

The plan for this trip was to travel around mainland Ecuador for 10 days, then have one week aboard a yacht sailing around the Galapagos Islands (which are a short flight from, and politically part of, Ecuador). Sounds easy enough. It was anything but!

The flight from Toronto to Ecuador's capital, Quito, was uneventful. I had to change airplanes in Houston (Continental Airlines' hub). There was also a brief scheduled stop in Panama City where some passengers got off and a few got on (Quito passengers had to stay on board). It was dark by the time we got there so I didn't see the canal from the air. Funny thing about this stop - you know how after every landing they make the same scripted announcement (first in English then again in Spanish): "Welcome to (insert name) airport where the local time is (insert time). Please remain seated until the aircraft comes to a complete stop in front of the terminal building and the captain switches off the fasten seat belt sign." and so on. There's always plenty of time to make these announcements because it takes so long to taxi to the gate from the runway, even longer if there is congestion & delays. Well, in all my travels I've never had a landing where the airplane shoots off the runway at a fast clip and pulls up to the terminal a couple seconds later - they had to abandon the first (English) announcement at "remain seated" because everyone was already out of their seats since we had stopped already and the seatbelt sign was turned off literally within a few seconds of touching down!

That was Saturday, I arrived in Quito about 10PM. Even though Quito is only a few miles south of the equator, the temperature is moderated by the altitude (9400 feet, the 2nd highest capital in the world) so it's often said to have perpetually Spring-like weather, usually no hotter than 25C during the day and cooling off no lower than 15C at night. I had arranged through the Internet for an airport pickup by the owner of the B&B that I was staying at in Quito (called Villa Nancy - pronounced "Beeyah Nancy"). On Sunday I did a quick look around the touristy part of Quito (called the "new city") and visited a local travel agency to pay for the Galapagos boat that I booked over the Internet.

No time to waste, there was a lot I wanted to see and do elsewhere in Ecuador in the next 8 days before heading off to the Galapagos, so Sunday afternoon I checked out of Villa Nancy and got a ride to the bus terminal. The 10-minute taxi ride costs \$3. The 3¼-hour bus ride south to the pleasant town of Baños costs only \$2.70! The bus wouldn't leave until it was full, but I got to Baños without incident and only a little cramp. For dinner in Baños, I walked in to a place called "Pepo's Bar-Cafe" and had a look at the menu, which was bilingual. They had something called "Llapingachos" for \$2.80 which was described as "Traditional from Ambato, with chorizo & potatoes omelette". We passed Ambato on the way here, and I like chorizo (spicy Spanish sausage) so I ordered it with a large beer for \$1. The Llapingachos turned out to be 4 mounds of mashed potatoes fried in mucho butter with 1/3 of a sausage cooked to a crisp, and 2 fried eggs sunny side up on top - and a small salad. Though not exactly as described, it was good enough and filling - but I don't think I would order it again!

Next day in Baños (Monday) I rented a mountain bike and cycled downhill to some waterfalls at Rio Verde. This excursion was in all the guidebooks and was very easy to do. It was not steep and dangerous like biking down "The World's Most Dangerous Road" (see my Bolivia/Peru travelogue!). Every store in Baños has a few bikes for rent tied up on the sidewalk as an extra cash earner so there were plenty of decent bikes to choose from. It's paved most of the way, some of it's dirt road, there are a couple of tunnels but traffic was light. At the turnoff for the hiking trail to the falls (a couple leisurely hours from Baños) there's a small roadside village where you can lock up your bike and grab a drink & snack before or after the hike to the falls. When you're ready to go back to Baños, no need to cycle up hill - there are frequent buses that you can flag down. The young driver's assistant/fare collector leaps up on to the roof and you pass him your bike and clamber aboard. They don't like to delay so once you get on the bus it takes off while the kid ties down your bike on top. Next time the bus stops to pick up/drop off passengers, the kid scrambles down from the roof and leaps on board as the bus takes off again - and collects your fare: \$1. The weather was clear & sunny, hot but dry - perfect.

For dinner Monday night I pulled out all the stops and went to a highly recommended restaurant run by a French woman from Provence. I had the house specialty - Steak Provençal which was the best steak I've had in a long time - and a large beer. For dessert, chocolate crepe of course! With a good cup of tea, the total was \$6.95 - expensive for Ecuador but a bargain for tourists. So far so good!

Next day, I checked out and hopped on another bus continuing south to another pleasant town called Riobamba with some tourist attractions and good transportation options. This bus wasn't full so I had 2 seats to myself. I noted in my diary: "We make good time, hitting some high speeds on the downhill's and when passing. The driver yawned excessively." From Riobamba, I could continue south to the city of Cuenca using a combination of train and bus.

