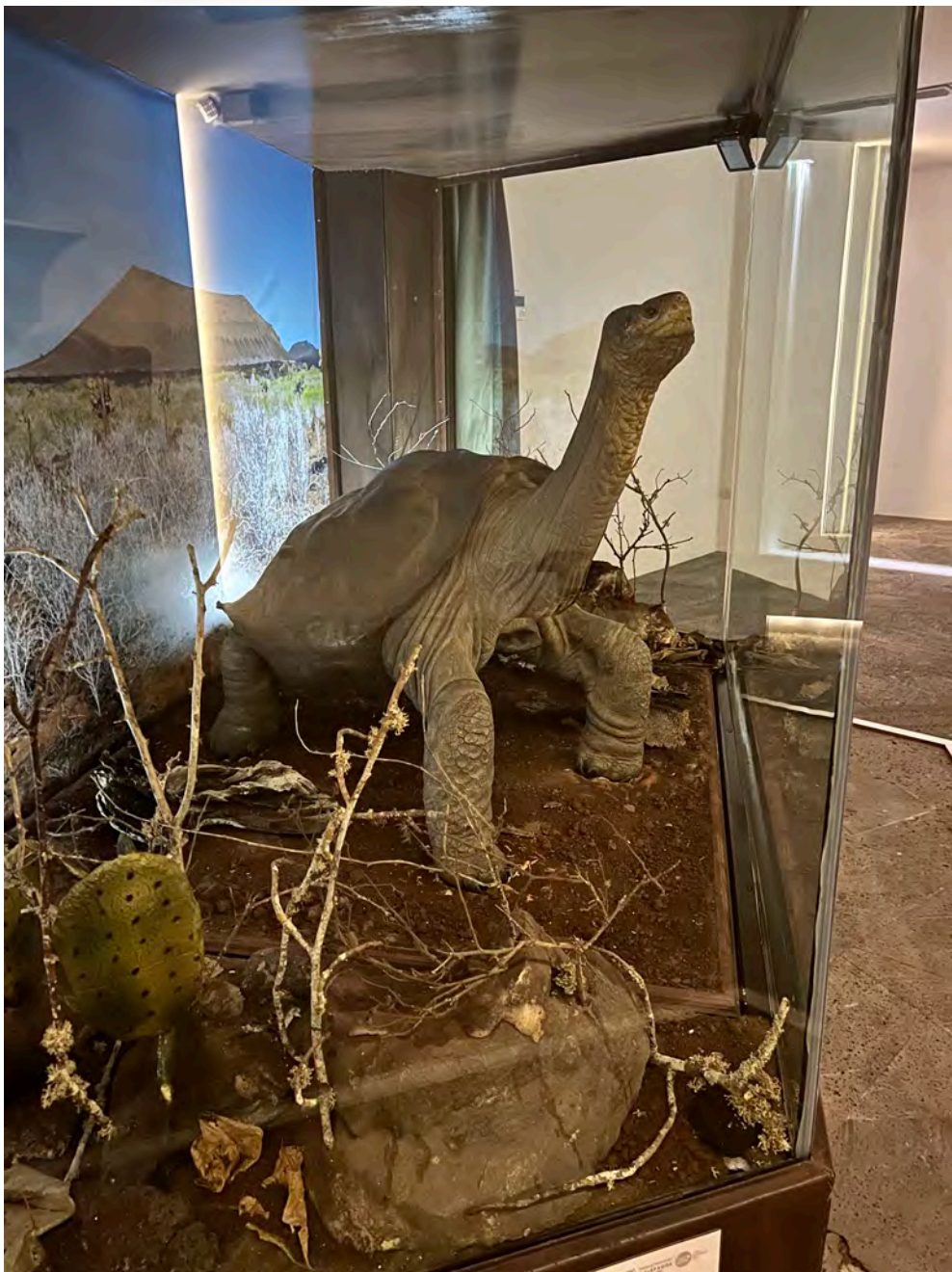


170 years. It takes them 20-40 years to reach maturity when they are able to reproduce. They lay only 2-16 eggs because here on the mountain they have less predators than their cousins on the beach. Their lifestyle is interesting. They bask in the sun for an hour or two before foraging on grass for 8 hours. Then they head for a pond where they urinate and defecate while using the water for heating or cooling to prepare for the night. The gross looking ponds are green from filth. The exodus into the pond was contagious so I had to find my own, private clump of trees. While in the pond they definitely know if people are watching them. When I returned past the pond, this fellow said to me,

“I have my eye on you!”



