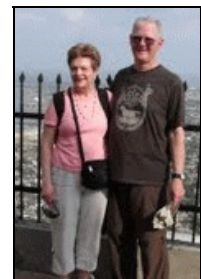


Edmonton and Area Friendship Force Club



Outbound February 2011 Sarasota, Florida FF club Cartagena, Colombia Bogota, Colombia FF club Ecuador Tour



EDs – Frank and Jessie Parker
Ambassadors – Clare Scott, Marj and Carl Eckert, Anne Dobko, Carol Williamson, Theresa Sarnecki, Bruno and Dagmar Lietz, Ron and Barb Olynyk, Cec MacKenzie, Adoline and Pat Glenn, Kay and Roy Harper, Angela Seery and John Yule, Dianna and Hugh Steele, Neil and Laura Larsen, Carol Bahry and Kevan Hanlen, Pat and Jim Ewing, Helen Kieran, Brenda and Glen Kane, Donna and Larry Wyatt, Lynne and Lou Duigou

Sunday, February 6, 2011—Edmonton to Sarasota

Friendship Force members from St. Albert and area left St. Albert for the airport at 4 a.m., bound for Toronto on the first leg of their journey to Sarasota, Florida. It had rained and the roads were very icy. More members from Edmonton and area met us at the airport and a total of 18 departed nearly one hour late on the flight.

We were warmly greeted upon arrival at Sarasota by all our hosts, as they held a large club banner so we could identify them easily.

Theresa, Carol and I stayed with Katy Goodwin. Katy was a most gracious and fun-loving host and made us feel at home and most welcome. Following dinner, the 11 p.m. bedtime was appreciated after our very early start that morning. (*Clare Scott*)

Monday, February 7—Sarasota

Today was a visit to Myakka State Park. We went with our hostess, Connie Bergin, and her brother Erwin Schuller from our home in Venus, a half-hour drive, to the park. The park is 58 square miles. Duigous and Kanes have joined the group that came in yesterday.

Bertha Palmer originally owned the ranch and her son willed it to the State. We had a great guide, knowledgeable and humorous. We learned a lot as we rode on the Myakka



Maiden, the Cadillac of airboats. The lake is 6 feet deep, 2.5 miles wide and 1 mile long. The river flows into the Gulf of Mexico. We saw alligators, cormorants, anhingas, wood storks, turkey vultures, live oaks, sable palm trees and lots of Spanish moss. We did not see snakes, but apparently anacondas can kill alligators.

The mother alligator makes a nest up to 6 feet high of vegetation which will begin to decompose. The heat generated will incubate the eggs like a solar oven. The female lays 30 to 60 eggs. The sex of the hatch depends on the temperature, so eggs on the top are males. Turtles are opposite and can lay eggs in alligator nests. Turtles hatch first so run like heck!! Although alligators have a 3000 lb/sq.-in bite, there are fishermen who waded in the lake to fish (obviously no women do this!).

We walked out to see the dam, while others went on the canopy walk, including the suspension bridge which took only four at a time.

After a picnic lunch, we went back home for a rest before going to the Welcome dinner. Many went to other members' places between the lake and the dinner, rather than drive back to Venus.

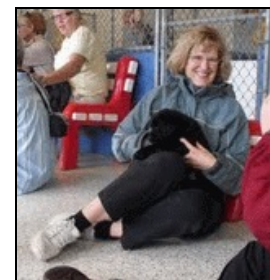
The host club had made dinner plans which were cancelled at the last minute, but Evie's Tavern stepped in and provided the same meal at the same price, a lovely spaghetti dinner. We were told that it is now "The Season," meaning that the Snowbirds from Canada and northern US are here, so it is difficult to find an available place for gatherings.

(*Marj Eckert*)

Monday, February 8—Sarasota

Today the group visited a Guide Dog School, one of only 12 international Guide Dog Schools. Their mission is to train guide dogs that will provide mobility, independence and freedom to those who cannot see. Labs and retrievers are best suited to be guide dogs.

Volunteers are very important and play a major role in the program. The cost of creating and nurturing one guide dog partnership is over \$60 000. The fun part happened when we had the opportunity to hold, touch and play with some puppies and observe their reactions.



Dagmar with a puppy

For lunch we enjoyed a Cuban combo sampler, consisting of three meats, high protein and delicious!

Our next stop was at the Manatee Viewing Center at the Big Bend Power Station. Manatees are an endangered species and need warm water to survive. They swim slowly and many are scarred by boats or fishermen. Because they are vegetarians, they travel up the nearby coast to dine on the mangrove vegetation. Their size has been compared to that of a cow or an elephant. It is difficult to see them clearly as they move around underwater, only poking up a nose to get air and then going back under quickly. It was an amazing interesting experience to see these manatees. (*Anne Dobko*)

Tuesday, February 9—Sarasota

The weather was cool when we arrived at the Ringling School of Art and Galleries. This school is famous for training students in animation and graphic art. We were assigned a tour guide and a host student. Our host student was from Venezuela and felt privileged to be attending this small but prestigious school. The tuition is \$30 000 per year and the school can accept approximately 1 400 students from many parts of the world. The program is four years long. One third of the time is spent in lectures, while two-thirds is used for studio project work. The course content is integrated with what the graduate will need to know in a job setting. Software and computer systems used by the school are second only to the quality used at NASA. Ringling is unique in that animation students are grounded in traditional animation skills before they move on to computer-generated animation.

We visited one studio where some students were working on projects and eagerly shared what they were doing. Ringling graduates are highly sought after by many companies—Hallmark, Dreamworks, Pixar, Disney and the CIA!

By noon the weather had warmed up and we enjoyed a picnic lunch, prepared by our hosts, in the beautiful Marie Selby Gardens. Afterwards we looked at the lush tropicals and orchids growing indoors, then proceeded to walk along the pathways throughout the gardens. We visited the Christie Payne House which has beautiful views of Sarasota Bay.

In the evening, we went with our hosts to homes of other members where we enjoyed sumptuous meals and great conversations. (*Carol Williamson*)



Eckerts at the picnic

Wednesday, February 10—Sarasota

The John and Mabel Ringling Museum of Art includes the historic Asolo Theatre (which was not open the day we visited), the Museum of Art, Mabel's rose garden, Ca d'Zan Mansion, the Circus Museum and many smaller exhibit buildings. They all occupy the 66-acre property donated by the Ringlings to the City of Sarasota.

Our first stop was to the Tibbald Learning Centre to see the miniature circus Tibbald had made to document the rich history of the circus. His work was marvelous. There were no two faces the same in the thousands of circus performers and workers that he created. It was so detailed! Howard Tibbald worked on this masterpiece for more than 50 years. During our visit, a siren sounded and we were instructed to leave the building, but it turned out to be a false alarm. Another exhibit showed the Ringlings' private train with lounge car, dining car, sleeping area, all very well appointed.

Our next stop was Ca d'Zan, the massive mansion set right on the water. Done in Gothic style, it took two years to build and nothing was spared to make the inside beautiful. The family moved into this palace in 1926 and lived in it only three months each year. Mabel died in 1929 and her husband died ten years later, a poor man. He was asset rich but cash poor. The flowers in Mabel's beautiful rose garden were impressive but had no smell.

We had lunch at the Banyon Café, a large tent surrounded by banyon trees.

Our last stop was the Art Museum to which the Ringlings had donated their extensive art collection. A very knowledgeable docent took us on a tour of the flower section, explaining how flower paintings began. The rest of the museum had many pictures by the great masters, right up to modern paintings.

Some of us took our hosts to dinner that evening. We joined with others as well as the Sarasota ED at a nice restaurant and had a very enjoyable time. (*Theresa Sarnecki*)

Friday, February 11—Sarasota

We started the day with our usual healthy breakfast, including fresh orange juice from a tree in our host's backyard. Then we went to the Mote Aquarium with our host. Arriving early, we walked along the beach, which had a grandstand for waterskiing shows. Unfortunately, it was deserted at this time of the year. However, we found a large tulip seashell and took a picture beside a blue heron.

Following this walk, we met the rest of the FF group at the aquarium. At the start there were a large variety of fish and sea creatures in different sizes of fish tanks. One of these contained a rockfish. It took a while to find it because of perfect camouflage and very slight movement. Then we spent some time by the dolphin pool, where the dolphins were patted by the trainers. From there it was interesting to watch the feeding of the sharks, which were individually fed and given medicine if needed. The feeding of two manatees and one giant turtle concluded the visit.

In the afternoon, the farewell dinner at Miguel's restaurant took place. Included was a short program of humorous skits and songs. We hope our hosts will find a use for those warm winter Olympics mittens! The remainder of the afternoon was free to be with our hosts. A rest and a chance to do laundry was welcome. (*Bruno Lietz*)

Saturday, February 12—Sarasota (free day so we have three reports)

Free day today—a chance to sleep a little longer. After breakfast our host and I visited rummage sales in two local churches. Yes, more paperback books to share or discard after Bruno and I read them. Our day host picked us up at 10 and took us on a tour of downtown Sarasota, which included a farmer's market and the very impressive library. We also checked out a real estate office and found we could buy a beautiful home for about half the price of an average Edmonton house.