Ecuador used to have train service throughout the country, but parts of the line were wrecked by mudslides during the last severe El Niño and there's not enough business to justify fixing it up (the buses have the trains beat). But there is one stretch of train track that's still in operation because it's so popular with tourists and train buffs. From Riobamba you can ride down one of the steepest tracks in the world - a 100 year old engineering marvel called the Nariz del Diablo (Devil's Nose) in which the train negotiates a steep cliff, descending 1000m in 15 minutes. That's not the only attraction - in Ecuador you've always been able to ride on the roof of the boxcars. I'm not sure why, maybe due to a shortage of passenger coaches, or for the unobstructed view, or maybe just for the thrill of it! Anyway, the tradition continues on the remaining stretch of train travel still available. It takes about 6 hours for the ride from Riobamba to the town of Alausi followed by the ride down the Nariz and back to Alausi where you can overnight or catch a bus north back to Riobamba or south to Cuenca. I wanted to go to Cuenca so I checked out at Riobamba Wednesday morning and carried my 2 bags to the train station at 6AM where people were already staking out their places on the roofs. There's a choice of the \$15 "normal" train where you ride on the roof of the box cars for the whole journey, or for \$30 there is a converted bus that runs on the rails which gets you comfortable seats inside and a roof you can ride on when you feel like it. I opted for the "luxurious" converted bus.

Anyway, I started the rail-bus ride on the roof but retreated inside within an hour because of the cold. Later, we ran into a delay when we got to a stretch of track that had been buried by a mudslide the night before. Surprisingly, everybody on board (train buffs from England, Germany & USA) thought this was a bonus and enjoyed the wait to see what would happen. I was a bit worried about the big train coming down the line 15 minutes behind us, and I sure hoped we didn't have to abandon ship because the mud was pretty thick & gooey - and we were miles from the nearest town. After 15 minutes of waiting, with the crew seemingly not knowing what to do, a bulldozer appeared from behind a hill up ahead - and proceeded to bulldoze the mud off the track! Following the machine, two guys with spades attempted to scrape the rails clean. Eventually we started moving forward slowly, crunching and shuddering over the not-so-clean rails. I seemed to be the only

person hoping that the railway ties haven't softened and we don't derail. But there was no need to worry as we got through that problem without harm. Turns out there would be plenty to worry about later!

After coasting down the Nariz del Diablo, via switchbacks (going backwards and forwards), we reached the bottom where an interesting sort of three point turn has been laid out in track enabling the rail-bus (or the train engine) to turn around for the ride up the Nariz back to Alausi. But the curves in this turnabout were so tight that the crew had to splash water or oil on the rails while we moved very slowly - we almost road up off the rails a couple of times, and we were a long way from civilization! The train buffs were having a whale of a time watching this! Eventually we were pointed in the right direction and we started uphill. At the first switchback, they threw the switch and we went into reverse up the next steep stretch of track. But there's only one reverse gear so we crawled along very slowly with the engine racing for maybe 15 minutes when we got to the next switchback - after we cross it they throw the switch and we go forward up the next stretch of track. I was riding shotgun: front seat next to the driver. I noticed he was paying a lot of attention to one of the gauges - tapping it and calling over one of the crew members and pointing at it, speaking in Spanish. Suddenly he stopped and switch off the engine. The English-speaking guide that was with the tour group said it was overheating. That's odd - this rail-bus has done this route 3 times a week for years. The crew added a quart of oil. The train buffs thought this was another wonderful bonus. After maybe 10 minutes they started it up and continued the drive uphill, but after less than 5 minutes they stopped again and immediately one crew member got out and started walking up the line! The guide spoke to the crew then turned to us and said "The engine's overheating, we'll have to walk the last 7 kilometers to Alausi!" Surprisingly, all the others remained jolly and immediately started the hike up the track with hardly a murmur, even though most were retired folk and the walk could be strenuous. Of course, they were only carrying a little camera and bottle of water - I had a heavy backpack full of cameras, lenses and film, and a handbag with a week's worth of clothes and toiletries. But I wasn't going to be the only one complaining so I started hiking like everybody else. Luckily the track, though steep for a train, was not too steep to make the hike uncomfortable. But you couldn't walk on the sleepers because they are unevenly spaced, so you have to walk beside the rail, and I found if I carried my bag in the hand on the rail side, it dragged on the rails so the bag had to be held up which was uncomfortable - but if I held it in the other hand, it got caught in the scrub brush growing beside the track. I couldn't win! But I hardly had time to worry about that - within a kilometer we were directed to a "short cut" path which was little more than a goat trail - and which was incredibly steep. I had to stop many times to catch my breath. I thought some of the older travelers were going to collapse, they were wheezing so hard, yet still nobody complained! At least the full equatorial sun was not beating down on us; the temperature was warm not hot, mostly cloudy - in fact it looked like it might rain! After what seemed like an eternity walking uphill like this, we reached a clearing on a sort of plateau, with a dirt road leading away. We were told to wait while a crew member continued up the road to the town where the tour group's buses would be told to come get us. While it was nice to stop hiking uphill, it now started to rain! Luckily, since I had all my travel gear with me, I was able to put on rain jacket, rain pants, and cover my camera pack. It was a gentle light rain - the English trainspotters felt right at home! Eventually we were "rescued" and driven to Alausi where I was dropped off at the stop for the frequent bus to Cuenca, only a couple hours behind schedule. Luckily the Cuenca bus was not full, so I had room to strip off my wet coverings and dry off. By the time we got to Cuenca (4 hours), just before nightfall, I had recovered from the hike and the rain, and all was forgiven. The guide books warn you about breakdowns being common in the Andean countries - most books usually include a picture of tourists helping push a bus - and since I got through Peru without mishap earlier this year, I was overdue for something like this. Could have been worse - as I was about to find out!!!

