

Reflections on South America

From our travels through 5 countries in South America over 47 days (maybe more), we have some observations about each country.

We usually stay in hotels in the downtown areas of cities. We always ask at the front desk or at the city's Information Center "is it safe to walk around in this area during daytime and nighttime?" We have gotten several answers, but the best one was in Guayaquil, Ecuador. The response was: "yes, you can walk around between these 2 streets (he indicated on the map) anytime you want. However, right here (indicating on the map again) you might want to walk real fast at night."

Traffic – what can we say except – horrible, hectic, unorganized, frantic, confusing, and no signage anywhere! We drive into a major city in South America following the signs for the Pan American Highway North, or to our next major city. Sounds simple, but once in town, the signs change to street names. We've just happened to find our highway out of town by the grace of God *every time!* It's just a PTL moment when we get to the other side of town and find the Pan American Highway again. We've been misplaced (or lost) for up to 2 hours in towns before, with Linda holding a map & Ed holding a compass while driving. The worst place has been Quito, Ecuador.

We can gain an appreciation of the economy of a country by observing several factors. Such as the basic condition of the roads: Are there livestock on the public highways? What materials are used to construct basic houses? Are there cars or trucks parked at houses? Do people have stalls on the side of the road to sell products (to us, this is a positive aspect of the economy)? How clean is the country? Is there running water at the houses along the road? Is there a general sense of commerce in the country? Is there an apparent industry?

These guidelines have given us the following impressions of the various countries we've traveled through.

Paraguay – driving is definitely a job for 2 people – one to watch the road and avoid pot holes, and the other to watch for stray livestock or horses or oxen drawn carts in the road. Driving through the country we see no apparent industry, except for on the eastern section that borders Brazil. There is no obvious form of commerce – and few large agriculture areas. People live as subsistence farmers, in houses constructed of wood. Some houses have hand dug water wells, but others seem to use the wells of their neighbors. There are very few automobiles out in the countryside, but the larger cities do have their share of traffic. However, most of these cars are old, dilapidated vehicles that make us wonder how they can even be providing transportation.



The people are friendly, but most lack a sense of drive or ambition. The people have a basic defeatist attitude about life; they don't seem to have hope or expect a better future. As we have driven through South America, we noticed that in Paraguay, the school children are walking home at 11:00 in the morning, and another group of children go to school in the afternoon, but only for 2 to 3 hours. There is lots of begging in the streets by children not in school. Also, young adults sell fruit & clean your windshields in the cities at traffic lights. These vendors can be very aggressive. In the cities there are also many young mothers with babies begging at the traffic lights.

We seldom see people reading. We'll be on a bus, and be the only ones reading a book. The local newspaper, "Ultima Hora" advertises there are 35,000 copies of the paper sold daily – this is with a population of 5 million people. That's only about 7/10 of 1% reading a newspaper. We will occasionally see someone reading a newspaper, but it's usually the local "rag", with either pictures of nude women on the front page or an up close picture of a gory traffic accident. We have found a greater population of poor people in Paraguay than in any other country we've visited in South America.

The most inexpensive food on the menu is beef, with any type of seafood being the most expensive. The currency in Paraguay is the guarani. Over the past 7 years, we've seen the exchange rate go from 4,000 guarani to the US \$1, to 7,000. When we left, it was around 4,500 guarani to the US \$1. We think that such a fluctuation would indicate a weak economy.

Argentina – the highway system is more developed than in Paraguay – no livestock in the roads, better built homes, more private cars on the road. Siesta time in the afternoon is taken very seriously. We would stop to check out a hotel and nobody would be there. If we found someone to help us, they said you will have to come back at 4:00 or 5:00 to talk to someone.



After siesta time, the people are very friendly. When we were in Mendoza, we went to the city Information Center to find a hotel. The girl was very professional, seemed well educated, and called several hotels trying to find us a place to stay. Apparently there was a national conference in town the same week we were there. Most hotels were full, but she found us a room in a convenient hotel, near the downtown area. The cities were fairly clean and well kept. We saw lots of people riding bicycles, even on the highway. There were also lots of fields of sunflowers growing along the road.

Besides the sunflowers, there is obviously an industry on the western side of the country in grapes grown for wine production. There are extensive irrigation systems at the vineyards, so water must be ample. There were many wineries near Mendoza that not only sold wine, but also various oils and vinegars. There is also a large tourism industry in Argentina. The southern part of the country is called Patagonia, and offers not only glaciers, but also hiking areas, as well as coast lines with great wildlife.

The highways were well kept with some divided sections. These sections had painted light poles that were very attractive. The menus offered lamb, goat, as well as basic beef and chicken. Seafood was available, and not too expensive.

The currency in Argentina is called pesos. The exchange rate while we were there was 3.2 to the US \$1. We saw very little begging on the streets.

Chile – we only drove in Chile north of Santiago, so these observations will be limited to this area. The people are friendly; we stayed at 2 different private homes during our time in the country. Talking with the folks where we stayed made it clear that the Chilean culture is very success driven, and people structure their work & study habits on the American style of striving for success.



Everyone seems to be in a hurry to get ahead. The country is clean, with no livestock on the roads. We didn't see many animal driven carts, but folks did ride donkeys or horses; however, these seemed to be workers on large farms. We saw very little begging while we were in the larger cities. As in Argentina, there was extensive irrigation near Santiago, before we reached the Atacama Desert.

In Chile we finally reached the seashore, and enjoyed driving on the coast line. One of the 2 favorite meals we've had on this trip was in central Chile – a great seafood restaurant perched on a cliff high above the Pacific. Our other favorite meal was in Northern Chile in Arica, also right on the coast line. There are lots of artichokes grown in this part of Chile and here we had a wonderful shrimp stuffed artichoke heart.

