

1/11/13 - Day 6 – Manta, Ecuador: We arrived in the port of Manta, Ecuador about 5am. The Amsterdam was tied up to the pier and it was daylight by the time we began our day. Looking out onto the pier we could see some tuna boats moored and the tour buses already lined up.



We had signed up with Cruise Critic friend, Karen D., for a private tour that included Manta, the town of Montecristi and the Paroche Forest. At about 8am Karen had her group meet in the Casino, which was shut down and deserted while

in port. As shown in the picture on the right, Karen and husband, Brad, had roll call to confirm that all 18 eager passengers were present then we were off to meet our mini-bus on the pier.



We appreciated the fact that Karen had sorted through the available tour organizations and selected one with a good reputation and tour agenda that appealed to our group. For future reference the pictures below provide some info about the tour company and the minibus we were on.



On the pier we met our tour guide, Diego, and he introduced his assistant Julia and our driver, Etalo. Diego teaches English to high school students in Manta and his English was excellent. Soon we were on our way as Diego, gave us some of the statistics about Manta and the tour we would take today.



We exited the port area and headed east through Manta. Later in the day, after about an 80 mile round trip, we would return to the port from the west.

Traffic in Ecuador drives on the right side of the road and distance shown on road signs is given in miles. This custom is very user friendly for people from North America.

It doesn't take long to get the message that tuna fishing is the main economic driver in Manta. In addition to the hundreds of tuna boats there were attractive displays featuring tuna fish along the city streets.



The road we took led along the shoreline of the Manta Harbor. We passed by a shipyard where tuna boats were being built with wooden framing.



The shape of the unfinished hulls with the repeating smooth curved ribs had a pleasing artistic appeal. In addition this scene showed that a ship building industry (although not the most modern) was contributing to the economic fabric of Manta.

Our first stop was at the Manta Fish Market where the local fishermen sell their catch. There was an

abundance of fresh fish and other seafood on display. We roamed around and took some pictures of what was being offered today.



In the photo below we haven't figured out what message the guy in the red shirt was sending.

The fishermen of Ecuador are blessed with abundant fish stocks by their cool ocean waters. The Humbolt Ocean Current sweeps up along the Western coastline of South American from Antarctica and is relatively cold. It therefore holds more oxygen than warmer ocean water further out in the Pacific. The higher oxygen content favors the growth of marine



life all along the food chain. In addition, there is an upwelling of nutrients from the ocean floor that also promotes life along the food chain. The hard working fishermen of Ecuador and elsewhere along the coast have become expert at exploiting this fortunate relationship, as shown in the fish market and the presence of tuna boats in the Manta Harbor. A secondary effect is that, unlike Cartagena, the temperatures in Manta were in the comfortable low 70s even though it is near the equator.

After visiting the fish market we boarded the bus and proceeded to our next stop which would be in the town of Montecristi. Before leaving Manta we passed several gas

stations that had the price of their gasoline posted, as shown in the picture on the right. Our tour leader, Diego, said that the posted gas price was \$1.037 USD per gallon for regular and the higher octane gasolines sold for \$1.480 and \$2.290 USD per gallon. We were incredulous at such low prices and asked if he meant dollars per liter. No, he assured us that the price was in US dollars per gallon. This is where we learned that (like we saw in Cartagena) Ecuador uses the gallon as a standard measurement of gasoline volume.

However, unlike Columbia, the whole Ecuadorian economy uses US currency for commercial transactions.



Once we digested this last information we asked how the gasoline prices could be so low in view of gasoline prices of \$4 to \$8 USD per gallon in other countries we have visited. We had never seen gasoline prices this low. Diego said that the private petroleum companies in Ecuador operate under strict government price controls and the price of gasoline is kept low because the average worker doesn't make much money. He said the minimum wage established by law for workers was \$294 USD per month so the government keeps the price of gasoline and other commodities low. There was plenty of traffic on the highways and down by the harbor there were parking lots filled with new imported cars waiting to be put to use so apparently the petroleum companies are happy to provide gasoline at these low prices. We suspect that such tight price control probably causes problems in other areas but that question was beyond the scope of our tour today.

