

Travel Risks
Southwestern College
Builders Abroad
(1/9/02)

Course: LAS 355G Adventures in Ecuador

Term: Fall, 2002

Trip Location: Ecuador including the Galapagos Islands, the sierra of the Andes Mountains, and the Amazon rainforest.

From: December 26, 2002 **Until:** January 12, 2003

Participation in this trip involves certain risks not normally found at Southwestern College. These include risks involved in traveling to and within, and returning from Ecuador; foreign political, legal, social, and economic conditions; different standards of design, safety and maintenance of buildings, public places and conveyances; local medical and weather conditions; food and water contaminations; earthquake and volcanic activity.

Below is a discussion of the known risks involved in this trip.

1. High Altitude

Unless you're from Colorado you'll probably feel Quito's high altitude within the first few hours after arriving. After La Paz, Bolivia, Quito at around 9,500 ft is the second-highest capital in Latin America. Altitude sickness usually manifests itself in insomnia, headaches, and/or nausea. In the event that you do experience symptoms of altitude sickness, in most cases, they can be remedied by drinking lots of water and getting plenty of rest. If you experience severe headaches or respiratory problems, including acute shortness of breath, consult a doctor immediately.

2. Sunburn

Sunburn will be a very real danger everywhere in Ecuador. It's easy to forget the power of the sun when you are shivering in the Andes. Because of the high altitude there is less protective air between you and the sun. Also, Ecuador is on the equator, which means the sun is always nearly overhead at midday at all times of the year. The danger of sunburn will be especially high while in the desert climate of the Galapagos Islands. You will be outside and in the sun most of the day dressed in shorts, t-shirts, and swimsuits. Sunscreen with high SPF is difficult, if not impossible, to find in Ecuador so be sure to bring enough for the entire trip.

3. Food and Water

If you're going to get sick while in Ecuador it will probably be from contaminated food or water. You should never drink the tap water anywhere in Ecuador or eat food from street vendors. Failure to practice safe drinking and eating habits is a good way to catch typhoid fever, hepatitis A, or some other horrible disease.

No one is safe from traveler's diarrhea, though most cases are mild. A bloody stool or anything beyond mild diarrhea, gas, cramps, nausea, or fever may require medical attention. Minimize the risk of getting sick by following these guidelines:

- Get immunized for typhoid fever and hepatitis A before leaving the United States.
- Use Imodium A-D or Pepto-Bismol in small doses as a preventative measure for diarrhea.
- Wash your hands before eating.
- Brush your teeth using bottled water.
- Drink only bottled or canned beverages.
- Beware of drinks served with ice.
- Never eat food from street vendors.
- Beware that salads may contain vegetables that have been washed in contaminated water.
- Undercooked meats, eggs, and seafood can be very dangerous.
- Beware of food bars.
- Remember to boil it, cook it, peel it, wash it, or forget it.

4. Muggings

Because of recent economic problems in Ecuador crime has increased significantly particularly in Quito and Guayaquil. Generally the cities are more dangerous than the countryside. You can drastically reduce the likelihood of being a crime victim by following a few basic precautions:

- Travel in groups. The old maxim "safety in numbers" is worth more than you know.
- Walk confidently with your head up. Never stare at the ground it makes you look nervous and weak.
- When you feel unsafe it's probably not paranoia, they're instincts that developed for a reason. If you get that feeling grab a taxi or go into a place with lots of people.
- Find out where the unsafe sectors are and avoid them if possible. In Quito robberies occur most frequently in areas popular with tourists: markets, church plazas, and buses. Bag-slashings are fairly common in these areas especially Plaza San Francisco in Old Town. Be especially careful at night in New Town around bars and restaurants frequented by tourists. Be careful on crowded busses where people close to you can slash your bags

or pockets. Under no circumstances should you ever walk-up the stairs to El Panecillo; the stairs pass through a very bad part of town. Avoid the interiors of large city parks and never enter one at night. Generally, taxis are the safest way to get around in Quito, especially at night.

- Be wary of people who are too friendly too quickly, or that offer to show you around. Use your judgment and don't worry about being rude.
- Keep all of your important documents in a secure place, such as an inner pocket or a pouch that is hidden under a layer of clothing.
- Carry traveler's checks and credit cards instead of large sums of money. You can always get replacement checks or cancel your credit cards but you can't get currency back.
- Don't wear expensive jewelry or wristwatches. They make you a target. If you can't afford to lose it, don't take it with you to Ecuador.
- Carry shoulder bags and purses in front of you to avoid having them snatched.
- Buy a cover for your backpack so that thieves cannot easily slash it open.
- Keep all bags and other valuables where you can see them in restaurants, train stations, airports, and other public places.
- Make copies of your important documents, card numbers, etc., and give them to a trusted companion. It's also a good idea to leave copies of important documents and numbers with a relative at home, or store them on password protected email account that you can access from anywhere.

5. Poor Road Conditions

Generally speaking the roads in Ecuador are substandard compared to American highways. Potholes, unmarked obstacles, and curves may be encountered at anytime. Drivers in Ecuador have the propensity to pass on hills and curves at highway speeds. Driving in Ecuador is not recommended. Leave the driving to bus and taxi drivers. Sit in the back seat of taxis and use the seatbelt.