The whalers of the 18th century were hard on the tortoises. They killed them for meat and oil. It is thought that the Galápagos had a million tortoises 500 years ago. Now, with conservation the population is up past 30,000. At the Charles Darwin center in Puerto Ayora, they have a



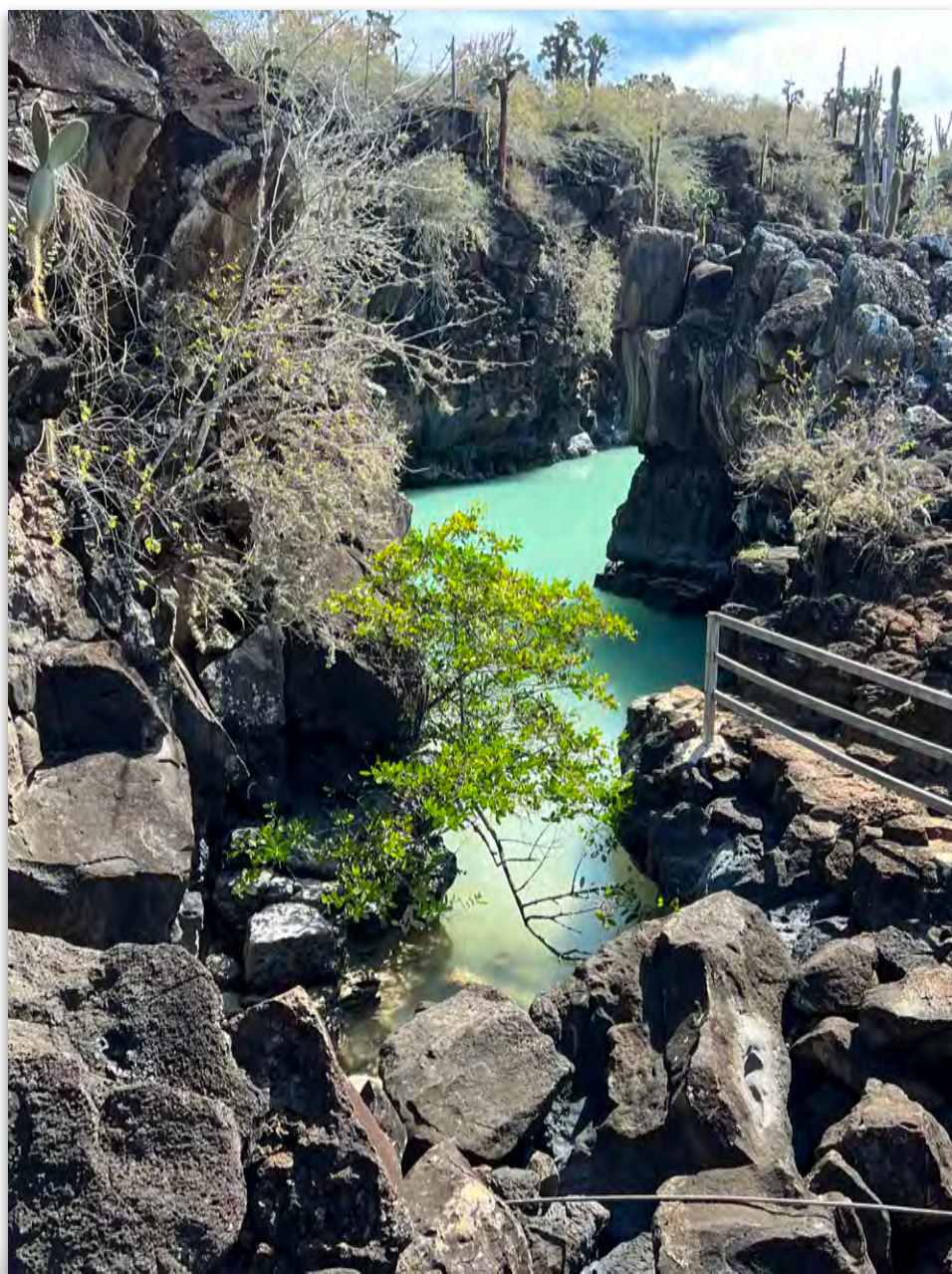
breeding program to bolster the numbers. These are the long necked tortoises with a different shell formation in the front. They can reach the cactus blossoms and joist with each other. They can exist without food or water for a year.