A few miles out of Manta we wound our way up a very steep road and arrived in a well kept collection of buildings overlooking the city of Montecristi. The buildings were all fairly new and dedicated to a presentation of Ecuadorian history and the iconic Panama hat which originated in Montecristi.



Our tour guide first gave us an almost passionate speech about the life of an Ecuadorian patriot known as General Alfaro. General Alfaro led Ecuador through turbulent civil conflicts and was instrumental in the writing of the current constitution of Ecuador. In honor of General Alfaro this nice tourist facility was named Ciudad Alfaro as indicated by the sign shown on the left, with a “dog of Montecristi” resting comfortably in the shade.

We first entered the attractive building shown on the right. Inside we found many exhibits about Alfaro. Much of the space was taken up by the room where the elected representatives approved the modern constitution of Ecuador.



Unfortunately, Alfaro was eventually assassinated. His ashes are enshrined in a mausoleum nearby. If we were better students of South American history this exhibit would have had more impact. However, we were left with the impression that the man, Alfaro, holds a place in Ecuadorian history on a level of perhaps, George Washington, in US history.



We then went to an exhibit of a full sized train on the grounds of Ciudad Alfaro. Here Diego explained how this train was used on the railroad linking Ecuador with other South American



countries. Before the railroad was brought into existence the deserts and mountainous terrain blocked communication between communities of Ecuador and other countries of South America. The purpose of the exhibit was to emphasize the importance of the railroad to the welfare of the Ecuadorian people.



About half of the space of the Ciudad Alfaro facility was dedicated to a working exhibit of the manufacture and marketing of Panama hats. Panama hats are woven from the fiber of a native palm tree and they are world renowned for their stylish look and durability. Diego explained that the name “Panama

hat” is an historical misnomer that has hidden the fact that the famous hat actually originated at Montecristi in Ecuador. The story goes that US president Teddy Roosevelt was visiting a Panama Canal event in Panama and someone gave him a nice woven hat that came from Montecristi Ecuador. Roosevelt returned to Washington D.C. wearing the hat and it was an immediate sensation for its dapper look. Since Roosevelt had brought the hat from Panama, it was immediately dubbed a “Panama hat”. Poor Montecristi town and the country of Ecuador never received the wide public credit it deserved for this contribution to sartorial splendor.



We were taken through a demonstration of how the fiber was obtained from the stem of a palm plant, processed using boiling water and sulfur and then painstakingly woven into the famous hat shape. These ladies shown here start weaving the fibers at the center of the top of the hat and then proceed to



weave up around a cylindrical wooden mandrel until the hat is complete with the jaunty brim.

Diego said that regular Panama hats might take up to a month to weave by hand but the finest quality hats could take 4 or 5 months. That huge amount of labor explains the cost of Panama hats which can amount to hundreds of dollars for very high quality.

During the hat making demonstration some well behaved Ecuadorian school children on a field trip joined us; much to the delight of the grandparents in our group.



After the hat manufacturing exhibit we wandered around through a nice market building where “Panama” hats of all kind as well as other Ecuadorian items were for sale.



We took a moment to photograph the town of Montecristi which was spread out at the foot of the mountain below the Ciudad Alfaro and Panama hat exhibits.



Our group then got back in the bus and drove the short distance down the mountain to Montecristi. We stopped at an attractive street selected by Diego and he turned us loose for about a 30 minute souvenir shopping event. One in our group was interested in purchasing a Panama hat of serious quality so Diego provided his expertise for that transaction.



