Hello everyone,

First things first, we made it to South America last night, on time and unscathed!! One more continent down with only Antarctica to go. Maybe in '09.

Seeing as how Ecuador is located in the northwestern part of SA, and seeing as how Quito, it’s capital, was our final destination yesterday, the flight from Miami only took four hours. So, although it was a rather long travel day, it was nothing like our annual treks to NZ. We were in bed by midnight, 11PM Wisconsin time.

There’s the first tidbit of so-called educational information that we hope to pass on in our Travel Reports; that is, that the northern part of SA is on the same time zone as our Eastern Zone. However, in that we have to travel some 600 miles to the west to get to the Galapagos Islands on Saturday, we’ll be adjusting our watches back to Midwest US time, an hour earlier that Quito.

OK, lets launch into a bit of info on Ecuador. It’s located in northwestern South America and the equator passes through its northern part. It’s a smallish country, about the size of Nevada and has a population of about 13.5 million. The official language is Spanish and 95% of its inhabitants are Catholic.

It shares a 350 mile border with Columbia to the north and an 850 mile one with Peru to the south and east. The country used to be called Quito but in 1830, because it straddles the equator, changed its name to The Republic of Ecuador.
It boasts three main geographical areas (plus the Galapagos), each having very distinct and differing climates: the coast to the west, the highlands, dominated by the dramatic Andes Mountains in the center and the "Oriente" or Amazonian rainforest to the east.

The facts that we found most interesting about the country involves three Andes peaks, all situated within the Ecuadorian border, with each boasting a unique geographical characteristic: Cayambe Volcano at 18,900' above sea level is the only place in the world where it snows on the equator. It simply is its highest point; Cotopaxi Volcano, at 19,340 feet, is the highest active volcano in the world; and (here's our favorite) due to the ovoidal shape of the earth, with the planet being wider at the equator, Mt. Chimborozo, at 20,700 feet, is further from the center or core of the earth than Mt. Everest, which stands nearly 9000 feet higher above sea level. How about that one, kiddies!!

Ecuador's two largest cities are Guayquill with 2 million, situated on the coast, and the capital city, Quito, with 1.8 million, located at 9200 above the Pacific in the heart of the Andes. After these two metropoli, the population drops off precipitously with the next largest city having less than 200,000.

Moving on to Quito, the country's capital lies about 150 south of Columbia and 450 miles north of Peru. It lies in an Andes basin and is ringed with jagged mountains. Some of the more dramatic, snow covered peaks can be seen on clear days but, unfortunately, we were denied such views due to the low-hanging and somewhat misty clouds which are prevalent at this time of year. Even though the equator passes just a few miles north of Quito, the temperature is mild all-year-round with highs rarely reaching 80’s (26 C) and lows infrequently dipping below 50 (10 C).

They say Quito has a small town atmosphere, but that was not evident during our short visit as the "Quitoites" were out in full force with the beginning of a week-long festival called the Feria de Quito Jesús. By the looks and sounds of things, the festival has more to do with marching bands and bullfights than it does Jesus. In that school is off for the festival, lots and lots of kids were observed taking part in some of the festival activities.
As I sit here typing in our Swissotel room, it’s after 9 PM and we can still hear the passing bands, some on foot, some aboard trucks and busses. This stuff apparently goes on for a whole week!!

Anyway, we were fortunate enough to have about a four-hour private guided tour of the city and, despite the cloudy and sometimes rainy conditions, it was sure bustling. We saw many of the city’s lovely plazas, ornate churches, government buildings, statues (some grand, some not so) and other fascinating sights, including many of it’s inhabitants, both young and old. Here’s a few of them:

Quito, through the haze, from one of it’s surrounding hillsides:

Plaza de Quito, the main city square and offices of Ecuador’s president
Some of the Feria de Quito Jesús festival activities:
The wee ones:
And, here's "Flat Stanley" and his new buddy, Stefano, for Mark & Annette.

A couple of more Quito shots:
That’s the statue of "The Winged Virgin", a 105 foot statue which overlooks the City. And here’s a couple of close ups:

OK, that’s it for the pics. Now on to............

Impressions:
It's much less exciting going to a new place at night than it is in daylight hours........

We've never seen so many people greeting arriving passengers at an airport than we did in Quito last night. At 11 PM......

For my sister, there are over 3500 species of orchids found in Ecuador. That's not an impression but, rather, a fact (which I forgot to include in to the earlier text)......

People seem to be on the serious side but very friendly nevertheless. Our guide called Ecuadorians "pessimistically optimistic".....

Believe it or not, the US Dollar, in all it's greenback splendor, is the official currency of Ecuador. Has been for 8 years.....

Racially speaking, we would estimate that, from the people we observed today, the percent of whites would be less than 20%, black about 2% and the rest, tan. The latter looks very similar to Native North Americans. They all speak fast!......

As we enter December, Christmas decorations are minimal. I mean minimal. Yay!!......

OK folks, that's all there is to Report No 1. Hope you're still awake. We leave tomorrow, real early, for The Galapagos Islands and we will not have any internet access until we return to the mainland on 8 December. Can you say "withdrawal"? So, you can expect Report No 2, which will obviously describe our inter-island travels, being sent from somewhere in Peru during December's second week.

Hope you're all well and continue to stay that way.

Love to all..........

Nan and Jack