

NEWSLETTER OF OUR SOUTH AMERICAN TRIP

By Alison Frater

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*Lava lizards, Galapagos Islands, Ecuador.
Photo: Alison Frater.*

An amazing time that lived up to and beyond expectations...

-- Alison Frater

Itinerary

Hi to all,

As previously mentioned/warned, Mary and I had planned a trip to South America. Well, we are now home safe and sound after an amazing time that lived up to and beyond expectations. It is hard to pin point favourite areas -- each destination being in such contrast to the others and most days seem to have had highlights and lots of cameos to remember.



*Land iguana, Galapagos Islands, Ecuador.
Photo: Alison Frater.*

In summary:

Ecuador - Quito, Galapagos Islands and Napo Eco River Resort (Jungle)

1. Quito is the capital of the country and the 2nd highest in alt. in the world at 2,800 metres. We were fortunate enough (thanks to our amazing booking agent in New York) to be stopping in the Old Colonial City -- at the foot of higher mountains, with cobbled narrow roads and fabulously maintained old buildings that feature balconies. Our "bed and breakfast" accommodation was in fact 5 star in a renovated 150 year old building and run by a retired cardiac surgeon and his accountant partner. The city's airport needs to be seen to be believed -- like landing in their main street. The area was once isolated, but now totally surrounded by the city with buildings and roads close to both ends of the strip which is short enough not to give any lee way -- their last mishap was 2 weeks before we got there. The city is still reasonably young in their tourist industry and as yet 'untouched'. We loved it. Fuel was priced the same per gallon as per litre at home.



Giant tortoise, Galapagos Islands, Ecuador.

Photo: Alison Frater.

2. Galapagos Islands: Stupendous. Every island on our trip was designed to give as much variety to our viewing as possible. About 2 weeks before we left home, we were told our boat had been changed -- 3rd time, but upgrading from an 18 berth to a 32 berther, and with no extra passengers, we were not unhappy. The local tour managers were extremely apologetic about the change and in Quito gave us a back pack and announced an open bar for the entire trip -- not to be sneezed at. We enjoyed that service, but did not abuse it and as it turned out there were only a total of 10 passengers on the bigger boat -- they would have had to have run it at a loss. Anyhow, we were there to see wildlife and wildlife we saw. The giant tortoises were a great introduction. I was surprised at how many of them there were. The tour of Charles Darwin Research Centre confirmed the future of these creatures to be secure.



*Adult and baby frigate birds, Galapagos Islands, Ecuador.
Photo: Alison Frater.*

Birds. We saw a few!! Our cameras went crazy -- the boobies are just so colourful and plentiful -- one had to watch where one walked, even though they had dedicated walk ways. A few were sitting on eggs, but most had chicks of varying ages and all beautiful and posing for the camera. Then there was the frigates with their bright red balloon like displays -- also common to see. Two highlights -- one day we were walking up a steep hill and from seemingly nowhere, a Galapagos Hawk flew in and perched in a tree just a few feet above our heads. He all but talked to us, and after all the photos had been taken we moved on -- so did the hawk -- to a tree even closer to us and demanded another talk and round of pics. We eventually parted company, but on the way back he flew in again and said "lets do it all again" -- he just sat and looked at us till we gave in and moved on. On another day, we'd been gotten up early because of whale sightings and set off in the zodiac. We saw a few, but Galap. whale smaller and less exciting than what I've seen here and in Hawaii -- however, when heading back to our boat (Evolution) a pod of maybe 200 common dolphins were spotted -- we sped up -- probably took 10 mins at full speed to catch them and then we ran along beside them -- still at full speed watching them diving, jumping etc. etc. -- it was adrenalin stuff -- too much speed for good pics, but I have one to prove it did happen. (No -- not this picture -- that's a red footed booby. Then there were all the other creatures -- sea lions, iguanas etc. -- all plentiful and amazing.



Galapagos Hawk, Galapagos Islands, Ecuador.

