

Friday, 3 April

We got into Quito about 20 minutes early, and then waited in customs for a while. In line, we saw a whole group of people wearing University of Dayton sweatshirts, and I asked them what they were doing. It was a campus ministry group that had come down to Ecuador for Spring Break to work with indigenous people. No engineering students among them, though, Aaron. I checked.

Marta met us outside customs, holding four bunches of beautiful roses. Ecuador grows roses and exports much of them to the U.S. Later in the trip, we would drive by many of the rose growers and Marta explained to me that the barbed wire and armed security guards outside the hothouses and fields are to help prevent people from getting in and placing cocaine in the rose shipments.

Anyway, we went with Marta and the driver she knew from the Embassy (Marcello) and drove the 20 minutes to their house. On the way back to the airport (when we were leaving), the trip would be 10 minutes through completely empty streets (4:30am on a Monday morning), but there was traffic at this time, and Marcello drove through many side streets to help avoid it. The kids loved his car because it has no seatbelts in the back.

Alessandra was outside waiting for us with Howard and Thomas. As soon as she saw the car, she started jumping up and down and Mo started screeching and I had to physically constrain Mo from jumping out of the car before we stopped. They were very happy to see each other.

The Youths live in a gated, guarded community filled with other embassy families. It is in the Northern part of Quito, and you don't see the shacks that we saw everywhere else. In fact, these are very nice houses. However, even within this gated community, everyone lives behind their own individual large metal doors, kind of like a compound. The Youths' house is the last of three connected houses -- part townhouse, but with a courtyard in the middle that Howard has filled with bird-attracting plants and hummingbird feeders. To get access to the three houses, you have to go through a large metal entry gate, and then there are also bars on all the windows of their house (required by the embassy before they could move in). In the back of this compound (through another large sheet metal gate), live the owners of the house that the Youths rent. They have their own gated compound and a very large house. Inside the compound is considered safe, but the kids are not allowed to leave the compound unless going straight to a friend's house down the block, with calls back and forth once they arrive. There are many domestic and construction workers who come into the gated community daily, and even with all the security, there have been thefts. Ecuador isn't much for kidnapping, but everyone's careful. Alessandra and Thomas's school is about as far from their house as Mo's school is from ours, but the kids must still take a bus to it to leave the gated community.

Anyway, their house is very nice, about the same size as their house in Maryland. Marx and Satch slept on a sofa bed in the living room, Scott and I had the guest room (which seems to also have been used as a domestic's room in the past), and Mo slept with Alessandra in her room. We were exhausted when we got in, and I was dizzy and had developed a headache already (my only altitude sickness), but everyone hung out for a while before going to bed.

Saturday, 4 April

I woke up with a terrible headache, but Tylenol soon made it manageable. For breakfast, the kids started a tradition of eating toast with Nutella. Both Alessandra and Thomas had baseball games

early that morning, so Mo and Satch went with them and Howard and Marta (who coach Thomas's team). Scott and I stayed back with Marx. Mo ended up playing on Sandra's team that day, and got some lessons about hitting the ball. They all had a great time.

Marta had to run to the embassy to finish up some work, and while she was doing that, we all went about 1/2 mile or so to the local community park, which was inside the gated community. There was a small zip line there that the kids loved.



Scott took tons of pictures, and I started reading a book I found in Howard's bookshelf, which turned out to be fantastic (won the Pulitzer this year), called "The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao" by Junot Diaz. Awesome book. About a family from the Dominican Republic, but much much more. I strongly suggest it.

Anyway, another family met us at the park. Kevin Skillen is the cultural attache' for the American Embassy. He and his wife Becky are originally from outside Pittsburgh, but now have a townhouse in Herndon. They have three kids not far from our kids' ages. I hit it off with Becky pretty quickly. They invited us back to their place for jugo (including strawberry, mango, and papaya -- yummm) and homemade brownies. Their place was just a couple of houses down from the Youths' compound, and it is HUGE. Gorgeous. Marble and glass everywhere. Becky made us tostados, these little corn-like things that pop, but not quite like popcorn. They were yummy. They also let the kids borrow boots so that we could go hiking on our excursion the next day. I really wanted to spend more time with them, but we had to get going because Marta would be home and she wanted to take us to this place for dinner.

We took the Youth's car and a cab to Mosaico, also in the north of the city. From the balcony in the back of the restaurant, you can look out across the entire valley of Quito, including the bullfighting stadium. It was a bit cold though, so we sat in by the fireplace. This place had Greek food in an Ecuadorian way. Interesting





combination, and very good.

That night we drove back and prepped for our two-night trip to Mindo the next day.

Sunday, 5 April

Marta made pancakes (she's a great cook), and the kids ate them up. My headache returned, but I kept popping Tylenol.

