

## Ecuador trip March 18-26



### Introduction

It all started back around November of the previous year when we found out that Paul Taylor our pastor at the Young Adults Fellowship had a sister and family in Ecuador, and that they were planning on building a team from PBC the next spring to participate in some ministry projects there. I thought it was a neat opportunity, and with my desire to travel and experience different cultures and how God can work through people all around the world, I decided to look into it some more.

Later I found out that the team was going to Shell, just a bit east of Quito the capital. And Shell is the site where the first missionaries including the famous Nate Saint and Jim Elliott had visited in the 1950's. After several years of ministry, the missionaries were found speared to death by the Waodani, one of the local Indian tribes. Nate Saint's famous yellow airplane was found in shambles along the riverbank. All hope had seemed lost, but Elisabeth Elliott (Jim's wife) and others went back to visit the Waodani tribe. God had really changed their hearts and worked a miracle through them. Now, the people in Shell including the descendants of the bellicose Indian tribe are some of the most welcoming toward missionaries that I had ever met.

It was an emotional last week of preparations, mostly mental for me, since most of the supplies and projects would already be prepared for us when we arrived. We just had to show up and be available for God. The mental preparation seemed to start about a week before the trip, when we had a packing party at the church to get all the supplies ready. I had to miss one of our team meetings since I was out of town, and during the other team meeting, the trip still seemed a bit far-off. So it seemed to come up rather suddenly!

I could tell God was orchestrating the whole thing, almost like He had a sense of humor, when I look back and see a pattern of events. The year started off with a trip to Junipero Serra peak with the Sierra club. Being the highest peak in the Santa Lucia range by the Ventana wilderness near Big Sur, the snow-capped peak is named after the father of Spanish missionaries. The missionaries built a set of 21 missions in California, from San Diego to Sonoma. Just before our hike to Junipero Serra peak, a friend

and I visited the San Antonio de Padua mission near the base of the mountain. A month later, on a trip to Morro Bay and San Luis Obispo, we visited a couple more of the missions along highway 101. And just a week before the trip, we hiked Mission Peak and toured the San Jose mission. It seemed rather fitting to visit the historic missions just before going on a missions trip!

As with many trips, there seem to be many last-minute changes and complications. But for this trip, this meant 3 people dropping out quite suddenly (including our pastor leader and his daughter!), and another person getting quite sick and almost dropping out at the last minute. I've found on most big trips, I became the most nervous about 3-4 days before the trip, when the flood of emotions and mental preparations came to a peak. And on this trip, my nervousness seemed justified. But I just knew I had to trust in God's provision that He was going to take care of all the details, even if some came at the last minute!

It was an early wake-up call Friday morning - 2:00 am! After a quick shower and getting my last couple things together, I was on the nearly deserted freeway on my way to pick up Ian and head to PBC, where our rides were waiting to take us to the airport. I know some people ended up just staying up late (since sometimes 2 am is their bedtime!) But for me, I figured a few hours sleep was better than nothing. I was a couple minutes early but most of the team was already there, chowing on Krispy Kreme donuts and coffee - providing the sugar rush to last the next hour or so to navigate the ticket counters and security lines before we could fall asleep on the plane.

As I was on the plane, I realized we were in God's flow and He was providing for our needs and we just had to trust in Him. I started to recognize some of the difficulties as bits of spiritual warfare (we had been studying Ray Stedman's book on spiritual warfare in our Bible study), where the devil works to discourage people from doing God's work. I had become quite discouraged the week before the trip. First of all, one of our members who was going to help translate for us had to change his mind when suddenly some things came up causing some severe hardships at work and financially. Then when Paul fell sick with pneumonia a few days before the trip, that felt like a big shock as well, since both him and his daughter would have to drop out. Then Ian developed bronchitis and I was afraid he would have to drop as well. I heard that during the India trip a couple months back that a bunch of people had fallen sick right before the trip (but they got better just before the trip and still went).

I know we all face periods of discouragement, and I wonder if that is one way God tests us to see how we would trust Him to push through those times. I feel it is often easier to trust in human wisdom since it is more visible. But God is unseen and holds the highest wisdom. His grace is sufficient for our needs and His provision will never come late (even though we may tend to doubt that many times!) I've found on trips in the past I am often prone to facing periods of discouragement, causing me to become reluctant to share details about the trip and be excited, as if I need to keep up my guard emotionally in case something happened.

But God knows all things well and He pulled through after all - Elizabeth was able to take Jonathan's place (even getting her passport expedited and having it arrive just hours before we got on the plane!), and in the place of Paul and his daughter, two other new people got to join at the last minute, Chris Chow and Liz. Chris had never been on a missions trip before, and we all felt this was a wonderful opportunity for him to reach out and serve. In seeing God's good hand in all the events that happened so far, I was reminded of Romans 8:28 "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose". Although some of the situations appeared to be countering God's good plan for our trip, God was able to work those things for good in the end.

