

A New Border Crossing – Leaving Ecuador and Reaching Peru

After leaving Quito behind, we made our way to Cuenca, another beautiful colonial gem of Ecuador. Unlike Quito, Cuenca doesn't have the steep hills, but it carries the same beauty in the architecture, plazas, and colorful streets. The downtown plaza has a charming ambiance, filled with many elaborate churches, not just the main cathedral, but smaller churches throughout the city.

The Cathedral in Cuenca, Cathedral of Saint Mary and Saint Julian, is not as imposing in size as Quito's, but its architecture is just as striking. The cathedral has three-giant blue-and-white domes, which can be seen at a distance. At night, the soft glow from the cathedral and the lights around the square give the town an entirely different feeling: still peaceful yet buzzing with energy. Restaurants call you in to taste their food, bars whistle for a night cap, and we followed the sound of music into a small bar on the plaza where a local jazz band was playing. It was a perfect way to end our first day in Cuenca.



The next day, while walking through the many colorful and unique streets, we found *Santo Pan*. The name caught our attention – holly bread? – we love bread, but can it make us holly? Maybe not, but the bread was in fact, heavenly! Our favorite bread was *pan mestizo*, a type of bread that represents a cultural blend of European and Indigenous people from Ecuador – it is soft and buttery, sweet and salty. A kind nun at the door told us *Santo Pan* is a working convent, which was built in 1820, and where you find the first wood oven of Cuenca. Moments like these, so unexpected, simple, and delicious, are what make traveling so rewarding.

Another morning, as we walked along *Rio Tomebamba*, the river that divides the old and new parts of the city, we came across a large park that drew us in with its greenery. It turned out to be the grounds of the Pumapungo Museum and Botanical Garden, and just a few blocks from downtown. Inside, we wandered through beautiful gardens, saw llamas grazing, many local birds, including one whose “bangs” would puff up every time it made a sound. The park also had a variety of crops including blueberries, tomatoes, corn, and watermelon. We crossed paths with a group of five-year-olds on a school field trip, all excited and full of energy. Seeing them reminded us of our own childhood field trips. The museum and gardens were well preserved, completely free to enter, and spotless. We've noticed this throughout Ecuador, places like Cotopaxi and Pumapungo are incredibly well maintained, accessible, and free of charge!





From Cuenca, we continued south toward Saraguro, a quiet indigenous town tucked into the Andes. Saraguro isn't a tourist destination, and that's exactly why we loved it. Walking around its plaza, we saw the local people going about their day, dressed in their traditional clothing. The women wear long black skirts – you can tell older women from younger ones by their hats, the older women wear them, the younger ones do not. The men wear shorter black pants, their signature black hats, and long braided hair. Kids played around the plaza, and the little girls were already wearing their long black skirts, just like their mothers. It was beautiful to see these traditions being lived and passed down.

A little farther south, we arrived in Loja, expecting only a brief stay. But as so many stops so far, Loja had other plans for us. As soon as we drove in, we realized the city was celebrating something! It was the *Festival Internacional de Artes Vivientes*, a massive 10-day celebration of live arts. We arrived just in time to watch a two-hour parade inaugurating the festivities and full of diversity – old and young dancers performing the native Ecuadorian dances from various regions, and several performers from other countries like.... yes, Colombia and the United States!!! The parade also included several marching bands, floats with an array of cultural representations depicting history, local traditions, religious and mythical values, and so much more. Downtown Loja truly turns into a living, breathing stage. The energy in the streets was something unique. Every street we turned onto we came across singers, comedians, acrobats, puppeteers, and all sorts of street performers scattered all over the streets. There were also main stages with cultural performances, and late at night the plaza was full of people dancing and having a good time to the sound of live bands.



<https://www.instagram.com/reel/DRFLt79jj61/?igsh=bmpvcjNiZG8za2xz>

But our absolute favorites were the painters. We found ourselves captivated by artists kneeling on the pavement, creating entire works of art out of chalk. Watching their drawings come to life right in front of us. Kids joined in too, covering the streets in their own bright scribbles.



We ended up staying two nights, happily postponing our original itinerary so we could spend more time enjoying the festival. That's one of the advantages of traveling without a rigid itinerary, when something special comes along, you can simply stay.

Eventually, it was time to keep heading south toward Peru, and that's where the journey got interesting. Unlike our smooth crossing from Colombia into Ecuador, the border crossing at Huaquillas was not as smooth. It wasn't overwhelming, but it was slower, a bit disorganized, and required patience, a longer wait and a lot of back-and-forth due to lack of signs. In fact, we entered Peru, got our passport stamped, left Peru back to Ecuador without a new stamp, forcing us to be in the country illegally for about 3 miles... then back to Peru. Still, it was manageable, and soon enough we were on the other side.

What amazed us most was how dramatically the landscape changed. We went from the cloudy Andean forests to the desert coastline of northern Peru in a single day, from 11,000 feet above sea level to the beach. Sadly, we also noticed a lot of trash along the beach and roads. Quite a contrast: for hours we drove through the familiar winding and pristine curves of the Andes, but about 30 miles before the border, everything suddenly flattened out, and the trash slowly started to appear. After so many mountain roads, that long stretch of straight, flat highway felt surreal, and the trash saddened us.

Crossing into Peru felt like turning a page into a new chapter: new landscapes and a whole new adventure ahead.

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