

Ecuador Aug. 2015

International Health Emissaries

Thursday Aug. 13, Friday Aug. 14

Arrive SeaTac 11:30 for 2pm flight. Glad I did because one of the security checkpoints was closed so it took a long time to get through. Arrived at the gate at 12:45.

Arrive SFO at 4:30. Shuttle to Bayfront Hilton in Burlingame. Meet my roommate, Ashley, a tiny 19-year-old college sophomore with huge startlingly blue eyes & a perky personality.

10* of us went out to dinner at The Elephant Bar restaurant. Big shorebirds drilling for food in the tideflats outside the restaurant window. I splurged on sweet potato fries and a forgettable dinner salad.

* Plus Cameron's parents

Back to the hotel about 7:30 & to bed early for our 4 am wakeup call. Ashley set her cell phone alarm, so we didn't ask for a hotel wakeup call. Her alarm didn't go off, so we woke up at 4:20. Then she discovered that her disposable contacts were the wrong prescription - she had brought her old ones! Poor thing. Luckily she has glasses...

The shuttle had lots of seats but very little cargo space. We have a lot of luggage

with all the medical supplies. Luckily we made it onto the shuttle.

There are 10 of us at the airport and three will meet us in Quito. Still getting to know everyone's names.

The flight to Atlanta went well, but we just learned that our flight to Quito has been delayed until 4 am due to volcanic ash.

I've been having a nice chat with Maria, the other ~~to~~ translator. She's older, probably late 70s. Half German and half El Salvadoran, she grew up in El Salvador. She has been on a number of trips with IHE.

The airline offered a discount hotel for the night, and toiletry bags for those who needed ~~the~~ one. Jack & I were the only ones who hadn't checked our suitcases. I am grateful to have all of my things.

We waited about half an hour for the hotel shuttle. It was very hot, even in the shade. I was surprised ~~on~~ they didn't at least have ceiling fans in the bus shelters.

Finally one shuttle arrived but we didn't all fit. Then another one pulled up and he berated the other driver for not taking all of the flight crew personnel, because "they tip & these other people don't always." I was shocked to see him discussing this so openly in front of passengers. I think tipping is a terrible practice. ~~People~~ Workers should get paid a living wage & clients should be spared the pressure & discomfort of tipping. I don't even have any bills smaller than 20s.

I'm now sharing a room with Maria instead of Ashley. Ashley is sharing with Brandi, her step-cousin, a 40-something dentist and single mother of two young boys. She reminds me a lot of Kelti Erwin in looks and personality. She's wearing 5-inch platforms to travel in. But she's a seasoned traveler so... She is in the process of divorcing a man who is now the CEO of "the biggest gaming company in Asia."

Saturday Aug. 15

Slept from 8 until our wakeup call at 2:30 am. (Good thing we didn't rely on the alarm clock, as it never went off...) On the shuttle at 3 am. The airport train doesn't run that early so we got to walk the two miles or so to our terminal, which felt great. We are flying Delta, which Jack, our leader, chooses because he likes their service. They provided yogurt parfaits, muffins, coffee, and other snacks. And the best news is that our flight is actually leaving at 6 am - hooray! I was mentally reconciled to the trip possibly being canceled.

Our crew thus far:

Jack Faia, our fearless leader, who has been doing medical missions for over 30 years and founded IHE 30 years ago. A small, wiry man in his 70s perhaps, he is a bundle of energy, unflappable under stress, with a ready smile & a lifetime of travel adventure stories. Dentist.

Scott Thompson, a semi-retired dentist. Tall & ~~bald~~ balding, gentle & easygoing, he loves ceramics & arts. He's been with IHE

since 2011 and goes on one trip a year.

Brad Gruber & his wife Mary - am still getting to know them.

Brandi Faia, Jack's niece, the Kelle Enwin clone.

Maria Prince, the other translator. In her late 70s (?). She's done many trips with IHE. A thin woman with a round, Germanic face, she wears Guatemalan woven tennis shoes with neon-yellow laces. A quaver in her voice makes her hard to understand - her voice cuts out like a bad telephone connection. She is calm & friendly and chuckles easily. She carries a film camera, DSLR, Kindle, & Ipad. This to me makes her appear pretty fearless. She speaks German as well as Spanish & English. She went to University in the States & married an American man.

Daniel Thompson, Scott's son, a tall 20-something with a beard. A quiet chap, he dropped out of accounting at University and now works as a restaurant kitchen manager.

Cameron Marzi, a high school kid from southern Oregon & the grandson of a longtime friend of Jack's. Thin & quiet.

Ashley Sercia, my erstwhile roommate, who I've already written about.

The airline served a breakfast of yogurt & croissant.

We're flying in a "refurbished" (I think that's what they said) 757. It has soothing blue cabin lights & illuminated wifi signs. Will those someday look as antiquated as the ashtrays in the bathrooms on yesterday's plane?

The flight was fine but dragged a bit. Just under 5 hours. As we descended into Quito I could see glimpses of green & brown cloud-tangled slopes, steep terraced fields, & flashes of snow. The city of Quito sits at 9300' in a valley surrounded by tall peaks.