We finally had our whole team which included 12 people:

- Josh Valdez
- Molly Schatzel
- Elizabeth Welk
- Liz Cooledge
- Josh Chan
- Stephen Parks
- Misa Mascovich
- Ed Jarvis
- Chris Chow
- Katie Nordhagen
- Ian Hsu
- me

## **Arriving in Shell**

Ecuador was a beautiful country, and I had been looking forward to it for some time. I was looking forward to partnering with people from PBC, forming deeper and meaningful relationships with people who I probably just knew fairly casually, and also getting to know some of the people in Ecuador. I was a bit nervous about the language barrier (I had studied Spanish in high school and had been to a few Latin American countries in years past, but the Spanish always seemed a bit rusty), but I heard the people are quite accommodating. I was also looking forward to the scenery, the beautiful rainforest, mountains and waterfalls.



Arriving in Quito, we stayed at a guest house the first night. I was pretty tired - even though there were really only 2 hours of jet-lag, just being up since 2 am was quite tiring, and with all the anticipation of arriving in Ecuador, my mind was exhausted! But it was exhilarating to finally be there! Pondering the large maps on the wall, I started to see a bit of perspective of where we were and where we were going. From Quito to Shell was only about 200 km, but the bus ride was going to take many hours over the windy mountain roads. Quito is just west of the continental divide (where all the rivers flow into the Pacific), and Shell is on the other side. We would be crossing a 11,500 ft pass over the crest of the

Andes! We would see the high mountains whose glaciers and snow forms the headwaters of the mighty Amazon that flows for over 3000 miles. Having been in Brazil a few years back along a different stretch of the Amazon, it was eye-opening and gave a whole new perspective of the land we were visiting.

I slept better than I expected, given the unfamiliar surroundings and high altitude (Quito is over 9000 ft), and eager expectations of the trip so far. We had a nice breakfast at the B&B inn in Quito and we had the bus loaded and we were on our way. Quito was shrouded in low clouds as we started driving south and heading up toward the mountain pass. Traffic was surprisingly light and well-organized and the roads were in quite good condition (as compared to many countries where traffic is pretty chaotic and the roads are muddy and rutted and barely passible!). Ecuador is one of the most friendly countries to tourists that I've been to - this could be since their economy is better than many countries, and more tourists are realizing what a beautiful country it is.

I was just finishing my sandwich when I saw peeks of blue sky overhead and realized we had cleared the layer of low clouds, revealing ranges of green mountains all around. Quito is a city in a "bowl" surrounded by mountains. It was like being in the Bay Area where fog covered the valleys and the hills poked through. Except the landscape is about 9000 ft higher in Quito. Even what seemed to be just hills around Quito were higher than any peak in the continental US (nearby Pichincha is 15,696 ft high!). Rolling green hills and farmland stretched to the horizon. Agriculture is one of their main industries in the highlands - it was amazing to see how they cultivated fields up to 12,000 ft, even including greenhouses tilted at steep angles, following the topography of the landscape.

I had been looking forward to this drive since I knew it would provide a bit of a cross section of the country and its culture. Farmers in the highlands tending herds of alpacas (or are they llamas?), Quichua people with their colorful outfits, interesting towns known for specific items (such as Salcedo for its ice cream and another town down the street known for its blue jeans), and the changing vegetation made for an interesting journey. Pine forests at 11,000 feet gave way to grasslands and shrubs at lower elevations, giving way to thicker and lush rainforest vegetation below about 4000 feet.



We stopped in Banos, one of the famous tourist towns along the way. Flanked by the 16,480 ft Tungurahua volcano, the town is known for its rivers, waterfalls and interesting volcanic features including hot springs, basaltic cliffs and gorges, and evacuation routes in case the mighty mountain

decided to rumble to life. (in fact a large eruption occurred just a month or so after we left causing a bit of a scare.) We had time to visit a couple of the sights - starting with a zip-line adventure! We parked just opposite to a wonderful twin waterfall, and as we were busy snapping photos, we realized there were zip-line cars going back and forth, whisking tourists to see the sight up close. I knew we were just passing through and had no expectation to actually partake in the adventure, but when some of us realized it was just \$1 and took just a few minutes, we decided to give it a try!

A 1-inch steel cable spanned across the enormous chasm, probably 2000 feet long and 500 feet above the canyon floor, passing over the Pastaza river far below. With no "safety briefing" or other preparation, the operator closed the door of the cable car platform and seconds later we were whizzing along the line - probably around 30-40 mph in the open basket, the wind in our faces! I barely had enough time to get my camera lens turned on to snap a couple photos and video - it all happened so fast! We zoomed right over the lip of the waterfall, and as the line gradually slackened past the falls, we slowly came to a stop above the rim. Soon after we were gradually being pulled back up the line.

Another minute later and we were back! I stopped to admire the operator's business - consisting of a small booth, a long line strung across the canyon, a gondola and a small motor about the size of a lawnmower engine to pull us back. Somehow he ran this business of whisking paying tourists over this scenic overlook. Pretty creative - and business was going quite well - the next basket was full just a few minutes later. Without the legal implications that would be required to run such an operation in America, the whole thing seemed so simple!

