

Hi there!

How are you? I trust all is well in your world – or you probably would have told me if it wasn't! It was great to read about some of the great adventures you've had this year. Some people have done some very interesting and even surprising things... Keep those stories coming... Love them!

After nearly three weeks of chilling out on the beaches at Mompiche and Muisne over the summer vacation, I decided to do something different and spent a weekend in the mountains of Mindo with my flatmate, Luis. In the heart of the cloud forest, Mindo is most famous for its spectacular waterfalls, ziplining (flying fox lines) and tubing. We stayed at Luis' family's house just outside the little township. Delighted to discover a *fiesta* was planned for the weekend, we set out in search of some fun. Cramming delicious *arepa* (a grilled white corn cake) covered with grated cheese and drizzled with honey into our mouths, we wandered the streets until the party found us; we danced all night in the streets to both live and canned Salsa, Meringue and Reggaeton music, drank tasty bone-warming *canelazo* with naranjilla (lulo) and watched a crazy fireworks display; flames shooting out of a series of wheels attached to a tall tower, and finally collapsed exhausted into our beds at around 6am.

The following day we hitched a ride in a truck up to the waterfalls. After dipping my tropical toes in freezing mountain water, I was content to sit on the riverbank under warm sun and eat *araza* (a yellow, pear-shaped fruit with a tangy sweet-sour flavor and large seeds) we'd picked from trees in the garden, along with freshly picked mandarins and bananas. The flavors! Wow! There is no taste on earth like freshly harvested organic fruit! I took photos (attached) while Luis and friends fearlessly leaped into the waterfall from the six and twelve meter high rock faces, landing in churning white water below. Walking down the mountain at the end of the day, we feasted on gorgeous ripe raspberries growing on vines on the roadside while watching brightly colored toucans flit through the forest before arriving home to pick sweet carambolas (starfruit) and perfect avocados from the trees, as well as delicious mandarins, lemons, limes, and bananas to take back to Quito along with a round of fresh mountain cheese. All throughout the weekend, Luis' mother over-fed us with delicious tilapia, fried yucca, fried cheese, beans and piles of rice as if she thought we were starving waifs. All in all, it was a successful adventure, but I really missed the beach.

The first few weeks back at school have been fairly uneventful, considering the drama of the first day when most pupils were really excited to be back, but others cried as if they'd been sentenced to death. A few emotional parents clung desperately to their children as if their offspring were going to be lost forever in the virtual bowels of the computer laboratory. So after the break, I'm back on shoelace patrol, making sure little boys like Jeremy don't break their necks tearing wildly around the playground, and sharpening pencils for kids too young to coordinate their hands and eyes to turn the pencil in the right direction for a nice sharp point. As the "Director of the English Department" I've been assigned a supervisory role over the three Ecuadorian English teachers which means I'm often in their classrooms, sometimes teaching, sometimes observing, and also training them to be better English teachers after I leave on 24 December. So far, so good.

Friends often ask me how I can afford to live in Quito on the pittance I earn... Well, here's a little Ecuadorian reality check... The prices of some everyday things in my life include; monthly rent at \$60, city bus fares cost 25c (I spend \$2 per week getting to work and home again). I can get a haircut for between \$1-\$5. 1lb chicken costs \$1 and a set menu lunch or dinner is around \$1.50-\$2; this usually includes soup, a main including meat and a fresh juice. If I had a car I'd pay no more than \$2.35 for Super, \$1.48 for Unleaded, and \$1.03 for Diesel per gallon (about 4.5 liters). A 250ml bottle mineral water costs 25c and a 5lt bottle is 99c at the supermarket. I can communicate with SMS messages for 4c a pop. To satisfy my sweet-tooth, 200g Nestle dark chocolate costs \$1.80 and pirated DVDs keep me entertained for \$1 each. Keeping up with the Simpsons, a full leg and bikini wax costs \$12. A cross-country bus ticket costs approx \$1/hr of travel (\$8 to Atacames; 7.5-8hrs, \$2 to Mompiche; 2hrs). In a local bar, a large beer (500ml) costs \$1 (and cheaper in the supermarket). A Mojito (minty rum cocktail) can be had for \$2, and a boxed liter of Chilean red wine (merlot or cab-sav) is \$5.50 at Supermaxi. Considering I consume approx 2kg fruit per day, strawberries are the right price at \$1/lb, granadillas are 25c, pineapples are 50c, and bananas cost 3-5c each. Delicious organic salad tomatoes are 50c/lb and large perfect hass avocados are 3 for \$1. I'm told a Big Mac costs around \$2, as is a Whopper, and a chicken burger at KFC (things I would NEVER actually eat, but asked friends for the prices!)... Need you ask more?

In a flurried blur of inspiration, perspiration and exasperation, I have somehow found myself writing travel and news articles for *The Ecuadorian Reporter*; the inevitable and unenviable result of going more than a year without a published word anywhere on the planet! Although I have written three screenplays, so I haven't been idle... The article attached (PDF with photos: nomasbasura) is my first publishing effort in Ecuador. And NO, of course I wasn't paid! Please! Get real! I live in Ecuador, not New York City!!! Enjoy the read and then pass it on to others!