Planned to be out the door by 10am, but we were pleased to get out by 10:45. Marta and Scott share their get-there-when-we-get-there gene, and Howard and I try not to be late. It wouldn't have mattered really, unless we had previously asked Marcello to be there at 10 (we needed two cars to take us on the 2 hour drive). As it turned out, we stopped a number of times, once to look at this farming community that had been built inside an extinct volcano (complete with touristy stands),



and a few times for children who either had to pee or felt as if they were going to throw up. In the end, no one did throw up that day, but the roads winded this way and that through the mountains, and Mo and Marxe didn't feel so good.

On the road to Mindo, the vegetation changed from desert-like and dry to more rolling and green and lush. Howard described some of the trees and flowers we passed and we saw turkey vultures flying above.

We stopped for lunch at this cheese place, where we first encountered trucha (trout), the fish of choice in Ecuador. Marxe ate a trucha, Scott had some meat thing, Satch had some pasta thing I think, and Mo and I had a cheese plate. All home-made cheese. It was good. We were warned by Marta and Howard, though, to NOT eat the berries and juices unless we had been assured of their first being washed correctly and the use of filtered water.

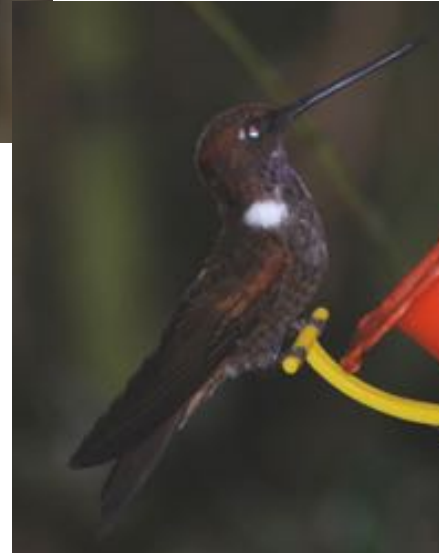
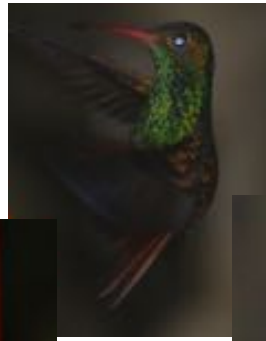
Anyway, we got to the Mindo hotel around 3ish I think. The place was completely empty, and they had not been expecting us even though Howard had reserved our rooms. Things quickly got solved though, and the staff was apologetic for the mix-up. A woman took us around the entire place, which consisted of 10 or so rooms in the main lodge, with separate bathrooms and then a couple of perimeter buildings. We ended up in two of the 4 rooms at the Bird House, which was about a ¼ mile walk from the main lodge, down through a covered boardwalk (necessary in the rain), past a pool and jacuzzi (all covered up), and through jungle. The rooms were a bit moldy smelling, but spacious, and very Swiss-Family-Robinsonish. Our place was far far far from anything, and we felt deep in the cloud forest (which we really were). Howard soon saw a few different types of hummingbirds, and a green toucan. The kids ran around playing



(they all get along very well).

Eventually we went back up to the front lodge because they had a large array of hummingbird feeders (about twelve) in this one section outside the driveway. We saw tons of different types of hummingbirds. They were everywhere. Very cool. We stayed there looking until it got dark, and then started thinking about dinner. Because the Youths' car had seats for 5, Howard





made two trips into town (about a 15 minute ride) to accomodate all of us. On the way back from town, though, and from that point forward (except on the trips to Mindo and Otovala from Quito and vice versa), we all piled in together, with at least 3 kids in the back trunk area (it's a Toyota 4-runner type car) and sometimes one or two sitting on laps. Anyway, Scott, Marta, and Howard found a place to eat that, again, was completely empty. We saw them bringing groceries in from up the street after we ordered. The emptiness isn't completely due to the economy, although Ecuador has been hit like the rest of the world. But there had been some huge avalanches and mudslides on the road from Quito to Mindo a few months back, and local business had not picked up again yet.

The vegetable soup was really good (soup seemed to be the best dish in Ecuador). Trucha was served again. While we were waiting for the food to be cooked (at least 45 minutes), Scott and Howard went down the street and bought potato chips for the kids. Afterwards, Scott checked out the barbecue stand down the street, which is where all the local townspeople apparently eat. Not a thing there for vegetarians. After dinner, we all piled into the car and went back to the Bird Room. The kids raced around some more until we could gather them all for sleep.

Monday, 6 April

Howard woke up early to go birdwatching (6:15), and ended up meeting us at breakfast in the main lodge around 8:30 or 9:00. We had tried to use the bathroom and shower in our rooms, but there was no water. When we told them at the lodge, they were very apologetic, and brought us a bottle of wine and four glasses, which they then delivered to the Bird House outside area (where there was a table upstairs on a balcony outside the room and a leather couch, etc downstairs. It was kinda cool sitting on the leather couch and chair under a palm roof, while the rain was coming down and the jungle surrounded us on every side). While hiking over to breakfast, Scott took some cool pictures of the plants and flowers.

