

Adventure

South American

NEW ASSOCIATE CLUBS ENLIVEN

COUNTRIES OF BEAUTY AND CONTRAST.



THE CLOUDS, LUMINOUS IN THE WANING MOON, WHIP BY THE WINDOW OF the plane like ghosts on uncertain errands. The city of Quito appears as a carpet of stars blanketing the Andes Mountains of Ecuador. For a moment time seems suspended, the plane hanging in the sky like a pendant. Then we bank east, homing in on the runway's blinking stripe. Below, the statue of the Virgin of the Americas keeps watch over the city from the Cerro Panecillo, a hill dominating colonial Quito, and cars speed along the dimly lit roads. The cabin speaker crackles and the flight attendant bids us farewell in the first of four languages. The man in the seat next to me smiles in his sleep as he mumbles in the lilting language of Quichua, as if speaking to a lover, just before the wheels touch the ground.

Our group included free-lance writers and photographers on assignment, and the trip to Ecuador could not have been more timely, because three Associate Club properties in Central and South America are now in varying stages of completion. The beautiful City Club Panama is slated to open in

BY EDWARD PITTMAN

PHOTOGRAPHY BY KIP LOTT



*In Latacunga,
the artisans make most
of their goods by
hand.*

ASSOCIATE CLUBS

CARACAS CITY CLUB

This club is scheduled to open later this year. On the seventh and eighth floors of Centro San Ignacio (as well as an outside terrace on the 10th floor), the club will feature floor-to-ceiling windows for dramatic views of Caracas and the Avila Mountains. One design option being discussed calls for traditional decor, accented by sculpture and paintings by local artists. Facilities will include a spacious lounge and bar, main dining room, private dining and meeting rooms for as many as 100, a large salon for entertaining and high tea, a library, and a state-of-the-art business center.

CITY CLUB PANAMA

This club opens in the fall in Panama City, on the 29th and 30th floors of the Plaza Panama, the city's premier business address. The interior features an interesting mix of pre-Colombian touches — such as custom marble floor patterns and art pieces from regional artists — paired with traditional dark woods. Facilities will include a spacious living room, bar and lounge, formal dining room, casual grill, a library dining room, and several handsomely furnished private dining rooms.

GUAYAQUIL CITY CLUB

Scheduled to open in spring 1999, the club will occupy 16,000 square feet on the top two floors of the World Trade Center, near the Avenue Francisco de Orellana, a fast-growing business center. Heavy architectural millwork and intricate ironwork — both characteristic of Ecuadorian style — will distinguish the club. Facilities will include a spacious living room, formal dining room, casual grill, boardroom, a library dining room, and several lavishly furnished private dining rooms.

the fall in **Panama City**. Later in the year, the **Caracas City Club** will begin serving members in the capital city of **Venezuela**. And the **Guayaquil City Club** is scheduled to open in spring of 1999 in **Guayaquil**, Ecuador's economic capital.

"Many of our members in our Florida Associate Clubs are Latin Americans," says Denise Bodman, director of marketing for the International Group of the Associate Clubs. "They want clubs in their homelands; and there are plenty of fabulous cities where we're a perfect fit."

"These three clubs are just the beginning," says Tom Bruff, senior vice president, director, for the Associate Clubs. "There are future plans to build Associate Clubs in Santiago, Chile; Buenos Aires, Argentina; and São Paulo, Brazil. South Americans conduct business during meals much more than we do in the United States, and they like the exclusivity a City Club provides."

It would be impossible to recount the entire trip, from first impressions of Quito to a trek through the Andes by train, to the three days spent touring the Galápagos Islands by ship, to the overwhelming scope of the Otavalo market. The following are selected moments and notes from the journey.

TWO

DAY

Surrounded by snow-capped volcanoes, Quito is a study in contrasts: Colonial and contemporary, chaotic and quiet, poor and prosperous, international and Indian. Dark-suited businessmen talk on cell phones next to Indians dressed in Alpaca sweaters — their heads capped by distinctive felt hats and their shoulders precariously balancing huge bags of shirts, hats, and shawls.

THREE

DAY

Modes of public transportation in Ecuador are more colorful and varied than in the United States. "Popular" class buses are crowded (often SRO) but inexpensive. And it's not unusual to be seated next to livestock. "Executive" buses are more expensive, but you can sit down and you don't have to sit with a chicken. "Selectivos" are as they sound — you get a seat and someone comes to take your money. The *Virgin de Santa* bus was particularly striking, striped with brown, orange, and red reflectorized tape, with its name painted in gold on the windshield.

