

Ecuador

A Land Full of Surprises for the Climber

Greg Walters

There was a bright flash and I paused for a moment from the relentless crunch of cramponed feet biting in to the hard packed ice. What on earth could that be, I wondered. My head torch was not switched on but there was no need. The light from the full moon lit up the route right up to the summit some 5 hours distance from where I stood. There it was again. It came from below. I turned and studied the landscape set out below me. A carpet of cloud spread out far west to the Pacific lowlands whilst to the south the night lights of Riobamba sparkled like some distant galaxy in the night sky. Once more there was a flash.....

Nine months earlier I had rung up Chris, my good friend and climbing pal of many years, and said it's that time again, we need to go and explore what the world has to offer us. Ecuador I said. Why? he said. I believe they have some hills of interest. OK he said. And that was that. So it was in the middle of January 2015 that we exchanged a dismal, dreary UK winter for the warm rays of a South American summer sun. Our first surprise on stepping off the plane after a 12 hour flight from Amsterdam was gasping for breath. The capital city of Quito is one of the highest in the world, nestling in the foothills of the Andes at an altitude of 2800 metres, quite a shock to the system for one used to living at 30 metres on the shores of Staffin Bay on The Isle of Skye.

So the next three days in Quito were spent sightseeing, resting, eating and drinking a huge variety of fruit juices. We discovered a French bistro five minutes walk from our hotel that offered a five course lunch for \$8 each. There was a Columbian restaurant like something out of a Tom Clancey novel, where the music was loud, the girls flirted with everyone, the men with moustaches sat in dark corners and the food portions could feed an elephant for a week. Wherever we went people smiled and were helpful, despite our lack of Spanish. But the most important part was that we were

acclimatising and having fun. It was, however, with some relief that we left the hustle and bustle of Quito and began our climbing expedition in earnest. Chris and I were part of a climbing expedition organised by a UK company using the expertise of local agents based in Quito. They handled all the logistics, thus enabling the twelve climbing members of the team to concentrate solely on the climbs that lay ahead. Apart from Chris and myself there was the usual motley assortment of climbers in our expedition; a barrister, two doctors, a seven summiteer, two computer boffins, a rather odd man from Denmark, an engineer, an ex Army engineer and his chatty wife. Additionally, there was the usual support team of guides, cooks and porters, so we were well set for the adventures that awaited us. On that sunny morning we headed north in our coach along the Pan-American Highway to the city of Ibarra to begin the arduous task of acclimatisation to altitude in readiness for the assault on Ecuador's three highest peaks, the volcanic summits of Cayambe (5790m), Cotopaxi (5897m) and Chimborazo (6310m).

Each new day brought with it a mixture of sensations, from the aromas of the wonderful food cooked for us to the trials and tribulations of getting up to the next summit (are we there yet?). Our expedition guide, Benno, was a cheerful chap of Swiss descent who would wax lyrical on the delights and splendours of each of the mountain areas we were trekking through. He was a man of great charm and patience, but with a ruthless streak of "cuckoo clock Swiss efficiency". He was largely responsible for the success of our expedition and getting us to the summits of Ecuador's "triple crown". Our first hike involved trekking around Mojander Lake at just over 4000m. The coach took us up a rickety road to a parking area, which helped a lot. The region is the remains of a volcano which reminded me very much of the Cuillin Ridge on Skye, with the added attraction of a huge lake to walk around. Benno, in his great wisdom, thought it would be good fun and fitness building to go off the trail a little and complete a full circuit of the lake via a lakeside marsh – not one of his best decisions. Our overnight stay was in a charming hosteria called Pantavi - yet another surprise. To get there we drove through a mountain village, down a road lined with very run-down houses, scrawny dogs and the relentless echo of samba music blaring out of open windows. We stopped outside a giant pair of closed wooden

doors. Stepping through the side gate we entered a world of colourful gardens, tree lined paths and the most delightful single storey bungalows. The food was a gourmet's paradise and the company delightful. It was a five star hotel in the most unexpected of places. We would return here later in the week and to other similar hosterias during the rest of the trip.

The next three days saw us trekking through the Cotacochi-Cayapas nature reserve, camping and sleeping at altitude to enhance our acclimatisation. We crossed passes at just below 4000m, descended into deep valleys and climbed once more through the cloud forests to ascend Olias Chico (4005m) and then camped deep in the foothills of the Andes next to Yanacocha Lake (3870m). It was a truly wild and spectacular setting, surrounded by peaks stretching up to 5000m. Our final day saw us descending through the paramo (knee-deep grass), past several Inca and pre Inca ruins to Chachimbito where we wallowed for 2 hours in the hot volcanic springs to ease our aching muscles and bones.

