

Freedom in South America

Above The Clouds

WE ALL HAVE DIFFERENT WAYS OF blowing off steam, finding ways to relax, and centering ourselves. Riding motorcycles works for me. I'll get out of the city, away from all the hustle, and lose myself in a long ride upstate. By the time I return home, I'll have a clear head. The pressure of work and life will have lifted, and life will again be focused and worry free.

I've met someone recently whose search for clarity wasn't that simple. His ride lasted several years and crossed

international borders. Court Rand found his inner peace, and what he'd later define as freedom, on the shores, mountaintops, and jungles of a South American paradise. After doing so, he decided to share his love for this Latin American gem with other adventurous riders, thus Ecuador Freedom Bike Rentals was born.



This big American V-twin was a rare sight for most village locals.



At over 9000' the view of Quito is amazing.

Location, Location

ECUADOR IS ROUGHLY THE SIZE OF Maine and sits on South America's Pacific Coast. It's divided by the equator and has the Andes mountain range for a backbone. Climates tend to remain the same year-round, with a wet or dry month being the only change. Basically if it's hot, it's always hot, if it's cold, well, you get the idea.

Seasons are determined by altitude, and it's possible to experience several in one day while on a tour, something unique to Ecuador. Court's a native New Englander, but he and the Freedom staff live and play in Ecuador. They're familiar with the towns they tour, have friendly relations with local restaurants, hotels, and service station owners. Plus, they speak Spanish fluently. That's a huge plus when your español is limited to ordering beer and finding a bathroom. They take their tours — guided or self-guided — and their customers seriously. It's an aspect of Freedom Bike Rentals that stands far above other moto-tour companies. Last year, I was lucky enough to represent *AIM* on a week-long exploration of this culture-rich and beautifully diverse country along with our old buddy Jon Langston.

Way South Of The Border

THE TRIP STARTED WITH A RELAXING FLIGHT INTO QUITO, Ecuador's capital. A beautiful and historic city located on the eastern slopes of an active, yes, active volcano in the Andes. At an elevation of just over 9,000', Quito's also the world highest capital city. Impressive. Court, along with his



Quito's town center is considered one of the most historic areas in Latin America.

business partner Sylvain, a guy that speaks French, Spanish, Portuguese, Klingon, and several other languages, were gracious enough to pick us up at the airport.

This isn't usually included in a tour package, but just about everything else is. Food, lodging, fuel, and barbecue guinea pig (we'll talk more about that later), basically all you'll have to pay for on these tours are cold beer and mementos. Currency in Ecuador is the US dollar, so no exchange is necessary.

Getting to Know You

OUR FIRST MORNING STARTED OUT WITH A QUICK breakfast and scooter ride around Quito. Being a fairly busy city, with lots of tour buses and car traffic, scooters seemed like a great way to get around and see the sights. Did I mention tour buses? Yeah, well, in Quito, and most of Ecuador for that matter, you don't let buses, trucks, or cars slow you down. Even if you're on a 50cc scooter. Just go around, in between, or even over them — whatever works. Hey, Court, don't let that bus get in your way (inside joke). Our city tour wove around modern and historic neighborhoods, down cobblestone streets and past churches built in the 17th century. We enjoyed an amazing view of the entire city atop El Panecillo, a 9,895' hill that's also home to a 135' aluminum monument of the Virgin Mary, a statue that can be seen from almost anywhere in Quito. After returning to Freedom headquarters, we geared up and got on our bikes (mine was a bright yellow Buell Ulysses).



A beautiful view of the clouds below at 14,000 plus feet.

Highs and Lows

OUR TOUR GROUP WAS SMALL. JON, COURT, AND I WERE on bikes, and Sylvain and Salina, our beautiful canine mascot and brains of the operation, rode in the support truck. We left Quito heading west, stopping about an hour into the ride for lunch at a roadside frittata stand. While eating, I asked Court where the equator was in relation to our present location. He responded by saying that the equator runs basically right down the center of the road that we'd been traveling on. I'd been riding along the center of the Earth, bitchin'!

After lunch, we ducked into the Intiñan Museum, where we straddled two hemispheres and were shown how gravity affects us differently when on the equator. Yes, water rotates clockwise on one side and counterclockwise on the other while draining or flushed. It's true, I saw it happen with my own two eyes.

We spent the night in a hostel (cheap hotel) inhabited by hummingbirds and exotic plants. Unfortunately, as Jon and I found out, beer cannot be served or bought on Sundays in Ecuador. Being from Connecticut, I've spent years dealing with this kind of thing. Jon's a New Yorker; this was a little harder for him. Our hosts came through, serving us cool refreshing cups of coffee that tasted a lot like Pilsner, the Latin Budweiser.

The next day, we navigated mountain roads thick with clouds and climbed to 14,000'-plus. The view from this vantage point was unlike anything I've seen. After a brief stop to enjoy the sights, we headed back down the Andes' western edge, twisting our way around rocky cliffs on

beautifully paved roads. The roads surprised me and will be a constant reminder of Ecuador's nationwide highway improvement program this entire trip.