Cuenca is Ecuador's third largest city, and possibly it's best city for visitors. It's big enough to have all of the mod cons, but not so big that it has the big-city problems. Everything you need is in the central part of the city; there are lots of shops, restaurants, markets, and even some wonderful European-style cafes. Very walkable, and a river runs through it. My first night, after the early morning train ride that broke down and the 4 hour bus ride in the afternoon, and a prolonged hunt for accommodation, I ate at a Mexican restaurant where I had a huge multi-course meal called the "Azteca Especial" that filled me right up to the brim (I'd hardly eaten all day). The set meal was a whopping \$6.50 and the 2 bottles of imported Corona beer were overpriced at \$1.50 each. No wonder all the other diners were tourists! But it was well worth it.

Travel trivia - to order a vodka & orange juice in Spanish, just ask for a "destornillador" (screwdriver in Spanish!)

Next day, Thursday, is the flower market day in Cuenca so I got lots of pictures of that - very colourful. I also looked in lots of stores, and spotted a leather bomber jacket that I liked - I showed lots of interest, asked the price (\$70 if cash, \$85 if by credit card), then started to leave to see if they would ask me to "make an offer" - they didn't (which is normal - bargaining is expected at the markets but not in the stores), so I left and planned to go back next day and buy it at that price. When I did, the price rung up was \$68. Okay! I also bought a Panama hat from a local maker. Genuine Panama hats, hand woven with Toquilla reeds, have been made in Ecuador for centuries but they weren't known by the outside world until they were exported to Panama to sell to the men working on the canal. Great for traveling, you can roll them up and store them in the pencil-case sized balsa wood box that they come with. They cost \$20 for your basic model, up to \$100 for a fine weave model that takes months to make.

I stayed two nights in Cuenca in a lovely little hotel called the El Quijote for \$18 a night with bathroom, cable TV and breakfast. For lunch before I left Cuenca, I went to a different Mexican restaurant that I noticed as I walked around the city. This was a little family-run place, with only one or two other table occupied by locals. The prices on the menu outside indicated it was very inexpensive. I wasn't too hungry; I just order a "taco con chorizo" and a beer. Right after I placed the order, he exited outside by the front door and went down the street. It wasn't something I said, I'd seen this happen in Peru. He had to pop down to the corner store because he was out of beer. After about 5 minutes he came back in carrying a bottle of beer, opened and served it! When I got my "taco", it wasn't a taco, it was a burrito - a huge one (at least 3" in dia.) that was about 80% refried beans and costs twice as much as a taco. I didn't say anything since he didn't speak English. Just like a taco, half the ingredients ended up on the table as I ate it! But when I got the bill, it said taco and had the right price (\$1.60). Just another unexpected Ecuadorian "bonus" I guess!

My next move was a short flight from Cuenca to Otavalo, north of Quito. I decided to fly (\$58) because it was half an hour in the air versus 6 or 8 hours by bus. It's a 10-minute taxi ride to the Cuenca airport from downtown. The driver was cheerful when I got in, then he had a bit of road rage with a Mercedes on the way - he was miserable when I got out! Think positive: Ecuadorian bonus!

I wanted to be in Otavalo for Saturday morning when the well-known Indian market is at its biggest. I scored a large corner room on the top (3rd) floor of a fairly modern little hotel - with windows all around two of the walls, looking right down the main street where many of the stalls start being set up before daybreak. Only \$10 a night, even on the busiest night of the week! The bellhop told me to run the hot water tap for 5 minutes to get hot water.

The Otavalo market is huge, and the famous Otavaleno textiles are very colourful. I didn't buy any, but snuck a few pictures for free. (See my link to pictures taken in Ecuador). The power went off with a bang just after 4PM – half the town, including my hotel, was without power – making for a very boring evening. After a couple hours of doing nothing, when it got completely dark and pissing with rain, I gave up on the power coming back anytime soon, walked over to the part of town with power, but found very few businesses and managed only to find a Chinese restaurant that was open and so I had my dinner there. Just a plate of fried rice, a huge portion for \$1.60 – I only managed to eat half of it before I was stuffed. There was no point in going back to the hotel with the power off, so I just walked around and around the streets that still had power. At about 8:45, *all* the power went off and the town was completely dark – I couldn't see where I was going. 15 minutes later all the power came back on and I could go back to my room without needing a candle. You get something unexpected every day in Ecuador!