After nine days of acclimatisation we were ready for the first big test, the ascent of Imbabura (4616m), a true test of our readiness to tackle the monster volcanoes that lay ahead. A 3am breakfast saw us at the start of the climb at dawn, 6am. We were just south of Ibarra, the temperature a warm 10 C at just over 3000m and a big day lay ahead. By the time we have finished it will be 4pm and we will have ascended/descended 1600m. The route up followed a good steep track through the paramo to a crag, followed by a traverse across steep ground to the ridge. What followed was unexpected, a long ridge traverse, then a down climb using fixed ropes. Another steep climb followed, up to a very narrow ridge, then along for a kilometre. Finally there was a scramble across very exposed rock to the summit. If you imagine climbing up the slopes of Ben Macdui followed by Snowdon's Crib Goch, descending the Hidden Valley in Glen Coe then climbing up and along The Cuillin Ridge all in one day, you have a pretty good idea of this preparation climb! And at altitude and in mist!

Another delightful surprise awaited us at the end of this tortuous day. We were to spend the night in the home of local indigenous Ecuadorian families. It was a wonderful experience. No English from them and no Spanish from us but it's amazing how you make

yourself understood. Food was plentiful and the fruit juices to die for – eat your heart out Tesco. In the morning we helped to make and bake our own bread for breakfast. It was just wonderful. We were well recovered and ready for Cayambe. The journey to Cayambe involved transferring from the coach to 4x4 vehicles for the journey up to the refuge at 4000m. It was a hairy drive over poor dirt roads and across switchbacks with very airy and steep drops down into deep gorges, not for the faint-hearted. The refuge had recently been refurbished with good bunkrooms. The afternoon was spent up on the glacier learning/practising snow and ice climbing techniques. It was an interesting experience because for the first time it became very obvious who was capable and more importantly who was up for it. The weather was calm and the views to the summit clear, which was the complete opposite to what we found at midnight when we began with our Alpine start.

The two great issues with Ecuadorian volcanoes are steepness and weather reliability. The big three volcanoes are cone shaped, particularly Cotopaxi. This means a slope angle of 38 degrees that is relentless in its severity and unending in its demands (slopes greater than 38 degrees become unstable in this environment with the inherent dangers that accompany such terrain). There is no escaping the slope, no flat ground for a rest, you just plod up hour after hour in your own world of pain and anguish. Then there's the weather. A clear night is a bonus but due to the proximity of the Amazon Basin to the east and the Pacific Ocean to the west, moisture in the atmosphere can and does cause havoc with navigation.

So it was with a sad heart and despondent demeanour that we set off to climb Cayambe at midnight in what might be best described as 'typical Scottish clag'. The guides had difficulty in route finding which did my self-confidence no good at all. It was mixed ground with a rocky ridge to get through for the first couple of hundred metres followed by an iffy glacier traverse with crevasses to avoid. We were roped up in pairs, each with a guide. Eventually we hit the right track and make steady progress through the night. My partner (one of the IT boffins) struggled with the altitude and ice techniques and although he eventually made the summit, it was to be his only one this trip. Just before dawn we saw the summit, above a huge cliff of overhanging deep blue ice. It was the time of day I hate the most.

It was not quite light enough to see properly, the temperature was at its coldest and I was knackered. Still, despite everything we made the final push, traversing around the cliff, then a final steep climb up on to the flat summit. I could say it was a real pleasure to be here but I would be lying. I could hardly see anything due to the clag. The guide told me that there was a crater with great views. Mmmm ! It was 7am and time for a few photos, then back down. We arrived at the refuge at 11am, had a quick hot drink and food then departed for the delights of Quito. One down, two to go.

It was nice to spend a little time in Quito, no more so than to sleep in a big comfy bed for a couple of nights. Time was also spent doing the usual housekeeping that is necessary to get your house in order. However, the afternoon was most enjoyable spending time at 'The Equator' 20 kilometres north of the city, in a tourist trap called Mitad del Mundo. It is said that a French Expedition calculated that the Equator ran through the spot where the monument stands. However, they miscalculated by 240 metres, a fact I had great pleasure in pointing out to my friend Chris, who is a Frenchman in disguise.