Back on the bus, we headed a little further downstream, passing the famous Pastaza river gorge, flanked by basaltic cliffs hundreds of feet high, a mecca for white water rafters. The cloud-shrouded mountains appeared and disappeared mysteriously, revealing bits of scenery one piece at a time. Being in the rainforest now, the clouds rarely parted for a view of the high peaks above (the climbing season is around January and June when the weather is the best around the high peaks, so I'd have to return). But having the misty clouds around added a sense of mystery to the environment seldom seen back home in CA.

Just a few miles down the road, we pulled into Banos by the river, where we saw stacks of rubber rafts, ready for the next white-water adventurers. A little ways down was the Pailon del Diablo - a famous waterfall and grotto that extends behind the falls. I felt we were on an eco-tourism trip back in Costa Rica enjoying a bit of vacation - a nice bit of recreation to gear us up for the next 6 days of work coming up. The trail down to the falls was about a mile, descending many flights of wooden steps. Every so often we'd come across a wooden sign, like a waypoint along the journey - many had Scripture references, such as "El que cree en mi, como dice la Escritura, de su interior correran y los de agua viva" - from John 7:38: "Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them". It was nice to have a Godly perspective when enjoying nature at the same time.

We could hear the falls long before we got to them - they were a thundering cascade probably 100 feet high, nestled deep in the canyon. A series of platforms had been built allowing us to get close enough to wish we had ponchos to keep out the mist. Shielding and drying my camera lens between pictures, I managed to snap a few pictures before risking permanent damage to the camera (that would be a bummer to ruin any further pictures of our whole trip!) A path took us through the grotto and behind the falls - we carefully went single-file through the low overhangs and uneven rocks to get up to the platform, where we could reach into the falling water (which was quite cold but refreshing!) I marveled at how they built the platforms in the first place (the first ones had been around for a while, but it

seemed every few years another one was built since they were dated. the furthest out one was stamped 2008). I felt privileged to see these wonderful sight.



It felt more like 3 miles instead of 1 mile going back up the path and all the steps, but we were greeted by a small band - with guitars and guiro and drums. Misa and Josh were dancing away - felt like vacation! I just sat and watched them dancing and marveled at their energy as I caught my breath from the hike back up all the stairs!

It was just another hour or so to reach Shell, our home for the next week or so. We found our hostel - called "Germany" where we'd be staying, but it was on the other side of a rather beat-up muddy road! I felt this couldn't be the right place - first the country name was wrong (I thought we were in Ecuador!), the road was so beat up (schlepping our luggage across the mud was rather non-trivial), and when we got there, the gate was locked!

It turned out we got there a little early so they weren't expecting us just as we got there. The "lock" on the gate was actually just a chain looped around (the lock wasn't applied, so we could just unravel the chain and open the gate - this was useful later in the week!). And we just happened to arrive during the road construction season (about 4-5 streets nearby were all torn up as well and throughout the week, we watched the road crews laying pipe, setting curbs, and putting multicolored tiles along the sidewalks). I had thought of Ecuador as a "third-world" country (implying it was poor and that we were "better"), but Ecuador is developing (and developing fast). Throughout just one week, we'd see several streets rebuilt (it would take months in CA!), even with most of the labor done by hand. It was kind of refreshing to see a society growing more organically - it reminded me of joining a start-up company (where things

may be a bit more chaotic, but they move quickly and when projects get done, there is more satisfaction). In a larger company things seem to move too slowly and inefficiently.

We enjoyed dinner the first night at a restaurant just down the street from our hostel (we found a back way through another gate allowing us to bypass much of the mud - another lesson learned that would be useful for the rest of the week!) There a missionary couple shared about some of the water treatment projects they have been working on near Shell. Clean water is such a critical resource that we take for granted so much in America, but it is a life-saver. This couple not only focused on building wells to provide clean water, but also educated the people on how to use the water effectively and maintain proper hygiene. Just building a well and expecting the people to use it wasn't enough - they had always had the lifestyle where cleanliness was not a priority. Training them and instilling in them a priority for hygiene is what was really needed - their water treatment project took on a holistic approach. I've always wondered someday if I might want to get involved with a project like that - my dad through Rotary knows many people who have volunteered for years around the world to provide clean water.



Back at our cabin, it felt like we were in a tropical paradise, surrounded by lush rainforest, the trickling creek at the bottom of the hill, and flowering plants all around. Our room was named the Papagayo Azul (blue parrot). So far it felt more like a vacation than a missions trip! I could lie in the hammock on our deck and let the sound of the rain and the birds lull me to sleep.

## **Sunday**

We headed over to the next town Mera - about a 30 minute drive back upstream from Shell to visit the Barton's church. At least 75% of Ecuador is Roman Catholic, with just a small percentage of evangelical Christians. The Bartons decided to make their home church the Iglesia Bautista (baptist church) in Mera. Of course the service was all in Spanish and the speaking was pretty fast, but I was able to make out some of the key words and Scripture references. The speaker seemed to ramble from verse to verse, going all through the Bible (it was hard to keep up with all the references) - but he had a free-form of a seasoned preacher who knew his Bible quite well - I was impressed.