After two nights in Otavalo, I caught one of the frequent buses to Quito (2 hours away). It was Sunday morning, this would give me a day and a half in Quito before the all-important flight to the Galapagos Islands Tuesday morning where I would get on board the sailboat for visiting the islands - the grand finale! I'd had some adventures in the past week, not all good, but managed to do everything I wanted to do and the last two days on the mainland should be a piece of cake. WRONG!!!

First, I thought I was really lucky to get on a bus with few passengers that departed within a minute or two (usually they hang around endlessly trying to roundup more passengers). But just as we got out of the town and started getting up some speed, the bus pulls over and the assistant jumps out and flags down a bus behind us. I jokingly think to myself they're probably going to combine the passengers from the two buses. Oh well, as long as I don't lose my good seat with an empty one next to it. A minute later the assistant comes back to our bus and makes an announcement in Spanish. I have no idea what he says but from his gestures and the fact that everyone else got up and started to leave, I figured they *are* combining the passengers - into the other bus! I'm the last one to change (and the only gringo) - and the other bus is now full! Bad enough I won't get an empty seat beside me like I had a minute ago, but I'll be damned if I'm going to stand for the whole 2-potholed-hour ride! They're actually short 3 seats, and the assistant points to 2 Coleman coolers in the aisle for the 2 locals to sit on. As the gringo, I am given special consideration and directed to the front of the bus where there are a couple of steps down to the driver's seat. My bags are taken out of my hands and thrown on to the dashboard and I'm indicated to sit on the steps! I agree only because we are already under way and if I refused some other passenger would probably be asked give up their seat to the whining gringo! I look at it as another Ecuadorian bonus! Besides, the view up front was great, the music on the stereo was great, the sun was shining in, and I gathered from what they said to me in Spanish that I would get the passenger seat up here (beside the driver) in about an hour when the lady sitting in it alighted. We made good time, so that wasn't so bad. Now I'm safely back in Quito, with time for sightseeing (on Sunday) and shopping (on Monday) before Galapagos! What could go wrong now? LOTS!

After checking in (Villa Nancy B&B again), I went to the Old City part of Quito (considered not safe after dark). It was Sunday so there wasn't much else to do except look at old colonial buildings and museums. The buses are chaotic for getting around the city, have no marked stops - you have to flag them down, and there's no map of the routes. A taxi ride would only cost a few dollars, but there was an alternative that couldn't be easier to use. There's no metro, but there is the next best thing - an electric trolley bus line that runs in a straight line through the city, well marked on all maps, with distinct "stations" where you can board the trolleys. I walked from my hotel to the nearest trolley station, paid my 20 cents fare, and got on the next bus - which featured a little girl singing for coins with a voice and set of lungs that belonged on the big stage! I was "downtown" in no time, but the weather has changed from the sunshine in the morning to cloudy - in fact it looked like rain, plus in the distance there was a very strange vertical dark cloud formation like nothing I'd seen before. Tornado? Mushroom cloud? Maybe just my imagination. Nobody else was looking at it. I looked at my city map and decided to take the trolley back to the New City where there is supposed to be a very modern shopping centre - I figured it would be open on Sunday and I wouldn't have to worry if it rained.

I found Quito's big shiny shopping centre without difficulty even though it was nearly a half hour walk from the nearest trolley stop. It was amazing for such a poor country (second poorest in South America, after Bolivia; third poorest in all the Americas after Haiti). It was as new and modern as anything back home, with all designer name stores. Prices were not cheap though; they were as high if not higher than North America. I read somewhere that half a dozen families own something like 80% of Ecuador's wealth, and this must be where they come to shop. Though poor, it's not the kind of poverty where everyone is out to get a piece of you. There were few beggars or homeless people that I could see. The country has a reputation for mugging's and drugging's and even kidnapping, but nothing untoward happened to me. Most people seemed happy, hard working and friendly - not trying to make a fast buck off the tourists.

After looking around the mall, I felt it was time to head back to the hotel using the trolley. Suddenly I noticed the mall seemed to be full of people wearing yellow jerseys - young people, families - mostly all walking in one direction. I thought maybe it was some kind of group exercise thing. No worries, they all seemed happy and normal. Then I noticed the mall was really getting quite crowded. The fast food restaurants were overwhelmed – they started closing their doors because of long line-ups. Then I noticed the doors to the mall were closed - and locked - nobody could get out or in! What's going on? I managed to find one open door with a security guard hopelessly overwhelmed by people with yellow jerseys pushing out, yet people with yellow jerseys also seemed to be trying to get in! I've been in some pretty thick, pushing crowds in Toronto during Caribana and it's not a good thing because you're helpless if there's a panic. I was thinking "You often read about people crushed to death by crowds in third world countries" - and then I realized I was in a third world country! But, after pushing and moving with the mob, I got out of the mall without incident - and noticed the crowds of people with yellow jerseys was just as thick outside - in the parking lot (small as it was), walking up the main streets, swarming over the nearby park. A small percentage had red jerseys, so I worried that my red rain jacket might trigger some kind of gang war - but luckily everybody seemed to be in good spirits. There was nothing to indicate that this doesn't happen every weekend. Then I remembered - the map showed a stadium nearby. So that's it! A football game must have ended, and a sell-out crowd was emptying out. They're all heading in the same direction I was. The trolley! They're probably all

heading to the trolley, which couldn't possibly handle this number of people. I don't know why I didn't just hop in a taxi. Instead, I picked up the pace and tried to get to the trolley stop before the bulk of the crowd.