At breakfast, Sandra (who has just become a vegetarian) got Howard to agree to give up his one cup of coffee every morning for her giving up all sweets. It lasted a day for her. But Howard actually



kept it up for three. The morning he went jogging, it all ended.

The hills around our cloud forest were verdant and filled with all kinds of wildlife. Scott and I saw what we figured out was a monkey in the trees outside our room (which had two walls made of mostly glass), and it was lush and beautiful. The clouds came in and out of view, but this is different than a rain forest in that it's a bit

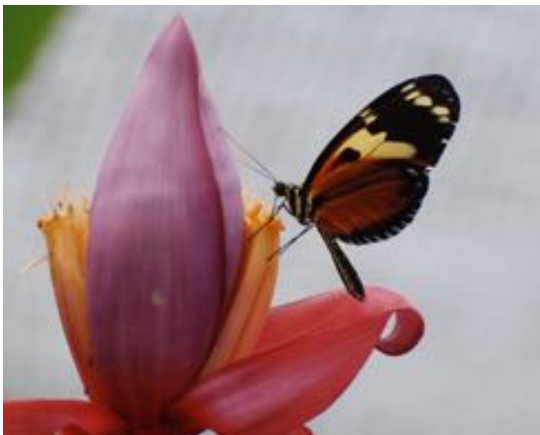
drier. There weren't too many mosquitoes either.

Breakfast was good -- eggs, yogurt, juice, bread, fruit. We told the hotel people that we would like to use the pool later (so they could uncover it), and then headed back to the Bird House to change into bathing suits for the day's adventures.

Piled all into the car again, and headed back into Mindo to see the Mariposa garden (butterflies). Different butterflies than we see in the yearly Brookside Gardens in Maryland, but much the same idea. A big hothouse, filled with plants that butterflies love and rotting fruit for butterflies to eat. Scott took many many pictures.



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Then we decided to go tubing.

Now Scott and I had pictured the kind of tubing that we did on the “mighty” Guadalupe Texas or on the Shenandoah in West Virginia. grab a big truck tire, sit it in the water, stick butt in it, and head downstream. Not quite.

This had 6 or 7 giant tires tied together with string and rope, as well as ropes looped around the tires for hand holds. You sit in the space BETWEEN the tires (not in the middle), grab the ropes, stick your legs into points to try to make footholds and hold on for your life! We all had on life vests and helmets that kept falling down over our eyes (one size fits all). The river would have been class 3 rapids in the States, and there’s no way they would have allowed any of the kids on the tubes. I held onto Satch so hard that my hand hurt when we finally finished. Marxie ended up behind me so I couldn’t reach her, but one of the two guides on our tubes stayed with her the entire time, even while pushing off and around and down (our group included Howard, Thomas, Marxie, Satch, and me and the other group was Scott, Marta, Mo, and Sandra, plus the two guides). Anyway, we got in the water, after being bitten all over our legs (and other parts) by these BUGS (we think they’re called Chiggers) that didn’t hurt when biting, but are hideously itchy still, a week after the fact, and the water was cold cold cold cold. Jeez, going over the rapids, we’d get splashed and try to hold on while gasping for breath because of the cold water. My legs were shivering so hard at times that it was hard for me to keep them in the makeshift footholds. Even with all this, I loved it. It was a very adrenaline-pumping mile or so down the river. The guides worked constantly at pushing us through rocky spaces, keeping people from falling in, and moving the tubes into safer falls. Satch was hooting and hollering and laughing between her yelps of “it’s so cold!” Thomas also liked it, and Howard was enjoying himself, a bit more quietly. But Marxie was very quiet, and I just knew she was hating every second of it. Not Marxie’s idea of fun. It was like an uncontrolled roller-coaster, and she hates roller coasters. I kept calling over to her, asking if she was OK, and she would give one word answers, “yes,” but I could tell she was frightened and wanted me there with her.

When we got to the put-out point, Marxie jumped off the tubes and got as far away from the river as she could. Everyone else wanted to do it again. We rode in the back of a pickup truck, standing up and holding on, back up to our car. Marxie loved the ride back, but kept saying she never wanted to do the tubing again. Satch and Mo were ready to get back on the river.

So then we headed back into town, and stopped at a little stand that served juices and ice cream. Swings surrounded the open windows. The proprietor is a young German woman, who married an Ecuadoran and opened this stand. She was very nice. We ended up having smoothie-type juices here, and then fruit salads so it turned into lunch. The kids loved it.