At noon we had lunch at the home of our day host and his wife. The house is located on one of several canals, from where they can reach the Gulf in their boat. Their yard has various tropical fruit trees, including oranges, tangerines, mangoes, and even macadamia nuts. Our day hosts took us on a stroll on Siesta Beach, acclaimed by a travel magazine to be the second most beautiful beach in North America. The vast stretch of clean white sand and clear water made us regret that the weather was not suitable for swimming.

In the evening, we took our host to dinner at Pelican Cove and were able to see the sunset while enjoying a seafood dinner. During a stroll along the pier, Bruno chatted with a local fisherman who had caught a small catfish. He offered us a taste of his smoked mackerel, caught previously from the same pier. Another eventful day. (*Dagmar Lietz*)

Free day today, but we were up at 7:30 and out of the house by 9. We had a lovely hour's drive in the country to the Lipizzan horses. Along the way we saw a number of orange trees with many oranges lying on the ground beneath.

The beautiful Lipizzan horses performed for a good 40–45 minutes. At age five, the horses begin their training, and they start to turn white between ages 5 to 7 years. They were originally trained for military use. Having the horse stand up on its hind legs was useful to the general. General George S. Patton and the Third Army rescued the Lipizzan and

Colonel Herrmann and his family assisted in this remarkable rescue. Disney made a movie, "Miracle of the White Stallions." Today the family still pays tribute for the great rescue. These horses can live up to 30 years. We saw one that was 31 years old. The next time the Lipizzans come to Edmonton, make sure it is Herrmann's Royal Lipizzan Stallions. According to his daughter, the HL performance has not been in Canada for years because when they came to the US, no one patented or registered them as performers.

After the performance, we went to the beach and had lunch on the pier overlooking the Gulf of Mexico. It was a nice walk to the end of the pier. We watched a group of fishermen who were setting up a big box with life saving equipment in it. We enjoyed watching a group of drummers and dancers who perform every night at the beach at 6 p.m. However, we did not stay too long as it was just too cold! The sunset was absolutely beautiful. (*Cec MacKenzie*)

Awakened to a nice sunny morning, but still a little cool. Had a great breakfast of waffles, strawberries, cream, tea and apple juice. After breakfast, we left for the market where there is a "parade of dogs." People bring their dogs for an outing and, of course, for others to admire, as they walk through the market, making their weekly purchases. Many booths had dishes of water for the dogs as they walked by. We didn't find anything to buy but enjoyed the event.

We visited the Shelby Library, looking for the DVD of "The Greatest Show on Earth" which we felt would be a great extension of our visit to the Ringling Museum. The architecture of the building was different because the pillars on the outside looked like upside down flower pots.

From the library, our hosts drove us to the harbor front. We walked along it, admiring the huge boats and then stopped at O'Leary Tiki hut, where we had fish, burgers, clam chowder and beer. That was enjoyed by all, especially since we actually had some warmth from the sunshine. We just relaxed at the table and enjoyed looking out at the bay with the yachts and sailboats. We stopped to take a picture at the huge statue of lovers, which was erected to remember the end of the world war.

Then it was home to pack as we were leaving for Cartagena early the next day. At 5:30 we took our hosts to one of their favourite restaurants, the Bangkok, where we all enjoyed a Thai dinner. When we got home, we watched the movie "The Greatest Show on Earth," complete with popcorn and pop. A nice way to end a nice day! (*Ron Olynyk*)

Sunday, February 13, 2011—Florida to Cartagena

We start the day off in darkness, leaving Braedonton/Sarasota, Florida, meeting the bus at McDonald's. The wheels of the bus go round and round through the everglades, Alligator Alley. This is the coldest bus ride we have ever taken with no sympathy from the bus driver. With frozen toes we arrive in Miami airport to catch the flight on Avianca to Cartagena. BUT our bus driver is new to this route and, I think, anxious to get rid of us so he dropped us at the first sign indicating International Flights. On inquiring we were advised to walk to the "F" gate. No, No, we have to go to the "J" gate. NO, No, no, we have to walk to the very last gate of the airport, where we got into one line, then another, then another—finally we get to the plane. What a surprise! This is Avianca, not Air Canada. There are plush seats, ear phones rather than plugs, a meal served with wine, Spanish-speaking stewardesses—what beauties! After watching a movie, we see the coastline of Colombia and then the highrises of Cartagena. Smooth landing and more line-ups.

Now the Confused Confusion begins. Jessie and Frank were last through the gate. In the meantime, confusion began with porters grabbing at our luggage and trying to make us understand Spanish. We're saying "NO" as we wanted to keep our luggage together. They kept wanting our carry-on luggage and demanding tickets and payment. They finally

convinced us that they would get us to our hotel for \$2 each for the ride. Well, they took us for a ride. Some paid \$2 and some paid \$7 and some paid \$10. And they got us to the front door with no taxis available for such a large group. But they did find a tour guide with a luxurious bus to take us to the hotel. Another \$70 for the group. Along the way we saw the old walled city, a UNESCO heritage site, as we traveled along the ocean, seeing people swimming and having fun. Now we were hot. We were very thankful when we got to the destination, Hotel San Pietro.

NO, No, no. The confused Confusion hasn't stopped. We have line-ups again, with requests for the electronic tickets—no, not the electronic tickets—the passports—we need to fill out another form. They need to make a copy of the passport. We didn't get the passport back. We're not getting a key, but finally, after a lovely cool lemonade, we got a key and



Hotel San Pietro in Cartagena

were taken up the stairs to the room. OH NO, Jessie and Frank's toilet doesn't work! Pat's treasured 40 oz bottle of Scotch crashed to the tile floor. Kay spilled her beer on the table after only a couple of sips. But all was not lost. We had an absolutely lovely night to be sitting in the little open-air bar, the moon in a haze straight overhead, mild with a slight breeze. We were joined by Donna and Larry, John and Angela, and Kevan and Carol who had all come to Cartagena on their own. After a pre-ordered supper from a menu of mainly fish dishes, we moved to the dining room and enjoyed

the singing and friendship of the young Italian men as well as a great meal. Carol and Anne, who are staying in another hotel, joined us for supper. They will move here tomorrow. All's well that ends well. (*Adoline Glenn*)

Monday, February 14—Cartagena—Valentine's Day

Pat is over crying about the broken bottle of Scotch!

Our day started with a good breakfast at the hotel. There were lots of choices and the coffee was strong enough to stand a spoon up. After breakfast, people went in different directions, some to the beach, some shopping and some to the patio on the roof of our hotel. Everyone came back happy.

At 2 o'clock we boarded a bus of sorts (a *chiva*) for our city tour. Getting on and out of the bus proved not only interesting but very hard work, especially if you had to get in over the rear wheels. Everyone helped each other and we got on our way.

The drivers here use their horns to power the bus as they are constantly blowing them. Our guide gave a bilingual tour and explained all the sights of the city. The first major stop involved a ride up a steep twisting road to the Chapel of Our Lady of Light. This is a centuries-old church located on the highest point in Cartagena. The trip up was highlighted by a group of teenage boys hitching a ride on the side of the bus. They ran along and jumped onto the steps and rode for awhile, then jumped off on the run. Not my idea of a fun way to travel!



On the *chiva*

At the top we were treated to a great view of the city, as well as the opportunity to see the chapel and the courtyard, both filled with religious objects. Then back down the twisting road with its hairpin turns and switchbacks. Along this road were some homes of the very poor people. These seemed to be built out of whatever was available and free.

From here we went to view the old fort and most of the group managed to climb to the top. Again, this provided a great view of the city and harbour. After a few hassles with the street vendors, we were on our way through the narrow streets to a commercial district

with shops enclosed by an arched sidewalk. Several people came away with treasures. Back to the bus, through the old town, but no stops here for shopping. We toured through the area, along the beach and back to the emerald store and museum. Again, some shoppers made purchases while other looked on in awe.

Everyone returned to the hotel and went their separate ways for supper. Our group ate at the restaurant next door, and it again was organized confusion when the meals were served and when it came time to pay. A short walk back to our hotel and off to bed to get ready for another adventure tomorrow. Thanks to Cec for the candy hearts on the bus. (*Pat Glenn*)

Tuesday, February 15—Cartagena

After a really good breakfast at our hotel, we said good-bye for the day to eight of our group who were off on a day cruise. Roy and I set off on foot to find a camera shop that would repair our Canon, but after a 2-mile trek, decided to give up.

Mid-morning, we hopped on a city bus (fare 1400 pesos each) to visit the old city, Centro San Diego, a UNESCO heritage site, where most of the buildings have been restored. We visited Simon Bolivar Park, hundreds of small shops, the library, an art gallery and a museum which had a display and description of the methods and history of the Spanish Inquisition as it took place in the early 16th century—quite gruesome. We had a drink at one of the many restaurant-bars where we met several of the other members of our group who had also come to the old city.