On a prior trip to Ecuador we had learned about an ivory like material obtained from the tague nut tree. One layer of the Tague nut shell has a color and hardness resembling ivory and it can be carved or machined into many shapes. In fact, they claim that the Tague nut could save the elephant herds of Africa because it can be used for many small things, like buttons, jewelry and souvenirs items where ivory has been used in the past. We were interested in a souvenir made from the Tague nut and after searching through many shops found a nativity scene we liked. It consisted of the outer (non ivory) shell of the nut with the holy figures inside made of simulated ivory from the Tague nut, as shown on the left.



Other sights along the street were interesting with many bright colors and displays of goods, as shown below.

With our tourist “must” purchase completed we boarded the bus with the



rest of our group and proceeded out of Montecristi. We were bound for Forest Pachoche southwest of Manta near the Pacific coast. It was there we would have lunch at the Hacienda San Antonio.



Leaving Montecristi we traveled along a well paved road through dry hilly country with a sparse covering of low brush. Along the roadside were mostly unattractive and disheveled looking houses, as shown below.



Occasionally there was a splash of color provided by a flowering tree.

At one point Diego pointed out a Ceiba tree which drops its leaves in dry weather and grows leaves when the rains return. We got a photograph of a couple Ceiba trees as shown below. Diego said that the Ceiba was the national tree of Ecuador and sometimes it is called “woman tree” because of the softly curved shape of the trunk.



In the suburban parts of Manta that we passed through there was some graffiti on walls. Diego said that most of the graffiti was related to political elections that were coming up soon.



After about an hour we arrived at the Hacienda San Antonio where lunch was scheduled.

Colorful tents were set up on the patio with tables for our lunch. We took our seats and were served a delicious seafood meal.



The Hacienda had bungalows for guests with inviting hammocks waiting in the shade.



After a very pleasing meal we boarded our bus again and headed for the Forest Pachoche. As Diego pointed out, Manta is in a region of contrasts. We had just passed through miles of relatively dry country. Now we were driving along the Pacific coast and we had climbed to an elevation of about 1000 feet. There was obviously more moisture available here and thick underbrush and larger trees were on both sides of the road. This was the Forest Pachoche. Some scenes are shown in these pictures.



Diego had discussed the Tague Nut and how the ivory-like shell could be made into buttons and other commercial items. He made a special effort to locate a Tague tree along the roadside. Finally Diego sighted a Tague tree that had a couple of the nuts prominently displayed, as shown in this picture below.



We then proceeded downhill for a few miles until we came to a beach at the Pacific Ocean. This was a spot where fishermen brought their boats in for landing and there were a few swimmers enjoying the surf. It appeared to be a low-

end resort area for the locals. An interesting feature were some areas on the sandy beach that had been roped off to protect the nests of eggs deposited by sea turtles, as shown on the right. Diego said that the prominent rock on the left at the far end of the beach was Nun Rock and the other was Bishop's Rock.



At this point we boarded the bus and retraced our path about 40 miles back to the harbor at Manta. While passing through Manta Diego had the bus stop at a five star hotel so one of our group could make a souvenir purchase in the gift shop. It was a fortunate stop because suddenly Barbara felt a twitching of her library card and we sighted a lovely sign that would confirm that the card had visited in Manta, Ecuador. We quickly got our obligatory picture and we on our way.



We arrived back at the Amsterdam about 3:30pm which provided a comfortable margin from the all-aboard time at 4:30pm.

The tuna boats across the pier from the Amsterdam were in the process of unloading huge tuna fish they had brought in from the sea. There was a net attached to a crane that lifted the fish up and dumped them into metal bins on a truck. We took some pictures of this operation that was fascinating to watch.



of the net and over the side of the bin onto the pier. One of the workers seized the moment and held the tuna up for us to photograph, as shown on the right. This was a fine and friendly gesture that we and other passengers appreciated. It was a nice way to end an enjoyable tour in Manta, Ecuador.

The tuna had been frozen while on the boat and frosty vapor could be seen rising from them as they tumbled from the hauling net into the bins on the truck. At one point a large fish fell out



The Amsterdam got underway about 5pm and left the Manta harbor headed for Lima, Peru, two sea days away.