

# **Travel to Ecuador in 2010**

## **Part I: The volcano avenue: On horseback around Cotopaxi (29. 12. 2009-10. 1. 2010)**

*A travelogue by Hartmut Porzig*



*Evening glow on Cotopaxi volcano as seen from foggy Machachi valley*

## **The volcano avenue: On horseback around Cotopaxi**

### ***Getting there***

Combining a trail ride through the Ecuadorian highland with a visit to the wonders of the Galapagos Islands seemed like a recipe for the perfect holidays – and, indeed, it was. Of course, it would have been possible to organize the two parts of this journey separately. However, choosing a reliable tour operator among the many offers in the internet who would offer cruises with a nice small vessel and a fitting time table proved difficult. Hence, I booked the cruise as an extension together with the trail ride via Hidden Trails, hoping that they would know whom to trust. It worked out very satisfactorily, even though it turned out that direct booking of the same boat would definitely have been cheaper. In part II I will provide the contact address. However, a really big advantage of this arrangement was the fact that the link between the two separate parts of the travel adventure worked perfectly even though the schedule was really tight.

Although Hidden Trails offered a number of attractive trails in the Andes, the choice of confirmed dates during January and February proved exceedingly small. I settled for the volcano avenue trail starting and ending in the Hacienda La Alegria situated about 50 km south of Quito. The program was to start shortly after Christmas of 2009. Hence, I would have to spend New Year's Eve in the South American summer rather than in the Swiss Winter.

Booking flights from Zürich to South America for that time of the year proved quite tricky. On the 28<sup>th</sup> of December, the only passage with a reasonable fare went via Miami in Florida and required two changes of aircraft. It also required an unusual number of painstaking controls on each airport, especially of the shoes, because earlier this year some idiotic would-be terrorist had tried to board a plane in Denver with explosives hidden in his shoes. Nevertheless, I reached Quito on the same day, albeit with a delay, and was quite positively surprised when I discovered that the taxi driver, I had asked for, was still waiting for me at the gate. In due time he delivered me at the gate of the small 'Hostal Alcalà', about a 20 min walk from the city centre of Quito. I had selected this place from among a large choice of hostals in the internet offering modest comfort at very reasonable prices. The Alcalà provided clean and secure rooms for about 24 \$ while no major hotel in the city would offer a room for less than 100 \$. However, a little Spanish was required to communicate with the people in the hostel, as they did not seem to understand any foreign language.

The next morning I found that I had still time for a short walk across the neighbouring quarters before somebody from the hacienda La Alegría would pick me up at 10 o'clock. Unfortunately, I managed to get lost and did not find my way back to the hostel. Although I knew that I was relatively close to the place, the first four people which I asked for directions could not help me at all. It remained unclear whether this was a problem of my Spanish or of their ignorance. In any case I was finally directed to an elderly gentleman in a nearby travel agency who very kindly explained the direction. I reached the hostel right in time to meet an already slightly nervous gentleman who turned out to be Gabriel Espinosa, the patron of La Alegría.

Soon we were driving southward on a panoramic road that offered beautiful views onto the old city centre of Quito. Gabriel was constantly talking into his blackberry or was explaining the spectacular landscape. After about an hour driving we reached the hacienda La Alegría,

beautifully situated in the rolling foothills of a mountain ridge amidst the lush green of trees and gently sloped meadows. The main building had been built about hundred years ago in the style of an Italian country villa by the grandmother of Gabriel. A relatively new extension to the side of the main building contained several spacious, stylishly furnished and comfortable guest rooms with a romantic view into a partially overgrown garden and onto a vast pasture for the horses (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkrRrQsviPg>). Nevertheless, tourism for horse lovers is not the only source of income for the hacienda. It is also a working dairy farm and a producer of wool from a small herd of highly attractive alpacas. In spite of their beautiful looks with their snowy white wool, large dark eyes and long eyelashes, they are not really fond of being touched and caressed by humans. They are always ready to spit the contents of their stomach in the direction of even the most benevolent tourist.



Partial view onto Quito. Old town left of centre.