We spent some time praying for individual concerns of some of the members of the congregation - it was a pretty close-knit community, like a big family (PBC probably has over 500 members and sometimes it feels a bit intimidating to try to know everyone!) It was fun going through the hymns and

praise songs - I didn't know most of them, but there was one "Tu Nombre Levantare" which I recognized as we were singing it as "Lord I Lift Your Name on High".

The Barton kids were having a good time hanging out with us - they have 4 kids, Sam, Nathan, Josiah and Isaac. Josh fell in love immediately with them - I'm sure Paul appreciated it - not having to constantly look after them when we were around! Josh was like a long lost uncle visiting from out of town! I think he had as much fun with the kids as they did with him - chasing after them and swinging them around and always with a smile on his face.



Lunch was at a restaurant with a great view overlooking the Pastaza river - we enjoyed tilapia (right there from the river) and locally grown organic vegetables (in America we take for granted we have imported food at any time of the year). It was quite tasty! And it was nice knowing we are patronizing the local people.



The ride back to the hostel was in the back of a pickup truck taxi (probably not legal in America, but was very efficient!) We had a little time to walk around Shell and explore a bit - the clouds had parted to reveal an amazing sight. Two mountains were starting to emerge in the distance - the mighty 17159 ft Sangay volcano and the top of El Altar (17730 ft). The glacier clad peaks seemed rather out of place as we viewed them from the tropical rainforest in Shell. When I went to get a picture of Sangay, I noticed what looked like a cloud starting to obscure the peak, but when I watched it a bit more, I saw it



was actually an ash cloud - the volcano was erupting! What an amazing sight, and it seemed God had it all in his plan to show Himself to us right before we started our work.



In the afternoon, we paid a visit to a local squatter camp. Located just a couple miles on a dirt road from Shell, the village gave the image of being the poorest of the poor. Many people who could not afford housing could "squat" on the land and own it (Ecuador has a rule that you can have a piece of land once you build a house, and a "house" can consist of simply a few poles and tarps!) I knew we were getting close as I saw a couple people bathing and getting water from a local stream. In the distance I could see a basic building with wood poles and a corrugated tin roof.

The kids were quite welcoming and receptive when we arrived - I'm glad since it was a rather muddy 1/4 mile trek from the end of the road to the pavilion where we met the kids. And careful to not step on the lines of leaf-cutter ants on the way! It was in a field surrounded by beautiful rainforest - the clouds were rolling in, shrouding the mountains around us in wispy strands of white.

A small portable CD player was playing a song and when I listened carefully I realized it was "Yo tengo un amigo que me ama" - it was a kid's sunday-school song I had remembered from my trip to the Honduras about 10 years ago! I still remembered most of the words since I had just played my old CD a couple weeks before our trip! I guess it's a popular song - I wonder if the kids would have known any of the other songs from my Honduras trip! Somehow with the kids already knowing a song I knew, I felt a deeper connection with them right from the beginning.

The kids loved playing games (red-light green-light, freeze tag) and singing songs and getting their whole bodies involved - one of their favorites was the "Superhero" song "Jesus you're my superhero" where they would pretend to fly around like Superman! We also had the kids make crafts - coloring crosses with different colored markers - those crosses were something they could take home and show their parents and keep for a long time. But I'm sure an even longer lasting memory for them would be seeing a group of folks from America to come to their small village and sing and dance and worship with them!

One of the kids named Lecha seemed quite shy and wanted to hide in the corner, yet his curiosity led him to listen from a distance. I found out later he had been abused by his parents and had developed a deep mistrust of grown-ups. I hope and pray that it wouldn't develop into something more severe later on in life such as reactive attachment disorder or depression. Throughout our time he started to open

up, although slowly. It must be hard growing up in a society where such needs are probably not recognized or treated.

## **Work Week**

The next 5 days - Monday through Friday, would follow a bit of a routine. Each morning we would show up at the local hospital - the "Hospital Vozandes del Oriente" where the work crew had a bunch of projects lined up for us. These projects included

- Building a fence around the property (to keep out squatters from taking parts of the land)
- Building a sidewalk across the street (in Ecuador drivers did not need to yield to pedestrians)
- Painting some of the guest rooms (the walls and ceiling were in pretty bad shape from many years of tropical moisture)
- Landscaping on one side of the hospital (it was quite rocky and steep)

The fence was hard work - involving removing parts of an old fence that was going to be replaced, digging post-holes for the new posts, mixing and pouring concrete, placing the poles, stretching and splicing the fence itself, and finally welding the fence to the posts. Part of the old fence had been so overgrown by rainforest after several years that 3 of us with machetes needed a couple hours to clear the thick trees (some were 6 inches in diameter) and unravel the vines that had weaved through the chain-link fence over the years. It was satisfying work though with visible progress each hour. Some of us even got to use a welding iron for the first time!

I took turns working on different projects each day - it was nice for a bit of variety and to use different muscles as well. A couple of the days I worked on the sidewalk, starting with digging and leveling the ground next to the road (the ground was full of stones and the vegetation was quite overgrown in places too), schlepping wheelbarrows of sand (kilo) and spreading it along the sidewalk (we didn't pave the sidewalk or put tiles - we left it as sand).