As we climb the steep hillside, shanties with brick and cinderblock walls dot the countryside, their roofs of rusted cast-iron sheeting reflecting what light penetrates the thick cloud cover. The sights are strictly rural: A small boy squatting by the roadside holds a cooing white dove; and an elderly woman coaxes three cows up narrow stairs cut into the hillside.

FOUR

DAY

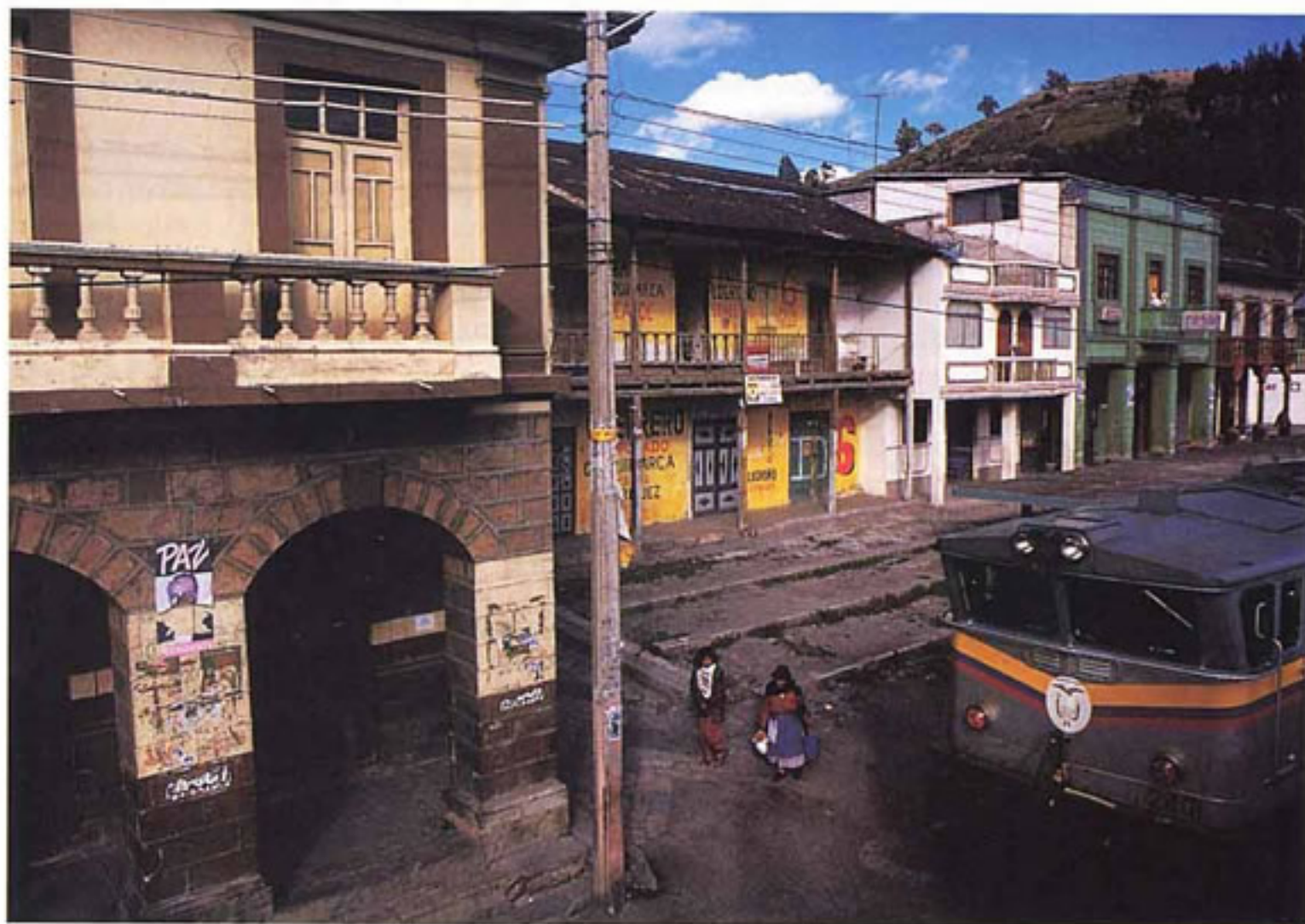
The market in Latacunga has vendors selling most of life's necessities, from sweat-shirts and sweaters to corn masa and rice. A mélange of people and animals mingle to set a most fascinating street scene. A man weaves through the crowd, balancing an incredibly tall pile of bread loaves. Dogs roam the marketplace in packs, occasionally testing their boldness to snatch food from a basket. And a man stands on the hood of an ancient Volkswagen Beetle, hawking salve guaranteed to cure impotence and cancer, not necessarily in that order, our interpreter tells us.