By 5 p.m., the neighbourhoods of the old city were coming alive with people heading home from work. It was fun to walk among the fresh fruit stalls, the shirt vendors, checking various shops as we passed, looking at local crafts and special pastries. We finally had supper on the upper floor of a restaurant on one of the main squares. We all ordered fish, and it came as a whole fish, head and all. The rice and salad were good. Took the bus home. It was hot today but very pleasant in the evening. (*Kay Harper*)

Trip to the Islands of the Rosarios—We were picked up about 8:15 for our trip to one of the islands of the Rosarios, Pirate Island. We had a calm ride out in the 52-seater motor launch with two 200 HP engines (for all the interested men). These islands are within the National Park so there was an additional fee of 12 000 pesos. Once at Pirate Island, we were served coffee and fresh pineapple and then went for a swim in the clear waters. Snorkelling was available at 11 a.m. but there were few brightly coloured fish to see.

At noon we were taken by launch to another island with an aquarium and “the walk.” There was really nowhere to walk so we were somewhat disappointed. We returned to Pirate Island for a lunch including a delicious hot soup, fish, rice, coleslaw, pineapple and watermelon. We enjoyed the rest of the afternoon. Theresa managed a relaxing massage. We had an interesting return—an hour of rough seas with our boat hitting the waves with huge smacks on the water. It was a full interesting day. (*Donna and Larry, Hugh and Dianna, Lynne and Lou, Theresa, Clare*)

Wednesday, February 16—Cartagena

At 9 a.m. this morning, it was -22°C with a wind chill of -30°C in Edmonton. Here in Cartagena, it is a cool 26°C and will be going up to a high of over 30°C !

Most people have decided to take it easy today. The hotel provides a breakfast buffet so people can wander down whenever it suits them. Fresh juice is always an adventure here as it will often be fruits we have never had juiced before—watermelon juice, tree tomato juice, to name some. No one goes hungry or thirsty! Frank and



Breakfast room

Jessie have arranged for a bus to take people to the airport tomorrow morning, and now Frank is busy collecting money from people to cover the cost.

Looking around at our group—there are some red shoulders, noses and necks from our time in the sun. Sunscreen works only up to a point. We are not complaining as we know how lucky we are to be here.

We spent some time at the beach this morning. Kay spent over an hour in the water—she is now relaxed (and very clean!). The beach became very hot so we left and returned to the rooftop of the hotel. It was lovely and breezy up there. It's a great place to visit with one another and drink beer (in the evening). Spending time in the hammocks under the thatched roof is a wonderful way to relax.

This was the last opportunity for us to spend time in the old city. It's a fun place to explore; wandering from street to street always brings new sights. It certainly gets very crowded as the day goes on. We visited the modern art gallery where there was a student exhibit underway. While the show was interesting, we were more fascinated by the building itself.

Brenda and Glen told us about a restaurant on top of the walls of the old city. We were in time to get a good table and be able to watch the sun go down. This far south, the sunset is fast and dramatic as the sun almost drops into the ocean. Our small group must have taken a few hundred photos of the event!! The mojitos were also a sight to behold—there must have been a small bunch of mint in each one of them. It felt very decadent sitting there having drinks with friends, watching the sunset and the lights come on in the city. We found a nice little restaurant for dinner, sitting outside in a courtyard.

Jessie arranged for us to check out of the hotel any time today, rather than wait until tomorrow morning. Tomorrow we say goodbye to Cartagena and look forward to new adventures and reconnecting with our friends in Bogota. (*Angela Seery*)

Meeting Old Friends: Jamie and Carmen Ardila—We had time in the morning after breakfast to go to the beach for a couple of hours of relaxing and enjoying the warm winds and the beautiful sun and sand. We rented a cabana and chairs for \$8000 pesos, about \$4 CAD.

At 12:30 we were picked up by Jamie and Carmen Ardila who had stayed with us when the Bogota FF club visited Edmonton in 2007. They took us to a restaurant a couple blocks away for lunch. We had *ceviche* (marinated fresh raw fish) with a peppercorn sauce, coconut rice, fried plantain and steamed broccoli and carrots. Dessert was pound cake and guava. Wine and mandarin lemonade and coffee finished the meal. After lunch, Jamie and Carmen took us on a driving tour of Cartagena. They live in a condo on the beach, about four blocks from the hotel.

They showed us some of the newer areas in the north part of Cartagena, as well as the Old City. Cartagena has about 1 000 000 residents, 200 000 upper class and 800 000 poor. They showed us the New Cartagena and the high rises that are the coming way for the citizens to have affordable housing. The government is putting up some of the housing as subsidized and social housing.

We saw the poor areas where most homes are two rooms. These have no power or water or plumbing. About 800 000 people live in this kind of housing. Many of these folks make their living as street vendors.

We went on to Barcelona de Indies which is a new city being built about 20 miles outside the city of Cartagena. It is a planned city with single family homes in a gated community. It will have schools, stores and some condos and apartments. It is for the upper class as homes cost about \$500 000 for a 3-bedroom home. The homes are being bought mainly by foreign workers who are in the petroleum industry.

Jamie and Carmen dropped us off about 4:30 p.m. as they had another commitment. They arranged to pick us up at 8:30 p.m. to go to the old city to see the lights at night. We parked outside the wall of the old city. Jamie paid a man to watch the car. There were no parking metres or attendants, but the man seemed to be hanging around. We walked to the square where slaves used to be sold, took a *caleche* ride from the square to the Hard Rock Café. Next to the café was a salsa bar that had lots of photos with famous people who visited the city and enjoyed the bar and the entertainment. An entertainer was dressed as a native man riding a burro. He made it really look like a real burro. The cathedral on Santo Domingo was beautiful, all in blue lights. This square is apparently very popular on New Year's Eve as people come down to celebrate and the restaurants put their tables out in the streets. The entertainment and dancing goes outside as well. There are apartments and condos in this area, but it costs about three times as much to live here. We enjoyed the music, beautiful lights and the opportunity to renew our friendship. We headed back to the hotel about 10:30 p.m. as we had to be up early to catch our plane to Bogota. (*Lynne and Lou Duigou*)

Thursday, February 17—Cartagena to Bogota

It was sad to say goodbye to the historical magnificence and the warmth of Cartagena, but we knew that we were setting off on another phase of our excellent adventure in Colombia. Frank had arranged group transportation for us, so together we boarded the bus for the trip to the airport and the hour and a half flight to Bogota.



On arrival at the airport, our hosts were waiting for us outside the baggage area. Not only were they waiting, but they also had a huge welcome banner and smiles and waves of welcome. For me, this welcome was a very emotional point. It was apparent that our stay would be with people who were kind and considerate. It certainly boded well for the rest of the week.

As we passed out of the baggage area, Cesar came up and asked us who we were staying with. Immediately we were introduced to Judy Fonseca, our wonderful host for the next week. This introduction process was happening to all the ambassadors. Judy and her son loaded us into their car and off we went to the freeway where we encountered our first culture shock—a city of 8 million people where most folks have more than one car—traffic everywhere—chaos everywhere!! But out of the chaos, a surprising order.

Upon being ushered into Judy's apartment, we were immediately ensconced around a table where we feasted on a typical Colombian meal. This process was to be re-visited as we were regaled and treated to all sorts of culinary delights on a daily basis—the Colombians enjoy their food!

Having grown in girth and circumference as a result of our meal, and almost unable to perambulate, we vamoosed to an incredible shopping mall where we spent much of our evening. Thus to a close came our first day in Bogota! Much, much more was to come. (*Dianna Steele*)

Friday, February 18—Bogota

Our first full day in Bogota. Following a good night's sleep and a breakfast of *arepas* Boyaca-style (cheese-filled and slightly sweeter than those we have had to date in Colombia), huevos and fresh OJ, we are ready for the day. One of the great treats here in Colombia is the abundance of fresh squeezed fruit juices—lime, papaya, pineapple, orange, guava (or guayaba), guanabana and more. These are found everywhere.

Today we are in La Candelaria, the historic centre of Bogota. Before the tour has started, we come upon a *telenovela* (soap opera) being shot along one of the side streets. It is

to be called *Amor y Temer* (Love and Fear). We discover that it is to depict events at the end of the 1940s to the early 1950s, the start of La Violencia, a very dark period in the history of Colombia. The male actors all look like they came out of some gangster flick. No women on the set this day. Many of us have our photo taken with the actors and the cars, beautifully restored vehicles from the 40s.

The first stop is a set of government offices housed in what were once the homes (four in total, one for the parents and one for each of their sons) of a wealthy business family, Echeverria. Now the adjoining walls have been removed and we are able to walk between the individual courtyards and enjoy the beautifully restored windows, wood floors and decorative ceiling work in the family living areas on the second and third floors of each of the former homes. All the rooms benefit from large windows that bring much light into each room.