The 2-year-old airport was clean, modern & not at all crowded. Customs was a breeze. They didn't even ask to see all the forms Jack had sweated blood to procure. We retrieved the suitcases & bags of medical supplies at baggage claim & wheeled them out to where our van drivers were waiting with two clean, new mini-vans.

It's cloudy & 55-60°. Our driver claimed that some of the clouds were ash from the volcano. We landed at 10:30 and got to the hotel around 2. The city sits high above the valley and we wound up cobblestone switchbacks to get to it. It was about a 30-minute drive from the airport. We are staying in the new town, in the Mariscal section. It sprinkled during the drive.

Our hotel is called Cafe Cultura. It's very nice. A bit pricey at around \$100 a night, but it oozes charm.

We walked a few blocks to lunch at The Magic Bean, which serves American food. Jack says Ecuadorian food isn't very good & no one has gotten sick at The Magic Bean. Brandi & I split a portobello panini with potatoes. It was good. Bob Marley playing.

Maria's & my room, #3, is amazing, with a clawfoot cast iron tub, shower, tile bath, faux stone painted walls. It's quite lovely.

I walked to Parque El Ejido. It's Saturday & the sprawling green space is filled with people strolling, bicycling, playing volleyball, demonstrating. Snack vendors, children in peddle cars, seniors on benches, artists selling paintings.

I walked across the street to another section of the park with a big climbing sphere made out of rebar painted white. The protestors had a tent camp set up there. One man saw my camera & said "No pictures!" I said I wouldn't take any without permission. Later Maria told me that they are afraid of the police getting ahold of pictures of them. Police were there but it appeared to be just a formality. They did not speak at all during.

Before that I did take pictures of people using the zoom lens on my new camera. It's wonderful! I can take closeup pictures from far away, without people knowing.

I headed back to Plaza Foch, the hip area where we had lunch today, to take some pictures. Back to the hotel about 6. Email and freshen up before we all met downstairs about 6:30. There was wine & conversation until dinner was served at 7:30. The food & ambiance were incredible. A long table set with beautiful cloths, folded cloth napkins, pewter plates, blown glass goblets, fresh flowers & candles. A fire in the fireplace.

The meal was exquisite. Salad, chicken with fresh mushroom gravy & perfectly cooked vegetables, tres leches cake.

I was absolutely stuffed, but couldn't stop eating.

The three people who met us here in Quito are Mike & Ellen Patton, a wealthy couple with homes in Fresno & on the Pebble Beach Golf Course (he's a retired Mechanical Engineer) and Mose Thomas, who I haven't gotten to know yet.

Back to the room at 9, pooped.

I've been taking 125 mg of Diamox (for altitude sickness) twice a day. I have a very slight headache which may be from the altitude but could be tiredness or possibly mild dehydration.

Sunday Aug. 16

Slept like a log until 6:20 am. A partly sunny day in Quito. Jacaranda blossoms & yellow ones visible from the window.

Scrambled eggs, croissant, & a delicious juice that tasted like a cross between mango & pineapple for breakfast.

At 9 we all walked to the trolley^(bus), which took us to Plaza Santo Domingo for 25¢. It took about 15 minutes. Old Town Quito is lovely & interesting. ~~We took~~ We walked to Plaza San Fernando & into the ornate gold gilt church. Then to Plaza de la Independencia, the heart of old Quito.

On Sundays the roads are closed to cars and open to bikes (the roads around the plazas). Other roads are closed for walking streets. At 9:30 it was still quiet, but by 1pm the streets were thronged with people taking Sunday strolls. There was music playing and vendors (not too many) selling snacks & toys & souvenirs. Colonial-era buildings like in Antigua or Mexico. The silver lining in our flight delay is that we got to ^{old Town} on Sunday.

At 10:30 we split up and some of us walked up to the Basilica. I could sure feel the altitude walking uphill! It's a perfect day: blue sky with puffy white clouds & about 70°.

From the 2nd floor of the Basilica is a beautiful view into the Gothic interior lined with brightly-colored stain glass windows. From the 3rd level balcony is a view over the old town & the angel statue that towers above the city. Up another level is a lovely cafe with cloth-covered chairs & tables & a view of the city.

Up one more level and you can look north to the new part of town. Brave people can walk a series of catwalks & precipitous ladders up to precipitous & higher views.

At noon we met for lunch at a restaurant off Plaza de la Independencia. Tucked in a corner of a quaint shopping square, perched on a second floor wooden balcony, it was called Café del Fraile. I had Locro, an Ecuadoran potato soup made with milk. It had grated white cheese & ^{chunks of} avocado in it, & a tendril of roasted red pepper. It was delicious! A bowl cost \$7 and was very filling. I also ordered Quimbolito, a steamed sweet corn & raisins (the menu said "sweet corn sponge with raisins, steamed in Achira leaves." It was like corn bread, but light & spongy. Also very good. A few people ordered humitas, which turned out to be plain corn tamales.

After lunch we took the "trole" bus (a bus with dedicated lanes, that stops at platforms - no stairs) back to the hotel, loaded all the luggage into one van, piled ourselves into another, and drove about 45 minutes to the place we'll be staying for the next four nights.