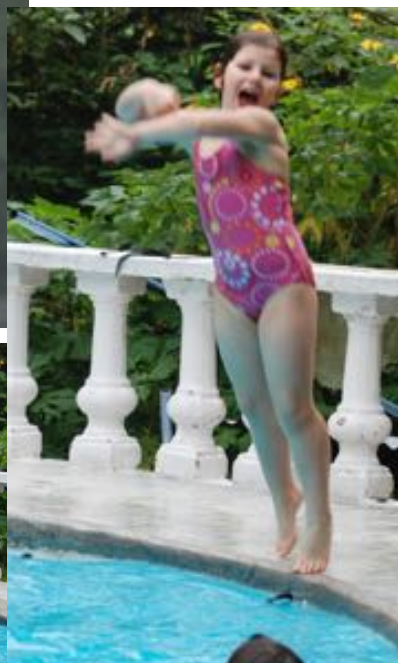




We went back to the hotel and into the pools. The jacuzzi was boiling. Too hot to even sit in, but



the kids found a way to start emptying the big cold pool into the jacuzzi to cool it off. They had a blast. We adults stuck our bitten up legs into the hot water to quell the bite itches, which helped for a bit. This continued for a couple hours and then we returned to our rooms where the water had been turned on and we all took hot showers.





Back into town for dinner at a place obviously servicing Americans -- organic this and that, food washed in filtered water, etc. We had a very good time, especially razzing Alessandra for not getting to have dessert, which was a soft chocolate brownie. The kids started singing “Coffee, glorious coffee” again (to the tune of “Food, glorious food” from *Oliver*) to try to get to Howard, but he just kept eating his brownie. It was fun. We were very loud Americans, but again, practically the only people there.



That night, we went back to the Bird House and set the kids up in front of Scott’s computer, showing *Underdog*, while the adults sat out on the terrace drinking our bottle of wine. It was very nice.

Tuesday, 7 April

Hot water shower, hike to breakfast, good fruits and juices again. Then we had to pack up and bring our stuff down to the main house, because Marcello was going to meet us there at 3:30 or so to go back to Quito. On one of our walks to/from the Bird House, we came across this gigantic FLY. It was huge!



Also around this time, Marta went running over the bridge/boardwalk to the Bird House to tell us all about a gorgeous butterfly she had seen (with an 89 on its wings), and one of the boards gave out, and she crashed onto her knees and chest. When she went to the lodge to tell them about it, they said ok. Nothing more. We had noticed previously that there were some new boards among all the older, more rotted ones.

After we brought our suitcases down, we all piled in the car, and headed back past Mindo, up a mountain, and stopped at the zip lining place.

Zip lining. How to describe? Well, to start, neither Mo or Marxe wanted to do it. Marxe didn’t want me to do it either, but I told her I really wanted to and asked if it was ok. She finally relented. This canopy zip lining place had 10 separate zip lines, which traversed the mountain forests. You get into this halter thing





that goes around your butt and legs, and has a harness that attaches to a pulley. The pulley detaches so that you can take it on and off a single cable, that goes from one high point on a mountain to another high point on a neighboring mountain and is anywhere from 300 to 500 meters long. You wear a helmet (better fitted than the day before, although it would really do no good if you fell)

and heavy gloves that stink and have hard plastic melded in the palm cause that's how you brake. You reach up with your hand and pull down on the cable. The cable goes across the valley below, above all the trees, and it's quite a sensation. So, Scott, me, Satch, Thomas, Sandra, and Marta all did it. You go up on this high platform to do the first zip and climb up the mountains to subsequent platforms, which are really nothing more than a piece of wood. At one point, Marta pointed to a branch that had been brought into service for the line, the high technology that this place employed.

So a zip line employee (all indigenous people with no English) strapped Satch to himself and Thomas in front of him, and away they went. Satch was beaming. She loved it. I almost faltered -- but then Scott reminded me how I always say that it's better to regret



something you have done than something you haven't done (Butthole Surfers, 1987). And so I went. I braked a little too hard on the first line, and got stuck hanging over the ravine before the platform, but was able to get in. We did this over 10 different zips. It was beautiful. Scott and Alessandra did some innovative poses (Superman, where you fly with arms out and belly down, and the Mariposa, where you curl your legs and go across upside down. For these, you have to go

with a guide). There was one zip line, the Kangaroo, where they bounced the wire, so you went up and down and up and down as you were crossing. Not for the stomach-queasy set. I'm really glad I did it. Everyone had a great time.

While we were doing this (it took close to 2 hours), Howard took Marx and Mo down into town and got them some ice cream at that stand. After we finished, we all went down and had some pizza, and then went back to the hotel to meet up with Marcello and head back into Quito. For dinner, we had some yummy soup that Marta had made earlier in the week. Then we all crashed.