At one major intersection, I had to stop and wait for a green light. I was on a concrete traffic island that separated straight-through traffic from right-turning traffic. I looked around at all the people on the other side of the road. Suddenly they started running - in my direction! Not good, all those reports of people crushed in stampedes in third world countries came back to mind! I was standing beside a large concrete planter; I thought I would stay put because the running people would go around it. Then I heard something behind me that sounded like a large piece of concrete or rock landing nearby. I turned around and saw a big fella bend down and pick up a large piece of concrete or rock as if to throw it back. Not good, time to move! The light had changed so I continued walking, a little faster, toward the trolley. When I got to the nearest station, it was bulging with people so I started walking in the opposite direction to the next station hoping it (and the buses) wouldn't be as full. I was able to get into the station, but I was not able to get in to the first bus that came along. So I waited by the door.

That's when I noticed there was stuff falling from the sky. It wasn't rain, it was like snow but it was about 20C outside so it couldn't be, in any case it didn't melt. I was wearing black pants and they were flecked with this stuff. When I tried to brush it off, it just smeared in. It was very lightweight - the cars and buses seemed to stir up what was on the ground - like little flecks of cigarette ash. Then I noticed most of the Ecuadorians had covered their faces with handkerchiefs, or scarves, or just pulled up the front of their clothes over their noses. I know there are active volcanoes in Ecuador, is this volcanic ash? I didn't know enough Spanish to ask the people around me. Nobody said anything at the hotel about a volcano. Maybe this has something to do with the strange dark cloud formation in the distance I saw earlier. Nobody seemed to be alarmed, they hardly seemed to care - as if they've seen it all before.

I was able to squeeze on the next bus and stood behind the driver. The bus was full when it pulled away. As it slowed before the next station, the driver said something on the P.A. and everybody shouted NNNNOOOOOO!!!! He pulled away from the station without opening the doors, so he must have asked if anybody wanted off here. The same thing happened at every station - I had about 6 stops to the station I needed to get off. At a couple stops there were people to get off at the back so he opened the back door only. Even though there were plenty of people at the stations trying to get on, and they looked a little ticked off that he wasn't opening the front doors, they didn't get violent as I feared they might. Some banged a bit on the door, but they didn't even hold open the back doors after some got off and some got on. In fact, I never saw anybody really angry in Ecuador, not even the guy with the rock! When we were approaching my stop, I hoped he would open the front door for someone since I couldn't remember the correct word to shout when you want off a bus. When he stopped, he again opened only the back door. I started pushing toward the front door. Everybody on the bus was in high spirits, singing and shouting and laughing. I tried to shout "Abierto, por favor!" (Open, please) over them, the only words I could come up with. But a guy near the door saw me struggling and knew right away I was a gringo trying to get off so he shouted out the right words to the driver and some others joined in and the doors opened and the somewhat anxious crowd outside started to push in but I managed to get out and away. Phew! Just a 10-minute walk back to the hotel now - but with the ash still falling and getting in my eyes, it was a somewhat painful walk as my clothes got coated in the stuff. It was eerily quiet, just like during a gentle snowfall back home, as the ash everywhere deadened all sounds.

Back at the hotel, they confirmed that a volcano hundreds of miles away had erupted early this morning, a volcano that had been dormant for 26 years! At first they thought it wouldn't affect Quito, but the winds carried it over the city - there was 3cm of the stuff in some places. There was no panic, everybody has seen it before - the last time, another volcano, only 3 years ago - but it's not good. Water reservoirs get polluted, crops damaged. The airport has closed already. Gulp! The airport? Yes, he said, and the last time this happened the airport was closed for 15 days! I'm supposed to fly to Galapagos the day after tomorrow - the whole reason why I came to Ecuador - and I've already prepaid in full the big bucks this luxury week in the islands costs!

It rained that evening, I was out looking for a restaurant and the rain turned the streets to mud - in fact the rain was like mud also, judging by the splotches it left on my raincoat! Well, the good thing about the rain is that it's keeping the ash down - it's no longer being stirred up by the traffic. Maybe it'll wash away and they'll get the airport cleaned up and opened in the next 36 hours. NOT!!!