(my fingers have started tingling - one of the side effects of the Diamox. So I'm going to stop taking it and see how I do. No one is taking it and no one else has any symptoms. Oh, Maria is taking it because she says she gets very sick without it.)

We are staying in guest cottages provided for volunteers by a Catholic organization called Tierra Nueva.

Its goal is to provide medical care to the poor people of "Quito South", an area of 855 sq. km. To raise money they also have a handicrafts factory that exports items. ^{Tierra Nueva} was started by an Italian priest many years ago. He is now dead and is considered a bit of a saint by local people.

The cottages are clean, with tile floors, 3 twin beds per room, 4 rooms & 2 bathrooms.

There is a common area with a kitchen, dining room, sitting area, classrooms, & wifi.

There are two enclosed gazebos & well-maintained gardens with flowers.

At 5 we met in a gazebo & Jack explained what will happen at the clinic tomorrow. There was wine, beer, and snacks. After a while I got tired of socializing and came back to the cottage.

It feels quite cold here, although my hiking thermometer says it's 70. I'm wishing I brought just one more layer.

It's surprising how many people didn't bring things that were on the packing list Jack sent, such as a water bottle. He has a tough job herding everyone, and some of his trips are much bigger. He can bring three volunteers for every dentist. Some trips

he has 7 dentists.

There's a school outside our window and kids are happily playing.

Dinner was a squash soup with salted popcorn - yummy - a cold salad of hominy, carrots, & peas - not so yummy, but we can only eat cooked vegetables - and a beef stew in mushroom sauce - yummy, though the beef was tough. Served with white rice.

Back to our chilly ^{rooms} beds for an early snooze and early wakeup.

Monday Aug. 17

Slept fine despite hard mattress, barking dogs, the occasional car alarm, & lights shining in the window. Up at 6:20 for 7:00 breakfast of blackberry juice (yum!), café au lait, scrambled eggs with ham, & white rolls with butter & jam.

Van picked us up at 7:30 with all the dental luggage & we drove to the nearby hospital (in the town of Chillogallo Quitumbe), where we picked up MariElena, the coordinator for the medical outreach programs. She is about my age, with a round face, & super friendly. It took about half an hour to get to the town of Santo Domingo Cutuglagua. We hauled the gear up a flight of

stairs to the top floor of a school house. The school yard was coated in coarse chunks of broken glass. The room itself was clean, with lots of windows, but reeked of petroleum products: a gas can, the generator, the oil they had spread on the wood floor. We opened all the windows & began setting up equipment. It took just over an hour. There were problems with the outlets not working, but soon everything was ready. Jack anesthetized patients & decided what care they needed. Brandi & Scott & Brad did fillings & extractions. Ashley, Cameron, ~~&~~ Daniel, & Moses assisted. Ellen & Mike sterilized. Mary ran the "store" where each patient could pick out a toy or clothes. Maria translated. I taught tooth care to the patients (72 today) & helped with translation. MariElena & her staff of "promotores" checked in the patients & kept track of who was next. They hung curtains to separate the different areas, set up trash cans, found us tables, and held the keys to the bathroom.

I loved getting to speak Spanish, although I found the people very softspoken

(shy?) & hard to understand. I also noticed that they didn't make a lot of eye contact with me. Maybe I was too close for cultural comfort, or maybe they avoid eye contact with authority figures, or maybe they aren't comfortable with a lot of eye contact in general. My cultural knowledge is slim.

At first there were a lot of wailing children. Jack says they were all from the same family, & that the family probably teaches the fear. After that there were very few tears. The initial wailing was a bit heartwrenching, even though I knew it was just fear & not pain.

About 12:30 some of us ate the lunches that had been packed for us: ham & cheese ~~sandwiches~~ on white rolls, chips, sweet biscuits (cookies) & an apple. I was a bit shocked that in addition to the lunches we brought for the workers, we also brought them Coke!

The bathroom was a cracked toilet with no seat in an unlit room. You flushed with a bucket of water. Some people found it difficult to use, but it didn't bother me.

At one point Maria felt faint & threw up.

The helpers brought her a padded office chair with a tall back, and after resting for a while she felt better. Jack later told me that she has early Parkinsons, & he doesn't think she'll be able to travel with him much longer.

At 5:00 we had finished all but three patients, who were told to come back tomorrow. The bus was late so we went outside & ogled Cotopaxi, which was belching smoke & steam. Beautiful!

The bus finally arrived. The driver was covered in diesel. A rock had punctured the tank. He had managed to plug it somehow. However, halfway back it began to leak again. He pulled over & about 5 minutes later another bus had arrived. We got to the hospital and dropped off MariElena and arrived back at Tierra Nueva about 6:30.

Dinner was noodle soup, chicken breasts, mashed potatoes, & a mix of broccoli, cauliflower, & zucchini. Everything was delicious!

They also serve a tea that smells like shampoo but tastes yummy.

Mike, one of the volunteers, reminds me of Elfar. Very funny & fearless interacting with local people. He also takes lots of pictures. Most of the older people in this group are conservatives, so I have to be very careful what topics I bring up. Everyone seems very deft at sticking to common ground.