Wednesday, 8 April

I woke up with a bit of a headache, but Mo, Marx, and Satch had bigger problems. Mindo is about half the elevation of Quito, and arriving back in Quito set all their senses off balance. Satch threw up twice on Wednesday, and everyone had headaches and stomach aches. At first, we were worried that it was something we had eaten at the pizza place in Mindo, but then we figured out it was altitude sickness. I looked up some stuff on the web, and we had been giving them tylenol, but that didn't help with the stomachs. The altitudesickness.org web site suggested coco mata, a tea made with coca leaves. It's actually legal. Scott thought that since they had replaced coca with caffeine in Coca Cola when coca became illegal in the 50s, that maybe caffeine would help. We also gave them 80% dark chocolate, and it seemed to help somewhat. Marx seemed fully recovered with this.

Marta had scheduled tennis lessons for everyone at the American Ambassador's residence. I was a little wary still of the altitude, so passed, but Marx, Mo, Thomas, and Alessandra opted in. I went along, and we were fortunate to get a short tour of the ambassador's residence. The ambassador was not there, but it was fun to see. A nice place. After the lesson, Mo felt sick again, and so we headed back to the house, with a quick stop at the butcher shop.

Satch had thrown up again while we were gone, and Mo went straight up to bed. Sandra was very sweet, caring for Mo and Satch and bringing them cold packs for their heads and warm packs for their stomachs. I decided to try to get the coco mata to see if that would work. Marta said they had some in the grocery store, and she had to go there anyway to get supplies for the Seder the next night (we did a second night seder only).

The grocery store was pretty cool. Recently, the Ecuadoran government began imposing a large tariff on all foreign products, so anything American (Oreos, Tylenol, whatever) was outrageously expensive. However, a couple of years ago, Ecuador also changed its money to the American dollar, so consequently, the dollar is accepted and used for all transactions in Ecuador. It's rare that you see more than a \$10 bill, though, and most Ecuadoran-made products are pretty inexpensive. I enjoyed looking at all the food in the store, and the way they do things there. They had run out of coco mata tea, and didn't have any children's tylenol (we had used all Howard and Marta's up), but we bought a lot of other stuff.

When we got home, we all kind of hung out, because everyone needed a break, and Mo and Satch still weren't feeling well. I made Mommy's special pasta for dinner. In the middle of preparations, Marta ran out with Scott to the embassy to get some medicine for her bites -- they were really killing her. All of us were scratching like crazy, but Marta's were burning.

It was a quiet evening, and we hoped everyone would recover for Thursday.

Thursday, 9 April

Both Mo and Satch woke up with their headaches and stomach aches continuing, but a bit less intense. We plied them with dark chocolate and caffeine and headed out to oldtown Quito. Although Quito is a nice place, the traffic was bad that day, and the air was worse. We walked around a small monastery for a while, but Mo stayed outside with Scott and lay down on a bench. Later, we walked past a few beautiful churches, but the kids still weren't feeling so hot, so we went into a place for lunch that Marta and Howard were familiar with. It was nice, and I first tried Locra there, which is a cheese and potato soup. Really good. They had tostadas for finger food. Neither Satch or Mo ate much.

After lunch, we went downstairs and into a small market. I saw a painting that I liked there, and Scott saw a piece of pottery, which looked like a carved out bowl, with 4 men playing poker in it. Marxe saw hand-made colored pencils from tree bark. We bought them all.

Then we headed back to the house in two taxis (Howard didn't drive down to old town because there's nowhere to park and theft is prevalent. Scott had to leave his watch at home and I left my wedding and engagement rings). My taxi driver was really nice, and Marta got his name/number because he offered to drive us to Otovalo (the town we were leaving for on Friday) for much less than Marcello was charging. He didn't speak much English, but between my understanding of Spanish and Scott's ability to speak Spanish, we got along fine.

At home, we started preparing for the seder. Marta was making matza ball soup (did I say she is a great cook?) and I ran to the store with Howard to find some potatoes and scallions for the Bulgarian potato salad that Magdalena had taught me how to make a couple months back. We also had little tiny brussel sprouts, broccoli, and matza. I got to experience the whole vegetable/fruit washing process with the scallions for the potato salad. First you fill a pot with the veggies and purified water and one capfull of bleach. Then you wait for 15 minutes and then empty the pot and wash the whole thing with purified water twice more. Quite the event, and this is required for every fruit and veg that they eat.

Another family -- the Goldbergs -- came over for seder as well. Bruce is the head of the DEA in Ecuador, and his wife Elise is a tiny ball of energy. They have three kids, the oldest of whom Marxe and Satch loved. Ellie was 12 and very sweet with them. Scott and I sat and listened to Bruce discuss drugs and prevention for a while, and how marijuana is linked to terrorism. After they left, we all cleaned up and got ready for an early morning departure to Otovalo the next day.

Friday, 10 April

We ended up using the taxi driver we had met on Thursday instead of Marcello. So Howard, Scott, Satch, Marxe, and Sandra headed off in the Toyota, and the rest of us headed off in the taxi. Satch was showing signs of improvement, but Mo was still not doing well. She lay on my lap much of the trip, in the back seat, until on our third stop (for kids peeing and feeling sick) we moved the suitcases out of the back of Howard's car to the cab and let Mo lie down in the back. Then Satch sat with us the rest of the way.