### ***First excursions***

In the afternoon Gabriel took me for a first ride into the mountains towering in the neighbourhood of the hacienda to try one of his horses. I slowly dawned on me that I would be the only guest on the trail ride around Cotopaxi. However, Gabriel did not seem to be bothered by the prospect of organizing this quite demanding trip for a single participant. He had a good command of English and I needed my poor Spanish only occasionally. The horses were not very tall, about 1.55 to 1.60 m high, but lively, easy to handle and well fed and groomed plus they had absolutely no problem in climbing steep mountains in the range of 3-4000 m above sea level. After dinner I enjoyed sitting in front of the burning logs in the large fire place that fought successfully against the cold evening air in the sitting room. Even in my room some friendly soul had lit a crackling fire.





*Hacienda La Alegría from the garden side*



*Alpacas*

The trail was to start on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January 2010. Hence, we had three more days for me to acclimatize and to try other horses on shorter or, mostly, longer rides with Gabriel into the mountains around the hacienda. One of them led to the top of a neighbouring mountain at 3800 m. It was a perfect day with warm sunshine and almost no wind. We passed a number of small farms where Gabriel delivered sweets (‘caramelos’) for the children as New Year’s gifts. Above the farming area we reached islands of cloud forest, a kind of old-growth forest



very different from the more recently created eucalyptus plantations on the lower slopes. It is a refuge of many endogenous flowering plants and trees that have been replaced elsewhere by farming activities. These forest islands owe their existence to the fog which almost permanently clings to these steep valleys and provides a constant source of moisture. Higher up above the cloud forest one enters the region of the Paramó, hardy grasses that cover the highlands above 3500 m. The way back was a slippery affair on farm tracks that had been transformed by the heavy rains into a cañon landscape that forced us to lead the horses wearily on foot trying not to drop very inelegantly into the deep ravines.



*In the paramó  
above Machachi  
valley*



*Nothing but  
roses in the rose  
plantation*

One afternoon we visited one of the huge rose plantations covering a sizable fraction of Ecuador's highland valleys that was managed by Gabriel's son in law. The plantation was located in a secluded valley and a number of security checkpoints had to be passed prior to arriving at an attractive garden adjacent to an array of greenhouses. They were designed to shelter nothing but roses in all possible colours and were provided with automated systems for the control of watering, temperature and pest control. Other small buildings contained an experimental station for the development of novel varieties or for testing the storage life of cut flowers. Finally there was a magnificent show room displaying huge sprays of roses in all available colour variants. The plantation is owned by a Dutch company that sells the flowers all over Europe but especially to Russia. Hence, there would be no business without boosting the longevity of the cut flowers to the present limit of 15 days. Overall I got the impression that due to the high degree of automation the apparently large capital investment had created only relatively few jobs to produce a commodity marketed almost 10'000 km away. It was not quite clear to me why they needed such an extensive security system to prohibit unwelcome visitors to enter. Maybe it was designed to deter spying and stealing new rose varieties. Back on the hacienda at the dinner table I met for the first time Patty, Gabriel's wife, an extraordinarily nice, spirited woman with a fine sense of humour.

### *New Year's Eve at La Alegría*

On the last day of the year 2009 we started early by car to visit a big Indian market at Saquisilí a small neighbouring town. In each and every village that we passed on our way people on the streets were preparing for New Year's Eve by enacting a very popular old tradition called 'Killing of the Old Man'. The old year is killed symbolically by burning a puppet carrying a mask. Unfortunately, the 'Old Man' leaves a widow behind who is now forced to go around asking for alms. Masked young people and children are busy to help the widow asking for treats. In some places they even blocked the road with ropes to stop the cars and forcing the passengers to contribute. In many places masks for the 'Old Man' were sold, preferentially with the face of former Ecuadorian presidents.



*Masks for the 'Old Man',  
(mostly famous  
personalities and past  
Ecuadorian presidents)*

Finally, we arrived at the market which took place on at least 6 different places in the town, grouped according to various topics like animals (pigs, goats, sheep, llamas, rabbits, guinea



pigs) or clothes or foodstuffs or supplies for farmers in short, a typical regional market without any touristic touch. While Gabriel was busy to buy vegetables and foodstuffs, I bought a kind of bedside carpet from a friendly old Indian woman. I was especially fascinated by the many different varieties of potatoes. One kind of very small but tasty ones is harvested in the mountains up to 3500 m. On the way back, there was an enormous traffic jam because all roads were clogged with busses filled with people travelling to their end-of-year family reunion. Almost every car carried an 'Old Man' puppet fixed at its bumpers.



