ECUADOR ECO VOLUNTEER

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# Ecuador Orientation Pack

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**Foreward:**

I originally wrote this little PDF to give volunteers that signed up with ecuadorecovolunteer.org a very detailed overview of what it's like to travel through Ecuador. Since changing the way this site works by removing the middle man and connecting people directly with various volunteer programs around the country I have decided to put this booklet in the public domain for anyone to download.

None of the information here has been copied off the Lonely Planet or Wikipedia - its all my personal advice for backpackers that I have learned from trial and error while traveling and living around Latin America for the last five years.

This eBook is full of the type of travel tips and advice I would give to my younger self had I met him before he left his sheltered home of Sydney, Australia.

I hope you enjoy it, and if you get something out of it, share it with someone who will too!

**Jake**

# How to Plan an Adventure of a Lifetime

When I was 21 I used to work in a soulless call center in Sydney pretending to further my career while really planning my first big trip overseas.  I didn't want your average vacation, I wanted to get off the beaten track and see some of the strangest most beautiful places on Earth and more importantly find out what the fuck I wanted to do with my life.

**I wanted the adventure of a lifetime.**

I have been traveling pretty much non-stop since and below are the rules I have learned on the way that I wish I knew when I first started out.  One word of warning however:

**Don't follow these rules if you want the same old cookie-cutter trip as everyone else.**

## RULE 1: Leave Little Details Up to Chance

Its easy to get carried away when planning for your overseas trip. I know that when I first started traveling I wanted to have every single little detail organized in advance.  Every restaurant, ancient ruin, hostel, and restroom recommended by lonely planet became part of my itinerary.

Since then I have realised that over planning takes much of the fun and spontaneity away from a trip.  That following the Lonely Planet like a bible instead of a guide will give you your average cookie-cutter trip like the majority of other people.

**If you want the adventure of a lifetime leave the little things up to chance.**

Its fine to plan a few big details like a rough guide of which countries you wish to visit or some Spanish school / volunteer program / diving master certificate / etc at the start of the trip to help you get your travel feet.

**For maximum spontaneity and fun just fuck the plans and go with the flow.**

You will be amazed at the great advice you get from random travelers, taxi drivers, and locals that the Lonely Planet never mentioned.

## RULE 2: Settlers See More than Hunters

We've all seen those ridiculous packaged tours at the travel agent or on the web that sucker people into believing they can: **"See Eight Countries in Eight Days"**

The ones where you are given an afternoon to explore Barcelona and the morning to "do" Paris; the ones where you spend more time on the bus looking out the window than meeting the locals.

There was a time when I'd be jealous - if Bob Burgandy saw seven countries in a month and I only saw four I'd feel like I was missing out. Then one day a wise old traveler told me: *"Slow down! If you rush around the world trying not to miss something then you are traveling too fast to experience anything."*

I heeded his advice and instead of playing hopscotch over countries I slowed down the pace and settled in a place if I liked it. And you know what happened?

**An average vacation turned into the Adventure of a Lifetime.**

So next time you like a place stay there for a little while longer even if it means sacrificing somewhere further down the road that may not live up to your expectations.

Its the best cure there is for "Travel Fatigue" and who knows what great parties you will get invited to and amazing people you will meet in that secret place off the beaten track you discovered only because you stayed a week longer!

## RULE 3: Its People not Places that You'll Remember Forever

Sure sacred sites like Angkor Wat and Macchu Picchu are mind blowingly awesome and belong on your bucketlist. But how great is watching the sun rise over the temple ruins of Angkor or set over the Andes when you have no one to share it with?

You will meet some amazing people on the road. The difference between them becoming lifelong friends or some passing acquaintance depends on how much time you spend together.

**This is the reasons why Rule 2 is so important.**

To have the Adventure of a Lifetime you need to sit back and relax and take in the beauty of it all to make those deep and meaningful connections.

## RULE 4: Be Grateful, Give Back

If we could shrink the world down to 100 people with all the existing human ratios remaining the same:

- 80 live in substandard housing
- 67 are unable to read
- 50 are malnourished
- 1 is dying of starvation
- 33 have no access to safe drinking water
- 24 would not have any electricity and 7 people have access to the Internet
- 1 person has a computer or college education

**In this world village how many people do you think get to backpack around Europe, Asia, or South America?**

“Travel” for tens of millions of people around the world is fleeing war, famine, and persecution. They end up in overcrowded refugee camps, inhumane detention centers, or dangerous slums and Favelas.