Our next stop is the Iglesia/Museo de Santa Clara, the only museum church in Colombia. This is a former convent that has been present on this site since the early 1600s. It was a closed order modelled on the Franciscans. This order, like many others and other churches in Colombia at the time, was quite wealthy. It cost money to join the order at Santa Clara. The money was used to maintain one's room and board within the walls of the convent. There are a number of interesting features in the church itself, including the ceiling which is covered in symbolic stars—a substitute as there were no open courtyards within the convent. There is also an abundance of religious paintings and carved wooden pieces that are covered with gold foil. As an aside, Simon Bolivar relied upon the churches and their money to help fund his liberation campaigns throughout this northern part of South America. According to our guide, for this and other reasons, the rise of political influence of the many religious orders—the Jesuits, Franciscans, Dominicans and others—eventually lead to the expulsion of these orders from the newly created Colombia.

We then headed to the Botero Gallery that houses the largest collection in the world of the paintings and sculpture of Colombian painter and sculptor Fernando Botero.

The day continued at the Casa del Florero (Museo de la Independencia), where Colombia's war of independence is said to have started over the denial of the loan of a vase for use at dinner.

Off across the Plaza Bolivar. The day is sunny and the plaza is packed with tents covering a sea of picnic tables full of patrons. It turns out that this is a monthly event for *campesinos* (farm workers) in town for business and this event, effectively an inexpensive lunch. There are typical foods from all over Colombia available for sampling. A couple of hours later, all of this is gone and cleaned up. Angela and Cesar are both interviewed for a radio program. We head to a coffee shop run by Fanny and Felix's son Sebastian. It is within a large building housing many artisan shops that look to be a great place to come back to for future shopping.

4:45 p.m. and it has started to rain, as we are on our way back to our hosts for a break before the welcome that begins at 6 p.m.

We are now on our way to the welcome and the tap has been turned on full. Several of the streets now have small rivers running down them, while others are developing small lakes. We drive by a few shops that are "below sea level" and the owners are now busy getting the water away from the inside of their stores and from the street in front of their business. Between the heavy rain and the normal rush hour traffic, several of our group and their hosts are late for the welcome, some two hours late.

Following drinks and introductions, the members of our club receive gifts: a ceramic *chiva* for the guys and a *mochilla* (shoulder bag) for the gals. Following dinner of pastry-wrapped chicken with a spinach puree, rice, cantaloupe and papaya salad and a creme brulé, the entertainment begins. There are a couple of singers and a dance troupe who provide a great selection of traditional Colombian song and dance styles from the various regions of the country. Then we are asked onto the dance floor for a practice session. This is when we (I)

discover in how good shape the dancers are! Great evening that ends early as we have an early start tomorrow. (*John Yule*)

Saturday, February 19—Bogota

“On the Road Again,” the band of gypsies and friends, more familiarly known as Friendship Force, boarded a bus at McDonald’s in Bogota at 7:30 a.m. for an educating, entertaining and awe-inspiring tour of areas around the capitol.

The day began with a pit stop at a unique type of truck stop where the sun broke through to provide a day of brilliance.

The bus meandered through the beautiful Colombian countryside to the new city of Guatavita which was rebuilt after the original townsite, dating back to the 1600s, was flooded because a dam was built. Highlights of the visit to Guatavita were the bullring (used for all types of social events), the modern church built following the plans of the Spanish architect who designed the new town after the flood. We were allowed to wander at our leisure through the town square and the town itself to peruse the shops.

Walking, talking and shopping work up an appetite, and we traveled from Guatavita to a lovely university campus on the Bogota River called the Universidad de la Sabana where we were hosted to a superb lunch (featuring Ajiaco soup, a Colombian specialty).

The tour then took us to the town of Zipaquirá, another historic town featuring the proverbial square and an impressive cathedral. What also made our visit to Zipaquirá interesting and memorable was a whimsical occurrence. Upon disembarking from the bus at the square, almost the first thing that people saw was a line of antique vehicles, including a police car, ambulance and a hearse. These vehicles merged into context as we saw across the square a film crew filming a movie. Further investigation proved that the crew was filming the same “soap” that we had encountered two days previously in the centre of Bogota. At the time, many of us snapped pictures of the actors, crew and the vehicles, and here we were again, approximately 100 km from Bogota, doing the same thing. Unfortunately, the vehicles that we had seen on the other side of the square were an actual funeral cortege for a service that was taking place at the cathedral.

A short ride up the hill from Zipaquirá led us to the entrance of one of Colombia’s most famed tourist meccas, the Salt Cathedral. To say that this visit was an indescribable visual and emotional experience would be an understatement. It was, for me, an experience that will not be forgotten, from the 12 stations of the cross, the statues of the archangels, the replica of Michelangelo’s “Creation of Man,” to the mirror pool. I am still in awe.

Emerging from the mine with the sun setting, we boarded the bus to close out a day of tremendous experiences. (*Hugh Steele*)

Sunday, February 20—Bogota (free day so we have two reports)

We spent the day with our hosts and were joined by Clare and her hostess at the Botanical Gardens where we enjoyed the rose garden, fruit and other varieties of trees, and a butterfly house with 15 local species. We were joined by Carlos, our host’s son-in-law from Calgary, and drove about an hour north to La Hacienda de la Marguerita. It was a fun place with a petting zoo and slide area for the kids. Lipizzan horses and some children put on a show while we were eating in the restaurant. Then there were entertainers and dancers. Clare was serenaded with a love song. Marj danced with a Colombian performer and with Carlos as well. Laura and Neil were there with their hosts, too. A clown made a hat and put funny glasses on our host, Alberto, as it was his 70th birthday. After the drive home, we had company and a cake and pizza to celebrate again! So we got to meet more of the family—Rosalba’s sister and brother-in-law, and their son, wife and daughter from here. They all enjoyed skyping to Calgary to Carlos’ wife and two girls.

Other members had exciting times, too. They enjoyed Central Park, a replica of the Taj Mahal, churches, a flea market, a picnic type dinner with rock tables and tree stumps for chairs, hanging gardens, museums and more. Most found that their dinner included a very large portion of meat, two potatoes with sauce and a small salad. Beer with soda was the drink of the day! (*Carl Eckert*)

A free day, so it says. Well, in Colombia it was busier than busy—with not even a mention of time for church.

The day began early, as usual. After sharing family pictures with our wonderful hosts Gloria and Lucho, ironing a few clothes, and having a small coffee (regular size for us) made from that delicious Colombian coffee, we're on our way.

It's 18 degrees and on its way to 25, at 8:30 a.m. It's a bright sunny day. We're off to Judith's golf course at Pueblo Viejo, 15 minutes away. We pass by the English/French Elementary School, greenhouses galore, and even more Holstein cows. Our lush green valley is flanked on either side by mountain ranges, a typical sight in much of Colombia as we travel.

The food choices at this golf course buffet are amazing, with pastries, meat dishes, arepa, pastel de yucca, fruits, and foods I have never before encountered. A walk takes us by the stables, golf course, tennis courts, squash courts, and soccer fields, all very busy with people of all ages.

Then off we go to Bogota to the Flea Market in the Usaquen neighbourhood for a stroll through blocks and blocks of handicrafts, jewellery, etc. Upon returning to Vivenza in Chia, we learn of our invitation to a nearby home for another sumptuous meal of salmon, salad, rice and a creamy cheese dessert.

It was a lovely day for exploring the nearby countryside and getting to know our hosts better. (*Carol Bahry*)

Monday, February 21—Bogota

After an early morning start (7:30), we were off on another adventure, a tour of Boyaca state. When the Republic of Colombia was born, Boyaca received the title "The Origins and the Road to Freedom" because the first battles for emancipation of the "Bolivarianos" countries were planned and won in Boyaca.

We travelled past areas where potatoes for Boyaca, for export, and for McDonald's french fries are grown. Many people in this area have diabetes due to the large amount of starch (potatoes and rice) they eat. They grow many varieties of potatoes and store them in peat silos.

The landscape was spectacular as our bus climbed high into the mountains, up to 3200 m. We passed several leather factories, fields of onions, beans and of course, potatoes. With their perfect growing climate, they are able to produce three or four crops a year. The homes were very humble, with water tanks on the roofs, where the domestic water was heated. Entire families were in the fields picking and bagging their crops.



Boyaca Bridge was our first and main stop. This historic sight was where, on August 17, 1819, the 2-hour battle between the Spanish Loyalists and the Colombia Patriots, under the command of Simon Bolivar and General Santander, took place. The Spanish were soundly defeated, and the newly formed Colombia obtained its independence. Simon Bolivar became their first president. August 17, their Independence Day, is widely celebrated! There is a large monument, high on a hill overlooking the Bridge, as well as one of Santander below the hill which is equally impressive.

We then drove 14 km to Tunja, the capital of Boyaca. This colourful city of 200 000 is the coldest city in Colombia with an average temperature of 10–18°C. Flowers thrive in this temperature and are in abundance throughout the area, even though it is very dry, with rain happening only twenty times a year. Tunja is where 14 of Colombia's presidents were born, many world champion cyclists call home, and an abundance of artists work and live. We had lunch in the beautiful historic Hospederia El Duruelo in Villa de Leyva. We sat on a sunny balcony, overlooking large displays of flowers, and were treated to a wonderful repast of soup, fresh buns, a large slice of roast beef, lots of local potatoes with sauce, and a cornmeal roll. Dessert was what some of our group called "Squeaky Cheese" which was baked cheese served with a molasses sauce. Beverages were lemonade, coffee and tea. This was a wonderful stop with beautiful grounds where one could stroll after a delicious and filling lunch.