The road to Otovalo was congested and it took much longer to get there than we had expected. Again, the scenery changed from dry cactuses and weeds and rocks to a much more Vermont-looking hillside and tons of farmed land plots. As with the road to Mindo and throughout Quito, we

saw many impoverished hovels, and children of all types running around or being carried on their mother's backs in sheets gerryrigged as baby carriers. We also saw old women carrying giant bundles of grain, vegetables, and cane matting on their backs. Education is not required in Ecuador, and in fact, you have to pay for school. Nevertheless, almost everyone we met was warm and sweet and nice.



To get to the hotel in Otavalo, we turned away from the city, and went up a mountainous brick-laid road, which, inexplicably, had speed bumps all over the place. It's not as if anyone could really go faster than 30 mph on these roads, but there were the speed bumps anyway. When we drove up the final hill and parked at the top of our hotel, I felt breathless -- it was absolutely, incredibly beautiful.



Across the valley from us was a dead volcano and mountains rising up to it, with farmed land in between, and clouds all around the mountain peaks. It is stunning there. Unfortunately, there had been another mix up with the rooms and pricing, but we got it all worked out (although the cost of the place was based on per person, so it was definitely the most expensive undertaking of our trip). We visited our rooms: ours was a dorm-style place with three bunk beds, one double bed, and two showers and a bathroom, and a front wall of complete glass so we could look out at the mountains;



Marta and Howard's cabin was gorgeous, with a fireplace, and a back door leading to llamas! A mother and baby llama were out back, and the kids instantly piled out there, Scott shooting pictures like crazy. The llamas were very friendly and had beautiful, large eyes.



We were given a tour of the property, which was pretty incredible. They had a separate building for the library, with lots of signed books by both English and Spanish writers. They had a natural amphitheater, a full organic garden, more llamas all over, a fish pond, horses, beautiful views



everywhere, and a dining room and game room in the main lodge. The game room had instruments, tons of videos to watch, and lots of games. The kids fell in love with the 4 dogs on the property.



At the end of the tour, the staff offered to make us lunch of tuna sandwiches for \$10 a person (! a whole lot for Ecuador) so we decided to go into town. Turns out this place is one of the top Conde Nast properties in the world (and priced that way!).

Down in Otavalo, we found a pizza place that had huge slices and a bottle of water for \$1. It was good and many of us ordered a second piece, which ended up being a mistake because it sat like lead in us for the rest of the afternoon. Then we headed down to the Otavalo market, which is almost beyond comparison. It's now one of my two favorite markets in the world (Amsterdam's old



weekly flea market also), but this one is sooooo cool. We got there late, when everyone had started closing up, but there was so much to see. The market is filled with indigenous crafts and art, and it's all indigenous people selling it. That day, we saw so much,



including this beautiful bag/purse, that I loved, but that I





couldn't bring myself to buy because I don't really need a bag/purse. The girls looked at the jewelry a lot, which was gorgeous with many layers of beads. And then we got to an area where they were selling large bolts of material that could be used as a tablecloth or hanging or whatever. I immediately fell in love with this golden-hued cloth, hand made, that was 3 meters long. That's one meter more than what we needed, and so I went back and forth between the blue one that was also gorgeous and 2 meters, and the golden one that I just loved that was 3 meters. Eventually Scott helped me justify buying the one I really wanted. Now all of this was majorly inexpensive. This gorgeous cloth that would have gone for hundreds of dollars in the states was going for \$35 I think, and we ended up bargaining down (which is expected) to about \$25. Mo saw a sweater she loved, and we got that (\$14, down from \$18). Then, as we were walking to another part of the market, a woman held up a tapestry for me that was just amazing. By the time I left there (with a tapestry), there were four women from other stalls, two of their children, my kids, and everyone else around laughing and telling me which one to get. It was really fun.



It was getting late, so we headed



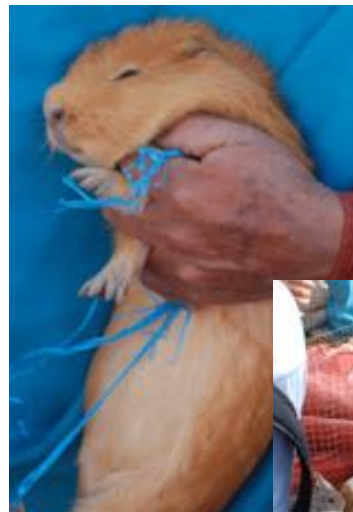


back up the mountain to the lodge for dinner. They served us this delicious berry juice,



Locra soup, and enchiladas. Chicken for some, vegetarian for others. Yummy. And desert was this berry mousse that Marxer couldn't get enough of. It was great.