So the next time you end up in a 12 person dorm that smells like sweat and wet socks be grateful for it.  You’re traveling goddammit.

## RULE 5: Have Faith That Things Turn Out For The Best

Fates a funny thing, whether its true or not depends on the faith you put in it. I have realised in my travels that whenever I believe things will work out for the best they almost always do.

Then when they didn’t and I felt Murphys breath on the back of my neck there was always some unexpected surprise, some silver lining around the cloud or lesson to be learned.

**Everything in life is a lesson or a reward.**

Thats a much more powerful lens to look at the world than seeing it as some random soup right?

When the 22 hour bus I took from Rurrenabaque in the Bolivian jungle to La Paz broke down for several hours I got to spend that time playing football with the children in some obscure village.

When I was living in Rio de Janeiros largest Favela Rocinha and I was broke because my bank card stopped working I was touched by the generosity of the Favelados who insisted on buying me lunch and beer until my new card arrived.

I've landed myself in some pretty sticky situations while traveling, but as long as I look for the learning experience, I find it.

**If you have a negative victim like worldview and you believe that people are out to take advantage of you, rip you off, etc, then you attract that type of people into your life.**

On the other hand if you believe the world is a good place full of good people then this creates a self-fulfilling prophecy and ultimately ensures you will share your adventure of a lifetime with fascinating and friendly people.

**"There are two ways to live: you can live as if nothing is a miracle; you can live as if everything is a miracle."** - Albert Einstein

**"The world is a book and those who don't travel read only a page"** - St Augustine

# Safety in Ecuador

## Gut Warnings and Common Sense

If you are vigilant and in the present moment there is a gut warning you can train yourself to recognize that will warn you when you find yourself in a situation where you or your belongings may be in danger. In my own experience and from stories I have heard from many experienced travelers this gut feeling is an incredibly powerful and prescient warning sign.

For inexperienced backpackers however it's best not to rely solely on this gut feeling - given time it will develop - but there are other important things regarding your safety you should be aware of as well.

**"Going with your gut" does not mean forgoing common sense because common sense is something you should exercise at all times in Ecuador and Latin America.**

Examples of common sense are avoiding dark and deserted back-alleys and parks at night, accepting drinks off strangers when you are alone, or climbing up to the crater of an erupting volcano. As a rule of thumb if you question or doubt a certain situation or someone's intentions then it's best to stay on the side of caution.

Finally, being prepared by having knowledge of scams and situations that are rare but do happen in Ecuador and Latin America is the best way to protect yourself from them.

**Note:** None of the following is meant to scare you – Ecuador is much safer than other places in Latin America - but being prepared against what is rare but may happen is better than being ignorant on some of the dangers in the country and on the continent

## Being Ripped Off (AKA "the Gringo Tax")

Like anywhere in the world, the vast majority of people are honest and authentic and will not try and rip you off. Remember however: you are in a developing country where the average spending / economic power of its citizens is much lower than your home country.

**This means you might encounter the "Gringo Tax" which can be anything from a slight increase compared to the locals to an outrageous "you must be kidding?" price for some stupid little trinket.**

Make sure you know the price of something in advance before taking that taxi or ordering that meal. This will prevent a big surprise when "la cuenta" comes after you have finished what may be a very average meal in a cheap looking restaurant (The restaurant looks cheap so it must be cheap right? In most cases yes but not knowing the price in advance may set you up for a gringo tax in less scrupulous places.)

Also never forget that $1 to you means much less than $1 to a street vendor who may depend on that to feed his family. Try not to become one of those obnoxious backpackers that spends half an hour haggling over fifty cents. Be grateful you come from a wealthy country and be generous with those who are less well off.

**Tip:** I have found the best way to find an accurate price for a taxi fare whenever arriving in a new city is to ask two or three people in the terminal how much it costs to this and that street: "cuante cueasta en taxi para llegar _____ y _____"

If the taxi drivers give a price much higher than the average answer of the two or three locals you have just asked then either argue down the price or find another taxi.