Jack, who says he is conservative, has a huge heart. He says that he is very rich. He is an avid hiker & has hiked the Everest Trail twice.

Tuesday Aug. 18

Breakfast hard boiled eggs, rolls, butter, jam, coffee, hot milk. ~~On~~ On the bus at 7:30, at the clinic by 8, anesthetizing the first patient by 8:15. 59° in our room this morning (62° yesterday). It's a beautiful blue sky day and Cotopaxi was gorgeous. But it was chilly outside & breezy.

Again ~~it was~~ chilly outside we stopped at the hospital to pick up MariElena. We had three patients left from yesterday plus 72 new ones. The youngest was about 2 & the oldest was 75 (she looked 90, and it's possible she

doesn't know her actual age. I had many adorable children today.

I've got a schpiel worked out. I tell them how important it is to brush their teeth twice a day, and how to brush them. Then I talk about sugar and Coca Cola and how bad they are for their teeth. Then it's on to the next patient, practically non-stop all day. It's a lot of talking in Spanish and by the end of the day my tongue is tired! My brain too.

For lunch we had sandwiches, banana chips (yum!), and not-very-good pears.

I took a few short breaks to walk around and take pictures. The school yard is strewn with rubbish & there are ankle-twisting holes. At one point a very drunk man was sprawled on the ground, right on top of the broken glass. This is a poor area, ~~but~~ yet people have cell phones, nice-looking clothes & shoes, & are clean.

The cutest thing I saw today was two young girls who were cousins, & one of them was holding the other one's hand while she was getting her teeth filled.

The clinic workers were selling Tierra Nueva marmalade & really hoping we'd buy some. It was \$2.50 a jar, which seemed a bit pricey, but we bought a few.

We finished early & our bus arrived at 4:15. It was warm outside. ~~On~~ On the way back we saw street vendors selling beautiful roses. Apparently Ecuador exports a lot of roses.

Back at the training center we are hanging out & relaxing until dinner.

Children still playing on the playground outside our window at 9:30 when we went to sleep.

I've slept poorly here. The mattress is very hard & the pillows aren't ergonomic, so I toss & turn a lot & get headaches from the neck pain.

There's no place to go walking here, so I'm not getting much exercise. Trying to do stretches.

All of this is a small price to pay for the amazing experience I'm having.

Am slowly finding common ground with each of the people here. Mose owned a funeral home and still works the part time. Brad loves to discuss grammar & technical things. Mike & Ellen just celebrated their 46th anniversary.

Dinner was quinoa soup with potatoes, a salad of green beans, carrots, & palm hearts with lime juice,

over-baked big french fries, rice, & the pièce de résistance: breaded, filleted trout from a fresh-water lake near Quito. It was pink-skinned & just delicious.

Wednesday Aug. 19

Yogurt drink with granola for breakfast - yay! Also scrambled eggs. And I love the hot milk for my instant decaf "café au lait."

We saw 80 patients today, but still finished before 5:00. When we got to the clinic the adorable boy from yesterday was there with his mom. He ran up and gave me a huge hug - it was a highlight of this trip! He remembered that I had given him a toothbrush yesterday. He remembered that Mary had given him a little car. This impressed me because I would have thought we'd all look alike to them (it's hard for us to tell them apart).

At one point the power went out & it took about half an hour to get the generator

started. It was very loud. Luckily the power came on after about 2 hours.

Several times people asked me why the doctor hadn't done this or that, such as a filling. Turns out that when Jack does the triage, he sometimes decides that a patient has too many needs, and there isn't time to do everything & still see all the patients.

Two women from the Tierra Nueva foundation came & took pictures for an article they'll be writing.

A 20-year-old kid came in. I began my schpiel about tooth care and he said "You can speak English with me - I speak English." His English was excellent. He was eager to practice. So we invited him to hang around and chat. His name is Santiago. He is studying biochemistry at the university. He told us that the building we were in used to be a school but is now a community center. The town has no running water or sewage system. Sewage runs into an open ditch. His father works in an oil camp near Coca, serving food to the workers. He comes home 5 days out of 20. He has never seen used clothes for sale, & says a nice hoodie costs about \$30. This seems like

a lot to me. The average professional makes \$500 to \$800 a month. Renting a room near the university would cost about \$120 a month so he lives at home & commutes about 90 minutes each way to school. University is free. He has 5 weeks off between each semester. He has a severely disabled sister. The doctors told the mom that the girl would never walk, but the mom refused to accept it & insisted on rehab. At 8 years old the girl finally walked. Santiago said his mom cried.

I wished we had brought a few books in Spanish to read to the little kids who were waiting for their moms.

A sad thing happened today. There are a limited number of spaces for the dental clinic. The promoters sell tickets for \$1. Someone copied tickets & something like 12 people got in for free. This meant that 12 people had to be turned away (they got their money refunded). It shows how popular and needed the clinic is.

I saw one boy today whose teeth were all brown & rotten. It was so sad. Luckily they're all baby teeth & hopefully he'll take better care of his adult teeth.

I saw a garbage truck go by & asked Santiago why there was so much garbage on the ground.