A couple of the days when it was raining, we were working on the guest rooms at the hospital. The cinder block walls and corrugated fiberglass roof were quite dirty and definitely needed lots of cleaning and painting. The ceiling probably needed a good hose down with a pressure washer (but the weathered fiberglass was rather delicate - a bump from one of the broomstick handles on a paint roller created a small crack). The easiest thing was just to paint over everything! In CA, it would probably take weeks to make sure everything was done properly and "to code", but in Ecuador, we just started painting!



We opened the paint and got the rollers going, but I started to wonder about the effectiveness of our efforts when the paint didn't seem to stick very much. hmmm - I noticed the can of paint indicated "Sellador" - I thought it might be the brand and maybe it was just an old brand. But Sellador was the Spanish work for sealer (or primer) Oh I see - we were just priming the walls and ceiling and were going to put the real paint on later! Two days later when we did put the actual paint, it looked wonderful!

Before we could get too far along with the painting, we realized some more preparation work had to be done - sealing the holes, removing switch plates and brackets, and removing an old sink. The wood around the sink in one of the rooms was pretty rotten and termite-infested, clearly visible from the way it sagged when we set anything down on it! A couple quick pulls and the tabletop came apart in splinters, sending the metal sink crashing to the floor. It quickly got messier than expected, but I'm glad it was gone before we continued painting!

By the end of the week, we could really see the fruits of our labor - the fence was almost done (completed around the front, and most of the way down the side). The sidewalk was done (and children were walking on it now instead of dodging traffic), and the painting projects were done (the rooms looked so much brighter that the dingy walls and ceiling had a fresh coat of white, and the old rotten sink and counter were gone). The landscaping was just about done - just needed time for the grass and plants to fill back in.

It feels refreshing at times to be doing physical labor and working with your hands - for me, working in software often feels a bit abstract and the fruits of the work may seem a bit more distant. The work we did in Ecuador was quite satisfying - being able to mostly complete our projects and seeing the immediate benefits of our work. Even the road crews that were re-paving several of the streets and laying the new sidewalks were making solid progress (visible each day). I feel in CA, the highway construction done by the unionized workers moves at a snail's pace and traffic is often snarled for months before we see any results!



I really enjoyed working with the local people - I felt like we weren't just there to do the work for them while they just sat back and watched. But they truly participated with us, heaving wheelbarrows and shovelfuls of dirt alongside us. Some of them were eager to learn words in English as much as we were picking up Spanish. I knew "ceiling" as "[something] razo" which was corrected to "cielo raso", just as one of the guys I was painting with didn't know the word for "brush" - we floundered a bit trying to pronounce the words correctly, but enjoyed learning from each other. We even got to learn a couple words in Quichua (Rodrigo was from that tribe) - "Imanala" is "como estas" (How are you) and "yoka shuti kong" is "yo soy" (I am).

Each night back at our hotel, it was nice to have times of debriefing where we could sing songs of worship, reflect in our journals, share and pray together. I feel those times of bonding is part of what really knit the team together. We knew we didn't have to struggle alone. For some of us, we felt as if we were fighting a spiritual battle as well as a physical one. Our muscles ached, we wondered sometimes what the point was (oh another wheelbarrow, another shovel of dirt), and it seemed like they other guys were a lot faster and more efficient. One day, we had cold showers in the morning (the water heater was out of gas), my shovel was broken, the wheelbarrow had a flat tire, and I felt I was just getting in the way. But I know God had a purpose for bringing us to Ecuador and I struggled to keep the bigger perspective. An analogy I always like to go back to is when the bricklayer is asked what he is doing, he could either say he is just laying bricks row by row, or he could say he is building a cathedral for God.

But in our struggles, God's grace seemed to increase that much more - the worship in the evenings had greater meanings, our fellowship became that much tighter, and the workers were eager to partner with us. When Ian was still coughing with his bronchitis, some of the folks from the hospital delivered the medicines he needed. And when I was most hot and sweaty and needed a break from digging, one of the workers offered us generous portions of naranjilla juice (ended up being my favorite tropical drink - I wish we had it back in America!)

## **Nate Saint School**

Although much of our work was physical work with construction, we also helped out at the Nate Saint school down the street. It was named after one of the famous missionaries Nate Saint who arrived in a bright yellow airplane to send the gospel to the natives back in the 1950's. The school is a missionary kid's elementary school (the local kids go to different schools.) A park a couple blocks away (Airplane

Park) featured a replica of his plane. In the front of the school was a historical panel talking about the missionaries - a constant reminder to the missionary children in the classroom.



One of the mornings we put together a skit for the kids - acting out the Noah's ark story. Ed (Noah) and Katie (his wife) had a good time - the kids got a good laugh. To return the favor, the kids took turns acting out skits from the Bible - from Adam & Eve in the garden, Daniel in the lion's den (all the kids wanted to be the lion), and Jonah and the whale. The kids were so natural at acting - seems like us grown-ups have so many inhibitions and are afraid of embarrassment (but the kids don't care!)