## Pickpocketing

From my personal experiences in Ecuador and from stories I have heard from other travelers the times you should be worried about pick-pocketing are at: busy markets, fairs, streets where you are constantly bumping into people, or those times when you find yourself packed into a bus at peak hour.

Pickpocketing is a non-violent crime so the worst that can happen is have the contents of your wallet (including credit cards, cash, and ID) stolen or the contacts on your phone and tunes on your iPod. Having the contents of your wallet or purse stolen is a pain but not life threatening so be alert but don't spend too much time worrying about it.

One quick and simple way to prevent pickpocketing is to put your hand in the pocket with your wallet and phone so no other hands fit. If you are on a crowded bus or busy market place, people are bumping into you and you get a strange gut feeling, this simple trick will prevent pickpockets.

There are thieves on public transport like the Metrovia in Guayaquil or the Trolley in Quito in peak time traffic that will use a razor blade to secretly cut a hole in your bag or purse and remove any valuable contents they can reach. They are so good at this that you may not even realise its happened until twenty minutes later when they are long gone. This can be prevented by holding your purse or day pack on your chest whenever on a bus in peak time.

## Bus Travel

The most dangerous thing that can happen to you on a bus is for it to crash. Bus crashes are much less common in Ecuador (compared to countries like Bolivia) since the administration of Rafael Correa began fixing the infrastructure, roads, and highways around the country.

Automobile accidents can happen anywhere in the world so it can be pointless worrying about something out of your hands.

One thing to be aware of is that on inter-provincial / state buses a polite and helpful young fellow may tell you that you should store your luggage in the overhead compartments. If you do this you may find a few hours later when you fall asleep or focus your concentration on the in-bus-entertainment (ie. The omnipresent Sylvester Stallone / Chuck Norris action movies that haunt the highways of Ecuador) the polite and helpful fellow will remove your luggage and get off the bus. To be safe never put anything you do not want to lose in the overhead compartments.

**Tip:** If you have a camera or small bag / day pack its best to keep it on your chest in case you fall asleep. If the bag is too big to put on your chest or lap then you can put it between your feet and thread the arm-straps around your legs.

## Assaults and Robberies

Assaults and robberies may happen if you are very unlucky or you forgot to use your common sense. It is true that many of the big cities in Latin America are dangerous, but that is just as true of the big cities of the west like London, New York, Paris, or Madrid.

In my five years traveling around South America and living in places as diverse as La Paz, Mancora, Quito, Buenos Aires and Rio de Janeiro I have only ever been robbed once. In this case it was because I forgot to use my common sense and decided to sit down in a park when it was getting dark to admire the sunset.

**Unfortunately for the robber he found the brokest gringo this side of the Equator and only got 6 bucks and dirty old jacket that smelt like a llama.**

If you find yourself in a dangerous situation remember to stay calm and try not to panic. Give over your wallet or valuables and make it known your friends are close by (Don't try and be a hero and fight - your iPods just not that worth it)

In the absolute majority of these cases the robber wants to grab your valuables and get out of there as fast as possible.

# Taking Care of Your Health

Whenever traveling it is very important to take care of your health. You will be in a foreign country far away from the safety net of family and well-funded western hospitals. Ecuador however has one of the better public health systems in Latin America that has dramatically improved in the last five years under the Correa government.

**Remember to always be prepared: make sure you have travel insurance that covers any health costs you may incur in the case of an emergency.**

## Band-Aids, Bandages, and Antibiotics

Ecuador has a huge range of pharmacies that are well stocked with drugs ranging from antibiotics and sleeping pills to condoms and contraception. There are so many pharmacies in the country's cities' that it's hard to walk down the street without finding one.

The pills available in the pharmacies are of the same quality, and often cheaper, than anything you will find in Australia, United States or Europe. Like back home you may be required to show a doctors prescription for non over the counter drugs. The pharmacists are often well trained and can give you great advice on how to treat any form of illness as long as you can communicate the symptoms in Spanish.