George (Lonesome) was discovered in the remote island of Pinto in 1971, and lived the rest of his life at the Darwin Station on Santa Maria Island. He was unable to reproduce and died there in 2012. His remains were taxidermied at the Museum of Natural History in New York where he was popularly displayed for a while. He has returned home at the Darwin Station to occupy a separate, airconditioned building for the world to come and say "Hello."

Puerto Ayora has a wonderful Chinese restaurant named the Plaza del Jardin. Their prices are way below their quality of food...another wonderment of the Galápagos.



A short boat ride North of town had some unusual cactus. The trunks resembled tree bark. The cacti decorated the banks of the beautiful, turquoise inlets from the sea. The view energized



a certain persons beyond belief. The wingspan on the takeoff is sure to gain one's notice. We saw a





lone booby chick who was missing his mama. On our return we saw sharks that refused to be photographed but a man of war that did not mind.





Ok. This was the meal before the dessert in the the Chinese restaurant. Yummy!



We engaged the Adriana, a catamaran for \$205/a day per person. She had a team of four persons. Bus driver, pilot, cook and guide whose name was Enrique. They gave us a day to

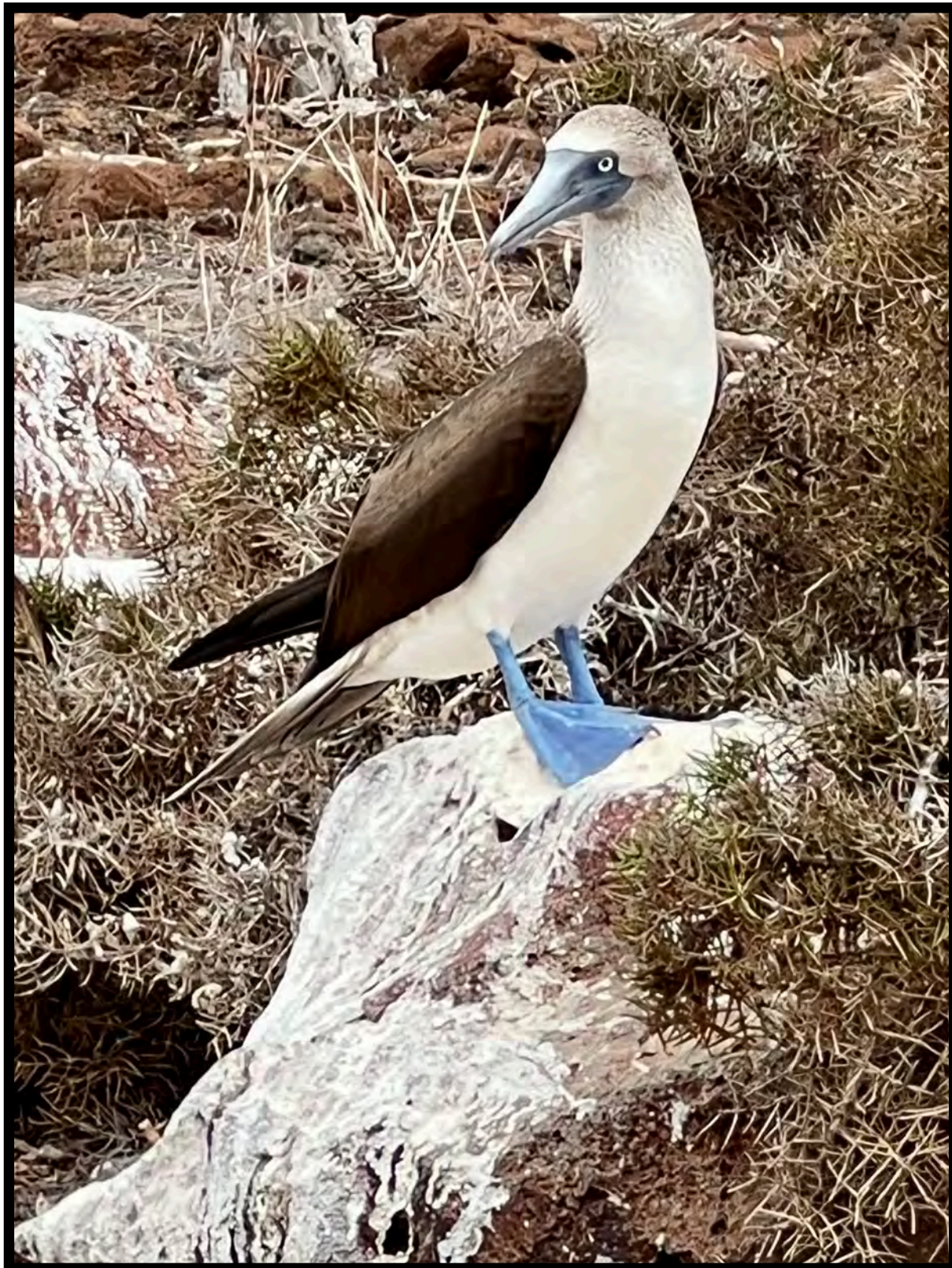
remember of extraordinary sightseeing. The bus took us to the Northern shore of Santa Cruz to the docks where we boarded the Adriana for the island of Seymour. We were fortunate to have a sea with good behavior; no one got sick. Our mates were from many nations. The day was divided into three parts. Land hike, snorkeling along the cliffs and then a swim with the sea lions. Enrique was knowledgeable and alert. At one point he approached an Oriental woman and said,