The kids loved making their crafts too - from coloring crosses to making beaded jewelry to making tie-dyed shirts! And there was enough dye left over after the kids were done that we got to do our own tie dye! I pulled an extra white undershirt (I hadn't planned on bringing an extra shirt), Josh tie-dyed his shoes and a couple people just did what they felt like! I hadn't done tie dye since high school but the technique was pretty easy. Soak the shirt in the solution, roll it up in a spiral, tie it together with rubber bands, then pour dye all over it. It doesn't really matter how you dye it - it will come out as an interesting pattern no matter what!



And of course the kids loved running around and playing games - from freeze-tag to races to fill buckets of water (where you weren't allowed to use your hands) to doctor-dodgeball to just running around in the field. I felt like I'm getting too old to keep up... On Friday they had their "Super Friday",

with crafts, games outdoors, singing, playing and getting photos (Ian brought a portable computer and printer so the kids could have photos right there!)

We also broke up into groups where some people worked on different projects and activities - some people worked on painting a puppet theatre stage and a bookshelf (and freely using all the available colors). Some people did activities with preschoolers at the Barton's house.

It was great having the Nate Saint school where all the the missionary families could take their kids to school in order to be able to serve long term in Shell. I just feel a little ambivalent since the kids may be almost a bit too sheltered - they could easily just be with each other and not interacting so much with the local kids. And once they graduate from middle school, where do they go to high school? There was no high school in Shell for the missionary kids - they would either have to go to Quito or back to the US when they got older. I hope and pray that as the kids grow up they would be able to continue their education in Shell.

## Tours

We were in a fairly significant area in missionary history. Starting with the Shell corporation settling in the area in 1937 to drill for oil (not much was found in Shell, but decent amounts were found elsewhere), they built an airstrip which was still used today. The airport is now mostly used by Mission Aviation Fellowship - since most of Ecuador is not accessible by roads and is entangled in thick jungle, much of the missions work had to be done by planes. The planes were buzzing back and forth for the whole week we were there - supplies were being shuttled back and forth, mail was being sent, and even children with the Compassion program were being flown in for the sponsors to be able to visit. (In Tanzania the year before, we all got to meet our children in Arusha). There are at least 220 airstrips throughout the countryside.

There were 6 aircraft in the hangar (one was still awaiting a new engine - they have to be replaced every 1700 hours regardless of their wear for safety reasons). We toured the mailboxes where supplies were being shipped - the boxes were organized by villages and the flights had to be planned to visit the villages in the most efficient way (sort of like the traveling salesman problem) to save precious gas and time. Even as we were there, one of the Cessna 172 planes just touched down and was wheeled by hand into the hangar! I hadn't realized how much of a vital part the aircraft played in serving the local people until I saw a couple crew unloading baskets of fruits and vegetables from the plane.



The Hospital Vozandes del Oriente across from the airport was founded in 1958 - it had been a dream of Nate Saint for many years. The current hospital was built in 1985 (replacing the original which was torn down recently). The Bartons have been working there for a couple years now - Paul is an anesthesiologist, treating patients on most days. We got to see the operating room (and even the Bartons house from the window of the OR!) It's got to be convenient - if you get a call when you're home, the hospital was just steps away.

We got a nice tour of the Nate Saint house - also located just down the street from the hospital. Built back in the 1950's, the original structure was still standing, though an addition had been put on and some renovation work had been done to restore the termite-infested timbers (they showed a piece of 2x4 that had been hollowed out almost completely by termites - the bugs were smart and tunneled through the inside while leaving the outside intact. This allowed the termites to keep their home longer before it collapsed, and it made it harder to tell when your house was infested since you couldn't see them!)

The house featured a couple of the Waodani spears in their full length (at least 8-10 feet long, with barbed tips). It must have been an intimidating sight to face those Indians back in the day when they were being first reached with the gospel. The house was like a museum including some of the original tools used by Nate Saint and the original missionaries, such as the basket lowered from Nate Saint's plane to deliver supplies, and a record player used to play the gospel in their native tongue. At the gift shop I enjoyed being able to buy some of the tools made by the indigenous people - a Waodani spear, a Shuar arrow and a Quichua bowl - the handicrafts were beautiful and the price was right (but was probably good money to the local tribes!)

The next day, we had the privilege of visiting a local orphanage - for me, this is one of the parts of the trip I had anticipated the most. Jesus challenges us that true believers are those who visit widows and orphans in their distress. And I figured seeing orphans in the developing nation of Ecuador is like something that Jesus would do if he were here today. The orphanage is called "Casa de Fe" (House of Faith) - it must have taken a lot of faith to open and run the place, but God seemed to really reward their faith.

My vision of an orphanage as I grew up was something like that from the musical Annie - a shabby run-down place run by a drunk lady who hated her job and the kids, and they were as miserable as she was. But at Casa de Fe, even though the children have gone through severe hardships, they had great smiles on their faces, and the people running the place did it cheerfully out of their love for God. The beds were well kept, the toys were organized and the children were learning valuable lessons in the classrooms. They even got to go outside and walk through paths in the rainforest and play in the yard (a far cry from busy NYC!).