Two days after we arrived in Quito we were on the coach heading south along the Pan American Highway through the 'Avenue of the Volcanoes' to Cotopaxi National Park, and then on a dirt road to the Jose Rivas refuge at 4800m. The Volcano Cotopaxi stands out from the surrounding valley, tall and proud and in your face. It's a perfect cone with very straight 38 degree slopes shooting into the clouds and beyond. We sat and relaxed outside the refuge, watching the sun set, casting a million shades of yellow, red and orange upon the snow capped mountain. Cotopaxi lifted her skirts for a brief moment and we were tempted by a quick glance of the summit before once more mist concealed that special place where we would stand tomorrow morning. So it was with a mixture of excitement and trepidation that we all hit our bunks at about 8pm for a little sleep before the 11pm rise for food and another Alpine start, and another Ecuadorian surprise. I can never sleep before a climb. It doesn't matter if I am in a tent, refuge or car. More so at altitude, so I just relaxed and listened to my music, with the rhythmic interruptions of the grunts, coughs and snores of the strange man from Denmark, fast asleep in the bunk next to me. At midnight and we stepped outside, to another day and another surprise. It was snowing! Whatever happened to the moonlit,

windless route to the summit? The coach took us up to the end of the road, at just under 5000m. Only 900m to go you may think, that's only a Scottish Munro, easy peasy! Well, the snow got heavier, the wind strengthened and visibility was pea soup. No matter, Benno was happy enough and my guide had a cheesy grin from ear to ear. So off we went, a trail of disgruntled clients wishing they were still all tucked up in bed back in Quito.

There is no escape from Cotopaxi, it's straight up and steep. As the night progressed the snow eased a bit but the temperature dropped. Visibility was poor and we stopped every 45 minutes for food and drink. My guide was still grinning but my partner from Cayambe was beginning to struggle. As we progressed further up the mountain his pace slowed to a crawl and at times his legs performed a strange dance that would not have been out of place on Strictly Come Dancing. At last, as dawn approached, we reached the false summit. Visibility had improved, the falling snow had eased and it was really cold. I looked around and saw groups of climbers huddled together for warmth and protection from the elements. It was the point of no return. From here it was a push to the summit, 200m gain in altitude and an hour of absolute hell away. I saw many climbers turn around and disappear down the hill. My partner unclipped and joined a descending group. He slapped me on the back and wished me good luck. I needed it. I moved closer to my guide and he was still grinning. He handed me a hot cup of tea like some magician pulling out a rabbit from a hat. How did he do that? We were joined by one of our expedition who had left his guide and was waiting to join a team going down. His hands were inside his jacket, up in his arm pits, and at the same time he was dancing about like some demented ferret. "I can't feel my hands" he said. "Well put your gloves back on", I said and after some pushing and shoving my guide and I manage to sort him out. Then to our amazement he declared his wish to continue, to which our guide agreed.

Off we headed to the summit, a journey of some considerable discomfort, up even steeper slopes, through knee deep fresh snow, whilst now almost dragging our new companion to the final destination. After an hour the ground suddenly flattened out for the first time in seven hours. I could see the sun peeking through the mist. The wind was up, throwing around the fresh snow but we were

on the summit. The guide is still grinning! As we stood around taking the obligatory photos the rabbit has appeared again but this time I found it a little difficult to raise my cup to my mouth; my jacket was completely frozen and required some effort to work it free, (Fig 1). It was minus 20 C and the guide continued to grin! Later that afternoon as the coach headed south, I took a last look at Cotopaxi. No cloud, no swirling mists, just a solitary cone shooting up from the valley. She stood proud and elegant, just like yesterday, with the snows glistening in the afternoon sunshine. She smiled at me knowing very well that she gave me the toughest ascent of any mountain that I have climbed. If only...I turn away and slump once more in my seat. We must be cursed. Will we ever get lucky with the weather? I fell into a deep sleep as the coach took us away south to Riobamba and the monster that awaited us – Chimborazo.



Figure 1 *On the summit of Cotopaxi.*

From wherever you sit, stand or walk, Chimborazo looms menacingly over you. It is a huge lump of volcanic rock capped in snow and ice and interlaced with numerous glacier fingers oozing their way down the sides of this cone shaped monolith. After breakfast our drive took us first north, then west, around its lower flanks. We gradually increased our altitude until our coach could barely make progress in the thinning air, spluttering and coughing out its poisonous fumes in a futile attempt to make its way even higher. We reached the park entrance and signed in as usual before making our way even higher along another dirt road, which took us to within a short walk of the refuge Edward Whymper (at nearly 5000 m). Here we reached our camp site and made preparations for yet another Alpine start later that night. (Fig 2).