Photo: Alison Frater.

3. The jungle -- 7 days of fun, canoes, humidity+++ , rain, mud, fun, birds, jungle growth, monkeys, fun, amazing hospitality, great naturalist and local guide, fun accommodation by the lagoon. Our resort was run by a local community of indigenous people, whom resisted a buyout of their land by oil magnates, and were fortunate to get overseas financing and 5 years ago achieved Nat'l Park rating and set up the resort. All profits stay in the community which is totally run by them -- they send the men off to town for the various necessary training -- hospitality, etc. etc. It is a credit to them and they are rightly proud of what they have achieved.



Heading out to explore the lake, Napo Wildlife Center, Ecuador.

Photo: Alison Frater.

Once we left our motorised canoe which had taken us down the Napo River for nearly 3 hours we transferred to smaller canoes and from then on, within the confines of the resort, it was all paddle power or walk -- ALL supplies arrive at the resort per paddled canoes. Because our flight out of Quito was delayed, it actually became dark as we canoed up black water creek on day one, which turned out to be a magical experience with fire flies illuminating our way and bats swooping overhead, catching insects. Although they carried a strong light which they turned on to show us things, the paddlers were very much able to 'see in the dark'. We previously knew about the canoes, but I had not realised how much time we would spend in them -- the best animal, bird and vegetation viewing is indeed this way. Although we traversed some areas multiple times -- each time was different and of course our guides knew where and when to look for specific birds/animals. The BIG thing to spot is the giant otter -- few in numbers, and elusive at times, but 'our' canoe had 5 or 6 separate sightings -- lucky. Monkeys are in abundance -- we saw several types and heard others. We did do several walks also.



*Butterfly and moth, Napo Wildlife Center, Ecuador.
Photo: Alison Frater.*

The unexpected highlight was a night away from the main resort. We'd booked in for 7 nights -- some only go for 2-3 and 5 nights. Anyhow on day five off we set. Mary and I, our naturalist, local guide, chef, outboard motor operator and an extra helper -- all in an open canoe, + bedding, food, drinks, gas cylinder for cooking and the chef in his chef's uniform!! Down the river for a further 2 hours then up a lesser river for 1 hour to a large collection of joined 'lakes' that form part of a flooded forest. We were there to see River Dolphins -- rare -- actually did have a few second glimpse of them just as we arrived, but not to be seen again. We stopped at an old eco lodge -- rarely used now -- made of palm thatching and although boasted 3 storeys, was more primitive than the place Maurice and I stopped at on Paama. It did have running tank water, cold shower and flush toilet out the back. Not a place to take everyone, but Mary and I loved it and to our surprise were fed 3 course meals -- same menu as we would have had back at lodge, with icy cold drinks. En route in both directions, lots of stops to see birds, etc. spotted by the crew. Their eye sight for spotting is phenomenal.



*Chullpas of Sillustani, on the shore of Lake Umayo, Lake Titicaca, Peru.
Photo: Alison Frater.*

Peru: Moving on -- we had previously been to Cuzco when we visited Machu Picchu 10 years ago. Since then the strong arm of tourism has moved in and altered the city. Still a great place to visit, but no longer the charming and natural local influence -- eg. Locals cooking and selling "their" goods on streets -- herbs, spices, guinea pig meat etc. etc. -- not seen. Talking with others, it seems Machu Picchu has also altered considerably -- I'm glad we went there when we did.

However, we did visit 2 sites out of Cuzco that were new to us and both amazing -- firstly the Moray archaeology site -- a huge area which they once thought had been an amphitheatre, but now (thanks to an Australian et al). know it was all of agricultural significance -- too complex to explain briefly on paper, but a fab place, then a visit to Maras salt pans -- hard work and with little return for the workers, but a photographic delight.



Canyon of Tinajani, Lake Titicaca, Peru.

Photo: Alison Frater.