Self-declared geniuses, my cohort Kate and I are now famous in certain parts of Quito (i.e.: La Mariscal) for winning the Quiz at Finn McCool's three times in a row. Acing categories such as 'The 1980s', 'Science Fiction', 'Science and Nature', 'Food', 'Music', 'Movies', 'History', 'Art and Literature', 'Geography', and 'Villians', team "Finn's Specials" won lunch for two at *El Crater*, a restaurant located on the rim of the Pululahua Volcano on the Pan-American highway just past Latitude 0'0'0', team "I Carried A Watermelon" (in honor of the late Patrick Swayze) won dinner for two in *La Rondalla*, on La Ronda in the historical part of town and team "The Six Pack" won a large pizza at *Tomato*, a fast food restaurant right around the corner from the Irish pub. One sunny Monday, Ricardo picked me up on his motorbike and we whizzed through the city and up the mountains to El Crater where we were served a spectacular meal of warm bread and potato soup, followed by grilled sea bass and braised garden vegetables, and then honeyed figs with sweet cheese, accompanied by fresh soursop juice and a magnificent view of the volcano crater plummeting into the valley below. Billowing clouds whooshed over the rim only to be sucked down into the valley and then lifted again like wisps of steam over the other side and we felt like we were on another planet for a couple of hours. We'll be back at Finn's to win again next week!

Squeezed tightly between the rattling window and an Amazonian Negress of elephantine proportions, two of her four robust offspring balanced precariously on what posed as her lap, on the way to Mompiche last weekend, we were treated to an hysterical impromptu theater production lambasting men on their maltreatment of women in Ecuador. An enormous man dressed as a woman pouted, poked, prodded and pointed at her abusive "husband" and then searched the entire bus for another prospective "spouse" in a raunchy display of unbridled passion while passengers howled uproariously, including me who laughed the loudest. Considering my Spanish still needs a lot of work, I was amazed at how much I understood. I haven't had that much fun on a bus in ages. The theater production was headed to schools in the coastal areas to teach kids about domestic violence, its consequences and how to prevent and avoid it.

Still chuckling, I retreated to my little room on the beach with all its charming idiosyncrasies. My favorite quirk is a close call between the toilet that doesn't work and is used as a dresser instead, and the bathroom light which is turned on by simultaneously twisting the two bare wires together and trying not to touch anything too sparky. An electrician, my brother Daniel would have a field day in this village! After I settled in, the hammock beckoned. I read a book and ate six different kinds of tropical fruit before drifting into a leisurely siesta. Being a granadilla addict is no mean feat. A day rarely goes by when I haven't consumed at least two, if not more. I might have to establish a 12-step program to deal with it. "Hi. My name is Roni. I'm an addict. I haven't eaten a granadilla for two days and I'm a living wreck!" HAHAAH!

Later the same day, just as I was about to make a Granadilla Cheesecake, the electricity failed all together. There I was, alone in the pitch dark with my cheese and cookies. Undeterred, I lit candles and ground cookies into powder with a rolling pin, heated butter over a wood fire, mashed cream cheese and sugar together with a fork and squeezed limes with my fingers. Using timeless cooking methods from the dark ages, I produced a magnificent dessert that impressed even the cynics – the cheesecake disappeared in record time and it got even better reviews than the brownies I'd made earlier for someone's birthday party. Finding the gelatin in Quito had proved to be an exercise in futility on my own, so I enlisted the help of friends and we routed it out – going incognito by another name – in a remote corner of the supermarket I would never have thought to look. Despite all the praise, I'm still waiting for the best cheesecake recipe in the world to arrive; So, Nancy, how's that coming along?

Hanging out on the beach, adventure is never far away. A local guy recently bought a motorbike but didn't know how to ride it. Suddenly, the *Mompiche School of Motorcycle Riding* popped up in the street and every man who'd ever sat his butt on a motorcycle was offering advice and suggestions to the hapless beginner rider. It was hilarious. Everyone took turns zipping the bike up and down the road, and I jumped on too (even though I haven't been on a motorbike in four years) and took off along the beach, and through town and finally back to the 'riding school' where the guy finally figured out how it all works. One weekend, I noticed all the Mompicheros had been shorn. It was almost as if

they'd been rounded up and herded reluctantly through the shearing sheds. I half expected to see footprints on their asses where they'd been rolled over and pushed out the chutes. Last weekend was the *Fiesta de Mompiche*... This was cause for great celebrations over three days. People came from remote corners of Ecuador to join the festivities which included sporting events (read: soccer), concerts, school activities and displays, and bonfires on the beach. The weekend partying continued until well after sunrise and the beach was littered with rum-sodden bodies until well after noon. After lunch, Alex suggested we walk back to Muisne along the beach with some friends. Immediately, I knew we were in for an adventure! Hitching a ride in a jeep with another friend as far as the first river, we began our trek; five men and me hauling backpacks, guitars, a tent, and a green plastic chair (no, I don't know why!) along with various odds and ends related to camping and partying. Within minutes, the boys spotted a humpback whale carcass that had been rotting on the beach for who knows how long. In their infinite wisdom, they decided to cart the bones back to Muisne.

