

Peru-Ecuador-Galapagos Travel

Reference elevations: Lima 150m, Cuzco 3400 m, Quito airport 2400m, Quito 2850m, Galapagos 20 m

What am I doing? A question that I asked myself many times during this trip. This day started out in Cuzco with a mandatory wake-up call at some time like 0500. When the trip leader is a former elementary school teacher, there is a leader and a tailer whose job is to make sure that everyone is between them. Of course, I promptly violated any such rules and they were sort of abandoned. Luggage was supposed to be outside your room half-hour before departure. I ignored that one too and took my own bags to the bus at the leaving time. At the altitude of Cuzco, I did not get much (if any) sleep; there seems to be a shortness of oxygen concentration at such altitudes.

I should really point out that Cuzco has a street, sewage and water system designed by the Incas (not really called that, the Inca was the leader). You are not supposed to flush any paper down the toilet even the dirty stuff. The toilet jammed a few times before I realized the sign on the wall. In contrast, Ecuador has a sign saying please flush the toilet paper. There are many people in Cuzco that make a living from the tourist trade. When I was on the streets near the main square, someone approached me with something for sale every two minutes. Of course, my orange tourist attire did not help my cause very much. I did purchase some items from the lady with a small child on her back and the one with a baby llama that she put in my arms.

Cusco used to be the Inca capital and still had streets constrained by nicely done stone walls that seemed wide enough for two llamas. Many one-way (una via) signs that I saw were ignored by any car that saw a clear pathway to the next street. Vehicles were forced to wait for the wrong way drivers to clear the street before proceeding. The mostly brown city either has two story brown adobe buildings or brown concrete blocks with metal rods sticking out the top. The only really good stone walls in the city were built with precision (and without mortar) by the Incas. The Spanish Dominicans managed to build churches sloppily on top the basic Inca block construction. They also installed prayer artifacts (paintings, statues) for the people and their new forced religion. The location is isolated and poorly designed for modern use. There are now 600,000 people in a crowded area; houses climb up the nearby hills without road access or basic services. Electrical wiring seems to proliferate everywhere and across poles in the city. The airport is right in the middle of town. Rail service from town towards Machu Picchu had to be discontinued because houses were built too close to the tracks and they were undermined. People also complained about the vibration and noise. The remaining rail station is far out of town requiring a bus transfer. From there, the rail section to the transfer point at Ollantaytambo is poorly maintained and quite slow. It seemed better to transfer at Ollantaytambo, which is the site for some extensive Inca ruins, despite the bus-train walk.

From our town center hotel, the bus takes 30 minutes to navigate the traffic system to get to the Cuzco airport. That airport is rated as one of the most dangerous due to nearby hills and its high altitude. Of course, the Avianca flight was delayed (they all were). Our group had to go through Lima (another airport disaster), collect baggage, and transfer to the Quito flight somehow. Apparently, a direct flight from Cuzco to Quito was not available. The old airport in Quito was also in the middle of a city in a valley between steep peaks. It was rated as one of the most frightening airports in the world due to the required steep approach and crosswinds. They built a new one in a more reasonable location far from the city. After collecting luggage and then going through customs, we had a 50-minute drive to get to our very nice Hilton hotel in the heart of the city. We should have considered staying at the airport, but there seems to be no culture there. However, it is lower and easier to get some sleep and saves the 50 minutes of traffic each way. I would have tried for the transfer direct to the Galapagos, but the plane schedules are generally inconsistent, and there would have been the missed flight risk. Ecuador is a reasonably prosperous country. Their unit of currency is the US Dollar which provides some financial stability. Their electricity system is US style 120 volt. There is a lot to see and do in the

country. The country used to have more of the Amazon region, but several conflicts with Peru and Colombia have reduced their amount of territory. The political unrest in Venezuela has caused many Venezuelans to come to Ecuador in search of political stability and employment, so they have a refugee problem. Our tour guide pointed out that in some ways, Ecuador is like a 51st state. It has become more popular with American retirees due to the lower cost of living there. The Galapagos, although owned by Ecuador, are a different place. Our guide (who was born in Ecuador) said it would be easier for him to become a US citizen than a resident of the Galapagos.

The next morning, we are off on the journey of a lifetime to the Galapagos (really).

- Luggage to the bus followed by a 50-minute bus ride to the airport
- 200-meter walk to the luggage checkpoint
- 600-meter walk to get to the boarding gate (some though the airport duty-free gauntlet)
- 2-hour flight to Baltra Island. The one runway airport was built by the USA during WWII.
 - The air base was there to protect the Panama Canal. The island is a large flat space and currently uninhabited. The traces of the old military occupation are still present.
- 100-meter walk to get to the terminal and luggage
- 15-minute bus ride to get to the ferry dock. Get your own luggage to the ferry.
- 5-minute ferry ride to the other side which is the island of Santa Cruz.
- 40-minute bus ride up to the top of Santa Cruz, across the top, then down the other side
- Finally, we get to the town of Puerto Ayora and pick up wet suits since the ocean is cold
- Walk from town down the pier where the water taxis are located.
 - Redeeming factors- the pier has sea lions on the pedestrian benches, sharks in water. Pelicans are diving for fish, hence the name Pelican Inlet.
- Go down the ramp to the 5-minute water taxi ride to a rock that is the terminal on the other side.
- Then the killer, a 500 meter walk up and down a hill to the Finch Bay Hotel (UGH)
 - The hotel is next to the ocean and a sandy beach; no view from the rooms to the water.

Expectation: I had visions of a nice water-front hotel with a dock. The tour boat would pull up to the dock, load the passengers and we would all head off for a tour of another island. The equatorial water would be warm and the seas would be calm between the islands. There would be 3 such trips. I had some concern about seasickness.

Actuality: There were two boat trips. The tour boats usually left and returned (3 out of 4 one-way trips) from the inlet between Baltra and Santa Cruz. That trip took about 1.5 hours from room to boat. I got really seasick on the two-hour trip to Santa Fe Island and should have had the scopolamine ear patch. The other trip was to North Seymour Island near Baltra (almost back to the airport, then a boat ride). One day was a bus tour around Santa Cruz Island. There was a 500-meter distance to the Darwin Research Center and another 500-meter distance from the bus parking lot to a beach. Both walks were on a hot paved road, which is not good and I avoided those. Later, I found out that a golf cart trip could have been arranged from bus drop-off to the Darwin Research Center.

Reality: The Galapagos are a very different place from anywhere else. Land animals and birds are friendly and curious. The people are into nature and conservation and are not present on all but four of the islands except for temporary tourism. Somehow, every island seems different in species and types of vegetation. Strange birds seem to be flying everywhere and nowhere. Near the hotel, I looked at a great blue heron do its dance and rummage through the plants of a tidewater area among the mangroves for a couple of hours. The next day, I went looking for that bird, but instead I found a baby blue heron chick (all white) in the same area, doing many of the same actions. On the taxi boat dock, I had to avoid stepping on a space-occupying sea lion. At the tortoise sanctuary, twenty very large tortoises lumbered slowly along while looking for a delicious patch of greenery. Once they found a nice area, they settled in for a slow eating session. Human presence was ignored and that is the charm of being in the Galapagos. People and the wildlife there appear to live in harmony without fear.