The only reason we revisited Cuzco, was to catch the Andean Express Train from there to Puno (Lake Titicaca) -- again a fab day -- travelling through an ever changing collection of villages, valleys and by high mountains. (The train 1 or 2 weeks later -- along with the highway, was closed because of local disquiet by the land owners -- again we were lucky.) A highlight to the area was of course to visit the floating Uros Islands. Colourful and lived up to their name and reputation, but again tourism is rife and the locals, whilst extremely friendly and hospitable, had open palms and plaintive demeanours. We visited a couple of outer islands including a visit to a kindergarten -- the kids were delightful. Where we had lunch, was on an island whose indigenous trace their roots to pre Incan times, and still practice some old traditions, and tend to be able to keep independently separate to other local Indians. They are famous for their weaving and also the fact that (not sure why or when), the men all knit -- lots of them seen walking around knitting (jumpers etc), whilst talking and managing their daily activities.



Rural life south of Puno, Lake Titicaca, Peru.

Photo: Alison Frater.

On our last day we toured by car along the lake towards Bolivian boarder. We spent a few hours off the main road in a remote area where again, the locals keep themselves isolated from the main population and their life reflects this. Their homes (all mud brick of course), are mostly rounded as opposed to the rectangle mud dwellings elsewhere, and farming is of another era. It was seeding time and we saw literally dozens and dozens of folk either leading oxen or donkeys with their wooden hoes and the woman following with the seed which was hand sprinkled -- or in some cases, the hoes were pushed by the man when no beast available. Although a safe place to drive through, the locals are "not friendly", so we did not get out of car and pictures were taken through car windows.

Of course on most days, we visited Incan sites -- all interesting, and a few local museums, churches etc. etc., often saw llamas or alpacas. Our hotel overlooked the lake and on arrival on day 1, a full moon had just risen over the lake, as we walked into our room -- welcome.



*Licancabur Volcano, Atacama Desert, Chile.
Photo: Alison Frater.*

Chile: A modern, vibrant country, that I could live in. Again very diverse scenery because of its geography, which we divided into 3 sections to visit.

Atacama Desert -- Nthn. Chile. Our base was in San Pedro -- about 2 hours from airport, via desolate desert. Our accommodation was simply amazing at Hotel Awasi -- mud brick sleeping areas with private outdoor walled areas (outside shower) plus full 5 star indoor bathroom. Reception, dining, lounging, bar etc. all outdoors, with open fires and gas heaters. All drinks included in tariff, which we had not realised previously, so helped the budget.



Chilean flamingos, Atacama Desert, Chile.

Photo: Alison Frater.

Day tours were all controlled by the hotel's own guides and in their vehicles. They had a choice of many with activities graded from easy to difficult. We had to choose what we did, which was a little difficult when you didn't really know, what was out there, but we chose well and they added on extra's to a tour that was more minimal than we realised. Anyhow, we visited salt lakes with flamingos -- not a lot of birds, but with wonderful reflections in the calm salt lake (click, click, click), we walked through a 2 km. canyon, which proved a more adventuresome exercise than we planned and had some challenges, but we did it, and a great walk before driving onto Moon Valley -- no moon, but great place to see the sun set. All trips of course, drove through small villages with its local folk and their lifestyles.



*Salt pond, Atacama Desert, Chile.
Photo: Alison Frater.*

Our last day was a full day out and we drove to a distant salt lake at altitude travelling via spectacular scenery -- a cone shaped volcano (like Lopevi Maurice) dominates the landscape. The highest point we crossed was 4,800 metres -- just a very brief picture stop -- probably 4,400 metres where we had a picnic by the lake -- sumptuous picnic with red wine.

Over all we managed the altitude well, but certainly knew we were high and walked slowly, drank lots of water and breathed slowly. In brief, although I haven't written a lot about this area, it possibly was my favourite spot -- but just by a short nose.