I had assumed it was like ~~rural~~ rural Morocco where there are no landfills so there's no point in picking up garbage. He believes it's just ~~ignorance~~ lack of education, & people teaching their kids that it's OK to throw garbage on the ground.

On the way back to the compound I noticed that gas is \$1.48 a gallon here.

My nose is very dry, and bleeds easily. I guess it's a combination of the dry air & the altitude?

After we returned to the compound, Marco, the caretaker, took us over to the store where they sell fair trade items from all over Ecuador to raise money for Tierra Nueva. They had a lot of nice things, but the only thing I bought was a jar of jam for my dad (orange marmalade, his favorite).

Dinner was quinoa-potato soup, rice, tough beef, and a salad we couldn't eat because the vegetables weren't cooked. This is a heavy drinking crowd. Tonight, in addition to wine & beer, there was also rum & coke. I don't know how they do it. I would feel like shit. This is also a

pretty wealthy crowd, especially Jack. He has great stories to tell about his travels to exotic places - first class.

I'm really enjoying this experience but am not sure I would do it again. A little high-end for me, too much drinking, & a bit too much tour-like group togetherness. We'll see how the rest of the trip goes!

Thursday Aug. 20

Hard-boiled eggs, rolls w/butter & jam, & blackberry juice for breakfast. We packed up and said goodbye to Marco & the compound where we've been staying.

The fancy bus picked us up again. When we arrived at the clinic, the cute little boy was there again! His name is Dilan.

It turns out that some people buy tickets for 2 or 3 days if they know they need a lot of work done, and that's what his mom did.

It's windy today, & very loud when it blows on the tin roof. Amazingly the power didn't go out.

The day flew by. We only had 57 patients.

Around 2 pm the Director of Tierra Nueva, a tall woman named Gloria, arrived with three of her staff, to see the clinic & thank us. We had been invited to come to the hospital for thank yous, but wouldn't have had time. Gloria spoke great English & gave a really nice speech in both languages, thanking us for our work & telling us about how Tierra Nueva was started by an Italian priest who came to Ecuador at age 20, saw the great disparity between the rich & poor, & founded Tierra Nueva to address it. It was very touching.

Earlier in the day I had passed my photo books around to the women volunteers (promotoras). I also showed them to several patients who were interested. Everybody loved them. I had forgotten that I had a photo of me singing with my band. One of the women asked if I would sing at the thank you ceremony. Yikes! How to get out of that one? Luckily the request was forgotten by the time the speeches rolled around.

We also had to say goodbye to Dilan, which was very sad. What an extraordinary child.

* They teach dental care, and health care to local people, with a focus on hypertension, diabetes, & asthma. One of them had to leave her 2 small children home alone so she could work at the clinic.

I was sad that Santiago, the boy who spoke such good English, did not come back.

At the end of the day we packed everything into the suitcases. The promotoras packed their gear into a truck. The packing & cleanup took about an hour. Then we gave the promotoras small gifts & hugged them goodbye. They are volunteers who receive \$20/month travel allowance.*

It took less than an hour to get back to our hotel. I sat up front & chatted with the driver. We arrived about 5. I took a cold shower/bath. Our room is really nice. We're on the third floor this time. Maria and I ended up chatting for a long time, until dinner was ready at 7:30. She told me about her Parkinson's diagnosis, breast cancer, foster kids, schizophrenic son, & 80-year-old husband who is developing dementia. She is an extraordinary woman who has been through a lot & handled it all with grace.

Dinner was once again amazing. I had crepes filled with sauteed vegetables, trout with potatoes & vegetables, and banana flambé - yum!

Everyone else had had a lot to drink. Ashley, who weighs about 80 pounds soaking wet, practically passed out at the table. I shudder to think how she's going to feel tomorrow...

My brand new Kindle died, so I'm trying to download books to my computer.

To sleep about 10 pm.

Friday Aug. 21

Up at 6, pack, breakfast at 7. Tree tomato juice - yum! A bit like orange juice but smoother, with less bite.

On the busses (vans) at 8. Cotopaxi is really erupting today! Huge plumes of boiling gray ash rising high into the air. Arrived at the airport just before 9. We could see the volcano from the ~~the~~ departure area. It was spectacular!

The Sacha Lodge representative met us, gave us our boarding passes, and ushered us through baggage check. We had a short wait before our flight. We flew in a nice Airbus 320 (?). There was a bit of turbulence rising out of

Quito. The flight is only 35 minutes. My seatmate was a young Ecuadoran man named Jimmy (Jaime). He was very friendly & shared his "Rose Geranium"-flavored Ecuadoran chocolate with me. It was delicious! He is a topographer who works with an oil company. He lives in Libertad, on the coast near Guayaquil. The company pays his transport: a 2-hour bus ride to Guayaquil, a flight to Quito, a flight to Coca, and a 3-hour boat ride to the job site. He works 21 days on and 8 days off. The workers live in containers made of metal. Can you imagine how hot those must be? He says he doesn't like the job but it pays well. He owns a ~~cocoa~~ farm and uses synthetic fertilizer. His girlfriend lives 5 hours away so he doesn't see her much. He is learning English & asked if I do "What's App" ("Up"?). I said no but gave him my email address.