*Indios selling pigs on Sasquisilí market*



*Indio women on Sasquisilí market*

On the hacienda the house was slowly filling with people, mostly close or not so close relatives ready to celebrate New Year's Eve together. As for me, I did not really look forward to spend the turn of the year in faraway country as the only stranger within a large family most members of which I had never seen before. However, thanks to the Spanish hospitality and the fact that they enjoyed the reunion so very much, I was quickly integrated into the family and did not need to feel embarrassed for a moment. After dark the 'Old Man' was

burned on a nearby field followed by a display of some fireworks. Finally everybody assembled around the large table in the dining room for a festive and long lasting dinner.



*Mountain potatoes*

The next morning most people on the hacienda were busy to prepare a show for a group of tourists which were expected to arrive from Quito. Recently, part of the old railway tracks that had connected the capital with the coast had been restored and was now used for nostalgic train excursions. Thus, a historic train stop in the immediate vicinity of the

hacienda was revived; the tourists would descend and would experience a little horse and lasso show and admire the beautiful alpacas. As if the two professional 'chagras' (Andean gauchos) would not be sufficient, I was also asked to dress up as a 'guest chagra', fit to spoil the whole show by my obvious clumsiness. After some waiting the tourist group, mostly Italians, indeed arrived, enjoyed the gaucho's artful technique in roping hoses, got spit at by the alpacas and went back, more or less gratefully, into their waiting train.

In the afternoon a lot of horses were saddled for all of the family members (including small but courageous children and their no less courageous parents) feeling fit to mount. Since there were no short rides on La Alegría, it took more than 4 hours before we were back for the dinner table.



*False and authentic chagra (guess which is which!) ready for the lazo exercise*



## *The volcano avenue trail*

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> day of January, a fine sunny morning, at 9 o'clock am our small party finally started for the big trail around Cotopaxi. My companions were Gabriel and Gido a nice young chagra from the hacienda as helper as well as five horses, three under the saddle, a packing horse and a spare horse that could be mounted in case of problems with any of the others. I was somewhat intimidated by the amount of care that was required to carry a single guest around in the wilderness. But nobody ever complained, not even the horses.



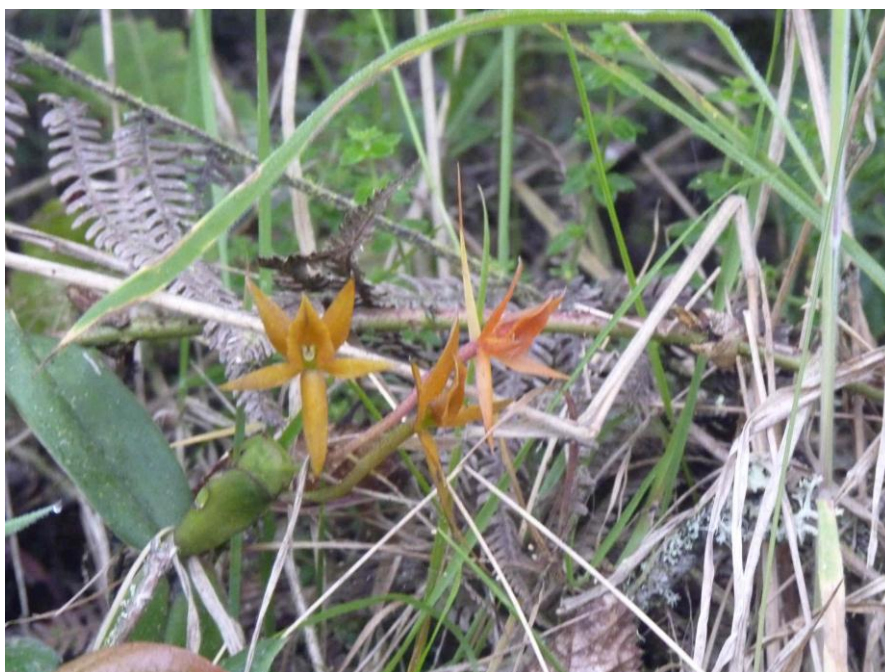
*On the slopes of  
Corazon volcano*

We first mounted for more than 4 hours in a beautiful open landscape up to 3800 m, not much above the last cultivated fields of the Indio farmers, before we descended into a steep valley, the last refuge of an extended old growth cloud forest.