We didn't get to sleep too early that night, even though we had to get up early the next morning. The girls (with Sandra in one of the top bunks) started a laughing fest that they couldn't break for a while. Scott and I thought it was pretty funny also.



Saturday, 11 April

At precisely 6:40 am, Scott turned on his iPhone with Beyonce ("All the Single Ladies") and we got everyone up out of bed because we had to be up at the main lodge by 7am to follow Jorge down to the animal market. We made it, piling into the back of the Youth vehicle again.

I cannot do this animal



market justice, because in the

end I just couldn't deal with it for very long. As we walked from the parking spot to the market across the street and up the road a little, we passed cows, and old women pulling chickens with their legs tied up out of plastic bags, and people people animals animals everywhere you looked. As we got to the market we saw lambs, chickens, kittens, ducks, geese, baby ducks, rabbits, and, yes, guinea pigs.

Now I have to divert for a moment. Guinea pigs, or cuyas, are considered a food in Ecuador. When Scott found that out, he made it his mission to get one on our trip. This was hard for me to stomach (ba dump bahl!), but I just let it roll, because I kept hoping the opportunity would not arise. At this market, with hundreds and hundreds of people, there were these large circular cages of wire with cute guinea pigs bunched together. Yes, these people had raised them and yes, it's a different culture, but it just became difficult for me to watch. Mo too, and Sandra too.

There were animals everywhere you turned, for sale to raise or to eat for the week (it's a weekly market). You could tell that the giant,



300

pound pigs were their owners' pride and selling them would provide for their lives over the next months, but it was still hard to watch. I tried to focus on the faces of the people attending the market, which were so beautiful.



Finally, I had to get away, so Me,

Satch, Mo, Sandra, Thomas, and Howard headed back to the car. We walked up a ways, smelled some very potent

cilantro a man was selling on the corner. Finally, Scott, Marx, and Marta came back and we headed to the lodge. It was only 8am, but I was really affected. If I hadn't been a vegetarian for the past 20 years, I would have become one that day.





Back
at the
lodge,
we
had



breakfast, hung out for a bit and let the kids run, and then headed back down into town to go the the Saturday artisans market, which is the biggest of the week. Here we saw even more than the day before. We bought a gorgeous, carved gourd. Satch got a pink beaded matching necklace/bracelet/ring combo, Marta and Howard bought lots of gourds to

hand out to family and friends upon their return to the States for vacation in June, and Mo and Sandra purchased the most annoying souvenir of the trip -- these little plastic things that you stick on your tongue and when you blow they make bird sounds. Eek! They loved it though, which was good. Scott ended up buying me that bag/purse that I loved the day before, and I bought a bag/purse that I could use to carry

my computer (the other one is too small), and we saw another painting I loved, reds. Very cool folk art, and I don't even remember what else we got. Then it started pouring, and we all hung out under some eaves, and we found a sweater for Scott, and started heading back to the car.

Now, you all know that I hate shopping. I really despise it. But I could have spent another 3 hours at this folk art/artisan market. It wasn't really like shopping. Plus it was fun bargaining with people who were nice and really expected you to. This was all in Spanish.



After leaving the market, we headed to Cotacachi, a town 6 km away. There was a fair going on there, and the city is well known for their leather goods, but first we had to get something to eat. As we crossed into the town, it was evident that this was a very different place than even Otavalo. Everyone was dressed in a much more modern fashion. The homes were more modern and had yards that were well kept. People looked more cosmopolitan. In Otavalo, almost everyone is dressed traditionally, and most houses are more on the hovel side of things.

So we had lunch at this place that Marta and Howard knew of. I had more Locra soup and a ceviche that was not to my taste. The ceviche in Ecuador is different from any other ceviche I've had. They cook their fish, and most often put it either in a tomato or mustard sauce. All the leftover food went in Scott's direction. The kids had fun in the restaurant's courtyard playground. Then we walked back to the car, stopping off to get the kids some postres (cookies and doughnuts).

The fair was not really what we were expecting. Part of the reason we had come to Cotacachi was to help me find a new leather coat, but the selection wasn't so great at the fair. I had lost my desire to shop by this time (this felt too much like shopping). But the kids did see one thing they loved. Snail slime soap. These gigantic snails, the size of your head, were leaving a trail of slime on this bar that the Ecuadorians converted into soap and said was great for your skin. The kids lobbied hard, but in the end, were defeated.

We were all beat, so we headed back to the lodge and just hung out, reading, etc, until dinner time. I forgot to tell you about the dining room. There was a beautiful picture window there that had pillows in it, so you could sit there and read and look out at the mountains. Also, there was a piano, pipes, flutes, an armadillo ukelele type thing (made with an armadillo shell), a guitar, and many drums. The kids loved it, and serenaded us lots. The dining room offered this herbal yerba tea 24/7, which is hot water with leaves pulled off their lemon verbena bush. Really good!