We could see the jungle & Napo River below us as we landed. We got off on the tarmac into steamy heat. About 86° & high humidity. The luggage came on carts to an open platform.

One of our guides, Eduardo, met us & took us to the bus. We drove a few minutes to the lodge office, a shady courtyard where they served filtered water, cookies, fruit, & had clean bathrooms. They also had coffee & tea. Eduardo gave us some history of the area. He was extremely difficult to understand (his English was). Oh, they also gave us a little backpack with a water bottle & sweat towel.

We then walked a short distance to the river & climbed on a "~~baselba~~" ^{canoa} a motorized canoe-like boat with a sun & rain cover & open sides. It held a bit over 20 people. We zoomed along for about an hour, zig zagging back & forth across the river to miss sandbars & logs. We saw yellow-headed vultures circling overhead. There were small settlements visible along the banks. Once I saw a bright yellowish bird dart into the brush.

We stopped at a small museum created by Capucin monks who studied the indigenous people many years ago. Eduardo gave an interminable, boring lecture which I ignored because I could read the Spanish (the exhibits were not in English). They served us lunch under a straw shelter:

chicken, vegetables, juice, cookies, apple. Food has been very salty, but that might be good here because we're sweating so much.

~~After~~ At lunch I met ~~a~~ two of the four people on the boat that are not with our group: celine & ~~Feyzi~~ from Istanbul. They just got married and are on a round-the-world trip in 15 days! They are both lawyers.

On the boat I met the other two people, a Dutch couple about my age. They have just come from Brazil. They loved Rio & Sao Paulo. They did not like Otavalo, Ecuador. They felt it was a homely city with nothing of interest.

We rode perhaps another 30 minutes to the Sacha dock. Then we walked about 20 minutes on a boardwalk to a small dock with small, fiberglass 10-person canoes. The guides then rowed us across a small lake to the hangout place. It has a bar, & here you can swim as well. They handed us glasses of cold, sweet lemonade, which tasted heavenly. They put out plates of appetizers & small pieces of yellow cake.

Fausto, the lodge manager, told us (in excellent & easy-to-understand English) about the lodge schedule & activities & assigned us to a guide group. We have Daniel, who hopefully is easier to understand than Eduardo.

Lunch is at 1, dinner at 7:30. There is a meal horn. Internet costs \$5 a day. We'll have guided activities early in the morning (when animals are more active) & at night, when nocturnal animals are active.

Our room is delightful. Spacious, with big screened openings, a porch with a hammock & clothesline, a bathroom with slate walls & floor, a safe, & a "dry storage" cupboard with a lightbulb to keep electronics away from the humidity. The room is very private.

I have decided not to take the malaria medication (Malarone) because many people who come here say there really aren't mosquitoes, and the meds can have unpleasant side effects.

I saw an agouti hanging around outside our cabin, making loud scratching noises in the undergrowth, and munching on a seedpod of some sort. I also saw a green parakeet when

we stopped for lunch.

At 6 pm we met at the boathouse to pick out rubber boots for walks.

We heard howler monkeys & oropendulas on our walk. It's dark now & there is a wonderful cacaphony of noises coming from the jungle. There are long raised boardwalks to get to the rooms, and they are lit at night. There is a central dining room with several levels. Made of wood & straw, it feels like a treehouse. Dinner was a delicious buffet with soup, scalloped potatoes, ratatouille, meatballs, pork (thin, breaded), & various cooked salads. There were three deserts, including mango mousse. We met our guide, Daniel, a really nice young man who speaks excellent & easy-to-understand Spanish.

Brandi, Ashley, Jack, & Cameron are in ~~my~~ group, & along with Brad, Mary, & Marie. The first three are heavy drinkers & not very pleasant to be around after they've had a few. Maria & I excused ourselves right after dinner.

I bit the side of my tongue Wednesday night & it's painful to eat. Not that that

stops me.

It's nice & cool now.

Saturday Aug. 22

Wake up call at 5:30. Breakfast at 6.
Yogurt, granola, & fruit for breakfast!

At 6:40 we climbed in a canoe, paddled across the lake into the outlet creek. The assistant guide is a Quichua man named Pancho who speaks Spanish but not English. We coasted downstream for about 45 minutes. Brandi had trouble being quiet, which may or may not have been the reason we didn't see any animals.

We docked ~~on~~^{the} canoe and walked a short distance to a very tall^{120'} wooden tower built around a kapok tree. I was scared but made myself go to the top. Nice view over the treetops. Saw some nice birds (see separate list). Pancho knows how to make bird calls. He, like all the Quichua guides they hire, also is very good at spotting & identifying birds. After about an hour we climbed down & then hiked in the forest for about an hour. It reminds me of the Everglades & the Cypress swamps.

We got back about 10:30 for snacks (lemonade, sandwich makings, fruit, cake). I had a delightful swim in the lake with the piranhas (didn't see any but did see someone catch one yesterday).

Walked up to the butterfly house & saw many beautiful ones. Then sat on the "balsa", or deck, area for a while until lunch. Another huge meal with 5 or 6 hot dishes, 4 or 5 salads, & 3 deserts. I ate at a table with the Dutch couple, who are very nice. He is the CEO of a company that encourages young people to go into the technical trades.