That afternoon, in Ambato, we learn that local healers use guinea pigs to diagnose sickness. The guinea pig is rubbed over the afflicted person's body, then dissected. By noting the color of the guinea pig's organs, the healer diagnoses the patient's ailment. Guinea pigs also are considered a special meal among the *indígenas*, or indigenous people. On "Guinea Pig Street," where the rodents turn on vendors' rotisseries, the delicacy is an expensive \$8 (compared to chickens for \$5).

On the road to Riobamba, which means "violet by the river," we pass families tilling marginal fields in the setting sun. As the temperature falls, the clouds creep down



In the churches of colonial Quito, Baroque and Renaissance styles mix to form the "horror vacuum" style, in which artisans cover every nook and cranny with paintings and carvings.



Atacusi, once a highland resort for people from Guayaquil, is now quiet.

TRAVEL TIPS

South and Central American business follows customs other than what we're used to in the United States. Before visiting, enlist the aid of a few travel guides. Here is a sampling of some differences.

- Taxi drivers often delight in taking advantage of unwary tourists, so agree on the price of a ride in advance.

- Ecuadorians eat late. If you want to avoid the bulk of the tourist traffic at local restaurants, plan on having dinner around 9 p.m. or 10 p.m.

- When in Ecuador, exchange rates fluctuate, so bring a calculator. And if you're visiting the Galápagos Islands, exchange your money while on the mainland.

- Latin Americans conduct business during meals more than we do in the United States. And don't be upset if your lunch partner is late, as schedules are more relaxed than in this country.

- The business dress code in Caracas is very formal (suit and tie), slightly less so in Ecuador and Panama (particularly in coastal areas).

- Check the business hours in the country where you're doing business. In Ecuador, for example, businesses typically close for two or three hours at midday, then reopen at 2 p.m. or 3 p.m. (The exceptions are many tourism-related businesses, which remain open with no siesta.)

the mountainside, washing over husbands and sons walking home through the fields, past wives taking the wash off the fence rails at the sides of houses, and past dogs sleeping on porches, before spreading across the valley floor. By late evening, we are settled into the Hostería El Troje, where evening entertainment includes a roaring fire in a stone courtyard and native couples dancing arm in arm across the cobblestones at dizzying speeds to Andean music. After a few dances, they part and venture into the audience for new partners. The touch of the *senorita's* hand takes me by surprise, and suddenly the courtyard is filled with people dancing. I do not know if it is the fire crackling in our ears or the speed at which we move, but our dance is over all too soon.

FIVE

DAY The next morning, I wake at 5:30 a.m. Outside, the cries of birds filter through the treetops. In the hotel parking lot, an Indian sits in his van, singing along to the Andean music on the radio. A boy about 6 years old climbs out and proffers a green ball. I realize he wants to play soccer. We kick the ball back and forth for a few minutes, and occasionally I mumble some elementary Spanish. He responds in broken English. Eventually, his father leans out of the van and signals him with a finger. The boy scoops up the ball and says a quick "Adios" before the van drives away.

Riding on top of the train out of Riobamba just before dawn is spectacular — the sky is the deepest shade of cornflower. We're warned to watch for tree branches overhanging the tracks. Apparently a time or two an unwary traveler has been swept off into a ravine. The early morning cold is bracing but exhilarating. We pass canals almost bursting with tiny jumping fish. Chickens dart off the tracks and cows regard us sternly. At every farm, dogs chase the train. Along the way, Indians stop their chores and wave. Children smile and jump up and down. One grizzled, middle-aged man hollers "Amigo!" and waves his shovel.

The roar of the wind dominates every conversation, as does the seemingly endless "clack clack, clack clack" of the train cars. We pass through the train station in Guamate and head down through the rocky valley toward Alausi. I gasp at a condor flying low overhead. Its tremendous shadow washes over the train before the bird vanishes over a hillside. The train passes tiny patches of red-striped angel's trumpets and waterfalls bordered by bright green-yellow mosses. We steam through stone tunnels crudely cut into the hillsides.