## Dating and Safe Sex

Use a condom. It doesn't matter if you are in a party hostel in the Mariscal of Quito full of other gringos or meet some gorgeous local Latin guy or girl – there are all sorts of nasties out there that travelers can catch if they don't use protection. Better to be safe than sorry.

## Alternative Medicine & Health Food Stores

Ecuador not only has a great variety of modern day pharmacies but a plethora of alternative medicine and health food stores as well. These stores stock everything from multi-vitamins, to ginseng and green tea, as well as some amazing curative plants from the Amazon like Una de Gato and Sangre de Drago.

**Tip:** As a preventative medicine there is nothing better than natural remedies to help our bodies' immune systems fight off sickness. Make sure you don't get sick on your trip by eating fresh, raw, and nutritious food (instead of hamburger binges) as well as drinking lots of water before going to bed after too much rum.

**Your body will thank you for it.**

## Shamanism

One of the most fascinating aspect of the incredible diversity of culture in Ecuador is of its Shamans and Shamanistic / Alternative medicine. While much of western medicine is extremely effective at treating impact injuries that may be caused in car or sports accidents, it is often guilty of only treating the symptoms when it comes to chronic causes of sickness.

Shamanism on the other hand is a more holistic form of medicine, which means it tries to treat the body as a whole instead of individual limbs separately. Similar to Chinese or Eastern medicine, Shamanistic medicine looks at everything in the body as interconnected including your thoughts and any baggage you may be carrying subconsciously.

Medical studies in the west are only recently discovering what Shamanistic and Alternative Medicine has known all along: that the mind / body connection is incredibly powerful and both sides need to be united in harmony for your body and immune system to function at its peak without illness.

Sacred Medicinal plants like the Ayahuasca have been used by Shamans in Ecuador for millennium to treat everything from malaria to cancer with results that have stunned scientists. If you are interested in meeting a Shaman and participating in an Ayahuasca ceremony ask us when you get here.

## Street Food & Parasites

If you travel often enough, sooner or later you are going to get travelers diarrhea. Unfortunately not everyone who prepares the food you eat may have the appropriate hygiene levels to match. Street Vendors are particularly notorious for not washing their hands and passing on all sorts of nasty parasites to backpackers.

This doesn't mean you should stick to eating Doritos and refuging in recognizable fast-food outlets like KFC and Subway. One of the greatest things about traveling, for me at least, is experimenting all of the delicious foods a foreign country may have to offer.

**Tip:** When searching for a restaurant to eat at its best to look for social proof. If the restaurant is full you can safely assume there is a fast turnover of freshly cooked food and the cooks wash their hands – if they didn't it wouldn't be so popular would it?

## What to do for Travelers Diarrhea

Most strains of parasites and food-borne germs can be killed off with a simple round of antibiotics. Over the counter antibiotics like Bactrim Forte or Diaren can be purchased at pharmacies for cheap. If you do have diarrhea it is important to stay well hydrated by drinking something like Gatorade or simply lots of water with freshly squeezed lime.

If you have a particularly strong strain of parasite that has been giving you diarrhea, flatulence, nausea, stomach pains, and cramps for months then it is probably wise to go to a local doctor or simply get your feces tested.

To get your feces tested you should first buy a "muestra de heces" from a pharmacy which is a plastic container that you *cough* shit into *cough* then take it to the nearest "Laboratorio" or laboratory.

There are hundreds of Laboratorios in every city of Ecuador and they usually advertise the types of tests they do outside:

“Analisis de Urino” – Urine Analysis

“Analisis de Sangre” – Blood Analysis

“Analisis de Eces” – Feces Analysis

These laboratories usually charge around $2 for a test. Multiple tests that search for everything from parasites, to white blood cell count, and cholesterol level normally cost between $10 and $20.

**Tip1:** Never be embarrassed when it comes to your health, these are professional who work every day with these types of illnesses.

**Tip2:** You get extra points if you take the meustra de heces to the laboratory on public transport in peak time traffic and get pickpocketed.

## Immunization Shots

Immunization shots are important to help your immune systems adapt to viruses and contagions that may not be common in your home country. If your country is like Australia then the doctors may charge you hundreds of dollars for needles which cost a fraction of the price in Ecuadorian health clinics or “centros de salud.” (at the time of writing Yellow Fever and Tetanus Shots are free in Ecuadorian Health Clinics)

However it is highly recommended you consult your doctor before leaving on your trip for recommended immunization shots ESPECIALLY if you do not speak fluent Spanish.