Next morning (Monday), dawned bright and sunny - the ash had stopped falling - but the whole city was almost shut down. Very few stores opened, the trolley and many buses were not running, and the airport was still closed. Most people just started quietly sweeping up. Worse, the sun dried out the damp ash on the ground and the traffic started churning it up so it was just as bad as when it was falling. Luckily my travel agency opened and I was able to get some help on what to do about getting to Galapagos. They called around and determined that the airport at Guayaquil, the port city in southern Ecuador was unaffected and it was starting to take over from Quito airport. But getting to Guayaquil would take all day - people normally fly there because the alternative, the bus, takes 9 rough hours in a cramped, un-air-conditioned, breakdown-prone old bus. But there was no way around it, I had to get on a bus and quickly because the only way I would get to Galapagos to meet the boat tomorrow would be to be at Guayaquil airport first thing tomorrow morning. At least I had the presence of mind to ask the agent to call a B&B near the airport in Guayaquil and get a reservation for me, as I will be arriving late. After checking out of the Villa Nancy B&B (in Quito), I asked them to call for a taxi to take me to the bus station. No can do - the power went off a little while ago and their phone was dead. Well, at least there is a bus company office 10 minutes away by foot that operates buses to Guayaquil, so I trudge through the sunny, hot, dusty streets with my suitcase & backpack - wearing my raincoat as a dust jacket and handkerchief over my face - and arrive at the bus office drenched in sweat and dirty. There is a huge line-up and it's not moving - because of the power failure! At least I think that's the problem - I can only guess because no one speaks English! After maybe 15 minutes of nothing, suddenly the lights come on and everybody cheers. Seconds later I hear the sound of a printer printing a ticket and the line starts to move, *very* slowly. By now I've given up on getting the next bus (at 1PM), but there are buses every hour so I hope to get the 2 o'clock bus. And by the time I get to the counter I've already decided to pay for 2 tickets so I'd have an empty seat beside me for stretching out on the long journey ahead. The price for one seat is \$9 so I'll pay \$18 for a tiny bit of luxury. When I look at my ticket it says I'm on the 3:05PM bus, not the 2 o'clock which sold out a few tickets ago (mine were the 3rd & 4th tickets sold on this bus, front row). Nothing I can do except wait around for a couple hours before the 9-hour ride to Guayaquil, arriving about midnight. I used the time to get a good meal. When I returned to the bus station at 3 o'clock, my bus was there (the number of the bus matched the number on the ticket). I walked up to the open door, the ticket taker looked doubtful, and said "Guayaquil?" I said "Si!" He said "Tres cinco?" (i.e. 3:05 bus?). I said "Si!" and showed him my ticket. Then a kid next to him grabbed my suitcase, slapped a numbered sticker on it, gave me the other half of the sticker, and took my suitcase round the back of the bus. I got on the

bus and took my seats - then started to think, I should have followed the suitcase just to assure myself that it was actually loaded on the bus and didn't disappear into someone else's hands. Because if I get to Guayaquil 9 hours later and the suitcase is not in the bus's hold, this little receipt is not going to do me much good!

It seemed to take forever to get out of Quito, but once we got out of the Andes the bus was able to get up to high speeds and we made good time with only one stop for food. Having two seats gave me lots of room but almost wasn't necessary because I had a front row seat with lots of legroom. The ride was *not* totally uneventful - after about 8 hours we stopped at a police check. You see these all over South America, and usually they just wave you through. Not this time! We got pulled over; I think it was random. A policeman came on board and made an announcement in Spanish. I didn't understand anything except "...señoras y niños..." (women and children). When he finished, all the male passengers got up, with their belongings and filed out of the bus. I went too, I assumed the policeman said the women & children can stay on board and be checked in their seats. I wasn't worried because the Ecuadorians weren't worried. Outside, we all had to show our identity papers (passport in my case), and we all had our bags checked. After a good half hour of this we could go. Just another one of those Ecuadorian bonuses! Could have been worse - I found out the next day that another passenger on my boat had done the same trip from Quito to Guayaquil on another bus at about the same time - and this bus broke down half an hour from Guayaquil. When they eventually scored a lift on another bus, they had to pay again!

Luckily the Guayaquil bus terminal is located in the outskirts of this big city (2.3 million), so we didn't waste time going all the way to the city center. There was a lot of typical shoving and shouting as people claimed their luggage - and I mucked right in! I got my suitcase safe and sound. There were plenty of taxi drivers even though we arrived near midnight. As always, the taxi drivers are so enthusiastic for your business they practically yank your luggage out of your hands. I had the name & address of the B&B written down; the driver hardly looked at it. They know any hesitation on their part and they could lose the passenger to another driver that pretends to be more knowledgeable - and a gringo is a good catch because there's always a chance to inflate the fare! So I was quickly bundled into the cab and we were off. *Now* the driver wants to see the address - and it's obvious he hasn't got a clue where it is! He called the place on his cell phone and got directions, but it hardly seemed to help. We drove to a semi-industrial area that was deserted. He got out a couple of times to look at the street signs, and once to ask a security guard. After what seemed like an eternity, he finally found the place. Like most places in Latin America, it's a fortress surrounded by high walls topped with broken glass and big, solid iron gates. I rang the bell. Luckily there was someone waiting up for me. She asked, from the other side of the door without opening it, something in Spanish. I said in English "I have a reservation..." and she asked me something again in Spanish. I caught the word "nombre" and I have traveled enough in Spanish-speaking countries to know that's "name" not "number" so I said my name and like open sesame the door was unbolted and I was allowed in. I asked the driver "Cuánto?" (how much) and he said something like "Ocho" (eight) and I pretended not to understand and turned to the girl and said "Is that 4 dollars?" and she said something to the driver and I heard him say "Cinco" (five) which I believe was a more reasonable fare (although this guy was so bad he should have paid *me*!). After check in I'm asked (in Spanish) what time for breakfast and I write down 6:45, then write Taxi - 7 and she understands. I'm shown to my room and feel very relieved. We passed the airport on the way here so I know it's only a few minutes away. The worst is over, what could go wrong now? Galapagos - here I come!