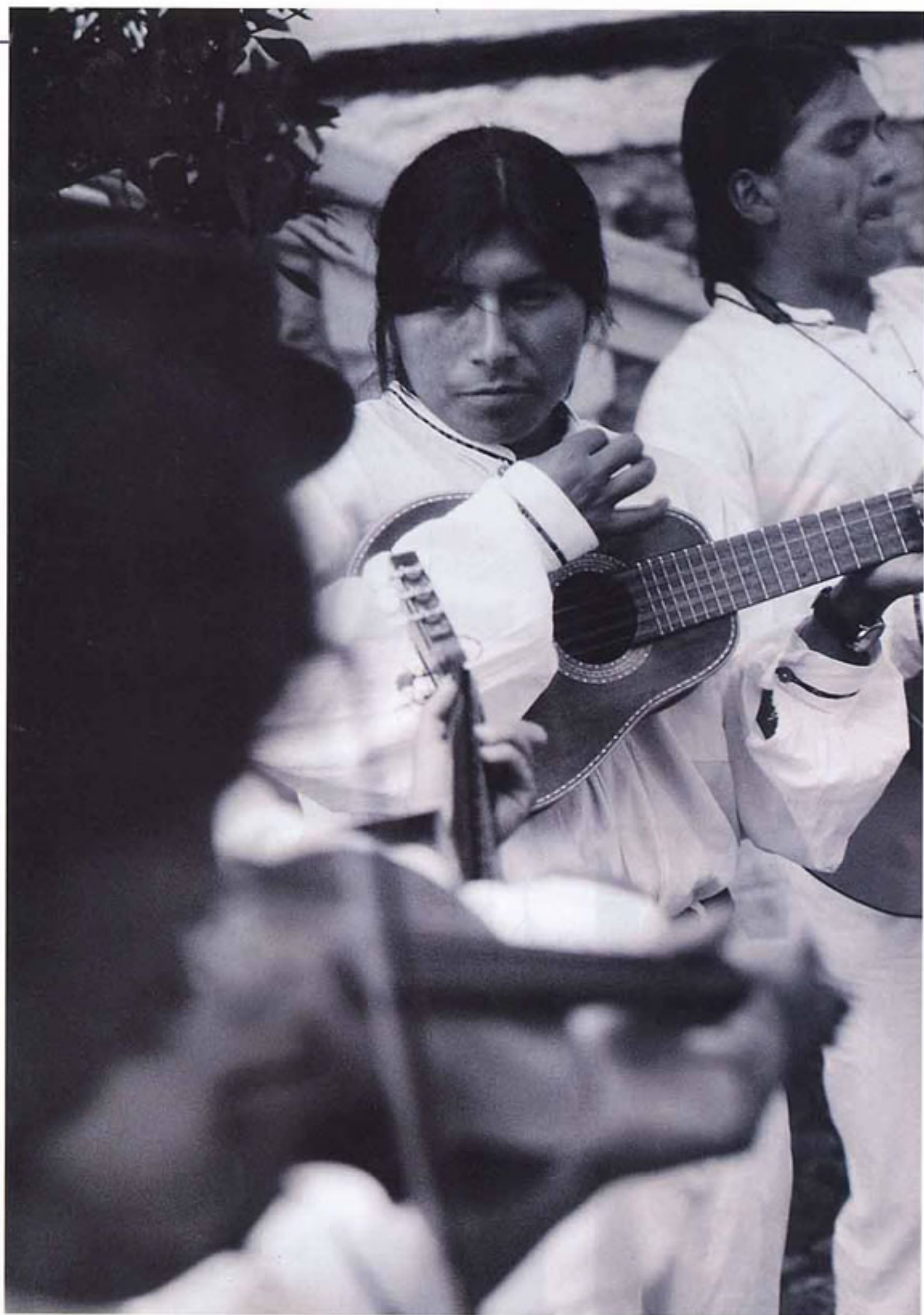
The whitewater of the Chanchan River parallels the tracks for miles as we head into tropical Ecuador. Half an hour out of Huigra, a favorite spot for backpackers, the air warms, and we discard layers of clothing. The mountains to the left are darkened by the shadow of rain and the vegetation becomes increasingly dense and fragrant. An insect buzzes past my head. Waterfalls distinguish the hillsides and huge ferns droop over the tracks.