Sat on the balsa until about 3:30, watching swallows, vultures, & yellow-bellied birds frit and soar. Pretty sure I saw an osprey.

Turns out that while our group has 8 people, ~~these~~ other groups only have 4 & 4. The foursome are the couples from Holland and Turkey. Turns out their guide is a ~~re~~ renowned bird expert. So I asked Fausto if I could switch groups tomorrow & he said yes!

Animals seen in Amazon

- | | |
|------------------------|---|
| Agouti | King Vulture (rare) |
| Big lizard - Dracena | Greater Yellow-headed Vulture |
| Small snake | Black Caracara |
| Tarantulas | green parakeet |
| Conga ants | Spangled Cotinga |
| Leafcutter ants | Dusky - capped Flycatcher |
| great otters | Kiskadee, Lesser |
| great egret | Blue Dacnis |
| oropendula | Opal-crowned Tanager |
| lined woodpecker | Hoatzin |
| mealy parrots | Osprey |
| blue-headed parrots | Swallows |
| dusky-headed parakeets | Ivory billed araçari |
| great kiskadee | White-throated Toucan |
| white bearded mannekin | Green macaws |
| wood creeper | Blue-headed parrots |
| yellow caracara | flycatcher |
| | Squirrel monkey |
| | Black - marbled ^{marbled} tamarind monkey |
| | White-fronted capuchin monkey |
| | Pygmy marmoset |

At 4:30 we went to the canopy walk. We walked for 15-20 minutes to three 120-foot-tall metal towers with catwalks between them. I was scared but determined. I made it to the top of the first tower, where we saw several kinds of monkeys (see list). I made it across the catwalk to the second tower by walking right behind Brad and chattering to take my mind off the drop. We saw toucans, parrots, macaws, and more monkeys. I stayed at the second tower while the others went on to the third. It was very peaceful and quiet up there alone. We stayed for the sunset, a blazing red ball. Going back across the catwalk was a bit nervewracking, but climbing down the tower was pretty easy.

We walked back in the dark with flashlights, looking for critters. We saw conga ants & two tarantulas.

A cool shower felt fantastic. My back felt very sore, probably from the tension on the tower climb.

I sat with the Dutch & Turkish couples at dinner, and their guide, Oscar. We talked about the Turkish couple's wedding, among other things. It was nice to have some new people to talk to, and who weren't drunk.

Sunday Aug. 23

~~Up~~ Up at 5, breakfast at 5:30, into the boats at 6. Paddle across the lake & walk back to the Napo River. On the way we saw a pygmy marmoset - adorable! We rode in the big motorized canoes about 30 minutes downriver to Yasuni National Park. We beached the boat on a sandbar in the middle of the river and climbed out. There are exposed clay banks along the river where the parrots come to socialize & eat clay. The clay contains kaoline which helps with their digestion (think Kaopectate). We saw a lot of parrots but they were pretty far away. For some reason they did not come out of the trees to the "clay lick." We waited quite a while, but no luck.

Then we climbed back in the boat & continued another 20 minutes or so down

the river to the Sani Isla community center. The Sani are indigenous people. There are about 700 people and 100 families. The women have formed a cooperative handicrafts & tourism group to raise money for their families.

We were given a tour of their garden, where they grow palm (harvested for palm hearts at about 2 years old), pineapples, plantains, coffee, white cocoa, & other things.

The community center also has the school, health clinic, & soccer fields. There was a soccer tournament going on. Teams come from as much as 3 hours away by canoe. They all had nice uniforms.

We were next taken to a thatched hut where they were cooking food on a grate over a fire: tilapia & palm hearts wrapped in leaves, plantains, white cocoa beans, & palm beetle larvae. Then we sat on wooden benches under thatch covers & tried everything. The grubs tasted fine & the texture was OK too - kind of like chicken with soft stuffing. The roasted white cocoa beans were delicious, like roasted chestnuts.

The fish was good, but very bony. The plantains are starchy without much flavor. The palm hearts were finely chopped & somewhat flavorless.

At the end we went into the gift shop where the women sell their handicrafts, especially jewelry made from seeds. I thought the prices were high & I didn't see anything I couldn't resist. We did pay \$5 per person for the tour & lunch.

The boat ride back took about 45 minutes. We saw great egrets & ^{a kingfisher} an osprey. There were many little settlements along ~~the~~ the river banks, with thatched huts, banana trees, women washing clothes by ~~the~~ the river with small children nearby. We saw three young kids who had canoed out to a sandbar & were playing. We saw large supply boats carrying trucks & equipment to the oilfields.

At the Sani center we saw Oropendulas building their pendulous nests. We also saw a lineated woodpecker, which looked just like a pileated. I was dismayed to see a woman using disposable diapers. They have to haul their garbage to Coca. There was some

garbage lying around. Back at 12:45.

I had spaghetti for lunch, and a piece of plum tart. Then a swim. Now sitting on the covered veranda gazing at the beautiful lake & the birds flitting around.