We took turns playing with the kids - one girl named Greis (sounds like Grace) had a malformed foot and had a hard time walking. She stumbled about, falling over often, but instead of frustration, she played and tumbled with the other children (several kids had birth defects preventing them from walking straight). We played with toy cars for a minute until she saw the "silly bands" around my wrist (given to me from one of the Barton kids) - I passed them on to her - they were greatly appreciated!

The bread in the oven smelled so good! The kids seemed to be well fed and taken care of - praise God! It's got to be hard work, considering all the special needs of the children. One kid named Samuel had a cleft palate (his parents thought he was cursed and named him Saddam Hussein before abandoning him) - he had to face abandonment by his family as well as his physical disability. I hadn't seen a cleft palate until seeing those mailers from charities like Smile Train years ago, and I always wondered what it was or if the children had been horribly abused or something - actually it's a fairly common birth defect (in the US, it's normally treated right at birth, so Americans would never really see it, unless it was in your own family). But in other countries, and especially when families could not afford the surgery, abandonment was the easier choice. It's amazing how Smile Train says they can fix a cleft palate for just \$250 per surgery. I hope they can be able to provide a surgery for Samuel.

We visited some of the other children - some had scars on their faces, and some had ankle braces, but all had smiles on their faces and just wanted to be held. I stayed behind when the first half of the group had their ride back to the hotel, and I wanted to stay longer, but it was time to go.

## **Fun stuff**

Although our schedule was fairly packed most of the week, near the end we did manage to explore a little and see some of the interesting things around us (of course many people used that time for naps and relaxing, but in a way I'm not sure when I'm going to be back in Ecuador so I don't want to feel I missed anything...) Just down the hill from our hostel was the Motolo river (tributary of the Pastaza which flows into the Amazon), and we got to see everything from wild heliconias (normally you just see them in gardens), very thorny roots of "walking trees" (that eventually creep downhill on their long standing roots, leaf cutter ants (long trains of them went for probably 100 feet), and plenty of vines to swing on by the river. In most tropical places I've been to, I've managed to find a vine to go "Tarzan" and see how far I could swing. Also on most days our "commute" to the school and hospital involved crossing a long swinging bridge high above the Motolo River!





A group of about 6 of us hiked down to the vine - I was still about 100 yards away when I heard an "oh shoot!" in the distance followed by a splash! Apparently Stephen was going to try it and slipped - whoops! But from then on we were a bit more careful - taking turns swinging and filming each other swinging out. Josh could have probably gotten all the way across the creek on the vine (but would be a little tougher to get back since there wasn't another vine there...) It was a good break from the busyness of working at the hospital and school.



One of the nights, we got to visit a bunch of the teens at a house down the street - they had a ministry similar to our Young Life ministry for inner city teenagers. Keeping the kids safe and off the street for a night where they can interact with each other and learn about God - it was a wonderful program. We got to play ping-pong, dictionary, pick fresh guayaba (guava) from their trees, sing songs around the campfire, and have pizza - it felt like being at a summer camp all over again! Pizza was quite a treat for the kids - in America it is often considered cheap junk food, but in Ecuador it is quite expensive and almost treated like a delicacy! One of the songs we sang was "God of Wonders" - the kids sang it in Spanish while we sang along in English to the same tune.

We also got to visit the Ecoparque, a nature preserve about 20 minutes further down the road from Shell. Surrounded by rainforest, the park features some of the native wildlife including parrots and monkeys as well as a fun ropes course and swimming pools (the main pool also has a zip-line where you can fly about 100 feet before jumping in the water). The locals seemed a bit cavalier about the

ropes course (no safety briefing, gotta wonder about the quality of the gear - were the carabiners made in China and recalled?), but we were all game. Swinging on the ropes to planks about 8 feet apart, stepping across high-wires, and shimmying across swinging ladders and steps were all part of the fun. But the platforms (and the zip-line in the pool) were quite creaky with several steps either missing or broken (in America this place would have probably been closed years ago).



Katie made good friends with the large green parrot perched on her shoulder for a good while - until it decided to move on, flew a bit and landed right on Josh's head! The talons were sharp and must have been a bit of a surprise! I just watched from a distance.

Often the unexpected would happen each day when we were in Ecuador... one day, a guy pulled up in his truck - I thought he might have known one of the workers, but he actually needed a jump-start. We pushed his truck around the corner, where he could get a rolling start down the hill. He pulled the clutch and managed to start it rolling down the hill - he drove back up and said gracias! Another day, a brother of one of the workers on the fence pulled up and said hi. We had just taken a break from the fence to see a guy holding a puppy in his arms, followed by a flock of some 20 geese! The birds just waddled along and followed him. Then one afternoon as we were taking pictures of the erupting Sangay volcano, I turned around just in time to watch a funny clown car pass by (looked like it belonged in Disneyland!)



The Bartons couldn't stay too much longer (Paul actually had a surgery that night), so we enjoyed a nice dinner right there at Ecoparque. They were wonderful for their hospitality, supporting us, doing laundry for us, and shuttling us around town in the "Barton-mobile". They plan to come back to the US to Texas next year. I hope they get to visit CA and PBC sometime.