When Cesar, our host and guide, was able to get us moving, we drove to the town centre, where the shop keepers were just opening after the noon siesta. There were choices of ceramics, pottery, jewelry, woven products, and handicrafts of fine quality. Our stop was completed with beer around a fun table with our travel mates. We walked back to the bus and lost no one!

On our return Cesar held a draw for two gifts from the hotel. Each person was to pick a number between 1 and 14—we did it four times before completion! According to Cesar, we weren't a very intelligent group!

As we drove back to Bogota, we passed the Boyaca Bridge and the monuments once again, but this time they were all lit up as it was just getting dark. What an impressive sight! We had an interesting drive through a small town called Segorua where we met three more buses on the street, which was very narrow, and our driver had to back up several blocks before we could pass. He made it and deserved the round of applause from the passengers. Our tired and happy group arrived back to our meeting place at 9:30 p.m., as planned. A very interesting, wonderful and long day! (*Pat Ewing*)

Tuesday, February 22—Bogota—a flexible day

Up again with the birds and on our way for another loooong day. Marie and I joined Elsa and Cec, Barb, Ron and their host family and went south of Bogota. Scenery, climate and traffic changed, as we wended our way up and down hills, round many bends in and out of traffic with no time or inclination for nodding off.

Traffic, as many others will attest to, is something else, yet there was no road rage. Three lanes of traffic seemed to mean five cars could fit. As we drove, we found ourselves disrobing—jackets and sweaters came off as the temperature rose to 30°C. A rock slide delayed traffic for some time, but the vendors were up and down the rows of cars selling their goods. They never miss a chance.

Chicken feed had to be picked up on the way, and this was delivered at Carlos and Fabiola's farm/summer cottage. What a lovely place they have! We were greeted by three, if not four, friendly dogs, visited the chickens, ducks and rabbits, ate oranges from one of the many fruit trees, took pictures, and last but not least, toured their quaint little summer cottage where there were about a million key chains hanging from the ceiling.

After refreshing drinks of freshly squeezed orange and mango juice, we were on our way to the Military Private Club where we feasted on a delicious meal. We, the ambassadors, had planned to treat our hosts, but they would have none of it, so our money stayed in our wallets for another day. The swimming pool was calling us and we obliged, luxuriating in it for quite awhile before it was time to be on our way on the long and sometimes harrowing journey home.

I rolled into bed about 10:30 and was in dreamland in no time. It was a very good day. (*Helen Kieran*)

We have a free day! But we still had to get up at 7:45 and do those everyday things, shower, shave and brush teeth. Our host, Gloria, loved to cook, so at 8:30 breakfast was served: melon, plantain, black coffee, arepa, cheese, fresh baked scones and biscuits. Since our hosts didn't have an automatic dishwasher, Gloria washed the dishes in the sink. We went outside with Lucho, said Hi and Goodbye to Roy, Kay and Judy, the other host. At 8:45 we jumped in the car and headed to Bogota. After finding parking space we walked the several blocks to the Gold Museum where we met the rest of the FF group. We had a guided tour and listened to a wonderful talk about gold and its place in the local civilization. The role of the shaman and the gold artifacts were explained in detail.



Gold Museum artifact

12 noon—We could have spent the whole day in the museum, but we were to go with Lucho to meet Gloria at a neat restaurant, the Crepery House. We enjoyed the food and the company. After lunch we walked to an emerald factory for a tour. We found out where in Colombia the emeralds were mined and the different grades of emeralds used for jewellery. Carol purchased a pinky finger ring.

1:45 p.m.—With Lucho and Gloria, we walked up to the Monserrate Tram which we took to the top. We were at an altitude of 3100 m and the view was breathtaking with a fantastic view of most of Bogota. Back at the bottom, we took a taxi ride to the Gold Museum. The taxi drivers really drive on the wild side, but on the other hand, I think they all drove the same way. Lucho went to get the car while Gloria took us through two more beautiful churches.

4 p.m.—We met Lucho at the appointed time and place. On the way back, we stopped at a pharmacy to pick up medicine for the pet dog who stayed at home. We got home about 7, tired but happy.

8:30 p.m.—Along with Roy and Kay, we took our hosts, Gloria, Lucho and Judy to an Italian restaurant in Chia. The spaghetti was good with a couple of bottles of wine. About 10, we headed for home. Checked for e-mail and then hit the sack about 11. We had a great day, with the expectation of another big day tomorrow. (*Kevan Hanlen*)

This was a “free” day, but like many of our group, our host, Elizabeth, took us to the Gold Museum. The English-speaking guide made the visit much more enjoyable and informative. The tour was about an hour and a half, but we just had time for an overview, including bone, textiles and pottery, which helped demonstrate the development of the culture of the indigenous people before the arrival of the Spanish. There are exhibits of gold artifacts made long before most people had heard of gold. The best way to understand it was an explanation on the face of a brochure: Gold was extracted from the earth, transformed, used and symbolized before returning to the earth in the form of an offering. Now the offerings have been found, used to explain how people centuries ago lived, and are on display for us who are trying to understand some of the theories of the development of man.

After this marvellous, mind-boggling tour, a group went across the street from the museum for a cup of coca tea, which contains a very small amount of cocaine. We did not feel any effect, but it was interesting to try as it is legal and readily available, even in grocery stores—but not legal to bring back to Canada or the USA as a sample!

A short taxi ride took us to the base of the Hill of Montserrat which is 3 152 m above sea level. Visitors and locals alike would climb to the sanctuary, but there were some problems with people being accosted on their hike up the hill, so the walk has been closed. Now Montserrat can be reached only by gondola. From the top, there is a spectacular view of the city with many landmarks that we have visited on this amazing homestay. Visiting the

Chapel gave a very special and peaceful feeling. We then went to the Casa Santa Clara restaurant for a feast of local seafood. As we ate and visited, we had a spectacular view of Bogota and surrounding area.

Back down to the base of the hill by gondola, a short walk took us to the emerald shop, where we received a demonstration of the mining, polishing and finishing of emeralds. The owner of this shop owns an emerald mine. Some of the prices seemed high but were much less than in many other places selling emerald jewelry or stone.

After this last chance to shop, it was time for Elizabeth to take us home. It was very difficult to find a taxi, as it was about 5 p.m., the busiest time of the day. We had planned to go out for dinner, but Rolando had a tiring day at work and the three of us, a busy day at play, so we stayed home and had a lovely dinner cooked by Elizabeth in her “chicken,” her pronunciation of kitchen. Our dinner was complemented by their local wine. We can see why the Colombian motto is “The only risk is wanting to stay!” (*Jim Ewing*)

Wednesday, February 23—Bogota

Today was mostly free time, so Joanna (a niece of our host) and I went walking at 7 a.m. through the neighbourhoods, seeing the city getting started for the day, vendors setting out their wares, working up an appetite for breakfast. Our area is full of modern apartment blocks with walking trails and parks all around. Many of the household maids were out walking the dogs.

After another delicious breakfast with interesting freshly squeezed juices, we set out for the farm owned by our host family. On the drive, we saw many farms in the countryside, along with cattle and other animals in the fields. One of the main activities on this farm is the growing of roses for export, and a tour was originally scheduled as a group activity, but since most of the roses had been cut for Valentine’s Day, this activity was cancelled. However, we were very pleased to be able to see the operation.

Jose Luis, the son of the owners, was waiting to show us around the massive enterprise. The roses are grown in vast greenhouses, as rain or insects would damage the flowers. Today, a team of workers had cut the flowers at 6 a.m., gathered them into bundles of 25 and put them immediately into water. The bundles were then collected, taken to the distribution area, measured, checked and packed in bundles of 100 to a box, to be taken by refrigerated truck to the airport. Today 10 000 long stemmed roses, every one of them perfect, were off to Moscow, probably via Amsterdam. Sales are generally one-third to each of Europe, the United States, and Russia. Roses that have a slight flaw are not considered to be of export quality and are picked up by wholesalers in Bogota. Jose Luis and his large staff have a great deal of technical knowledge, consult regularly with rose experts to grow new varieties and colours, and put in much intensive labour. It is a very precise operation!

On another part of the farm, 200 000 chickens came to gawk at us, as we looked at them. They are free to run around within the confines of the fence and were curious about these visitors. They produce 50 to 60 thousand eggs per day which are taken by truck to an egg-sorting building for grading and packing. Within 24 hours these eggs are on their way to store shelves. Another production of the farm is milk from 30 Holstein cows. It is a busy and well run place.

On our way back to Bogota, we stopped at a restaurant owned by our hostess. Located on the edge of the city, it is always very busy on weekends, when families come to dine, but also to enjoy the playground and ride the ponies. Our hostess asked the staff to prepare a typical Colombian meal, which included several kinds of meat. Jose Luis drove to the restaurant in his truck, but rode with us into the city as driving restrictions meant that he could not drive the truck in the city today. He declared that he was going to get a motorcycle!