*Gabriel leading  
through the cloud  
forest*

It is probably not so much by their own choice that the Indios cling to these high slopes for farming but by the fact that most of the good land down in the valley has been taken by the Spanish colonists. On a small slippery path we passed through absolutely fantastic and abundant vegetation. Huge tree ferns, palm trees and a lot of large leafed trees that I could not identify were covered with all kinds of saprophytic plants, like ferns, orchids and bromeliads. In the under storey grew giant-leafed sorrel and fern species. After a long time in the enchanted wood we emerged at our overnight shelter, a lonely and rather odd and overgrown hacienda crowded by numerous dogs and puppies mostly golden retrievers, sheep dogs and Labradors. The buildings looked very much like constructed by an amateur tinker rather than by a professional builder. The place was called Bomboli (<http://whirley.wordpress.com/about/hacienda-bomboli>). It was inhabited by Oswaldo and Marianita, an elderly couple which received us very friendly and started immediately to prepare a snack for tired riders. Inside the place was more spacious, nice and comfortable than I had suspected from the outside. In the basement they had a few convenient guest rooms. I was accommodated in one of them slightly irritated only by looking into several odd, asymmetrically root-framed mirrors on the walls.



*Bomboli: Orchid in Oswaldo's garden*

While Marianita, slim and petite, was busy to prepare a delicate dinner in her kitchen dimly lit by candles, since the place had no electricity, Oswaldo talked about his project to save single handed the flora of the cloud forest, especially the orchids. In spite of the beginning dusk and the fog he immediately took me for a tour around his park that looked more like a botanical garden and sheltered no less than 60 species of orchids (if I understood him correctly). I was shown even more orchids before we started back through the cloud forest on the next morning.

After we emerged from the forest we ascended on the steep flanks of the extinct volcano Corazón. At over 4000 m we passed close to the summit where two small snowfields had survived the Ecuadorian sun and enjoyed a stunning view into the wide Machachi valley. After a long descent we reached a recently established small holiday resort called Serra in the middle of an Eucalyptus forest. We were comfortably accommodated in bungalows scattered among the trees. I had ample time to practise photographing Mt. Cotopaxi in a distance,



beautifully illuminated by the evening sun. It was already pitch dark when Patty arrived with our luggage. Unlike in Bomboli there was electric light, at least for some time. However, at 22h everything went dark.



*A rare view: Cloud forest with tree fern in the sun*

During the next day we slowly penetrated into the mountains on the south side of Muchachi keeping Iliniza volcano on our right and the Cotopaxi on our left. The road gently inclined through a rather alpine looking valley past small Indio farms. Some of the buildings were still constructed in the traditional stile from a framework of wooden bars covered with grass or reeds with window and door openings only on the front side. The farmers usually own only rather small pieces of land because the usual practice of gravelkind tends to diminish the area of land available for each child with each generation. This is another reason why people are tempted to shift the fields higher and higher onto the steep slopes removing the forest and increasing erosion. The soil on the slopes is not rocky but surprisingly soft. Beneath the surface weathering there exist thick layers of volcanic ash. On the one hand this certainly improves the fertility but on the other there is a considerable danger of mudslides.



*Through a beautiful valley into the mountains*



*View into Latacunga valley*

On the fields the farmers were busy to harvest potatoes and onions while dealers were driving around with small lorries to purchase the produce directly from the fields. Where the picturesque valley ended we reached a steep half overgrown path leading us to a pass at about 3800 m. The valley through which we descended on the other side had a completely different character. It was rather dry and almost devoid of human dwellings. Only an old Indio woman accompanied by some goats visited us at lunchtime and after accepting some surplus food vanished wordlessly.



*Partially dilapidated traditional farm houses revealing the construction principle*

Several hours later we arrived at the floor of the large valley on the south side of the Cotopaxi and reached the impressive old hacienda 'La Cienega' built in 1570. Several years ago it had been converted into a luxury hotel that still breathed the glory of past Spanish colonial times.



The buildings including a private Church were grouped around a beautiful flower garden complete with old trees and a pond. The horses were accommodated on a large pasture adjacent to the hotel, while Gabriel and I myself occupied a suite with two bedrooms and a spacious sitting room with logs burning in the open fire place.