If I didn't have photographic evidence (don't forget to read the captions!), I'm sure no one would believe my *Whale of a Tale* about that bizarre afternoon. I watched in fits of giggles as four men hauled a three-meter long adult whale's rib bone and then a two-meter long sternum bone into the sea, all the while thinking "It's too late to save this whale, guys! It's been on the beach too long!" Ignoring my loud mirth, they bound the beached bones to balsa trees with a series of mind-bending seafaring knots and floated them along the coast in the surf. Meanwhile, Jose carried all the backpacks, and I carried my camera. When we reached the river, he said, "Roni, you'll have to take off all your clothes!" with a huge grin. "It's the only way to stay dry!" Yeah, right! Alone on an isolated beach with five men... AS IF I was going to strip naked! Grinning back, I wrapped Alex's sarong around my body and removed all my clothes... Carefully placing my backpack and camera on my head, I waded through chest-deep water as the tide rushed in. Safely on the other side, I put on my top, dropped the wet sarong to my waist and waited, much to the disappointment of the boys. Stripped to underpants, two boys carried the remaining backpacks on the plastic chair above their heads across the river. We all met on the other side; the boys with the bones, the boys with the backpacks, and me.

After some minor adjustments to the balsa rafts, the bones were once again manned and set out to sea. Again, I was relieved of my backpack and Jose and I walked to the next river, the one separating Muisne from the mainland while two boys helped the whale-bone boys along. Jose and I arrived at the point first and hitched a ride on a passing fishing boat to the island. I perched in the fork of a barnacled tree and read my book while Jose waited for Alex and the other whale-bone boy to swim across, letting the bones drift in the current until they caught them with ropes and hauled them ashore. A bemused moto-driver was convinced to come back and pick us all up. To his amazement, the whale bones were balanced across the front of his vehicle and he drove them to the township. Meanwhile, the other two boys were busy building a raft to cross the river. They finally arrived ashore just ahead of the returning moto. We all piled in; six of us, and drove into the township feeling deservedly victorious as we watched the sunset over the horizon. The whole adventure took about 4hrs. Back at the bar (Mona Lisa) we decided to cook dinner over the wood fire and celebrate:

Tapado: Take 5-6 green plantain bananas, peel them and slice them in half lengthways. Then, cut them in half again crossways. Place them in a large pot of cold water with some salt and a sprinkling of oil and boil them for about half an hour. Add 2-3 roughly chopped red onions to the pot and sprinkle in some ground black pepper and paprika. Chop a handful each of fresh oregano and fresh cilantro and add that to the boiling pot. Roughly chop 3-4 large tomatoes and finely chop a small red hot chili pepper and toss them in too. Meanwhile, clean about 12-15 smallish fish (hand-size) and rinse them well before adding a small handful of salt. Rub the salt into the fish well before throwing them all into the pot with the fish juice. Boil the whole mess until the fish is cooked through. Place 2-3 fish in each bowl with some plantains and pour the soup over the top, then serve with a mountain of steamed rice and a glass of fresh lemonade. Just as I put the last fabulous spoonful of *Tapado* in my mouth, an alarm went off and I had to race off the island to catch the overnight bus back to Quito.

The following morning, on my way to school still tired and bleary-eyed, the bus stopped unexpectedly and for just a tad too long at an intersection. Curious passengers began craning necks. I could hear the driver laughing from my seat at the back of the bus. Across the street, three men flung themselves wildly into the dirt on the roadside. The chicken they were chasing zoomed across the road in no time (answering that age-old question) pursued by another three men who had joined the chase. Within seconds, all six men were covered from head to toe in dust and dirt as the escaped chicken raced back and forth across the road expertly dodging speeding traffic. Men scattered across the street, landing belly-down in the dust, chicken-less fingers scratching in the dirt, bus driver and passengers hooting with glee. Several more attempts at diving for the fowl and coming up empty-handed caused more

riffles of laughter throughout the bus. We half expected to see fresh chicken-burger splattered on the road any second. Eventually, the chicken was recaptured and peace was restored. It was worth being late to school just to see the entertaining show.

Life in Ecuador is normal... Things go on and on as usual, causing barely a ripple in the sea of life...

big love, big hugs, big bones

Roni 1/10/2009



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[01 It's too late! This whale has been on the beach too long.](#)



[02 Whale-bone surfboards, perhaps.](#)



03 you wanna do what!!!.



04 It will make a great center-piece at Christmas.



[05 without the backpacks, we could have just swam across.](#)



[06 Chillin' on the beach.](#)



[07 Oh the madness! The lovely madness!.](#)



[08 Muisne Beach.](#)



[09 Mindo Fireworks.](#)



[10 Mindo Wild Flowers.](#)



[11 Mindo Leaping Luis.](#)



[12 Mindo River Siren.](#)