This is the country where we took a boat trip to see penguins, what a treat! As well as tourism, the country has lots of mining; in fact the largest copper mine in the world is in Chile. In many towns we passed, the town would be covered in a grey dust which comes from the mines. We also saw lots of very large, very expensive mining equipment. In fact, our overriding impression of this part of Chile is DRY!! The Atacama Desert is one of the driest places in the world, with some regions NEVER having recorded any rainfall. We went several days driving through sand dunes and desert – very impressive. Some areas had to have their drinking water trucked in; these areas hadn't had rainfall in over 9 years!

People's houses were made of brick or concrete blocks. They had well kept yards, with their livestock kept in pens. Lots of houses had trucks parked in the yards. The people had a more positive, middle-class look and attitude.

The currency is also called pesos. The exchange rate while we were there was 630 pesos to the US \$1.

Peru – this country should really be divided into 2 parts, Southern Peru & Northern Peru, with Lima as the dividing point. Southern Peru is very involved in tourism. The people are almost pushy to obtain your tourist dollar. The towns are older, smaller streets, more crowded, and busier but also quaint and enjoyable. The food is consistent from place to place. Tourist traps are everywhere. We were told that the Machu Picchu tourist trade was controlled by the local mafia, and we believe it. However, one of our favorite hotels was in Arequipa, Peru. It was a hostel and only cost about \$25/night. This hostel served as a Spanish school as well as a place for wayward travelers. They arranged our trip to Machu Picchu.



With all the tourists come lots of vendors & beggars. This constant request for your money did become almost annoying. In the central parks of the larger cities, policemen were stationed to prevent selling of goods to the tourists. However, just as soon as you stepped into the street and out of the park, you would get bombarded with stuff to buy. It appeared that most homes had running water.

Northern Peru is basically corrupt! The police have set the stage by exploiting the traveler. In three days we were stopped 8 or more times by the police asking for everything from a bottle of water, a few dollars to help buy fuel for the patrol car, to a dubious “fine” of about \$50 (which we paid since he was holding our passports and truck papers ransom). The hotels are cheaply decorated and accommodations are minimal. The roads were strewn with trash, and there is a basic “we don’t care” attitude by the people. With the landscape being a dry

dessert, the area is basically depressing. We were anxious to leave Peru! This was our feeling until we reached Mancora Beach, which was our last night in Peru. What a treat to find!! We were able to end our trip through Peru with a more positive attitude.

The currency is called soles; and while we were there, the exchange rate was 3.1 soles to the US \$1.

Ecuador – if you ever wondered where all the Susan B. Anthony dollar coins went to – look in Ecuador. Your pocket or purse gets heavy with all the coins. The US dollar is the currency used in Ecuador. In the past, Ecuador used sucres. But in 1999, the exchange rate went from 5,000 sucres to the US \$1 to 25,000 sucres to \$1 – an inflation rate of about 500%. At this point, the government changed the currency to the US \$1. There were lots of bankrupted people, banks & businesses in the country, as their sucres ended up being almost worthless.

The city of Guayaquil is so clean that at the River Walk they have pressure washers that apparently work from one end of the park to the other with bleach water (you can smell the bleach when you pass them). We actually witnessed a taxi driver picking up trash on the side of the road and put it in the trash can! We also saw a city worker with a putty knife cleaning gum & candy off the sidewalk. Almost all the towns we passed, regardless of how small, had a colorful central park with beautiful play equipment for children. Running water has been in every place we have noticed.

There appeared to be a general feeling of prosperity in the country. There is agriculture with sophisticated machinery – mainly bananas, pineapples and cacao (chocolate). Lots of people selling produce in stands on the side of the highway. Diesel fuel in Ecuador is only \$1.00/gallon. There oil & natural gas wells here in Ecuador. We wanted to put some in our luggage and bring it back to the states. Seafood is really cheap. We could get a meal of shrimp – LOTS of shrimp – for less than \$5.00.

Our only problem with Ecuador is the horrible nonexistence of highway signs. Also, this was the only country which did not use the Pan American Highway logo on their highway number signs. In fact, our map showed national highway numbers, but the signs on the road used local department (or county) highway numbers. This made navigating very confusing. As we mentioned above, Quito was the worst town to drive through. Also, the Port of Guayaquil has to be the most corrupt port in the Americas – it took us 18 days to ship our truck to Panama so we could continue our trip. Our shipping agent said that she did not agree with paying bribes and neither do we. But by the end of 18 days of living expenses, we began to wonder.

Since we are so close to the Equator, it means that the days are all the same length. We are currently in summer, which should be long days, with light well into the evenings. The equivalent of Ecuadorian December for Atlanta would be June, in which it doesn't get dark till nearly 9:00 PM. Here, the sun rises around 6:30 AM, and sets around 6:30 PM - everyday. So we have a consistent 12 hours of day & 12 hours of night.

The people of Ecuador seem to be well educated. The Sunday newspaper has a whole page of book reviews. It's common to see folks reading in the parks. We also see folks doing suduko puzzles regularly. We're here close to Christmas when most school children in South America are on "summer break". However, the children in Ecuador are still attending school, and it's already December 7th.



We realize these observations are limited to our prospective as we pass through each country. They are also generalities, and there are exceptions to each of our statements. We've enjoyed our travels though South America, we're glad we did it. We've learned a lot about South America, the power of prayer, and how daily Bible readings really speak to us directly about what's going on in our lives. But the old saying "been there, done that" we will claim as our own; and maybe not try to do this again!