*Main entrance of La Cienega*



*Detail of the entrance to the old church at La Cienega (early 17<sup>th</sup> century)*

After breakfast the next morning a friendly member of the hotel staff took time to show us around in the historical rooms of this splendid manor where already Da La Condamine (the eminent French scientist who in 1735-45 had measured the exact length of the equator and had sailed down the whole length of the Amazon) spent some time as a guest. Celebrating the 250th anniversary of this event, the French embassy had donated a commemorative plaque. Similarly, Alexander von Humboldt from Germany, the most famous scientific traveller in South America who visited the continent in 1799-1803 had been a guest on La Cienega in 1802. In the 'President's suite' in the central tower of the main building his portrait and an inscription commemorated his visit. Also on display was the account book of the hacienda for the years 1950 to 1960 when dairy



cattle and horse breeding had been the main business of this huge possession. Today farming activities have been given up in favour of the hotel that is owned by the Lasso family, one of the most influential families in Ecuador.



*Indian Farmer*

Later we rode mostly eastwards through rather arid valleys and mountains south of Cotopaxi volcano. The soil seemed to consist of volcanic ashes but appeared much less fertile. The farms and fields looked rather miserable. After several steep ascents and descents we reached a high valley with extended pine plantations that belonged to a hacienda called 'Baño' which had given up the breeding of cattle and of fighting bulls in favour of timber production.



*Pansache*

A little further on we reached a place called Pansache, a flat depression in the middle of alpine pastures with a lonely, one storeyed house close to a walled enclosure for cattle. The house contained the very modest living quarters of an old retired chagra couple and a large almost completely empty room that apparently served as occasional lodging for herdsmen



where we pitched our tents. On a gas stove an enormous amount of readymade frozen vegetable soup was to be thawed while in front of the house on a large charcoal fire Guido and the driver of the support vehicle were busy to barbecue large pieces of meat and sausages and to cook potatoes and vegetables. I had no idea who was supposed to eat all that until I realized that the old chagra couple was happy to collect all the surplus food to enrich their next meals.



*Cotopaxi emerging from the clouds*

After a rather cold night we fetched our horses early to search for the hot spring that had given the Baño (bath) hacienda its name. After a long ascent through a remote valley with little signs of human activity except for some rickety fences around deserted pastures, we finally reached the famous hot spring.



*On the way to the hot spring (above) and taking a bath in the hot spring (right)*

It was situated in a small secluded cañon where the warm water was collected into a masoned pool about 10 m long, 5 m wide and 1.50 m deep. The water had a temperature of about 38 °C and hence, was ideally suited to take a bath amply compensating for the lack of water and washing facilities at the shepherd's hut in Pansache. We all mounted into the water and, in view of the cool wind up here at over 3500m, could barely bring ourselves to get out again. Back on the horses we had to ascent further without much traces of a path until we reached a pass at almost 4300 m.



*A vast empty country*

With fair weather the view from up here must be breath taking but for us a cold wind was blowing and all the surrounding mountains including the Cotopaxi were shrouded in deep hanging clouds. Therefore, we did not pause very long but soon started to descend into the vast, completely treeless high valley that extended on the opposite side of the pass home to several herds of cattle dotting the slopes.



*Chalupa*



The mountain tops on the opposite side of the valley were hidden by deep hanging clouds intensifying the somewhat melancholic impression of this remote and reclusive vastness. The pastures in this valley are shared by four haciendas but there are no fences and the cattle – more than thousand animals – range freely in smaller or larger groups each with bull, cows and calves in the extended area. Far away we spotted a few huts, dwellings of the chagras which were in charge of the cattle. Since the hacenderos, the owners of the cattle, rarely show up in this lonesome place, the chagras work rather autonomously for 22 days at a time before they return for 8 days to their families back into civilization.



*Chagras visiting in Chalupa*

It took us almost 3 hours riding upstream and respectfully avoiding groups of cattle watched over by a bull to reach a place called Chalupas, an assembly of chagra huts one of which had been rented and refurbished by Gabriel for his guests. The chagras kept a large pack of rather noisy but friendly dogs which allegedly are used and required for hare hunting. However since we did not meet a single hare on our trail, I trust that the hares are about as rare as the legendary Andean bear. The single storey house of Gabriel appeared surprisingly spacious and well equipped even though some of the rooms were not yet finished. While we had dinner two of the chagras appeared to help us eat and to discuss Gabriel's ideas about making the yearly roundup of the cattle a thrilling experience for his riding guests. He also pondered the idea of not only extending the protection of the Andean bear but also to resettle them in areas where they had been eliminated. With respect to the latter proposition, the two chagras reacted exactly like Swiss mountain farmers usually greet the idea to resettle wolves or bears in the Swiss Alps: They declared such intentions as crazy and squarely refused any support. They declared that the bears would do nothing but kill and eat their cattle. Gabriel's explanation that this type of bear is essentially a vegetarian met with total disbelief.