6. Earthquakes, Volcanic Activity, and Mud Slides

Ecuador sits on the Pacific "Rim of Fire", where two tectonic plates grind together: the Nazca Plate, supporting the east Pacific, is slowly shoving itself under the American Plate underneath mainland South America. The result is the Andes Mountains as well as several active volcanoes.

Cotopaxi, about two hours south of Quito, last erupted in 1877 and is considered to be the highest active volcano in the world. There is smoke bellowing out of its cone shaped top but only climbers on the top of the volcano can see it. Guagua Pichincha, located 7 miles west of Quito, last erupted in October of 1999 and covered the city with a coating of ash. In future eruptions with large lava flows Quito would be protected by a higher inactive volcano, Rucu Pichincha, that lies between Guagua Pichincha and Quito. Sangay, located about 150 miles south of Quito is one of the most active on earth, with a constant pool of lava burbling in

its crater. Tungurahua and El Altar, located about 100 miles south of Quito and Antisana, about 30 miles southeast of Quito have all seen action in this century. Earthquakes and avalanches of melted ice, snow, mud, and rocks accompany most volcanic activity. Sometimes heavy rain is all that is needed to induce a landslide.

The stretch of the Pan American highway from Ibarra, through Quito, to Riobamba is called the Avenue of the Volcanoes for good reason; the views from the highway are dominated by 10 glaciated volcanoes that tower to over 16,000 feet.

7. Motion Sickness

Motion sickness occurs when the body is subjected to accelerations of movement in different directions or under conditions where visual contact with the actual outside horizon is lost. The balance center of the inner ear then sends information to the brain that conflict with the visual clues of apparently standing still in the interior cabin of a ship. Symptoms generally consist of dizziness, fatigue, and nausea, which may progress to vomiting.

Prevention is best accomplished by seeking areas of lesser movement in an interior location of a large ship, or by facing forward and looking outside the ship at the horizon. Several medications are available both by prescription and over the counter that may prevent or limit the symptoms of motion sickness. The over the counter medications Dramamine or Bonine can be very effective for short trips or when symptoms occur intermittently.

8. Snorkeling

There is dangerous sea life to consider while snorkeling and swimming in the waters around the Galapagos Islands. Male sea lions guarding a harem of females can be very dangerous in or out of the water. Cone shells and scorpion fish should never be touched. Wear sandals or tennis shoes when swimming to avoid being stung by cone shells if you should accidentally step on one.

Several species of shark are found in the Galapagos most are harmless to humans. Sharks usually approach out of curiosity and shouldn't be a problem unless blood is present in the water. Avoid swimming near a feeding frenzy of boobies, pelicans or dolphins, as these attract hungry sharks.

The Yellow-bellied sea snake is very poisonous but is rare except in El Nino years when the water is warmer.

9. Insect Bites

Some mosquitoes in the rainforest have the potential for transmitting malaria and

yellow fever. To minimize the risk of contracting these diseases follow these guidelines:

- Take a prophylactic drug for malaria just before, during, and after leaving the rainforest. See your doctor for a prescription and get the medicine before you leave on your trip.
- Get immunized for yellow fever before leaving the United States.
- While in the rainforest use a mosquito repellent with DEET (N, N diethylmetatoluamide). Higher percentages of DEET are more effective but are more caustic to humans. Avoid getting DEET in the eyes, on the lips and other sensitive regions. DEET is a good plastic solvent, so avoid getting it on your camera and other plastic surfaces. Read the directions and precautions on the container.
- While in the rainforest wear long pants and long sleeved shirts.
- Before leaving the United States spray the clothing you plan to use while in the rainforest with permethrin.
- Use mosquito netting to cover the beds.

Beside mosquitoes, Ecuador has a number of other potentially harmful insects that include scorpions, centipedes, black widow and brown recluse spiders. Try to keep track of any bites to notice if unusual symptoms develop.

10. Snakebites

Being bitten in Ecuador by a snake is extremely unlikely. Snakes are seldom seen because they usually slither away into the undergrowth when they sense that people are coming. Those that don't move away are very difficult to see because of their cryptic coloration. More likely the snakes will be seeing more of you than you will of them. Fortunately, the majority of snakes in Ecuador are non venomous.

To minimize the risk of being bitten by a poisonous snake follow these guidelines:

- Never place your hand or foot anywhere that you cannot see first.
- Do not climb rocks or trees.
- Do not walk over rocks where your hands or feet may sink into holes or crevices.
- Do not reach into bushes or trees.
- Stay on trails; avoid bushwhacking.
- Walk carefully along trails and try to watch where you are stepping.

In the Galapagos, the Yellow-bellied sea snake is very poisonous but is rare except in El Nino years when the water is warmer.

11. Hiking

12. Horseback Riding

Horseback riding entails known and unanticipated risks that can result in physical injury.

- Tell your guide if you are unfamiliar and uncomfortable with horses.
- Ask for a docile horse.
- Give the horse a wide berth when walking behind it.
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13. Whitewater Rafting

Whitewater rafting entails known and unanticipated risks that can result in physical injury, death, and property damage. Such risks cannot be eliminated without jeopardizing the essential qualities of the activity. The known risks include riding through rapids where you will be jolted, jarred, bounced, and thrown to and from. During the navigation of the rapids you can be injured if you come in contact with paddles, other participants, and fixed equipment inside the raft.

It is possible for you to be washed overboard or for the raft to overturn. Rafts are slippery when wet and accidents can occur getting on and off the raft.