Back home, we did some packing, while our host family prepared plates of food for the farewell party.

Our farewell gathering was held in a meeting room in a hotel not far from our home. Everyone had brought plates of all kinds of food and between visiting and dancing, we again enjoyed eating! It was such a short time ago that we were being welcomed, and now it was



almost time to say good-bye! The gift of \$100 that our club gave to the Bogota club was turned over by them to two women in the club who worked with poor children. The Colombian folks love to dance, and before long, most of us had joined them, encouraged by an excellent DJ and lively music. However, the early morning ahead meant that by 10 p.m. we were on our way home. (*Jessie Parker*)

Thursday, February 24—Bogota to Quito

It was an early start to the day with the alarm ringing at 4:30 a.m. We had only a 20-minute drive to the airport so I knew that we were better off than many others in the group. All three of our hosts came along to the airport. It was a teary farewell because they had been such wonderful, warm, friendly hosts. Then came the 2.5 hour wait for departure. Breakfast sounded like a good thing to do, so we ordered scrambled eggs and toast for \$3, thinking that we would not be eating until Quito. We boarded on time and were off to Quito—a 1-hour, 22-minute flight. I was really tired so I zonked out quickly. However, I was soon awakened by Ron to ask if I wanted anything to drink. Well, to my dismay, they served a full breakfast of fluffy pancakes, omelet, hash browns, bun and fruit! I had eaten only two hours earlier! But, of course, I polished off the whole thing. And, before I knew it, we were landing.

We were met by our guide, Alfredo, who got us on our bus and to our hotel, all the while giving us information about the city and area. Quito was founded December 6, 1534, by the Spaniards. In 1940, its population was only 60 000. Then it got an influx of people when the coffee and cocoa industry began, changing the make-up of the city as workers from the country moved into old Quito, causing the “rich” citizens to build in another part of the city. The next such influx came in 1972 with the discovery of oil. Now the city has over 3 million people.

As we drove through the city, I noticed considerably less traffic—no congestion of the kind we experienced in Bogota, cleaner streets, observance of traffic laws and lanes of traffic and more English. We arrived at our hotel at 11 a.m. but our rooms were not ready, so we left our luggage there and were getting ready to go on our city tour when Alfredo said it was going to rain. So instead, he suggested that we go to the equator, which was on the other side of the mountain and would not receive rain. Though most of us would have loved a nap, we got on the bus and headed off like the good sports that we are.

We arrived at the site where the newest and most accurate equator line has been marked using GPS. It passes right through the Ethnographic Museum, which houses many artifacts. We were divided into two groups, each with a guide, who told us many things about the equator and how the indigenous people used the equatorial phenomenon in their lives. She also took us through several activities, each of which reinforced the unique properties of the equator and the difference between being on the equator and moving only 2 m to either hemisphere, including the following:

- how the indigenous people used a metal pin and a “clock” to tell time
- how gravity pulls straight down at the equator, but swirls clockwise and counter-clockwise respectively in the southern and northern hemispheres, using a tub of water to illustrate



Donna and Larry on the equator

- how we can make an egg balance on a nail at the equator
- how different it is to walk on the line with eyes closed, arms out and thumbs up.

The people who balanced the egg got a certificate and everyone got their passports stamped to show they visited the equator.

After the visit, we went to a restaurant that served Ecuadorian food. We had an empanada with meat and chili sauce to start. Then we had a very generous serving of potato soup with avocado—the soup was the same as we had in Bogota. This was followed by a dish of fried banana, deep fried pork and fat, popcorn, an unusual cooked corn, potatoes, onion and lettuce. For dessert it was candied fig with a sauce and a bit of cheese. Yummy and very filling!!

When we arrived back at the hotel, our luggage was in our rooms, which were old but quaint. We accessed ours from the outside. We all gathered in a visiting area where there was a cozy fire, sofas to relax in, a computer and tons of books! We shared some wine, compliments of a few who visited the store nearby. Many thanks for that! During the evening, a group of students and their leaders from the USA checked into the hotel. We got to meet the leaders and had some interesting discussion about their mission, which took them down the Amazon to a village where they did some humanitarian work. (*Barb Olynyk*)

Friday, February 25—Quito to Otavalo

Ecuador is a fascinating country and we are eager to see more of it. Our little boutique hotel, Café Cultura, was perfect for the first night here—we enjoyed the quaint little (and sometimes huge) rooms and the paintings everywhere. Our bathroom walls and sink were decorated with sunflowers, and our bedroom had pink cherubs flying around the walls.

Our morning was spent touring the old city of Quito—the central square with its huge monument of Simon Bolivar, the ancient Church of the Company of Jesus, the President's Palace, the modern City Hall, and the beautiful Cathedral decorated in gold leaf. As Alfredo, our guide, told us a bit of the history of Quito, an honour guard practised marching to a drum and giggling school children dressed in navy and red uniforms lined up near us to visit the buildings in the area. Quito means “the centre of everything,” and was first established by the Incas 500 years ago. In 1534, the Spanish conqueror, Pizarro, named the city San Francisco de Quito. The old town, a United Nations World Heritage Site, is full of narrow cobblestone streets winding up and down hills and colourful two or three story buildings with Spanish-style balconies.

Following our tour of the old city, we drove up to a 3000 m high hill overlooking the city to see a 42 m high metal sculpture of a winged Virgin with a snake around her feet. It was an amazing sight—7000 pieces made in France and assembled in Quito in 1973. As we looked up, we saw a “halo” around her head—a beautiful sun dog around the sun directly over our heads and hers. The view from the lookout at her feet showed a huge city of high rises and red tiled roofs, 52 km long, surrounded by volcanoes.



Leaving Quito, we joined the Pan-American highway which runs from Alaska all the way south to Tierra del Fuego. We passed several northern suburbs known for their frittatas (deep fried pork) and noticed pigs hanging on hooks outside cafes advertising this delicacy. Another small town called Calderona is known for its Day of the Dead on November 2. The indigenous people leave out bread for the spirits of dead adults who come to visit that day, but none for children's spirits since they might not know how to return to heaven afterwards.

The area just north of Quito is very green with many eucalyptus and pine trees, and many ornamental grasses. But it quickly changed to near desert conditions as we drove along a deep canyon above a brown river, nearer the equator. Green long-leafed agave plants,

cactus with brilliant orange and yellow flowers, and lacy acacia trees grew along the road. Alfredo told us that many of the local plants are still used as medicines by the local shaman. As well as medicine, all parts of the agave are used for thread, ropes, and food. Turning another corner, we drove out of the dry canyon into a fertile valley full of greenhouses growing roses for North America, and caster apple and avocado orchards. Two dozen long-stem roses sell here for \$1—very cheap love! Alfredo said that the present use of organic fertilizers from compost and animal manure instead of the chemical fertilizers of the past has reduced sickness among the workers in the greenhouses, and they are relatively well paid at \$400 per month (the average worker in Ecuador gets \$250). The hills were a green patchwork quilt of fields growing corn, potatoes and lima beans.

Thanks to Les K. back in Edmonton who told us about it, we had lunch at the beautiful Lago San Pablo, a modern resort and restaurant overlooking a volcano, with nicely manicured grounds and a picturesque alpaca tethered on the lawn. Excellent food and wonderful views from the restaurant! Two lovely Quichua singers entertained us on the bus as we drove away, and then sold us the first of many colourful scarves we were to buy during the trip. Our shopping continued when we arrived at Cotocachi, a town famous for its leather products. In spite of a heavy downpour, our intrepid shoppers went from store to store hunting for perfect fits and good deals. Seven or eight new jackets joined us in the bus, along with luggage, belts and purses - a most satisfying day of bargaining!



New leather jackets!

Our hotel for the next two nights was Casa La Hacienda, a pretty little hostel-hotel with cabanas in the back. The rooms were generally small but comfortable. We enjoyed a glass of wine, beer or whiskey on the balcony as we watched swallows darting about, chasing insects and the sun setting over the volcanoes. (*Brenda Kane*)

Saturday, February 26—Cotocachi and Otavalo

We woke up to a beautiful blue sky, with birds singing and my iPod playing music, thanks to Larry who showed me how to use it as an alarm clock. After an excellent breakfast of scrambled eggs and ham, café con leche, freshly squeezed strawberry and pineapple juice, fresh rolls and fresh fruit, we took the bus up to Cayapas National Park near Cotocachi. Cayapas Park is over 180 000 hectares in area and is 11 000 feet high. We hiked up to the crater and saw a lovely blue lake (over 200 m deep) with no fish due to the high mineral content. It has two islands and has not erupted since the 1600s. Alfredo identified many more medicinal plants and bushes as we walked along, and showed us some tiny pink orchids, the only ones on earth to live at that altitude. We were also lucky enough to see a rainbow lizard and a brilliant red, blue and black honey-eater bird. In the distance, across the valley, hundreds of workers were harvesting potatoes by hand for a neighbour. They would be rewarded with free potatoes and a party, much like our old-fashioned barn raisings.