I had a long shower in the morning - took my rain jacket, rain pants and pack cover in the shower to wash the ash off them! I was running a bit late, in fact, when I opened the door at 5 to 7 the lady was right there with her hand up in a fist - just about to knock on the door! Breakfast was eaten very fast! The "taxi" she called was unmarked and judging by the driver who had a hard time understanding my simple request to go to the airport, it was probably just a friend of hers. The airport terminal was predictably chaotic. But I had the name of a contact for the boat, our naturalist guide for the week as it turned out. He reminded me that I needed to purchase my air ticket (I had forgot, that was one of the things I'd plan to do yesterday in Quito!). Airline tickets are just about the only thing you can buy on credit card without paying a penalty in Ecuador, so I had budgeted to charge the \$350 airfare. Wouldn't you know it, their reader wouldn't work with my card! And I didn't have a backup, or enough cash! I went back to the guide and told him, and said with all these problems this week I guess I'm just not meant to go on this island cruise - can I get my money back because I'd like to take the next airplane out of this country! Luckily, Rod (Rodrigo) the guide had a better idea, got on his cell phone and called the local office of the boat owner. He asked for someone to rush over to the airport with a credit card and buy my ticket so that I can get to Galapagos today (there would be no point in going tomorrow, I wouldn't be able to catch up to the boat). He said they would work out something with me later to settle up. And so everything turned around, I got my ticket, I got on the airplane, I got to the Galapagos (against all odds!) and from this point on my disastrous holiday turned into a spectacular holiday - the week in the Galapagos was the best thing I've ever done. First class all the way and a stress-free time after such a stress-filled week! Woo Hoo!!!

The boat was beautiful, the weather was great, the islands and wildlife were amazing, the guide & crew were terrific, the food was fantastic!

The three-mast sailing yacht that I had chosen over the internet normally carries 16 passengers in 10 fully-equipped cabins - but because it was low season, only about 10 were expected the week I was booked on it - and because the volcano closed Quito airport, many people could not get to Ecuador from other countries for a few days (many international flights turned back, with vacationers kissing their prepaid holidays goodbye). That happened to 2 couples booked for this week, so in the end there were only 5 passengers that week - myself, a couple from New Mexico, one from Boston and one from Munich - there were more crew than passengers! The crew seemed happy; less work for them I'm sure. I kept on asking the guide, are you sure they will sail with so few passengers? Apparently they do, even if it means losing money I guess.

There are dozens of boats licensed to take tourists around the Galapagos islands - most work on a 7-day schedule, but each with different start days, so there are about 10 boats waiting near the airport each morning and most of the airplane's passengers go straight to the boats. Some boats are bigger - up to 90 passengers - a few are smaller. I'd have to say, ours was the best looking boat around that day! You never saw a happier group of 5 people - all of us had an adventure getting here and any of us very nearly didn't make it.

A typical day goes like this - breakfast at 7, then we are taken ashore by panga (dinghy) for about 3 hours along marked trails or beaches with our naturalist guide, admiring and learning about the diverse and unique wildlife. Back to the sailboat for lunch, then another shore excursion in the afternoon. Most days we also snorkeled with the sea turtles, sea lions and penguins in the afternoon. Dinner would be at about 6.

followed by a briefing about what we will do the next day. Overnight, the boat moves to another island or another visitor site (from 1 to 10 hours away) - so each day it's a different scene, a different set of flora and fauna. Some days, we would move in the afternoon and en route we would see whales or dolphins. The sails were hoisted a couple of times for the long stretches - they added a couple of knots to the speed of the motor - and made the sailboat experience complete. One day the crew shot a goat on one island where goats are a problem, and we had it for dinner. Another day, we had pelican for dinner - tastes like chicken! A hook & line was used to catch fresh fish on two days. The meals greatly exceeded my expectations - and I had high expectations!

After the chaos in Ecuador last week, the week visiting the Galapagos Islands was hitch-free. Half the time we were beyond communication range and happily unaware of what was going on in the world. But one thing hanging over our heads was the state of the airport in Quito - would we be able to get home after the Galapagos? On our last day at sea we got news that the airport had reopened Sunday! Hurray! I was flying Galapagos to Quito Tuesday and Quito to home Wednesday - too good to be true? YES!!!