Oscar says no boats are allowed on the river at night except in an emergency, and then they must have a light.

The river is shallow in many places, and there are many sandbars & logs.

Oscar also told me that he misses the Kichwa village where he grew up. He now lives in Coca (on his days off) to be near his kids, who are in high school & college, but he finds life in town noisy, stressful, & complicated.

I haven't seen any mosquitoes here, or gotten a single bite. It's low to mid-80s & humid during the day, but cools off nicely at night.

At 4:30 we got in canoes & paddled up Anaconda Creek, one of the creeks that feeds the lake. It was quite narrow & magical. We heard & then saw a flock of Huatzin,

clumsily flapping about in the trees. Then we saw a great otter! There was more than one. They would pop up, exhale a noisy burst or two of air, and go under again. They were adorable! We saw a huatsin nest and a few small birds. Then we continued to a bridge where we met the other half of our group. The canoe ride was about an hour. They climbed into the canoe and we walked back on a trail (they had walked in). We saw a hole in a tree with a screech owl, but I couldn't see it. Pancho showed us how to weave palm fibre into strong string.

Back about 6 for a nice, cool shower. Watched an agouti carefully burying seeds (actually planting them, but he didn't know that). After he buried the seed and patted down the soil, he carefully "hid" it with a couple of leaves.

I saw a big group of monkeys feeding in a tree near my cabin! There were tiny black tamarinds & larger squirrel monkeys. They were so cute, leaping, jumping, climbing, & eating! It's so much more exciting to see them in the wild than in a zoo.

Dinner was a BBQ on the "balsa," the lakefront veranda, with another big spread. I had chicken, roast potatoes, salad, chocolate mousse, and a bit of pineapple strudel.

At 8:30 we went for a canoe ride on the lake in the dark. Brandi spotted a baby caiman, which was super cute.

Up early tomorrow for our departure, so packing tonight.

Monday, Aug. 24

On our canoe ride yesterday we heard howler monkeys in the distance. It's an unearthly sound, like a hurricane wind. Ominous, thrilling.

Sasha Lodge has offered a neighboring family free transport to Coca whenever they like. So eight of them joined us on the ride: 3 adults & 5 children. One was a young boy, perhaps 7 or 8 years old. I gave him my picture books to look at, which he loved. Then I let him use my binoculars, which he did for a long time.

The motor stopped working at one point & we thought we'd have to call for a backup boat. But after some fits & starts we got on our way again. The boat has two motors & can run fine on one, so I'm not really sure what the problem was.

We saw many oropendula nests, which look like displays of pendant earrings hanging from tree racks. Their yellow-tailed inhabitants darted about.

Before we left the lodge, Pancho gave me a woven bracelet wrapped in a leaf - a regalito.

Saw yellow caracaras & anis on the river ride.

The Sasha rep met us at the dock in Coca and took us to the office for snacks & bathroom before driving us to the airport & helping us get checked in.

We landed in Quito just after noon. Jack, Brad, & Maria stayed at the airport with our luggage while the rest of us were driven back to Cafe Cultura. Mike, Ellen, Mose, & Denise will spend another two days in Quito. Most of the group stayed for a \$7 3-course

lunch at the cafe, but I wanted to go back to Old Town. Daniel had recommended a place to get Loco de Papas, Ecuadoran potato soup with cheese & avocado. It's called Vista Hermosa & is on the roof of a building, with a wonderful view of the Basilica & angel & old Town. It was a little pricey at \$8, but was large & filling.

Then I walked some more, to see things I had missed a week ago, including La Merced church & La Ronda, a shopping street in the oldest part of Quito. It wasn't much. Old Town has its charms but didn't really grab me the way other cities have.

I sat in the main square for a while & chatted with two nice older men.

I got on the trolley to head back. It was very crowded & I had to hold on with both hands. I completely forgot to guard my fanny pack! A man told me it was unzipped. I ~~was~~ felt sick. My money purse with about \$40 was taken. Thank god I had my passport, credit & debit cards, and extra money in my money belt. The experience knocked the

wind out of my sails & left a sour taste in my mouth. I haven't been quite myself since.

I got back to the cafe about 5. At 5:30 Fernando picked us up. We were at the hotel by 6:30. It was too early to check in for our 11:30 flight, so we got some dinner: a grisly hamburger at Johnny Rockets with an unpleasant-tasting pickle relish.

About 8 we checked in and went to the waiting room. I was able to sleep on the floor for a little while. We were all feeling pretty loopy. The flight left on time at 11:30. I was able to sleep off and on most of the way.

Tuesday, August 25

Arrived Atlanta 5:30 am. It took an hour & a half to get through immigration, customs, baggage claim, & security. It was hard to stay upright & thinking clearly. The security area was a zoo & the TSA personnel were harried & a bit crabby. Now we're in the air heading for San Francisco. I slept off & on most of the flight. Said goodbye to the IHG crew at baggage claim. Was able to get on a 1pm flight

to Seattle, instead of 4pm (\$25 charge). I forgot that Alaska would charge me \$25 to check a bag, and the jams I bought can't go through security, so I had to toss them. If all goes well I'll land at 3, Grant will pick me up, and I'll be home by 4!