Figure 2 *High camp on Chimborazo.*

It was 10pm as I made my way out of my tent, and I stopped and glanced around. There was no need for my head torch. There was a full moon that lit up the campsite and, more importantly, the route up the west ridge and beyond. There was no wind, no rain, no snow, no

cloud, just a perfect, still, cold night, with the whole of the southern sky blinking at us. Once more Ecuador had produced another surprise (remind me to raise a glass to the weather gods back in Quito!). An hour later five others from our party and myself were standing over the slumped figure of another of our companions. He was disorientated and muttering about his head. He had lasted 30 minutes and 50 metres of increased altitude before his guide gently carried him away, back down to the camp. He was not the last.

Chimborazo is a technical mountain of mixed ground which requires 100% concentration at all times, otherwise it will spit you out and dump you back to where you have come from. The first two hours were spent tramping up to the west ridge then along to the 'The Castle', which is a large outcrop of gnarly rock covered in ice and knee-deep snow. The route over it required some delicate footwork and there were airy moments along its narrow ridge. A period of descent and re-ascent followed, crossing two couloirs including some very steep slopes, to reach the main western flank that eventually took you up to the summit. As I looked up to this flank I was reminded of Christmas. There were two other routes that merged ahead of us, and the head torches of the roped parties above us looked remarkably like the fairy lights cascading down the sides of a Christmas tree. A hour later we joined the lights and began the laborious task of climbing the beast that is Chimborazo, straight up the 38 degree slope to the summit, some six hours away.

Again there was another flash of light and this time it lit up the whole of the western sky above Chimborazo. Looking down to the Pacific lowlands I witnessed a tropical thunderstorm battering the coast far below. It was then I realise that we were so high up that we were above the clouds and exempt from nature's fury. It was 3am. Another flash appeared directly in front of me, but this time there was no rumble of thunder, just the dulcet tones and smiling grin of my guide who enquired as to my well being. "I'm fine", I told him and after a brief pause to wonder at the power of nature we pushed on to our goal. It was 7.50 in the morning. My legs were aching and my whole body felt the fatigue of a ten hour ascent up to the top of this magnificent volcanic mountain. But I was very happy, with a smile that was even wider than the permanent grin on my guide's face. I felt the warmth of a beautiful sunrise on a perfect day with no



Figure 3 *On the summit of Chimborazo.*

wind, snow or cloud to obscure the wonderful panoramic view that unfolded before us. I could see the summits of Cayambe and Cotopaxi standing proudly above their carpets of cloud (so that's what they look like!). On mornings like this I understand why we do these mad things; not because they are there and need to be climbed, but for that inner sense of wonderment and peace that you feel standing on the roof of the world, (Figs 3&4). And a wee bit of satisfaction that you had made it.

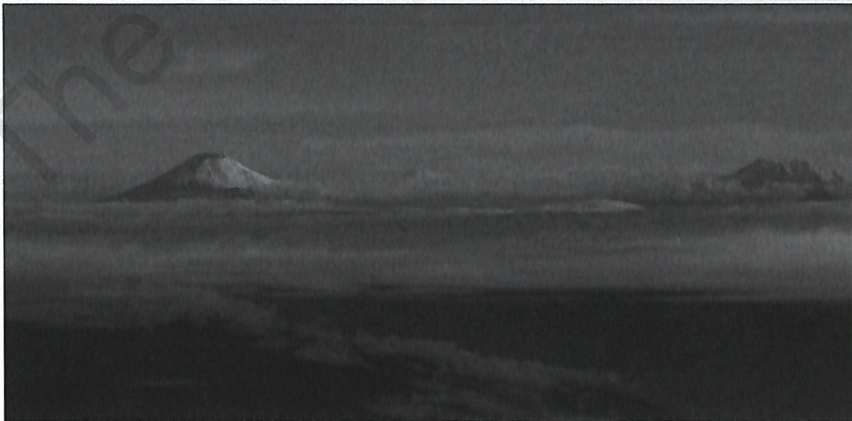


Figure 4 *Cotopaxi and Cayambe from the summit of Chimborazo.*

We lingered for a while, grinning and hugging, as you do. I glanced east towards the Amazon Basin, a strange and mysterious land that Chris and I will visit in four days time. What a bizarre thought – from 6310 metres to 120 metres. Five hours later I was safely returned to camp, lying on my back with my feet in the air, having just fallen off my chair whilst still clutching that precious bottle of beer. And standing over me with arm stretched out was that wonderful grin.

The author is a Club member and involved with the Skye Mountain Rescue Team. He and his wife Suzanne, also a Club member, run a Bed & Breakfast at Achteleen, Staffin, Skye.