Nobody wanted to leave our wonderful sailing yacht when our time was up Tuesday morning, but we had no choice - 16 passengers were on today's flight from the mainland to take our places on the boat, including a pair that couldn't get to Guayaquil last Tuesday. But at least we got confirmation that our plane would go all the way to Quito. That was important because I (and another passenger) had left some luggage stored at the B&B in Quito! I sure didn't want to do the 9-hour bus ride from Guayaquil to Quito again! (And back, if the international flights were still using Guayaquil only). We landed in Quito Tuesday afternoon, and I immediately called my travel agent in Quito who had my flight details for reconfirming. Oh yes, she said, my flight tomorrow morning is confirmed - have a good flight! So I had a pleasant afternoon & evening in Quito and turned in early. At 5AM next morning I got up, showered, packed, and got a ride to the airport. Guess what, no international flights - the airport has only been handling domestic flights since it reopened on Sunday! Clearly, a reconfirmation means nothing! They were a little surprised to see me back at the B&B when I showed up an hour later - my room hadn't been touched so I just reclaimed it! It was still early enough to get my included breakfast!

Happily, Continental Airlines checked the airport later that day and gave it a clean bill of health, allowing the first airplane from the US in 11 days to land that evening. I got my ticket changed to get on that overnight flight back to the U.S. (instead of waiting until the next day for the daytime flight) and I got away without having to pay for another night's accommodation - good thing too, I was down to about \$5 cash! It was the only airplane departing that night, so the airport was strangely quiet, no line-ups, no crowds, no chaos, no noise, no waiting to go through security, plenty of room in the waiting lounge to stretch out over 3 or 4 seats. I had a delay during check-in when they couldn't print my boarding pass with the exit row seat I requested (this row has so much more legroom), so the agent just wrote 15C on the boarding pass and said "Don't worry, it's in the computer." Sure enough, when I get on the airplane there is a lady sitting in 15C and when we compare boarding passes, hers is printed 15C and mine looks like I just wrote it in. I tried to explain it to an attendant passing by, but I was directed to the front of the aircraft to speak to a "ground agent". After explaining it all over again, I was told to go back and wait near the seat while the agent checked. I really wanted the exit row seat - I got to the airport 3 hours early to beat everybody else that asks for the exit row! 5 minutes later the agent came back and handed back my boarding pass saying "This seat is better" - he had scribbled out 15C and wrote in 2B - Business Class! Hey, this airline really likes to please the customer! So I gathered up my carry-on and moved to the front. I sensed the other people in business class that paid big bucks give me a funny look. I tried to make it look like I was supposed to be in business class, but blew it right away by rolling up my new leather jacket and attempted to stuff it into the overhead bin - I jumped when the attendant snuck up on me and said, "Would you like me to hang up your jacket Mr. Hodgson?" We're not in Economy class any more, Dorothy! Then the ground agent checks in on me and said in a loud voice "This is much better than 15C, isn't it?" I coughed and said, "Thanks for straightening it out". I took my seat beside a guy who looked a little ticked off about losing the empty seat beside him. I nearly laughed when I saw he already had his shoes off and there were conspicuous holes in the *tops* of his socks. When he saw I had a copy of today's New York Times (snagged from the back of a seat in economy) I shared it with him to keep him quiet. This was before the airplane door closed - until it did, I worried that somebody would walk in at the last minute with a boarding pass printed with seat 2B! Later another attendant came around to take my orders for drinks, dinner and breakfast. First thing she says is "This is much better than 15C isn't it?" With all the business class food and reading the Times, the 5-hour overnight flight to Houston passed quickly with hardly any chance to try and get some sleep.

The fun didn't end in Houston - there was a 5 hour layover before the first nonstop to Toronto. But I did some research on the internet and figured if I could get on the next departure to Newark, leaving in an hour, I should make a connecting flight from there to Toronto and arrive home an hour earlier. That required some begging and some running through some airports, but I made it! Just! Got more frequent flyer miles too!

All's well that ends well. And although it seems like I had a terrible time in Ecuador, the week in the Galapagos more than made up for it. And there's plenty of truth in saying things could have been worse - it was far worse for some other people that week: On our second last day on the boat, we received news that another boat (which we had seen at one of the islands a couple of days ago) had hit a reef and sunk in the middle of the night. Everyone was rescued fortunately. We saw them at the Galapagos airport; they flew back on the same airplane. They were all wearing donated clothes. They were Germans on a package holiday. One woman was on crutches - broke a toe. They lost almost everything - money, passports, airline tickets, cameras, the lot. It happened at about 4 in the morning on only their second night, so they hardly got to see the islands. The second mate was in the bridge at the time - the boats move on autopilot but there are alarms for when it gets too shallow or too close to land. Apparently the guy turned off the alarms and fell asleep. I'd call that a career limiting move - but in Ecuador, who knows; if he has the right connections and greases the right palms...! The passengers had 5 minutes to put on warm clothes, grab anything and get in the lifeboats. Of course it was pitch black outside, being a long way from civilization. They were rescued by fishermen.

As for me, I want to go back for another week to the Galapagos - on the same boat with the same crew if possible! Must remember to make sure they don't turn off the alarms at night!