“You can return those shells to the beach that you have in your pocket right now..”

She was embarrassed and hesitantly came up with a few.

“.... and now get rid of the rest of them. If not, you will be arrested at the airport.”

The hike was constantly interrupted by flying birds. It was an airport of birds going to and from the sea on a hunt for food. At home we have turkey buzzards and a few hawks to dot our sky; here it was far more busy.





The blue footed boobies and the frigates (frigatas) are close neighbors here in Seymour Norte. The blue footed boobies are the best divers. Their heads and beaks are more streamlined than frigates and pelicans. Old pelicans become blind from diving and then die of starvation. Boobies can dive at 60 mph with no splash to depths of 80'. They can hold a five inch fish in their crawl and fly it back to feed their chick. There is a video of this transaction in the electronic version of this book. They can grow up to 3 pounds. The chicks begin to have blue legs after four months. Females have bluer feet than males



which comes in handy at mating season.

Their colonies can be seen as far North as California but the greatest population lives in the Galápagos.

The frigates are a large bird, the females larger than the males. They can fly for two months without landing. They have the ability to sleep while flying. They are also known as pirates. They steal from other birds while in the air or on the ground. There are always one or two hanging around the fish market in town. A frigate will steal a fish from a booby just as she is trying to feed it to her chick! The frigate





chicks are white fuzzed and so innocent looking. The male displays a stunning red plumage on his chest when he is looking for a mate. In normal times the peacock display all but disappears. It is interesting how these two species of birds can be neighbors.



Here's a yellow headed iguana who blends in perfectly with the cactus and coral rock



The real enemies of these creatures are the feral dogs and rats.



The sea sings a lullaby causing the sea lion to sleep while the iguana stands guard and the crabs come looking for trouble. We came upon a sea lion pup that was only minutes old. The gull was waiting to clean up the afterbirth (placenta) while the frigate was doing reconnaissance. Can



you imagine this happening in real time while you are standing there just two yards away? What a precious jewel is the Galápagos! Yes, sea lions have nipples.



The sea was a little too rough for snorkeling so we motored to another beach to swim with the sea lions. This big, old boy liked Marjan more than me. Our French mates had wet suits and underwater cameras so they had no fear of a bite from a sea lion. The dad and his teenage boys ended up with multiple bites on their legs. What fun! The frisky sea lions got too close to Marjan



who yelled,

“No way, they will bite me open and here comes the shark...I’m outa’ here!”

My experience with these teenage creatures was how fast and strong they were. Those multiple pounds could bump you in an instant. It was not a fair sport. Enrique said,

“They have every right to touch you, but not you them,”

Would I do this again? Absolutely, YES! We all looked at their molesting as our privilege.



The dingy was full of happy folk when we arrived back at the Adriana. As we boarded, the cook



showered us with warm, fresh water to rid us of all salt and sand. What a blessing for all. He then cooked us an excellent dinner featuring tuna with fruits and veggies...sooo good!



Some more friends.









The visit to Ecuador was such a treat. We were bid an unusual, friendly farewell. As we were dismissed to board our Avianca flight to Quito, we heard something coming behind us. It was our favorite iguana wishing us a “thank you for coming” and have a bien viaje!

Text by John Bucher Herr

Photos by John Bucher Herr and Marjan Vuurman