*Osorno Volcano and Lake Todos los Santos, Lake District, Chile.
Photo: Alison Frater.*

Puerto Varas -- The Lakes area. What a contrast from the desert. Emerald lakes, blue lakes, spring in full swing with a mass of blossoms (wild as well as cultivated), but still volcanoes and Andes peaks dominating the scenery. We were lucky with the weather and had clear blue skies on day 1 when we walked about 3 hours from our hotel (which was by a lake) by the volcano and back along the lake.

Next day on the lake, a little cloudy, but lovely all the same. Last day was over to Chiloe Island via a ferry -- saw sea lion and dolphins and enjoyed a different day driving around this island with its brightly painted shingled homes, Heritage listed churches, local museums (fishing orientated), but rainy day. Again a brief description, but lots to see and well worth the effort to visit.



*Cuernos Mountains and Lake Pehoe, Torres del Paine, Patagonia, Chile.
Photo: Alison Frater.*

Patagonia. Our final destination -- way down south. We were lucky with the weather on first 2 days, and our drive from airport north up into 'The Park' (Torres del Paine) -- was amazing -- the new wildlife we saw just as we drove along -- condors, guanacos (alpaca like), lesser rhea, huge geese + local agriculture -- sheep mostly -- poor land -- large acreage farms, and approaching high mountains. In the park the Towers were fairly clear (click click) and it was windy -- one had to be careful. Scenery spectacular and we passed many lakes en route to our hotel -- vegetation also interesting. Saw a condor being asked to leave area by a pair of eagles, and a pair of male guanacos having words with each other, whilst the female stood up on a ridge observing.



*Nandu, the native ostrich, Torres del Paine, Patagonia, Chile.
Photo: Alison Frater.*

Day 2 was showery early, then clearer than day 1, but windy++++. Area is famous for its high winds at this time of the year, but this day was extra so, with gusts up to 100 kph -- couldn't take pictures at times, as couldn't hold camera still. The scenery was more spectacular than previous day, with sunny condition. Our boat trip to glacier was delayed a few hours because of wind, but eventually got away -- motoring into the wind had water over the front of boat ALL the way and couldn't see a thing, but it was worth it -- glacier looking good, although receding in depth at an alarming rate. The boat going back was calm with good vision of lots of little bergs we hadn't realised we'd passed on the way out!

Last 2 days were wet (rare for time of year), cold with fresh snow on mtn. tops -- had a short day because too wet to walk. Snowed a bit on drive out of park, and still raining last day back to Punta Arenas airport.



Vicuña, Torres del Paine, Patagonia, Chile.

Photo: Alison Frater.

Throughout the entire trip our dining had been pre arranged -- not talking about boat or jungle resort. With one exception, the food was great -- I did get to eat some interesting things, that I necessarily wouldn't repeat, but mostly found new, interesting and tasty foods. Some places we ate al a carte, some it was a set menu, and in some cases a choice of two things. Most restaurants were chosen because of their service and position -- we learnt a lot about dining. It is not only the food, but the experience and they make that experience an art. Lunch (as in middle of the day meal) was usually 3 courses and equally big as evening meal -- too much on some occasions, but it balanced out as flying days were 'snackos' and often left hotel pre breakfast.

So that's that. Had a lengthy delay in Buenos Aires coming home, so got to see a lot of US election night. Results were announced just as we got the call to board at 2.30am local time. Oh talking elections -- this is interesting:

Ecuador had a referendum whilst we were there, and Chile had local elections for Mayors, but obviously of more import than Aust. local elections as the President resigned because of 'shock' result in Santiago -- anyhow, the point of this story is the rules preceding the election in both countries.

No alcohol can be consumed, sold, bought, served etc. from 7pm Friday before the Sunday election, until 7pm after polls close. In Ecuador our restaurant could not serve wine, but in Santiago, the city on Saturday was very quiet with lots of shops, museums, restaurants etc. closed -- it was our free day. We did find an open restaurant -- we were their only clients, but they sold us a bottle of wine.

Well enough enough -- Cheers from Alison

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