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Viva Cuenca!

Bronwyn Fredericks recently returned from Cuenca, Ecuador.

I have had the opportunity over the years to travel with work and generally always try to include some time while away to be a tourist. This year I was fortunate to be awarded one of three national scholarships to attend the International People's Health Assembly in Cuenca, Ecuador. While there, I made sure I got out and explored and experienced the people and the place!

Ecuador is in the north west of South America, between Columbia and Peru and includes the Galapagos Islands and a part of the Andes Mountains. I was told several times that Ecuadorians consider Cuenca their most charming city. It has a very relaxed and peaceful feel and is situated 8,315 feet above sea level on four rivers that intertwine and connect throughout the city and the hills. There are cobblestone streets, lots of little bridges, and beautiful gardens along with centuries old buildings with old lace ironwork balconies that overlook the streets. As well as the Spanish colonial influences, which are everywhere, there are Inca ruins to explore and the culture of the Indigenous people to experience. The UNESCO declared Cuenca a World Heritage Site in 1999.

Cuenca is very easy to get around. Once you get use to the altitude, you can walk with ease through much of the city and if you need a taxi, it cost \$1.50 US, no matter where and how far you go. I spent my days in the inner city exploring, looking at the amazing handcrafts and visiting the Panama hat factory. There is a misconception, which I also had, that the Panama hat is from Panama. Originally it was made in Montecristi, on the coast of Ecuador. The hats were sent north to the workers on the Panama Channel and hence the name.

When seeking directions to several inner city locations, local people referred to them by using the 'old cathedral' and the 'new cathedral' as markers. The 'old cathedral', the Sagrario Church, was built in 1557 and is one of the oldest churches in Latin America. Inca blocks from the near by Pomango Palace were used in its construction. The 'new cathedral', the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception was built in 1880.



Photograph: The 'new cathedral', the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception (1880)
(Bronwyn Fredericks, 2005)

The flower market was near the old and new cathedrals, which filled the inner city square and the side streets off it with the intoxicating smell of roses.



Photograph: Cuenca Flower Market (Bronwyn Fredericks, 2005)

As I wondered around, I thought about how people in Rockhampton had given directions to me in the past using the old bridge and the new bridge as markers. I wondered in the years to come whether people in Rockhampton would still be talking about the old bridge and the new bridge. If Cuenca is anything to go by, they will be.

One of the most memorable days I had was a day trip out to the Ingapirca Inca Vestiges, which are the most important architectural legacy of the Incas in Ecuador. Ingapirca is about a two-hour leisurely drive each way and nowhere near as crowded as some of the other vestiges in South America. All around the Ingapirca Vestiges were Agave plants, all different types, which are all the rage at the moment back in Australia, including Rockhampton.



Photograph: Ingapirca Inca Vestiges, Ecuador (Bronwyn Fredericks, 2005)

There are many choices of accommodation, from hostels, guesthouses and hotels. Rooms in a hostel can be found for \$10 US a night, including breakfast and access to a hot shower. I stayed in a hotel that was \$35 US a night, including breakfast, a bathroom and my laundry done. There are no fast food takeaways or big chain restaurants in Cuenca, people take the time to sit and eat their meals in cafes or restaurants. I had many lovely times out with people from the conference, sharing good conversation, listening to live music and eating freshly cooked and very reasonably priced food.

I have no complaints, other than the length of time it took to get there. I do intend to go back to South America and to learn some more Spanish, to make the travel easier.

If you are thinking about travelling to Ecuador as part of a trip to South America, don't just plan on going to the majestic Galapagos Islands or the heritage listed city of Quito. Include Cuenca, as it truly is a lovely city and is well worth adding to your trip!