As we descended, the temperature rose and our surroundings changed. Rocky cliffs turned into sandy dunes, and the thin mountain air became salty and robust. Finally, after cresting a soft, sandy hill, the Pacific Ocean came into view. We've traveled through two seasons and dizzying heights to arrive in the beautiful beach town of Canoa.

Canoa is a great place filled with friendly, laid-back people looking for waves to ride and a hammock on the beach to spend the night. After a sip of homemade Ecuadorian moonshine and a solid night's rest, we continued south to Ecuador's largest city, Guayaquil.

The traffic getting into Guayaquil is heavy, as it's a modern town with high-rise buildings and tons of tourism. It's also a stopover point for those traveling to the Galapagos Islands. We spent the night in a hotel, right on the main drag. It reminded me of Park Avenue in New York City, only instead of a park, we looked out onto a fast moving river.

In the morning, while waiting for Sylvain and Salina, Court, Jon, and I were mobbed by a gaggle of exotic Latin beauty queens who demanded photos of themselves with our bikes and us. I really miss that town.

Cuenca was our next destination. A historic town similar to Quito, it's filled with centuries-old buildings and strong local traditions. We had dinner in Cuenca with friends of Court and Syl's, who insisted we eat at their favorite local restaurant, Mi Escondite, which specializes in barbecue cuye (guinea pig). It was delicious; if you're ever in town you've got to try it.



Newly paved roads crisscross Ecuador thanks to its nationwide highway improvement program.



The highest I've ever been on two wheels, Mt. Chimborazo (20,564').



After dinner, we walked around town enjoying the age-old culture. I met a shop owner whose handmade guitar business was passed down through five generations. He was open late working on a guitar, but he spent the better part of an hour showing me around his shop and explaining the craft. He was filled with pride while talking about his work, a true craftsman.

In the morning, we left Cuenca and blasted back up into the clouds. Today we'd reach our highest elevation of the tour, 15,500'-plus, a mere hike to the highest place on Earth, Mt. Chimborazo. Yeah, yeah, relax, I know what you're thinking. But, according to Ecuadorian lore, Earth's not a perfect sphere. They say because of Earth's rotation, the planet has a bulge at its center, so when measured from Earth's core, Chimborazo actually sits higher than Everest. Take that, Himalayas!

We left the dizzying heights and motored toward Baños, a town known as the gateway to the Amazon, nestled at the foot of the once thought dormant Tungurahua volcano. In 1999, volcanic activity restarted and has been ongoing ever since. Funny, we rolled in after dark, and I had no real idea of where we were until morning. It was an amazing sight come daybreak.

Baños is a popular spot for the adventurous. There's great hiking, gondola rides across huge gorges, waterfalls, and mineral-filled hot springs. Yes, minerals. I was told that's why the water's yellow, and I believe that story, especially since I soaked for an hour in that chicken soup. I must say, it was relaxing.

After washing off the minerals, we hopped on our bikes and continued on. Our surroundings once again changed, and the chilly mountain air became hot and humid. We'd officially entered the Amazon jungle. This was the fourth season we'd experienced on this journey. There was the autumn-like weather

in Quito, a cold, windy winter in Chimborazo province, brisk spring in Baños, and now a hot summer in the Amazon.

This is where Jon and I would spend our last night in Ecuador.

We heard tales of spiders the size of dinner plates, and snakes large enough to swallow a man whole. All jokes aside, there is wildlife, yes, maybe a bit larger than we're used to here in the States, but nothing to worry about.

The Cotococha Amazon Lodge is a high-end resort set on the banks of the Napo River, comprised of thatched roof bungalows, a four-star restaurant, and a two-story lounge area that blends in seamlessly with the surrounding rain forest.

After arriving, Jon and I took a quick swim in the river; it's not often you get to end a long day's ride by cooling off in the Amazon. The next morning, we took a guided hike deep into the jungle, cooled off in a waterfall, and rode inner tubes back down the rapids, where Court and Syl were waiting for us, bikes gassed up and ready to go.

Journey's End

OUR FINAL RIDE WAS A LONG ONE, NOT IN DISTANCE, BUT because it was hard to imagine we'd be on a plane only hours from now heading home. I didn't want our adventure to be over. We rode high into the Andes once again, the air cold and thin, the once-plush jungle canopy was replaced by a volcanic landscape. Reluctantly, we followed our guide as the sun quickly set, and the twisted valley road grew dark.

Off on a distant hillside, we could see the city lights of Quito glowing, marking the end of this unforgettable journey. Court gave us a thumbs up as we entered the city, I looked over at Jon and did the same. The tour was over, but my love for this Latin American gem is sure to last a lifetime. Thanks for sharing, Court. **AIM**

SOURCES

ECUADOR FREEDOM BIKE RENTAL
Dept. AIM
Quito, Ecuador
603/617-2499
FreedomBikeRental.com