## **Mitad Del Mundo**

It felt like a long ride back out of Shell up the winding roads, climbing up to the crest of the Andes. Passing Banos with its waterfalls, misty mountains and highway tunnels I was reminded again of the beauty that had been around us all the time. Ice cream at Salcedo was again appreciated - my 4-layered cone featured creme (cream), mora (blackberry), naranjilla and taxo (local tropical fruits). With every 1000 ft we climbed up the mountains, we saw the vegetation change, starting with lush tropical rainforest, which gave way to smaller and shrubby bushes, then to grasslands, pine forests, farms, and glimpses of snow-capped peaks far away.

Our destination for the afternoon was "Mitad Del Mundo" - the "center of the world", called that because the equator passes right through. A large monument stands centered right on the imaginary line, and we reached there just a couple days after the vernal equinox, where the sun would be in the same plane as the equator all day. The shadows fell pretty squarely on the faces of the monument - over many centuries, different tribes around the world have worshiped in auspicious places such as this since they felt their god placed a special meaning on the location.

The monument houses a museum talking about all the tribes in the area, including the Waodani (the locals call them Huaorani since Spanish lacks a "W"), who killed the missionaries back in Shell. A local Andean band was playing, their flutes, guitars and drums echoed through centuries of the Quichua culture. I am looking forward to being back in South America in a few months to go to Peru and Macchu Picchu, also populated with the Quichua people.



We enjoyed a nice celebration dinner of sorts at Mitad Del Mundo at the Yaravi restaurant - featuring local cuisine, several types of corn and nuts, fried plantains, and best of all, cuy (roasted guinea pig). The cuy tasted a bit like tough chicken, but had decent flavor, and the fun feeling of eating something exotic. I was a little ambivalent about the guinea pig (this is only the second time I've eaten an animal that was also treated as a pet with a name - I had a pet frog when I was a kid and we had frog legs in Hong Kong, and we had pet guinea pigs in 2nd grade). I don't know if I'll have it again - maybe I'll treat it as a "been there done that" kind of thing.

## **Journey home**

It had been a wonderful 9 days in Ecuador - as with many of these types of trips, it was a bittersweet experience heading to the airport and heading back home. I missed my friends back home and missed my normal routine. But I knew I was going to miss all the new friends I had made in Ecuador. It was a beautiful country and I felt I was just starting to get familiar with the surroundings and the people when it was time to go. Although the trip was relatively short, I know our work for God has eternal consequences. I hope and pray that the experience wouldn't be merely a superficial one and something to score "brownie points" with God, but that it would truly be life-changing. I had been fasting from alcohol for Lent (so enjoyed tropical fruit juice instead of beer the last night) and I think God had honored that by providing this wonderful experience in Ecuador where I could serve Him with a clean heart.

On the other hand I knew I had my activities and freedom back home - our schedule had been fairly tight and regimented the time we were in Ecuador (I'm glad in a way we did get to maximize our time, even though there was little margin in the schedule). I knew I was going back to familiar food and safe water and everything too (I think throughout the trip everybody had at least one bout with the "Montezuma's revenge"). I think our bathroom had been "destroyed" a couple times - I'm glad the cleaning people didn't seem to mind - besides they are probably used to foreigners not used to the food. In fact one person had gotten quite sick right as we were leaving, even having to throw up just a few feet from one of the customs officers in the airport! But everyone was fine on the flights and the whole way home - God had been protecting us.

I was supposed to have a cramped middle seat for the first leg of the flight back home - but I was quite happy when someone decided to switch seats and allow me to have a window seat on the right side of

the plane. I would be able to have a view of what we missed on the way in (it was nighttime and low clouds) - now it was sunny and beautiful.

Ian took a different flight, straight to Washington DC where he was to give a presentation for some business meetings the next day. He was finally getting over his bronchitis (he had been coughing off and on during most of the trip), and was able to get some rest on the way. Luckily work hadn't been too busy for me during when I was gone - I knew I was going to experience some "reverse culture-shock", and at least I was able to ease back into things a bit. I know the first time I go to a grocery store and see the abundance of goods we have, or be able to re-experience the many comforts we have back in America, I will have a renewed perspective. I hope it will be one of gratitude and not arrogance and feelings of entitlement.



Leaving Quito, I was surprised to have my ears pop as we ascended, not in the normal way, but in the opposite way! Planes are normally pressurized to about 7000-8000 ft, and since we were starting from over 9000 ft, the pressure increased as we took off! It was cloudy as usual on the east side of the Andean crest - the tropical moisture being uplifted from the Amazon valley, but the break in the clouds caused by the topography of the mountains was clearly visible. Cayambe, the only place to find snow on the equator, was visible with its 18,996 ft summit poking high above the clouds. Numerous other peaks and crater lakes were visible as we headed back north. What a sight and an wonderful "amen" to a great trip!

We all got back home in SFO late that night - we were delayed in Miami due to a large fire that had destroyed some large fuel tanks at the airport a couple days earlier (many flights had been canceled, but we just diverted to Tampa to re-fuel so we were OK). We were tired but satisfied. Thanks all who gave me prayer and financial support - it was a wonderful trip and I hope to be able to come back someday.

- The End -