Fog and cloud-covered mountains accompanied us also the following day when we crossed vast deserted valleys and plateaus on the eastern side of Cotopaxi. In some places we passed huge lava streams from past eruptions of the volcano that were only sparsely overgrown with mosses and other pioneering plants. Except for some corrals used for the roundup of cattle there were few signs of human activity. Finally we reached the wooden reed-covered buildings of an old hacienda situated on a hilltop. The place was called Tambo and had been partially converted into a mountain lodge. It disposed of a large and comfortable sitting room

and, on a wooden gallery, a row of small sleeping rooms with curtains for doors. Shortly after our arrival we had a chance to witness an amazing example of the professional skill of the local chagras. In a small valley we could overlook from our hilltop position three of them, on horseback, were busy to transfer one of the semi-wild bulls from one pasture to a different herd onto another pasture. To control the bull from a distance, three ropes were fixed at his horns, two of them used to pull him forward and the third one, handled by a chagra in the rear of the animal to slow it down in case of a sudden attack on the two pulling chagras.



*Hacienda El Tambo*

As it turned out we were not the only guests. Three French girls with their local guide had also reached this place on horseback, albeit with aching hindquarters. However, their trip was to finish already the next day in another lodge north of Cotopaxi. After dinner the local chagras organized a guitar which one of them played almost professionally. He also had a very good singing voice and commanded a rich repertoire of, mostly melancholic, chagra love songs with, nevertheless, exciting melodies. After a while he also remembered some dancing tunes, Guido prepared rather adventurous alcoholic drinks and hence, in spite of the limited number of women, concert and party ended only well after midnight.



*Lonely rider on the way to  
Tambopaxi*



The next morning was cloudy and foggy as before. Together with the French party and a tremendously energetic little dog we followed a path around the northern slopes of Cotopaxi through a nature reserve. The path crossed many old lava streams from the last eruption and should have offered breath-taking views onto the icy slopes of the huge close by volcano. Yet, only from time to time could we catch a short glimpse of the glaciers above our heads. Around midday time we said good bye to the French girls and their guides and mounted along the flanks of the invisible volcano to reach at about 4000m a high and relatively dry plain that offered some excellent terrain for gallopades. In spite of the height, our amazing horses moved seemingly effortless and without losing their wind.



*Feral horses in the Cotopaxi nature reserve*



*View across an old lava flow from the northern slopes of Cotopaxi*

On the way we encountered several groups of feral horses which were said to live in this area more or less undisturbed for almost 300 years. Finally we reached Tambopaxi a group of buildings in the middle of nowhere that belonged to a mountaineering lodge where we spent the night together with many alpinists mostly US Americans. In spite of the instable weather conditions they had made an attempt at reaching the Cotopaxi summit but had failed and were accordingly frustrated.



*Last view on  
Cotopaxi behind  
clouds*

Thus came our last day on the trail. Shortly after Tombopaxi we left the rather barren area of old lava flows. The spectacular landscape in the northeast of Cotopaxi received us with a rich vegetation of flowering brushes and transient gaps in the clouds that allowed last glimpses onto the towering glaciated mountain.



*The last mountains pass  
leading back into Machachi  
valley*

Overall our path gained steadily in height and after a last steep ascent through a blue wilderness of flowering wild lupines we reached a pass on the edge of Ruminahui Volcano



where a sign indicated an elevation of 4230 m. Here we crossed the last mountain ridge prior to a long descent into the familiar valley of Machachi. As soon as we reached the valley floor, Gabriel and Guido, my two companions, apparently felt an urge to set a new speed record in reaching the hacienda. Hence we cantered with only very short breaks across the whole valley almost up to the doorsteps of La Alegría. Again, I admired our brave horses which barely showed any sign of exhaustion.

Somewhat wistfully I passed my last afternoon and evening on La Alegría among the people which had cared for me with such extraordinary hospitality. My flight from Quito to the Galapagos Islands was planned for early the next morning. Therefore, everything was arranged such that somebody would wake me up at four o'clock in the morning and somebody else would drive me to the airport. Everything worked out perfectly, except that the taxi driver permanently pushed his car to the limits of its maximum speed. He careered through the quiet streets of the Quito suburbs as if the devil was trying to get hold of us and reached the airport almost an hour earlier than expected.

***Here ends part I.***

***To be continued with***

***Part II: A cruise in the Galapagos Islands***