The night is spent at the Hilton Colón in Guayaquil, which is the cultural, economic, and political center for the country's coastal region. Some historians claim the city was named after the area's last Indian chief, Guayas, and his wife, Quil, who chose to commit suicide rather than submit to the invading Spaniards. When the Guayaquil City Club opens in the spring of 1999, the facility will occupy the two top floors of the World Trade Center.

SIX

DAY Time has come to board the *panga*, or dinghy, that will take us to the *M/V Santa Cruz*, which, in turn, is the ship that will carry us to the Galápagos Islands. The gangplank, however, is blocked by a sleeping sea lion. Minutes later, he still hasn't stirred, and a low, growling sound is becoming louder. He's snoring!

The Galápagos Islands were officially discovered in 1535 by Fray Tomás de Berlanga, the Bishop of Panamá, who arrived by accident when his sailing ship was delivered by the Humboldt Current. Although he searched vainly for fresh water, he was



*Traditional
Andean music has a haunting,
melancholy sound.*



Penguins often swim near Pinnacle Rock.



*Beautiful
native "tigua"
oil paintings
can be found
throughout
Ecuador.*



*Near
Palмира
— the
highest
point on
our train journey.*

impressed by the many giant land tortoises. In a 1574 atlas of the world, he referred to the area as "the Islands of the Tortoises." Thus, the Galápagos Islands. Later, buccaneers and pirates inhabited the islands. One such buccaneer rescued a castaway named Alexander Selkirk, whose adventure provided the inspiration for Daniel Defoe's classic, *Robinson Crusoe*.

Once on North Seymour Island, our naturalist guide, Emma, explains that El Niño has brought unusually high rainfall, giving us a rare opportunity to see the islands in bloom. Cacti and yellow *muyuyo* flowers cover the ground. Silvery gray stalks of *palo santo* (holy stick) trees stretch toward the sky and fill the air with the scent of frankincense. Brown-striped lava lizards dart back and forth in front of us, sometimes pausing in the path to perform what looks like pushups (but what we learn is really a challenge) before disappearing into the brush. Magnificent frigatebirds (the island is said to have the largest colony in the Galápagos) fill the sky. The swallow-tailed gulls, with their eyes marked by bright red rings, appear settled for the afternoon, resting before their nightly hunt for fish and squid. Then I see a blue-footed booby wandering down the path. Our guide repeated the legend that the Spaniards called the birds clowns, or *bobos*, because of their bright blue feet and their clumsy gait.

SEVEN

DAY Just before we land at Bartolomé, near Pinnacle Rock, I spy a handful of the islands' estimated 2,000 Galápagos penguins, the only species of penguin native to the tropics. One theory holds that they arrived during an Ice Age and were stranded when the earth warmed and the ice melted. They are black and white, but because of the oil in their feathers they look almost silver in the sunlight. Sightseeing at Bartolomé Island also means exploring the moonscape-like surfaces of volcanic areas. We climb to the summit of the highest peak and look across the water at the black of the most recent lava flows.

We snorkeled with White-banded Angelfish and Blue Parrotfish, and when we approached the territory of a school of tiny black damselfish they attacked, their scales turning pale beige as they pecked at my mask. Later, swimming with sea lions seemed like a strange underwater dance. They rolled over in front of me to reveal their bellies, then hugged the bottom, then rose up suddenly and swam toward my face until we were almost nose to nose. Back onboard the *Santa Cruz* the experience seemed like a dream, but as tangible reminders I have my sunburned shoulders and the salt on my lips.

EIGHT

DAY On the last day at sea, we land on Tower Island in Darwin Bay. The landing area is the caldera of an extinct, partially eroded volcano, and the surrounding cliffs form the inner portion of the crater's rim. Swallow-tailed gulls nest on the rocks near the beach, cooing to their screeching offspring. Tiny fiddler crabs scuttle across the sand, waving their disproportionately larger claws in challenge. On the return to the ship, it starts to rain. Borne on the ocean breeze, the tiny drops tap our cheeks like cool kisses. →





*Magnificent
frigatebirds
searching for
mates fill the
skies above
North Seymour
Island.*



*Indigenas (indigenous people) from neighboring villages
examine livestock in Otavalo.*



*This
young
Otavaleño
sells flutes
made by his
father.*

In the afternoon, we land at Puerto Egas on James Island, also known as Isla Santiago. The beach is black, made up of volcanic ash now reduced to fine sand by countless waves, and in the waning light of the afternoon sun, silvery flecks of quartz or mica sparkle like tiny diamonds.