For a list of commonly recommended vaccinations for Ecuador follow this link:

http://www.netdoctor.co.uk/travel/south_america/ecuador.shtml

Keep in mind that necessary / unnecessary vaccinations depend on what country you reside in. For example, some countries require a yellow fever vaccination for anyone that has visited South America, even if you are from that country.

## Malaria Pills

Malaria is not as common in Ecuador when compared to parts of Africa or Asia but its best to be prepared. Ask your doctor about the preventative pills you should be taking when visiting the Amazon and always remember to use mosquito nets and insect repellent. Malaria Tablets can be purchased for 10cents each at most pharmacies in Ecuador.

# Packing Your Backpack for Ecuador

Ecuador has one of the greatest diversities in ecosystems and climates in the world. This country is remarkable in the amount of different landscapes that converge over such a small area. In fact scientists even say you can find up to 100 different “micro-climates” in a 100 km distance.

So how do you pack for a country where you can travel from the hot dry heat of coastal cities like Guayaquil in the morning, arrive in the cool climate of the Andes for lunch, then after another few hours on bus arrive in the wet heat of the Amazon before sunset?

**By being prepared for everything.**

**Here is what I pack:**

- Five pairs of underwear and seven pairs of socks
- A good outdoor jacket, preferably wind resistant and impermeable
- A jumper that is good to hang out and go out with
- A beanie (aka tuque in Canada) and gloves
- Four shirts and one collared shirt for classier occasions
- Two jeans for hanging out and going out
- One of those incredibly handy pants that can be unzipped into shorts
- Two pairs of shorts, one that can double up as swimmers
- A pair of shoes that are good for walking around and going out
- A pair of water proof / resistant trekking shoes with ankle support
- My rock climbing "pies de gato" or cats feet (optional of course)
- Some thongs (aka sandals / flip-flops)

**Accessories:**

- Headlamp
- Pocketknife or Leatherman
- Kindle or eBook Reader (incredibly useful)
- Toothbrush, Toothpaste, Soap, Shampoo, and Deodorant

Electronics and sunscreen are the two things in Ecuador that you will not find to be cheaper than anything available at home. If you like the beach or trekking it's wise to pack a tube or two because that bulge going around the planet earth on the equator means you are that much higher to the sun.

Band-aids, Painkillers, Antihistamines, and Poop-Stoppers (aka Immodium) as well as contraceptives, condoms, and tampons are all available at local pharmacy. Malaria tablets are available at pharmacies in Ecuador for 10cents a pop but it may be wise to organize anything that requires a doctor's prescription before you leave.

# Visas and Immigration

Ecuador's laws for Visa and Immigration are constantly changing so you should always check the requirements on the Ministry of Exterior Relations website (using google translator if you are not fluent in Spanish) http://www.mmrree.gob.ec/servicios/visas.asp

At the time of writing this however Ecuador was one of the most lenient countries in the world with its Visa on Arrival policy. This means its much easier to write which countries CANNOT enter Ecuador without a Visa than writing out the plethora of countries permitted. If you are from the following countries you are required to organize your Ecuadorian Visa beforehand:

Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Nepal, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia.

If you are not from any of the countries above (judging from the Google Analytics of this site thats pretty likely) then you do not have to worry about getting a Visa beforehand.

If you do happen to be from any of the countries above the reason for the restrictions was probably due to a problem with human trafficking originating from these countries which I mentioned in my post about: **Advice About Overstaying Your Visa in Ecuador**

> **The only Visa Requirements for the rest of the world is that you have:**
> 1) A passport valid for at least six months after you arrive in Ecuador.
> 2) Proof of onward travel, such as a plane ticket back to your home country.
> 3) Demonstrate you have sufficient funds to stay in the country.
>
> Further Reading: **A Step by step guide to extending your tourist visa in Ecuador**

## Now you've read this I hope you are feeling prepared and ready to set off on the adventure of a lifetime.

## I wish you the very best of luck!

**Jake**

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