Otavalo market

Then we drove down to Otavalo and spent three or four hours in the world-famous market. Alfredo organized the day well with several shuttles back to our hacienda so shoppers could go back to rest as their interest waned. It was a very colourful affair, with blocks of clothing, jewelry, pottery, handbags, hangings, paintings, food, musical instruments and entertainment. Local women, with long braids, dressed in black skirts, white embroidered blouses, colourful shawls and gold jewelry sold their products while pets and little children played on the ground. Men also had long hair but generally wore western clothing—jeans and T-shirts. Both men and

women wear black felt hats, and the women used their scarves as backpacks to carry everything from babies to bundles of cloth to food. We enjoyed a very reasonable pineapple pizza and beer while chatting with travellers from Denmark and Austria. We also ran into several Edmonton travellers who were part of a medical team doing hip replacements in Quito—what a small world!

The afternoon ended with beer and wine on the patio of the hacienda, once more surrounded by our “Mother” and “Father” volcanoes. (She had a few clouds on top this morning, indicating that he had visited her during the night.) Dinner was at a pleasant little restaurant in Cotacachi where the food was reasonable but the wine was very expensive. Luckily the beer was good! We enjoyed a local band that played Andean music and bought a CD to remind us of the evening. As we fell asleep that night, we heard frogs croaking, crickets twittering, a few birds singing, creaking walls, a loudly dripping faucet, and occasional fireworks from a party down in the town, all part of the peaceful countryside of Ecuador. (*Glen Kane*)

Sunday, February 27—Otavalo to Cotopaxi to Misahualli

We were up early for breakfast at 7 and our trip back around Quito and then to Volcano Alley in the highlands of the south. We had strong coffee served first, followed by juice and a plate of fruit. The jugo was a sweet orange juice and lilo, a yellow-coloured juice that everyone seems to enjoy. This was followed by scrambled eggs with either ham or bacon, a typical breakfast meal.

We took the ring road around Quito. On the way, Alfredo explained why Ecuador had taken on American currency for its standard currency in 1996. The coinage consists of a mixture of Ecuador silver and American silver. The President was elected in 1994 and is commonly referred to as “a loco” because of his strange ways. He dressed very informally in jeans and a T-shirt and went against the traditional expectations of a president. He also liked to sing on many occasions, even though he wasn’t a good singer. He stole the entire yearly budget of the country, loaded it into plastic bags and moved to Panama. He used this money for personal expenses, including an offer to pay the salaries of the entire Barcelona soccer team so that his son could play on the team. Ecuador was thrown into an economic and political crisis. The UN monetary fund would not give money to the country and suggested that the banks limit withdrawals to \$200 per month. Unemployment, inflation, increase in gasoline prices, and a devaluation of Ecuadorian currency were the results. In 1999, one USD was worth 22 000 sucre. People became angry and there was a great deal of political unrest. A number of presidents passed through the ranks. Some were revolutionaries and others were nepotists, giving high level positions to their family and friends. The International Monetary Fund then suggested that the government use the stable US dollar for its currency. This helped to stabilize the Ecuadorian economy; investors decided to invest in the country because of the more stable economy and its cheap labour. The increased employment brought more prosperity to the country. One of the last presidents promised to bring back “a loco.” Many people expected that he would be punished but he received the welcome of a king. Within a few days, the people realized that he had almost destroyed the country, so he left for Brazil. Ecuador continues to use US dollars for its currency today.

We passed the Cayamba volcano on our way to Quito and watched two cows pulling a single plow to till the fields. We passed many greenhouses that grow the beautiful roses to be exported around the world. You can buy 25 roses for \$1! We noted the pine trees from Canada and Switzerland that had been planted. Because of the climate, the trees grow quickly and self-seed to create lush forests.

Today was a family day. We stopped in Quito so that our bus driver’s wife could deliver a suitcase with clothing and personal items to Fausto. We stopped again about half an

hour later so that Alfredo's family could deliver our lunch. We met Alfredo's wife and two children, his dad and mom and his brother.

South of Quito, we entered the "volcano alley" area. It is very high with a tundra vegetation. This area is famous for the condors (only 85 exist today) and the growing of lima beans, potatoes and corn. Dairy cattle produce milk. Some cattle are fed grass and other broccoli. As you might expect, the milk from broccoli-fed cows is less popular than grass-fed cows.

We climbed to 11 600 metres. We went off the Pan-American highway to view the volcano, Cotapaxi, that last erupted in 1877. Alfredo showed us the several layers created by the lava flows—the black anthracite, the anthracite burned by the lava, and the red anthracite caused by the oxidation of the iron. We walked around Laguna Limpiopungo looking at the alpine flowers, the birds and the beauty of the glacial lake. Everyone took their time breathing slowly and taking breaks as we experienced faster heartbeats and shortness of breath at this high altitude.



Our castle hotel: Hacienda La Cienga

We then returned to the Pan-American highway to our hotel, Hacienda La Cienga, an historic hotel where Simon Bolivar, Alexander Humbolt and numerous presidents have stayed. What a beautiful spot! Supper at 7 included a hot beverage made of lilo and honey, the traditional chicken soup with potatoes, avocado and corn, then steak, potatoes and a type of vegetable salad. We had mango mousse for dessert. We were entertained by the Cotapaxi traditional group. Another interesting day! (*Donna Wyatt*)

Monday, February 28—Hacienda La Cienga to Riobamba

Before leaving this beautiful spot, we wanted to check out its historical importance. It was built in 1695 and preserved in its original state. We noted the Academy Award winners available from the internet but not broadcast in Ecuador. The best picture award went to *The King's Speech* with Colin Firth as best actor and Natalie Portman as best actress in *The Black Swan*.

We then started our journey to Riobamba. We went through an interesting town, Latacunga, that has been destroyed three times by the volcano Cotopaxi. It is famous for its chugchucaros or pork cracklings. The town celebrates *La Mama Negra* or black mamma who was like a doctor to everyone. They have a parade where the men dress in white with black faces and give alcoholic beverages to everyone watching the parade. If you don't drink the alcohol, they give it to you anyway.

We stopped at San Salo where ice cream is their specialty, particularly the *salcedo*, made of natural raspberry, lime and mango fruit juices and vanilla ice cream. There we were with a good breakfast under our belts, eating ice cream at 9:30 in the morning!



We entered Ambato in Tugurahua Province where broccoli, lettuce and tomatoes are grown. The main industries were the assembly of Chevy and Mazda cars. The area is an interesting place to live as the tectonic plate is always moving. We saw the traditional community of Salasacas, a home for weavers and then Pelileo famous for its manufacture of blue jeans including famous American brands such as Gap. There was a fertile valley where potatoes were grown. Our next stop was Banos, which means spa, although it is one of the first Spanish words everyone should learn as it also means bathroom. Some people went shopping on the main street, and others went to the hot pools and the cooling pool below the beautiful waterfall not far from the main street. We enjoyed the city before leaving a 4 p.m.

On the way to Riobamba, we took a different route past the dry lava runs of the volcanoes. The huge boulders and the devastation were amazing. We arrived at Hosteria Abrasungo about 5:45. What a beautiful spot! Our room has whitewashed brick and a beautifully painted fireplace. We have woven rugs on the tiled floor. The water is hot and there is a hair dryer—hurray! We enjoyed a supper of quinoa soup, trout, chicken or spaghetti as a main course and a dessert of figs with white cheese. The hotels just keep getting better.
(Larry Wyatt)

Tuesday, March 1—Riobamba to Cuenca

Sunny, approx 18–20°C. After breakfast at the Hacienda Abrasungo, we boarded the bus to visit the Chimborazo volcano. It is the highest volcano in the world at 6310 m. It is extinct as it has not erupted in about 5000 years, but its glaciers are rapidly melting just like many in North America. Its distinction as being the highest is because it is the farthest from the centre of the earth.

The people in the south part of the country are lighter skinned than the people in the north because they are approximately 70% Spanish and 30% indigenous blood. The Incas invaded this part of the country and conquered the villages, killed the men and set the women and children to work in the fields.

We visited the oldest church in Ecuador, Virgen de Maria Natividad de Balbanera, which was founded in 1534 by the Franciscan Fathers. It has walls three feet thick made of andradite stone. The old houses in the small village were made of adobe with thatched roofs, but today's homes are made with cement blocks and have tin roofs. The homes are typically two rooms and often do not have indoor plumbing. About 20 years ago, the Israelis came and taught the people of this area how to irrigate as it is very dry. They now grow corn and pine trees. Over the next mountain range, the land is very green and fertile with lots of small fields and farms.

While in Balbanera, we saw a demonstration of how vegetable ivory is carved using the seed from the Tagua palm trees. We saw the huge seed pod that contains 50–60 nuts from which the carvings are made. A number of carvings were purchased by the group.

Alfredo, our guide, tells us that Ecuador has four main regions and industries: oil from the rainforest, roses from the highlands, bananas from the coast, and Galapagos tourism.