Before dinner, the kids ran all over the area, playing with the llamas, playing hide and seek, etc. Marta, Howard, Scott, and I sat in their room with the fire in the fireplace, and just chilled. It was very nice.

Dinner was an artichoke, grown in their garden, which was really good, pasta, and salad for the vegetarians, and (surprise) trucha for everyone else! Also at dinner, Mo and Scott got into the deal making. Earlier Mo had tried to make a deal





with Scott that if he gave up all meat, she would give up all sweets. It didn't go far. But tonight, with Sandra's help, Mo struck a bargain. Scott can eat no meat (only fish) and Mo can eat no sweets (only pie and birthday cake, when it's actually someone's birthday that she has been invited to attend). They each get to break it once every three weeks.

Movie watching commenced in our room, which was not really set up for it, but it was ok anyway. Eventually,

everyone went back to their rooms, and we went to sleep.

Sunday, 12 April

Day 3 of not shampooing hair (because they didn't provide shampoo at this place), but we all took showers and soaped off anyway. After breakfast, we decided to try to hike to this waterfall that the staff had told us about before 11:30am, when our Quito taxi driver would be arriving. We had to leave earlier rather than later because traffic heading back into Quito after the Easter weekend was going to be horrendous. It had rained a lot during the night, so our plans to take the girls out on horses (minus me) was nixed. Anyway, Scott, Mo, and I found rubber boots offered by the hotel that fit for the most part (we had to return the Skillens' boots earlier). The hotel didn't have any boots for Marx and Satch, and I paid for that later. Anyway, we took some hiking sticks and headed out to the top of the property, and then started hiking through sticky, slimy mud, and lots of cow poop, which Marx gleefully warned us of every time she passed it. Marx and Thomas led the group, only falling into the mud once or twice. I helped Satch (with stick) and Mo (without stick) along as necessary, which happened mostly on the high climbs and steep declines cause the mud was so slippery. Scott brought up the back, cursing away, as is his habit during strenuous activity. Jorge from the hotel said it should take us 30 minutes to get to the waterfall, but with our crew and the mud, it ended up taking us about 45. We saw the gorgeous waterfall, took the requisite pictures, and then headed back.

To get through the gate close to the top of the property, you need a key. Marta had the key farther back, but Marx, Satch, and I were ahead of that group and met one of the guys from the hotel, who pointed out his father's property to me, across the valley. It was an amazing place. Tranquil, he said. Anyway, we didn't have the key, so he helped the three of us over the barbed wire, and we headed down to the faucet by the library where I had Marx and Satch remove shoes and started washing the caked mud and poop from inside, outside, all around. Took about 5 minutes per shoe. Then everyone else joined us, and we packed up and headed out (after more money discussions with the hotel). On our way out, we stopped by the great artisan market again, so Scott could get Marx a sweater, I could get Scott one of the scarves he was looking at (he ended up getting one also), and Marta could get more gift gourds.

Back to Quito, and traffic wasn't that bad at all. Only one stop for a car-sick child. We were lucky, because the driver said that by 4pm, it would be stop and go traffic the entire way.

So we got back to the house, and everyone chilled. We washed the muddiest of the clothes and had a quick lunch of leftovers from the Seder. Then Howard, Marta, Scott, and I hid all the Easter eggs (with jelly beans and some trinkets inside) around the ground floor, and the kids ran around searching for them. Scott put one on top of the kitchen door, which the kids finally found with some prompting.

Marta then started cooking for Easter dinner. She made an amazing rice pie that the kids (and all of us) loved. It was an old recipe from her mother. And Scott got some ham, which Marxe then saw and decided she was not going to be a vegetarian anymore. It had lasted two weeks. Maybe next time, it will last longer. Dinner was really good.

Afterwards, we packed for leaving the country and hung out, and eventually went to sleep.

Monday, 13 April

Up at 4:10am, out of the house by 4:25am, and to the airport by 4:40 am. Fit all our bags into 5 carry ons (put a rolling backpack into the suitcase we had to check on the way out which held all the Youths' gifts (and liquids)), so we didn't have to check anything, which was good later on. We had to then go to pay the exit tax, which was \$40/person, cash only! We had just enough to cover it.

Both flights were uneventful, but we had a very short layover in Houston, and ended up running from customs back through security and to our gate on the other side of the airport (ergo, good that we didn't have a checked bag). Only other thing of note on the flight was that the movie was *Marley and Me*, which is about a dog, and Marxe ended up watching it. The dog dies at the end, and Marxe was devastated. She was sobbing and so upset.

It was nice coming home and opening all our purchases up. The tablecloth looks great in our dining room, and everyone loves their sweaters/necklaces/bags/etc.

We had a wonderful time with the Youth family. We all got along great and ended up being good traveling companions, and Mo and Sandra immediately took up as the twins they left off as last July. We look forward to seeing the whole family again for their vacation home in June, as crazy as they will be. Good memories for everyone.