

THE CHIVA EXPRESS

When you visit Ecuador and select your condo in the mountains of Cotacachi or on the Beach in San Clemente, (click on the information block) you may have some extra time to explore this small, beautiful country. Ecuador is half the size of France and offers many unique travel experiences; THE CHIVA EXPRESS is such an example.

Chivas are typically old school buses with open sides and brightly painted. I have been looking for old number 70 that took me to school every day back in fifth grade, but have yet to find it. These party buses are used during festivals and often have a brass band and a booming bass drum conjuring a party atmosphere. Friends rent these Chivas and celebrate through the streets.

Now, this CHIVA EXPRESS is a modern bus, with comfortable seats, bathroom and even some local art, mounted on a train chassis. It's a bus on tracks, and allows you to tour the unbeaten paths of Ecuador with a bilingual guide. www.chivaexpress.com will allow you to see what I mean. Enjoy riding inside or share the exhilarating experience of "riding the roof". There are several itineraries to choose from, and my wife, Isabelita and I opted for the 3 day 2 night tour. We rode in the seats on top to better sense the indigenous cultures, markets, smells, and views in a novel way not to mention that it offers the best vantage to take exceptional photographs. All a wonderful fantasy in reality.

The CHIVA EXPRESS is a new tour and some of the rail tracks have yet to be renewed, so we were met for the first leg of the trip by a small bus and traveled via Ecuador's highway system. Leaving Quito we rode south toward the train station, stopping in Sangolqui to sample oven fresh pork then walked to the local market. Sangolqui is such a small town yet the market overflowed with flowers, unusual fruits, and vegetables. I have lived in Ecuador for four years but the guide stumped me with several fruits I had never before seen, and we sampled Passion Fruit, another first for me.

Then we boarded the first CHIVA EXPRESS in Tambillo. Our new ride was shiny clean and it was emotional to see our coach waiting for us on the tracks. The licensed conductors helped us board, passed out ponchos and we were off! Leaving the train station the regular train followed for a short distance, but stopped at the edge of town. I suppose it was switching tracks. Our guide informed us that the CHIVA EXPRESS uses the tracks on alternate days with the regular scheduled train. The air was crisp, and my wool gloves, stocking cap and poncho protected against the mountain breeze. The conductor blew the horn entering every curve, at workers tending their fields, at children, at cows and sheep that were tethered near the tracks, and at the occasional dog that raced us. Only one dog won a race against us. Everyone photographed spectacular gardens of purple flowers that we learned were plots of quinoa, the cereal used here in so many different meals. At the end of our first ride we disembarked at Guamote, where hot chicken soup and coffee greeted us. A definite A-plus stop!

Our journey continued and our trusty bus whisked us to a working hacienda where we experienced Ecuadorian cowboy life. Isabelita and I shared a glass of milk, so fresh it was still warm, and several people in our group showed off their milking expertise. We watched cowboys, called jinetes, make rawhide rope and then use it to lasso a rather cantankerous bull. Inside the hacienda dining room we sampled humitas, a corn, egg and cheese pastry, fresh jams, juices and dark Ecuadorian coffee.

Near by a rose plantation tour awaited. The colors, smells and beauty of the gardens made all of us balk when time came to return to our bus, but time was precious and our travel continued to Urbina. Llamas roamed this cold flat land, and with a little imagination, you could be on the set with Clint Eastwood in the movie High Plains Drifter. A cold wind whistled around our ears making us retreat to the warmth of the train station's kitchen, where another treat awaited...Hot bread, jams, chocolate bars and cups of canelazo. A steaming cinnamon beverage laced with aguardiente, sugar cane liquor. The aguardiente is optional, but it sure does fend off the cold of the paramo.

Our day wound down in a restored four star hacienda in Riobamba. As our vehicle approached the gates there were soldiers everywhere! Turned out that the President of Ecuador, Rafael Correa, and a group of dignitaries were spending the night there too. During supper, the President strolled into the dining room and sat at the table adjoining the one Isabelita and I occupied...Hey, I am trying to tell you this is a spectacular tour!

The second morning we headed to the Alausi station and boarded the second CHIVA EXPRESS where we conquered the infamous Devil's Nose, a huge rock mountain. Building a railroad on this precipice was an engineering marvel brought to fruition around 1900 by a couple of brothers from the U.S. We zigzagged down to a rushing river on the canyon floor, and to the ruins of an ancient train station. Marble columned ruins are all that's left of a once elegant train siding.

Late afternoon we toured grass and stone terraced Ingapirca, the most important Inca ruins in Ecuador.

Night had set in by the time our exhausted group arrived in Cuenca at another four star hotel. Excellent restaurant, hot shower and a comfortable bed ended our second day.

A city tour of Cuenca, another of Ecuador's beautiful cities, was our third day. Pollution free, French architecture, uncrowded cobblestone streets made for a pleasing day walk. The flower market has recently been renovated, and frankly, I think this area lost some of the allure that the old market possessed, but beautiful roses and skillful Cuenca merchants continue selling colorful bouquets at wholesale prices in this tiny square. Next door to the flower market is a church and Carmelite convent. Honey, jam, and medicinal cures, prepared by the nuns are sold through a lazy Susan contraption in the wall. If you need a souvenir "for that hard to please someone", this may be the place to find it. Cuenca also houses some of the best silver and goldsmiths in the country. Their silver filigree and 18 carat gold wedding bands are an inexpensive treasure and an

added incentive to consider this adventure...even if you don't get to sit next to the President.

Reality set in when our beautiful tour came to an end and we boarded our return flight to Quito.

Prepared by Willard Robinson