According to Alfredo, marriage in Ecuador may have up to three ceremonies—civil, Catholic church and shaman. The festivities usually last up to eight days and everyone in the village brings food and drink to share. The couple may be given some land to farm (usually 25 hectares) from the community land. They cannot sell the land but must give it back if they leave the community.

We saw “The Devil’s Nose,” a ridge that marked the start of the railway from here to the coast. The railway was built many years ago through the Andes by Guatemalan slaves as a route to the sea coast. It is not running now but is being restored as a tourist attraction.

The Incas, we were told, were here only 42 years in the late 1400s and early 1500s but in that time, they created some terracing of land and many miles of aqueducts. The Incas were a very powerful group with a large (200 000 strong) army. They made an alliance with the indigenous people by marrying a princess of the tribe. The women of this area dress very colourfully in velvet skirts, white embroidered blouses and felt hats.

In about 1525, the Spaniards arrived in this area and brought diseases like chicken pox, smallpox and influenza. The Inca king died of smallpox. He had divided his Inca Empire into two sections, one for each son. There was a war between the two and the younger son won. When the Spanish arrived in Lima, the people thought they were Gods because they rode on horseback and wore armour. They captured the Inca king and killed 40 000 Incas. The king was told he could save his life by giving the Spaniards all his gold, silver and gems and by converting to Christianity. He refused to convert and so he was burned alive at the

temple in Incapirca. This temple built in the 900s was destroyed in 1535–1540 by the Spaniards. It was rediscovered by German archaeologists in the 1920s. The Ecuadorian government expropriated the site in 2000 and now controls the restoration as the community did not want the area disturbed. The large area contains foundations of both Inca and pre-Inca indigenous people's dwellings, tombs, food storage, army barracks, the Inca king's home and those of his three wives, as well as an area where human sacrifices of young women took place. Many of the stones used to build the king's home and temple were cut pieces of granite carried overland 1500 miles from Peru.



Incapirca ruins

Today the people in the Incapirca area are short in stature. The Inca kings were tall but the Spaniards killed all of the upper class and the rest of the people were forced to work hard and were not given any meat to eat, so growth was stunted. The local shops had lots of beautiful alpaca scarves, ponchos, sweaters and crafts for sale. Many of us purchased items.

We arrived in Cuenca at the Caravallo Hotel about 6:30 p.m. It is in the old city and was an old home converted to a hotel. It was built with the classic inner courtyard. It is a beautiful old building with modern touches added to the rooms and bathrooms. We walked to dinner around the corner from the hotel and had a beautiful three course meal cooked by a French chef. Appetizers included choice of Greek salad, shrimp in cheese sauce or cevichy. Entree choice of beef bourguignon, pepper steak, chicken or vegetarian entree. Dessert was a choice of mango cheese cake or chocolate ice cream.

We finished off the evening with a short walk to the hotel and then met in the large reception room on the second floor to finish off the wine and beer we had purchased, as we could not take it on the airplane the next day. (*Lynne Duigou*)

Wednesday, March 2—Cuenca to Quito



Cec trying on Panama hats

The day is sunny and about 20°C. After a nice buffet breakfast at the Caravallo Hotel, we boarded the bus with our luggage and set out to tour the Museum of Panama Hats—Homero Ortega. Panama hats are all made by hand. The straw is harvested in the rainforest on the coast. The fibres are split, sun dried, woven by hand, bleached or dyed, dried, shaped, edge finished, ironed, and banded. Thirteen members of the group bought hats.

We continued on the bus with a city tour beginning at the viewpoint. It is the site of the church of the Virgin of Turi.

Cuenca city sits in a valley between two ranges of mountains, with the wetlands on one side and dry lands on the other. It has about 600 000 people and is a very wealthy city as people work overseas and send their money home to build homes or start businesses.

We visited the main square in the Old City and were able to visit both the new (1894) and old (1557) cathedrals. Much of the old cathedral and its four chapels have been restored as have the mosaics and paintings. Several crypts have been found in the old cathedral. The treasures housed in the old church have been put in museums for safe keeping. Rich people paid to be buried in the church by donating money or treasures. The new cathedral was so large and heavy that it began to sink, so the bell towers were never completed.

We had lunch at a restaurant next to the new cathedral and boarded the bus for the trip to the airport. We presented Fausto, our driver, and Alfredo, our guide, with their tips and our thanks for a safe and interesting trip. Alfredo and Brenda Kane were able to do a group check-in at the Aerogal desk at the airport, so we went through security to the gate as a

group. Our plane left a 7 p.m. for Quito, a 35-minute flight. We were served juice and cookies on the way. We were met at the plane by our bus and taken to the Hotel Café Cultura. Most had the same rooms as on the last visit. Soup and sandwiches in the hotel restaurant served as supper for most everyone. (*Lou Duigou*)

Thursday, March 3—Leaving Quito, heading home

We awoke in the honeymoon suite at the Café Cultura. This hotel is great, even if there sometimes is not enough staff for peak times. Today is the day when all but Jessie, Frank, Kay and I are leaving to get the plane from Quito to Bogota to Canada. We had a delightful breakfast provided by the hotel. Since there were no planned group activities for the rest of the day, we were free to do whatever we wished, except get lost or hurt. Some headed off to the market a block away and got lost shopping for 3 hours (been there, done that). Kay did all her last minute bargaining and came away with a purse, shirt, wallet, slippers and two plates, to add to the rest of her shopping collection. There was even time for a nap back at the hotel before the rest of the group departed. (*Roy Harper*)

The bus to take us to the airport arrived at 3:30 and once more we loaded all our suitcases and new bags and boxes full of treasures. Before we boarded, Larry and I were called to open our suitcases. The inspectors did not find anything so on we went to Bogota.

Bogota airport was pretty calm until 10:30 when we had to go through security again. Some of us had our carry-on luggage searched thoroughly, but no one was carrying anything that was prohibited. We left Bogota at midnight, enroute to Toronto. It was a peaceful 6-hour overnight flight, with a hot breakfast served before landing. Thank goodness for Canada Customs—no one had to open a suitcase to my knowledge! Most people continued on to Edmonton. (*Cec MacKenzie*)

Friday, March 4—Quito with Parkers and Harpers

After a rainy evening and night, it was another sunny morning on the mountain tops. It was a pleasure to rise early and enjoy our coca tea and several cups of coffee to start the day. Our breakfast was good, although it took some sorting to get it included in the room price, as expected.

Jessie and Kay headed off to the street market around the corner, while Roy and I had a leisurely time of it at the hotel. It was a treat to have easy access to the computer and the internet with no one hovering nearby for their turn!

Once the ladies returned with bags and goodies, we compared notes and relaxed for awhile, again enjoying all that nice free coffee. Later, following instructions from the young lady at the hotel desk, the four of us headed off to the huge National Museum about four blocks from the hotel. The Museum had four sections: the ancient archeology, a Gold Room, a Colonial Art room full of religious art from the past, and two other art rooms covering 1800s to the present.

The presentations were very well set up with English as well as Spanish explanations for the displays. They also gave good coverage of the history of the areas and the various tribes and their contributions to the early development of the country.

We took a round-about route back to the hotel, enjoying the ambiance and character of the streets and people we passed on our way. After relaxation, internet, and newspaper reviews, we enjoyed a nice meal in the hotel dining room. Service was very good, as usual. After reading and crosswords, we headed off to bed. (*Frank Parker*)

Saturday, March 5—Quito - Bogota - Toronto - Edmonton

Lovely breakfast! When our whole group was here, the hotel set up a buffet breakfast for us. Now that there are no large groups, a breakfast menu is presented and we have ever so many choices! I will miss the tree tomato juice.

Saturday is market day in the huge park about two blocks from the hotel so off we went. It was a beautiful day for a walk around the big park, checking at the many stalls to see if there was anything different from what we had already seen. This is the day when local artists display their paintings, pottery and other work. We were tempted but always had to think of fitting things into the suitcase.

We had picked out a nice little restaurant for lunch but discovered that it was closed on Saturday. However, we found another little place that had a menu del dia displayed—soup, roast with mushrooms, rice, salad, papaya juice and fruit salad for dessert. No one there could speak English, so we just pointed to the menu. We thought each item was \$2, the price posted, but when it came time to pay, we found that the whole menu was only \$2, probably the best bargain around!

Our shuttle to the airport went fairly quickly as today is a public holiday so there is not much traffic. Check-in at the airport was slow, so it is fortunate that we had plenty of time. The plane was full with people heading to Bogota, as that airport is one of the few that has a direct flight to Canada. Even though our luggage was checked through to Toronto, the personal check-in at Bogota seemed rather tedious, including a change of gate, after everyone had lined up for an hour. The overnight flight to Toronto was smooth and the hot breakfast, welcome. We landed a bit early but had to sit on the tarmac for over an hour, while snowplows cleared the heavy overnight snow.

Kay and Roy continued on their flight to Edmonton. Frank and I enjoyed the day with our daughter in Toronto. We were two hours late leaving that evening, as the snow had delayed all flights, starting that morning. It was minus 20 when we landed in Edmonton!
(Jessie Parker)