The last night aboard ship, a few of us sleep on deck. At midnight, we begin to cross the equator for the return trip. The seas are rough, and we huddle together on the bow, buffeted by the 12-knot wind. We share details of our lives back home — and dreams we may never achieve. Under the glare of a million stars, tickled by droplets of sea spray, warmed only by thin blankets and a few sips of Scotch, we curl up in the deck chairs and fall fast asleep.

NINE

DAY Prior to boarding the plane at Baltra to return to the mainland, we stop at the Charles Darwin Research Station in Puerto Ayora, which was founded in 1959 by two scientists on a UNESCO mission. Today, one of the station's primary missions is raising and repatriating Galápagos tortoises. Unfortunately the program began too late for three now-extinct subspecies. Another subspecies, from Pinta, is survived by a tortoise known as Lonesome George, thought to be between 70 and 100 years old. He is the last of his kind, and when he dies sometime during the next century, his subspecies will vanish.

Several of us hire a car and drive to Hacienda Cusín in San Pablo Del Lago, in the shadow of the Imbabura volcano, in order to be at the famous market in Otavalo early the next morning.

TEN

DAY Our group reaches the Otavalo market very early, but thousands of Otavaleños already are there, some having started the trek from their mountain homes days earlier. In the minutes before dawn everything is blue: The cloud-shrouded peaks of the nearby mountains; the trucks carrying animals in cages made from sticks and bailing wire and coat hangers; the Otavaleños in their traditional dress filing down the sides of the roads; the smoke from the cooking fires curling into the morning sky.

Two Indians note the merits of a calf as the owner points out the calf's strong chest and stomps his feet to indicate strong legs. The would-be buyers reach into their pockets to feel their money, then shake their heads and move on.

At the craft market, an elderly man carries a reed sack filled with sweaters his family had knitted during the past month. He also carries the table on which he will display them. Stalls by the hundreds line the streets for blocks. Some display shirts and belts; others, tagua nut necklaces and silver bracelets. Many offer indigenous Alpaca sweaters and woolen shawls.

Aromas of fresh-baked bread, fried potatoes, and cilantro pervade the vegetable market. Here, the merchandise is fresh and colorful. A huge bowl of chilies is a pastiche of yellow and orange. Pink onions are bound by cords and arranged like peculiar molecular models. Eggs range in color from a creamy white to an almost chocolate brown.

Suddenly it is late afternoon, time to return to Quito and to telephones and faxes and voice mail. Can it be? Tomorrow brings the flight home.

ELEVEN

DAY Too soon we are on the plane, headed back to the lives or loves we had left behind. The plane's contrail winds over the white-capped peak of Cotopaxi, over the churches where parishioners sing the *Ave Maria*, over Otavaleños climbing the steep trails to their homes high in the mountains, over fields where corn and coffee beans warm in the sun, over frigatebirds riding invisible updrafts — over all the hills, valleys, and towns of this beautiful green country. ♦♦

WHERE TO STAY:

Hilton Colón Quito: Luxury hotel at one end of Avenida Amazonas, one of the best areas for shopping. Phone: 011-593-2-560-666.

Hostería El Troje: Near Chambo, Riobamba. Phone: 011-593-3-960-826.

Hacienda Cusín: In San Pablo Del Lago, near the Otavalo market. Built in 1602, the rooms of this charming 25-room inn feature fireplaces, beamed ceilings, and local crafts. Call 617-924-1974 for reservations.

Hotel Hilton Colón Guayaquil: Luxurious and massive. Phone: 011-593-4-689-000.

WHERE TO DINE:

La Rincón La Ronda: In Quito. For dinner, go late (after 8:00 p.m.). The chateaubriand is a bargain at about \$7. Try the local Cabernet. Phone: 011-593-2-540-459.

Villa Gertrudis Piscina: In an old home in Baños. A fixed-price meal included a curious Ecuadorian variation of chicken-fried steak. Phone: 011-593-3-740-441.

HOW TO GET THERE:

Adventure Associates is the U.S. representative for Metropolitan Touring, Ecuador's travel agency. It can arrange various types of travel, such as half-day city tours, honeymoons, and guided adventures through the Andes Mountains. Call 800-527-2500.